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The Mother Who Forgot Her Family

I read a long time ago that 13% of people over 65 years suffer from Alzheimer's Disease (3). Throughout my life, I have usually read such medical statistics with an ignorant difference. That is, I was unaware of the devastation such a statistic really means and how significantly it changes the lives of those it describes. To me, those people affected by Alzheimer's Disease were just another number showing how miserable this world really is... that is, until my mother became a part of those numbers. Now I know what it means to be a part of that statistic. It means one's life is turned upside down. It means that any sense of normalcy is obliterated, literally forgotten because of what happens to the mind of a person who has Alzheimer's Disease. What frightens me all the more is that this blight of a disease is expected to only rise in the next 30 years, by 2050, to afflict a total of 132 million people (3). What tragedy this disease has and will continue to inflict upon the world! In this story of mine, I attempt to bring to reality the tragedy of Alzheimer's Disease. I attempt to make real in the minds of my readers, the statistic I began with. I attempt to do so by telling my own mother's story.

My mother was a lively person. Her infectious smile, bright eyes, and personable character naturally made her the confidant of many. People trusted her, longed for her advice, even her approval. Coupled with her beautiful countenance was a brain of incomparable wit and intelligence. She could return any joke or insult with a quip that would send any opponent running for the hills. Hers was a brain one should tread lightly around. Not only was her brain equipped with the sharpest of wits, her administrative skills were peerless. She loved her husband faithfully, planned school events with efficiency, raised her kids with a firm, but loving hand, and even still had plenty of time to dedicate herself to various hobbies. I remember when my siblings and I had kids, her energetic attitude poured out love onto all of her grandkids. Everyone loved my mother. Unfortunately, her brain did not.

I distinctly remember one spring trip visiting my mother and father with my family that something just felt off; specifically, with my mother. She kept losing her keys. We would always end up finding them in the weirdest of places, like in the fridge or in the microwave. At first, we

all thought it was funny and teased her a bit, yet this continued to happen throughout the remainder of our trip. It troubled me. I remember hearing on the medical section of the news that memory loss was a common and early symptom of Alzheimer's Disease. Specifically, this abnormal type of memory loss is called mild cognitive impairment or MCI. It is the kind of memory loss that occurs more-so than the regular person but does not too profoundly affect one's life (2). I had also heard that people recover from MCI to continue on with normal lives and normal brain function (2). This last bit of information brought me some succor, yet a tinge of anxiety continued to afflict my gut. A question continually pestered me: was my mother just experiencing the natural aging process or was it something else, entirely sinister?

A few months, during Christmas time, we visited my folks again. This trip really troubled me. When we all greeted each other as we arrived, she had trouble remembering my kids' names. By this time, I definitely knew something was off with her. I know some level of memory loss is inevitable with age. Yet, I was hard pressed to chalk up to natural aging, her forgetting my kids' names. Considering grandchildren bring such joy to their grandparents, I figure something like a grandchild's name would be the last thing a grandparent forgets. I noticed that she had greater difficulty moving around this trip and that she was unable to smell the candle my daughter gave for Christmas. Once again, shivers of anxiety suffused my bones. I felt the hair stand up on my head. That news program talking about Alzheimer's Disease and MCI that so haunted my thoughts once again flitted to the forefront of my mind, reminding me that MCI and greater difficulty in moving and smelling were connected (2). What was all the more bone-chilling was that my mother's MCI continued to worsen. There were no signs of regression between our spring and Christmas trips. Upon that realization, I steeled myself for the tough conversation I knew I was going to have with my dad. I decided to plan on calling my dad about my mother's supposed MCI after Christmas, so as to allow my family to enjoy the festive spirit and each others' company.

When I called my dad, he said that he too noticed mother's recent decline in health, and that they had actually gone to a physician prior to our visit who confirmed my mother had MCI; he recommended they find a specialist. My dad told me she was due for an appointment with the specialist just a week after our call. He relayed that she continued to worsen after our visit, as she would get lost in her own house and struggled with basic tasks like making a phone; these, I knew, were all symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease (1). Furthermore, she had trouble finding

words while speaking and was losing good judgment, as she would leave her purse in the car with the windows down when going shopping. These, too, I knew to be symptoms of Alzheimer's (2).

My dad was a champ throughout this whole process. I could tell it was breaking his heart to see his beloved deteriorate, but he loved her even greater, the more she lost her faculties. Not only was he devoted to her, but he was faithful to keep me updated throughout the entire process. After their first visit with the specialist, he called me up and expertly described what was physically happening to mom. I felt as if I were talking to the doctor herself. He explained to me that the primary organ that was being affected within mom was her brain and that her brain was physically deteriorating, a condition generally described as a neurodegenerative condition (3). This neurodegenerative condition, my dad explained, to me has no known cause (3). It just happens to people. Essentially, what was happening to mom, was that certain parts, vital to the functioning of her brain, were being lost, causing the degeneration of my mother's mental and physical capabilities (3).

My dad continued to elaborate, moving on to how the doctor was able to diagnose mom. Using various technologies, the doctor was able to take pictures of my mom's brain, through a process known as neuroimaging. In these pictures, they look for what the doctors call, lesions on the brain, and also seek to rule out other possible diseases that might be afflicting the patient (3). My mom can now say people have taken pictures of her brain... how eerie. The specialist also tested to see whether or not mother had a condition known as dysphagia, which is a clear sign that can determine the intensity of AD (Alzheimer's Disease) in a patient (3). When I heard this, my first thought was, what in the world is dysphagia and how do you even say that? Well, I can answer the first question, unfortunately not the second. Dysphagia is a condition that deteriorates a person's ability to swallow. It is literally as if someone forgets how to swallow. It is quite a sinister condition. My dad told me about the various uncomfortable ways the specialist tested my mother for dysphagia. She was found to have a slight case of dysphagia. There was one last diagnostic tool my dad explained to me, but I did not quite understand half of what he was saying. What I gathered though, is that by taking a sample of my mom's saliva, the specialist looked for what she called biomarkers, which are things that identify if certain processes are occurring in one's body, in an attempt to see if my mother was experiencing MCI and AD (3). Unfortunately, these biomarkers were present in my mother's saliva. Through their

neuroimaging, tests for dysphagia, and search for biomarkers, the specialist diagnosed my mother with MCI and AD.

Naturally, as all our worst fears were confirmed that mom had Alzheimer's Disease, we desperately searched for forms of treatment, so as to reduce her suffering. In our search for a treatment, possibly even a cure for mom, we quickly learned, to our most severe dismay, that nothing exists to cure Alzheimer's, and furthermore, to treat it would require many medications (4). I know my mother and father despise taking medications, even I do, it is one more burden for the sickly to bear amidst their suffering. Nonetheless, it would be utterly foolish to not take medications. So, we began our search for what my mother would have to ingest. In our search, we learned that the medication an Alzheimer's patient takes depends on the severity of their AD (4). For instance, because my mother had a moderate case of AD when we discovered her disease, she was prescribed drugs that inhibit cholesterol. These drugs stop the deterioration of chemicals within the brain that are vital to a person's ability to think and remember (4). Unfortunately, this drug eventually becomes useless, for it does not actually stop Alzheimer's Disease from attacking these chemicals which support brain function (4). That is why there are different drugs for differing levels of AD's severity.

We experienced this firsthand. At first, the cholesterol drugs worked great. It was awesome! Mom was getting so much better. Less and less were her keys found in the fridge. She had an easier time speaking, reasoning, and doing basic tasks. She was even able to remember all of her grandkids' names. Thus, was a fleeting relief though. We all knew it would not last. I mean these drugs were only meant to be temporary. As I think upon my mothers' suffering it deeply pains my soul. My heart is struck with intense grief. My whole family suffered along with my mom.

As was inevitable, her AD grew worse, rendering the cholesterol drugs useless. Whereas she used to have a moderate case of AD, it grew to be severe. My family's capability to take care of her was weakening as her symptoms grew more and more severe. I remember during this time, we all were searching wherever we could for new treatments, consulting books, articles, videos, people, really anything that would help us help mom. During this time, mother was struggling to use the restroom by herself. That is how helpless this disease rendered her. Upon hearing she had such a symptom, a medication commercial I saw on TV flashed into my head. It was advertising a medication that would prolong an AD patient's ability to take care of

themselves. Essentially, what the drug did was to mitigate the death of a person's brain cells, cells that allow them to be self-sufficient (4). Thus, preserving their brain cells, the patient was made more self-sufficient.

Eventually, mother grew to a point where the new drug was growing more and more useless. We looked into possible new future treatments that might help her, like various other drugs and medical and immunization therapies (4), but in one of her last moments of having a clear mind, mom told my father she wanted to stop fighting the disease. I could hear and feel, physically feel, the grief in my dad's strained voice as he told me this over the phone. As this disease broke my mom's brain, it broke my dad's heart. His beloved was dying. She could hardly remember his name. Sometimes she would scream with terror when seeing his face because she thought him a belligerent stranger. Other times she was still, motionless, vacant of expression. And every once while, her sunshine-personality would sparkle through her face once again and we would get to bask in her rays of joy as she remembered herself and her family. Such sunshines eventually disappeared without ever piercing the storm clouds of her disease again. And thus, with grieving resignation, we looked into ways of caregiving for mom, knowing she was alive but gone. She was present in body but vacant in mind. I remember during the first moments of my research, I read in a journal written by various doctors and nurses of how AD affected various families in an Asian country (5). It was described how the AD patients lost the ability to communicate and carry on relationships just as my mother had (5). Though I was forewarned of such a tragedy through that journal, it was of no avail. No amount of foreknowledge could have prepared me for that tragedy.

Mom did not live very much longer after losing her ability to communicate with us. Maybe this is just me being superstitious, but I guess her body knew she did not have much more reason to live. Maybe that was a mercy. I do not know. Maybe all these thoughts of mine are just the mad ravings of a grieving son who has just lost his mom. There is one thing I do know for certain: Alzheimer's Disease is bad... really bad. Horrible. I hope this account of my own mother's and family's experience with Alzheimer's Disease illustrates that. I know I could never truly convey the sorrow this disease struck my family with, but maybe, just maybe, I can make that statistic I began with in my account, just a little clearer to people.

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