

“Listening to the silence”

It is said that stories were invented to make children fall asleep and to wake adults up. This is why I want to share with all of you this story, my story, to wake up whoever is asleep. I want to dedicate it to all the people that, just like me, enjoyed looking after a relative that was suffering from a mental illness and that, because of love, they stopped doing it, just like I did.

I had been looking after my mum for four years. I say four years because it was back then when I decided that she should live in my house. I became her main caregiver after she suffered a cerebral aneurysm. I like to think, and I am sure of it, that I have been looking after my mum for my whole life, but the only thing that has changed is the way I do it. Looking after a loved one is something altruistic; it is solidarity, love, dedication and doing your best depending on the possibilities and circumstances of the moment. During these last years, living with me meant sharing everything I had, and that included living with my daughters and my husband. Because of this situation, I requested in the Family Court her legal incapacity, which meant that my mum would have a legal guardian, a representative that would be responsible of the decisions that affected her.

In this way, we both started a wonderful journey where our family bonds became even stronger. We were not only sharing our home, but a family life project. Every morning I would wake up willing to do whatever was necessary so she could be alright. I know that all I gave her during those years was what she needed, the right thing to do,

because every time I look back and remember everything we lived together, I feel my heart is full of joy.

So until this point my life was almost, just almost like a story. But as in every story, there is always a moment when things go wrong. This is what happened last year, when I had to make the hardest choice of my life. At the beginning of said year my mum suffered a thrombosis in her already damaged brain, and the daily life became so complicated that I, her only caregiver, saw myself overwhelmed, tired, and what is worse, I started to feel that sadness had taken over my life, our lives, which made me start thinking about the possibility of turning to what they call “respite care”. At the beginning it was so hard, but little by little I started to understand how important this was for her, for me and for my family. In this way, little by little I started creating silence in my life, trying to listen to every signal that was out there and that had to be analysed only when you were calmed. I gave myself some time and I trusted more and more in myself. I let my mind guide me saying “do not worry, do not let anyone make you feel guilty, this is the hardest path to follow but it is the safest, stay here”.

In my story there were no bad stepmothers and I did not need a prince charming either. All I needed was a fairy godmother so I could ask her to give me my mum back with her magic. Even if it was for only some minutes, I wanted to see her again; that woman that I knew so well, that clearheaded mother that could listen so well, that could talk, that could empathise and think straight, that could give and share, that could love. I needed to talk to her during some minutes, I had to tell her what was going on, I wanted to know her opinion so together we could find a better future for

her. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and waited for the magic of the stories to come. Just like in the story of Cinderella, before the strokes of midnight ended and brought me back to reality, I run into HER again. Mentally, I grabbed her hand, I looked at her in the eyes and I told her, without being dramatic, everything that had happened and what could happen if she went to a retirement home for an indefinite time. Those were the shortest but most intense minutes I could ever imagine, but it was the time I needed to hear my mum say “thank you, my daughter; do not worry, everything will be alright” with a sweet look in her eyes. I opened my eyes and came back to reality, knowing from that moment on that her gratitude included not only what was left behind but what was yet to come.

Days later I signed the papers needed for her to join a nursing home where everyone looks after her very well, where I can go and see her, where she is happy to see me, where there are days when she does not recognise me but I still now she is my mum, the person that I love so much, doesn't matter where or how she is. This Christmas I gave her a comfortable blanket so she could still feel my warm. I want this blanket to be mine when, in some years, my husband or my daughters will probably have to make decisions for me; but they will not have to think about it for long as I have already taught them how to do it. I really hope things stay like this, because it is said that our decisions have an impact in our future, and that at the same time we are who we are because of the decisions we made in the past. If the decision made is the right one, we will see it in the future, in some time. For now, I can only say that some months after she joined the retirement home we all feel a bit better.

This story will have a happy ending when all of us who have loved her have learnt to live accepting unconditionally what is unavoidable.

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