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Nesting Dolls of Motherhood

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By Vincent O'Keefe

In my boyhood, I never expected to become a stay-at-home parent like my mother. But that experience brought us closer in my adulthood. A mother of six, she had always insisted there is nothing better in the world than “holding babies.” During my many hours holding my two infant daughters, I had to agree.

Sadly, my mother's mind eventually succumbed to Alzheimer's disease by the time my daughters were teenagers. For me, the most poignant moment of our family's Alzheimer's journey occurred at my mother's nursing home during her final months. As part of Mom's

memory care, my sister had the great idea to give her a baby doll, especially since we knew Mom still loved to hold babies. To keep the doll from getting lost, the back of its head was labelled with my mother's first initial and last name in black letters.

During one of my visits, my mother held the doll tightly to her chest, and I noticed the label. Enter a series of doublings. They say one's "deep" childhood memories are the last to leave a brain suffering from Alzheimer's, so it seemed my mom was desperately—and literally—trying to comfort herself as a child, to hold on to her most authentic self by clinging to a doll with her name on it.

The way she hugged that doll also eerily mimicked the way my siblings, my children, and I hugged her during that time. All were hoping to reach vestiges of my mother, for the content seemed to be leaving the form.

One thing Alzheimer's cannot diminish, however, is a person's legacy. And Mom's legacy of love for "holding babies" showed up beautifully in the form of my youngest daughter in her early years. Whenever we were in a store with dolls, my daughter would carefully "test" each doll by holding it under her left arm to see if it fit snugly. When she found the one she loved to hold the most, she would smile, squeeze it tight, run to me, and ask if she could keep it. I imagine my mother skipped through those same motions nearly a century ago.

In a final twist of maternal irony, I later learned that even though the doll my mother loved so much had her own name written on it, my sister and mother actually called it by my long-deceased grandmother's name. In that light, I realized that not only did my mother love holding a baby, but in her diseased state, she still longed to be held like a baby herself—by her own mother. For there is nothing better in the world.

—Vincent O'Keefe

Vincent O'Keefe is a writer and former stay-at-home father with a Ph.D. in American literature. He won an honorable mention in the 2024 Erma Bombeck Writing Competition in the local human interest category for his essay "Nesting Dolls of Motherhood." His writing has appeared at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Parents*, *Insider*, *Next Avenue*, and *City Dads*, among other venues. Visit him at VincentOKeefe.com or on X [@VincentAOKeefe](https://twitter.com/VincentAOKeefe) or Facebook at [Vincent O'Keefe](https://www.facebook.com/VincentOKeefe).