

Memories

Raquel Olavarrieta

I softly knocked on her door just to find her sound asleep. She looked so peaceful; her sheets covering her all the way to her neck, hiding the numerous IVs that were placed when she was rushed to the ER. Her teddy bear was next to her pillow, and her daughter was sitting by her side avidly reading Kathleen Negri's *Mom Are You There? Finding a Path to Peace through Alzheimer's*. To me it was Sunday all over again. I was sixteen and it was that day of the week when I got to visit my grandfather. There he was, sleeping comfortably on his stretcher, surrounded by IVs and unable to open his eyes for more than two seconds. Those remarkable two seconds when he might have been able to remember my name.

It was through her daughter that I got to know more about Mrs. J. My assignment was to assess the patient's mental status, perform a depression screening, complete a thorough medication review and report back to my psychiatry attending. I was unaware that my visit would become so much more meaningful than just determining my patient's Folstein Mini Mental score.

I learned that Mrs. J was not the luckiest child growing up. Coming back home from school was the most dreadful time of her day. As she walked in, she would immediately check on her mother to make sure she did not have new bruises, and then quickly hide from her father as she realized that the scotch bottle sitting on the night table was again empty. As soon as she turned 18, she found her escape in marriage and quickly enough became a mother herself; she swore her children would not have to see the things she saw. Mrs. J. had a family and she was amazed to realize that this could be the first time in her life she was happy.

However, she was unable to put behind her the ghosts of her traumatic childhood, so she made sure she remembered to take that pill her psychiatrist had prescribed. Some days she would take one too many, just to stop reliving such dreadful episodes, just to find solace in her dreams. She thought she had found the antidote to her bad memories, until one day she woke up to check her infant's cradle only to find him lying on his chest, lifeless. It was uncertain how she would be able to put her guilt in the past, but she knew she still needed to be a mother to the rest of her children, and she did the best she could. Even though she strongly relied on therapy, the death of her child was a chapter of her life she could not escape from.

Why is it that she is able to remember those episodes that hurt her so much, but she is unable to recognize those who care about her the most?

Now, 60 years later, she lives with her husband who, at 92 years of age, is still her pillar of strength. Only now she is unable to call him by his name. On occasion, she tries to hide from him and when he is close she begs him not to hurt her. She reminds him how good she has been this week and repeats, "Daddy not today, please not today." She does not understand why those two ladies dressed in white have to be at her house so often, and why they make her take those pills every day. She sometimes sits on the couch and wonders what these women are putting in her pills, and maybe next time they come close she will push them away. I am now able to understand why my grandfather would not let me give him his medications and kept referring to them as venom. To him, I was that lady who kept trying to poison him.

Later, during the evenings, Mrs. J. is visited by her daughter and for that time it seems as if she is a different person; almost completely healthy. They can sit and talk about the grandchildren and upcoming birthdays. She has always wanted to be the favorite grandmother. However, these lucid periods are short-lived and she soon returns to her childhood. Tears run down her cheeks and she is again under her bed, hiding because she knows Daddy is mad.

She cries inconsolably and repeats over and over again how badly she wants to go home—but she is home. On occasion, she is found holding her pillow very close to her chest saying, "Please breathe again, please take just one more breath." Isn't Alzheimer's disease supposed to cause memory impairment? Why is it that she is able to remember those episodes that hurt

her so much, but she is unable to recognize those who care about her the most?

I am back in Mrs. J's room talking to her daughter as she explains, in tears, how her mother's condition has slowly declined to the point where her lucid moments are almost completely extinct. She has become increasingly disoriented, weak, and aggressive toward her caretakers and family members. She spends most of her time sitting on her couch at home crying inconsolably; trying to escape from the memories of a cruel past, but unable to recover those that would give her hope for happiness. As I carefully listen to her story I realize that for me it is Sunday again, and even though grandpa has been gone for almost 12 years now, I am here in his room, visiting him one more time.

■ **Raquel Olavarrieta** is a fourth year medical student. She was born in Barquisimeto, Venezuela and has always enjoyed writing, although more so in Spanish than English. Raquel is excited about graduation and will pursue a career in pediatrics. She hopes to train and practice in Florida and to continue to contribute to HEAL in the future.



Character
Marielys Figueroa-Sierra