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Four minutes if I got lucky with the traffic lights. That's how long it took me to get from my house to my grandparents. As a child their home was an extension of mine. I hated playing sports, but my grandpa still showed up to every single low-level sports game my parents dragged me to. My grandma, she was my favorite phone call of each day, we had a strange dependency on each other. I often think it was because, as she claims, "we share a brain". Referring to our similar anxiety diagnoses'. The dreadful trips to Florida we shared together really brought us together. Dreadful is not the normal word I would use to phrase a vacation. But, on these trips we just sat and watched my great-grandfather lose a little bit of liveliness each time.

Saturday afternoon, usually around 12:15 the convertible would arrive in my driveway. My grandpa would get out, greet the family, and then take my brother and I out for lunch. It wasn't just about going for lunch, it was the routine. As the years went on, lunch got different. I mean, yeah when I was five I ordered chicken fingers and fries. Differently, at seventeen I was more interested in avocado toast. But, these weren't the changes that bothered me. Conversations once were about my favorite activity at recess or my fascination with nickelodeon star, Sam Puckett's, infamous butter sock. Now, conversation topics have changed, revolving around births, deaths, illness, and divorce.

I've always considered myself the "favorite" grandchild. It started as a joke, but now growing older, I think it is a fact. The birth of Ryder, my cousin 13 years younger than me, sprung on many new emotions. A baby in the NICU during covid meant one thing. My grandparents had to choose. Expose themselves to children filled with school germs or meet their new grandchild. As a selfish teenager, I was livid. I always thought everything was about my

brother and I, because to be fair, it always had been. This time staying connected with my already technologically challenged grandparents was a struggle. My grandpa used to share this quote to anyone who would listen, “If you put your problems in a pot you would pull them right back out.” This is something that later became extremely prevalent in my life.

Happy and healthy is all you could pray for your baby to be. My cousin was just that, so back to lunch we went. The leather seats at the diner booth felt the same, chicken noodle soup still the same too. But, once again, a change in conversation. This time, awful, lump-in-throat bad. My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Covid than this diagnosis, my teenage self was begging for normalcy. All my friends were going to football games and parties to enjoy their first fall as high school students. Yeah, I was physically there too, but mentally I was all over the place. I struggled to put into perspective that I was able to have fun with my friends while at the same time my mom was recovering from intense surgeries in bed. I chose to stay home a lot, I hated every moment of it, but I wanted to be there for my mom. Surgery, recovery, surgery, recovery. That was the pattern that my life felt like that year. My mom could no longer cook for us, so I was just eating take-out or my dad's inedible cooking. Yes, I was so lucky to have food on the table during this rough time. Though, as a selfish teenager, I just wanted my mom to be back to normal. I ran away a lot during this time. I left the house, called my grandpa, and went to their home. My house was filled with stress and their home was quiet and peaceful. Thankfully, my mom got better, but this wasn't the end of my dreadful road.

I've always worried about what's next in life. So, as a junior in high school I dragged my family on college visits. For some strange reason, my dad didn't want to come on the long weekend trip to Miami. It was weird, but I wanted to see the school, that's all my selfish brain cared about. Sightseeing, beach time, fancy dinners filled the long weekend with endless laughs

with my brother, mom, and I. Until I had a dream. A weird dream that my parents got divorced. It felt really accurate, it was weird, and to be honest haunted my brain for months. I was embarrassed to tell my mom about it when I woke up. I kept it to myself, with a weird pit in my stomach. After a long flight, I finally made it back to my bed. I woke up and immediately felt uneasy as my dad walked into my room. He was crying and tensions were high. "My job scammed me, I wasn't making my salary for the past 5 months, and worse I lied about it." Okay, this was weird. I just had a dream about my parents getting divorced and now my dad is openly saying he lied to my mom. I cried, bawled actually, this felt fake. I needed an escape, so obviously, to my grandparents I went.

As time went on, my family felt broken, I was so confused. We all lived under one roof and ate dinner together as much as possible. That's just the outer layer of what a family is made up of. The bond, trust, and love was gone, I wasn't told that but it was a sensation. That house I grew up in, all the memories shared, it simply no longer felt like home. The worst part, I was nosey, wanting to know everything. After digging through my mom's things and text messages, I found nothing. Time went by and still nothing except a feeling inside of me. Her life360 location was suddenly shut off in my family circle. What was going on was a constant question circling back and forth in my head. This only led me to snoop more. Days went by, nothing. My curious and confused brain could not handle it. It was about time, I overheard my mom on the phone with her friend, "I just can't love him anymore." Tears flooded my eyes and rolled down my face. Inside of me I knew this was coming, but now it was real, my biggest fear.

Lunch again, now this time the Nordstrom Cafe. An interesting choice as it wasn't a regular place for my grandfather and I. My caesar salad was okay, I was more happy about all the things he had bought me earlier in the day. He's always been generous but this day, whatever I

wanted I got. Our lunch together began with casual chatter. Common questions like “How’s school?” and “Any fun plans this weekend with your friends?”. He finally built up the courage to ask how everything was going at home. I opened up. I hadn’t told anyone about how I was feeling, it was all bottled up inside of me. I said “Awful, honestly. I know this situation isn’t going to end well”. When he asked why I felt this way, I knew I had to share what I had heard. Finally, I cracked someone, he gave in to my curiosity and fear. He didn’t deny it and actually, he slightly admitted it. I’ll never forget him saying “This isn’t going to work out the way you may wish, but no matter what Gigi and I are here for you”. These words were my security blanket throughout the whole divorce. This divorce was so hard on me, how could my childhood just change overnight one year before graduating. I couldn’t grasp reality.

My plethora of hardships would often be kept inside to handle on my own. If it weren’t for my grandparents, I would have spiraled out of control. So, waking up for my first day of senior year, my dad wasn’t home. Followed by him not being home for late night pickups, casual weeknight dinners, and everything else that was once part of my “routine”. I was lonely and my house no longer felt like home. So, as per usual, I escaped to my grandparents. Their house felt like home and never changed. I didn’t need to worry about anything there, but all I wanted was my house to feel like home again. I truly never thought it would. One random day scrolling on TikTok made my house feel like home. That may sound weird and not true. But, that runt of the litter mini goldendoodle on my for you page saved my family. The three of us was never an accurate number to describe my family. The number would always be four. Cali came into my life after begging, and ultimately my grandpa convinced my mom and got me the dog. The divorce broke us, but this puppy brought us together, my mom, brother and I needed her. Thanks to my grandparents, they made my crazy life stable, no matter what. Any hardship I encountered

they solved the situation. They never failed to show up for me. There's no specific moment that was pivotal, because my entire childhood growing up beside them changed me, influenced me in the best way, to someday be like them.