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Big Poppy

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The slow sorrow fills me before I am fully awake. My mind rushes to find the cause. It only takes a second before two words complete the search: BIG POPPY

Nothing in particular happened yesterday. I don't know why the full enormity hit me like a wave of grief. It was our usual pleasant time together – "our Sunday stroll" he calls it. My grandfather, slightly stooped behind his walker, appeared confused but smiled lovingly as I approached. We took our unhurried afternoon walk, enjoying the soft breeze and the deliberate pace of our conversation. Our hour long date ended as it always did, with his wishing me a wonderful and healthy week, and I, jokingly, telling him to stay out of trouble. As usual, he would tell me he could not promise anything, and we laughed, hugged, and parted ways. It was nothing I could put my finger on, but yesterday, perhaps for the first time, I worried that my grandfather could see his own life as a growing grayness that would eventually fade away. Walking back to our car, I recalled my parents' murmurs a few years back, discussions about Big Poppy coming to live near us, using words new to me – dementia, Alzheimer's, progressive deterioration. I didn't realize the impact these words had on our lives, on my grandfather's life. I do now.

My grandfather – Big Poppy- is the most loving, gentle, and supportive person I know. Born into a poor immigrant family, he worked from the time he was ten years old – selling newspapers on a dodgy corner in Philadelphia in the biting winter and hiding when gangs lurked nearby, harassing him for his nickels and dimes. His parents pressed him to achieve more in his life than they could, emphasizing education as a way out of their impoverished surroundings. Big Poppy listened. He studied at a local university to become an accountant. He did not stop working until, at seventy-eight years old, he realized the words and numbers on the pages in front of him had become a jumbled puzzle. His life had not been easy, but appreciating the opportunities that his parents had given him, he raised his own family and worked hard in a way that made me think of history lessons in which our country achieved greatness through the toil and determination of its citizens. No one ever called Big Poppy a superhero, but his dedication to his career and to his family made him an everyday hero.

I see him weekly, so the signs were not obvious to me at first. Some things, really the important ones like his character and his love for me, are still the same. My grandfather remains his warm and kind self. His face lights up when he sees me approaching, eyes twinkling as though he is thinking about the secret language we created when I was eight. He listens intently to my stories and laughs when I tell him about how I found my sneaker in the middle of our street and no one could figure out how it got there. He tells me about how he prays in his room every morning, and I chuckle when he calls these daily prayer sessions his "insurance policy". Big Poppy is still wise. His advice is cogent and ageless. I ask him how to be successful in life, and he answers without hesitation, telling me that at home, in school, and with friends it is important to be respected and respectful. Despite these moments of clarity, his memory is wearing around the edges: He repeats a story a few times when we talk. He asks the same questions multiple times and then digests the answer as if he had never heard it before. He will try to press money into my hand multiple times a day. Big Poppy's mind is on a perpetual loop. He tries to fight this loop, but eventually it will win.

As his grandson, I have never made anyone so proud. When I first learned to walk, a bit on the late side, Big Poppy cried tears of joy. No one has ever been happier to see another person toddle into a room. When I won my fifth grade spelling bee, Big Poppy told every member of his family, including a number of cousins I had never met. When he retired after forty years of working for the same company, hundreds of his colleagues and friends threw him a

party. During his celebratory speech, he referenced how I impacted his life no less than seven times. Every day of my life, my grandfather makes me feel cherished. I find myself agitated about what details he may not remember: Does Big Poppy remember that he flew to St. Thomas a day after a Category 4 hurricane to survey damage and help their local government? That he spent hours sitting at a veterinarian's office while his sixteen year-old cat received chemotherapy? That he would sleep on my floor at night whenever he visited, so I could pretend we were camping? These small pieces of life are the ones that make us who we are, and if Big Poppy can no longer remember these parts, I wonder who he is to himself.

We are supposed to help keep his mind sharp. We ask him, "What state do you live in?" and "Who is the President of the United States?" I find myself rooting for the right answer as if my favorite football team is vying for a spot in the Super Bowl. I pray for the right answer because that gives Big Poppy one more minute of lucidity. Sometimes he answers correctly, and sometimes he sadly shrugs and says, "I give up, buddy." In his exasperation, it becomes clear that this disease takes everything. Alzheimer's leaves in its path a hollowed emptiness.

While there is no denying this adversary living in Big Poppy's mind, there is some beauty in my grandfather's world. Big Poppy appreciates simple accomplishments, like walking around his entire building without stopping and putting together twenty piece puzzles of elephants and kangaroos. The weight of the world and all of its demands lighten when we take our walk together because in Big Poppy's mind, there no longer exists complicated problems and pressing deadlines. Together, we can appreciate how quickly the birds dance across the sky and the smiles and greetings from other walkers passing our way. Time with Big Poppy forces me to slow down because he cannot speed up. Whether or not my grandfather remembers, our time together has significance if only in teaching me the importance of taking a breath and soaking in the present.

I know there will probably be a time when I am deleted from his world. This knowledge is almost unbearable to me. Will our bond endure this? I refuse to accept that the answer is no. I will not allow our relationship or my grandfather's life to disappear with his memory. I will remember his words, his kindnesses, his impact on the world. Even if he cannot remember his wife who died many decades ago, I will do it for him. I will carry his imprint on the world and know that Alzheimer's cannot take the memory of who he is to me.