

Car Rides with My Mamaw Throughout my Life

A Reflection on the Passing of Time



Ada Spears, May 2012 at Steele Creek Park in Bristol, TN

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Six months ago, June, 2015

On a sunny, Thursday afternoon, I'm picking up Mamaw at her house; I am twenty-one, and she is seventy-four.

I stepped out of the comfortably air conditioned car and took a deep breath of hot, dry, Bristol, Tennessee air in front of my Mamaw's small home. She's seventy-four now, and has lived in that house for twenty years, almost as long as I've been alive. The sun was right above my head, and I had to shield my eyes to see her standing there; my Mamaw, dressed in brown capris and a light pink shirt, smiled through the screen door and pushed it open. I could see from where I stood that her hair was almost non-existent. She had been losing her hair for the past few months, and we had no idea why. Patches of it were white and feathery on top of her head. She's gone to the doctor about it, but they don't know why either. I ran up the steps, skipping a few of them to get to her more quickly. I took her walker, jogged to the car, and slid it in the backseat as she tried to walk down the stairs by herself. I had been working a lot, so I hadn't seen her lately; the last time was about three weeks ago. It amazed me how she could look so much more frail and skinny in just three weeks. She had aged ten years in the past six months because of her second stroke; my family didn't know how much time we would have left with her.

"Don't do that without me!" I laughed, running up the stairs and grabbing her arm to help.

"I know," she mumbled. She winced a little with each step, determined to make it to the car. I knew she wished she could do it by herself: she could have done it a year ago. She held onto my arm as tight as she could, using me as a cane.



September, 2001

I am six years old, and Mamaw is driving the car down Volunteer Parkway in Bristol, TN. She's sixty-one years old.

I waited anxiously in the passenger seat of my Mamaw's 1983, white Volkswagen on a sunny morning. I remember it was early in the morning because I was excited I got to miss school. With my hands on my knees, I could see the golden arches from here, about half a mile away. I had been exceptionally good today at the doctor's office, so I knew what was coming. Mamaw put her blinker on, and slowly turned into the left lane.

"What are you thinking this time: vanilla or chocolate?"

I couldn't help but yell, "chocolate!" and smile widely up at her. We pulled up to the window and Mamaw ordered: "Two hamburgers and a vanilla and chocolate cone". At this point, my six year old self could barely keep from jumping through the roof of the car. We pulled up to the first window and Mamaw reached for her small, brown leather purse from the bench seat between us, and thumbed through a couple of one dollar bills. Her silver wristwatch reflected the sunlight; I looked up at her. Her hair was gray, pixie cut, and in big, beautiful curls. She had just gotten it done before she came and picked me up from dad's work. It always looked so soft.

As she handed the drive thru worker the money, I could barely breathe. From being excited, yes, but also because that's why I had gone to the doctor: I could never breathe. Most of my childhood I saw my hands aggressively shaking from all of the medicines I was on, and I could never go anywhere for more than a few hours without breathing treatments. I was a walking balloon from steroids that I had to take. I still have scarred lungs from having

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) as a baby. RSV is just a contagious virus that hits the respiratory tract, usually while a child is a baby. Most kids get better; it's like a bad cold. But my lungs never healed quite right. Mamaw never looked at me in pity though, or got upset for having to take me to the doctor. She would just tell me that it's an excuse for us to go get ice cream.

"Thank you" Mamaw said to the drive thru worker, and I reached up with both hands for my ice cream; we always ate the cones on the way home.

"Thank you for taking me to the doctor today, Mamaw." Mom always told me to thank her when she took me.

"You're welcome, sweetie," she smiled down at me. Her big, brown eyes were gentle and compassionate as we got back on the highway.

I looked at the individual strands of hair in her curls, and the second hand ticking slowly on her wristwatch as she drove down the road. Even at six years old, I made the conscious decision to remember everything in that moment, because I knew one day I might forget it.

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October, 2010

A Tuesday afternoon, with the rain drizzling slightly. I have just turned sixteen, and

Mamaw is seventy.

"I just don't think anyone is going to ask me. Everyone has already been asked by a guy and I haven't," I grumbled, coming up to a red light. I had just gotten my driver's license and Mamaw was picking me up in front of Tennessee High School at 2:45pm when she asked if I

wanted to drive home. She had gotten a new car since the '83 Volkswagen. She now had a bronze, four door, 2004 Hyundai. It was the first time I had ever drove her somewhere. I knew she wanted me to drive her because she wanted to see how I did, but I noticed the tiredness in her eyes as she asked.

“I never did want to go to prom” Mamaw added. I looked over at her, eye-level.

“You didn’t go to prom?”

She looked out the window: “He wouldn’t let us.”

I gazed at her somewhat awe-struck; I wasn’t expecting that response. I knew that she was probably talking about her dad, my great grandpa. I turned back to look out the windshield.

“Well, it’s probably not all it’s cracked up to be anyway” I shifted my eyes towards her, and she was smiling. She placed one hand on my knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. Her hands were paper thin; I could trace her blue veins all the way up to her elbow. I couldn’t do that a few years ago. As I drove down the Volunteer Parkway with Mamaw in the passenger seat, I thought about how things can’t ever stay the same. I looked at how we switched seats with me now driving her, and I felt...old. Not really old, I just didn’t feel like a little kid anymore. I was growing up, and she was growing older. Looking back on that day, although her arm was somewhat frail, her grip then was still firm.



Six months ago, June 2015-continued

She released her grasp of my arm as we reached the bottom of the staircase. I stood up straight from where I was bent down, almost carrying her. Mamaw stood about to my chest level

now. My family and I are all pretty short, but Mamaw now stands at about four foot seven; her back is hunched, with each bump of her spine noticeable through her thin, cotton shirt.

“Will you get the car door for me?” she looked up at me, quizzically. I was driving my mom’s silver, 2005 Toyota Corolla. I took a step, and opened the door as wide as it would go; her arthritis to the point where she cannot separate her fingers to grip things. Once I had Mamaw in the car I walked easily to the driver’s side and slid in.

About halfway down the road, Mamaw asked me whose car I was driving.

“It’s mom’s car, Mamaw, can’t you tell?” She didn’t say anything, embarrassed from not being able to recognize the car she’s rode in for years. I stole a glance at her. Her head didn’t reach the headrest, and she could barely see out the front windshield. With the windows rolled down, the wind breezed through the patches of her hair, separating strands so that I could see each one individually. Her arms like twigs were placed in her lap, and her fingers were fused together. Her small, brown leather purse was at her feet. She looked like a small child dressed like an adult.

“Hey, I got something for you,” I reached into the backseat with one hand on the steering wheel. I placed the gift in her lap, unwrapped. I kept my eyes on the road, but I heard her gasp.

“Oh, you got me one!” She quickly put her new straw hat on her head. It had a little brim all the way around it, and it sat right on top of her head. Mamaw used to hate hats, they would mess up her luscious curls, but she had been asking for one for the past couple of weeks.

“It looks so good, Mamaw, I’m going to have to get you some more.”

“I can start a collection, can’t I?” she chuckled. And she was back, joking and laughing with me like she used to. For the past six months lately, I mostly just answer questions.

Almost to the doctor’s office, we passed the McDonald’s sign. We both noticed it at the same time.

“Afterwards?” she asked hopefully, looking up at me.

I said yes, and she smiled gently and nodded.



Three months later, August, 2015

The Sunday evening before classes start at East Tennessee State University. I’m twenty-one, and

Mamaw is seventy-four.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything? I know I’m in Johnson City, but it’s only about thirty minutes away,” I lectured through my phone, heading down North Roan Street in my silver, 2008 Suzuki Forester. I flicked my eyes to the clock on the radio: 6:58pm. I heard her sigh.

“I’m okay, babe. You enjoy yourself at school,” And with that, I knew the conversation was over.

“Okay. I love you Mamaw.” She clicked her house phone off. I threw my phone in the empty passenger seat. I knew she’d never tell me she needed something, she wanted to take care of herself. But she wasn’t doing well, mom had told me about it. She began staying at my parent’s house in Bristol July of this summer; when I came to visit, I made her food, changed the channel for her, and some days I would brush her thin, frail hair. One day I asked: “Do you want

to go for a ride, Mamaw? Maybe get a cone?" She looked down at the hand-made quilt over her legs.

"No, I can't eat it." She wanted to, but she couldn't. Her hands couldn't hold the cone anymore because of her advancing arthritis. She couldn't even hold the remote. I walked over to her, and sat on the arm of the chair beside her. She looked up at me, and I down at her. She reached up to grip my hand, and I squeezed hard back. I pushed my fingers between hers, and locked our palms together.

And I thought about how unfair yet fair it is to take care of the person who took care of you. It's like we take turns helping each other in the stages of our lives so that we can have the same compassion one day. I thought about how I had grown up and experienced so much as I got older, but as she got older, experienced less each day. And as I turned into my apartment complex, I thought about how time is fiercely unrelenting; it does not slow, and it does not quicken; it is merely just consistent.