

## Meet You in Heaven

There are some things that you can't forget. The image of your mother crying, or your father struggling to repress from doing so. The corners of your grandmother's smile, or perhaps the depths of your grandfather's nostalgic stare. Ten letters can take these all away. Ten letters can erase eighty years of sheltered love, protected memories, meticulously woven relationships. Alzheimer's.

My Grandmother believed in God. She knew He was always watching and that He would protect and guide us while she began the inevitable battle against these very ten letters. She prayed every day while her mind still let her, although never for herself. She prayed for her daughter. Her daughter, my mother, is a woman who worked for years to have children. Due to health precautions, bearing a pregnancy became an impossibility. Instead, she worked with a surrogate across the country to have a child. After four failed sperm and egg implants, I was born. My grandmother called me the miracle baby. I was her only grandchild, and a recipient of a large portion of her prayers. I like to think that her prayers brought me into this world. How lucky am I to have someone who loved me more than anyone before I took my first breath.

I was eight when she was diagnosed. Perhaps Alzheimer's acts as a reversion to childhood, or sorts. It washes away the years, stripping the brain of societal standards and norms, until maybe all that remains is basic personality, until that is taken too. I used to go on trips to Dairy Queen with my Grandfather and her. She'd lean over to my Grandpa and say, "There's a little girl in the backseat with us." She wasn't sure who my Grandfather was either. When we'd get to DQ, she'd make sure he bought something for the little girl in the backseat, too. She remained her fun-loving self until the end. One of the last times I saw her, my mother and I were wheeling her around the halls of the nursing home when she told us she wanted to go to the party. She directed us to this "party," and with each turn announced we were

heading to the party. Soon enough, several other patients decided they wanted to attend as well, and we formed a conga line, of sorts, all heading to the party. Some things you never forget. Sure, she forgot our names, her age, her family. But she never forgot her kindness. That, she could never forget.

Some days were better than others, as I imagine all Alzheimer's cases are. She hated the nursing home. My Grandfather stretched out putting her in one for as long as he could, but after finding uneaten medication around the house, and the water he told her to drink pooled in his shoe, we made the impossible choice. The home had a nice courtyard, which my Grandmother usually liked to go in with us. Some days she'd scream that she didn't want to go outside. These days, we roamed around the halls instead, finding the piano in one of the common rooms so I could play something for her. One day she pulled me aside, and whispered, "Can you drive?" I smiled and replied, "Only a bike." I was eleven. Her eyes lit up, "That's great! Let's get out of here!" I laughed a little, and took her back in to see my Grandfather.

My seventh grade dance was coming to a close; the parents were lining up outside of the gymnasium while we all danced with our glow sticks to Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer." As I walked out, my dad was standing right outside, nearly first in line. We left my school, and I could never forget the eerie silence upon entering my house. My mother just stared at my, my dad stroked my back. They didn't have to say anything. Sometimes silence yields all the answers.

The morning of the wake, I wrote a card for her. I didn't want anyone to read it, it would be our secret. After everyone was leaving, I stuck it in her casket. My Grandfather watched me as I tried to hide it, and asked me if he could see what it was. I shook my head, having no intention of sharing it. He said okay, and seemed to forget about it. When only immediate family remained, I looked over to see him standing

by her casket. He reached for the card, and discreetly read it and put it back. I saw him wipe his eye, then come back over as if he'd never left. I debated mentioning it to him, but decided to pretend I hadn't seen it at all. I still remember what I wrote in that card. Some things you can't forget.

Ironic, isn't it? How a disease that makes one person forget makes hundreds more remember? I was very young when my Grandmother was still health, but that doesn't mean I don't remember her then. I think everyone has some childhood memories that they randomly remember: a particular day, experience, dialogue that they can't seem to forget. I remember always sitting in her house, in my mother's childhood bedroom, and creating three-dimensional cups out of paper. I'd craft lids and straws, decorating them with palm trees or flowers. My Grandmother would come in to check on me, and always bring me a glass of milk in a short, patterned glass. Sometimes she'd bring me mashed potatoes, putting in plenty of butter and making sure there were no lumps. She'd call me her love bug.

Everyone at the wake that day thought of at least one particular moment they shared with my Grandmother. Not a single one of these memories was from when she was sick. Instead, we all remembered bits and pieces of her life, forming a large sequence of events that had been stripped from her memory, reliving memories that never deserved to be forgotten. Ever since, I began to understand the fragility of health, and just how lucky we are to have it. Good health can be taken in an instant, and often we are powerless from stopping it. I've learned to appreciate my health, and my family's for that matter. I have become so close with my Grandfather, and have learned that he is the strongest man I know. No one's ever seen him cry. Although I think I might have, when he read my card. Since, I have learned to value relationships more than I had before. At any time, ties can be broken, history expunged, love forgotten. Treasuring relationships is the only way to keep them afloat.

I've done a lot of pondering, mainly regarding how God chooses when to take people back to Him. Everyone always says that the best people go first, but why? At first I thought maybe it was because it was these people that God missed the most. I later realized that He would not be that greedy. Now I think that she left first to become my guardian angel. To watch me and my mother from a spot where she has more control, where maybe she could help rather than powerlessly watch from beside us. I know she's always there it's one of those things you can just feel. On my sixteenth birthday, I was missing her a little more than usual. My Grandfather handed me a card and told me that she had picked it out for me. Suddenly, a piece of paper had a lot more meaning. Before she got sick, she had bought this birthday card for me, thinking she wouldn't be there to celebrate with me. But she was there, I know she was.

Coping with Alzheimer's teaches appreciation. For me, this appreciation was for my family. I've learned that nothing is more important than family. My Grandmother loves me more than anyone, and I am incredibly blessed to have had someone who would do anything and everything to see me smile. Relationships like that are hard to find, but impossible to forget. This disease of forgetting has taught me to remember: the good times, the smiles, the jokes that maybe weren't that funny. Regarding society, I have learned that there are a lot of people who have gone through similar experiences. Just because they aren't the same as mine, does not mean they are any less painful. Too many people create competitions of who's had the worse experience, of who's gone through more pain. While doing so, they completely forget the other's agony while trying to prove their own. Instead, we must all come together to help and guide one another through periods of darkness. Instead, we must all come together to find a cure.

I still remember what I wrote in the card I put in my Grandmother's casket. "Meet you in Heaven."

Some things, you never forget.