Sometimes, I get a whiff of my Papy. It usually happens in office buildings or shopping malls, where old men wear old man cologne to try to cover their old man smell, but it never really works. His scent changed as I got older, as we both got older and he stopped wearing cologne and eating so much meat and mingling his fragrance with America. The newer scent was more natural, more him; it perfumed his desk and his study, even when he wasn't able to climb the steps to get there.

Today, the odor of a beach, not a man, brings the memories.

A different ocean is the same. The slimy green and brown plants on San Luis Obispo's Avila Beach smell like the seaweed we found in Mamie and Papy's Northern France backyard, after it soared over the five-story house in a storm-fueled super wave. My sister Sandrine and I talk, laugh, try not to feel old. We remember the electric shutters on the windows that kept them from shattering. We remember Papy singing in tune to the thunderclaps and crashing water. We remember Papy.

December 24, 2003. He and Mamie, my only complete set of grandparents, are visiting from France, which means putting on our best of-course-we-go-to-church-every-week faces and trying not to act like the obligatory Easter and Christmas parishioners we are becoming. We opt for midnight mass, so Christmas festivities can begin early the next morning. We pass three Christmas tree lots and four Salvation Army Santas on the way to Christ the King. Our house's smell of pine saturates our skin and follows us into the car; I can't smell Papy. We park at the Italian restaurant down the street. While everyone bundles, Papy gasps and points at my chest. When I look down, he flicks my nose and crouches as I giggle. "Joyeux Noël," he says.

"Joyeux Noël?" I repeat.

"Très bien!" He kisses both my cheeks.

We are on time, early even, but the church is packed. We find a little space on the end of one pew for Papy—he is old and heavy and would have trouble standing for two hours. The rest of us—parents, sister, Mamie, and I—find space to stand at the back.
Mass begins. Thank you all for being here today, on the Eve of our great lord and savior's birthday, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, John 2:17, etc. The crucified Jesus hanging behind the priest is draped in red and illuminated by gold. The parishioners join in with the choir, *Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.*

I sit down, stand up, sit down roll onto my back and it's okay because I'm eight. I think about the peppermint sticks and hot chocolate they'll have after church, and maybe cookies last year they had cookies but I wish I had another jacket it's so cold and it'll be colder then late how long have we been here? Must be an hour already oh I can see Mommy's watch stop moving hmmm is that 12... 12:20? Only? Well at least we'll get the bread stuff soon and why is Sandrine poking me what do you--

"Yves!" My dad yells his father's name and rushes to the pew, where his dad's face is red and twisted and his arm smacks lightly against the wooden bench. The people around us stare but the whole ordeal is quiet enough that mass continues, undisturbed. A man helps my dad carry Papy out to our minivan, where he slumps in the back, gasping.

"Stay with Mamie, girls, I'll be back soon." Mommy doesn't even kiss us goodbye before she gets in the car, and Papa speeds away toward the Martinez emergency room. We ask Mamie what's happening, is he okay, when will they be back. She worked as a nanny in England so she can actually talk to us, communicate with more than a wink and a laugh like Papy, but not tonight. "Je ne sais pas mes filles." She kisses all four of our cheeks and takes our hands. "Let's go inside."

The minivan returns an hour later, just before mass ends. Mommy is alone.

At home we pray, get in bed, pretend to sleep. We hear the garage door open late, too late, who knows when, but when we get up Papa and Mamie are gone. "Papa will be back soon," Mommy tells us, "Mamie wanted to see Papy."

We wait. We eat. We put on the jolly Christmas music that now sounds eerie, foreboding. Papa returns and slumps in a chair, lets his hat fall off his head and breathes loudly. We attack him with the questions we've been repeating, what happened, is he okay, where is he?
He says words we don't understand, stroke and arteries and blood clots. Mommy nods as if it makes sense.

So what does it mean, when is he coming back, is he okay? Is he okay? Is he okay?

"He's going to be okay. He'll come home soon. They just want to keep him in the hospital for a little longer." He sits up quickly and widens his red, sunken eyes. "Do you girls want to open your presents? It looks like Santa came!"

We're appalled, we're flabbergasted, we're crying. "No, we want to wait until Mamie and Papy get back."

He slumps back down and nods, letting his eyes close.

Mommy's turn to ask questions. How was he acting? How did he look? What did the doctors say?

Papa's voice is grave. "He can't, ah, I can't believe it. He can't think of words."

"In French?"

He nods. "I would hold up keys and ask, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est Papa?' What is this? And he would do this [he makes the motion of turning a key in an ignition] and say, 'Mais oui, bien sur bien sur! C'est uhh,' but he couldn't tell me what it was called. Same thing with a pen, he made the motion of writing but when I asked him, 'No Papa, what's it called?' he just shook his head."

Nine years later I learn about Broca's area in an AP Psychology class. I learn that this region in the frontal lobe of the dominant hemisphere of the brain is linked to speech production. That if you damage this area and develop a condition called Broca's aphasia, you cannot express yourself through written or spoken language. That people with Broca's aphasia usually grasp what is being said and know what they want to say, but can't get it out. Years of watching my grandfather's eyes contort from comprehension, beg for our understanding when he mashed vowel sounds and throaty hums into potential sentences, finally makes sense. I share the knowledge with my dad after school and though nothing changes, the definition gives us strength.
Today, we are ignorant.

My parents have been talking. "It's okay, she has our number."

"But what if she—"

"It's okay."

"I should start on lunch. They'll be hungry."

"They'll eat."

"What about you? And the girls? You must be—"

Papa takes Mommy in his arms.

"Sit, babe." She slumps now, her face in her hands. "I don't think they'll be coming back soon. Here, I mean, America."

"Why? Flying? The hospital?"

Papa laughs—surprising, unsettling in its sincerity. "He was so frustrated." Doctors make the worst patients, my dad loves to say, and Yves has been a doctor his whole life. "He was pulling tubes out of his arms and rewrapping his own bandages. Once he even got up and tried to walk out when the nurses left! And of course I was translating everything, and when I was talking to the doctors he would give me this look—" Another real, lean-back pat-his-belly laugh. "And he would say something like—"

He looks at my sister and me, "Well, I would just tell him, 'Non Papa I'm not going to translate that.'"

They get back in the afternoon, Papa and his parents. We squeal and jump and everybody kisses everybody's cheeks. Christmas as usual, presents food games be merry. Papy maybe talks less, maybe walks slower and yawns more but he is him.

They change their flight, leave the next day. We wave at the terminal, expecting them to return in six months like every six months since we were born. They do not come back. They stay in France, close to his doctors and his home and his language.

The call comes one, maybe two years later. It doesn't matter. I track it only as before, and after. Before the wheelchair, and after. After the change in diet, communication, movement, and before.
Another stroke. This time he is paralyzed on his left side and cannot speak. At all. But he can understand, he understands, you can tell by the depth of his eyes and the sounds he makes when Mamie tells him we are coming to visit. On the phone, she tells him so we can hear too. You can tell by the smile on the half of his face that he controls when we tell him we love him.

On Avila Beach in San Luis Obispo in 2014, four years after Papy died in his sleep, we remember. We remember the year his speech therapist helped him relearn "Joy-eux ann-i-ver-saire" for my dad's birthday. We remember how he would insist on another glass, through gestures, even though he was not supposed to drink on his heart-healthy diet. We remember how he would roll his eyes, and kiss our hands, and speak without words.

Lying on the beach, sandy and sunburned, tethered by our conversation, I learn that my memories are incomplete. Sandrine tells me there's something else, something I don't know. "Mommy hasn't told you this yet, I think. She just told me a couple years ago. But you know how were a really stressed out kid? Like you were so concerned about everything."

"Yeah." Perfectionist, I call it. Worrywart, someone else might.

"And you had that teacher, what was her name? Mary--"

"Mrs. Crothers."

"Right. Well she and Mommy were close you know, cause she worked in the class all the time, and they were really worried about you. Cause it was every little thing, like if you got something wrong on a test or messed up on an art project. You were so unhappy--"

"That's not true," I object. "I was happy. I was just anxious."

"Okay, whatever. You seemed unhappy. And you got those stomach aches all the time. Well, apparently they were talking about bringing you to therapy, trying to get you help. And they were gonna talk to you about it after Winter break. But then—" Here, Sandrine's eyes fill with tears. Not an uncommon occurrence, but it makes my own throat tighten.
She swallows. "Then, Papy had his stroke. On Christmas. And apparently after you got back to school Mrs. Crothers asked Mommy, what did you do? And Mommy's like what are you talking about? And I guess you were like, a whole new person."

"What do you mean?"

"You were so relaxed. Like you weren't freaking out about pointless little things. I mean you still cared about school but it just, didn't matter as much."

"Hmmm."

"I know."

"I don't, I remember being stressed out and then not being stressed out but I don't remember when it happened. Or why."

"Well."

"Yeah."

I lower myself onto my elbows and look into the black center of the sun, a bad habit of mine. I wonder about my eight-year-old thoughts, if whatever I found then is still in me now. Was it the realization of death, learning that people who are here can become not here almost immediately? I might have just gotten distracted, my own mortality keeping me from fretting over multiplication problems. Or maybe I started breathing a little more consciously, since I learned how quickly the air can start to smell empty.

I want to ask Sandrine this, all this, I want to analyze and get her input and come to a conclusion. But words fail, so I take her hand.