

Excerpt from 'My Mother is my Daughter'

Chapter 8 - The '10 to 2' watch

Visits to my mother were conducted on a regular basis and she relied on me to provide life's little extras. Goodies ranged from new stockings, boxes of tissues, specialty soaps or perhaps, some biscuits and sweets to appease any 'between meal' hunger pangs.

She had quickly learned that my visits provided her with special treats, and her gaze would immediately travel to my carry bag as I entered the room. I became fairly clever at anticipating her needs even before they were voiced, but one request surprised me totally.

'I want one of those things you put on here,' she said, pointing to her wrist.

'Why do you need a bracelet, Mum?' I asked.

'No, no,' she said irritably. 'One like that, but you put it on here.'

Again she pointed to her wrist but also indicated the clock radio on the bedside table.

'Oh, you mean a watch!'

'Yes, I need one. I don't know what time it is.'

'Well, Mum, if you'd stop turning your radio off at the wall, this clock will work and you'll always know what the time is.'

She gave me a look of disgust. 'I don't like those numbers.'

Whilst agreeing that the digital nature of the clock/radio could be a problem, I was still unsure that the small face of a watch would be any help to her. Mum had suffered a degenerative eye disease for some time and her sight had worsened over the years.

'Perhaps if I bought you a large clock that hangs on the wall, would that be better?'

'I can't carry that around. I want one of those things on here.' Again she pointed to her wrist. Resigned to the inevitable, I promised her a watch on my next visit.

Certain this would be a 'two minute wonder', I was reluctant to outlay too much money. I located just the thing at a local discount store. Sporting a very large face with appropriately clear numbers and a smart gold band, I was sure this would meet with Mother's approval. Her eyes lit up like a small child at Christmas time as I fastened it around her wrist.

'Oh, darling, that's wonderful. I feel so much better now that I know the time.'

'That's great, Mum. I've set it to the correct time, so tell me what the time is now.'

She peered at the watch face for some minutes without speaking.

'Are the numbers large enough for you to read, Mum?'

'Yes, dear, they're very nice.' Suddenly she looked up at me and smiled. 'It's ten to two.'

'Er – not quite, Mum, it's actually half past three.'

'Oh, all right, dear,' she said, showing no surprise.

It was obvious she understood the concept of time. If the actual figures were muddled to her, why make an issue of it? The important thing was the pleasure she derived from having her own watch.

This exercise, whilst worthwhile for Mum's peace of mind, did make me wonder about the capacity of memory in those afflicted with dementia. Every time I visited, I would manage to bring the conversation around to her watch.

'What's the time, Mum?'

Glancing at her watch, she would smile at me. 'Why, it's ten to two, dear.'

That small statement had remained in her memory bank, and I wasn't about to rain on her parade. Eventually the subject of the watch had run its course and I no longer mentioned it, but noticed she always wore it. I was surprised, however, to receive a phone call from her early one Sunday morning. I could tell she was upset.

'My watch is missing, dear. I don't know what the time is.'

I was tempted to point out, rather caustically, that she didn't need to worry. Wasn't it ten to two? I knew, though, she would need to see this for herself. I told her that if the watch didn't show up by the end of the day, I would call in on my way home from work on Monday and give the room a thorough search.

Previously I had dropped everything and raced to the hostel each time there was a so-called 'crisis'. This proved very wearing and, inevitably, I would discover she had forgotten the crisis, forgotten she had phoned me, and seemed happy and content.

'Don't worry, Mum, it will turn up soon.'

'I don't like not having my watch,' she said sulkily.

I repeated my promise about a search the next day and hung up. But the incident stayed with me and I wrestled with my conscience.

'Maybe I should have gone over there just to put her mind at rest,' I said to my husband an hour later.

'Let's be realistic,' he replied. 'She will have forgotten about it a few minutes after hanging up. I'm sure it will turn up, and if not, you'll see her tomorrow.'

I could see the sense in his words but needed reassurance that I was not abandoning Mum in her hour of need. When the phone rang again a little later, I heard Mum's excited voice.

'I've found it – the watch – it's here. I'm so happy, dear. It's back, isn't that wonderful?'

'Oh, Mum, that's great. I thought it would show up.'

A happy ending, but one, in fact, with a very strange twist. Mum's phone call to say her watch had been found came at ten to two!