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Sunflower

By Hannah Moloney

June hasn't known her name for three years. I tell it to her every morning and call her June all day. She doesn't know my name either: Rodney. I take care of June, the love of my life.

Fifteen years ago she started to forget; we're getting old, we said, but really her brain was slowly failing. They said she was experiencing dimming cognitive abilities, like a soft light that hums and flickers when it is turned down low.

June sleeps in the bed we used to share, in the master bedroom at the end of the hall. I sleep in the room adjacent, right next door, so that if she gets up at night I can hear her walking, feeling around in the dark for the bathroom. June's small bare feet cause the wooden floor to creak with each step. She yells out, asking if there's anyone there. I'm there and since I don't sleep soundly, I meet her, and guide her through rooms that aren't familiar to her even under the harsh lights overhead.

Many nights June wakes up crying, the wrinkles on her face like riverbeds flooding. On these nights she realizes that she doesn't remember, and all I can do is tell her I'm Rodney, her husband, that I love her, and that I am there.

June and I have a bloodhound. His name is Shakespeare and he mostly sleeps on the floor by June. Shakespeare is thirteen years old and has a face like he never grew into his brown furry skin. They told us he might be helpful, like a guide dog, for when June gets angry or lost.

June and I met when we were older, older than our friends were when they met their husbands or wives and settled down. June and I didn't find each other; we weren't looking. We just let each other in.

When we moved out of the city and into our home, I had to duck under the doorways; June could walk under any limbo stick. She was loud and funny and never minded that I didn't have much to say. June always had a big group of friends-- women who would read the same books, gossip and have each other over for lunch. Together they would chat for hours in the living room, her glorious loud laugh echoing through the house. As the years passed it became hard for June; she couldn't remember what they were talking about or how she knew them or, eventually, their names and faces. June would blush and stammer. She would get confused, apologize or cry, and then get up to leave. The ladies don't come around anymore.

Some days I go out to mow the lawn or tend to June's old flower garden. Shakespeare sniffs the dry ground around our little white house and circles me before finding a spot on which to lie down in the shade of our oak tree. I wipe the sweat dripping down my nearly bald head with the back of my arm and pick flowers to put in a vase next to June. I tend to the yard and to her sunflowers because she

used to. If June could remember how she loved the flowers and the yard, my name and who I was, she would say something like: Hop to it, Rodney! The flowers need some love!

June was once invited into a promising clinical trial. That was seven years ago, back when she knew and she said no; she didn't want to fly to Washington, D.C. to be poked and prodded. She was a good candidate, they said; she exhibited a variety of symptoms and was otherwise in good health. I could tell she was embarrassed, scared. "What do we have to lose?" I asked her, blind for a moment to her losing her memories, and by the light of hope. "We'll save the money for the flights." She shook her head quietly and turned away from me to climb the stairs.

I found June out in the street one morning. I had woken up early to take a shower. I checked on June in her room down the hall. She was sleeping, her round moon face in the sunlight of the open window. I left her there.

When I was clean and dressed, I looked for her and she was gone. I shouted for June, hoping she remembered her name or me. My heart hurt. I ran through the house as fast as my old skinny legs would let me move them. I panted and fought for air. In the backyard Shakespeare barked; he was panting too. Past the front gate I saw her, walking down the paved road in her white floral nightgown, a beacon of sunlight. She told me she was going for a walk.

"Let's go home," I said.

"Is it far?" she asked. "I'm very tired."

Even then I thought I could care for June.

I pack a suitcase with June's few belongings. I fold her soft pink and blue shirts and long linen skirts into small uniform squares and gather up her calendar, her vase, her quilt and a few of our photographs.

June sits quietly in her wheelchair on the front porch looking at the sky and the trees and the houses beyond our fence. In the last year she had become less stable. She pats Shakespeare on the head; he can sit next to her like that for hours. June doesn't say anything and doesn't notice as I walk up to the open front door behind her. I sigh deeply and look at her for a moment. June is 81 years old and beautiful, her white silver hair curls in a ponytail down her back.

"We're going on a vacation today," I tell her. She doesn't hear me through the thoughts drifting idly across her mind. "What do you think about that?"

"Hmm?" June turns and lifts her face to meet my eyes, "Why?"

I walk over to her and place my hand gently on her skinny shoulder; she doesn't shrug away from me now. "It will be great; we need a vacation. The hotel is nice; you'll have your own room with a view of the lake. And we can bring your things to make it feel like home. There are people there just to take care of you." I wring my hands as I recite this speech.

"Alright... let's go," says June, as she looks back into the sky over her sunflowers.

I lift my frail and darling wife up into the passenger seat of my pickup truck. I fiddle with the black metal frame of her folding wheelchair and place it in the truck's bed with her luggage. June asks me again where we're going and I remind her. She's not scared or anxious and for that I am grateful.

June will die there, in a home for people with dementia or Alzheimer's, under the care of strangers who will tell her her name and care for her. I will go back to our home for now and tend to her flowers. I'll kneel on my old knobby knees in the dirt in her garden and dig up long wet earthworms and summer cicadas buried in their exoskeletons. I'll turn the rusty faucet of the long green hose and water her flowers until the earth at their roots cannot drink any more. I'll watch as her heliotropes turn their silky yellow and brown faces to the sun. Everything I do, I do for June.