

Dear Sarah Ann,

Here I am, thinking about you again. Enjoying the memories, just like you taught me to. The Sunday afternoons at the skating rink. The day trips to the boardwalk in Ocean City for rides and cotton candy. The taffy pulls in your mother's kitchen. The secret pen pal letters and presents you sent when I had my appendix out in third grade. I wonder how, after all that love, I moved away and forgot you for so long.

I remember the day I found your number at the retirement home. "Sarah Ann? Do you remember me? It's Betsy." And you welcomed me back like I hadn't been gone for almost forty years.

That's when you started teaching me about growing old. "The memories are so important," you'd say. "They're what we live on." Memories were your gold, and you were careful to live on the good ones -- the ones that brought you joy. The other ones - the ones about being deserted as a young bride and raising your little girl without a father and working from sunup to sundown to make ends meet - those you either found thank-yous in or you just left them alone.

Every time I visited you in those latter years, you gave me gifts from the memories. Once, when we were talking about the taffy pulls, you asked me if I remembered what you and your mother used to call me back then. "Sunbeam. We always called you Sunbeam, because that's how it was when you walked in. Like a ray of sunshine."

You gave me your memories of my parents almost every visit. Your favorite one was the time they came to your house all dressed up in their fancy new clothes from Newport. Your mother looked them over and said, "Clare, you look beautiful. Carlton, you look like a damn fool." You laughed at that one for decades.

There was one thing you said almost every time I visited. "Bets," you'd say, "you're blessed with wonderful parents." Then you'd tell me about all the things they'd done for you over the years, even back before I was born. You loved to catalogue their kindnesses. "They're good people, Bets. They're good people." It was as if you didn't want me to miss how rich I was.

We talked about family, too. About your grandchildren and great-grandchildren and all the far-away places they'd lived and visited. You were proud of them, but I always suspected that, deep down, you felt kind of sorry for them. You never understood why they couldn't just be content on good Eastern Shore soil like you were.

You taught me a lot by the things you wouldn't talk about, too. Whenever I'd try to tell you about our business ventures, your attention would drift until the conversation turned back to friends and family. Things that mattered. Things that made the kind of memories you could live on.

I remember when we sent you helium balloons and you tied them to your walker and brought your birthday with you to the dining room three times a day for as long as they could fly. And I remember how we'd set up the little tree in your room at Christmas, and folks would stop by all the time just to watch the lights. The first year we did it, you said it was the best Christmas you could remember. You were, by choice, easy to please.

Sometimes I can't help wishing we could have just one more visit. I'm tempted to say if only. If only I'd brought my children to see you. If only I hadn't missed all those years between the taffy pulls and the retirement home. But you would hate that. You never did have time for if only.

The last time I saw you, we both knew you'd soon be gone. We knew the cancer was finally winning. It was Christmas again, and our little tree was all lit up, but you never noticed. I sat down beside your bed, and you held my hand, and I cried. You didn't try to stop me. "It's alright, darlin'. You go ahead."

And here I am, remembering you and crying again. I'm not trying to talk myself out of the tears, either, because I know what you'd say. "It's alright, darlin'. You go ahead."