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Alzheimer's

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Author Bio

Amy Butcher is a small-town girl who's attending college in an even smaller location. She's a diehard tree-hugger, an uber-liberal and a super-vegetarian. She likes writing, traveling and macaroni and cheese an awful lot. She's currently a freshman, double-majoring in both English and Creative Writing with heady plans to journey to New Zealand sometime in the near future.

Alzheimer's

He moved in with us when I was ten. I remember helping my father carry his luggage in from the car, the cold October air pressingly sharp against my young little cheeks. At one point, with the last suitcase poking out from the trunk, my father pulled me aside.

"It's going to take some time for us to get used to things," he told me, only he said it like it was a warning, as if I should be prepared.

I didn't know what my father meant at the time, but I realized it the second I held my first conversation with him.

He couldn't remember who I was.

At the time, I had been really into Challenge 24 cards. That first night, I distinctly remember looking up from my purple and yellow cards to see his figure standing in my doorway. His expression was blank; his eyes honed in on the cards.

"You're supposed to find a way to make the numbers sum to twenty-four," I explained, hoping he might join me. Maybe he'd be a challenge. I had all but mastered the game and was eager to advance; my brothers were so sick of losing that they refused to play with me any longer. "You can multiply, add, subtract or divide the numbers, see?" I explained. "You just have to figure out how to make them equal twenty-four."

He looked at me for a long time without blinking. A minute later, he asked me how to play.

I spent the latter half of that night at my mother's bedside, crying and pleading with her. I didn't understand.

Since then, it's only gotten worse.

He lives in a room up in the attic, right above my bedside. At first he would wander the house late at night, mumbling about fruits and all of the different colors he saw. He'd announce an object's shape or texture, as if by defining everything he saw he would remember it. He never did. Red cold plate. Green soft carpet. I must have heard him say, "Hard gray television," at least four times in a single evening.

Eventually his late-night wanderings stopped. My mother worried that he may be a threat to the overall calamity of the nighttime house; she wasn't sleeping peacefully anymore, she'd say.

They installed a lock on his door at some point the following week. After that he wouldn't leave the room; he'd just pace back and forth on those old, creaking wooden planks. He'd jingle the doorknob and wait for a good hour or so before climbing into his bed in defeat, and then the cycle would repeat.

I would lie still in bed and listen to his cries.

But perhaps the worst thing about it was that he could never remember where his wife—my grandmother—was. She had died several months before he moved in with us, before his Alzheimer's got really bad. She had died before, back when he knew my name, back when he could still remember what he had done with his day.

"Do you know where Margaret is?" He'd always ask in the same sad tone, his eyes wet and curious.

The first time he asked, I didn't know what to say. I was so surprised, so saddened that he couldn't even remember that his own wife had died. Standing that miserably, rainy July day in a thick black tuxedo, he had cried so hard. When they lowered her casket into the ground, he fell to his knees on the ground, visibly shaking.

I had never seen my grandfather cry.

Whenever he'd pull me aside to ask, his eyes seemed so haunting and empty. They'd flicker about the room, scanning the couch and the recliner for her feminine, baby powder-scented presence.

Eventually, on advice from my father, I would just lie to him.

"She's in the other room," I'd say, "don't you remember, pop? She's cooking you a grilled cheese sandwich, just like you asked."

And then his face would light up in the same beautiful way, and he'd smile, nodding, saying to himself, "Oh yes, that's right, that's right."

He just seemed so much happier that way.