

Nora and Ann, Mother and Daughter*
by Renee Marks Cohen

Nora and Ann committed joint suicide; that's what the mother, Nora, explained in the documents she left to be found in her apartment or mailed in advance. I read about the suicides in the newspaper.

Nora was in her mid- or late 70's; her daughter, Ann, who had cerebral palsy, was about 30. Her condition was so severe from birth that she couldn't crawl, walk, or toilet herself. But she could feed herself from a table, use a motorized wheel chair, and master a computer to create graphics and communicate on the Internet. She could talk, but a novice listener had to concentrate intensely to understand her.

Nora had devoted much of her life to her daughter's care, *so much* of her life that her husband couldn't stand it, and they were separated. With hope of improvement, Nora tried many treatments for her daughter: magnets, Botox, pure oxygen, colored lights beamed at the eyes, many vitamins and supplements, on and on and on. Some of the practitioners she described seemed like quacks, but I never commented.

Nora was able to work part time over the years; she told me about her real estate sales, about being an assistant to a computer enrichment specialist offering classes, about her own small import company.

I met them when I responded to a flyer Nora posted in the convent where I studied yoga. The flyer asked for volunteers to help "program" Ann—exercise her extremities according to a formula devised by a physical therapist. So I and one or two others and Nora would collect at their apartment, and do the exercise thing with Ann lying on a table, while we talked and laughed together. The sessions were often set to occur before my yoga class at the convent, which was almost next door to their apartment building.

Nora and Ann had designed a high school curriculum that would lead to her graduation. Ann went to her senior prom, whose logistics were coordinated by her mother: advance wheel chair "dance" instruction, a corsage and special gown, limousine, tux she bought for the prom date and whose pants legs she hemmed when the date arrived for the prom. A friend who was a nurse and their neighbor accompanied the prom couple to help with Ann's

toileting during the evening. The nurse was one of the original exercisers who lived at a group residence as a student. Nora found her a neighboring apartment when she took her first job.

Nora, the mother, had an operation for a urinary condition, and several years later needed a much more serious operation. It was cancer. Maybe Nora knew she was going to die. Her husband, who lived separately, was 10 years older than she, and he also had cancer. So what happened? Why a joint suicide? Did Nora never seriously consider a move for her daughter to a group home for those with severe handicaps? I had given her information about possible trustees who could manage the financial and legal aspects of Ann's care, if she could no longer be with her mother.

I never read any of the letters Nora left for people. Maybe the part time caregiver arrived and found them. The newspaper said she planned everything in detail before she used a gas and plastic bags to help her daughter and then herself die. She even made arrangements for the care of their dog. Ann was used to the placing of a plastic bag over her head; in that therapy, breathing whatever air was in the bag was supposed to make her stomach or chest muscles stronger.

They were both intelligent, sensitive people. I do not judge the mother, and I think about them both when I see their apartment building almost daily, and when I pass Nora's email address while scrolling down my email contacts, at my desk, to send a note.

*I have used fictitious names, to respect the privacy of the family.

Author Bio: Renee Marks Cohen has done lifestyle writing as well as medical editing and writing. In the latter niche, she has been the managing editor of New York Medical College's *New York Medical Quarterly*, and the author, for Janssen Japan, of over 35 interview articles on schizophrenia. She has edited books on neurology, taught Beijing Medical University scientists how to write, and audited clinical trial case report forms. Cohen is also a zumba and yoga enthusiast. You may reach her at: [RMC Email](#).