

The Changing Course of Dementia

Category: Dementia

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Every morning, my grandparents would make breakfast, go for a walk, and drive to our house for lunch. In the afternoon, Grandfather watched football while Grandmother read magazines or worked in the garden. She planned to grow tomatoes once the spring rolled around.

She never did plant those tomatoes. In an unexpected cascade of events, my grandfather was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And while my grandmother had been struggling with her memory for a while, her dementia took a drastic turn after his diagnosis. She acted out in ways that were unlike her: calling the police, chasing my ill grandfather through their house with a knife, barraging my mother with terrible insults. I saw firsthand how much strain families and caregivers experience.

It was frightening to see my sweet grandmother completely disappear, as if she had never existed. But the hardest part about witnessing my grandmother's battle with dementia was seeing her slowly return to herself only after my grandfather had passed. When my grandfather was in hospice, she would tell him, again and again, that she didn't love him. He never heard one last "I love you," or really any word that was not twisted by the hand of dementia.

COVID-19 hit immediately after my grandfather died, and we moved my grandmother into memory care. She finally mellowed out. When my mom and I visited her outside, masks on, behind the bars of a fence, she would say, "I feel like he is just on a business trip. I am all alone now." Sometimes, she would forget that my grandfather had died, and asked where he was, and whether she had even gone to his funeral.

Five years have passed. My grandmother grows yet quieter. She wins bingo often. Always fashion conscious, she wears an elegant pink sweater and a scarf around her neck, even though they both have visible stains. My mother visits her every single week, and I go whenever I can.

What I have learned from my family's experience with dementia is that, ultimately, it is the people around us who define us. My grandmother's dementia story is not only hers, but also my grandfather's, my mother's, and mine.

My grandmother doesn't remember much about her life, but we remember.

We remind her who she is every time we see her. I think about my grandfather often, and how dementia impacted his final days. But I refuse to mourn my grandmother, because she is still here with us. When she waves goodbye from her bedroom door, her smile is the same one I've known all my life.

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