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Assisted Living for Our Parents: A Son's Journey

Abstract

[Excerpt] I wrote this book to help aging parents and their adult children understand the problems and risks in choosing an ALF, with the hope that they might avoid some of the experiences my mother and I had. My story echoes many other people's stories. But of course I don't pretend that what I will describe happens to everyone entering an ALF.

Keywords

congregate housing, United States, case studies, aging parents, family relationships, parent, child

Comments

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ASSISTED
LIVING
for Our
PARENTS

A Son's Journey

DANIEL JAY BAUM

FOREWORD BY CAROL LEVINE

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*For my mother,
Ida Frieman Baum*

עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא

She is a Tree of Life.

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Foreword

Today, as millions of North Americans enter midlife and even reach the point of retirement themselves, they grapple with questions such as: Can Mom continue to manage on her own? Is she safe? Should Dad move in with me? What are my obligations to my elderly parents? Those approaching old age also worry about what will happen to them when they themselves cross the age threshold, especially if they are childless. Who will take care of me? Will I have enough money to take care of myself? Will I end up poor and in a nursing home? What can I do now to prevent that?

In this book Daniel Baum, who himself is in his seventies, writes about assisted living facilities, or ALFs—continuing care retirement facilities that numbered over 32,000 in the United States in 2000. He explains what it is like to see one's parent grow old as one also ages. He describes in moving and compelling detail the decision he and his 89-year-old mother, Ida, made to sell her home and move her to an assisted living facility, where she spent her final years.

At first, money didn't appear to be a significant issue. Daniel Baum had a loving relationship with his mother, and as the sole surviving child, he did not have to contend with the dissension and recriminations that are so common among family members as they try to figure out who will take care of Mom and Dad. In addition to being a loving son who wanted to do right by his mother, he is also a lawyer with experience negotiating complex

contracts, as well as an academic who has published two books on the nursing home industry and retirement.

In many ways, this story parallels that of thousands of North Americans. In my work at the United Hospital Fund directing a research project on family caregivers, I hear stories every day from daughters, sons, and spouses desperately trying to deal with the latest crisis, sometimes in their own households but often from afar, and almost always with inadequate information. Sometimes I imagine airplanes filled with anguished family caregivers crisscrossing the country to deal with Mom's fall, Dad's erratic driving, the home-care worker's unreliability, or the nursing home's neglect. A special fare for caregivers would be a very good thing.

Policymakers sometimes portray older people and their family members as greedy devourers of public resources; in my experience, the opposite is true. Older people carefully guard their independence and often refuse help of any kind until a disaster forces a change. Adult children must contend with anxiety about maintaining the balance between their parents' autonomy and safety, as well as the safety of others.

Given this state of almost perpetual worry, it is no wonder that families who can afford it see assisted living facilities as a solution and that assisted living facilities market themselves to adult children—the Daniel Baums of the world—with a very particular pitch. A random sampling of web-based descriptions reveals fulsome descriptions of amenities: an “elegant lobby,” a “charming dining room,” “beautiful views,” “superb food.” Activities emphasize active participation in sports, crafts, and intellectual discussions. Dedication to “healthy living into high old age” stops just short of promising eternal life. Both adult children and their parents may be particularly attracted by promises of “aging in place,” which has become a catch-all concept for a wide variety of living situations that relate to residents' autonomy and independence. As Daniel Baum illustrates, these promises may be hard to fulfill. Assisted living facilities re-

quire compromises and accommodations, some necessary, others more for the benefit of management.

The author's journey also reveals the underlying tensions that drive practice and policies in the aging field. There is no single definition for assisted living. Facilities call themselves independent living, continuing care communities, naturally occurring retirement communities, and many other designations. Each state regulates (or doesn't) assisted living differently; to avoid complex skilled nursing home regulations, assisted living facilities and their counterparts distance themselves from the kind of services nursing homes provide.

As he tells the story of his mother's decline and the assisted living facility's response to it, Daniel Baum is questioning, to be sure, while acknowledging its perspective. He understands that all institutions have to protect their own interests to survive. Assisted living facilities also have to protect what they see as the interests of all the residents while at the same time promising each individual independence and autonomy. The author also questions himself. He asks, How could I, a law professor, not have read and appreciated the fine points of the contract? What more could I have done to preserve my mother's independence when she was moved to the skilled nursing facility?

In the story, the reader comes to see just how easily a lawyer or anyone one else can overlook such fine print and readily accept the assurances of assisted living facility administrators during tours and informational interviews. In fact, it is common for gifted professionals in their own right to be unable to transfer their skills and knowledge to the Byzantine world of long-term care when it comes to their own parent or spouse. As I speak to professional groups around the country, I hear many emotional, often angry, stories of how a nurse, social worker, doctor, or lawyer finds the system he or she works in every day unresponsive to his or her own parents' or relatives' needs.

The author asks, Is there a better way? His mother's experience has led him to consider carefully what he wants for himself

as he ages and to organize his life to make it happen. For now, he has found an answer for himself in what he describes as his vertical neighborhood, a high-rise complex in downtown Toronto, a mixed-generation facility with amenities and security going far beyond most assisted living facilities. Many of us are looking for solutions, too. It is important for individuals to consider the possibilities realistically. Yet the future may depend on political will and public support for a range of affordable options for long-term care.

Daniel Baum's generous sharing of his experience provides insights and information that will be extremely valuable for many adult children. A careful reading of this book will help them make, if not the best, at least the most informed choice possible for themselves and their parents.

CAROL LEVINE

United Hospital Fund
New York City, September 2006

Acknowledgments

Never before have I written a book in the first person. With my other books, including those on retirement and the nursing home industry, the discipline of academia compelled a certain distance, a sign of objectivity. This book, however, is personal. It reflects the specific experiences of my mother and me.

Without the encouragement, ongoing critique, and specific editorial suggestions from my long-time associate, Penny Mallette, who was also a friend to my mother and me, I doubt that the book would have been completed.

It took more than a few years to find the proper voice, one that is my own. Without Jessica Starr's early help, and that of Lynn Wasnak, friend to both my mother and me, I am not sure that voice would have matured as it did.

I confess to a certain anger when I first considered writing the book. No doubt, some of that anger reflected grief at the loss of my mother. But, some of that anger reflected the institutional nature of assisted living. It took patience and ongoing dialogue with my series editor, Suzanne Gordon, for me to temper the angry edge and achieve a resulting balance. I am grateful for this.

Though this book is a thin volume, several years have been invested in its development. It is, in one sense, the story of my mother. But, in a larger sense, it is not a memoir. I have written it to assist others—adult children trying to help their parents (usually their mothers), and also ourselves, recognizing that we follow in their wake.

I do not claim to be an expert in the several professional fields touched upon in this book. Concern for my mother's ongoing health and safety, her quality of life and, as it turned out, the choices that might have been hers were subjects that I probed. I am not a medical doctor, a specialist in assisted living for the elderly, or one who leads efforts to find alternative living arrangements for the elderly, including independent living. I have my own experience—and that of my mother. Also, I have called on professionals with hands-on practice to review my reasoning and conclusions. Of course, I alone am responsible for the conclusions stated.

Among the professionals who reviewed or otherwise commented on the approach I have taken are: medical doctors Paul Rosenberg, emergency room physician, Toronto, Ontario; Michael Weinstock, family practitioner, Toronto, Ontario; Arthur Waltzer, surgeon, Tampa, Florida; recreation therapist Denise Altschul, Toronto, Ontario; Fredda Vladeck, director, New York Aging in Place Initiative; Robert McMullen, executive director, Abbeyfield Houses Society of Canada; and the property management team of my "vertical village:" Marcie Sherwood, David Colvin, and Judy Creamer. Norman and Judy Barron, who knew my mother and me over a span of decades and understand assisted living facilities, gently provided support and advice to me when it was most needed.

The staff at "Glengrove" (the assisted living facility portrayed in this book and whose name has been fictionalized) shared institutional experiences with me. Some were positive; others, in effect, were "war" stories. I honor their requests (some expressed, others implied) for anonymity. They, too, have fictitious names in the book. They include: "Susan," the residential manager; "Anne," the dining room manager; "Sally," the bank manager; "Cindy," the activities director; "Bee," the apartments' licensed practical nurse; and the volunteers, including "Simon." You know who you are. I thank you.

My mother entered Glengrove close to the age of 90, relatively healthy with a close-knit support system of family, extended family and friends that remained in place until her passing. First among the family was her grandson, my son, Aaron. His was a pervasive, but laid-back presence. Aaron and my mother were frequently on the phone. One of her more ardent wishes was that Aaron would marry. (She wished the same for me, but with the passing years probably gave that hope up as a lost cause.) Aaron did marry, but the event came after my mother's passing. She would have loved my new daughter-in-law, T'mimah (who helped me with the Hebrew part of the dedication to this book).

Even after my brother's death, my mother was included in the warm and loving circle of his widow, Barbara, and her mother, Rita, plus brothers, sisters and children. They gave me further insight into the strength of family in living one's life fully and independently.

Then, there was my mother's immediate family consisting of her nieces and nephews (and some of their children). They were responsive to her (and to me). Several lived close by, such as Mel and Irene, who, on occasion, took emergency calls about my mother from Glengrove. And, on several holidays, they had my mother and her special friend, "Alice," for dinner. Others lived farther away. My cousins Herb and Doris often telephoned. Herb arranged flight tickets for Aunt Lil to visit my mother, and he followed with visits of his own. As well, there were Aunt Dolly; her sons Brandy and Bob; plus my cousins Muriel, Max, Carol, Barbara and Gene; and also my cousins' children Betsy, Lauren and David.

I have fictionalized Glengrove and many of its staff and officers—but what I have written faithfully reflects both my mother's and my understanding that Glengrove was committed to achieving an environment that would foster independent living and aging in place. But, we also came to understand that, as

is the case in many assisted living facilities, there were inherent conflicts between aging in place and the capacity for independent living. Fictionalizing Glengrove and its staff and officers has allowed me the freedom to define that conflict.

DANIEL JAY BAUM

Toronto, Ontario, 2007

ASSISTED LIVING
FOR OUR PARENTS

Introduction

Three years ago my mother died in an assisted living facility. Almost seven years earlier, at my suggestion, she left the home where she had lived for over forty years and moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a not-for-profit complex constructed with the help of the local Jewish community. Her stay there went relatively smoothly so long as she remained healthy. But episodes of illness and injury punctuated her stay, and finally she experienced the inevitable decline that led to her death.

Her moving into an assisted living facility (ALF) seemed like the best option for both of us. When my mother became more fragile and less able to cope on her own, we could have sold her house, moved her into an apartment, and hired extra help during the day—a solution that we could have afforded. Or perhaps she could have moved in with me. I was her only living child, and we were close. But I was single and divorced, lived in Canada hundreds of miles away, and had a full life of my own. Having her live with me, or close to me, wasn't practical for either of us. My mother would not have wanted to leave behind her many friends in the city where she had lived all her life, so I doubt that she would have accepted the offer.

Assisted living attracted us by its promise of “aging in place.” This would allow my mother to navigate gracefully the passage between independence and dependence. She would live in a place that would respect her adult independence yet recognize her growing need for assistance. She would get help in recreat-

ing a community, and she would have some stability and control in her life during her waning years. We would both find security and peace of mind.

The facility did not fulfill its promise, however. While it gave lip service to independence, residents there lost control over major areas of their lives—both physical and financial—long before they lost the capacity to make decisions.

Although my mother's final decline was relatively brief, it left an imprint with which I am still trying to cope. I understand that the strength of my reaction to her death is colored by my grief. However, I have shared my experiences with others whose parents have died in assisted living facilities, and I have come to understand that my mother's experience was neither unique nor just a matter of bad luck. Rather, it was the logical outcome of a new American way of death that seems to be almost built into the ALF experience.

Although plenty of books can guide adult children in caring for aging parents, few deal with the relatively new and increasingly popular phenomenon called the assisted living facility.¹ Indeed, before we made the choice to move my mother into an ALF—and even for several years afterward—I wasn't clear about what distinguishes an assisted living facility from an independent living facility or a skilled nursing home. Now I have grasped at least some of the nuances and the policy reasons behind them. But how many adult children or their parents understand the bargain they make when they sign an open-ended ALF contract? How many know what to look for and what will be delivered when their parents choose to "age in place"? How many make what amounts to an impulse purchase? How many have sufficient knowledge to help their parents cope with the many surprises of assisted living?

I wrote this book to help aging parents and their adult children understand the problems and risks in choosing an ALF, with the hope that they might avoid some of the experiences my mother and I had. My story echoes many other people's stories.

But of course I don't pretend that what I will describe happens to everyone entering an ALF.

My mother was relatively affluent and, with my financial help, could afford a high-end facility, where monthly rents then ranged from \$1,700 to \$6,000. (I know that most people don't have that luxury.) She also had family members to watch out for her. (For people who have no family, assisted living is often their only option, and one that they have to navigate alone.) My mother also had a zest for life that not all the elderly enjoy. She had not suffered the fate of many women her age—surviving the recent death of a spouse—and so did not view an ALF as merely a place to end her life.

I also know that many people have had more positive experiences than those I will recount, while others have had even more problematic ones. For many who have a will to live while they still “have their wits” about them, as my mother put it, life in an ALF can be exciting and marked by moments of hope and learning, yet it can also be enervating, frustrating, and sometimes frightening.

My mother was typical of the strongest among the two hundred thousand Americans—mostly women—who become residents of assisted living facilities each year. And Glengrove was a typical high-end facility. It was a modern complex of fifty assisted living apartments (one- or two-bedroom units), sixty “suites” (each consisting of one large room partitioned for sitting, eating, and sleeping), and a nursing home with a maximum capacity of 230 beds in either single or shared rooms. For much of my mother's stay, the nursing home, like many such facilities, was significantly underutilized, with only slightly more than half of the beds occupied. The apartment residents referred to the nursing home and its attached skilled care unit as the “sick building”—a place they generally feared because of its association with further loss of freedom, removal from their apartments and, finally, with death.

Though nominally open to all, Glengrove was a combined ef-

fort of the city's Jewish community, where economies of scale brought Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform groups together. Compromises of a sort had been made, for example, with regard to dietary laws, keeping Kosher, and traditions like keeping the Sabbath, when, to illustrate, the elevators worked automatically, not on manual button direction. There were two synagogues—one Orthodox and the other Reform, both with young rabbis. A member of the Glengrove board of directors once asked the Jewish community's supervising elderly Orthodox rabbi, "So what will you do if a resident makes a non-kosher meal in her apartment?" With a bit of a twinkle the rabbi answered, "I set rules, but I'm not a policeman."

My mother had a strong hold on life, a sense of humor, and an interest in others in the ALF and in the community outside. If my mother could make a good life for herself in what appeared to be a typical high-end ALF, I was sure others like her might do the same. I wasn't thinking only of my mother's future. I was sixty-three when my mother moved from her home. Although I had long acted to be financially secure, only recently had I begun to think about how I would live my life as the years passed.

I was sure I would be in a good position to monitor and to help my mother. I assumed that my education, training, and work enabled me to be an aware observer and a strong advocate. Observing, asking questions, probing for facts, and sensing emotions had been part of my adult life as a reporter for a major daily newspaper, a graduate student in law, a lawyer and law professor, a labor arbitrator and human rights adjudicator, and a writer on public policy questions.

What I discovered was that I had limited ability to influence my mother's experience. Although I constantly sought information related not only to her experiences but to those of other residents, as well as staff and volunteers, I felt powerless to affect the events that hastened her decline and death. If someone with my skills and education could not help a loved one, what would

happen to someone who was less affluent, less assertive, and lacked skill as an advocate?

The not-for-profit assisted living facility where my mother lived was an institution bent on doing good—or at least doing as little harm as possible. In writing this book I describe the pressures that administrators and staff deal with daily. To a considerable extent, however, what I describe reflects my perceptions and those of my mother. Because they may not reflect the intentions of those who ran the ALF, I have changed its name as well as the identities of individuals, and I have not identified the American city where it is located.

In this book I recount my mother's years at Glengrove and my experiences trying to help her live there in a positive way. I evaluate my success or failure in maintaining her quality of life and respecting her wishes. And most important, I examine the assumptions I made—and abandoned—as I helped my mother negotiate life in her new home.

For example, I originally thought I was helping my mother to choose how to live her final years. But on what basis could she choose, and what was my role in effecting that choice? I also assumed that my money would enhance her quality of life, but later I wondered about that.

I was concerned about social isolation. Her quality of life would depend on her sense of security and comfort in her new surroundings. She was a social person and made friends both at Glengrove and outside. She built a deep support system of people among whom there was mutual caring. But could she maintain that community as she became more frail and aged in place? Could an ALF be a place of security? Would she get appropriate medical care that would help her maximize her strengths and cope with her weaknesses? And what about end-of-life decisions? Would the ALF respect her wish to die in place as well as age in place?

Dealing with my mother's final days and then her death was a wrenching event. She and I had never really talked about these

matters. One evening when I came to Glengrove to take her out to dinner, she presented me with a check. She said it was money she had saved over several years and that it was to cover the cost of her funeral. She felt that I had done enough to help her. Almost in passing, she mentioned that she didn't want to be kept alive if she were brain dead. She concluded: "I have no intention of dying anytime soon. . . . Let's go to dinner."

I have often wondered what might have happened if, at the start, I had taken a different approach. What if I had helped her purchase another home, one that could have been renovated for safe use (e.g., with no stairs and with railings along the walls)? What if I had hired the necessary help to enable her to stay in her home? Would these actions have resulted in a better lifestyle? Would they have given her continued independence, including the right to die in her own home with dignity?

For my mother, the answer to these questions now have no meaning. She died in the "sick building" at Glengrove. But I hope that what I learned will help other adult children and their parents understand how to take greater personal control of their lives.

What happens to our parents on their final journey affects us, their adult children. One day we will be making the same journey. How we help our parents may shape how we respond when our children, our friends, or other relatives try to help us. One day most of us will make such choices, or they will be made for us. We travel in our parents' wake.

1 Choice

MY MOTHER'S LIFE CHANGES

In my mother's eighty-ninth year, it seemed only a matter of weeks before I sensed that she could no longer live safely in her home. The suddenness of that realization came as a shock. For more than forty years, she had lived independently in her small home, a two-bedroom bungalow with a garage, basement, and small yard. My mother did not share my concerns. She was her own person, though with the passing years she looked increasingly to me for advice.

She had always seemed a bundle of energy. Under five feet tall, bright-eyed, intelligent, she preferred to listen before talking. She would bide her time. Then, she would speak her mind. She held strong moral and political views with regard to religion, Israel, and her sense of family. She was a hardened Democrat. Franklin Delano Roosevelt could have done no wrong. Morally, Clinton was flawed ("He's a man, just a man") but was still a good president. Being Jewish was important, especially during the High Holy Days. For a Jew, marrying or even fraternizing outside the Jewish religion was wrong. Whatever the issue, Israel was to be supported. Her family, both immediate and extended, was central to her. She always seemed to be there for me, though for decades she worked a forty-hour week.

My mother came from a modern Orthodox Jewish family of five children (four daughters and a son), seemingly dominated by my grandfather. "Seemingly" in the sense, as my mother told

it, that if she or her siblings did any wrong, they could count on my grandmother telling my grandfather and then saying to him in Russian, “Don’t spank the children.” My mother graduated from high school—no small achievement in those post-World War I days.

My father was a loving person with strong views shaped by the realities of adolescent enlistment and service in the trenches of World War I. He had only a fifth-grade education, and during the Depression of the 1930s he lost his job as a shoe store manager and had to labor as an unskilled factory worker. Like my grandfather, he was master of the house—subject to being overridden, usually quietly, by my mother. My father, like my older brother, was a heavy smoker. They both died of lung cancer after long, painful illnesses during which my mother stayed by their side. She grieved deeply and openly, and then got on with her life.

Caring for her home, keeping it spotless, and making improvements had been a major source of pride for my mother. She had no help, nor did she want any. She scrubbed the floors, painted the walls, and shoveled the snow. When she was ill, her wish was to be left alone. She, nature, and God would see to her cure.

There also were times when fast-talking salespeople had taken advantage of her. There was, for example, the “lawn-improvement” company that had promised a greener, more beautiful yard, which it would service. The chemical mix that they sprayed on the yard turned the grass brown, and the maintenance service never materialized. My mother had seen this merely as a bump along the path of daily life. She was aware that there were predators out there who preyed on the weak and vulnerable. She was aware, too, that some of them would even try to steal her identity. “That’s why I don’t give my Social Security number to anyone,” she said. But she did not think such wrongs could happen to her; her outlook was positive.

My mother had many creative outlets. She was known among

relatives and friends—and indeed throughout her neighborhood—as a great baker. Her special holiday packages of strudel were much anticipated. The recipe was her secret, but since I wanted to pass it on to family members, my mother agreed to give it to me, on the condition that the teaching was to be by doing. Everything was to be done from scratch. That meant making the dough, rolling it paper thin, chopping walnuts, sorting and filling pastry rolls. The process took hours. I finished in a sweat. Leaning against the kitchen wall, this little woman, who made strudel as a matter of course several times each year, looked at me with a sweet, sad smile and said, “I’m sorry it was so hard for you.”

My mother had always worked outside the home. Her first full-time job was as a shoe saleswoman, and her boss (for two years before their marriage) was my father. Later, and for much of her adult life until she was forced to retire at sixty-five, she was a top salesperson (of men’s underwear) in the city’s leading department store.

My mother had a love of work and didn’t want to retire. She enjoyed meeting customers and making sales and felt confident that customers would return. Even toward the end of her life, she would comment on the quality of retail service, sometimes praising and sometimes criticizing, but always intimating that she was still a salesperson at heart. Her forced retirement came when the department store for which she worked changed ownership and the president, who used to visit and congratulate her on the sales floor, himself was shown the door.

One day while I was in town visiting my mother soon after she retired, my friend Larry and I met and, over a glass of wine, hatched a plan: Why not give my mother the opportunity to profit from her strudel? Let her see the commercial value in it, and maybe she would have the urge to start a new business that we would be happy to help finance.

Larry made a reservation for dinner at Les Arbres, a well-known local restaurant. We then stopped by and left some of

my mother's strudel (from a box she had given me) with Armand, the maître d', and put some special plans in place.

That evening, my mother and I joined Larry and his wife, Judy, at Les Arbres. We talked and joked through our appetizers and main courses. Then came dessert. Armand said that he had something special for us: there on an elaborately decorated pastry tray was my mother's strudel. She looked surprised, and then she laughed. Armand, rather seriously, said that it was no laughing matter. He already had sold ten pieces at seven dollars each. If my mother would bake more, he would be pleased to feature her strudel as a special dessert. Without hesitating, my mother thanked Armand but firmly said no. Her strudel was for family and friends. She had left the world of paid work. She owned her home, and she had a small pension and Social Security checks to support her.

My mother was frugal, though it seemed that throughout her life there were always more debts than cash to pay them. Still, she managed to make ends meet. Her only real asset was her modest home for which the mortgage had been paid some five years earlier. Except for home improvements, such as central air conditioning and carpeting, she had continued to spend little and to shop for bargains.

She lived contentedly, and if anyone had told her she was living close to the poverty level, she would have been insulted. She saw herself as independent and middle-class, in no small measure because of the independence that her home provided. Indeed, her home, in her eyes, was an estate that she wanted to pass on to my son, Aaron.

I had worried about my mother in retirement. How would she spend her days? Would she become fixated on television? Would solitude lead to depression? I need not have worried. She often had dinner parties for a dozen or more people—a joy to her and her guests. She prepared at least four courses for these meals and served the food on her unmatched but much-envied end-of-line pieces of china. During the last two years before she moved

into Glengrove, my mother relented and allowed some of her guests to help clear the table and wash the dishes. (She had refused the gift of a dishwasher.)

A LIFE CHANGE?

Things changed dramatically about ten months before my mother turned ninety. Until then her world was vibrant and balanced. Even at eighty-nine she took pleasure in traveling by plane from her home to visit me in Toronto, agreeing to the use of a wheelchair in the airport only because she was carrying such a heavy load of strudel.

Yet, in a matter of months death took many of my mother's friends who were important parts of her support system. The death of her family doctor and longtime friend, Walter Gold, saddened her. She had often visited his home and had become a second grandmother to his children. Then she lost her sister, the matriarch of the family. My Aunt Rose was a tiny woman with a great heart and a big car—which she often drove with my mother as a passenger. My mother and Aunt Rose, whose husband had died years before, had been close. And then there was Josephine, her neighbor across the street, who frequently came by for late-night chats. Aunt Rose and Josephine died quickly within weeks of each other.

My mother also witnessed the end of the neighborhood she had known. Her synagogue, which my grandfather had founded, had moved miles away. Aunt Rose used to drive there with my mother; now there was no readily available transportation. So, too, her favorite kosher-style food store posted a notice that it would soon move to a distant location.

My mother's situation—an elderly parent living alone and losing her support system—impelled me to begin some general reading and to converse with similarly situated friends. What I learned from my initial research was perhaps obvious to many people: the experience of changing neighborhoods and worlds is widely shared. It is, of course, the nature of any community to

change. For older residents, however, change becomes more pronounced as families move away and friends pass on. They respond by drawing the wagons of their life into ever tighter circles. So long as there is the intimacy of close family ties, basic good health, and the desire to live, positive approaches to aging and to getting on with life—even including death—exist.

But for me the reality was complicated by distance. My mother's home—and that meant her friends, family, and surroundings since birth—was a U.S. city almost a thousand miles away. Mine, for more than thirty-five years, had been Toronto. I telephoned regularly and visited often, but I could not be there on a daily basis to help and, if necessary, monitor her well-being. Of course, some elderly parents do move in with their children, but for my mother, a move to a distant city would have ranked as among the worst of possible alternatives.¹

What I wanted for my mother was, I believe, what she wanted for herself: her own space, freedom to structure her own use of time, and the ability to care for herself. So long as she remained healthy, there was a good possibility she could remain in her own home. She ate well, preparing healthy food that she enjoyed and continuing to create new recipes. She had designed an at-home exercise program involving the use of a bungee cord. Still, her cholesterol had gone up to worrisome levels. Also, laser surgery to remove cataracts really hadn't seemed to help what was a degenerative condition. Reading, which my mother enjoyed, had been sharply curtailed.

My mother got to the eye surgeon (or, rather, he got to my mother) before I was aware of what he had proposed. She had heard of him through a television solicitation and from some acquaintances. She accepted what she heard. In both his TV advertising and his interview with my mother, he promised that the laser procedure would be painless and effective. He said nothing about the recovery period and, like many patents, she didn't ask. He promised that my mother's already limited sight would be restored to 20/20. What is more, on the day of the