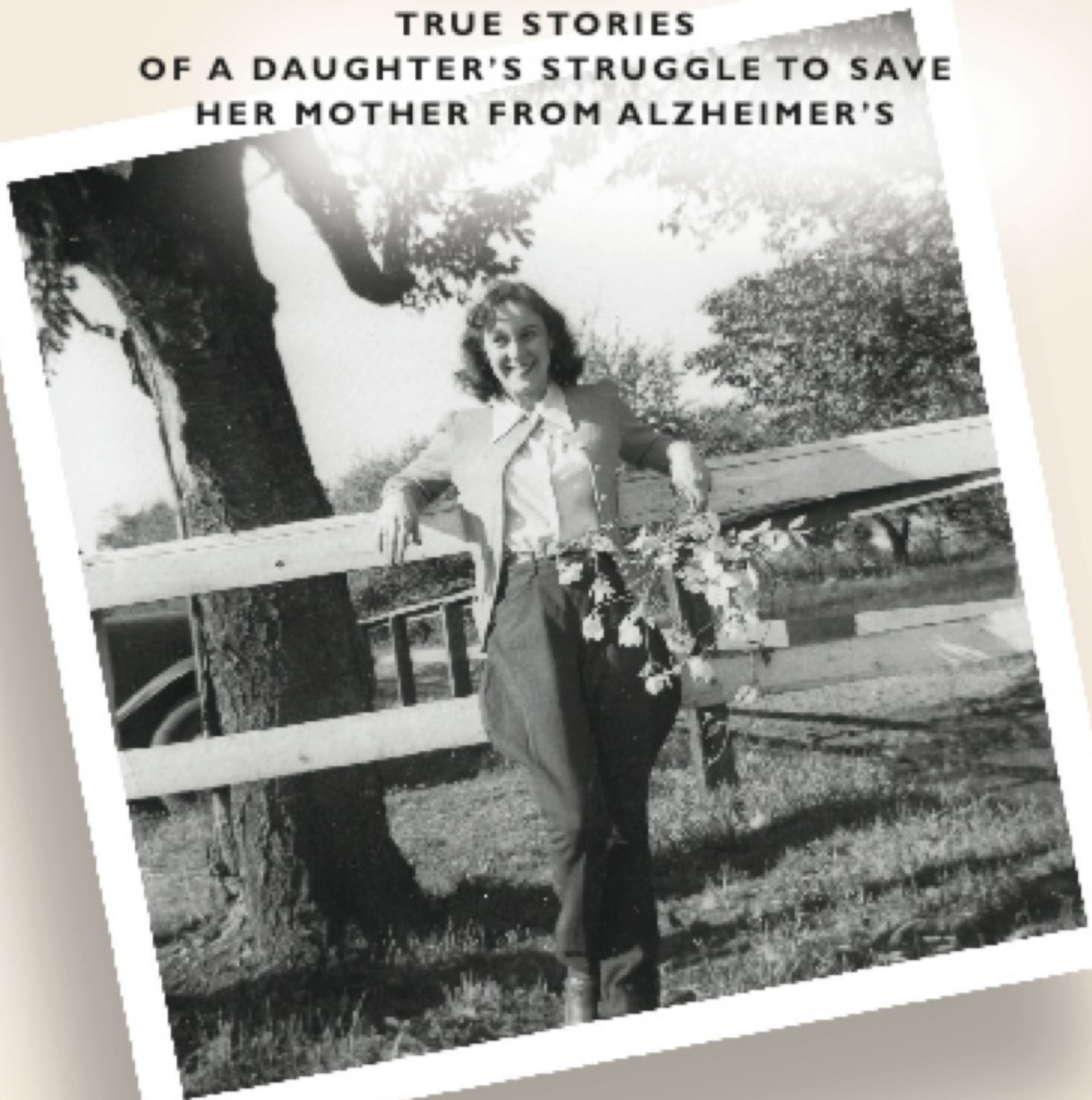


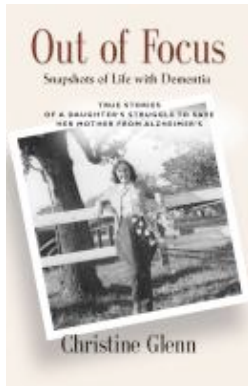
Out of Focus

Snapshots of Life with Dementia

TRUE STORIES
OF A DAUGHTER'S STRUGGLE TO SAVE
HER MOTHER FROM ALZHEIMER'S



Christine Glenn



Marie was a vibrant member of the "Greatest Generation" until forgetfulness deepened into dementia in her 80's. She fought for independence, but a car accident triggered the beginning of an unwelcome journey.

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Christine Glenn

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ISBN 978-1-62646-318-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

Chapter Two

Insidious Creep

“Until you have stared Alzheimer’s in the face, you don’t understand the frustration, fear, and grief that comes with it.”

-Sandra Day O’Connor

Mom was always at the center of our small family. She was loving, active, managed the home on a limited budget, and took care of all the family finances. I have distinct memories of her balancing the checkbook each month to the penny. Literally. She paid all the bills and kept meticulous records.

I learned to waste nothing as I watched Mom save twist ties and rubber bands and reuse paper bags from the grocery store. She would save tiny, used remnants of soap and sandwich them together to get the maximum use from each bar. Dinner leftovers were transformed into the next night’s meal in creative ways that always looked delectable. Nothing was thrown out or wasted in our house. We weren’t poor or rich; we were a typical American middle class family in the

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1950's and that meant one wage earner (Dad) and a stay-at-home Mom.

And Mom loved her life. She was happy to be a housewife and mother; she had dealt with her girlhood dreams for the most part and was content. Mom would never have been a bra burner in the women's movement that was on the horizon. She made home life warm and secure and happy for my father and me. It was a great childhood from my limited perspective.

My mother's life revolved around the home and those in it. Those things enriched and limited her world. While the family remained in that young stage and all were still at home, life was good. But when the inevitable changes came, I can't help but think that Mom was ill prepared to deal with the challenges. First, I went off to college and later married. That was a painful period for her. But Mom and Dad had a strong marriage and adjusted to the empty nest. They were truly each other's best friends and they were lucky to have over 50 years together. Then Dad became sick. He was diagnosed with cancer at 78, had surgery and other treatments and lived another 5 years. During those years, Mom was his primary caregiver. She did so willingly and lovingly and I know she was glad to be there. Her life, however, was totally focused on Dad

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and when he eventually weakened and died, it was life altering for her. She often said that she thought she would go first...a curious assumption considering the statistics on longevity among men and women. She seemed blissfully unaware of this reality.

After his death, Mom had a spurt of energy that seemed to be the result of freedom after so many years of caretaking. But once that spurt was over she seemed at loose ends. She never had outside interests and life became empty and frustrating for her. Not one to reach out to others, her world began to shrink month by month. I noticed memory lapses but chalked it up to age and brushed off any concern. After all, I sometimes forgot why I went into a room in my own home. What was I looking for? We all have lapses; it seemed normal.

Then one day our lives changed direction. I received a call at work and heard Mom's tone of controlled panic as she explained that she drove the car through the front of her house. Trying to picture this event conjured up all sorts of images from a totaled car and injured driver to complete dining room destruction. Following a frantic schedule rearrangement, I left work and made the short drive to Mom's at record speed. My mind was reeling as I pulled

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up outside Mom's patio home. There in front of me was her aging Mercury Cougar wedged into the front wall of the carport just under the picture window which was remarkably untouched. Mom was unscathed physically but still shaking from the scare.

First, I sat her down to double-check her condition. When I was sure she was not hurt, I squeezed into the Cougar's driver's seat and backed the car out into the carport. A quick survey of inside damage revealed the wall neatly split but the window above still in its moorings and undamaged. The car stopped just short of the dining room table; nothing inside was ruined except the wall. Even the tile floor was unchipped. The car had only minor scratches - no broken headlights or dents. The first phone call was to the home/car insurance company, and I was stunned when the agent on the other end of the line expressed no surprise at the accident.

"We see it all the time," she said calmly, "they (meaning elders) drive through the house pretty frequently." Really? This was news to me.

With all the details taken care of and appointments set up, I made two cups of tea and sat down with Mom to replay the accident. After an hour of talking the

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best explanation she could give me was that she had blacked out as she drove in the carport, hit the accelerator, and run the car through the wall. She had no memory of the incident and "woke up" sitting in the car in the dining room. At this point, Mom collected her purse and a few bags, got out of the car, unlocked the front door and walked into the house. She saw the damage to the dining room wall and the front of the car sticking through the wall and immediately called me.

My first thought was relief that she did not black out and hit the accelerator while in traffic. She could have killed herself... or someone else...easily. At the very least it would have been a serious accident. I briefly recalled a similar incident not long before in southern California when an elderly man lost control and ran his car through a street fair killing several people. Next I realized that if this was a "black out" as my mother described it, there had to be some serious underlying reason and we had to find out what it was. We had a problem.

All this sounds dire, I know, and it was. But some good came from this home invasion believe it or not. First, Mom was genuinely scared by the accident and knew she could no longer drive. She told me to sell the car and I wasted no time taking her up on this

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suggestion. I had been struggling for some time with the fear of her driving - she had gotten lost at least once before and was driving so slowly that she was a real hazard on the road. But that car was independence and she was not about to give that up. I could understand...I wouldn't want to surrender my independence either. The accident provided the perfect opportunity to get rid of the car with Mom's total compliance. But I knew it had to be fast. The car had to disappear before she changed her mind. So, it did.

There was more good that came from this as I mentioned before. This might not seem like information that falls under the category of "good" but it did set our lives in another, more accurate direction. After several doctor's visits and multiple tests, the doctor determined that Mom had a TIA - a transient ischemic attack- what is often called a silent stroke. This explained the "black out" and set the stage for the dementia that was to come.

The doctor further explained that there may have been many of these silent strokes and this one was just the most visible and dangerous. These strokes did not impair her physically, but mentally Mom was losing brain power and the increasing memory loss was a sign of

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that. Shortly after the accident she began to have trouble with numbers. First it was the checkbook - I noticed her trying to subtract the entries in the check register and watched as she struggled over even simple subtraction. In a few weeks the checkbook told an interesting story. In those few days following the accident, Mom had lost the ability to add/subtract and this got rapidly worse. Soon she could not copy numbers accurately and one day she told me that she weighed 180 pounds - a good trick for a woman who couldn't break 100. Shortly following that, Mom started having trouble with dollar bills. At first she struggled over the numbers on the bills but eventually got all the one's, five's, ten's together. Later I realized that she couldn't tell the difference between the numbers on the bills - a one, a five, a twenty - they were all the same. Now it was not safe for her to shop or pay for anything with cash. The doctor explained that the part of her brain that dealt with numbers had likely been damaged and she would never regain those abilities.

Another warning that the doctor gave me was that these types of silent strokes often precede a larger stroke. Or Mom could suffer from a series of smaller TIAs that would each further decrease her abilities. I wished that these strokes were not silent; I wished that they screamed out each time they hit. Honestly, it

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would have been easier to deal with the stages if I had known they were coming. There was something insidious about these silent thieves that crept in and stole pieces of my mother's life from her. The insidious creep also stole my mother from me and I resented it.

We made it through the home invasion. Insurance took care of the house repairs; the car had minor scratches that were polished out before the sale. Mom recovered from the shock but her ability with numbers began to shrink even more. Soon she couldn't tell the time from the wall clock. Television channel numbers were like Greek to her and the remote control was impossible. She confused my phone number with her social security number. Any number-based idea was out of whack. But otherwise she hit a plateau and stayed on it for some time afterward. On the other hand, I was starting up a learning curve steeper than any I had ever experienced. This was the first time I stared dementia in the face and it scared me.

Mom forgot the entire car incident the next day.



Mom with her brother on leave from the army during WWII

“Mild cognitive impairment is the stage between normal forgetfulness due to aging and the development of dementia...The early symptoms of dementia can include getting lost on familiar routes. As the dementia becomes worse, symptoms are more obvious and interfere with the ability to take care of yourself. The symptoms may include poor judgment and loss of ability to recognize danger.”

- from MedlinePlus, National Institutes of Health

Chapter Three

Frequent Fliers

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt

Nothing starts the day off like getting a phone call that begins:

“Hello, this is the Scottsdale Police Department calling about your mother.”

Once your heart starts to beat again, you can listen to the rest of the conversation. Fortunately I was on the phone with a very kind and experienced officer who said immediately, “She’s alright.”

Then he unfolded the story of my own “frequent flier” as the PD liked to call elder citizens who wandered away from home and couldn’t find their way back. Mom had decided to walk to the Safeway to pick up some groceries. Keep in mind that we live in Scottsdale, Arizona, which is located in the hottest part of the state in the Sonoran Desert. In the hottest

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summer months, it is not unusual for the noontime temperature to reach 110 degrees. The sun blazes and even the fittest of us do not exercise or stay out in the midday sun. It is not safe.

Mom chose to walk to Safeway at noon. She had her purse and made it safely to the store which is about five blocks from her patio home. She bought some groceries including canned goods, eggs, and a bottle of wine. Then she took her grocery bags and her purse and started the walk home.

Picture for a moment an 83-pound woman of 90 years carrying two armfuls of groceries and a purse as she walks five full blocks in 110-degree heat. The mind boggles; I honestly don't know how she made it as far as she did. But at some point in her journey, she either blacked out or temporarily lost awareness. She dropped her bags, breaking the wine bottle and a dozen eggs. Her purse fell nearby and she began to wander. She was lost in a sea of patio homes that all looked the same and couldn't find her way home. She made it to a house a few blocks from her street and knocked on a door. When the owner responded, Mom was disoriented, clearly lost, and had no identification. They got her out of the heat, gave her something to drink, and called the

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Scottsdale PD. Thank goodness for the kindness of strangers.

After some discussion Mom was able to give the officer my home number - how she remembered it I will never know. Once I heard the details from this amazing policeman who treated my mother with such gentleness, I jumped in the car and raced over to pick her up. She was disoriented, overheated, but otherwise safe so I thanked the neighbor profusely and took Mom home.

After she cleaned up and rehydrated, I broached the subject of making decisions. We discussed that it was probably not the best idea to walk to the store in the middle of summer in Scottsdale. We discussed that 110-degree heat is not safe. We discussed that the groceries are too heavy to carry for five blocks. None of these issues raised any concern for mom; she could not recognize danger in her actions. We discussed the missing purse; she said she had some cash in the wallet. Oh well...that was a lost cause.

Or so I thought. This is where the story gets interesting and takes an unexpected turn. About two days later we received a phone call from a man who had found Mom's wallet. He wanted to drop it off and explained that he also found the groceries but they

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were pretty much ruined from the heat. He was familiar with the neighborhood because he had parents who lived nearby. So, I agreed and he came by shortly after with the wallet in hand. He was very modest as I thanked him and said it was the right thing to do. I managed to get his name and address before he left.

Once the door closed, we opened the wallet to see if anything was missing. Every item was still there including over \$500.00 in cash that Mom had squirreled away. Unbelievable. It was not only unbelievable that she was walking around with that amount of money, but also amazing that it was returned in tact. I thought that we had witnessed a little miracle in the face of such a scare.

Mom did not wander again - it was her only foray into the land of frequent fliers. I had to do something for the miracle man who would not take a reward, so I bought him a gift card for Safeway and expressed my thanks in a card. We definitely dodged a bullet that day.

Mom forgot the whole episode one day later.

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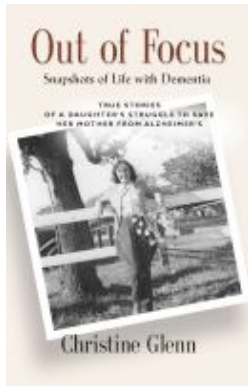
Epilogue: There are a variety of location devices on the market that can help find frequent fliers. One form is a pendant with a panic button that notifies a central dispatcher when pressed. I purchased this for Mom years earlier and she threw it out after a week. She said she didn't like that thing around her neck. Another option is a watch with a GPS tracking device. These are available at Amazon.com and many other sites, but getting the dementia patient to wear them consistently is the challenge. There are also door and motion alarms available. Of course no single device works in all cases, and it may be a combination of these items that are best for you.



Vacationing with the family, circa 1965

“Brain changes that occur in Alzheimer’s disease (or dementia) can affect the way you act and how you feel. People with Alzheimer’s or dementia may experience distrust in others, anxiety, and wandering.”

-from Mayo Clinic Alzheimer’s caregiving newsletter



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