

CONVERSATIONS WITH MY MOTHER

A Novel of Love, Hope, and Dementia on the Maine Coast

By Ronald-Stéphane Gilbert

*To my wife Leah, my son Nathan, and my middle sister Mary, my mother's selfless and
unflagging caregiver.*

"...one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels."

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*

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Author's Note

I began this book in 2016, en route from Boston to Cleveland, after a weeklong stay with my eighty-nine-year-old Francophone mother in the small Maine town where I was raised and where she still lived with my sister in our family home. Over the course of several visits earlier that year, it had become apparent that Mom's frailty was increasing and her clarity of mind decreasing. During my latest stay, she'd experienced multiple instances of confusion, and, just before I left, had been diagnosed with first-stage vascular dementia.

For fear the mother I'd known was fast disappearing, I began visiting and calling her as often as possible. Consequently, from her initial diagnosis through her passing a few years later, I witnessed firsthand and at a greater remove the effects of her illness. Some, such as her growing fatigue, disorientation, and anxiety, I'd expected, but others, like her flights of fancy, startlingly sage pronouncements, and bursts of pitiless candor, caught me by surprise.

These and other changes I observed in her were the impetus for this story: a fictionalized account of one woman's descent into disability and dementia, and the occasionally touching or chilling milestones that marked her journey. Composed of episodic, chronologically ordered chapters and written in the first-person present tense, the book explores how, as its central character's dementia evolves and she herself devolves, her dominant traits recede and resurface, disappear and reappear like reflections on a lake or pane of glass under a variable, fast-moving sky. It details her struggle to cope with her growing limitations, sense of loss, and awareness of her impending demise, but also describes how, even as her identity frays and then fades, her core characteristics—insight, empathy, and kindness—remain intact, preventing her complete loss.

This is perhaps the story's central point: that, however deep and tangled dementia's morass, the affected individual doesn't always entirely vanish. He or she might still be present—perhaps only fleetingly and in fragments but present nonetheless. I hope this perspective offers a measure of consolation to the many who've accompanied a loved one down dementia's long and sometimes painfully disturbing path.

PART I

Along a Twisting Trail

CHAPTER 1
“Every Road Leads Somewhere”
Medium Take

It’s a clear fall day, the sky a brilliant blue, the trees along the beach road suffused in bright golds, rich russets, and deep reds. I park the car by the now defunct Wormwoods, my late father’s favorite seafood place, the victim of changing tastes, since, even in Maine, old New England favorites like deep-fried fish, clams, and shrimp have largely given way to less-caloric, presumably healthier fare.

My _____89-year-old mother, who’s asked me to drive her here, looks seaward through the windshield. “We can’t see the water from this spot,” she remarks.

“You’re right—that new beach house blocks the view,” I say, pointing to a tall, gray-shingled building by the breakwater.

Mom’s expression is inscrutable behind her big Jackie O sunglasses. “Your father proposed to me here. We’d just had dinner at Wormwoods and were sitting in his car smoking—that was back when everyone smoked.” She sighs. “I miss my cigarettes.”

“But you stopped smoking forty years ago.”

“Bad habits are hard to break.” She presses the index finger and forefingers of her right hand together and gracefully lifts them into the air in eloquent evocation of the vanquished habit and memory of her elegant, now vanished, younger self.

“Anyway, as I’d started to say,” she continues impatiently, perhaps irritated at our having drifted off topic. “That evening, after your father proposed, he and I sat here, looking up at the stars shining in the black night sky. We could hear the ocean—the waves breaking against the rocks—but we couldn’t really see much. It was too dark.” Then she says quietly, almost to herself, “I really miss your Dad.” Because of her sunglasses, I can’t tell if her eyes are misting over with tears, as they sometimes do when she speaks about him.

To distract her, I say, “Why don’t we walk over to the breakwater and get a better view of the ocean? After all, that’s what we came here for.”

She hesitates, then, as if thinking aloud, murmurs, “Pourquoi pas—why not?”

Before she can change her mind, I get out of the car, retrieve her walker from the trunk, and open her door. Putting my arms under hers in an awkward but necessary embrace, I pull her up off the car seat, help her step onto the gravel-strewn berm, and grab hold of the walker.

“Good thing I’m not in heels,” she remarks. “When I was younger, I wore them whenever I went out—even just to the supermarket.”

“I remember,” I answer, steadying her on the walker as we begin the short walk to the shore.

“Everyone wore high heels back then—when we were all young and stupid,” she adds with a laugh.

“You were never stupid.”

“Sometimes I feel as if I were never young,” she mutters, while we inch forward, skirting small stones and pits in the gravel along the roadside.

The wind off the water is strong today, a force to be reckoned with. As we reach land’s end, it flattens Mom’s tan trench coat against her frail body, sends the ends of her white scarf streaming upward, and dishevels the few strands of silver hair that jut out from beneath her kerchief, which in all likelihood she wore to prevent just such an occurrence.

“That’s a pretty kerchief,” I remark.

”It’s very old—like me,” she replies, breaking into a smile. “No one wears kerchiefs anymore, just like no one goes to Mass.”

“You think the two might be related?” I ask.

She pulls her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose and gives me a quizzical look. “Who knows? All the women used to have to cover their heads in church, and then, when we didn’t have to anymore, people stopped going. So, yes, maybe.” She pauses. “People are strange sometimes—and, of course, the devil is clever.”

As we get closer to our destination and the ground underfoot becomes ever more uneven, my mother announces, “This is close enough.”

We look out at the breakwater, a half-mile of rough-hewn granite that bisects the bay, separating the river flow from the sea, the water lighter on one side than the other. Toward its end, fishermen—tiny figures in the windswept distance—raise their arms skyward, hoisting rod and reel to cast their lines into air and ocean. Beyond them, the breakwater’s endpoint seems almost to disappear into the horizon.

“A road to nowhere,” I remark.

“Every road leads somewhere,” Mom replies, taking hold of my arm to steady herself against the wind. “Even if it’s not where you want to be.”

CHAPTER 2

“Ask a Stupid Question”

Short Take

My mother is lying on the brown leather sofa in her family room. Phlebitis has forced her to rest and raise her legs every afternoon since my childhood—though, in truth, these days, she lies down more to nap than to alleviate leg swelling.

The walls of the family room are hung with photos of deceased relatives, vanished pets, and long-gone local landmarks—a Victorian beach hotel, the old Portland train station, and the town square’s white-spired First Congregational Church, lost in a fire years ago.

“I miss them all—the people, the dogs, the places,” she remarks, even though she has been staring at the ceiling and hasn’t so much seen as sensed me looking at the photos. “A lot has changed, but I like this town. It has everything I need. I don’t have to travel anywhere.”

After a moment, she turns her head on the sofa pillow, looks at me, and, in a concerned tone, asks, “Do you still travel all of the time?”

Some of my jobs have involved my traveling all over the world, which she hasn’t liked. “Not as much as before,” I reply.

“Good! It bothered me, your flying all over the place like that. I hate planes!” she says emphatically, then coughs.

“You flew to my wedding in Cleveland,” I remind her.

“Well, of course! I would have flown to the moon and back for that!”

“Why?”

She gives me the exasperated look that she typically reserves for errant TV remotes or for faucets that won't stop dripping. “Because you're my son!” Peering at me over her rimless glasses, she adds, “Sometimes, you ask stupid questions!”

“It's my specialty,” I answer, smiling.

She considers this. “You must take after me.”

We both laugh.

CHAPTER 3

“Sic Transit Gloria Mundi”

Long Take

Grimacing, my mother shifts her weight in the passenger seat of my old Lotus sportscar. “Are you uncomfortable, Mom?” I ask, as the traffic light switches from red to green and I shift the car into drive.

“Yes, a little,” she replies. “I can’t believe I didn’t remember to bring my seat pillow. I’m so forgetful sometimes,” she continues, with characteristic self-effacement.

“It’s my fault, Mom. Diane handed it to me as we were about to leave but then I got a text message, and I forgot the pillow on the kitchen table.”

“We all make mistakes.” she says, forever forgiving.

I’m driving my mother to the beauty salon to give my sister Diane, who lives with Mom and is her principal caregiver, a break from chauffeuring her to her many medical and personal-care appointments. I’ve never taken Mom to the hairdresser’s before, so I’m surprised when the GPS guides us into an industrial park instead of to a shopping center. “Are you sure Diane gave us the right address?”

“What address did she give you?”

When I tell her, Mom replies, “Could be. I’m not certain.”

“Well, does this look like the way you usually go?”

“Maybe—but who knows?” she answers, resigned to the fact that nowadays she’s more likely to recall the details of a long-ago wedding than what she had for breakfast.

With no choice but to follow the GPS’s guidance, I pull the car into the gravel parking lot of a corrugated-steel building and scan the list of tenants at its entrance. To my surprise, this includes the “Coiffed Creations” hair salon, “Nine-Inch Nails” manicure studio, “Virtuous Cycle” bike shop, and a vegan-oriented coffeehouse called “Coffee with a Conscience”—all names likely to have engendered laughter among the residents of this small Maine beach town when I was raised here, prior to its invasion by out-of-staters.

“Do you think it’s really possible for coffee to have a ‘conscience’?” I ask Mom.

She looks at me uncomprehending, and then, reading the building directory, frowns.

“Don’t be so literal.”

“I can’t help it—remember, I started my career as an editor.”

“That’s just an excuse. You like finding fault—with things and with people!”

“I do when they’re actually at fault,” I reply, driving the Lotus into a parking space so deeply rutted that it causes us to lurch forward in our seats. “Like the geniuses who decided not to pave this parking lot, for example.”

She unbuckles her seatbelt with a sigh. “Judge not, lest ye, too, be judged.”

“But aren’t we judged every day, by almost everyone we meet?” I object. “And, anyway, when did you start quoting scripture?”

“I always have,” she answers primly.

“Really?” I respond, knowing full well she hasn’t. “Then quote me another passage.”

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” she replies, without hesitation.

“My, you’re on a roll today,” I comment, opening the driver’s door and walking over to open hers.

“I will be if you don’t help me out of this Matchbox Car of yours,” she says, trying to maneuver her arthritic legs over the car-door threshold. “Why a tall man like you got a tiny toy car like this is beyond me.”

I lift her feet off the floormat and try to ensure that her head doesn’t strike the top of the doorframe in the process. “Well, you know me and my obsession with fitness.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, grabbing hold of her walker.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I tease her. “I bought a sportscar so that I’d stick to my diet—I mean, if I put on any weight, I won’t even be able to squeeze behind the steering wheel.”

“Said the man in the thrall of a mid-life crisis,” Mom counters. “Go ahead, make fun,” she continues with a frown. “Those thirty pounds you’ve lost have left you looking like a skeleton, though—no ‘ifs, ands, or buts’ about it.”

“It’s all the exercise,” I answer truthfully, since I bike twenty-five miles a day.

She glares at me. “You need therapy—and I don’t mean the physical kind!” she exclaims and adds, “You’re anorexic!” for emphasis.

“That was Gisele,” I say, referring to one of my younger sisters, who was indeed anorexic in her adolescence—a cause of much familial upset at the time and for long afterward. “But that was decades ago,” I say in an attempt to calm her. “She’s better now and has been for ages.”

“Whatever!” Mom mutters, causing me to regret having raised the topic.

I try flattery to distract her. “Why are you having your hair done today, anyway? It looks great!” This is not an exaggeration. Her thick, gray curls put the scraggly coiffures of many women her age—and my own white-haired, balding pate—to shame.

“You must need new contact lenses,” she replies, as we negotiate the building’s handicap-access ramp. “Maybe it looks OK right now, but, in a few days, it will be a mess of knots and whorls sticking out at odd angles.”

“Like that bush?” I point to a bramble whose thorny, unpruned limbs jut out onto the ramp, forming a minor hazard.

She looks at the intrusive branches. “There you go finding fault again—I swear you’ll even find something to criticize in heaven.”

“Probably,” I say as we enter the lobby—a small, fluorescent-lit space with gray linoleum flooring. “If I even get into heaven.”

She winces. “Joke all you want—someday you won’t think it’s so funny!”

“And what day would that be, exactly?” I ask as we head down a corridor.

She glares at me. “I’m serious—it’s a character flaw to always look at things so critically.”

This strikes me as a critical remark in and of itself but since we’ve already arrived at the beauty salon, I say nothing.

“Why do you come here, anyway?” I ask, stepping ahead to open the salon door, which is flanked by several Photoshopped coiffeur posters. “Aren’t there nicer places closer to us?”

The look she gives me is nothing short of deadly. “There are, but I come here because my stylist, Monique, is a distant cousin, and she could use the money, especially since she got divorced again.”

“Again?”

She nods. “It’s the third time, I think.”

“How is she related to us?” I ask, mostly to avoid saying something that Mom would consider judgmental.

“I don’t remember the details, but she is,” she replies in an urgent whisper. “Now keep your voice down or, better yet, just shut up, period.”

Monique, a tall middle-aged woman with too-dark brown hair, sits in her styling chair on the far end of the salon, which is filled with women roughly Mom’s age having their hair washed, set, or dried. “Hi, Yvette,” she calls out, “How’re you doing today?”

“Fine, thank you,” Mom answers brightly, even though there’s only a 50-50 chance that her frail voice will carry over the swoosh of running water, roar of the hair dryers, and the ruckus of general chatter. “This is my eldest son, Rob, who lives in Cleveland,” she continues, as Monique draws closer.

Giving me the once over, Monique asks, “How about those Indians?”

“Yeah, aren’t they something this season?” I answer, hedging my bets, since I don’t follow the local sports teams or any others either.

“Well, that’s one way of putting it,” Monique replies with a smile, not revealing whether they’re winning or losing. She turns to Mom and asks, “What’ll it be today, Yvette—the usual?” which makes me wonder if she’s ever been a bartender.

“Yes, I think so,” Mom replies.

Monique studies Mom’s head appraisingly while I guide her towards the styling chair. “You know, your hair looks pretty good this week,” she tells Mom. “It barely needs to be set, really.”

Mom seems abashed. “Well, a curl can’t hurt, though, can it?” she replies, sitting down. “I like to keep up appearances.”

“Don’t we all?” Monique replies with a bemused smile and then starts to comb through Mom’s thick tresses. “We should be done in about forty minutes,” she says to me, “if you want to run a few errands and pick her up afterwards.”

“I think maybe I’ll just wait,” I answer, knowing that’s what Diane usually does.

“Suit yourself,” she replies. “There’s coffee and muffins in the waiting area—made them myself.”

“You did?” Mom remarks—simply to make conversation, I’m guessing.

“Yeah, I was unusually ambitious this morning,” Monique replies, and both she and Mom start laughing.

“Thanks,” I tell Monique, and walk to the front of the salon. There I sit down on a tired-looking futon set between two tattered armchairs, one of which is occupied by an elderly woman waiting for a stylist. On a large, flat-panel television across from us, the Red Sox, in the final inning at Fenway Park, are losing by a hair’s breadth.

“It’s been this way all season,” the woman remarks, pushing an errant strand of gray hair off her wrinkled face with an irritated gesture. “I mean—they tear through most of the game and then fall back and leave you on pins and needles toward the end of it.”

I recall that this is how the Sox played through most of my childhood—though, in truth, then, as now, I seldom paid much attention. “Seems like that’s their style,” I offer, “or maybe their curse.”

The woman breaks into a smile, the lines around her eyes and lips becoming momentarily deeper. “Maybe,” she replies. “My name’s Celia, by the way.”

“Mine’s Rob,” I offer. “Nice to meet you.” From the coffee table, I pick up a day-old copy of the *Portland Press Herald*. The lead story is part of an ongoing series on the battle between summer residents and shorefront communities over whether or not seasonal homes

should be taxed at market value. Since the positions and arguments of each side are predictable and, by now, tiresomely familiar, I put the paper back down again.

Noticing its headline, Celia comments, “Those out-of-staters will do anything to keep from paying their fair share, won’t they?”

“Guess so,” I reply with a shrug.

No longer smiling, she looks at me more closely. “You live hereabouts?”

“No,” I answer. “I live in the Midwest, but I was raised here—first, at Hill’s Beach in Biddeford and, afterwards, in Saco.”

“You get a special dispensation, then,” she remarks, her smile returning.

“How so?” I say.

“You’re not really from away.”

My cellphone vibrates. The call is from my Parisian business associate, Valérin de Courty, so I take it. “Bonjour, Valérin!” I say and then ask how he is “Comment ça va?”

“Trés bien,” he responds and immediately inquires whether I have time to talk, “As tu quelques moments á me parler?” Then, without further ado, he asks me a project question far too detailed for me to answer confidently without referring to the client’s files, which are on my laptop.

“Écoutez, Valérin! Je devrais consulter le dossier du client pour te répondre avec certitude, mais je ne suis pas chez-moi actuellement. Puis-je te rapeller un peu plus tard?” I

interrupt, telling him that don't have the client filed in question with me and asking if we can talk later. He agrees, so I say, "À bientôt!" and click off the cell.

Celia stares. "Are you French?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. French-American," I say.

"Wherever did you learn to speak French like that, then? I majored in Latin and French at Colby, and it was decades before I could even begin to understand North American French," she says with a pinched expression, as if she'd just caught whiff of an offensive odor.

I consider this lament—not uncommon among some who've learned French in high school or college—both condescending and indicative of limited fluency—but don't say so. "The local accent was beaten out of me," I respond neutrally, since Celia's age warrants a measure of respect—even if, under the circumstances, perhaps only a modicum.

"Beaten?"

"Yeah, at a variety of private universities," I respond, smiling wryly.

Celia laughs. "Well, you speak it beautifully."

Though this isn't true, I humor her. "Thanks—but it's easy, isn't it, with such a beautiful language?" I refrain from adding that, when spoken as a birthright, maybe any language has an innate beauty that becomes self-evident.

On the television, the Red Sox hit a game-deciding home run, and the crowd at Fenway rises in the stands and flings a flurry of baseball caps skyward. One of the hairdressers increases the volume. The game's commentators are speculating on the team's chances of taking the

pennant, even though they currently trail behind the league's leader—a situation that, it seems, is often the case for them at this point in the season. Exclamations of surprise and gratification ripple through the salon.

“You have to hand it to the Red Sox,” Celia remarks, “somehow, they always surprise you.”

“Apparently,” I answer.

Mom, her hair fresher- and fuller-looking, approaches, accompanied by Monique.

“That was fast,” I say. “Did you just wash and set it?”

“Not even,” she answers. “I didn't really have to. All I did was use a little styling mousse, comb her hair out, then spray it.” She turns to Mom, “and it worked out well, n'est ce pas, Yvette?” she asks, with the exaggeratedly upbeat tone that one might use to address a pet or small child.

My mother looks dubious. Maybe she is just uncomfortable because she generally doesn't speak French unless she's certain that all present are conversant, and, having noticed Celia, she isn't sure of this.

Celia's hairdresser walks up. “Hi Celia,” she says and then, inevitably, asks, “So, how'd you like your hair done today?”

Celia runs a hand through her thin, loosely tied-back hair. “Make it really beautiful, with a lot of body—like hers,” she answers, gesturing toward Mom's full, well-rounded curls.

Perhaps unable to tell whether Celia is serious or joking, the hairdresser answers, “Sure. Why not give it a shot? Who knows what might happen!” Everyone starts laughing.

I turn to Mom. “See? Judgments aren’t always bad. Sometimes they’re complimentary.”

Mom gives me a sharp look. “Yes, sometimes,” she concedes, “but things can change quickly.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, after a couple of nights of being slept on, my hair won’t look so great and all of you might have a different opinion.”

Everyone laughs again.

“Sic transit gloria mundi?” I inquire.

“Exactly,” Mom answers.

“What does that mean?” Celia’s hairdresser asks.

Looking bemused, Celia, the long-ago Latin student, translates. “Thus passes the glory of the world.”

“Is that in the Bible?” Monique asks.

“No, but it ought to be,” Mom answers.