

How can presence be felt through absence?

Shortly before returning to university after my year abroad, I visited my grandparents. My Granddad had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's the previous year, but his illness was in the earlier stages and manifested itself in frequent memory loss or forgetfulness. On this occasion, however, he was his usual self - an inquisitive man of few words, but one whose words would often carry great significance. This day was no exception. He enquired about my studies, and asked if I had any thoughts as to what I would like to do as a career. "I'm not sure, something to do with languages and travel?" came my indecisive reply. "Well, just make sure it's something you enjoy doing!" he said, another concise nugget of his wisdom duly imparted.

I vividly recall this conversation as the lasting memory of Granddad as he was, before his illness cruelly took over.

In the following months, I was preoccupied with preparing for exams and my final year dissertation. I was working towards the next stage in my life - finally becoming a "proper" adult rather than a poor student; an adult with a job, money and responsibilities.

The prospect of this new stage was daunting, but nothing could prepare me for what was to come next. I knew Granddad had been ill for a while, years even, but his condition was deteriorating rapidly. Sudden episodes of fainting, wandering out of the house in the night and hospital visits were becoming commonplace. After much turmoil and distress, we were told that in fact my Granddad was not suffering from Alzheimer's, but rather a case of vascular dementia that had gone undiagnosed. He had endured a series of mini-strokes, which had consequently lead to his fainting and cognitive demise. All of this piled on top of two equally serious illnesses that only added to his pain and delirium: prostate cancer and diabetes.

The dementia discovery was shocking and unwelcome to say the least. We now knew that his condition was worsening rapidly, his cognitive and physical capabilities diminishing with each day.

He was transferred into a nursing home specifically catering for dementia patients, much to the reluctance of my grandmother and indeed, every one of us. It was very much necessary as Granddad's care requirements intensified, but ultimately it was nothing other than a heartbreaking last resort. The upheaval and distress of moving to a strange, unfamiliar place away from home clearly wasn't helping his situation, and over the following months more time was spent in hospital than at the nursing home.

I had been engrossed in my studies. Regretfully, I hadn't seen Granddad since my last memorable meeting just months before. Part of me was scared of witnessing his deterioration; as if by seeing him it would somehow validate the illness, as though it was all just a figment of our imagination. I wanted to remember Granddad as he was; I had seen some photos and he was almost unrecognizable. My mind was in a fragile state with the pressure of exams. I

was stressed and knew that seeing Granddad would tear me apart, while simultaneously crumbling with the sense of guilt for not being present.

Fortunately, Granddad kept fighting and just when we thought we were losing him, he would prove us wrong. My studies were finished and I visited him in the home for the first time. I had been forewarned of his condition and was told "*Granddad is very different to when you last saw him.*" He recognized me from a distance as I entered the room and mouthed my name. "*I didn't think I'd see you again,*" he said breathlessly. He was pale, had shrunk to a quarter of his overweight size and was visibly fragile. His angular limbs jutted out abruptly against wafer-like, translucent skin. His speech was slurred and for the most part incomprehensible, save for a few choice words and phrases and the occasional exclamation of "*Pain!*" Remnants of his spirit were present; but his body was defeating him. He spoke of all manner of situations and experiences - he was on a ship, in a foreign country or with an invisible character. He told stories, which were a band of gibberish punctuated with moments of lucidity and detail; it was like a theatrical performance of a daydream. Were they embellished past experiences? Dreams previously unspoken of? I'll never know.

Unable to feed himself, I fed him a chocolate ice cream. Seeing a relative who fed and looked after you as a child regress to an infantile state was sobering to say the least, but there was nothing I could do but embrace it. To get emotional or reflect too deeply would reinforce the gravity of the situation. It became a game; like feeding a baby. The condescension and indignity of it weighed heavily on my mind, but I tried not to dwell on it. The home was a refuge for lost souls, uncooperative bodies and had an air of sadness which stunned me into silence. The walls and doors of each room were adorned with young faces, families and former selves, which bore little resemblance to their occupants. Happiness, health and halcyon days were long gone. These people were shadows of their former selves, no matter how much light you shed on their situation.

Upon leaving the home, Granddad shook my hand and whispered: "*Well it was lovely to meet you, young lady!*" I was at once amused and bemused, relieved that his humor and personality had not left him - that his physical manifestation, which bore little resemblance to his former self, was confirmed as being my Granddad through the quirky fragments that remained.

Each visit to the home was both a blessing and a curse, and leaving was the hardest part. Granddad seemed to stoically accept it for what it was: "*You can go home now!*" he sighed one day.

Weeks went by and his condition exacerbated. He was no longer able to sit in his chair in the living room with the other residents. He became confined to his room; plain but for the photos and drawings decorating the walls. I travelled back down to visit and immediately noticed the difference in his speech and mobility, or lack thereof. Feeding became more challenging and his temper would fray due to the immense pain that not even painkillers could subdue.

His breathing was labored and heavy and his speech becoming less and less pronounced. He wore the look of a man who had battled too hard for too long. In more animated moments, his eyes would dart around the room, tracing apparently invisible objects or people and responding with smiles, laughter and mouthed, silent conversation. He spoke of the presence of deceased family members and seemed at ease, locating their position with an outstretched arm. As a devout Roman Catholic from an Eastern European family, religion was important to him. We didn't know what he was experiencing, hallucinations or something else, but it was comforting to see him looking so calm and reassured between the more traumatic moments. We were fortunate that doctors allowed Granddad to return home for his final three weeks of life.

In the aftermath of his death, I experienced anxiety and frequently endured panic attacks and a generally depressed mood. My first experience of death as an adult made me fear the loss of other people close to me. Granddad's fragility also made me fear my own mortality, and having seen the effect of his passing on other members of my family, made me fear causing similar heartache should I pass away. A curious and seemingly selfish twist, but something that has become easier to accept with time. Initially, I still felt Granddad's presence as strongly as his absence, which made his death seem incomprehensible. Gradually, happier memories replaced the tangible physical presence and although the feeling of loss never subsided, a sense of acceptance and closure wrapped around me as I learned to let go; not forgetting, but remembering.

At 22, I had considered myself to be past the vague thresholds of childhood - 18 and 21 – and didn't expect to be jolted out of my forward trajectory and held in a purgatory of sorts. I had experienced the fragility of the human condition and the vulnerability of those to whom I had looked for support and guidance in my youth. The cruel regression of indiscriminate illness and age had taught me that you have nothing if not your health, and that you can't stop natural processes from taking away the ones you love. You can only be grateful to have had the privilege to be their son, their daughter, their wife; their contemporary in the ephemerality of life.

I take away a more pragmatic approach to life, mortality and loss, in that acceptance and appreciating every moment lived is essential. Not to dwell on what might have been, but to remember with fondness the happier moments; the smiles, the laughter and the life lived, not the life lost.