

EIGHT STATES

About a year ago my wife, Katie, convinced herself she had early Alzheimer's. It's not out of the question since her mother died relatively young from complications of it. Katie's always been quirky, though, so it's hard for me to sort out what's Alzheimer's and what's just, well, her.

The issue at this particular time is that she wants the two of us to drive the back roads across the country, ending up in Oregon where she can get a doctor to help her kill herself. This makes me think dementia is playing a role, because even a six-year-old should be able to figure out why this idea does not appeal to me.

"Until the very, very end," she says, "it'll be a blast, just like your favorite movie, *Lost in America*." We're sitting on the couch, and I'm eating what's left of a Reese's Peanut Butter cup after Katie's nibbled the chocolate from around the edges. I flip off the TV she'd previously muted at a commercial and walk into the kitchen.

Besides the assisted-suicide thing, it's also unsettling that she doesn't recall my favorite movie is *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

I wonder if she remembers that in *Lost in America* Albert Brooks' idea of dropping out of society and RV'ing across the United States morphed immediately into a disaster. It was hilarious, but still.

She follows me into the kitchen.

"We can take your van and sleep in it," she says, like she's trying to coax an old dog outside in the rain. "We won't even spend money on hotels."

Our Ford Transit Connect works better as a cargo van than a sleeper. “I’d have to sleep with my knees in my chest.” Katie’s 5 feet 2; I’m 6, 1.

“Oh, come on, Joe.” She stands on her tiptoes and twists the hair above my earlobe. This is one of the things she does when she wants me to do what she wants to do. Maybe she’s never noticed that I do what she wants even when she doesn’t flirt. “We’ll take the tent for the nights when you want to stretch out.”

Our tent. It’s supposed to take five minutes to assemble but always takes us an hour.

Back in the day we used to camp all the time, but now the idea doesn’t appeal to me anymore. It’d never bothered me too much that I’d wake up every morning with something stabbing me in a kidney, no matter how persuasive the message on the box of the blow-up mattress was, promising me that this would be the one that wouldn’t leak air overnight.

I’m 44, and Katie’s 11 years older than I am, so I’m not sure why she’s so enamored with the idea, except that since I’ve always weighed almost double what she does, she’d wake up suspended on air, my princess without the hint of a pea in her mattress.

I audibly exhale, and I guess Katie interprets hesitation or exasperation in it, even though it’s really a sigh of resignation. Her reasoning lumbers on. “I’m the one whose up like a jack-in-the-box at the slightest sound, Joe. I’m the one who’ll have trouble sleeping. Every night you’re snoring as soon as your head hits the pillow.”

She's right. And as luck would have it, I'm not working right now. I'm a professor at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, and I don't have any responsibilities this summer.

Katie quit her job as a librarian last month, in May. She claimed she had become so disorganized that she had to leave before they fired her. I certainly don't believe that, but I chose not to pursue it with her. We've always lived frugally, we're both ardent thrifters, so barring some unforeseen disaster, we're set for retirement already.

Would there be a physician in the world who would help her end her life at this point in time? Physically she's in perfect health. Mentally there might be a few problems, but surely she'd pass the count-by-sevens-backward-from-one-hundred test as well as I would. (I'd get to 93). I don't believe there's a physician in Oregon or anyplace else who would help her end her life, so maybe a trip across the country is what some doctor somewhere would order.

Oregon, here we come!

Kentucky

"What does disgruntled mean?" Katie asks me.

She's reading a book while I drive, and I want to tell her it's exactly what I'm feeling now. I'd assumed she'd wanted to take the back roads to look at the scenery, but she's had her head buried in a novel ever since we left home this morning. I'm thinking about getting on I-64. She wouldn't know the difference. She hasn't looked up once. I've seen the directional arrows for it about 20 times now, and I've started to think these signs are meant for me specifically: Joe Warren, be smart, take the interstate.

“What does disquiet mean?”

Very disquieting that she’s asking me this. Katie is the librarian. I’m the economics professor. What’s happened to her hitherto vast vocabulary?

“I’m starving,” I say, when I see a mom-and-pop restaurant.

“I can’t stop now. I have to get to the end of the chapter because I can’t find my bookmark.”

It’s the only restaurant I’ve seen in the past hour and a half that isn’t boarded up.

“What’s a maelstrom?” she asks me.

As with the other words, I give her a brief definition. My stomach grumbles its discontent, as I wonder if this trip is on its way to turning into one.

Illinois

It’s 2:09 a.m. when Katie asks me what I’ll do after she’s dead. She uses that word, not “moved on” or “gone.” We’re in the Transit because we’ve been tenting on nice nights and sleeping in here when bad weather is forecasted. It’s impossible to sleep though. Hail relentlessly thwacks our metal roof. I can hardly hear her, so I pretend I don’t.

I’m lying on my side, turned away from her. She throws her arm around my chest and positions her mouth close to my ear. She still has to yell. “Marry somebody who makes you laugh, and make sure she understands your sense of humor.”

I used to say and do things that would make Katie double over, but lately she doesn’t get it. Similarly, I used to laugh when Katie said something silly, but I don’t anymore. I’m never quite sure if she’s being absurd on purpose, and I don’t want to hurt her feelings if she’s not.

I don't much like this distressing game of hers, but I decide to play it. Even if she dies 20 years from now, she's likely to go before I do because of the difference in our ages.

"I'm not going to find anybody else," I yell. "You're the only one I could've ever suckered into marrying me."

"Joe, that's crazy talk. All the casserole ladies will be falling at your feet."

"What's a casserole lady?"

"The women who will bring food to the house in supposed sympathy that I'm dead, but really they'll be hitting on you."

"Well, I'll take their food but pass on any other offerings." I roll over as gently as I can. I don't want the blow-up mattress springing a leak. "None of them will measure up to you."

She sighs and rolls her eyes.

I kiss her neck.

She giggles.

Sex on this trip hasn't been an easy thing to accomplish. At campgrounds your next-door neighbors are 10 feet away at most. Tonight we discover there's a definite benefit to the deafening pelting rain that's kept us awake all night.

"Remember what I said about laughing, Joe," Katie says as we drift off to sleep. "Beauty doesn't matter."

Tomorrow we'll have to stop somewhere to buy a new mattress.

We spend three days in the Ozark Mountains. The first night we arrive there's a band playing bluegrass at our campground, easily within walking distance, so we have a few beers and dance. We haven't done either of these things in at least a decade, and I don't know why.

I make a mental list of other things we love but haven't done for a while— watching old movies, bicycling rails-to-trails routes, marveling at the art in Berea, Kentucky. Berea's less than an hour's drive south of us. When we get back to Lexington, I'll suggest to Katie that we spend the day there again.

Katie befriends our fellow campers while we're dancing, asking a few of them to take our picture with my iPhone. For the rest of our stay at the campground, I'll be accosted by friendly people every time I try to walk unnoticed to the bathroom.

The next day we take a long hike in a wooded area. Katie can't stroll more than 50 feet without darting toward a butterfly or a flower. She's always been like that in the woods, Helen Keller dashing from object to object after Anne Sullivan helped her solve the language mystery. I stroll leisurely, listening to the scurrying rodents, smelling the pine-scented breeze. Once in a while I grab her hand and point to a bird of prey watching us from above or an odd-looking insect sitting on a leaf, because that's the only way I can stop my human pinball for a minute.

On the third day we rent a two-person kayak. I let Katie sit in back and steer because she says she wants to. I know it means we'll zigzag back and forth, not making any progress unless there are rapids to push us downstream. I know we'll eventually change places, but whether this takes 25 minutes or three hours depends on Katie.

About two hours into it, I suggest exploring a small creek that's flowing into the river we're on. She surprisingly steers us to its mouth like an expert, but then, as I paddle with all my might against what I thought wasn't that bad of a current, I don't get anywhere.

"Are you helping at all back there?" I ask finally, and I turn my head so she can hear me.

That's when I see that her paddle isn't in the water. Not only that, she's actually hindering our progress by holding onto a low-hanging tree branch.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I don't want to go up that creek," she says. "It looks spooky."

"Why didn't you just tell me that?" I ask.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"So you thought you'd let me paddle for 20 minutes instead?"

"I thought you'd give up a long time ago," she says.

I start laughing. Katie joins in.

That's the thing about the two of us. In small ways, after all these years, we can still surprise each other.

Kansas

Katie is charmed by Kansas; me, not so much. We're on an infinitely flat and boring road with endless brown prairie grass dotted with old rusty water towers and ugly silos.

Driving, I have a hard time staying awake. Katie says she'll do it. I tell her we need to get

gas in the next town, and I don't think I'm in the passenger seat more than a minute before I fall asleep.

I'm not sure what wakes me up, but it's probably the intense heat.

"Gosh, Katie," I say groggily, "it feels like it's 110 degrees in this car."

"I think the air conditioner is broken," she says. For some odd reason, she doesn't look like she's sweating, but I'm sopped head to toe.

I look at the console. It's about 90 outside, and she's got the heat on full-blast. I turn the knob to choose the blue color for the air conditioner, and Katie glances down while I'm doing it.

"I thought red was cold," she says.

"Nope," I say, "red for hot, like red-hot."

"But red is the color your fingers turn before frostbite sets in, and blue is the hottest flame on a Bunsen burner."

I don't know how to respond to logic like that. And I don't have to because I lean further over in my seat and notice the low-fuel indicator.

"We need gas," I tell Katie. I don't want to scare her, but it seems rude not to inform her since my next words are to Siri: "Take me to the nearest gas station."

"Oh, Joe, I'm so sorry. I forgot you said we needed gas, and I forgot to look at the gauge."

"Don't worry about it, Katie. Running out of gas has happened to everyone at least once." I tell her this even though it has never happened to me.

Siri says there's a town not far down the road. We might make it.

“I forget everything,” she says sadly. “My brain’s like that payphone we passed a few miles back—useless.”

“Waterbeds,” I say. She looks puzzled. I want to get her mind off our gas situation. Mine too. “Things people don’t use anymore.”

She grins. “Tinkertoys.” She’s got the idea.

“Cigarette vending machines,” I say.

“Wooly Willy.”

“Metal ice trays with levers.”

“View-Masters.”

When I don’t come up with something in five seconds, Katie continues, “Lite Brite, Bernie Bernard, Romper Stompers, Spirograph, Etch-A-Sketch—”

“Stop,” I say, laughing. She’s naming every toy she played with as a kid, whether it’s in use anymore or not, and for that her brain is impeccable. “It’s my turn.”

But that’s when we roll into the gas station with at least a few drops of fuel to spare.

Colorado

We’re sitting atop a rock at Hoosier Pass. We had to scrape ice off our windshield this morning, but now the sun is hot on our skin. This is the highest point on the trip Katie mapped out for us, 11,542 feet above sea level. She tells me we’ll head north and stay in the Rockies until we get to Idaho, then head west again. In the process, we’ll cross the continental divide nine times.

“Why did I hate taking care of her so much, Joe?” Katie whispers this, breaking our half hour of silent splendor-watching.

She’s talking about the eight years she cared for her mom, after her dad’s sudden fatal heart attack. I met Katie a few weeks after her mother died and have been hearing her side of the story in bits and pieces ever since.

“Sometimes, God forgive me, I couldn’t tell the difference between hating the circumstances and hating her.”

She’s confided to me that she prayed to die, because she didn’t feel it was ethical to pray that her mother die instead.

What started with Katie’s kind actions being countered by her mother’s hostile and aggressive reactions, ended with Katie feeding her mom baby food with a spoon, changing her diapers, and setting an alarm every two to three hours through the night to turn her in bed so she wouldn’t get skin ulcers. Katie never prayed for her mom to die, but when she could no longer swallow, Katie refused to have a tube put straight into her stomach, which was the immediate cause of her mother’s death.

She told me once she felt like we were closer to the same age than we really were because her life had been suspended for those eight years. So even though she was 36 when we met, she felt like she was 28; emotionally she was only three years older than I was.

“Mom was so out of it, she didn’t even know who I was,” Katie says now, “but there had to be a time, even if it was just a sliver in the very beginning, when she knew what was happening to her, when she could’ve made decisions that would’ve changed the way things played out.”

Katie and I met at a grief recovery group in 1993. I'd just lost my twin brother at 25. Someone had told me about a support group held on the third floor of a community college on the west side of town. I was desperate for some kind of help, but from the doorway I knew right away it wasn't for me. I knew I wouldn't be able to talk about my brother in a group setting.

"Sorry," I said, "wrong meeting."

Unbeknownst to me, it was the only meeting at the school that night. Katie ran after me. She listened while I talked to her for hours.

"It seems like there's always guilt and regrets involved with the death of a loved one," I say now. I focus on a pale blue mountain the farthest away from us, the one that blurs with the horizon. Is it fifty miles from here? One-hundred? "Why isn't our misery torture enough? I think often how I wish I'd asked Jeff if he was taking his medication."

"Joe, do you think if you'd nagged Jeff about taking his meds, he'd be alive today? I think he would've died anyway."

"See what I mean?" I ask.

Still, even after all these years, I wish I'd endlessly badgered him about it.

"You're so right, Joe. Guilt is stupid, and don't you forget it."

I jump off the rock with more force than necessary, intending to stomp out the gloom. I take Katie's hands in mine. "Let's explore Breckinridge."

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Wyoming

We love antiquing. We started about five years ago. We go our separate ways and then show each other the items we liked best at the end. When I'm finished rummaging around

in a store in Lander, I text Katie to find out where she is. I call. She doesn't answer. It's a big place, three floors, lots of nooks and crannies. I do a sweep through the whole place and I can't find her.

It crosses my mind that she's wandered off, into danger perhaps, but I shake it off. She wouldn't do that. She's definitely not that far gone. I know this in my bones.

Yet, what pops into my head is the variable-message sign I saw on the interstate a few months ago—a license plate number, a make, a model, the message “Missing Adult.” I'm sure that family didn't think their loved one was “that far gone” either. My heart starts to beat faster.

I'm trying to decide what to do. Do I call the police? Do I go outside and start walking down the sidewalk? If so, do I walk north or south? I decide to do one more sweep through the antique store.

I find her sitting cross-legged on the floor in a tucked-away corner of a room that wasn't much more than a cubbyhole to start with. Her back is to the entrance, and I'm glad because it gives me a second to change the expression of too-much-relief on my face. I push some crap out of the way and sit down on the floor next to her.

“What treasure have you found?” I ask, as calmly as I can muster.

“Oh, Joe,” she says, “I found letters in this Maeve Binchy book. They're from a woman in Maine to her friend here in Wyoming. I feel like I know both of them now.” She removes purple pages from one of the envelopes, gently unfolds them, and reads aloud.

“Dear Grace,

Suddenly, it's awkward with my husband and daughter. My friends don't call anymore. Even Evie! Remember how she used to tell us minute, intimate details about her sexual encounters? It was embarrassing, but we listened. Now, when I try to talk to her about my cancer, she changes the subject. Every last one of us is going to die, so why is the subject taboo? Maybe it's easier to listen to words on paper. Can you do that, Grace?
Love, Ginny"

Katie folds that one and replaces it with gentle precision in its envelope, then begins her search for another one. "Here it is." She mumbles, "I haven't put them in chronological order yet."

"Dear Grace,
It was so good to see you. You've been gone only a few hours, but already I miss you. Watching old black and white movies alone isn't the same. No one else brings me wildflowers. Was being with me hard for you? I hope not. It meant the world to me.
Love, Ginny"

Katie picks up the entire pile of letters and stacks them so their edges are aligned, then holds them out to me.

"That's nice, Katie," I say. I'm afraid she'll be disappointed in my adjective selection, disheartened that I don't reach out, take the pack-full and devour every word that Ginny has written, but Katie pulls the letters back to her nose, closes her eyes and smiles.

Three people walk by the doorway at a leisurely stroll while she inhales. I'm sure all she smells is mildew. When she opens her eyes, there are tears in them. "These letters are here because Grace has died now too. They're together again."

I put my arm around her shoulder and hug her close. I wait for what I hope is an appropriate amount of time to pass before I ask her to see her iPhone so I can turn the ringer back on.

Idaho

We've been to Boise close to a dozen times, but we've always flown before. Katie's college roommate, Charlotte, moved here when she was 28, and for all these years their friendship has endured. It probably helps that Charlotte's husband and I—although he's twenty years older than me—get along terrifically. Doug's an artist type, and every time we come here, or they come to Kentucky, he's got a new hobby, or even three or four new hobbies, and I've picked up a few of them from him.

This time he's playing guitar at a coffee shop, and at his insistence, I join him to strum on one of his ukuleles. He got me interested in playing almost a decade ago. Katie and Charlotte sit at a table and pull their heads away from each other at the end of every song to clap ferociously. I'm not sure if we're good or they've drunk too much caffeine.

On a morning toward the end of our stay, Charlotte and I sit alone at their kitchen table. Charlotte sips tea. Katie and Doug are in the back yard. Katie's playing fetch with their collie, Apollo, and Doug is watering their garden.

"I'm glad she finally did this," Charlotte says. When I furrow my brows, she adds, "You know, drive the roads we were supposed to bicycle together after Katie finished her master's degree."

I've heard this story before, how Katie had to cancel on Charlotte last minute, after the two of them had researched bike touring, gotten in shape and quit their jobs. A

few weeks before they were supposed to leave is when Katie's dad died suddenly, and the multitude of things her mother had been relying on him to accomplish for her became alarmingly apparent.

I don't know why I didn't piece it together before—why Katie chose the route she did.

Valiantly, Charlotte flew to Virginia and started the cross-country bicycle trip on her own, meeting Doug on the second day. The trip, I'd heard long ago, went through Berea, Kentucky, and it occurs to me why Katie read a book that first day—we weren't on the trail yet.

I listen to the coffeemaker's final puff of air and push my chair back to pour a cup of coffee. Charlotte and Doug don't drink it, but they've kept the coffeemaker on hand for over 25 years solely for when Katie and I visit. I no longer drink it either, but I don't want to hurt Charlotte's feelings by telling her this, so I sit back down, take a sip and manage, I think, not to grimace.

Charlotte clears her throat. "Katie told me she thinks she has Alzheimer's." She whispers this, even though Katie's outside howling and growling at Apollo and can't hear what Charlotte's saying. "She says she's going to quote unquote end it all down the road."

I put the coffee cup down, and sigh.

"So she's confided this to you, too?" she asks me.

I nod. I suppose she hasn't told Charlotte that down the road to Katie means down *this* road.

Charlotte says, “I told her I’ll always love her, no matter what, even if she’s not herself.”

Here’s my take on that. How can I love her if she not Katie anymore? I’ll handle having to dress her or feed her when she no longer remembers how, and I’ll cope when she forgets to use the toilet. Those are “worse” scenarios in “for better or worse.” But what if she no longer sees all the wonder in the world?

What if she no longer loves me?

I nod again, not in agreement, but as in “I’m hearing you.” Charlotte, of course, doesn’t know the difference.

Still whispering, she continues. “I told her she’s not allowed to do it without telling me first, and she said ‘I’m telling you now,’ and then she said ‘you’ll try to stop me.’ It was hard, really hard, but I promised her I wouldn’t.”

I try to speak but my voice comes out gravelly, and I realize these will be the first words I’ve spoken all morning. “Do you think she has Alzheimer’s, Char?”

Charlotte looks down at her tea as if there is a bug floating on it. “I’ve noticed some things,” she says. She keeps studying the invisible bug.

Oregon

Astoria is where Katie’s bicycle trip, had she taken it, would’ve ended. She wants to splurge on a hotel. “You know,” she says, “like they did in *Lost in America*.” She wants us to be able to see the water from our room. Since Astoria is part of Long Beach Peninsula, this is a request that’s easy to fulfill. Finding a hotel that doesn’t face water might be a more difficult feat.

She waits until we've watched TV in bed for a few hours, she waits until we've turned it off and made love, she waits until I've almost fallen asleep, to say, "I made an appointment with a doctor tomorrow."

The next morning I wake up to an alarm clock that the previous guests must have set. Trancelike, I stumble into the shower. The shampoo lather in my hair is about to run into my eyes, I'm about to duck my shoulder to position my head under the shower nozzle, when I realize Katie, who one-hundred percent of the time jumps up to the sound of an alarm like a jack-in-the-box, hadn't moved when I turned it off.

In a nanosecond, all the pieces fall together, every last one.

Shampoo bubbles flying, I sprint to Katie's side. I grab her shoulders, I scream her name, but her body only moves to the rhythm of my shaking her.

I call 9-1-1. I open our hotel room door naked and soapy to find the number of our room. I manage to get my jeans and T-shirt on before the paramedics get there, but just barely because by this point I'm shaking uncontrollably.

It's not until early afternoon that I find myself alone in the hotel room.

I don't look on her phone to find a doctor to cancel an appointment with, because I know she'd never set up a consultation and never planned to.

I don't look for a suicide note, because the police would've found one when they rummaged through her luggage and found her note which exonerated me. Besides, I know now that that's what this trip across the country has been—her farewell.

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I will breathe guilt like carbon monoxide on my return interstate drive to Kentucky as I convince myself that at some point I knew what Katie was going to do in Oregon, and I

let her, because I didn't want to change the diapers of a stranger. Anger will be my partner in the driver's seat at times as well.

But now I'm numb. I sit on an uncomfortable chair at a small round table and stare, unseeing, at our awesome view and fixate on her well-thought-out attempt to ready me for her death without straight-out telling me what she was up to. And I wonder how Katie tricked me into walking that fine line where I would be braced for the worst, yet not stop her. How could someone with Alzheimer's fool me completely?

END