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2011 November Newsletter

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And then there's this loss...

It's weird, you know? I've been peripherally aware of Alzheimer's my whole life. I've known of people who've had it, but not anyone that I've personally known has been affected by it.

I remember thinking that I was so glad that I didn't have to worry about having to deal with it...oh, the confidence of youth! The knowledge that you and your loved ones are untouchable! I was not arrogant in my assurance, it was based on family history. After all, dad's maternal grandfather was sharp as a tack until his death at the age of 94; his daughter, my grandmother, is 98 and a half years old (halves become important once again...have you noticed this?) and also very mentally healthy.

I know that -- back then -- I would have felt awkward even talking to a member of a family whose loved one was suffering from Alzheimer's. I would have had no idea what they were dealing with...what it was like. What do you say?

Now I know. It's so hard to explain, so hard to make someone understand who doesn't know them or know what to look for. To a certain extent -- on good days -- it's a nuance thing. On other days, it's painfully obvious.

Mom and I have talked and it's truly like he's become someone we don't recognize, his tastes, his reactions. They'll go to a restaurant...a restaurant they've gone to for years...and he'll order things that he's never ordered, ignoring his most favorite menu items.

He's become obsessed with Carl's Jr. hamburgers. I can not remember a time my father ever went to Carl's Jr. Not once. Never. And now he goes several times a week! And he eats peanut butter and jam sandwiches constantly. Mom will offer to make dinner -- or when he was here, we'd have oodles of leftovers from Christmas meal -- and he'll decline because he either wants to or already has made himself a peanut butter sandwich. Sometimes a couple each day.

But for me, most of all, it's in the eyes. I saw a picture of Dad in June, last summer, at Callie's wedding. It was him, but it wasn't my daddy. His eyes are different; his smile has changed.

I went out looking to see if I could see when it started. I know when the strange behavior became marked: April of 2004 after he took the dinger off the top of the RV. But the fact that he took the dinger in the first place is indicative that something wasn't right.

His caution and intentional regard for safety is noted in the fact that he still has all 10 of his fingers despite life long interactions with a table saw and other dangerous tools. And yet he fell from a ladder...on his head.

Even before then, there were subtle changes in his ability to process information, but nothing so obvious that it caused any of us to wonder...in the early days.

But his eyes. When did he slip away? I looked back through my old photos...searching for it: the absence of the fire in his eyes. The mischief that was always lurking.

Now his eyes ask a question that not even he can find words for. But there's a hesitancy there, an uncertainty. There's no way to even know if he's noticed that he's leaving...quietly.

Written by Nicole Walters, Karan's sister.