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The Scars of Memory

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The illusion of permanence is made palatable by the capacity for memory. When this capacity is lost, the world becomes terrifyingly fluid and unfamiliar. Panic sets in as the known fades away into a dizzying cacophony of novelty. Disassociated from the mind, an aged body roams the hallowed and confusing halls of life, unsure of where it came from, how it got there, or who it is. This loss incites a ripple effect upon those nearest to it, scarring the minds that remain associated to their bodies.

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The phone rang.

My dad looked up from the piles of zoning maps and land planning documents that he had sporadically spread out on the kitchen table. His consulting firm was only half an hour down the road, but he was home early to pick me up from tennis practice and cook dinner. My sister, Kelsey, and I wouldn't dare to admit it, but his cooking paled in comparison to that of our mom. Or, perhaps, her food was simply more familiar to our palates. After all, routines often aren't recognized until they're disrupted.

He didn't bother to move from his seat next to me as the phone rang in its cradle. The call wasn't for him; it rarely was these days.

My mom walked into the kitchen, looking far thinner and more tired than she usually did. Some assumed it was diet and exercise. Others knew the truth. She picked up the phone as if it were an animal instinct similar to the fight-or-flight response.

"Hello?" she answered with strained cheerfulness.

The screaming that came spilling out of the phone's receiver contorted my mom's face into a haunting blend of fear, anger, disbelief, and a disconcerting hopelessness that I hoped to never again witness in my life. But pain, in its various iterations, lingers

ceaselessly in the dark shadows of the future, waiting its turn to strike the good and the undeserving.

I remember the stupefying effect of that muffled screaming as it leaked out of the phone, slithered up my spine, around my neck, and into my ears, gripping my eardrums like icy tendrils of horror. I had never before heard screaming like it. The actors in the movies and on television try their best to authenticate the shrill of pure fear, but nothing can compare to the real thing.

Though the incessant screaming had passed, my mom tried to ask questions and impress remedies upon the man on the other end of the line that was attempting to take care of my screaming grandmother, my Nanny, my mother's mother.

This is a moment that sliced itself into the walls of my memory, creating a jagged, painful laceration. I have attempted to stitch it, to make peace with it. Over time, the wound has healed—as do most wounds with the allowance of life's constant array of distractions and experiential growth—but it has undoubtedly left a scar.

* * *

The mind has a curious way of coping with its own demise. It knows that something is wrong even before the neurons shoot and spit from synapse to synapse, catalyzing the full recognition of an unfortunate truth. It presses a panic button hidden somewhere behind the prefrontal cortex and begins to fight like hell to regain normalcy. The side effects of this jerk reaction vary. Some grow numb and ignorant to their reality while others become hyperaware, shaking with the dreadful anticipation of oblivion.

The experience differs from patient to patient, but all of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease share a singular truth: uncertainty immersed in an environment of certainty.

While the rest of us continue to live in a state of awareness and conviction, they look on, growing exponentially more unsure by the minute. *What kind of car did I drive in high school? Where was my childhood home? What year is it? What is my daughter's name?*

Who am I?

How do I eat?

How do I breathe?

My imagination, as wild as it may be, struggles to conceive of that feeling to this day. How terrifying it must have been. Our memories link us to the past, ground us in the present, and prepare us for the future. Instead, my helpless grandmother, my Nanny, my mother's mother, was damned into an unforgiving state of limbo. No past. No present. No future. Just the inconceivable terror of the unknown.

She was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease in 2001, shortly after the death of her mother. Family and friends assumed that her new struggle with memory and abnormal behavior were just symptoms of depression brought on by the crippling weight of her loss. But a physical examination of her seemingly healthy middle-aged body, a blood test, and a variety of other medical assessment procedures quickly disproved that theory. The diagnosis was chronic, and that assumed depression became a reality with her life now being allocated its specific card from the deck of demise.

Over the following years, the neurodegenerative disease gradually took its relentless toll. Forgetfulness, confusion, withdrawal from normal activities, and poor judgment culminated into changes in mood and personality born from a helpless frustration. Of the roughly five million people diagnosed with Alzheimer's, only five

percent are effected by early-onset—this statistical advantage of individuality is far from being a winning lottery number.

One of the worst aspects of early-onset Alzheimer’s is the fact that these people still have lives to live. They have families. They have friends. They have experiences that still crave to be experienced. Yet, rather than living a life not even remotely close to its natural end, my grandmother was damned to a life of lesser quality and a mind rapidly building up with amyloid plaque.

As she made the disheartening progression from early-stage to middle-stage, and her memory ironically lodged itself somewhere in the past of good health, she became more difficult to care for.

* * *

I recall a brief moment in time, right after my mom placed the phone back in its cradle, when she could have easily been mistaken for Atlas, carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, her knees bent and shaking, face straining with effort, but nonetheless remaining on her own two feet.

Atlas informed my father and me that she needed to head over to my grandmother’s house, refusing any help from the two of us. We were instructed to eat dinner, finish homework, and not wait up for her. We were instructed to let Kelsey know where she was going. We were instructed that everything would be okay.

She left, driving down a road using only her muscle memory as the sun dipped itself into the darkness and cruelty of night. They call it “sun-downing,” a time in the day when the disease is most present.

The house fell into silence.

As my dad prepared a pale dinner, I walked past the mirrors that would soon be covered with sheets to avoid impromptu conversations between my grandmother and her sister, past the halls that would soon ring with tortured screams, and into Kelsey's room where my grandmother would soon stay during the late stage of her disease. A nursing home would eventually become the only option, as the scars that were to be inflicted would reach an unfeasible limit.

My sister and I shared a look that told of scars obtained and scars looming, of degeneration for generations to come.

* * *

Memories and scars are one in the same. The events that occur throughout our lives, regardless of being terrible or triumphant, leave their mark. The triumphantly terrible scar that my grandmother, my Nanny, my mother's mother, left in my memory is a paradox. While I wish more than anything that it were not there, that the pain were never inflicted, in the same breath I am grateful for the capacity to remember it.

Years have passed and the pain has grown phantom, but the scar, hidden and jagged, will remain.