

Sitting in his kingly chair at the head of the table, Homer, my grandfather, looked down at the same faces he saw every year in that room. Today was Thanksgiving. Though his 14 year old grandchildren, and likely many more at the table, would have probably preferred Christmas, he enjoyed Thanksgiving the most. He and his wife got the whole family together in their home for a day. Once we sat at the table, he loved to lead the discussion and tell jokes and stories. He even managed to keep discussions about history and politics civil at a Thanksgiving dinner. He could have gone on forever if Black Friday shopping didn't cut it short. Sometime after dinner half the party left, sound in mind that they'd be back soon.

A year later, my grandfather was waving at the door as people made their way in. He had a cane now but did his best to hide it. Again, he sat at the head of the table, but didn't make his commanding presence like he used to. Rather than leaning in and starting the conversation, he sat turned to one side, bouncing one leg, quietly waiting until dinner was served. His furrowed brow and tired eyes kept wandering here and there, lacking their usual focus. The whole atmosphere that day seemed off. The conversation at the table was quieter this year. We disregarded it as a result of the chairs left vacant by circumstance. But the truth was that PopPop did not lead the table as he always did. He only added a few comments from story to story, and when he built up the energy to tell a joke, he seemed flustered when it never quite landed right. As the night went on, he leaned in and sat straighter in his chair, but the stifled atmosphere still remained. Even in his goodbyes he kept this brevity, before falling asleep on the couch while watching the news.

The next year we had our worst fears confirmed. Homer was diagnosed with dementia. There had already been noticeable changes before that point, but once we had that information, our visits were never the same. I tried to keep my optimism; I knew that dementia was gradual, after all, and I had confidence in my grandfather's resilience. This was the very same man who was still active well into his seventies and boasted about never needing medicine. I thought he would still be mostly the same person I knew in early childhood. Me and my mother were the first to arrive, and we started talking with MomMom and PopPop. I was starting to work out for Crew, and guessed at what the season might be like. PopPop's eyes lit up and he motioned his cane, grasping at a memory. He talked about a group of friends that he knew that used to row at Georgia Tech. He remembered seeing them rowing early in the morning under the bridge. Sometimes during his walks in Philadelphia he caught those strangers rowing under that bridge. Wait, that didn't seem right - I pulled out of the conversation for a second; did I miss something? Suddenly he was talking about bicycles. At that point I began to smile and nod; I had difficulty following the rest of his story. By the time he concluded, I felt guilty. I must have just not paid attention, I thought naively. Soon enough more joined in and the conversation shifted elsewhere. I didn't know how to interact that Thanksgiving. I thought I was just being awkward, but soon found that I wasn't the only one having trouble interacting. Everyone seemed to have difficulty with the weight of new information. The subtle differences from last year's Thanksgiving became blatant this year.

Once a whole year passed, we seemed to come to accept the diagnosis. We learned to smile and nod, to change topics, to never say the word “remember.” That Thanksgiving Homer was the last to sit at the table; he had to be coerced from the TV, and walked with his walker to the table. For the first time, he didn’t recognize his spot on the table. “Where am I sitting?” he asked dejectedly, as if we planned to exclude him from dinner. Once he did take his seat, he stared vacantly into the yard or back to the television. He had to be reminded to eat. The ever-persistent dog ended up eating more of his plate than he did. He used to scold his wife for the very same thing.

That was the last year Thanksgiving was held in that house. The large coastal home was traded for a small house near family and a reserve for my grandfather to live off of. We expected selling the home would be the hardest mountain to summit, but that was simply a foothill compared to finding a place to keep Homer. After we finally found a memory care home that survived MomMom’s vetting process, we started moving stuff in. One day later we had to move it all back out. The home wouldn’t take Homer; it wasn’t a lift facility, which was a term we weren’t familiar with and did not have explained to us. Another month later we finally had a home for him. We came to the home to celebrate Thanksgiving with PopPop, as they invited us to their own event the home hosted. They didn’t expect so many to take the invitation; we had to get another table brought out. We were by far the largest group there, and some of the tables were made up only of the other residents. We were hoping not to bother the staff too much, but they actually seemed happy to help us. “It’s nice you’ve got as large of a group as you do,” one employee said. “Some people don’t even bother anymore once they’re placed in here.” After acquainting ourselves, the family sat more comfortably, but I was still tense. The change in location emphasised that everything changed too quickly for me to adapt. But after looking around and seeing my cousin carry on like we were back at our old table 5 years ago, I knew how to go forward. If he can’t remember times as a family himself, I thought, we can do our best to make that memory a reality again. We did our best to laugh and talk just as much as we used to. PopPop glided up to the head of the table in his jerry chair. He used to get so worried about travelling as he became less mobile, but now we came to him, and rolled up with a smile. Behind the disease that shrouded my grandfather so often, I swear I saw that same glimmer in his eyes I saw five years ago.

After last Thanksgiving, I’ve learned that it takes a certain kind of acceptance to properly interact with people with dementia. You have to accept that your fundamental relationship will change. You can’t make more memories fishing or walking in Rehoboth or exploring Longwood anymore; a relationship with someone with dementia is more about what memories you keep rather than make. You have to accept that you can’t ask many questions, and those you do often won’t garner a coherent answer. Even though thinking this way has helped me interact with my grandfather and others at the home, the idea never quite sat right. I don’t want to accept anything. The fact that my grandfather could change so completely, and that there was likely a similar story behind every face in that gathering room, is something I don’t think I’ll ever be able to really accept. Thinking back to the employee’s comment, some clearly don’t even

want to face the issue. I'm not quite sure where I'll end up for college, but wherever I go I want to volunteer, to help show that forgetting family and losing family are two different things. Too many people shy away from their own family in the face of the disease. I want to show people that just because they might not be able to remember does not mean their actions can't have meaning. I want other people to give the same feeling PopPop felt sitting at the end of the Thanksgiving table.

We don't know where we will have Thanksgiving next. The memory care home we have grown accustomed to may not be tenable as his dementia grows and reserve shrinks. Regardless of the uncertainties of the future, I'm looking forward to the next big family meeting with PopPop. We make visits all the time, but they never quite evoke the same reaction as that big table did. He had that same smile he always had at the table every year. He may not be able to put names to faces, but he knew we were there for him. Not even dementia will keep Homer from his family.