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*In Sickness and In Health*

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Red and black. 64 squares. You against your opponent. A competition of strategy. "Your turn!" my great grandpa says with a grin as he double jumps two of my little red chips. I toss them off the board and into the heap of useless red checker chips that is growing at an alarming pace. Sullen about the loss of two more members of my team, I carelessly slide my last remaining chip. With a laugh, my great Grandpa Reg takes my last piece and wins the game. My great grandma, Grandma Ann, stands in the kitchen drying dishes and laughing. "Don't feel bad honey, your grandpa wins everything, he's the luckiest man alive." She smiles at me, the laugh lines on her face forming an intricate, lace pattern. Grandpa Reg winks at Grandma Ann, "I sure am!". My great grandparents' love for each other is on brilliant display in this moment, and whatever disappointment I had over the loss of checkers evaporates.

Two years later, my great grandpa didn't seem very lucky to me. It seemed like he was losing. He had left his sun-drenched home in St. Louis. Lost the games of checkers and jigsaw puzzles late into the night. And worst of all, lost his beautiful, laughing wife, drying dishes and taking steaming, melt-in-your-mouth sugar cookies out of the oven. My great grandma had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She had always been vibrant, but slowly she began to fade into black and white. She became increasingly anxious and angry. Little things like going out in the rain without an umbrella would send her into a flustered state that she wouldn't break out of for hours. Everyday tasks like going to the store became arduous undertakings for her and for my great grandpa. My great grandma began to forget where she was, what she was doing,

and worst of all, who Grandpa Reg was. He would come home to find my great grandma ready attack him because she believed he was an intruder. For years Grandpa Reg took care of her by himself, but eventually it became a job too enormous for one person. Exhausted by the constant battle to keep my great grandma safe from her own mind, Grandpa Reg decided it was time to leave home and move closer to the rest of the family.

My great grandma was placed in a nursing home in Minnesota, and there she began to lose her speech abilities. She grew increasingly frail and the delicate smile lines on her face seemed to disappear behind lines of concern and worry. Grandpa Reg got his own apartment, but spent more time at the nursing home with Grandma Ann than he did at his new home. He was her advocate and voice when she didn't have one of her own. When a nursing home attendant styled Grandma Ann's hair wrong, Grandpa Reg told them or did it himself. When the bedsheets were too scratchy or the food wasn't warm, my great grandpa made sure it was seen to and fixed for my great grandma's sake. As one person, he provided for two. He still does. The days in the past morphed into the present, and Grandma Ann is still in the nursing home. Grandpa Reg still provides for her every need.

During wedding vows, the happy bride and groom often state that they will be faithful "in sickness and in health." I wonder how many blissfully ignorant couples truly understand what this means. "In sickness" refers to more than just a common cold or a little bout of stomach flu. Sickness is watching the person who is your world slowly lose their identity. Sickness is having to fight for every smile; every moment of recognition.

Sickness is Alzheimer's. My great grandma's sickness has not been a happy or easy one. But through it I have learned what it means to love. My great grandpa's love for Grandma Ann goes beyond any kind of love I have ever witnessed or experienced. His loyalty to her is unwavering. He showers her in love and affection. He comes to the nursing home 3 times a day to feed her meals. He talks to her for hours even though sometimes her only response is an occasional blink or a slight tilt of her chin. I have learned what a real love story looks like through watching my great grandparents handle Grandma Ann's disease.

Grandma Ann has been in late-stage Alzheimer's for almost 8 years. During the late-stage or 7th stage of Alzheimer's, people lose their ability to sit up by themselves, their muscles and joints become rigid, and they can't smile anymore. My great grandma has had shingles multiple times, she's stopped eating solid food, and she contracted numerous respiratory problems. We've gotten warning after warning that "it may be time to say goodbye," but each and every time, Grandma Ann pulls through. It's incredibly rare for Alzheimer's patients to make it to the final stage of Alzheimer's and continue on for 8 years. After simply being diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the average life expectancy is 8 to 10 years. My great grandma has lived with the disease for 14 years. And I know it's because of Grandpa Reg. His love keeps her going. It may sound cliché, but it's the truth. There is simply no other explanation. My great grandpa's love is unconditional; his love for Grandma Ann doesn't depend on the love he receives from her. My great grandma hardly ever recognizes me, or even her own daughter (my grandma), but she still has moments where she obviously recognizes my great grandpa. Sometimes,

Grandpa Reg will laugh and Grandma Ann's eyes will focus. Other times, Grandpa Reg will walk into her room and Grandma Ann will lock eyes with him; she won't make eye contact with anyone else until he leaves. During these moments, the depth of Grandma Ann's love for Grandpa Reg is clear. No disease is able to mask it. And in these moments, I see my great Grandma in the kitchen, smiling and laughing.

There have been many other Alzheimer's patients in my great grandma's nursing home. One spoke fluent Greek, another could sing songs with perfect pitch. Though many of them can't remember the names of their children or how to brush their teeth in the morning, they have still retained aspects of their identity. I believe my great grandma continues fighting Alzheimer's everyday because even though parts of her mind are no longer there, at her core she is still my Grandma Ann. The part of her identity that she will never release is her love for Grandpa Reg. When I visit my great grandma, I want that moment of recognition so badly. I sit and hold her hand and imagine every part of my being calling out to Grandma Ann, "Grandma it's me! Remember me! Remember the time we stayed up until 12 a.m working on a puzzle? Remember that time we went to your church and I drank too many cups of fruit punch and got sick? Remember?" Usually, her eyes don't clear. But I believe she knows I'm there and that I love her. Alzheimer's may have compromised her memory and trapped her inside of a mind that isn't her own anymore, but it hasn't changed her core identity or her ability to know love.

Years ago, as I sat in my great Grandparents' house playing Grandpa Reg in checkers, I didn't know it was a moment I would value for the rest of my life. I didn't think the sunlight in their kitchen or the melt-in-your-mouth sugar cookies would be

memories I treasured. But Grandma Ann's struggle with Alzheimer's has taught me that memories are one of the most precious things we have. Alzheimer's is a cruel disease because it steals those things. It takes away the memories we hold dear. However, Alzheimer's won't win. It may steal memories, but it can never steal the capacity to love and feel love. In the end, nothing is stronger than our ability to love. Grandma Ann and Grandpa Reg prove this each and every day. My great Grandpa has undergone many hardships because of Alzheimer's, but his love for my great Grandma and her love for him has never changed. And because of this, as Grandma Ann would say, he is still "the luckiest man alive."