"So there I was, a Catholic at a Jewish wedding!"

You laughed your warm, loud cackle that always filled the room and vibrated my bones. I smiled and laughed, too, despite the fact that this was the fifth time in a row you told me this story. We sat across from each other at the white oval table in your breakfast nook, leaning back in the cushioned rolling chairs. The wheels always got stuck on the gray tile floor, but the sound of wheels catching in the grooves was an old song you knew. The breakfast nook was a familiar place—white table, white cushion chairs, white walls, a clean open space that had windows on all sides to see out onto an expanse of neat, trimmed green golf course.

You were comfortable with me. Your face was a round, plump peach—though a freckled, wrinkled peach—still rosy with health. Your now-white hair, no longer dyed an ash blonde, was fluffed as usual. Your blue eyes—which I did not inherit—beamed through your glasses at me, your grandniece. My name caught on your tongue and you swallowed it down, but you knew me still. I was family. You felt safe.

It saddened me, yet also fascinated me how you didn't realize you already told me this story just a few moments before. Some cognitive needle kept skipping over the record of your memories. *A Catholic at a Jewish wedding, bwerp! A Catholic at a Jewish wedding, bwerp!*

Repetitive stories are one of three district verbal repetitive behaviors observed in Alzheimer's patients, the other two being repeated questions and statements. I've read in pamphlets that caregivers and loved ones are advised to stay calm and provide the response the patient is looking for, even if the caregiver/loved one has to repeat themselves, too.

So I let your record skip.

It didn't annoy or frustrate me. To be honest, I cherished it. I reminded myself that there would come a time you would forget this story, too. It was one of my favorites. I hoped listening to it on repeat would help me remember it when you didn't anymore.

After all, if the reels of a favorite film were going to be destroyed, doesn't it make sense to replay it as many times as possible before the ribbon of story ripped? If it was a book, shouldn't it be read until the pages burned, never to be turned again?

"She was such a nice girl," you continued, a sad edge to your voice, "She died a couple years after that." Your bright blue eyes became a little cloudy. "What was her name…?"

"I think it was Shirley?" I offered, although even then, I wasn't sure that was correct.

"Yes, the girl I went to college with," you said. You met this nice Jewish girl while at Berkeley studying Business Administration. You met your future husband there and married him in 1952. Before your marriage, you had a part-time job at Macy's in San Francisco, selling clothing and hats. You even modelled the hats from time to time to encourage people to buy them. You were an excellent sewer and had good taste in fashion. Customers would often request your service, because you were always honest about what looked good and what didn't.

"You know," you continued, "I went down to her house to work on the dresses for the wedding, and her father came in to talk to me. You know, he was a Jewish cattle buyer."

I smiled as if this was the first time you told me this part of the story, instead of the sixth. "Oh my gosh," I laughed, shaking my head.

You had grown up on a cattle ranch, like me. You went to college and left the ranch work behind to your younger brother—my grandfather, which he didn't mind, because he wanted to be a cowboy anyway. Your ranching background came in handy that day, though. When your friend

told her father that you were raised on a cattle ranch, he promptly went into the room with you to chat about current cattle market prices and what breeds were better.

"So there I was, sewing dresses for the wedding and talking cows with him! I didn't care. He was so happy that his daughter brought home a girl who could talk cows with him! I couldn't believe it. So there I was, a Catholic at a Jewish wedding!" You cackled gleefully, then your expression became sad and confused once more. "She died a couple years after that…of cancer, I think…"

This time you drifted off into silence, your energy spent. How many times did you have to relive your friend's death in the last ten minutes of conversation? I didn't push you. I probably should have come up with a different activity—repetitive behaviors appear most when the Alzheimer's patient is bored or anxious—but I was at a loss on what to do. For as long as I had known you, you were the one who came up with activities, not me.

In the early 1970s, you went back to school to be a teacher. A program had been developed because there was a shortage of teachers; participants worked in classrooms during the day, then took classes at night. When you began the program, you had already had four children. You completed it, however, and began to teach in Salinas, California, where you lived.

By the time I was three or four years old in 1995, you had retired from teaching, moved back to Calaveras County, and transitioned into being a one-on-one preschool teacher for my sisters, my cousins, and me.

You lifted me into the tall chair, so I could sit at the cool kitchen counter made of light-gray tile. It was angled into a half-hexagon, and I always sat at the angle closest to the breakfast nook. Sometimes I would turn in the tall chair to look out the window and watch old men in golf

carts buzz pass, since the house was in one of those golf-course subdivisions. Or I'd stare at the shimmering blue pool, eager for the time lessons would be over and I could go swimming.

You were good at keeping my attention (once you got it. I was always a bit of a day dreamer). My "classes" with you were busied with a variety of activities, so I was never bored. Each class day, you focused on one letter in the alphabet, starting with 'a' going all the way down to 'z'. To start, we would roll the letters out with pale pink salty-smelling playdough on a colorful pad collaged with all sorts of cartoons: zig zags, squiggly lines, flowers, houses, animals, gingerbread man cookies…there was a lot going on. We'd make both the capital and lower-case version of the letter, and you would write it on my back, which I loved because it tickled (but in a good way, not like normal tickling where someone shoves their hand into your armpit or stomach to the point of pain, which I hate). You'd also write my name, *B-E-C-C-A*. The letters sank into my bones, bled into my mind and heart, and became a part of me.

Then you pulled out these cards with pictures of mouths on them, and you taught me how to look at the card and mimic them to make the right sound for each letter. Long a and short a, how to use my lips and breath for *buh, puh*, and *wuh* for 'b', 'p', and 'w'. How to press the tip of my tongue to the roof of my mouth and speak through my nose for 'l.'

It wasn't until many years later I learned that this "kit" of letter-symbol tiles and flashcards was a teacher's aide called the Auditory Discrimination in Depth, or A.D.D. These days, it's called the Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing (LiPS) program, something you explained to me back when I was in college (originally to be a teacher). It was before you were diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so you remembered the program well when I interviewed you for an assignment.

For lunch, we always “cooked” something based on the letter; ‘a’ for apple slices, ‘b’ for butter dips, ‘c’ for chocolate chip cookies, and so on. I was excited for the day we did ‘i’ because we made homemade ice cream with that wooden thing that had a crank.

And of course, there were things like swimming, board games, cards, painting on the back deck, jumping on the miniature trampoline, and books. So many books. One day, I remember sitting at that gray-tile counter, flipping through a book about colors—it had a parrot in painting coveralls—and my eyes settled on the purple page. I can’t even remember the drawings on the page, but I remember being drawn to that color.

That’s my favorite color, I decided. And it’s stayed that way ever since.

There’s a picture of me taken in 1996—I’m pretty sure you took it—where I’m sitting at the kitchen counter with the colorful dough pad before me, busily cutting some paper for an activity with pink kiddie scissors. There’s an open box of Crayola markers in front of me, so I had a choice of colors to use for whatever project it was. However, only one marker is beside me, easily within reach, the one I chose for my project.

The purple one.

The ribbon to show support for Alzheimer’s disease is purple. The Alzheimer’s Association rallies individuals to #GoPurple and share #MyAlzStory in order to raise awareness on how to #ENDALZ. According to them, June is Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness month, and even lists a variety of celebrities who have shown their support by wearing purple shirts.

This connection to the color purple wouldn’t come back to haunt me until many years later, after you were diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. For all the time before, purple was simply my favorite color, and you, Aunt Pat, were simply one of my favorite people.

You were so incredibly bright. That's the word I think of when I think of you: *bright*. Your blue eyes, your smile, your laugh, your humor. I have a long list of important reasons why I miss you, one of them being that you and your husband Uncle Maurie let my dad, your nephew, live with you for a short while after my parents divorced and he figured out what to do next. It was a kindness he never forgot, and he was always grateful to you.

But truth be told, it's the little things I miss the most.

For starters, I miss your fun, silly phrases. Whenever I told some ridiculous, but hilarious story to you, you'd say, "Oh, what a riot!" If one of my sisters or I rolled the dice and got ahead of you on a board game, or if we snagged a card from you in Go Fish, you'd praise our craftiness with, "Oh, you're such a fox!"

I miss how you used to call the freezer the "ice box." And how you would pronounce "orange" as *ah-range*, and my sisters and I would say, "Aunt Pat, it's not *ah*-range, it's *or*-ange!" I think it was a bit of your Irish ancestry coming through, since you were raised with family who still had the accent.

I miss how, whenever we went swimming in your pool, you never got your hair wet. You only dog paddled around the pool. You refused to duck your head under the surface, and always scolded my sisters and me when we would playfully splash water at you, though I don't think we ever worked up the courage to soak you entirely. I could never understand it—I was getting my hair wet. What was the big deal? I realize now it's probably because you didn't want to have to restyle your ash blonde hair. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you with wet hair. Maybe you didn't like the way your hair looked when it was wet.

I miss how you used to lay me down for a nap, so that you could watch *Days of Our Lives*, and got annoyed whenever I got up, insisting to you that I wasn't tired. It was probably

because you believed the show wasn't very kid-friendly. You firmly sent me back to bed, and I would listen to the muffled sounds of characters getting betrayed and scandalized. I could tell by the music. *He cheated on her? How dare he! What is cheating?*

But mostly, I miss reading books at your house. You, who gave me the gift of words, fostered this love of books by having so many on hand for my sisters, cousins, and me to read. Reading was something you valued, too. As a child, you often went over to you Aunt Bertha's house next door to read, but told your mother you were going to sew, since your mother saw reading as a waste of time.

At your house, reading was not a waste of time. There were fun stories about animals, and a few written by Roald Dahl. *The Magic Finger* and *The Twits* were a couple favorites of mine. After a flurry of games, activities, swimming, and walking, it was so nice to retreat to one of the spare bedrooms, pull a book off the shelf, curl up on the bed, and read. Whenever I did, you always gave me space by doing some household chores or watching *Days of Our Lives* again.

We had a routine. I assumed that this is how it would always be. It never occurred to me that someday, it all would end.

It developed slowly. It was barely noticeable; diagnosing Alzheimer and dementia patients is hard, because forgetfulness is commonplace for everyone, it's easy to hide, and to forgive. There is no single test that proves a patient has Alzheimer's or other dementias. It often consists of several medical examinations over time, and the Alzheimer's Association reports that there's still only a 90-percent accuracy in diagnosis with a highly skilled physician.

Your daughter Terry says it was around 2014 when you were technically diagnosed with a psychiatric exam, but how long had you had it by then? Had the trauma from your bad car accident in 2010 triggered the disease? Was it developing even before then, the plaque protein called amyloid-beta slowly building up in your brain? Did you inherit APOE-e4, the risk gene that increases the likelihood of getting Alzheimer's? The APOE-e4 version of the gene, according to a study conducted at Washington University of Medicine in St. Louis with mice, makes amyloid-beta at the same rate and amount as other genes, but doesn't clear the protein as well as the other genes. They didn't know why. Seven years after the study was conducted, I'm not sure they know yet.

If you had it, maybe my grandfather had it, too. Maybe he passed it on to my father, and maybe he then passed it on to me. Knowing Alzheimer's can run in the family medical history has made me a bit of a hypochondriac. Every time I get a headache, every time I forget someone's name or lose track of what I'm doing, I wonder: is it Alzheimer's? Is the plaque building up in my brain now? Should I eat less sugar, and more avocados and extra virgin olive oil? Terry began to stir coconut oil in her black coffee every morning to stave the disease off, until a study showed coconut isn't one of the "good" fats for preventing Alzheimer's.

I could be tested to see if I have the gene. Having the gene doesn't necessarily guarantee I'll get Alzheimer's, too, but the risk will be there. Did I inherit the gene? Do I want to know if I did?

Did you tell yourself you didn't have it, as your mother before you did, because you wanted to believe you were fine? Your mother never had an exact diagnosis, either, since it was the late nineties in a rural area, and we just didn't have services for it yet, aside from elderly care. She was forgetful, though, and often accused family members of stealing her wallet.

Women are more prone to develop Alzheimer's than men. Terry has a theory: it's because women multitask more than men. Perhaps the multitasking eventually tires the brain, causing it to short circuit.

When it began to show with you, however, you had a couple significant symptoms. Socializing began to exhaust you, when before you had always been the first to arrive at a party and the last to leave. You also struggled to balance your checkbook when Uncle Maurie couldn't do it anymore due to his poor eyesight. Neither of you were driving anymore.

As the progression of the disease became more apparent and we all began to accept this change in you, you somehow made it funny. Even then, you didn't laugh any less. In fact, I never saw you become angry, which is common in Alzheimer's. You did become withdrawn at times, but you had many good days, and shared many good memories with everyone as they popped into your mind.

Whenever you had a small moment of forgetfulness, you'd just look me dead square in the eye, grin and say, "My goofy brain!"

And we'd laugh. *Ha ha ha, silly Alzheimer's!*

It seems morbid, but in times like that, laughter really is the best medicine.

One night, your husband Uncle Maurie heard some thumping coming from your room. He carefully shuffled his way across the house—he was practically blind due to macular degeneration and wasn't moving very swiftly then—and down the hall to your room, where he found you on all fours, banging your fist against the carpeted floor.

Incredulous, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to figure out where I am," you replied matter-of-factly.

When Terry told me this story, I said, “Well, you have to admit, it’s pretty impressive she can still get down on all fours at her age.”

We stared at each other for one quiet moment, then busted out laughing. I don’t know why it was so funny, but probably because it was true. How could one’s brain forget the house they lived in for twenty or more years, yet the body it controlled still managed to bend and squat like that? It *was* impressive.

I didn’t like to say I was babysitting you, toward the end. Your Alzheimer’s had progressed quite a bit by the time Uncle Maurie passed away. Your daughter Terry stayed with you whenever possible, but she couldn’t be there all the time. We took turns hanging out with you for the day. And really, for the most part, you were still functioning fine, just forgetful. I was just there to make sure you weren’t alone and didn’t wander off.

The mornings always started off good and active. You’d take me on your morning walk around the neighborhood, chatting happily the whole time. I would tell you about what I was doing on the ranch and of course, that sparked some memory still tucked away in your head, and you’d tell me the story a few times, and then we’d finally change the subject.

One day, we passed by a brick house at the top of a hill, just a few blocks from your house down below.

“We almost bought this house when we moved back here from Salinas,” you said with absolute clarity, a rare moment by then. It was still morning, however, when you were at your best. “We came back so I could take care of my mother.”

“When was that?” I asked. It was so foggy, this information. I felt like I should have already known it by heart, but I didn’t. How much of your life did I miss? How many times had I

driven past that house on my way to visit you without ever glancing at it? What if I had learned to read at the kitchen counter instead? I didn't ask these questions, though. I didn't want to overwhelm you.

"We had looked at the house we live in now, but Maurie didn't want it. He wanted this one instead." You waved a dismissive hand at it as we passed. "I didn't want this one."

"Why?"

"It didn't have a pool, like the other one did. But Maurie didn't pay any attention to me and put a down payment on this house instead." You sniffed indignantly. "That man never listened to me." The Alzheimer's made you more honest with me about your true feelings toward your late husband.

"So…how'd you get the other house?"

You grinned mischievously. "I told him I was coming up one weekend to stay with my mother, and he stayed in Salinas. While I was here, I went and told the realtor that we changed our minds and wanted the other house instead. They transferred the down payment to the one we have now. Maurie didn't find out until later and was furious." You shrugged and laughed. "I didn't care. I got my pool."

You always were a determined woman, Aunt Pat.

When we finished the loop and returned to the house you almost didn't buy but did, we went through the fence gate to go through the back door. I forgot we went through the gate and, out of habit from childhood, went to the front door. When I saw you head straight for the gate and look at me over your shoulder in confusion, I laughed at the irony that I forgot something, and you didn't.

Every time we went through the gate after our morning walk, we'd pass by Uncle Maurie's old boat. Terry hadn't sold it yet. You *tsked* your tongue and said, "Maurie just doesn't do anything with that boat!" Even after his death, he got on your nerves.

Then you'd look over at me very seriously, chin tilted down, blue eyes over the rim of your glasses, eyebrows raised and say, "He's gone, you know." Very matter-of-fact.

"Yeah, I know," I replied, shifting uncomfortably, avoiding your eyes. I came over the evening before he died to say good-bye. We weren't particularly close, but he was family. I didn't have much to say to him as I sat beside him in the hospital bed set up in his office, his favorite space in the house, and I left well before he passed away. *How long, Aunt Pat, before you were gone too?*

I shook my head. You weren't gone yet, I reminded myself. We still had time.

Terry prepared your house to sell for several years. She's gotten work done on it, hosted several yard sales, and told everyone in the family to take what they want.

I took a few books—not *The Magic Finger* or any other of the books I enjoyed as a kid. Not sure if you gave them away before, or someone else snagged them before me, but I didn't get them. It hurts my heart. I still have your A.D.D. kit and other teaching materials that I'm not sure I'll ever use. I took the Bundt cake pan, a dessert popular with my sisters and me. Some clothes from your closet that still smell like you.

Terry also gave me a tapestry your mother bought when she married your father in 1930. She found it rolled up in your closet, a family heirloom you wanted to keep but probably didn't know where to hang.

It was made in France and depicts a scene of French countryside family life: a peasant mother stands on her front steps, resting a basket on her hip and gazing lovingly at her family. The father sits on another basket and fixes his young toddler's toy boat. Their older son in rushing into the frame, proudly displaying the fish he caught with his net, which rests on his shoulder. Ducks, chickens, and a few cats peck and lay about their yard, enjoying the plush grass and sunshine. A windmill watches over them from the distance, its arms splayed and waiting for the wind.

When Terry saw it, she immediately thought of me and offered it to me. I fell in love with it as soon as I saw it, and once I was certain no one else wanted it more than me, I took it. I hung it behind my bed. Every time I look at it, I remember that family is a beautiful thing.

I couldn't bring myself to take much else. It felt greedy, in a way. Maybe I'm avoiding the inevitable. Maybe I'm afraid of change.

I've had a recurring dream about your house for most of my life. I'm not sure why. It's not my style, and it's not in my ideal area—I'd much prefer a place with several acres, where I can farm and have chickens and no neighbors. This place is the exact opposite of what I want.

I don't dream of my childhood home in Mokelumne Hill, or of the house your father built right down the road from where I grew up. I don't dream of the homes up in West Point, where my sisters and I lived with my mother's second husband (though, perhaps that's a good thing. I'm not sure if I want to relive those memories). I don't dream of either of my grandparent's houses, the one in tucked into the hills just outside of Paloma, or the one all the way down in the Imperial Valley desert on Shank Road.

Have those houses appeared in dreams before? Sure, they have. Not the way yours has, though, over and over again. Always a similar dream, always a bit altered and different from last time.

In this dream, I drive up to your house, weaving through the La Contenta neighborhood of houses. I walked through the front door, through the foyer, then turn left in the living room, right down the hall into your room. Then I head to your walk-in closet—which I've spent a rare amount of time in. All the way on the back wall, there's a door. On the other side of the door is a pet shop. I walk through the pet shop, where there's yet another door, which leads to a Chinese restaurant.

When I was a child, I dreamed of the pet shop bursting with puppies, kittens, turtles, fish, birds, snakes. Sometime when I was older, however, the pet shop became barren. Every time I entered, the shop once bursting with life became silent, cobwebs hanging from the empty cages. At some point, it seems, the pet shop went out of business. The Chinese restaurant remains busy on the other side.

I have never walked back through the other way. I always begin at the front of your house, walk through, then stop when I get to the Chinese restaurant, and the dream ends. I've never fully stepped into the restaurant and sat down to eat. Maybe someday I will.

I, to this day, have no idea what could have influenced that dream. I don't know what triggers it. You never had a lot of pets; Uncle Maurie had a dog named Trixie. That's it. I always wanted to ask you what you thought the dream meant. Maybe we would have just laughed at the oddity of it.

The brain is a funny organ. Where does it find the material for dreams from stories that aren't there?

As your Alzheimer's progressed, you soon developed a habit of making up stories, or at least stories you remembered as true, but apparently were not. One false memory you shared with me stands out the most.

It happened on a day during your last summer with us. We were up at our "cow camp" cabin in Bear Valley for our family reunion. Terry had brought you up to the fresh air, and you were just thrilled to see everybody. As we sat in our fold-up camp chairs around the fire pit, you held your three-month old great-grandniece, my older sister's daughter Paige, and you were so gentle with her. You gazed around at the teetering green pines and blue sky, happy to be there, proudly wearing your brown cowgirl boots. You wore them whenever you had the opportunity.

We were swapping stories and telling jokes, and you were inspired to share a funny memory about helping your brother and his wife—my grandmother—herd cattle in the mountains. One day, there was a calf that needed to be tied up, so it could be carried down the trail on the horse.

"Since we didn't have a rope, Eloise just hopped off her horse and tied the calf up with her bra!" You laughed at the memory and we did too, while my grandma looked on, mortified. "I don't think I've ever seen anything so funny in my life! I'll never forget it."

Later, when you were out of ear shot, my grandma told me in hushed undertones, "That never happened! I have *never*, in my *life*, used my *bra* to tie up a calf! I have no idea where she came up with that!" Other family members confirmed that it was, in fact, not a true story, but they just let you believe it was.

False memories are common in Alzheimer's. In an effort to understand just what was going on in your brain that made you produce such a scandalous false memory, I read a study

called *False Memories in Alzheimer's Disease: Intact Semantic Priming But Impaired Production of Critical Lures*.

In 2015, the University of Nantes in France conducted some research about how false memories are generated in Alzheimer's patients. They recruited twenty Alzheimer's patients from their clinical population and specialized care homes from the Nantes area, and eighteen older, but otherwise healthy adults to compare. With the patients consent, the researchers led the shuffling elders into a room one by one, sat down and tested them for forty-five minutes each. Perhaps the patients thought they were simply playing a card game?

They performed a Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) paradigm, which consists of presenting a list of words that has at least one critical lure, or similar word, to see if the tester would falsely recall it being in the list. For example, words listed could be, *bed, tired, moon, covers, pillows, pajamas, yawn*, with the critical lure being *sleep*, the word that ties all other listed words together, yet is not actually on the list itself. When asked to repeat what words they briefly read on the list, and the tester answered that *sleep* was on the list, they produced a false memory. Because the word is so familiar to the other words, its activation within the semantic network increases the familiarity to that word. The activation process then intervenes with the source monitoring process: the testers' brain can't pinpoint the source of the activation of the word, but still sense it's there, so they list it with the other words they read.

They also performed a lexical decision task, by presenting subjects with a list of words and "nonwords" that followed the rules of the given language, but weren't actually real words. The subject then indicated whether they thought the word is real or not. The analysis is based on reaction time and error rates.

Their first hypothesis was the activation of target items during the presentation of the DRM lists does not spread toward the critical lures, due either to a disturbance of the semantic network or to an attentional overload. Since the critical lures may not have been activated when the list of words was presented to them, the patients later couldn't recall them.

The second hypothesis was the activation of the critical lures are preserved in Alzheimer's patients, but that their mnemonic trace does not persist long enough in the memory to enable its later production due to an episodic memory decline.

The tests reminded me a bit of when you and I would sit cross-legged on the gray-blue carpeted living room floor, side by side, with several neat rows and columns of cards face down in front of us. On the opposite side, there were cute little illustrations of animals and the kind of food they ate. Flipping the cards over, not only did I have to memorize where the cards were placed, I had to correctly match the animals with their food. *Oh, the beaver. The beaver eats the aspen leaves. Where had I seen the card with the aspen leaves? Wasn't it in the lower left corner?*

"Oh, you're such a fox!" you'd say when I grabbed the correct card.

The Alzheimer's patients in the study weren't as foxy anymore. In the DRM task, they produced less critical lures—that is, they didn't state the critical lure words when asked—than the older unaffected patients. However, in the lexical decision task, their results indicated that both the group of Alzheimer's patients and healthy older adults activated the critical lures normally in the lexical decision task. This supported the activation-monitoring theory, according to which activation spreads from words of DRM lists to their critical lures during the presentation of the lists. They stated, "Even if it cannot be asserted that the semantic network of

our Alzheimer's patients is integrally preserved, our results suggest a preservation of the activation process in these patients as well as in healthy older adults."

The researchers felt that these results argued against the hypothesis of a nonactivation of critical lures due to difficulties in identifying the associative links between items in the DRM paradigm, but rather concurred with the hypothesis of activation and a rapid disappearance of the mnemonic trace of the critical lures in Alzheimer's patients due to episodic memory impairment. So, they probably do think of the critical lure, but simply can't "remember" the critical lure when asked the recall the words they saw listed.

So, maybe your false memory was a source-monitoring failure. Maybe you read some funny story about a cowgirl tying up a calf with her bra in a book or magazine, or maybe you saw it on TV. And at some point, when reading or hearing the story, it reminded you of my grandma. *Cows. Horses. Mountains. Rope. Bra.* But when you forgot the correct critical lure—perhaps it was the name of the character in the story—your impaired episodic memory reached for a name you did know: *Eloise*, your sister-in-law, the cowgirl.

I can't be certain of what exactly caused your false memories, though, and neither can the researchers; even they said more studies would be needed to explore this issue. There's so much, it seems, left to discover in the mind affected by the disease.

All in all, you handled the Alzheimer's well, and we shared so many laughs for a while more.

But I was right. There would come a time when the stories would stop, when the laughter would fade. When you would fully, truly, forget; your memories, true *or* false; who we were; who you were; how to function, how to live; everything.

After the summer ended, that time came.

It finally reached a point when you had to be moved to a home. Terry chose Foothill Village, a senior living facility in Angels Camp. It's a nice place. The craftsman style exterior is painted a calm sage green with off-white trim, and the immaculate interior is comprised of clean lines, an occasional gentle pop of color like warm peach, with a hint of rustic design to mask its medical background. It smelled good, too, though I can't pinpoint what the smells were. I will say it didn't smell like old people.

You weren't thrilled with the move, Terry told us, when she took you there after months of planning. It was one of the most difficult decisions she ever made in her life, and I know it weighed heavy on her heart to take you.

You kept your suitcase packed for a while and asked Terry often when you were going home. We weren't allowed to visit you for some time, because we had to let you adjust to the new living situation.

The transition, however, proved difficult for you. Despite your good care, your health declined rapidly. I only got to visit you twice. The first time, my sister and her two kids came along with me. You and the other residents were happy to see some curious toddlers poking around the visiting room, their big brown eyes taking in the people, and smiling when they smiled back.

I sat by you for a few moments, chatting with you. For once, you weren't very talkative. You seemed a bit more lost than usual, but pleased to see us, even though you couldn't quite place who we were.

I noticed your fingernails. They were painted a dark plum.

"I like your fingernails!" I said, hoping it didn't sound forced. "Purple is my favorite color."

"Thanks," you mumbled.

I lifted up my Sorel winter boots, checkered gray with lavender shoestrings. It was a stretch, since they weren't the same shade, but I went for it, anything to engage you in conversation. "They match my boots. See? My laces are also purple."

You brightened a bit at this. "I like those boots," you said.

"Me too. They're really comfortable and warm," I replied.

That's really the only part of the visit I remember, to be honest. I know it wasn't very long. I think you fell asleep shortly after we arrived, so we left. I pressed my lips against your downy hair, now completely white, your bright blue eyes closed in slumber.

My second visit was around Christmas. My dad, uncle, and I went together. This time, we went to your room, since you were in bed and couldn't be roused. We stood around awkwardly for a bit, struggling to think of something to talk about. My dad offered to read you the Christmas story about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, but you turned him down.

"Maybe some other time," you whispered. He complied, tucking his pocket Bible back into his jacket, but I could tell he was disappointed. It was his way of trying to get you in the Christmas spirit, to keep you involved, and your rejection was hard for him.

I tried a different approach.

"So, I got this book for Christmas," I said to you, holding it up to you to see. "It's all about raising beef cattle. And I need to read it, you know," I leaned in closer, grinning, "That way I know what I'm doing."

It worked. The corner of your thin lips lifted. You thought my joke was funny and I was relieved. My goal for the visit was achieved: to make you smile again.

We stayed a few more agonizing minutes, making awkward conversation, then left, feeling a bit deflated. The next time I saw you would be the last time I'd see you alive.

On January 7, 2016 we got a call from Terry saying, "This is it. It's time to say good-bye."

The Alzheimer's had caused your brain to deteriorate to the point where it lost the ability to control your most basic biological functions. This made you susceptible to infections, and the UTI you got just a few weeks prior was difficult for you to recover from. Your health declined rapidly after that, and your body began to shut down. The disease finally destroyed your goofy brain, and the rest of your organs followed.

So, Terry brought you to your childhood home in Mokelumne Hill. Your father built the house for your mother in the late 1920s before they married, and Terry lives there now. She knew that it was the place you wanted to be. My dad and sisters and I even lived there for a short while, several years after my parents divorced, when I was in my final years of elementary school. The previous tenant had moved out, so you again offered a place for my dad to stay when we needed one, always on the lookout for us.

For once, my dad, uncle, and I set aside our ranch work to go spend one more day with you. Many more family members showed up: aunts, cousins, my older sister and her two kids. Terry's two sisters weren't there, but that couldn't be helped. While we all knew death was coming that day, we didn't know when. One lived at the other end of the state and one lived out of state. Neither would make it in time. They called a lot throughout your last day, and Terry

placed the phone by your ear. Your two youngest grandkids would pipe through the phoneline, too, telling cheerful stories.

We all gathered around you lying on a medical bed, positioned so you could gaze out the large window over the sweeping green meadow out front. The living room was the largest room in the entire house, yet we were still crowded.

Hours passed, and the sun set over the hills, the outside world descending into darkness. Soon the meadow was no longer visible through the window, just the reflection of us surrounding you in the glass, a final family portrait.

And then we waited for you to die. We all said something that we hoped made you feel better. We all cried, even my uncle, whom I've never see cry. When it was my turn, I had my hand placed on your ankle on the foot of your bed. We all had our hands on you, anywhere there was space.

"Thanks for teaching me how to read," I finally mustered.

Then your son Martin called. I think the phone call was hard for him to make. A single tear rolled out of the corner of your eye at the sound of his voice. You were still in there, somewhere.

"That's why she held on for so long," Terry said. "She was waiting for Martin. She had to be."

As your breathing slowed, the door in the kitchen opened.

"Hello?" A female, French accent called out softly. A woman appeared, a caregiver sent to help Terry care for you. She took in our somber gathering, immediately understood what was happening, and quietly sat down in the corner, waiting with us.

Breath in. Breath out. Silence.

Breath in. Breath out. Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Your death was quiet. You faded away, ever so painstakingly slow. But that's Alzheimer's for you.

Through her tears, Terry asked the French caregiver, "What time?"

"Ten-oh-two," she replied gently, looking up from her documentation. *10:02 p.m*. The time imprinted on my brain, rolling in off her round accent, and I never forgot it.

I didn't cry. Instead, I sat down on the couch in a daze. I had never seen someone die before. Paired with the sadness was relief; sad my bright, funny great-aunt was gone, but relieved your suffering was over.

Sometimes I wondered if you scrambled around the inside of your mind, slamming your fists against the impenetrable walls of your disease, screaming to be let out. *Where am I? Why am I trapped in here?* You were too spirited to be confined to a box.

My dad, uncle, and I stayed the night with Terry. We didn't want her to be alone with you. We spent the day there, too, till she was ready to call the morgue. We watched movies together, as she sat holding your hand. It wasn't until afternoon that she called. I can still smell the hint of musty walnut your body began to give off throughout the day.

The nurse who came out was a sweet little thing with a gentle soul. As she moved you around to clean you, she spoke softly to you, saying things like, "Okay, I'm to lift your arm now." She was completely respectful of your body, even though it was lifeless.

After she was done, I noticed you still had polish on your finger nails. I found a cotton ball and some nail polish remover, and carefully took your hand in mine. As I pinched your

index finger to clean the nail, I noticed the polish was the same purple I saw the day I visited you just a few weeks ago.

And suddenly, I wasn't an early twenty-something cleaning my dead great-aunt's clammy finger nails. I was three-years-old again, sitting at your gray-tile kitchen counter. I was learning my colors, and my eyes zeroed in on the violet shade. And I very distinctly decided, *that's my favorite color.*

As I did, you traced the tip of your warm index finger on my back, spelling out my name. I giggled. *B-E-C-C-A*.

"That's your name," you said as you grinned at me, your freckled, wrinkled cheeks plumping up, your blue eyes thrilled with my bursts of laughter. You loved me. And how I loved you.

I blinked and I was back. I held your finger between my own, truly realizing what it had done for me. *The Magic Finger.* For the first time in twenty-four hours since your death, my eyes stung with tears.

It wasn't enough. After you had given me words and colors and knowledge, after all the times we laughed together till our sides hurt, with you saying, "Oh, you're such a riot!" or "Oh, you're such a fox!" After you and Uncle Maurie let my dad live with them a brief time when my parents divorced, after advocating for your students and your son for so many years, after *everything* you had done for me and my family, all I could offer you in the end was clean fingernails?

It wasn't enough and gone was the time I had to make it up to you.

I forced myself to get a grip. I had purple nail polish to remove. So, I brushed the tears away and did what I could.

So there I was, a Catholic at a Jewish wedding.

Well, sort of. I suppose the phrase would now be a Catholic at a Jewish funeral, but it was still slightly disorienting. You were Catholic, but I'm not, so the ceremony was both familiar and strange to me at the same time. Though my dad defected from the Catholicism, choosing instead to raise my sisters and I in a more nondenominational church, I had enough general knowledge of it to be able to stumble through the service. I had been to the Catholic church in Mokelumne Hill before as well. There were people I knew at your funeral, and people I didn't. I observed the stained-glass windows, just as I had as a kid, portraying the life and death of Jesus. How fitting for a funeral.

My uncle and I had ordered a bouquet of flowers, with a lavender ribbon that read *Beloved Aunt.* As they delivered the flowers, I peeked into your casket and grimaced. You didn't look like you. Your healthy peach glow was gone, replaced with a yellow, embalmed parlor. I think you would have liked what Terry picked out for you, though: a red floral western shirt with a brown suede vest. You were buried with your boots on.

Anyone who wanted to share something was welcome to. Terry shared your life story, and some of her favorite memories with you. My dad talked about you letting him live with you shortly after his divorce, and how much it helped him, a newly single father with three young daughters.

Next, my older sister Stacey told everyone how one day she wanted to sew a dress, and you instantly pulled out an easy pattern and leftover fabric, and by the end of the day, Stacey had a new dress you helped her make.

"That was the thing about Aunt Pat," she said, "She always let us believe we could do anything we set our minds to."

My younger sister Tori chose to share a story of how you never let us go swimming right after we ate, insisting we'd get a stomachache, and the congregation had a much-needed laugh. If there was anything you taught us, it was that laughter was good for the soul.

I hadn't prepared notes or anything, but I knew what I wanted to say. When the opportunity arose, I gathered my courage and stood, walking over to the podium before the funeral attendees.

"I'm Becca, one of Aunt Pat's grandnieces. When I was trying to think about what to say, I thought I'd say that my favorite color is purple."

I shared the story of deciding that purple was my favorite color while sitting at your kitchen counter, how you made learning fun and how much you cared about your students. Then I told them how cleaning the purple polish from your fingernails brought that memory back to me, and the realization of how much you really meant to me.

"This woman taught me so much," I concluded, "like she did for so many others. It was the least I could do, this final act of cleaning off that purple nail polish, for this woman who did so much for me.

"Purple, from now on, will be more than my favorite color, but will always tie me back to that moment with my Aunt Pat. I'm really blessed to have known her."

Stacey stood off to the side next to one of the stained-glass windows of the church, sobbing at my words. After I finished, I went over and held her.

At the gathering following the funeral, a distant relative came up to me. As she approached me, she gave me a funny look.

"I thought you dyed your hair purple!" she exclaimed.

Surprised, I shook my head. "No. What made you think that?"

"Well, when I saw you and Stacey hugging, I could have sworn your hair was purple!" She paused for a moment. "It must have been the light through the window."

I thought about it. "Maybe."

She smiled at me, struck with realization. "It was her. Aunt Pat was there with you."

Were you? Or was it just a coincidence? A trick of the light through the stained-glass window? The brain can make people see and do strange things, after all, so I can't know for sure.

However, I choose to believe you cast your spirit through the prism between here and there, to offer comfort and joy to me one last time, refracting purple.

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