



Jimmy

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Once he had had a steady gaze, a head of jet black hair, and a long stride. He used to be a strong man with a lively sense of humor. He had run a wet laundry business and could carry his own weight in wet clothing. They called him 'Jimmy'.

My wife tells me he built the front porch on his home in Bradley Beach by himself. It was the same porch that held the weight of three generations of his family.

Other memories are no less remarkable. He used to come home to the Bronx from work and hug his children and tickle their cheeks with his whiskered chin. They would run from him with squeals of laughter.

After winning a battle with lung cancer, none of us thought anything could ever touch him again. He would remain the family's patriarch, a man both stern and ready to laugh. He would be the same man that grew melons the size of trucks in his backyard garden. He would always be the same man that built the porch that once held us all.

But something did come that he could not fight. Though it could not be weighed it would be the heaviest burden of his life. It stole his memory and long strides. He cannot remember the names of his children. His steps are mincing and a stroll down the block is a long journey fraught with the danger of falling. He tripped a couple of months ago and broke his hand, the same hand that once hammered, sawed, and hoed.

Every month the illness stealthily stole first the recent memories of the day and eventually the memories of the past hour, the last minute. Yet, some memories are stronger than others, stronger than the names of family, and stronger than flesh and bone.

Jimmy had a succession of powerboats. He loved to fish. The vitality of the ocean shore mirrored his own life.

A couple of summers ago we took him for a day sail. It was one of those seemingly timeless, unforgettable summer days on Long Island Sound with an open, cloudless azure sky. There was a good breeze, not enough for white caps but enough to put the lee rail in the water. We had a 23-foot, high aspect sloop that season. It reveled in the wind and would dip its lee rail in the water whenever the opportunity permitted. As much I love a boat that heels to leeward, he did not. The step from the boat launch to our sailboat was adventure enough. Any misstep would lead to a fall or dunking. And, when the boat dug its heels into the water and the water lapped at the lee rail, I saw some glimmer of fear in his eyes.

After that day sail, he always asked about sailing and the boat. 'Have you taken her out recently? Is the season already over? Is she out of the water? When can we go again?'

There is something about water that binds us to it. Maybe it is the salt that flows through our veins. Maybe the water and wind remind us that there can be great beauty in the world, a beauty that is timeless and wordless. Sometimes illness or those other challenges that life presents us takes us away from that beauty, but it is still there nonetheless.

Jimmy often cannot remember his daughter's name. He cannot understand the disease that has robbed his higher cognitive faculties. Yet, he remembers the boat, the wind, and the water.

This last summer we got a more mild mannered boat, a Capri 18. To quote a neighbor, it is as cute as a button. Its relatively higher freeboard makes for a dry ride. Its lifelines are reassuring. The size of it is right for our purposes. Jimmy is always within reach. If need be, I can moor the boat by myself while my wife or one of my children keep a watch on him.

This last summer we went on another marvelous day sail. Jimmy did not know it was a different boat but that did not matter. We went to windward but the boat was confidently stiff. Jimmy sat high and dry and not one hint of fear ever crossed his brow. It all made for another day to remember on the water.

Funny, how we have all these words that people who do not sail find needlessly confusing, like port and starboard, leeward and windward, and tack and gibe. The words we use on the water are a lexicon all their own that most would find useless.

Jimmy does not know any of those words. If we told him he would not remember. When my son has the helm and asks 'Ready 'bout?' or 'Heading up?', the words mean nothing to Jimmy. Though he may not know the vocabulary, he knows the context. The wind and water need no explanation. The words can be defined and delineated in a dictionary, but what they mean to Jimmy is more fundamental, more tactile.

Alzheimer's has taken much from his mind but it can not erase Jimmy's memory of a sail on a fine summer day.