

AS SHE caressed the tender skin of her mother's aged hand, Sarah Reed cast her mind back to a time when the woman who raised her was young, vibrant and full of life.

The dreary confines of the nursing home slipped away as her mother, Mary Edney, spoke passionately about being a woman in her prime. There was the first flush of romance with Sarah's father, her glamorous job as a Thirties catwalk model, and her exhilaration at surviving World War II.

Sarah listened intently, realising that after decades of misunderstandings and missed opportunities, she was finally getting to know her mother.

As adults, they had never been close. Sarah had kept her mother at arm's length, distanced first by an aversion to what she saw as Mary's reactionary views, and later, by the demands of her own busy life. Mary had done little to rectify that. There were no dramatic fights or seething resentments. It was more that they had reached an unspoken agreement to retreat from each other's lives.

So what had changed? Why were mother and daughter suddenly growing closer after 50 frosty years?

Astonishingly, Sarah owed this newly forged bond to her mother developing dementia. Far from the dreadful and irreversible slide into the total loss of self that this condition is generally believed to provoke, it actually helped them to connect as never before.

Mary was diagnosed with dementia in 1998. As her short-term memory fell away, her long-term memory seemed to improve, enabling her to offer her daughter snapshots of a happier life in days past.

The weaker Mary became, the closer they were, so that by the time she died at the age of 91 in May 2009, Sarah felt she knew her mother in a way she would never have thought possible.

'I was astonished by the effect Mum's dementia had on our relationship,' says Sarah, 62. 'It is a ghastly illness, but it brought us together in a way we'd never managed before. By the time she died, I loved and understood her.'

'I regret us not having that closeness before, and think that maybe Mum regretted it too. We both recognised this was our chance to change that.'

SARAH has since given up her job in marketing and built on her experiences to create a new career helping other people with dementia.

A single mother-of-two from London, it was her determination to have a job as well as motherhood that drove a wedge between her and her mother.

'Mum assumed I would go to finishing school, marry a respectable professional and become a home-maker as she had,' she explains.

'She wanted me to replicate her life but that didn't appeal to me, and I felt that disappointed her.'

Mary met Sarah's father, Roy, a GP, when she was 19, and married him a year later, in 1939. They raised their four children, Sarah, James, now 69, Guy, 65, and Lorina, 59, in Faversham, Kent.

'Mum cooked amazing roast dinners and Dad grew vegetables and roses. He was pragmatic and talkative, while she was quiet and reserved, and they were utterly devoted to each other.'

Driven and ambitious as a child, Sarah found more common ground with her father, unwittingly pushing her mother away. 'I wanted the excitement of London's bright lights,' she says.

'I was desperate to leave dull old Faversham, but she made me stay at school and do my A-levels. Her word

by Antonia Hoyle

was law.' After school, Sarah went to art college in London, where she met and married her photographer husband. They had two children, Poppy, now 28, and Alex, 26 — but separated when Poppy was four.

'It was sad, and I had to provide for the family financially, but I refused to wallow in self-pity,' says Sarah. 'My bringing the children up alone made the three of us even closer.'

It also meant she often couldn't spare time for the two-hour drive from London to Faversham, however.

'So I would take the children to see Mum and Dad once a month,' she says. 'My parents wouldn't travel into London. I did wish I could see them more and I felt guilty, but my children needed me. My brothers and sister visited them, so it wasn't as if my parents were completely alone.'

Sarah's relationship with her mother rumbled on in this same low-key way until 1998, when Mary, then 80, was diagnosed with dementia.

'She'd started buying the same things from the shops every day, even though her cupboards were full,' Sarah says. 'Then she had a fall and broke her hip. I was very anxious about her.'

Sarah's father, Roy, was Mary's primary carer for several years.

'It was heart-breaking for him to see his wife of 60 years turn into a different woman,' says Sarah.

'Mum would wander off and disappear. She lost interest in cooking. Dad could barely boil an egg, and no longer had anyone to grow vegetables for.'

'All the things they had enjoyed — foreign travel, having friends for dinner — became impossible as their world shrank.'

Two years later, Roy admitted he couldn't cope and Mary was moved into a nursing home in Faversham in March 2001.

Sarah, who was still juggling work and motherhood, initially visited once a month, having drawn up a rota with her siblings. 'Mum and I didn't build a

How Mum's dementia unlocked precious memories – and finally brought us together

rapport during those early visits. I'd tell her about the children but I could see she didn't understand much. I felt frustrated. It was as if I was continually failing her.'

In December 2005, Roy died of septicaemia and kidney failure, aged 88. 'We had no idea he'd been so ill,' says Sarah. 'It happened so fast. He died within four weeks of going to hospital. We took Mum to visit, and they both knew it was the last time they would see each other.'

'I was grief-stricken. In the midst of their grief, Sarah and her siblings had to deal with the realisation that responsibility for their mother had now passed to them.'

WITH Mary's last remaining link to Faversham gone, they moved her to a home in Laleham, Middlesex, in June 2006, so she would be nearer to them in London. But Sarah fretted about her mother being in an unfamiliar place, living with people who knew nothing about her, so she compiled an album that told Mary's life story to help the care staff connect with her.

'I went through all her photographs from when she was a child to the moment she held her first great-grandchild,' says Sarah.

'There were hundreds of them, stuffed in old boxes. I'd never seen them before.'

'It was marvellous, and an incredible surprise, but somehow I still didn't relate to the woman in the photos.'

When her mother saw the album, she glowed with pleasure.

'Her eyes lit up and she smiled with

a genuine happiness I hadn't seen for years,' says Sarah. Together, they leafed through the pages, starting with a grainy black-and-white image of Mary aged five, sitting in the garden with her parents.

'I'd written simple captions under each photo,' says Sarah. 'The first read: "This is my life. I was born on June 25, 1918."

'As Mum read it out, she sounded articulate, proud and excited. Although she was confused by the present, the past made her come alive.'

They leafed through pictures of Mary playing tennis, going for walks, picnicking in the park, and, later, splashing in the sea at Bournemouth. 'Mum explained that she and Dad had taken walks by the river in their early days together. The secluded path near Faversham gave them privacy to get to know each other,' says Sarah.

'Bournemouth beach was where they'd honeymooned.'

'Suddenly I saw my mother not as a timid housewife, but an excitable

Making a connection: Sarah with her mother, and (above) her parents, Mary and Roy, in 1940

teenager in the first throes of love.'

There were pictures of Mary as a catwalk model for sportswear company Lilywhites, looking stunning in swimsuits and tiny tennis outfits.

'She told me about the twice-weekly fashion shows and the parties, and she seemed so glamorous. I would have loved to have looked like her.'

Before long, Sarah began to look for-



told me how she'd made clothes out of armchair covers. But she insisted she was lucky: her two brothers were pilots, her sister was a GI bride and, remarkably, they all survived.'

After the war photos, they moved on to early motherhood.

'She said she loved the early years, and that it was so much easier before we all started answering back,' says Sarah.

'Suddenly I was struck by how insufferable I'd been. As a teenager, I thought I knew it all. I thought Mum's lifestyle was dull, and that I was above it all.'

'I felt ashamed, and said I was sorry for not being a better daughter. She held my hand and smiled. There was no need for words. It was a lovely, warm moment.'

Sarah retrieved objects from Mary's now empty home to spark memories.

'I brought in her metal egg whisk. She couldn't remember what she'd had for lunch that day, but she knew the whisk was kept in the sink drawer and that she'd used it to make the icing for her coffee cake.'

'Her memories brought mine flooding back, and I realised how much I loved her. I thought of the times I'd done my homework at the kitchen table while Mum made her special flapjacks, and the smell of her marmalade bubbling on the stove filled the room.'

'I realised my childhood was far more contented than I'd believed.'

The advance of Mary's dementia only served to accelerate the flood of memories.

'I brought in her old-fashioned bristle brush and she explained how she had kept her hair curled with rags,' says Sarah.

'I realised that, even in old age, she had a unique beauty and grace. I made sure she still had her hair done once a week, and bought her deep-red dresses which flattered her pale skin.'

BECAUSE she was determined to give Mary constant reminders of home, Sarah stitched up her mother's threadbare bedspread, embroidered with pink cabbage roses, and brought it into the home.

'As we grew more comfortable with each other, we would often sit in silence,' she says.

'Mum would fall asleep while I held her hand, or we'd sit at the window and admire the beauty of the autumn leaves.'

'Although she often didn't recognise those around her, Mum always remembered me and I enjoyed our time together. We didn't talk about how we'd been in the past. It no longer seemed important. I think we were both anxious to rectify past mistakes.'

By August 2008, Mary had lost the ability to swallow or speak and was drifting in and out of consciousness.

'I didn't know if she could hear me, but I wanted her to know she was loved,' says Sarah.

'I held her hand and told her she had been a marvellous mother. I thanked her for telling me about her life, and told her it was OK to let go.'

Following her mother's death, Sarah decided she wanted to help the relatives of other people with dementia. To that end she has devised a series of 'memory cards' bearing images from the Forties and Fifties, to inspire memories, conversation and closeness.

She had given up her marketing job, and in October 2008 set up her business, Many Happy Returns.

'I wanted others to discover the same relationships with their loved ones as I had had, and to focus on the person, not the illness,' she says.

When Mary finally passed away in May 2009, Sarah felt a combination of relief, sorrow and gratitude, which now drives her determination to help others.

'There is no cure for dementia, but people who live with it don't have to have horrible lives,' she says.

'Mum's final years were full of love and happiness. I'll always be grateful for that. Although it took a lifetime, we finally formed a very special bond.'

You can play a great tune on a tuber

IT SOUNDS like the ultimate Blue Peter challenge: build an orchestra out of vegetables.

But in China, an ingenious pair of musicians have done just that – making a series of instruments from various vegetables bought at market stalls in Beijing. Their

efforts have now earned them thousands of pounds from appearances on TV talent shows. The friends drill holes in bamboo shoots, carrots, marrows and other veg to create a variety of wind instruments.

Each vegetable has to be fresh –

too dry and the notes sound out of tune. The pair's piece de resistance is a set of carrot panpipes on which they produce a note-perfect rendition of Auld Lang Syne.

Well, they claim it's perfect – Burns fans may feel they've had a marrow escape...