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Sonder

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Sonder

I.

I am twenty-one years old, and my job is to take care of the elderly in an adult living facility. Since I am the newbie at the job, I am often stuck working the overnight shift—ten o'clock at night until six o'clock in the morning. The majority of this shift involves helping people go to the bathroom every two hours. But at 4:30 a.m. sharp, one resident—I'll call him Walter—wakes up. This is when my job gets interesting, and the last hour and a half always flies by.

Walter is over ninety, and he makes sure you know it. He taught elementary school for something like forty years and then volunteered at the local hospital for thirty-something more. Despite the fact that Walter is far more mobile than most of the residents, and despite the fact that his memory is still as sharp as a straight razor, his morning routine takes longer than most of the others. I don't mind the extra time Walter takes, because I like listening to his stories.

On this particular morning, Walter is complaining that his son, who lives in Florida, is not coming to visit him for Father's Day.

"I just can't believe he isn't coming to see me."

I hand him his comb. "I'm sure they will set up a Skype session for you," I say.

Walter shakes his head. "Well, on Father's Day many years ago, my wife and I went up to visit his wife and him. She made this huge meal for us. My wife loved the meal very much and ate and ate and ate. I only ate a bit; it wasn't settling right with me for some reason. Well, my wife raved about the

meal. When we were driving home—it was about an hour drive—she began complaining that her stomach hurt something awful.”

“That’s no good,” I say. I think the story is heading in the direction of his daughter-in-law’s cooking giving his wife food poisoning. I knew Walter didn’t like his daughter-in-law very much.

“Well, no, it was no good. So we get home and I tell her to lay down and I got her some milk of magnesia and I told her to rest. But, when I went to check on her a little later, she was unresponsive. So I drove her to the hospital and after they took her in, they came out a few minutes later and told me she was gone.”

My throat tightens and my stomach twists into a knot. I am not sure how to respond to this unexpected revelation at the end of Walter’s story—he didn’t seem visibly upset by the memory. That meant I shouldn’t be either. I had no idea that he was describing the day his wife died. Walter always told his stories in the same nonchalant tone while he combed his hair or situated his suspenders. Recounting them to himself, rather than to me.

“Oh, my. That’s crazy, Walter,” is the only thing I can think to say.

He continues combing back his gray hair well beyond the necessary amount. “That picture was taken just a week before she died. It was our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.” He motions to the yellowed, framed photograph on his nightstand. Walter, with horned rimmed glasses and a sports jacket, sits behind a full-faced woman with curls piled on top of her head.

“I can’t believe they don’t let us have paper towels in our rooms anymore. It makes everything much more inconvenient.” I rip my eyes away from the photograph, in awe that Walter changed the subject so quickly. How could he get over his wife just like that? “Can you get me my belt?” he asks.

“Yes, of course.”

I find out later that Walter never remarried. I calculate that he was fifty when she passed; he is ninety-two now. He has had forty-two years of time to process what happened to her. He has had forty-two years of memories without his wife.

II.

A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from my mom and learned that my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease—a condition that is common among the residents I work with. It’s terrifying to know what my grandpa has in store—what my dad, my aunt, my cousins, my entire family will have to witness over the next few years. I’ve witnessed it—the sorrow in the eyes of family members as they watch their loved one barely able to pick up a fork and feed themselves. My first thought when I found out about my grandpa was, *I need to write his stories down*. He won’t be able to share them for years and years, like Walter has had the gift to do.

My grandpa was once a diving clown on the Atlantic City board walk. He was picked out of a line-up during the Korean War to be a guard for a four-star general. He was the oldest of four boys and his father died when he was a young teenager. He can tell you anything you need to know about classic cars. He loves horror movies. He met his wife driving a taxi cab.

He has eighty-two years of experience that can still live on if written down.

III.

My dad and I are standing in line at Starbucks on a weekend when I decided to get away from campus for a while and make the two hour drive home. The baristas are shuffling around behind the counter—their green aprons whipping as they glide from espresso machine to fridge to register. I concentrate on the rich smell of coffee filling my nose as I try to muster the courage to bring up the topic of my grandpa. It's the first time I've seen my dad since hearing the news, and I don't want to seem unaffected by the situation—working with old people makes you realistic. But I also don't want to tiptoe around the conversation, so I just say, "We should really record grandpa telling some of his own stories and family stories before his memory gets too bad." I carefully look at my dad out of the corner of my eye, trying not to be too intense about the urgency of the situation. I know that with medicine, my grandpa could have as little as six months of lucid memory left.

"He's actually written a lot down already, throughout his life," my dad says, staring at the menu board hanging above us, even though he always gets a *grande* hot mocha.

I'm surprised when my dad says this—my grandpa was a writer? How did I not know that I shared this deeply engrained quality with him? "Wow. That's great, then," I say, relieved that his memories are preserved; waiting to be shared when he no longer can.

I picture my grandpa as a small boy with a full head of hair, slicked back, and overalls unbuttoned. He is sitting on the ground, looking up at a white haired man. The man is shaking his finger and imparting wisdom to my grandpa. But that's not how it works. More likely, my grandpa listened to the stories of others, just as I do. He let them sink in and he let them change him. Then he realized, "I need to write down what I've done, what I've seen, the people I've met. I need to tell my story."

IV.

On one of my few nights off from work, I decide to go to downtown Cortland to watch a band that's a part of the Main Street Summer Music Series, a program coordinated by the town to attract locals to Main Street to sustain

businesses while the college students are gone. The concerts—usually local cover bands—always take place outside in a small parking lot and the Cortland Beer Company sets up a tent. Quite a few people show up every Friday to enjoy a few drinks, socialize, and have an excuse to bask in the warm weather that is so coveted during New York State summers.

I grab a Red Dragon Lager and sit down on a concrete parking block toward the middle edge of the crowd. People of all ages line up in rows of plastic lawn chairs. Some brave women in their mid-forties are spastically dancing in the front—flopping their arms in an attempt to get the lead singer’s attention. The band plays song after song of classic rock and country. I bob my head to the music. They actually aren’t half bad, for Cortland.

As I look across the crowd, I think that each person has a story to tell. Each person is currently creating a memory in their life and each person has had memories stored in their past. I wonder if the women dancing in the front are married and unhappy, or if they are newly divorced and feel free, or if their husbands are sitting in the back, smiling because their wives have still got it. I wonder if the middle-aged man in the wheelchair twisted his ankle or if he has a degenerative disease that has immobilized him for the rest of his life. I wonder if the two little girls whispering to each other will still be friends when they are seniors in high school. I wonder who these people share their stories with—who have they passed their experiences on to? Who will keep them alive when they no longer can themselves? How many of them are writers? How many of them have been written about?

The band shifts from a wild rendition of “Sweet Home Alabama” into a slow country song; I can’t remember its name. The song is a love story. It’s about a man longing for the girl who left him years before. The lyrics are sappy. Slowly, people in the crowd either grab the hands of their significant other and join the women in the front, or they simply stand and sway with each other in front of their chairs, holding their lovers closely.

I feel a nudge from the younger man sitting next to me. His eyes are glossy with booze. He leans toward me. “My parents tell me that my grandparents used to tear it up on the dance floor. My grandma and grandpa never drank alcohol in their lives, but they would go out and just dance and dance and dance. They were always the last ones on the floor at the end of the night.”

“Do they still dance?” I ask. It was a dumb question—he clearly said *used to*. He said his parents had told him the story; his grandparents probably weren’t even alive anymore. But I can’t help but hope that his response will be that they are still alive and physically able to twirl each other into the wee hours of the morning. I hope that they were able to grow old healthily with each other, unlike Walter and his wife. I hope that they are still sharing their memories with each other and their grandkids, something my grandfather will soon be unable to do.

“My grandpa died a few years ago. My grandma hasn’t been able to dance much since I’ve been alive.”

I nod again and look away. *Only a few years.* She hasn’t had decades to process all the days they spent together. She probably still imagines him as the spry young man pulling her down into a dip. And I think of Walter, who never got to see the lines that would begin to striate his own wife’s face as they grew old together, enjoying retirement, traveling to Hawaii, watching their grandchildren grow up. I think of my grandfather, who will soon be unable to remember meeting his wife in a taxicab, the name of the waitress at Reilly’s, his best friend in the army, my name, my father’s name.

There is a couple dancing in front of me. They’re in their mid-forties. I can tell by the gray roots dusting the woman’s otherwise brunette head and the cracking skin of the man’s hands, which cup her waist. They’re getting older. Do they know it? I hope their children are here watching them hold each other close—I hope their grandchildren are told about this moment. I try to hold it in, but I can’t. My eyes swell with tears. I can’t be crying because some unknown couple in front of me is older than they once were, in a life that I know nothing about. I feel like it’s not my place to cry for the days Walter never had with his wife. I feel like I shouldn’t be mourning the recent death of a stranger’s grandfather, or the grandmother’s inability to dance. I shouldn’t be worrying about my grandfather’s eventual fate. I should be embracing the memories he has told me already.

The man next to me notices. “Everything okay?” He seems nervous that he’s sitting next to a crying woman.

“Yeah. I just know a lot of old people, that’s all.”

I realize now that I am mourning the lost memories, the moments that aren’t told—the flashes that are lost in the blur of living lives.