



The Inevitability of Elsewhere

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Dying is inevitable. We are all going to die. Someday we'll be alive, and the next, we won't. We'll have dying words. A final breath. One last supper.

In that moment, when we inflate our lungs beyond capacity—because, God, it just feels so good to breathe—and tiny black dots scatter across our eyes, cloning until the world has disappeared, we'll wish for one more moment, but it'll never come. Then we'll fulfill an inevitable end to a billion different lives.

Death is a universal inevitability. Alzheimer's is not.

That inevitability belongs to me.

My grandmother had been getting bad for years. That's what we called it—"getting

bad." It stung less than a clinical diagnosis, and I guess it was a way of stupidly pretending that what was happening to her was okay. That she'd be forgetful, but wouldn't forget us.

But she isn't getting anymore. Now, she's got.

The entrance to the memory-care unit where my grandmother lives is flanked with a bulky, beeping keypad. If the door opens from either side without the proper code, a blaring alarm rings throughout the entire unit. The bored workers spring from their non-existent tasks, swarming. Most of the patients barely even notice when the alarm is set off.

Are they patients? This isn't a medically run facility. But what else can they be called? Inhabitants? Dwellers? Clients? No term can

do justice to the unwilling and unknowing imprisonment of dozens whose memories have disintegrated.

My grandmother is classified as a wanderer. In the middle of the night, she'll carefully step out of bed and into her slippers, shuffling into the hallway, nursing her bad hip. Sometimes she helps the night staff fold washcloths until she decides she's tired again. Other times she's Goldilocks, sneaking into someone else's room, hanging her robe on their hook, sleeping in their bed.

I sometimes wonder if she wanders just to get lost. If she pads around with a vacant grin, searching for something she isn't sure exists, or if she's trying to disappear. How sad would that be? All she wants is to be lost, but she can't escape the inevitability that, at some point, she'll be found.

When I was in eighth grade, my grandmother's sister, Mary, died of complications from Alzheimer's. She was the first person in our family to live long enough to develop the disease. Everyone else died abruptly and too young. Cancer, heart attacks, strokes—these were the initial killers of my family.

It must have been so scary for my grandmother to witness her bossy older sister regress like that. The worst was near the end, when Mary had to be spoon-fed. I didn't know much about her other than she kept root beer candies on the coffee table and had a dentist's chair in her basement. But even I cringe at the image of a tiny, frail woman who has forgotten how to eat.

"If I ever get bad—really bad—I want you to drive me to the beach, buy me an ice cream cone, and take me for a sunset stroll on the pier. Then, when we reach the end, I'd like you to push me in."

We used to laugh and roll our eyes, droning, "Okay, Grandma." But now I have to wonder

if there was an element of seriousness in it. If she would rather have died tragically than have had to suffer through this mental decay.

No, wait—my grandmother isn't suffering. Her days don't exist since her mind is trapped elsewhere. She's happy. It's a sort of hopeless, pitiful happiness that leaves a perpetual half-smile on her lips, despite her not having a clue what she's smiling about. But it's still happiness.

It feels wrong to say that I'm suffering more than she is. I'm not losing my mind or my memories or my ability to verbalize what I need to say. But my grandmother doesn't know these things are happening to her. She's stuck in some indecipherable time period in which I do not exist, and I'm not even sure if she exists in it either. She's lost, and she's okay with it.

She's lost, and I'm not okay with it.

Death has become a recurring topic of discussion in my family. We've come to the unanimous conclusion that we don't want to end up like my grandmother. Not because we would suffer. But because everyone around us would.

Alzheimer's is tricky like that.

Quickly and painlessly: that's how we'd all like to go. My aunt wants to have a heart attack while she's out jogging, just tip over in a ditch and die, and my cousin Katy always says, "If I ever get like that, please just shoot me."

Quick and painless, like a bullet.

Before my grandmother's stroke, when she was in a fuzzy middle stage between severe dementia and full-blown Alzheimer's, my mom drove her to the beach and bought her a chocolate ice cream cone.

"Then we took a stroll."

"Oh, God. Please don't tell me she's floating facedown in the lake right now."

"She isn't." Tears were collecting in the corners of her eyes, but she didn't cry. Instead,

my mother sadly smiled and said, “They’ve built a fence at the end of the pier.”

My grandmother lives in a prison with paintings of beaches bolted to the walls. It seems cruel to me. No matter where she wanders, my grandmother is surrounded by endless watercolor reminders that she’s still here.

In September, during my senior year of high school, my grandmother had a stroke. I returned home to an empty house, to an urgently written Call Me note resting on the kitchen table.

“I’m at the hospital,” my mother whispered. “Grandma had a stroke.”

“Oh.”

The rest of the conversation is hazy in my mind. I think I might have offered to drive to the hospital, but it was an empty invitation. I didn’t know my way, and I didn’t want to see her, sprawled on a stiff hospital bed, breathing through her mouth beneath a flickering fluorescent light.

I don’t remember crying.

I think I was in shock.

Not because my grandmother—the sweet, stubborn woman who taught me the art of holding a grudge and kept expired cereals in her pantry—had a stroke, but because that last strand of hope had finally burned away.

Through the jumble of words that spilled from my grandmother’s mouth, she managed to tilt her head ever so slightly toward my mom and ask in a weak, trembling voice, “What happened to me?”

The moments of clarity in the thickness

of confusion.

The first time I cried was the first night my grandmother moved into the memory-care facility. The first I’d seen her since the stroke.

On her door was a homemade sign: Welcome, Josie!

The only people who called my grandmother Josie were the people who didn’t know her. To everyone else, she was Jo, a feisty pistol whose bluntness matched her one-syllabic name. But I guess she’s different now, a completely new entity, docile and serene. Maybe she is Josie.

She seemed so little when I saw her, as if she’d shrunk, compacted. Her glasses were missing, but the indentations of the rims were imprinted on the bridge of her nose. I tried not to touch her because I was scared she might break.

The stroke didn’t affect her physically; it struck another blow to her brain, wiping away the few memories she’d been holding onto.

I’m now forced to introduce myself to my grandmother: “Hi, Grandma! It’s Meredith,” like I used to when I called to invite myself for a sleepover. But back then, she’d always chuckle and say, “I know. I recognize your voice.”

Now she no longer recognizes my face, but she always tells me I’m beautiful.

My grandmother still had the plastic tag from the hospital tied around her wrist when we went to visit her that night. She stalked around her room, peering around corners as if searching for a ghost, mumbling things I couldn’t understand. The longer we stayed, the more I fidgeted. Zipping and unzipping my sweatshirt, fumbling with the fan because

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the room was so stuffy and warm. I wanted to leave. I needed to leave. I'd completed my good deeds for the century.

When my mother finally absorbed my wordless cues, she hugged my grandmother tight. She kissed her cheek and repeated cycles of I love you, I love you, I love you.

Then it was my turn. I wrapped my arms around my grandma's fleshy back and she squeezed me in return, laughing because she didn't know what she had done to deserve all this affection. Then when I stepped away, she smiled at me, revealing a single missing tooth and said, more clearly than she'd said anything all night, "I love you."

She didn't know who I was. She didn't know that I was Meredith, her youngest granddaughter, the only child of Stephanie. But she must have known, despite the fuzziness in her brain, that she was supposed to love me. That she did love me.

I'd never been so crippled before that moment. The second my mother and I stepped into the hallway, I bent forward and began weeping. The abruptness left me breathless. Grief is a terrible thing after someone has died, but I sometimes wonder if grieving the loss of someone who's still here is worse.

You know that part in the movies, right after the climactic breakup in the rain, when the girl runs off, sobbing, because she's loved the wrong person through the entire first half of the film, and decides she must, must, must see her soulmate and profess her undying love for him, right this moment? Then she gets in her rusty, unreliable car and drives some absurd distance to stop

him from boarding a train/plane/bus, still sobbing.

It was like that, only crying and driving is a significantly harder combination than any movie makes it seem. I felt like my heart was broken in a different way. The ending to the movie starring the girl and the boy will undoubtedly be happy. They'll reunite, fall back in love, and live happily ever after, the end.

The movie starring my blank-faced grandmother is equally predictable, but in the way that you're praying some *deus ex machina* will crack through and overturn everything you thought you knew, but realizing, secretly, as you're wringing your hands and biting back tears, that it won't.

I believe in elsewhere after death. Maybe it's not heaven, or hell, or anything in between, but it's somewhere. Alzheimer's is elsewhere before death. A parallel universe of happiness where memories don't matter because everything is irrevocably present.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm not grasping my memories tightly enough. I'm too wound up, too focused on the future. Yes, I have a life beyond this moment, but I also have a life in this moment, and that matters even more.

Alzheimer's is an inherited mental collapse.

I wonder if it hurts to lose your mind, if there's a physical feeling of memories slipping away, or a tugging in the brain as it attempts to remember a name.

I hope not.

At least for my grandmother, I hope it doesn't hurt.