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OPINION

'American Fiction,' Alzheimer's, and mid-century moms

We bemoan the onset of Alzheimer's, yet having seen 'American Fiction' twice, I can finally consider the possibility that my mom had some kind of disconnected peace, absolved at last of her parental responsibilities.

By **Karen Stabner** Updated February 26, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Tracee Ellis Ross stars as Lisa and Leslie Uggams as her mother, Agnes, in the Academy Award-nominated film "American Fiction." In the movie, Uggams' character is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. CLAIRE FOLGER

My mother was in bed, resting, and I was sprawled alongside her.

"Look at her hair," she said, in a carefree tone I wasn't used to hearing. "Isn't it beautiful?"

I rolled over to see who had entered the room; maybe the new nurse, who had long, wavy hair. Nope. The only people in the room were my mom, me, and the caregiver, who had many remarkable attributes, though beautiful hair was not among them.

The caregiver smiled. "It's true," she said. "Karen has very pretty hair."

My mom kept it up. She liked the way the sun coming through the window picked up a little red in my hair, a little gold, many colors, not just brown, and, oh, it was so shiny. She was quite pleased that she'd alerted us. And then, job done, she fell silent again.

A little context: My mother had complained about my hair since I was 8 and she sentenced me to a pixie cut because my ponytail and bangs were too much trouble. She never let up. It was always too long for her taste, and for heaven's sake, couldn't I do something with it? Now, suddenly, she loved it. I could barely catch my breath, because this wasn't like her. She had always run a tight emotional ship.

She died six years ago, after as many years with Alzheimer's disease, but she floated to the surface when I saw the film "[American Fiction](#)." I laughed along with everyone else at the book publishing send-up — but I winced, even as I chuckled, as Thelonious "Monk" Ellison's mom began her long goodbye. Anyone with a family member with Alzheimer's knows what a patient goes through before arriving at what my mom's caregiver called her peaceful place. It's a transition marked by anger and confusion, as memory betrays, and betrays again, until there's no fight left.

My mother eventually forgot what she was trying so hard to remember and settled into a new, calmer space that seemed not to have a past. A nice irony: She lived in the moment without trying, without meditation or therapy or guided breathing. I once interviewed an actor whose kitchen clock read "NOW" at every number's space. That woman's life goal was my mom's default state.

On a previous visit, she had spoken to me with delight about her grown daughter Karen, who coincidentally lived in the same city I did. When I pointed out that I was her grown daughter Karen, she laughed and said, "Don't be ridiculous." The doctor explained that her memories of the recent me were gone, as she unspooled further and further into the past. In her current frame of reference, her daughter could never be as old as I was. The logic was inexorable. Someday she would not be a mom at all; there would be no memories left of my sister and me.

She liked the sun shining not on her daughter's hair but on a stranger's.

The same thing started to happen to Monk's mother, as I sat there in the darkened theater, which led me to an idea I did not want to contemplate but couldn't avoid: Both she and my mom seemed to be happier having forgotten their lives, or were at least more carefree than they were before they fell ill. My mother had always behaved as though the world would crumble if she ever stopped fretting — and yet here she was, comfy, smiling, looking forward to the afternoon applesauce and cookie, wearing cozy sweats she never would've considered back in the days of fashion and make-up, of the hairdresser and the right belt to go with her outfit.

She was a member in good standing of the Greatest Generation, a traditionalist who managed the home front while my dad worked to pay for it. By my math, the "American Fiction" mom, who first appeared in the 2001 source novel, "Erasure," would've been almost the same age, either late Greatest or an early member of the Silent Generation.

Women of that vintage faced a tricky challenge: Good mothers raised daughters to believe we could reject their lives and define a different one, and sons who too often dismissed them as relics of the past. I grew up in what I think of, now, as a fulcrum family, where the pressure on women like my mom — to stick to the script so that her girls could rewrite it —

must've been tremendous. How much easier to reside in a parallel universe where the only pressure was to be awake when the applesauce arrived or to take a five-minute walk outside with a nice person holding her around the waist.

We bemoan the onset of Alzheimer's because it robs a person of their very being, and if they can't be themselves anymore, then what's the point? But that's us, broadcasting from the world we know. For all I can tell, my mom might have enjoyed being responsible for nothing, to no one. I have no idea if she was aware that her job description had changed; maybe her newfound peace came from thinking that this was how life had always been, or maybe the very definition of thinking no longer applied. The rest of us assumed she was miserable because we couldn't imagine anything else and told ourselves that if she came to, for a moment, she'd demand that we show her the escape hatch right that second. Still, we can't say for sure.

What if most of the suffering belongs to the witnesses, the ones who say, "I'm your daughter," or son, only to realize we will never, ever be able to convince our mothers of that fact. Maybe the pain is ours alone, when we hear a mom who has stopped censuring herself say something cruel we wish she hadn't, or something loving we only wish we'd heard before.

"American Fiction" does not make anything easy for us even as we laugh our socks off; not work, not family dynamics, not race, romance, aging, none of it. There is no resolution of the sort that often involves Julia Roberts and George Clooney being happier than they were when your popcorn bag was full. The consensus is that "American Fiction" is a very funny, very smart, very provocative movie, and a showcase for Jeffrey Wright, which would be reason enough to celebrate. But on another, subversive level, as Monk points out, it's about ambiguity — about messy reality at a point in time when we are too quick to lock into our beliefs and refuse to budge.

Nobody's life is tidy. Six years out, having seen "American Fiction" twice since its release, I can finally consider the possibility that my mom had some kind of disconnected peace, absolved at last of her parental responsibilities — even as I berate myself for such baseless speculation, the flip side of bemoaning her fate. I don't know what the truth is, which is the point. The film's cognitive subplot rattled me with every beat, as I waited, like any well-trained moviegoer, for the story to wrap itself up. It did not; I defy you to tell me with any certainty what happened 10 seconds after the screen went black. No easy out. You know. Like real life.

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