

Mom

A death fosters floods of memories. With Mom, several rush to the fore, seemingly randomly: the spectacular (her singing a duet with Dad of "No Two People Have Ever Been So In Love" in front of a gym packed with Cub Scouts and their parents, singing from atop the upright piano Dad was playing), and the mundane: she in the kitchen, patiently teaching me how to make her famous brownies, then sprinkling powdered sugar over them.

But of the many memories, one stands out: Mom and the family 1955 blue Chevy station wagon, and how often she had to struggle with it to help make ends meet for her family of five kids, especially in the hard, cold Minnesota winters. Dad's produce brokerage business boomed in the summer, when grapes, strawberries, peaches, watermelons and other fruits were in season, and we were flush. But the shop was bare in the barren winter, when, to keep us financially afloat, Mom once again had to brush off her teaching credentials and go substitute teach in the Minneapolis schools.

To do so, she broke the law every day to get to work, because she had only a learner's driver's permit. She could drive legally only when accompanied by a licensed driver, but she always had to drive to work alone. Try and try again as she would, she could never pass the driver's test.

The great hope with the Chevy station wagon was that it had these wonderful new things called an "automatic transmission" and "power steering" -- miracles of technology that would free her from stalling and jerking through intersections because shifting into first -- let alone into second or third -- was beyond her, unless she "rode the clutch" and quickly burned it out. But even with the help of an omnipotent "D" to shift into, she flunked the parallel parking, the signaling, the right turn, the left turn, the stop signs. She was simply too nervous.

And nervous she was every dark early morning to work, when after packing school lunches for five kids and leaving them for us in the refrigerator for when we awoke, she set out through the ice and snow and brutal cold to alien schools where, if she was assigned anything above the third grade for that day, the day meant suffering through the usual coarse meannesses and unruly behavior that my brother and I would ourselves routinely extend to any "sub" who came to our schools.

And I remember how she came home from those days exhausted, using her last energy of the day to prepare a dinner that was of the kind considered "modern" and miraculous at the time: frozen food, usually in the form of fish sticks and french fries and frozen peas, or TV dinners in aluminum trays.

She usually succeeded in hiding from us the toll her toils had taken that day. Yet sometimes, during those money-strapped winters, I could hear her from outside my parents' bedroom door, quietly crying, or finally at wit's end, yelling down to us to be quiet for what seemed no reason at all.

We were kids, of course, and mostly oblivious to her sacrifices. But I do remember worrying that on some fateful morning a cop would stop her and find out she had no driver's license, and I was always too afraid to ask what would happen then. She would joke about that possibility, but I know she worried, too.

One miraculous summer day, she passed the test. You needed to score 70 out of a hundred, and she scored exactly 70. She proudly carried the results in her purse. My guess is, the examiner by then had gotten to know Mom pretty well from all her previous flunk-outs, and he may just have pushed a 69 to a 70. Maybe that actually did happen. Kindnesses can lurk anywhere. Mom believed that. She lived by that.

Another thing that crowds out other memories of Mom are her hands. She was always upbeat, positive, optimistic; but her hands betrayed just how much she worried about things. She never could grow nails because she always chewed on them. For a while she tried various gimmicks, such as wearing artificial nails, or putting bandaids over all her fingertips, but none of that worked.

But those same hands were so kind and gentle to the touch. It was what you could only call a mother's touch. Even in my 60s, when I'd go visit her at Foss Home, I'd plop face down on her bed and ask, "Is the doctor in?", and she'd know exactly what I meant from all the previous times I asked that. "Yes, Dr. Mom is in," she'd say with a conspiratorial smile, and for about 10 minutes I'd get a soft and gentle shoulder and neck massage from those soft hands. And during those moments -- when we both knew it was a moment of mothering, not massage -- she would do something she would otherwise rarely do: She said nothing.

These memories are, of course, lodged within a much bigger thing: Love. She said many, many times in her life: "God is love". Often she would add to that: "And that is all you need to know." Our family dinners were always preceded by this simple but ample blessing, said in a well-worn cadence:

"God is great,
God is good,
and we thank Him
for this food.
Amen."

We thank Him for Mary Jane Johnson: daughter, wife, mother, friend.

Amen.