

The rainbow sherbet drips, cold on my fingers and sticky on my chin. My twin sister, Lily, munches on her pink bubblegum ice cream, the crunch of the cone like dry leaves. My grandpa, towering above us, spoons cool pralines 'n cream into his mouth and watches cars pull into the gas station.

Grandpa says it's time to go: "Grandma's almost finished making dinner." Lily and I happily oblige.

Walking home, along the river path, over the bridge, across the crosswalks, past the park, and up the never-ending hill, I don't realize how different our relationship will become.

As I pass the JC Penney, I don't realize the purpose of these walks is to improve Grandpa's physical strength; I don't realize his mental fragility could snatch him away at any moment; I don't realize that walking, for him, is a way of pushing back the timeline. All I know is I'm happy to be eating ice cream with Lily and Grandpa.

As Lily chases me along the path, the river bubbling and belching beside me, my little legs push faster than my lungs can pump and my breath comes in short bursts. What I don't know is that in a few years, my breath will catch when I learn what "Alzheimer's" means. I don't know that I will choke back tears every time Grandpa neglects his hamburger, every time he falls to the ground from dehydration, every time he forgets my name.

Across the bridge we go. Grandpa holds my hand as I bounce from stop sign to stop sign. I traipse past the wooden castles and bark chip carpeted ground of the park, yearning to go in. We don't. What I'll learn when I return is that the park is ash, burnt by a single, but powerful match. And, after this, I'll learn that even when tragedy strikes, it's not the end.

From the ashes of the park and my naivety, I'll find something stronger and more beautiful. I'll go from playing in parks to laughing with Grandpa as we walk behind his retirement home, along the river trail, at *his* pace. We'll go from watching TV shows with me perched on the armrest of his recliner to me presenting cat memes to the residents of Memory Care. I'll rejoice in watching the afternoon sun set over the pines with Grandpa, him with his wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen-covered face and me with my brown bangs for protection. What I'll find in the remnants is love, love that stems from appreciating the little things.

My white clouds of respiration encircle the imaginary mountain we've just climbed. We summit the hill, drawing closer to home; Grandma's cooking greets us at the front door.

When time flies past us, when my grandfather's clock will tick its last tock, I will have an overwhelming desire to melt out of myself. I will want to melt the hurt from my body, but doing so would erase Grandpa. It would erase the waves of excitement that crashed into Grandpa's green eyes every time he saw me; It would erase the depth of his "toot-toot" remarks. It's these little, but monumental moments I'd be erasing, and never could I do that to my soft-spoken and loving Grandpa.

So instead, I'll let Grandpa's breath float soothing words through my hurt, let his blood in my veins fill the hole in my heart. I'll embrace this painful love by continuing to do our things. Grandpa and I will listen to "Earth Angel" forever, me singing and Grandpa humming. Grandpa and I will dance forever, goofily twisting our hips and shoulders. Grandpa and I will smile together, beaming wider and wider as the song plays on.

To my grandpa, and all those I've had the pleasure to work with in Memory Care, thank you - thank you for teaching me not to be afraid of the brutal word, "Alzheimer's." Upon first entering Memory Care, I was expecting to find the fragile shells of people, shells with whom I wouldn't be able to relate. Instead, the unexpected occurred: I discovered that people living with dementia and Alzheimer's were, in fact, just like everyone else I knew: compassionate, funny, insightful, and chatty.

Kate, one of the women with whom I worked, would ask me time and time again if I had a twin - fraternal twin to be exact - and of course I would say, "yes." Once she heard that three letter word, she would break out into a smile and would tell me about her twin brothers. Since Lily and I are fraternal, she would always highlight the fact that one of her brothers had flaming red hair and the other had black, curly hair. She was thoroughly invested in our conversations, and earnestly listened and answered when we talked about the benefits and struggles of being a twin. Not only did Kate care about my being a twin, but she cared about how I did in school and relationships. My favorite pieces of advice she gave me for school were, "Never sit down with a pencil in your pocket" and "bring your teachers apples." She would also inquire about my relationship status, and, not so subtly, hint that she had a handsome grandson my age. Kate and my grandpa were the two people who truly taught me that although Alzheimer's is a tragic and devastating disease, there is still so much life, love, and humor to be shared with one another.

In internalizing and actualizing the humanity of the residents, I recognized that my past biases had caused me to subconsciously neglect the older generation, and it made me realize why young people may tend to ignore this generation: fear. In order to assuage the stigma and fear surrounding people with Alzheimer's and help younger generations realize their prejudices, I plan to study psychology in college. One of my goals is to study the effects of Alzheimer's on human interaction and demonstrate how, even though a mind may be deteriorating, it doesn't mean the person doesn't experience profound human emotion. The most important part of the psychological research I hope to perform in college is an analysis of how to interact with people of varying degrees of Alzheimer's or dementia. Depending on the case-by-case severity of Alzheimer's, some people struggle from short term memory loss, and others with speech, so figuring out the best ways to interact with Alzheimer's patients is my goal. I aspire to do this because I fell prey to my own misconceptions about the Alzheimer's community, and in

overcoming them, I was surrounded by incredible people who enriched my life. I would like other people to have a chance to experience this community in a similar way.

The second part of what I plan to do for Alzheimer's awareness is to study political science. While I can't say I would change the relationship my grandpa and I had in his later years of life, I will say Alzheimer's significantly altered the extent of what he could do physically and mentally, which in turn affected our relationship. My goal in studying political science is to change the legislature to bring more urgency to curing and researching Alzheimer's. If I gain a significant platform, I plan on sponsoring or lobbying for more resources for Alzheimer's patients.