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IT'S THE GOOD STUFF THAT GETS FROZEN IN YOUR BRAIN

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My WORD

I walked into my grandmother's room at the nursing home and was struck by the stark odor of urine and baby powder. As I sat there watching her sleep, I wondered at what point an odor becomes a stench. Up until now, I had associated the smell with babies and new life. Now, it represented dying.

When she awoke, I stared into eyes that stared back but no longer recognized me. Did she still recognize herself, I wondered. Maybe in her own mind she was still the young woman, called Artie, who boarded a train to move cross-country from West Virginia to California. Maybe she had somehow been able to freeze her brain in the most pleasant place of her life and just stay put.

Looking back, I think I saw some of the early signs of Alzheimer's disease in my grandmother. She began to let her gray grow in and didn't seem to care. Many times, she couldn't seem to find the right word when she was speaking. She was no longer interested in hopping into the car and going to Dairy Queen for a hot fudge sundae. I'd always eat the ice cream too fast and yell out "Freeze Brain."

I suspect that losing yourself doesn't happen all that quickly. Our everyday routines, which define who we are, are so in our faces that they risk being overlooked. They unravel imperceptibly like the thread that holds a button on your coat. We know the button is getting loose, but by the time we really pay attention to it, it's about to fall off, or has fallen off. If we're lucky, we have a spare sewn inside our coat. Many times, we have no spare, and we're stuck with the loss.

Soon after my grandmother moved into the nursing home, she began to withdraw from her surroundings. When she could no longer swallow, she was fed through a tube. During my last visit, I couldn't help but think that the tube was drawing the life out of my grandmother rather than providing nourishment. She looked like she had been sucked dry.

My family finally made the difficult decision to disconnect Artie's feeding tube. She died within a matter of days. We also decided to have an autopsy done on her brain to determine if she did in fact have Alzheimer's disease. It's the only way to know for sure. Her brain was refrigerated until the autopsy could be performed. I took some comfort in thinking that the brain freeze would keep her in that pleasant place I wanted to believe she'd recaptured when her life started to unravel.

I learned from the autopsy that Artie did in fact have Alzheimer's disease. But I learned much more. You eat the ice cream too fast because it tastes so good, and then you pay with the headache. But when it's over, you remember how good the ice cream tasted, not the headache. So you do the same thing again next time.

It's the good stuff that gets frozen in your brain. I will always remember Artie as she was before she got the disease. I have frozen her image as I want to remember her. I hope she was able to do the same during those years of losing her mind.

Memo: Susan Long lives in Winter Park.

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