

## IN THE BEGINNING

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It's difficult for me to pinpoint when Mama started to "lose it." It had to be over twenty years ago, around 1983-84, when my sister-in-law Deborah joined our family. From time to time she would make subtle comments about Mama's behavior - but none of the family could see what Deborah saw. Deborah recently summarized it by saying she found it difficult to hold a conversation with Mama. I guess when one is on the outside looking in, things are viewed differently from those already on the inside. We'd simply dismiss Deborah's comments and say, "That's just the way Mama is. Don't pay her any attention." Now that I think about it, that is NOT the way Mama always "was." Hmmmmmm ... Why didn't we notice it back then? Mama's mental capacity had decreased very slowly over a long period of time. That's why it was so difficult for us to notice the change. Yet Deborah immediately recognized that something wasn't quite right. This was probably because sane people usually recognize an unbalanced person when they meet them. Mama had slowly become mentally unbalanced and those of us closest to her didn't see it coming!

I recall the day I had to admit that Mama had a problem. I was at work, and my usual practice was to call Mama and Daddy several times a week. I made my normal call to say hi, how are you doing, love you, and bye. From out of nowhere, Mama began to make accusations about me taking money from her!!!!!! Did you hear what I said? Mama accused ME of stealing from her!!!! I can't begin to describe what I felt at that moment. I was shocked! I was stunned! I was speechless! And I was hurt!

When I could take no more of her accusations I tried to say something in my defense, but I was not getting through to her. It didn't take long for me to figure out that I was talking to a stranger. She didn't want to hear anything I had to say. Since I was at work, the only thing I could do was to hang up the phone. I sat at my desk and cried.

I called my friend and coworker Terry. We had previously worked together and shared the same cubicle at another law firm. Although Terry's mom is exactly one week older than Mama, Terry's mom began to show the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease five years before Mama. I knew Terry would understand what I was feeling; besides, I was not in the mood to do a whole lot of talking. Terry's desk was four floors above mine but in a matter of minutes she was by my side. She explained that the person I had known as "my" mother did not attack me. I had just spoken to another person, a sick person, and she was only manifesting the signs of her illness. She recommended that I read the book, "CARING FOR THE CAREGIVER," and she even brought me a copy of it to browse through. That was my moment of truth. It was obvious that Mama had a problem and it was not going to go away.

During this same period Daddy was battling prostate cancer. He had been hospitalized a few years earlier. After his discharge, he never went back to the doctor for follow-up testing, so we had no idea what the status of his medical condition was.