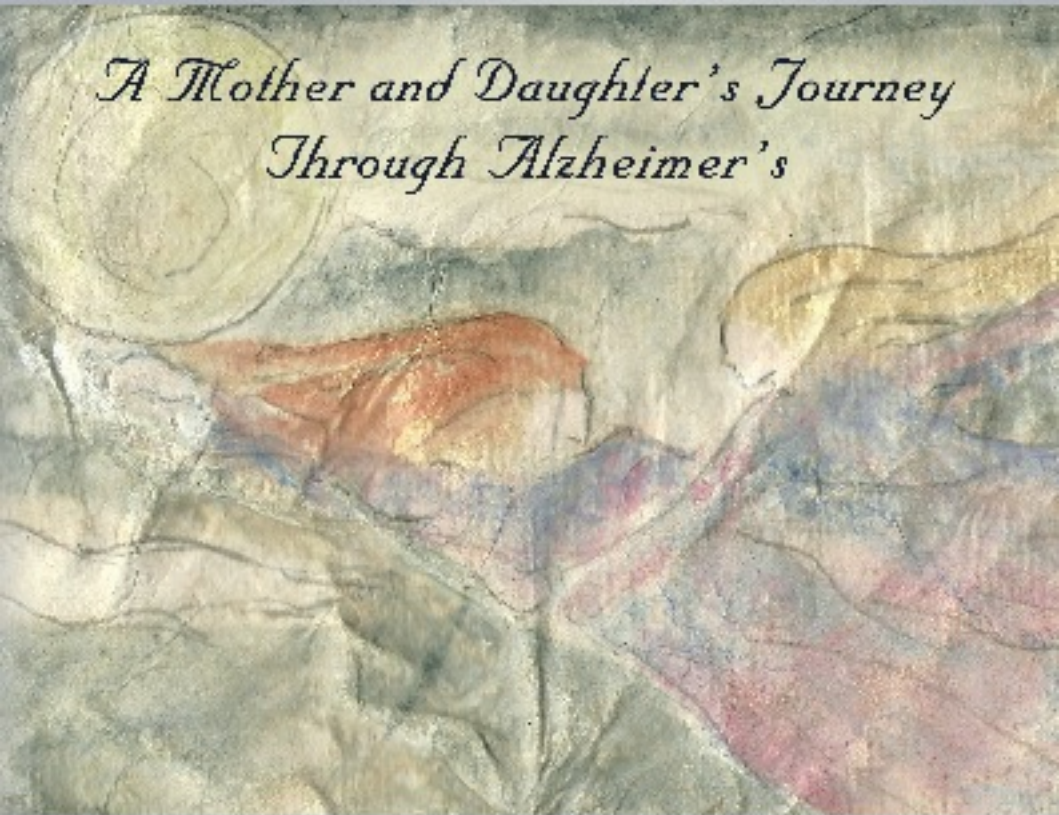
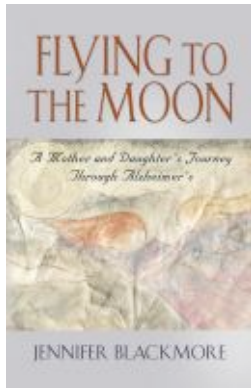


FLYING TO THE MOON

*A Mother and Daughter's Journey
Through Alzheimer's*



JENNIFER BLACKMORE



FLYING TO THE MOON: A Mother and Daughter's Journey Through Alzheimer's is a memoir about the enduring devotion of a daughter and her beloved mother, their lives imperiled by an abusive marriage and a debilitating disease. Set in vibrant, multicultural Miami, this affectionate account touches on universal themes of loss, survival and empowerment. Poignant, honest and inspiring, *Flying to the Moon* offers hope to everyone affected in some way by this tragic affliction.

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Jennifer Blackmore

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Prologue

Little pieces of paper, napkins, envelopes and yellow sticky Post-its filled with scribbled words stare up at me. I wrote these in fleeting, stolen moments of inspiration, desperation and, ultimately, sadness.

Days, weeks and years pass, as these little bursts of light emerge through the wall that safeguards me from the strife that was my marriage and from the anguish of witnessing the ravages of Alzheimer's disease that, fragment by fragment, erased the mind of my beloved mother.

I spread these familiar pieces of paper about my bed again, shuffling them and recalling, "It's all waiting there for you, Jenna Doll," my mother says, encouraging me, helping me to find my way home. I record her words on a 3"x5" scrap of paper.

"The world is your oyster, you know," she tells me late one afternoon, observing my exhaustion from my work and home life. Later that night I write her words on an envelope and place it alongside my bed.

Inscribed on a P.F. Chang napkin, "Your beauty is troubled if it cannot play."

Other notes to self include, "Enjoy her presence and wisdom!" And my favorite, "Mom and I talk brilliant nonsense."

This is our story.

The Announcement

“You know, Jenna, I think I’m losing my mind.”

Ivy makes this announcement as we sit in the family room on a Sunday morning watching *Meet the Press*. I see fear and desperation in her eyes as she grips her head with both hands.

I’m not shocked by her announcement, having witnessed my mother’s struggles over the past few years. How many times I’ve watched her get lost in familiar places, forget what she said from one minute to the next, search for a word she is unable to retrieve.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I respond. “Don’t worry. I think I’m losing my mind, too.”

Leaning forward, she props her arms on her legs, folds her hands and regards me intently. With a twinkle in her bright blue eyes she smiles and says, “To be honest, I’m tired of it anyway.”

We laugh; as we often do these days – it helps us cope.

I am being honest too, when I tell her I think I’m losing my mind. Working full-time while taking care of her, living with a dysfunctional stepfamily and trying to make a bad marriage work has taken its toll. Somehow I’ve lost myself – and lost my way.

Ivy stares at me for a moment, stands up and puts her skinny arms around me. We stand together for a few minutes, holding each other.

“Doll, let’s go out on the town, shall we?” she says with a lively voice.

She loves that phrase. I think it reminds her of more carefree days, and I go along, knowing there is no turning back.

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“That sounds like a grand idea, Mom!”

We spend the afternoon at Cauley Square, a historic Florida community in southern Miami-Dade County sprinkled with small cottages hand-built in the 1800s by pioneers.

The cottages have been renovated and converted into antique shops, restaurants and artists’ studios. Over the years hurricanes have pummeled these to pieces like matchsticks, but its essence prevails. I feel an affinity with the place, having survived Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

I hold my mother’s hand as we stroll through its canopied streets lined with giant ficus trees, Royal Poincianas bursting with fiery red-orange blossoms and pink and red bougainvillea bushes. We step onto the wood porch of the Tea Room and smile at the bas-relief mural covering a wall, a profile of a mother and daughter dressed in turn-of-the-century attire sitting across from each other at a café table, drinking tea. We’re reminded of simpler times.

I open the screen door and we walk hand-in-hand into the foyer. An uneven Florida pine floor is covered with Oriental rugs in various sizes and colors. The interior is filled with white wicker furniture, antiques and china plates and trays painted with red, pink and yellow roses lining the walls. Delicate lace curtains cover the windows. It reminds me of trips to my grandmother’s house, whom I visited often as a little girl.

Her name was Linnie, but we called her Mammy. Our relationship was sweet and simple, unlike her more complicated relationship with Ivy. When they were together, I rarely sensed a feeling of warmth between them. Mammy had paid for Ivy’s two brothers’ college education, and I suspect my mother resented having to

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work for seven years to pay her own way, though she never admitted this.

I used to sit for hours on her living room floor playing with pennies she stored in a jumbo-sized Pond's Cold Cream jar. I loved to turn it upside down and watch dozens of pennies topple out and bounce onto the floor like a miniature waterfall. My little fingers spread them over the carpet with the excitement of an artist putting paint to canvas. I formed all kinds of images with them: horses and cats, circus performers, landscapes with buildings and trees. I created a magical world with those pennies.

Mammy loved to garden and grew rhubarb in her back yard. She baked the most beautiful pies, topped with a pie crust carefully pinched at its edges and adorned with graceful swirls she sliced with a knife. I learned from her how to roll the dough and seal the top and bottom crusts with my forefinger and thumbs. She let me try my hand at the swirls, but mine were no match for hers.

The Tea Room has beautiful pies, too. Whenever Ivy and I go out it feels like a celebration, and this time is no different. We order glasses of chardonnay, quiche, homemade tomato soup and tea sandwiches made with banana nut bread filled with cream cheese and olives. The cooks cut off the crusts the way Ivy used to when she hosted her bridge club parties. Memories of grandmothers, mothers and daughters fill the air with sweetness.

We laugh and put our worries aside, at least for the afternoon.



You know, Jenna, I think I'm losing my mind.

Lost and Found

Ivy began to become disoriented, whether walking or driving, when she was still living alone in Ohio. She always made light of it, as though it were an adventure we didn't understand.

"What's all the fuss about?"

It's Saturday afternoon, and we decide to see *Titanic*, the movie now playing at the Falls, a lush, elegantly landscaped Miami mall with shops on either side of streaming waterfalls and one of our favorite destinations. The Falls reminds Ivy of her older brother, a landscape architect, and we share his love of plants.

We sit halfway down, close to the aisle, drink our Sprites and share a small bag of popcorn. Time passes, and I'm captivated. The ship is starting to sink and Leonardo de Caprio and Kate Winslet hang from the bow, preparing for their descent into the dark, frigid waters of the North Atlantic.

"All this water – I have to go to the bathroom."

This is the best part of the movie, and I don't want to leave. A small voice tells me to go with her, but I ignore it.

"Come right back, Mom."

"I'll be all right."

After she leaves, the voice in my head becomes louder. *That was a mistake; you should have gone with her.* I turn to the back of the theater every few seconds waiting for her to reappear. Five minutes pass. The path from apprehension to fear to panic is instantaneous. *I shouldn't have let her go alone. I'm a bad daughter.*

The drumbeat of my heart warns me of impending doom, my mouth turns to sandpaper. I'm not in a movie

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theater anymore. Feeling the terror of both a toddler separated from Mommy and a mother who has lost her child, I bolt out of the seat and start to search. A teen-aged ticket taker in a red vest jokes with a co-worker as I approach.

With a shaky voice I ask, "Have you seen a small elderly woman dressed in light blue?"

He shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders. "No, sorry."

I circle the lobby, asking anyone in a red vest the same question.

"She sometimes gets confused. She has short white hair and light blue eyes," I ask everyone and nobody.

We had shopped earlier at Chico's, leaving our purchases while we went to the movie. I think that maybe she went back there, confused.

I'm in full panic mode now, thinking *I'm never going to see her again*, but push away that thought as I enter Chico's.

"Did my mother come back here? Remember, we were here about two hours ago?"

"I'm sorry, she didn't. Is everything all right?" I shake my head, and then take the bag containing our purchases and leave.

Fear is beginning to take hold of me as I encounter a security guard, but I'm still coherent enough to tell him what has happened. He asks for a complete description, and I repeat it – twice. He alerts others on his radio while I pace, walk in circles, search, and search some more.

Please be okay, Mommy.

Mall security has alerted the staff at the theater by now, and another ticket taker comes up to me.

"How long has it been since your mother left?"

I somehow find a voice, small and tremulous, like the panicked passengers' voices on the Titanic.

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“Um...I don’t know, maybe 30 minutes ago.” *It seems like five hours.*

“Were you watching *Titanic*?”

“Yes.”

“I think I know where she is.” He escorts me down the corridor.

“Is that your mother in the doorway over there?”

I see her standing there without a care in the world. I want to scream at her, shake her, punish her, weep, shower her with hugs and kisses – and never let her out of my sight again.

“Mom!” I hug her and grab her hand, tears cascading down my face like the waterfalls outside.

“Is something wrong?”

After leaving the bathroom, she had returned to another screening of the film in a different theater. She hadn’t realized she was lost and wasn’t afraid; she knew I would find her.

We leave the Falls and return home in silence. My insides are raw.

Everything is different now. I can’t trust that she will find her way home. She loves to take long walks around our property. This is a problem. In back are an avocado grove and neighboring horse farm. I have an internal alarm clock now and check on her often.

Some months pass. It’s late afternoon on a Saturday, and my instincts warn me of danger.

“Have you seen Grandma, Jonathan?”

“No, not lately.”

“Look for her in the avocado grove. I’ll drive around in the car.”

He jumps up, “Okay, Mom.”

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Fear tastes familiar now. I start the car and proceed down our long, snaky driveway, clicking the remote that opens our gate. Once comforted by this carefully crafted barrier protecting me from outside danger, I now see prison bars too slow to open as I turn out of the driveway.

I don't see her ahead and make another turn past the brightly colored daycare center, formerly a hardware store. Its colors irritate me. A final turn down the narrow, secluded road behind our property proves fruitful. A half-mile ahead is a vision of blissful eccentricity: Ivy is strolling down the middle of the road, flanked by our dogs, a glass of chardonnay in her right hand. A white ankle sock is on her left foot; a knee-high stocking on her right. I can't help but laugh with relief, as I pull beside her and lower the passenger side window.

"Do you need a lift?" I ask with a smile.

She smiles back, delighted to see me, as though it were happenstance I was driving by.

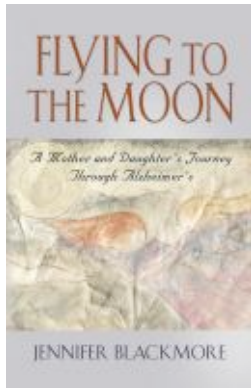
"Sure, why not?"

Jonathan walks the dogs home through the grove while I drive around the block to the main entrance.

"How was your walk, Mom?"

"Beautiful!"

She's holding a blue jay feather in her hand, a small treasure found on her journey. My pulse and breathing return to normal. Another day, another adventure – how can I be angry with her?



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