A Doll for Nadine

I'm shopping for a baby doll, or perhaps a stuffed animal, for my cousin Nadine. As usual when I start to shop for something, I am wowed by the variety available. I spend hours perusing the possibilities on Etsy. In the doll category there are rag dolls, Waldorf-style dolls, ultra-realistic newborn dolls. There are dolls that have a simple face and a simple body with no lower extremities; the body is just a rounded shape encased in soft material, almost like a vegetable in a pod. Their faces are sweet, joyful, optimistic. Then there are the animals: Long-horned cattle are a best seller, if Etsy is to be believed. There are huge spiders and squids and dragons, and lemurs, and cats and dogs and bears. Some of the dolls, and some of the animals, are weighted with rice or with glass beads; some of them can be heated in the microwave or cooled in the refrigerator to provide an augmented sensory experience. They all promise to be soft, cuddly, comforting to those in need of comfort.

My cousin Nadine is in need of comfort. She was starting to wander out of her home at odd hours, and falling, and ending up in the emergency room. The last time that happened she spent a couple of days in the hospital, and then we—my sister and I— moved her straight to rehab. A week or two later we were in the lobby of her building, talking to the administrators of the facility about the next step, and Nadine walked past us, not seeing us, headed towards the door. An alarm rang when she got close to the door and someone came and guided her away. At the end of her rehab period we moved her to assisted living, in the same building but in a closed wing behind locked doors, and that's where she is now.

When Nadine first moved to assisted living, she spoke of it as a prison; she expressed the wish that my sister and I could be locked up with her. She told me she wanted to die, but that she didn't want to kill herself. I don't want to suffer, she said. At her birthday celebration last year she remarked that she hoped she wouldn't have too many more. She never asked about her house that she had lived in for probably fifty years.

In the beginning there was a speech therapist who would read Jane Austen with her. Nadine

referred to the therapist as her student, and confided to me that her approach to literature was not very sophisticated. She complained that her glasses were wrong and that she therefore could not read. Her aides found her glasses mangled, or they disappeared altogether; one time I discovered a missing lens behind the little refrigerator in her room. Nadine told me once that she figured that if her glasses were broken, she might get to leave prison to see the eye doctor. Demented, maybe, but not stupid, my cousin.

When I visited her I would walk up and down the halls with her. Conversations drifted into word salad. For a long time she incessantly cried Help me! When I said I was there to help, what did she need? she would say, I don't know! Sometimes she would call for her mama. Where is my mama? Mama, mama! I told her I guessed I was her mama now, and not a very good mama at that, alas. She told me she thought I was a good mama. The fact that I am fourteen years younger than she didn't seem to trouble her, or occur to her. Her aides reported that she was occasionally aggressive towards other residents, that she rammed them with her walker; sometimes she hit her aides. She bit the dental hygienist. The aides were concerned that the other residents might fight back, might push Nadine and cause her to fall. The assisted living facility has some activities for the residents. When she participated, the other residents recognized her excellence in completing phrases, in answering trivia. For the most part she refused to participate in these activities, feeling they were beneath her.

Now she wouldn't be able to participate. Now she barely speaks at all, and she doesn't walk. I don't know if it's just the new medication that has dulled her beyond recognition, or whether she has just deteriorated so far that she can't find any words. Every day we get reports from the aides on her bodily functions. Most of the time her eyes are closed and she's motionless, although she's not necessarily asleep. It looks like a rehearsal for death.

I am relieved that she's no longer crying for help.

Nadine retired a few years ago after a long career as a professor of English literature at a nearby university. She was vibrant, witty, irreverent; also fiercely independent and private.

And stubborn. Super-smart but not full of herself. She was a gourmet cook. She loved her garden. She collected pigs—figurines, images, what-not. Nadine has the same nickname as I do, though she spells it differently, and the same Hebrew name; she and I were both named after the same grandfather. She was married, then divorced, long ago. She never had children. She has a younger brother, but he does not live nearby and visits only occasionally. He and she have not always been on the closest of terms. She studied chemistry as an undergraduate at University of Pennsylvania, but switched to English for her graduate studies and her PhD. I can remember working on solving crossword puzzles with her and my sister and my stepmother. My husband and I invited her to come with us on vacation to Cape Cod a few times; she shared a room with my mother-in-law, who is similarly delightful. We loved spending the time with her. My kids love her too. She was a one-of-a-kind personality. I admired her independence, her self-sufficiency, her literacy, her wit. She worked, she traveled, she saw friends. She didn't need a husband, and if she wanted one, she didn't let on. Children, same.

During the first years of the pandemic, my sister and I would have a weekly Zoom call with Nadine. She was more or less able to do this at first, but we noticed after a while that she seemed to be having a lot of technical issues. She often did not succeed in getting on the call, and she blamed this on incompetent repairmen who had changed something on her computer. Sometimes she would be angry or annoyed when the technology defeated her. She hinted darkly that the repairmen could not be trusted.

Then came the day when she called my sister, upset, and told her she would not come for Rosh Hashana dinner because she had gotten lost on the way, and somehow ended up at the mall, and that she had turned around and driven home again. Nadine seemed to think it was 5:30 in the evening and that she was late for dinner, whereas in fact it was 5:30 in the morning. I think she's losing it, my sister told me. My sister is a psychiatrist, so she is qualified to have an opinion on such matters.

A few months later Nadine began her neighborhood wanderings, sometimes in the middle of the night, and sometimes she would fall and a neighbor would call the police or the first aid

squad, and my sister would go to the emergency room to rescue her. On at least one occasion I went too, to relieve my sister so she could go home and deal with all the other stuff she has to deal with, including her own health. Other times Nadine called my sister to complain that her house was full of grannies and she couldn't get them out. She was offering them cookies and tea, but they wouldn't take any, and they wouldn't leave. She told us she had had other visitations in the past. She sometimes heard her parents' voices coming from her basement, and she suspected that her father had rented out space down there to some students, who were loud and obnoxious. Once my sister discovered that Nadine's oven had been on overnight, or maybe longer—impossible to say. Whatever was in there was burnt into oblivion. Meanwhile, Nadine was losing weight.

A few weeks ago I heard Nadine murmur something about a baby, holding a baby. I wasn't sure what she was saying, exactly, but it gave me the idea of getting her a doll. I was hesitant, because there is something very infantilizing about giving a grown woman—a grown woman who never had children—a doll, but, who knows, maybe she would like it; maybe it would be comforting; maybe she had always regretted not having a baby. And maybe she would be mortified and affronted. I decided I would get her a doll and just leave it where she could find it, and if she felt like picking it up, she could, and if not, that was fine too. I started to look into it, and as I've said, found a great variety. I decided to steer clear of the realistic ones, thinking: It's one thing to have a real baby, who might look ugly at first, but you know that they'll grow out of it pretty soon; and quite another to have an ugly baby doll that will never become adorable. I also decided against the pod-shaped baby because I thought Nadine might find it disturbing that it was missing its lower limbs. I finally settled on a cute, simple cloth doll, weighted to give it something like the feel of a real baby. According to the Etsy writeup, one could buy real preemie-size clothing for it if one wanted. I researched preemie-sized clothes on Amazon, because of course I did, but I didn't order any until I knew whether Nadine was going to take to the doll. I also looked at about a million stuffed animals, the long-horned cattle and the cats and the lemurs, and finally settled on an endearing creature that could have been either a bear or a dog, and had very soft gray fur and was also weighted. The baby doll arrived first. It was indeed quite heavy. I put the doll in Nadine's lap and tried to put her

arm around it, but she did not respond to it in any way. Today I brought her the weighted bear-dog, and again, I draped it over her recumbent body, but again, she did not respond. The doll was sitting on the chest of drawers across the room, smiling sweetly. It had an abandoned look.

Nadine is officially on hospice now. It does not mean what I always thought it meant—that life-saving treatment would be withdrawn in favor of only palliative care. In any event, she doesn't have any life-threatening illness other than the dementia. The dementia could kill her because she has forgotten how to eat, but her aides give her nutrition shakes and she subsists on those. The aggression and agitation of a few weeks ago is gone, replaced by an over-medicated stupor. Can't they calibrate the meds better to shut down the agitation without turning her into a zombie? They're working on it, haven't figured it out yet. Apparently these things are not simple.

I imagine that after I leave, the bear-dog will join the baby doll on the chest of drawers, where they can comfort each other. Together they will watch Nadine in sorrow as she slips quietly towards the dark.

Nikki Pusin
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In memoriam: Nadine Ollman, d. June 27, 2026 יהי זכרה ברוך