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In October 2013, I received a call from my mother. My parents had recently flown back to Alaska from Texas after attending my father’s fiftieth high school reunion. My mother felt this was a milestone too important for my father to miss, so she made travel arrangements. They would spend four weeks in the Lower 48 visiting family and friends in Texas and Florida. They flew to Dallas, visited my older brother and his family, her brother and his family, then she drove the rental car 290 miles west to Big Spring, where my father grew up.

Big Spring is a small town at the crossroads of U.S. Highway 87 and Interstate 20, between Midland and Abilene. Big Spring’s popularity peaked between the 1950s and 1970s due to an oil boom, a feature in the movie Midnight Cowboy, and the economic stimulation of Webb Air Force Base, the place my parents married and after graduating from The University of Texas School of Nursing, and receiving his draft notice, my father enlisted in the Air Force. While his military career began in the south, my parents moved oversees for several years, then farther north, having kids along the way. My father’s military service ended in Fairbanks, Alaska after 20 years as a nurse in the Air Force, retiring with the rank of Major.

My mother thought it important for my father to see his high school classmates again as it had been decades since they were all together. These were the kids he grew up with in West Texas, attending primary, middle, and high school together. They were his best friends. Together they would get into trouble, causing mischief and breaking rules in Big Spring. These were the guys you would see at a fiftieth high school reunion, standing in a circle, telling stories about the time they siphoned gas from the doctors’ cars in the Malone Hogan Hospital parking lot. Or the time they stopped at the local gas station to use the restroom when the paper towel machine fell off the wall, causing a loud commotion. They ran, only to be chased by the gas station attendant, jumped into the car, as Deeroby pulled a gun out of the glove compartment “just in case.” They would place hands on each other’s shoulders, throw their heads back and laugh, and tease each other, while drinking their beers and raising their glasses, saying “remember when…” My mother understood deeply the significance of this celebration and the importance of attending this event as long-term memories are typically the last to be forgotten with Alzheimer’s Disease.

While a fiftieth high school reunion is a joyous occasion, a month away from home took its toll. Airports to navigate, TSA screenings, limited mobility on airplanes, small, tight-space airplane restrooms, different homes, floor plans, beds, and bathrooms, time changes, waking up earlier, going to bed later, household items in different places, no familiarity with spaces and places, lack of structure and organization, unpredictability. All of these things affected my father’s ability to cope with his environment and put additional hardship on my mother as she helped him navigate these challenges. They returned to Alaska from Texas, both exhausted and my mother, overwhelmed.

When I answered the phone my mother’s voice sounded tired, defeated, sad. She told me there had been an incident. She said my father had become more agitated, aggressive, and defiant. He wouldn’t listen to her, my father was upset and, in his anger, he wanted to knock the television off the stand, she grabbed his wrist out of frustration, while she held on to his wrist, he yanked his arm away. The combination of grabbing and pulling with my father’s watch on his wrist caused his thin, delicate skin to tear, resulting in an abrasion. My mother, worried about his injury and her state of mind, she took him to the hospital at Fort Wainwright. As she shares the details, she begins to cry.

She apologizes for hurting him, saying, “I didn’t mean to,” and tells me how exhausted she is. She’s 66 years old and has been my father’s primary caregiver since his Alzheimer’s diagnosis nearly four years ago to the day. She said she met with the hospital social worker and explained to her what happened to my father. The social worker does not pass judgement on my mother nor does she place blame. She comforted my mother and listened. My mother would later say the social worker’s empathetic response was a blessing, one that she was eternally grateful for. The hospital staff decide to admit my father for the night so my mother could get some sleep and rest. Leaving my father at the hospital was one of the most difficult decisions my mother had to make. She said before they discharge my father, the social worker wanted to meet with her to talk about ‘next steps’ for my father’s care. In her tired, exhausted voice she says, “I think your father has transitioned to the next stage and it was exacerbated by our trip. It was all too much for your dad.” I do not know what this means but I don’t for clarification as I know what she needs is for me to come home. Although my mother doesn’t say the words, I know she needs me to be there with her. She needs support and help with my father, someone to lighten the load. As my parent’s only child who lives in the state, I know I am that help.

Over the next few weeks I split my time between Valdez and Fairbanks, driving north 350 miles to support my mother by caring for my father so she did not do it alone. I would sit with my father while my mother left the house for several hours. She would go to mass, run errands, or go to the beauty salon to get her hair done. It was an opportunity for her to have time alone, away from my father, and the constant care she had to provide him. One evening I stayed home with my father so my mother could have a few hours to herself. I asked her how long she would be gone, hoping it wouldn’t be more than a few hours. I was nervous anticipating how much help my father would need from me. I’m good at sitting with him, making small talk, watching TV together, asking him simple, easy-to-answer questions. Alzheimer’s makes it difficult to follow along with anything other than simple conversations and instructions. I can answer his questions but I worry about the hard stuff. What if my father becomes agitated or angry? What if he becomes afraid or anxious and wonders where my mother went? Seeing a fearful adult is startling, distressing. Fear is a feeling often associated with children. It’s understandable for children to be fearful, and easy for adults to respond to children who are scared. It is quite alarming to see a sixty-six-year-old man suddenly overcome with fear. Will I be able to calm him down, to comfort him? What if he needs help going to the bathroom, or worse, what if he defecates himself and I have to clean him up? My mother has shared this could potentially happen but says dismissively, “He’s your father. He’s done so much for you. You can do this for him.” My stomach churns at the thought. It’s not that easy. I silently pray, “please be home before then, please be home before then.” I am ashamed by these feelings and silent prayers. I wish it were easy. All of these thoughts run through my mind as we sit in silence watching the local PBS station.

My father is sitting in his usual spot; the oversized burgundy leather chair and Sammy, a short-haired Dachshund, is asleep, nestled between my father’s thigh and the armrest. Once he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, my mother thought a dog would help my father in the way animals can bring joy to our lives. I think he’s indifferent to the dog and it helps her more. Either way, the dog is helping. I’m sitting next to him in the cream-colored, velvet, floral print chair. Neither one of us says anything, although this isn’t unusual. Since my father’s language skills have diminished, most of what is said between us is nondescript, weightless. Before Alzheimer’s, we may have talked about his grandchildren, how Aidan is doing since starting middle school, or how basketball is going, for Bennett, my father loved sports, or how my daughter, Carsyn, is as funny as he is. At this stage of Alzheimer’s, conversations are one-sided. I ask questions: are you okay, do you need anything, are you cold? See, weightless.

We’re watching Rick Steve’s Europe: Rome’s Baroque Brilliance. For twenty minutes, we sit in silence as Rick Steve strolls through Rome, with his jacket slung over his shoulder, he visits the Pantheon, Campo de Fiori, the Borghese Gallery, Vatican City, Saint Peter’s Basilica, the Sistine Chapel, the Victor Emmanuel Monument, Piazza Navona, and the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi. I turn toward my father and watch him as he sits, staring at the TV with his right arm extended, picking at his elbow with his left hand. A decades old habit - sitting in his favorite chair, watching television while picking at the scaly patches of skin on his elbows caused by psoriasis. I am comforted by this as I have not seen him do it in years. Picking at his elbows, or even knowing he has psoriasis is one of the things it seems he’s forgotten since his Alzheimer’s diagnosis. My father’s voice cuts through the silence as he says, “I’ve been there.” I turn back to the TV to see what he’s referring to, as Rick Steve’s voice fills my ears. I say, “yeah? With mom, when you guys lived in Spain?” “Yyyep!” he replies enthusiastically. His one-word response long and drawn out for effect. A trait he would often employ that I’ve heard so many times before. I watch him watching the TV and I know he’s remembering his time spent in Rome 39 years ago. I see recognition in his eyes as he watches. “Was it cool?” I asked. My father turned toward me, we locked eyes, he smiled wide, and said, “ooooh, yeah!”

I cherished this quiet moment together. It was a moment when we connected, my father was present, not just in body, but in mind and spirit. I know this to be true as I could see it in his eyes when he looked at me. I felt it in the space between us. The energy my father emitted was palpable. His true essence swirled in that room as we watched Rick Steve explore Rome, as my father’s disease slowly dissipated out of him, like a warm breath exhaled in cold air. *This* man was the man I would call when I was in college to ask for advice about ailments, medical issues, or sicknesses my friends and I were experiencing, *not* the man I heard yelling from the garage “help, help, help!” in a scared, panicked voice. As I opened the door and flipped on the light switch, illuminating the pitch-black garage and my father, filled with terror, swearing and spitting because he turned off the light as he was leaving the garage, got disoriented, and didn’t know how to get out or turn the light back on. It was not *that* man. *This* man was the man who surprised me with homemade biscuits and gravy when I came home from a late-night shift working as a hotel front desk clerk during the summer. Not the man who wrote the message for my mother I found sitting by his chair that said ‘taxes redddy’ in childish handwriting. It was not *that* man. *This* man was the man I woke up early morning on January 1, 2000 to let him know I was in labor and needed to go to the hospital. My husband was working as a police officer in Valdez while I stayed with my parents to await the birth of our son in Fairbanks. This man insisted I put on all my winter gear as it was 40 below zero and drove me slowly to the hospital due to ice fog. Not the man who taped decades worth of photos to the walls throughout the downstairs living room of my parents’ house and covered every end table and china hutch with propped up photos, to remind himself of a life well-lived, wanting to hold on to memories. Trying desperately not to forget. It was not *that* man.

In the world of Alzheimer’s, it’s called a lucid moment. People who suffer from Alzheimer’s Disease are known to experience moments of lucidity. It can last for several minutes, hours, or a day. It was the only time I ever witnessed my father’s lucidity since his diagnosis and I don’t know if he had other moments. I think of this moment often, our time spent together, watching a PBS show on Rome, and my dad remembering, and me remembering the man he used to be.