



THE POWER OF MEMORY (OR LACK THEREOF)

AN ALZHEIMER'S TALE
STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHRISTY PIÑA

Four years ago, I began to lose one of my favorite people in the world. Today, she's gone. The ironic thing is, she's still here, but she might as well not be.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer's disease is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. It is the only top 10 cause of death that cannot be prevented, cured or even slowed. Almost six million Americans are living with it, and the rates are steadily rising. By 2050, as many as 14 million Americans may be living with this most common form of dementia. Every 65 seconds, someone across the country develops Alzheimer's.

All these scary statistics never occurred to me or to my family, until one day this was Tuta's reality, which in turn became our reality.

Tuta is my tia abuela (great aunt). She is my grandmother's sister on my mother's side, and she was my world as a little girl. She was the cool aunt who let me do whatever I wanted. We would have Dunkin' Donuts every morning down the street from her beach apartment. Come the afternoon, we'd have Chinese food for lunch and then again for dinner.

As a child, I had a list of whose favorite my brothers and I were. My eldest brother, Chris, was my grandma's favorite. My second older brother, David, was my mom's favorite. And I was Tuta's favorite.

Today, she barely even remembers who I am. Sadly, she barely remembers who any of us are.

She has been hospitalized a couple of times for falling because she forgets to step. Subsequently, she was Baker Acted because she was a danger to herself. Today, she cannot hold a conversation or walk around without a diaper. It is the saddest thing I've ever experienced in my life.

"I feel like she died when nobody was looking, so there's this weird in between space where I feel I'm not as sad as if she really did die because she died when I wasn't paying attention," David said. "Had she died in a car accident, I would've been sad, but because I wasn't in Miami when she got sick, I didn't witness her degradation. At this point I feel like we're just waiting for her to die because she's not there anymore anyway."

When we do try to hold a conversation with her, the most we get back is one-or two-word responses that usually consist of "no se," or "I don't know" in English. Her new word now is "envidiosa," which translates to envious.

The last genuine memory I have of her before she got extremely ill was my high school graduation. She still had her fiery red hair and her fashion sense, complements of careers at Macy's and Victoria's Secret. Soon after, she started losing

job after job because she wouldn't show up to work due to her forgetfulness. I'm about to graduate college, and it pains me to think that this time around she won't be there to watch me cross the stage, and she doesn't even know it.

"The natural course of Alzheimer's disease (AD) or disease progression is considerably variable amongst different individuals," local geriatrics doctor, Uma Suryadevara, wrote in an email. "In general, the average length of time from the onset of symptoms to being diagnosed is two to three years. From the onset of symptoms until death averages around 9 to 12 years. Prognostic prediction is especially hard in patients with Alzheimer's because cognitive decline over a six month or a year period does not predict the rate of decline at subsequent time interval."

Sometimes, the signs of memory loss are there, but we write it off as just aging. By the time we start to see an extreme difference, it may be too late.

"I guess my biggest shock came from seeing her go from the life of the party to somewhat subdued, and then by the time we started asking why she had gotten kind of calm and started doing the tests, it was shocking to find out it was more than just your typical memory loss," my dad, Alicia, said.

My mom, being the optimistic person that she is, turned to the positives of Alzheimer's or rather not necessarily of the disease itself, but how it changes the relationships people have with each other.

"It changed her," my mom, Nirma, said. "In a way it kind of calmed her down. Of course, how she was was awesome, but I saw a relationship between Ama (her sister) and her, in some weird way, even closer. It makes the people around her softer and more considerate, so it kind of has that power. It's very difficult to see the change in her, but I can't deny the good also because good can come from anything. I feel like she's at peace."

One of my friend's grandfather had severe Alzheimer's disease and it caused his personality to do a complete 180. He was always extremely serious and never really laughed or smiled very much when he was healthy. When he got sick and his Alzheimer's disease got really bad, he changed. He started to always laugh and smile and though you could no longer understand him when he spoke, he never stopped trying to get his sentences across.

While it's an extremely sad disease and there is no cure (yet), sometimes there is a positive side of it. Sometimes it can bring families closer. Sometimes it can cause a drastic change in personality that allows for the person diagnosed to be someone they never were and maybe deep down always wanted to be. Regardless, it comes with the price of knowing you're losing someone you've grown to love wholeheartedly.

"Although my great-aunt's Alzheimer's is somewhat surreal and certainly saddening, we still share moments of joy as we eat, talk, reminisce on great times, joke, laugh and, of course, we will always love her dearly," Chris said.

