

## The Kindness of Strangers

By Pam Fordham

One of my favorite movie lines is from *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Blanche Dubois asserts that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers.” Shmoop.com describes Blanche as an “uber-tragic figure” who is “out of place, lost, confused, conflicted” and “living in her own fantasies.” To say that she was dealing with some mental health issues is surely an understatement. Perhaps what is most tragic about her life is that so few people are kind to her – despite knowing that she is vulnerable and suffering. I remember reading the play in high school and thinking of Blanche as an outrageous person – unbelievably outrageous, more so than anyone I had ever met. As I got older, my understanding of Blanche and her antics seemed clearer, even palpable.

Long before my mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, the dis-ease had taken its toll on our family. The only person more determined than my mother to hide the signs of her deteriorating mental health was my father. But Alzheimer’s was a masterful opponent, determined to destroy everything in its path. While we tried to help Mom maintain the presentation of her sanity, Alzheimer’s put all kinds of obstacles in her path. We used humor to combat the forgetfulness, but humor could not begin to contend with her hallucinations, paranoia, and depression or the silence that followed when she was no longer able to speak. It was worse than I could have ever imagined; one by one, our family was being taken out by the disease, and I started to accept that we were doomed.

What saved us was the very thing that Blanche Dubois depended upon but was denied: the kindness of strangers. Sometimes the kindness came in the form of a stranger who offered assistance, a kind word or a smile. Sometimes the kindness was from a colleague who let me vent or cry, brought me a meal or just gave me space to recover from a difficult time. Our family could not stop the course of Alzheimer’s, but the kindness of nearly everyone around us made each plateau bearable; time and again, we recovered with our dignity intact.

At the height of my mom’s challenges with Alzheimer’s we took a three-day trip to Kansas to visit my Aunt Pudd. My dad stayed behind, but I assured him (and genuinely believed) that everything would be fine, and it was – until it was not. At night, Mom woke up disoriented in the new environment: I spent half the night trying to convince her to return to bed as she frantically searched for exits, and the other half trying to suppress her screams. When we arrived at the airport to return to Buffalo, I

discovered that our flight had been canceled. Fortunately, we were put on another flight in first class, but the extra pampering did not allay Mom's confusion. I was able to convince her to stay seated, but the screaming continued throughout most of the flight. I was overwhelmed with the nightmare that was playing out for everyone on the plane, and I started to prepare for the possible ways the trip would end. Maybe the pilot would do an emergency landing, or maybe the airport police would be waiting for us.

What followed would become my strongest memory of that trip. Each time my mom fell asleep for a few minutes, one of the passengers in first class came to talk to me. I apologized profusely, but each person told me my words were unnecessary. One person offered to switch seats with me if I wanted a break. Another person simply patted my shoulder. Someone else bought me a strong drink, telling me it would settle my nerves. Even the flight attendant assured me that I was doing just fine. As we got off the plane, yet another passenger told me that she would be praying for me. Later, when my dad asked me how the trip was, before I could answer, my mom blurted out, "It was just beautiful."

A lot of conversations about mental health relate to things we can do for ourselves as caretakers: getting counseling or enough sleep or learning to say no to the demands of others and yes to "me time." All that advice served me well in the years prior to my parents' passing, but more than anything, what helped me the most was the kindness of others.