Family Portrait

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"There she stands, alone in the world, a sad little gray haired woman with no past. No memories to guide her through a sea of unfamiliar faces. There is a ravenous beast loose inside her body, it grows stronger every day, feeding on the memories of the people she loves and cherishes. As the beast grows stronger, she grows weaker until one day, she will no longer exist."

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There she stands, alone in the world, a sad little gray haired woman with no past. No memories to guide her through a sea of unfamiliar faces. There is a ravenous beast loose inside her body, it grows stronger every day, feeding on the memories of the people she loves and cherishes. As the beast grows stronger, she grows weaker until one day, she will no longer exist.

Another man stands beside her; he says hello to his wife Mildred. She looks at him, confused and frustrated. She exclaims that her husband is a young man and has a full head of strawberry red hair. This man, standing in front of her, is old, overweight and has thin white hair. She points at her daughter and calls for her mother. The family tries to explain that her mother has been dead for years. She shakes her head, stubborn as ever, and asks for her boys. Another man steps before her. Mildred yells, this man before her is not her son. Where are her boys? She shouts at the strangers surrounding her. The family wonders if she is looking for the son who died many years ago. She replies forcefully, telling them she knows Andrew is dead. She wants to see her boys. Mildred only had two boys. The family wonders if she is searching for the young version of her grown son.

Now she holds her hand out to her granddaughter, a flicker of recognition. The granddaughter steps forward and grasps Mildred’s hand. Mildred pats her granddaughter’s hand as she has always done in the past. She looks at her granddaughter, fear, trust, hope for an answer in her eyes. She asks her granddaughter to tell her who these strangers are that stand before her. She looks sadly at Mildred and sighs, they are her family. Mildred shakes her head in disbelief. As a final effort to convince Mildred, her granddaughter points and tells Mildred who each person is. Slowly she turns to her granddaughter and calls for her. Her granddaughter sadly tells her, this house filled with pictures of relatives alive and long dead is her home.

A family, defeated, stands before Mildred. A woman they once knew as wife, mother, grandmother. She is just a shell of the woman she once was. A disease with no cure eating away at the memories of the people she loves and cherishes. The woman who was once the caretaker is now the one who needs to be taken care of. The woman who once was the teacher is now the one who needs to be taught over and over again. The woman who was once an integral part of the family before her is missing, gone, lost to the world forever.

Today is a bad day. Mildred does not recognize anyone or anything. She is living in a time long past, searching for the faces that existed back then. The family wishes for the good days. Those are the days when she recognizes her family and is able to communicate. The good days are the days she lives in the present and looks back to the past. The good days are the days the family regains hope, only to have it dashed again by a bad day.

The family stands together. They have hope for a cure. They know it will come too late for Mildred, but maybe not for them. The family lives in fear that
someday, this beast, this destroyer of memories may come to visit each of
them. One by one, slowly stealing their memories away.

--Kim Gurdziel