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IN LOVING MEMORY

KATHRYN HARLAN-GRAN

The first time I remember my grandmother forgetting was when I was six years old and she misplaced her potato salad. I am sure this is not the first time that she was forgetful—in fact, it may not have been a symptom of her Alzheimer’s at all. After all, I frequently misplace things that turn out to be right in front of my face and, to the best of my knowledge, I do not have a neurodegenerative disorder. But for some reason, this is the moment that my brain draws forth as the start. After picking me up from first grade, we had gone to our local Raley’s supermarket and she had purchased a small plastic drum of potato salad for lunch. Just moments after arriving back at home, my normally demure, collected grandmother was stomping around the kitchen, flustered, unable to find the potato salad.

“It’s right here, Grandma,” I offered uneasily, gesturing at the top of the printer in the next room. She had set it down there when we first came into the house.

“Of course,” she smiled, relieved that she hadn’t left it twenty minutes away in the checkout line. She didn’t comment on it further—and what was there to say? She had misplaced her lunch—but I was left with an uneasy

feeling in my stomach that I couldn’t seem to shake.

We visited Raley’s almost every day after school. The occasional detour to the Jamba Juice next door held the true allure for me, but for my grandmother grocery shopping was a social experience. She knew nearly every employee by name, and I’m fairly confident that the ladies in the deli section counted her as a genuine friend. They would chat amiably about husbands and children while I gazed absentmindedly into glass cases of lunchmeats and marveled at the bakery section. There were a few employees who continued inquiring with my mother about my grandma’s wellbeing even years after she no longer came to the store.

Over the years, I have unearthed countless examples of what I now think of as “Romantic Alzheimer’s,” dreamy TV-appropriate versions of reality where dementia patients keep their long-term memory but get “confused” about the present, or who find new love and somehow remember it when all else fades away, or who miraculously become lucid for hours or even days at a time, even in the advanced stages of the disease. I have since learned that, while such things do happen,

they are far from the norm, and they certainly shouldn't have been what I was expecting. I think perhaps my least favorite example of Romantic Alzheimer's is when I see people on social media attest that their grandfather loved their grandmother so much that he never forgot who she was (<3). I think the reason that this makes my stomach want to crawl out through my mouth is its corollary: that perhaps the reason my grandmother forgot me is that she didn't love me enough.

It's easy, in retrospect, to see this wasn't at all the case. My grandma was in Kauai with my parents when she found out that my mom was pregnant. Since my dad is her only child, that made me her first grandkid. From what I understand, excitement doesn't even begin to cover how she felt—ecstatic, perhaps, would be closer. On the plane ride home she announced to everyone that she was going to be a grandma. She was so delighted, in fact, that she retired from her job as a legal secretary when I was born and moved in with us, expanding our family of three to a happy family of four. Since both of my parents are teachers, she was able to care for me while they were at work during the day. She taught

me about letters and colors and how to make friends with all the animals we could find on the ten acres of property surrounding our home. She would push me on the swings and sing me nursery rhymes. She let me play dress up with her clothes and shuffle around in her shoes, many sizes too large. When she watched *As the World Turns* in the afternoon, she encouraged me to stand in front of the television and dance to the theme song, even if that meant that sometimes there was a toddler obscuring her view of the soap opera's first few moments.

Perhaps as a side effect of a child's memory, perhaps as a result of commuting between homes after my parents' separation when I was six years old, I recall my grandmother in two separate but distinct ways. It is almost difficult to think of her as a single person who underwent a dramatic change; instead, I remember two people who were unfortunate enough to wind up sharing the same body. She forgot my name first, and then my father's, and then finally her own.

The grandma who helped me finish jigsaw puzzles when I got too frustrated to continue slowly gave way to one who didn't have sufficient motor skills to button

a shirt, who was unable to remain present for long enough to bathe herself. The love disappeared from her eyes, along with the compassion and eventually the understanding. When working as a legal secretary, my grandma knew true shorthand—like another language entirely, a single symbol represented an entire word. When I was thirteen, the year before her death, I watched her write the words “O God” on the stone surface of our living room table. I never saw her pick up a pencil again.

That was the same year that my grandma left the house and refused to come back. During the day she stayed with an adult daycare facility to prevent precisely this type of incident. Although I recognized the necessity for assisted living services, I don’t think that she liked it there. I believe that there was some part of her grappling for dignity as her faculties deteriorated in a way that she could not possibly comprehend. Although she was well treated, some angry part of her psyche resented being looked after. She would frequently leave the building with new friends and utterly forget them by the time we made it home.

It was a warm day in early fall, the sort of day when the light goes hazy and everything looks just a little bit tired. The summer heat had cooked the tall grass carpeting our property into long, brittle stalks, telling secrets in the soft breeze. The wine grapes in the vineyard across the long, empty country road hung

heavily on the vine, waiting for noisy machinery to come and vibrate them off into a bucket for collection. It was the perfect day for a walk, which I suppose was the initial thought that crossed my grandma’s mind when she slid on her shoes and walked out the front door of our house. My dad sent me after her, assuming that she would walk the couple of hundred feet down to the end of our gravel driveway and then return, as she usually did when she wandered out of the house. At fourteen I already had far too many years of practice caring for my grandmother, so I should have been more than qualified for the job.

On this day, however, she did not turn around. I jogged to catch up with her.

“Where are you going, grandma?” I asked brightly.

“Home,” she spat, shocking me with the venom in her tone.

“You were just at home,” I tried to explain, pacing beside her down the hot blacktop.

“No, that’s not my home. I have to go home,” she insisted, sounding quite confident and increasingly agitated. I tried to explain that this house was her home, that she had lived there for more than a decade now, that all her belongings were there, that her son was there, that I was. In short, curt statements, she informed me that I was wrong. Normally I would have acquiesced, but we were now nearly half a mile from home and she showed no interest in turning back.

“Okay, then, where do you live? Where is your home?”

In retrospect, I suppose that I can understand why that question would have shaken her, because I realize now that the answer was that she didn’t know. I had, at the time, assumed that she must have been thinking of a real place in the wrong time, but I am now fairly confident that she had no clue—and that not knowing must have terrified her.

“Leave me alone! Stop getting in my way!” She had begun to shout. “Stop following me and leave me alone!” It was at this point that I began to panic and called my dad on my cell phone, asking that he drive down and pick us up. When I hung up, my grandma stopped and turned to look at me.

“I don’t want you here! It’s bullshit!”

“What is?”

“It’s bullshit to think I ever loved you!”

She turned to continue stalking down the road, just as my dad pulled up beside her in his filthy gray Prius. He reached across the center console to shove open the passenger door.

“Come on, Mom. Let’s go home.”

She climbed wordlessly into the car. My dad offered me a ride, but I decided to walk back up to the house—slowly.

Later that year, on the last day of November, 2011, my grandmother finally passed away.

Usually I would not use the word “finally” to describe a death because it makes it sound as though it’s something that was long anticipated, long awaited. In this case, however, that makes the word a particularly apt description. Though Alzheimer’s Disease has a special way of killing a person, it rarely actually takes a life—rather, it causes such severe incapacitation that infections or falls kill patients first. It was one such fall that landed my grandmother in the hospital with a broken hip, and then sent her to hospice care, and then sent her home in a black cardboard box of ashes on my father’s work table. She sat there for some time before he finally moved her, and I suspect that the only reason he ever took action at all was that he was afraid that a cat would bust into the box and try to eat her.

My mom, my dad, and I were all together when it (finally) happened. Since I wasn’t yet old enough to drive, my parents had to shuttle me back and forth between their respective houses and they had decided that it was easier just to meet in the middle than to take turns driving the full 40 minute round trip. I was about to seal myself into the warm cocoon of my mother’s car when we heard my dad’s cell phone ring. We all knew what it was before he even picked up.

A few moments later, he joined my mom where she stood beside the open passenger door, keeping watch over my huddled form.

“That was hospice,” he said simply. “Grandma died.”

The call had come through in a tiny, two-minute window when the three of us were all together. We didn't say anything else. We didn't even cry. We just sat there together under the stars.

Four years later, I am finally able to think of my grandma with her good face on, her true face, the person she was prior to the disease taking root in her mind. The woman I remember taking me to get smoothies after school and helping out in my kindergarten class is my grandmother—all the rest was brain death. And I am strong enough now to say firmly, confidently, that nothing that she ever said or did took place due to a lack of love for me or anyone else in her life. The grandma I got to know had more love than nearly anyone I've ever known. So now I think back mostly with nostalgia, sometimes with regret. There is a poignancy to my remembrance of her, knowing how proud she would be of the life I'm living if she had only lived long enough to see it.

A couple of months ago, I took my boyfriend of almost three years to Jamba Juice. The Raley's next door closed down years ago in favor of a newer version a few miles away, and I haven't really thought about it since. For some reason, though, on this not-quite-hot November afternoon, I rub my thumb across the dusty glass of the huge front windows and look inside.

Everything is exactly as it was, as though frozen in time. The large red armchair sits beside the side entrance,

its color dulled by a thick patina of dust. Empty magazine stands lurk beside empty registers; shelves that once stocked firewood and patio chairs are barren but exactly where I left them eight years ago. Large signs loom above empty aisles: Dairy, Pharmacy, Deli.

My boyfriend looks on, baffled as to why tears have suddenly started streaming down my face.

"She would have loved you," I tell him. "She would have loved you so much."

OUR SPOT AT BIG WOLF

MARGARET BRUNET