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Memories
Sophie LeMay

I finally carved out an hour of my Sunday to visit an old friend. A few years ago, she was plucked from her life by some distant cousins after receiving a late-onset Alzheimer's diagnosis. Now she lives in a specialty retirement home for memory care. My mom gets over there more often, but I've never found the time. It has been a little purposeful, I admit. It's scary to watch someone disappear before your very eyes.

Gladys Haddad was truly a woman of the 60s. We call her Grace; whether it's an endearing nickname or an attempt to whitewash her real one, I'm not sure. The daughter of a construction worker, she was the first girl to go to college of her Arabic cousins. She even went on to receive a Ph.D. in women's studies and write two award-winning books celebrating historical female figures of the Western Reserve. She was undoubtedly brilliant. Now, she can't find her way from the lunchroom to the 8 by 8-foot room where she spends her blurred days.

It's a crisp fall day. The outside of the building looks homey enough, but you open the red front door and are greeted by a wide metal door with a key code lock and a sign that reads:

Thank you for visiting our home today. We hope you have a wonderful visit. Please keep us safe by making sure that none of us leave through the door as you are coming in to visit. Fondly, the Residents.

We sign in. The place is built in a big loop with that one door as the entrance and exit. It's all carpeted with a heathered gray pattern – the same kind you see in elementary schools and libraries. The fabric is thin as a paper towel and darkly patterned so that it doesn't absorb spills or show stains. The lobby is littered with at least 15 people sitting in wheelchairs; they're seemingly mid-transport, as if the driver they're reliant on left to grab something, but the same people are still sitting there when we leave. After weaving through a maze of propped up, swollen ankles, we find Grace in the art room.

She's sitting at a table with three other women, all four of them with their heads down, asleep, as an enthusiastic white man in his mid 60s introduces today's art project. My mom rubs her arm to wake her, and she rolls her head up and smiles weakly. She doesn't know who my mom is, but she knows this is someone she loves. As we help her out of the room, a nearly bald woman in a motorized chair looks at me intently. I smile, and she tries to smile back. We take her to her room so we can talk, and it's hard to watch how much effort it takes for her to shuffle down the hallway.

“How are you today, Grace?”

“I never know.”

It's oddly comforting to be around someone who won't remember what you say and do. Humans walk around every day crumpling under the pressure to uphold a reputation - it's pitiful, really. In an hour, this woman won't remember I exist, so what do I have to strive for? It's strange. I had low expectations of her memory, implanted by my mom as she watched Grace decline while I kept my distance. I think that's part of why it was so hard to finally visit. I was terrified of what I'd find.

We walk down the hallway, passing room after room, each one fitted with identical red and yellow plaid curtains to make it feel like home - whatever that means to these people. The motorized twin-sized beds have mahogany headboards; a weak effort to sterilize the place. Some rooms are shared between two people, almost like college dorms or prison cells. I can't help but wonder what the pillow talk is like in those rooms. Paper flowers and old Christmas cards line the windowsills, and each neatly made bed has a teddy bear resting on the pillow. Every room, without fail, is plastered with family pictures. The doors don't have locks; the lack of privacy and lack of trust are simultaneous, it's even built into the architecture. On the wall in front of each room is a four-picture collage frame recounting the patient's life.

My name is Shirley Hummel. I am the only child of Ernest and Irene Moore. I married Paul Hummel in 1949. We raised our son David and our daughter Bev. I worked as an Elementary remedial reading teacher.

You can call me Robert, Bob, or “hey you!” I was born in Germany. My family left Germany when I was 5. I met my future wife Alice at a New Year's Eve party. Together we raised our children Laura and Bernard. Ask me about my volunteer work in Holocaust education.

My name is Shirley Cranley. I was raised with 7 siblings by our parents Stan and Martha. I won a blue ribbon in the Oregon state fair for my Black Angus steer. I used my prize money to pay my tuition for Oregon State College. I met my future husband Tom on a blind date in New York City. Together we raised our 8 children. Tom and I lived in Japan on a military base for a time.

They help the nurses talk to the patients. I don't know how they choose what snippets to pick out of a life. I also don't know who did the choosing. Alzheimer's works backward - degrading the most recent memories first, sparing the older ones for a while. The hippocampus is a pea-sized piece of tissue in the core of the brain that solidifies new memories. It is slowly shredded in the first few years of

the disease, destroying the brain's ability to retain new information. However, the cortex where older memories are stored is initially unscathed.

It takes us a good 20 minutes to walk to her room. Her legs bow inward, and she bears all of her weight on the red walker she uses, one of the thousands owned by the facility and passed down generations of patients as they inevitably degrade to wheelchairs.

"You ok?" my mom asks.

"So far."

I'm typing on my phone as I walk, frantically taking notes on her every movement, trying to nitpick the existence in which she's somehow found herself. It'd be rude, if not for the fact that in a few short hours she won't even remember we were there.

"We saw on the sign-in sheet that a lot of people visited today!"

"Oh. Did they?"

She doesn't know where her room is.

In her twenties, Grace was engaged to the love of her life. He was a military man who lit up her world, but he died in action during World War II. She was devastated and never dated again. She lived in a mid-century modern house with her brother Phillip for her entire adult life; she lived on the 2nd floor and he on the 1st. His floor had wood-paneled walls, a dark red shag rug, and a recliner. Hers was light and floral. They simply didn't exist without each other. I only visited that house a few times. Still, it was always decorated for a holiday – usually St. Patrick's Day or Easter, since she had a unique love for those, and they happened to bridge the 5-month gap between Valentine's Day and the 4th of July. A few years ago, both Grace and Phillip disappeared from their house, not responding to calls for days. Their cousins had moved them out following their simultaneous Alzheimer's diagnosis without telling any of their friends. They survived the move together, but he died just months later. That was three years ago, but she still can't remember he's gone. Her cousin Rosemary tells people just to keep reminding her when she asks where he is. We walk into her room after reading her frame, which is filled with pictures of him.

"Where's my brother?"

"He died, Grace. I'm so sorry."

"Oh."

She used to break down every time. Now, I think she remembers this feeling. It's numb.

We help her pivot until she's positioned over the plastic-covered couch, and she winces as she falls back. I sit to her left, and my mom pulls up a chair in front of us. We cover her with a flowered fleece blanket from her bed, which is tagged with her name written in large sharpie on the corner. Two lamps light the room, placed on a side table next to a pile of books she can't even read anymore. Among

the stack are her own books, but she doesn't even know she wrote them. Once she gets settled on the couch, she looks at me intently and smiles.

"What's up with you?"

Years ago, when Grace was still working at Case Western Reserve University, my mom met her for the first time at our church. I was in the littlest choir at the time, and she loved listening to us. My mom introduced me to her early on, and every single time our paths crossed after that, she gave me a tender little kiss on the top of my head.

"Oh, Grace – Nancy Sherwin said to say hi!"

"Oh. Did she? Keep me informed."

Nancy was her best friend at church. With a lot of the things she says, I can't quite tell if she really remembers or if she's pretending to remember so she doesn't seem so far gone. We tell her about the service this morning, and we start singing one of the hymns. Her lips begin to move slowly to the words of the song.

Grace shivers, and my mom turns on the musty-smelling radiator that sits under the small window. We start to go through the pictures around her room, trying to grasp any fragments of memory while they're still there. Our family's Christmas card from 2016 is sitting behind an orange and yellow paper flower. We show it to her, and she smiles. She points at my picture.

"I know her..."

"Who's she?"

"Someone I know very well. She's cute." She turns to me and smiles.

"And who's that?" My mom asks, pointing to herself in the picture.

She looks up at my mom's picture and looks up at her.

"I'm 51 now!"

"You don't look it." There's a picture of us at the Cleveland Cavaliers' championship parade on the inside cover. "Oh, they were really happy." She doesn't quite know who they – we – are, but that's something Grace would say. She's still there under it all.

There's a picture of a couple from church. The woman was a photographer, and when they visited Grace for her birthday, they brought her a picture of themselves. I'd assume it's their effort to preserve themselves in her memory, and I can't quite decide if it's strange or not. To their credit, however, she recognizes them. She was close with them, but it still doesn't quite make sense that she remembers them. Memory doesn't make sense.

We pull out a picture of her own family, most of whom she hasn't seen in years. It's black and white, dated to 1986.

"Who are these people?" we ask her. I'm almost scared of the response.

"Family members." She's dodging the question.

"Can you name them?"

“Well, there I am...”

“Who’s this?”

“Is that Tony?” She’s questioning it so she’s not wrong. She knows she knows these people, and she’s terrified of the fact that she can’t name them anymore. I can see it in her face. “Now I’m all mixed up. Who are all these people?” The admittance. It hurts; it hurts deep.

The family pictures littering the room are there to remind her who she is, but do they even help if she doesn’t know who’s in them? Moreover, if family doesn’t help her ground herself in the relational web of this world, then what can? She knows her brother; I doubt she’ll ever forget him.

“There’s Phillip, and there’s me...I think that person is a cousin. I- Sorry.”

This is the first of many apologies.

I’m not quite sure what our motive is, but we keep trying to talk through memories. We take out a picture of Grace and my mom at the Severance Hall: one of her favorite places in the world.

“Oh! That was fun. What did we do?”

We make memories every single second of our lives. That’s why we remember the chocolate cupcakes with green frosting and the smell of orange soda in Chris Hebert’s basement in ’77. As we live, the hippocampus receives constant input, so it needs to distinguish what is worth holding on to. Because it’s so hard to conceptualize, the concept of why we remember what we remember has been studied by hundreds of researchers for decades. The main finding, and the one we’ve hastily accepted, is that we remember moments when we felt emotion. It makes sense, on a fundamental and scientific level, but for whatever reason, I’m hesitant to believe it.

We’ve started quizzing her, almost.

“Do you remember Thanksgiving at our house? We had turkey, and stuffing, and pumpkin pie...”

“We did all those things? Good for us.”

“Where’d you get your Ph.D.?”

“CWRU.” Does she know what that stands for, or has she just learned to recite the letters when people ask her? It feels almost like a defense mechanism.

“Do you remember your birthday party? I was there, and Nancy Sherwin, and Barbara Pelowski, and we all had cake in the meeting room.”

“Oh. And that’s what we did?”

“How old are you, Grace?”

“How old am I?”

“What year were you born?”

“How old am I?”

“What year sounds right? 1938?”

“I-”

Yes, she's lost her memory, but she's lost her confidence even more. We try desperately to fill up air space with conversation, but we lose momentum every so often. It's strange - awkward silence isn't so awkward with someone who won't remember it.

It's been over an hour, so we start to leave. We ease into the announcement of our departure; visits to my Grandma have trained me – it takes at least 30 minutes to leave someone who lives alone. Grace doesn't really live alone, but she lives in her own head most of the time these days. People who live in retirement homes, especially, cling to the normalcy of humans from outside their little bubble.

"It's time for us to get going now."

"Who's going where?"

"We're going to leave, but you'll stay here."

"Stay here?"

"When will you be back?"

"I'll come back," my mom replies hurriedly.

"You always do."

We've talked for a while, and her brain is tired. She says she has to go to the bathroom, but once she gets to the doorway, she says she doesn't need to anymore.

"What do you want to do when we leave? Do you want to stay here or go into the living room?"

"I- I don't know. You decide. I'm mixed up today."

We decide to leave her in her room to take a nap. She needs it. "Why don't you stay here for a while? We're going to walk out."

"Ok. You should have that to yourself."

Every so often, I see the person I know peak through the dense fog that has taken over her brilliant brain. That's one of those moments. We start to walk out, saying I love you profusely yet trying, lovingly, to escape before she asks another question.

"You better tell me what I'm supposed to be doing. I don't know."

"You're staying here for now."

"Should I go to the living room?"

"Do you want to go to the living room?"

"I don't know."

We change our plan and start walking with her, just to go somewhere. Grace never had children, her parents are long gone, her brother is dead, and her cousins keep their distance. She's being kept alive through countless falls and bouts of pneumonia just to be kept alive. She's alone and deteriorating slowly; it's what we all fear. She starts to drift farther from coherence as we walk. We stop in the hallway so she can catch her breath. She suddenly gains just enough clarity to feel the weight of what her life has become.

"I don't feel very healthy."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't even know what's gonna happen tonight."

"You'll go to dinner and go to sleep."

"I don't feel like it. I feel mixed up."

"It's ok."

"No, it's not ok."

"How can I help you?"

"I don't know. I feel foolish."

It's nothing but heart wrenching.

A gray-haired man pushes his mom in a wheelchair. She's childishly beaming and waves to Grace.

"I see her every day! I sit with her!"

We smile and say hi as she passes. She leaves, and Grace looks to us. "What are they talking about?" Following that distraction, she has to decide where she wants to go again. "Will I be able to find my way back?"

"Someone will help you."

"Someone else is going to help me?"

"Yes, we have to go."

"I'm mixed up."

We've made it almost all of the way to the front door, and she wants to go back to her room. She's too scared to be alone in the unfamiliarity of the circular building that she's lived in for almost three years. We walk again and finally make it to the room, and she shuffles back to the couch, pivoting once again before weakly falling into the cushions.

"One last thing before you go... I- I'm not quite sure. What should I do?"

"It's Sunday; you don't have to do any work today!"

"How do I know when it's Sunday?"

I go to hug her as we finally get up to leave, and I'm almost scared to touch her. How does Alzheimer's make bones feel brittle and hugs feel weak?