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Full Circle

It's strange how life travels in full circles. The years roll past, and what once was is now reversed.

When I was growing up, my grandparents kept a camper in an RV campground called Slumber Valley, down in Pennsylvania. For a few summers around the time I was twelve, they invited the three oldest boys in our family for a week's vacation. It was a time of swimming in the park pool, eating meals outside at the picnic table behind the camper, and playing board games.

Grandpa wasn't a socializer and *was* a homebody, so he didn't care for these vacations. Why go live in a tiny camping trailer for a week when your own home was good enough? It was all foolishness to him. He stayed in the background, or disappeared entirely, so I have no recollection of what he did those summer days. Only a few memories stand out.

This first memory stays with me clearly. I'm a worrier, and as a

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child I worried obsessively about the most foolish things. The incident is among a thousand like it in my life, but this one stuck in my mind because I *realized* I was worrying in a foolishly obsessive manner. The self-recognition made the memory stick.

Before we left for Slumber Valley, Grandma was loading the car and doing other preparations. While Grandma kept herself occupied, Grandpa decided to take a walk in the woods until she was ready to leave. We three boys tagged along.

Almost as soon as we walked into the woods I began worrying.

“How much time do we have?” I asked.

“When should we go back?” I wondered. “What if Grandma is waiting for us?”

“What if we don’t hear when Grandma calls us?” I fretted.

Then, “Maybe it’s time we go back,” I said.

On and on I went. I obsessed over the idea of Grandma waiting for us, and I’m sure I wearied Grandpa. As he answered every one of my questions and not-so-subtle suggestions, I realized I was being unreasonable. Didn’t I trust my own grandfather? Was I really afraid that Grandma might leave without us? If I was in such a hurry to get back, why on earth did I go on the walk in the first place? I recognized my foolishness, but I couldn’t shake the nagging thought that Grandma could have called for us and we hadn’t heard. I felt we really *ought* to go hurrying back. Something bad might happen. The feeling defied all reason.

Finally, Grandpa gave in to my pestering, and we went back. Of course, Grandma hadn’t called for us.

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My worrying habits were always with me. While at Slumber Valley, Grandpa told us that if a high wind came when the camper canopy was extended, the wind could rip the canopy right off the trailer. If we woke up in the middle of the night during a windy storm we were instructed to wake him to close the canopy.

Wind ripping the canopy off the trailer—scary thought. Warning Grandpa before it happened—big responsibility. So I obsessed over the possibilities while I lay in bed that night. How would I know when it was a bad enough storm to wake Grandpa? Would he be mad if I woke him and it wasn't really necessary? I didn't want to make Grandpa mad. But equally scary was imagining the damaged camper if I didn't wake him when it was necessary. Two bad possibilities weren't enough, so my mind fretted over a third: What if I accidentally slept through such a storm and didn't have the chance to wake Grandpa?

That night we had a terrific thunderstorm. The lightning flashed in brilliant white, the thunder crashed like an artillery barrage falling all around us, and the rain beat on the roof by the bucket-fuls. It sounded like a storm to end all storms, but any mature person listening realized that for all the crashing and booming and drumming, the rain was coming straight down. There was very little wind and not much reason to go out in the middle of the night and get completely soaked just to retract the canopy. But all I could think about was the violent storm, and my moral duty to save the trailer from permanent damage.

I scrambled out of bed and nervously hurried to the back of the trailer, pounding on the bedroom door.

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“Grandpa! Grandpa!” I called. “There is a storm! It’s—”

“Yes, I can hear it,” he said (who couldn’t, with it booming loud enough to rattle the windows). “Go back to bed. Don’t worry about it.”

I went back to bed, feeling relieved that I had done my duty. And when we all got up in the morning, the canopy was still attached to the trailer.

Grandpa was a reticent fellow. In part he simply didn’t have as much to say as an outgoing and vivacious person, but there was also a part to his silence and stillness that was a shield and defense. If he didn’t speak, and didn’t act, he couldn’t say or do something that would leave him open to emotional wounding, humiliation, or regret.

Growing up, I never really saw much into his life. He was that smiling and laughing man, always happy to see his grandchildren. He would read us a story, or make peanut butter brittle, or maybe go on a walk and we could come along. But that was as deep as it went, and the older I became the more I realized that most of Grandpa was hiding behind that wrinkled face—stories and thoughts locked up behind those watery blue eyes.

Sometimes, a little more of him would show through, brief flashes of a larger man. Once, we went for a walk with Grandpa at Slumber Valley. There was a waterfall on the creek that ran beside the camp and he took us to look at it. I don’t remember how the conversation went as we walked along, but he must have been in a playful mood. Somehow we got on the topic of running, and it came to Grandpa and running—and how he couldn’t.

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“What, you think I can’t run?” he said. “You think I’m too old? I’ll show you!”

Next thing I knew we had a race, and Grandpa was running down the forest trail.

We were flabbergasted. At first we tried to give chase but we were so surprised, amazed, and amused that it was hard to not stop and watch him—just to laugh for the fun of it all. Grandpa was racing us! He was already in his mid-sixties, but for that brief moment the years fell away and we saw a much younger man, a *different* man, sprinting down the trail ahead of us, light on his feet, finishing with a quick leap over a branch laying across the trail.

I think that was the only time I have ever seen my grandfather run, the only time I have ever seen him so fully take leave of all care and thought, and act like someone who truly remembered what it was to be a boy once.

The years have swung past now, the summers flashing by like moments of bright light in the quickly spinning orb of life. Grandma and Grandpa took their camper out of Slumber Valley, and the summer trips stopped. The years have passed, one to another, and I’ve grown up, becoming, perhaps, just a little less of a worrier. And Grandpa—well, time has worn at him. It hasn’t strengthened him in the vigor of life, as when the dew of youth is still fresh. For him that was a long time ago. Instead, time has ground youth and health from him and brought disease instead. The years have milled him fine and thin, and now Alzheimer’s is grinding him away. Will anything remain?

Once, Grandpa drove me and my siblings around, as he took the

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extra kids that couldn't fit in my dad's car to the family gatherings. Now I take Grandpa to family gatherings.

Once, I followed Grandpa on walks in the woods and worried about being away from home too long. Now I take him out of the house, and he worries and wants to go home as soon as we've reached where we're going.

Once, I worried about the weather, and things that didn't need to be worried about. Now Grandpa stands at the window and looks at the gray sky, the rain, or the snow, and frets and worries. "I don't like it," he says. "Something doesn't feel right." The unease hangs over him, an unease no rational thought can chase away.

Today is the last day of December 2006, the day when the old year gives way to the new. My grandfather was born this day, many years ago. He is turning seventy-nine, and he is sick with Alzheimer's. We don't know what to do.

Grandpa struggles to show affection. I know it is there; I have seen it in him. It comes out in the backward way of words that say "I love you," without being so embarrassing as to actually say it. I don't recall him ever directly commenting on how my father raised us, or directly complimenting me any further than perhaps a rare "You're a good lad," that might escape as if by accident. But in spite of that scarcity of words, I still knew. For him, you didn't say those sort of things, but I knew he loved us because when I was little his face lit up with a smile when we came to visit. He would read a story when we asked, pop out his false teeth to surprise and maybe even scare us, and then hug us goodbye when it was time to leave. I knew what he thought of our character when we grew

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older because then, when he needed help, he asked us for help—whether it was help with the roofing project or help with the moving project.

He never talked much, but he made things. He was an artist, a tinkerer, and a man of his hands. He would draw and paint, carve, whittle, and build whatever came to his fancy and satisfied his muse. He could tune a piano, and play it some, a mandolin, too. He could even sing, I was told. His house was filled with the things he made. And yet, he was his own worst critic. Nothing he made was good enough in his eyes. Even if others wanted to buy what he created, he was ashamed to sell what he had made.

He grew up in the heart of the Depression, and that marked him. All his life he was certain poverty was at hand, and destitution waited around every corner. Born on the last day of a fading year, a middle child of ten, he became a quiet country man. Sometimes temperamental, his mood could range from melancholy to bouts of fierce anger. Short and slim to the point of being scrawny, he worked hard, smoked hard, and drank copious amounts of coffee. He raised a family with his wife, held a number of respectable jobs through the course of his life, and retired early from a job at IBM creating prototype circuit boards. He never thought he amounted to much.

Now he is losing all that he once had. Those hands which once controlled the sharp tools of the woodworker now struggle to use a light switch or button his shirt. The things he knew and the things he learned are deserting him. His past creations haunt him as reminders of skills lost and what he is becoming. His tools sit on shelves and in boxes and bins, unused. The last remaining

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drawings and carvings sit in corners of the house like forgotten markers of a fading past. Except not forgotten—not exactly. No, they are put away in the hopes that the loss they represent might be forgotten, and the pain of loss with them. The mandolin given to him for Christmas a few years ago is hidden under his bed at his request. To be kept safe, he said. And now he lays on that bed in restless slumber.

Alzheimer's takes even the smallest things. Grandpa curses himself now when he stumbles and cannot walk, or struggles to turn on a faucet. He knows he could. He remembers, and he struggles, determined to do what he once did. But it is a struggle he cannot win. It is a thing painful to think about, a thing I try to put from my mind. Otherwise, it will break my heart as I daily watch him lose his fight—as I see ever more clearly what he had, what he has lost, and what he still has and is daily losing. I feel the urge to laugh with a bitter-sad laugh because the echo in my mind is a cry of tears when he acts the fool because he had forgotten how, and calls himself a stupid filthy man because he urinates on the floor, spills his coffee, and can't remember how to dress himself.

The days are hard, but worse for him, the nights. Restless nights, and with each one he seems anxious for the dawn. One morning Grandma came into the kitchen while I was helping Grandpa with his morning routine.

“How was last night, Papa?” she asked.

“Terrible,” he said.

“Well,” she answered, leaning over to give him a kiss. “Maybe the next one will be better.”

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“Awww, shit,” he said. “You know that isn’t so. The next one is going to be worse than the last, and the next and the next and the next after that...” Then he trails off before continuing, as if to himself (and perhaps only I heard it), “I never thought I would be, but I’m scared.”

I hold out my arms now, ready to catch him when he totters and falls. I tuck him into bed at night and give him a goodnight kiss. He is losing his life one bit at a time. He knows it, and I know it. He is scared, and I am sad.

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Nobody Here

This week I found Grandma sitting in her chair, crying,” my brother Arlan informed me. “She said, ‘I can’t take it anymore. I can’t handle Grandpa. Tell Rundy I need him now.’”

Arlan brought Grandma's plea on September 24th, 2006, and I left the same day. I was twenty-four, and I was going to live with my grandparents and care for them. Alzheimer’s had frayed their lives until everything began unraveling. I had decided I would help, and that decision changed my life.

When did it start? I think all of us asked that question. Maybe the answer is “At the very beginning”—the seed of sickness sown in DNA, growing through childhood and adulthood like some hidden monster until it couldn’t escape notice anymore. That is speculation. I have read that the human brain has an amazing ability to compensate for losses. In one article it was suggested that cognitive function may begin altering years, if not decades, before the brain's coping ability fails in ways we notice. I suspect this is true.

But there is another question whose answer is not speculation: *When did we notice?* When did this disease begin affecting Grandpa’s life in ways we could not miss? When did we get the

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first hints that something was wrong, even terribly wrong?

The realization was progressive. The signs were at first excused, denied, or minimized. Grandpa was growing old. Old people were forgetful. They made mistakes. It was okay. Really, it was. At least, it wasn't too bad, right? Nothing that would amount to anything.

Except it did.

I remember one incident that occurred years before anyone realized Grandpa had a problem. It surely wasn't the first sign, but it was one that lodged in my memory, an occurrence remembered, and reflected upon.

At the time we all laughed, even Grandpa, though he was sheepish with embarrassment. Grandma told the story on Grandpa at a birthday party.

“We were in a gas station convenience store,” Grandma said, almost breaking down in laughter before she could finish the tale. “We were picking up a few things. Pa takes them to the check-out girl to have them rung up. And the girl says to him, ‘Do you have gas, sir?’”

Grandma started laughing and had to regain control of herself before continuing.

“He looked at her completely serious,” Grandma said, “and put a hand to his stomach and answered, ‘No, not right now. But sometimes I do after supper.’”

We all had a good laugh at Grandpa's mistake in the cashier's meaning. Afterward, a few people privately wondered if it was a sign that Grandpa wasn't quite as sharp as he used to be—but in

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the end, so what? It was a little mistake, we told ourselves. Embarrassing, yes, but he was in his seventies and mental slowness was expected.

But it was only the beginning.

When Arlan moved in with Grandma and Grandpa in 2003 to attend college we began to hear more firsthand stories. During Arlan's early college years they were stories of little oddities which confirmed that Grandpa was no longer the sharp man he had been. But those little signs grew into something more. At first, the incidents were more frustrating than ominous. Grandpa disassembled the kitchen faucet to fix a drip, and then couldn't put it back together. (Who hasn't been in that situation once?) Driving out to social engagements, he would suddenly turn onto a different road, which no one else thought was the way to go. There would be an argument about why this way had been taken, with Grandpa sometimes stubbornly insisting that, "This was the way to go." Eventually they would reach their destination. Maybe Grandpa had known what he was doing. (Anyhow, who hasn't taken the wrong way once?)

The mistakes grew worse, and the events became harder to explain away. Grandpa was involved in a car accident, pulling out in front of a vehicle he didn't see. Then, on a very normal trip back from picking up his car from the repair shop, Arlan observed Grandpa in the other vehicle, driving in a highly irregular fashion, quickly switching lanes, inexplicably taking turns down side streets, then disappearing into the unknown. Grandpa eventually returned home, uninjured—but with no explanation for what he had done, or why.

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It was indisputable that it was no longer safe for Grandpa to drive. He hated, even feared, the act of driving—but he didn't want to give up the right to drive. Giving up that symbol of competence and independence was a sign of a frailty he refused to admit. Grudgingly, he allowed someone to chauffeur him on longer trips. Mercifully, before a disaster occurred or a confrontation developed over the possession of keys, outside events intervened. After an incident where Grandpa drove erratically down the highway, declaring that the car was acting “strange,” Grandma had the vehicle traded in for a new model. Grandpa insisted on checking the car out, but once seated in the vehicle, he couldn't decipher how it worked. A little change, a little different look, and everything was incomprehensible.

Grandpa couldn't drive.

He continued to grow worse.

He began to act strangely. He would get lost in stores and Grandma would have to find him. He sometimes failed to recognize a grandchild at family gatherings. He wanted to go home shortly after arriving to visit. He began to agitate, even at home, and follow Grandma around, shadowing her constantly. He sometimes spent the night on the couch instead of going to bed. He began to have trouble remembering how to use the TV remote, and sometimes confused it with the telephone. He began to forget how to turn on lights and turn off faucets. He forgot where he was going, what he was doing, and what he wanted. He made odd requests and strange demands.

Nobody was laughing now.

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But we hoped, or perhaps pretended, that it wasn't so bad. Some days Grandpa acted like his old self, as if nothing was wrong. Some days, he was his old self. But then there were the other days, the days when he did things which shouted, "Something is not right!"

A dramatic turning point came when Grandpa was scheduled for a routine colonoscopy. He was given a solution to take home and drink, which would clean out his colon for the upcoming procedure. But instead of having several bowel movements, Grandpa vomited throughout the evening, and into the night.

That night he became a different man, a crazy man. He wandered around the house, mumbling to himself, poking at little LED lights on electronic devices, trying to make them go out. In the middle of the night he entered Arlan's bedroom, waking him from a sound sleep.

"Is something the matter?" Arlan asked, startled. "Can I get you something, Grandpa?"

Like a mute, Grandpa bumbled about the darkened room, pawing at things, his hands finally coming to rest on Arlan's printer, which he then attempted to put in the garbage.

"What are you doing, Grandpa?" Arlan said.

Muttering something about taking out the garbage, Grandpa struggled a little while longer then said, "Oh, never mind," and left as he had come.

Life in the house suddenly had an entirely different feeling.

That night of sickness gave a glimpse into Grandpa's future.

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What was coming could no longer be denied.

Grandpa recovered from his vomiting, but it seemed that things were permanently different. I remember when Grandpa came over for a birthday party some time later. He was noticeably impaired—not enough for an inattentive stranger to detect, but I noticed. He appeared even more withdrawn than usual, as if his world had shrunk to a little circle around him. He hunched at the dinner table as I brought him his coffee for supper, looking harried and uncertain at the prospect of eating in the boisterous atmosphere. During the meal he acted disconnected, one minute present for the conversation the next minute distant, as if a synapse broke somewhere, leaving him to wander off in his own thoughts.

The evening became even more strange.

After supper Grandpa got up from the table to use the bathroom but instead headed for the laundry room. When I intercepted him he explained in the most reasonable manner that he wanted to “Go piss in the corner over there.”

Once he was redirected, and his business completed (properly in the bathroom!), Grandpa went out to sit on the porch. Apparently he found the chair too uncomfortable, because he went back in the house, took a soft dinner roll from a basket on the table, carefully wrapped it up in a paper towel, and brought it outside. There he placed the roll on his chair, and sat on it.

Both events went beyond odd. They were bizarre, surreal, and so unlike the Grandpa I had known. This was only the beginning of the Grandpa I would come to know.

He was taken in for tests. A brain scan, and many questions later,

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he was diagnosed: Alzheimer's, a sentence given with finality. The doctor labeled him with the mental ability of a two-year-old (quite unfairly, I think), and pronounced that soon he would be unable to recognize even his wife. There we had it—Alzheimer's, and no escaping it.

The disease was a bit of a secret at first, at least for Grandma. And to her it remained a shame long after it wasn't a secret. This wasn't supposed to happen. It was an embarrassment. Other people went senile, lost their minds, and acted crazy—but not her man. It couldn't be happening.

Yet it was happening, no matter who wanted to deny it. What was to be done? Something had to be done.

Arlan graduated from college and began to look for a job in the spring of 2006 while at the same time trying to help Grandma and Grandpa as much as he could. But once he had a job there would be no extra person home all day. That left the question of what would happen next.

When the call came to inform Arlan that he was accepted for an employment position, Grandpa was the only one around to answer the phone. The conversation that followed was later related to Arlan by his new employer, on whom it had made an impression.

“Hello?” Grandpa said, picking up the phone.

The man said he wished to speak with Arlan.

“Okay, let me go find him,” Grandpa said.

There followed a long wait. Then Grandpa returned and picked up the phone again.

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“Hello?” he said.

The man stated his request again.

“Okay, hang on,” Grandpa said again, and left for the second time.

There followed yet another period of silence during Grandpa’s absence. Finally, he finished wandering around and picked up the phone yet again.

“Hello,” he said. “I can’t help you, and apparently there is nobody here who can.”

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