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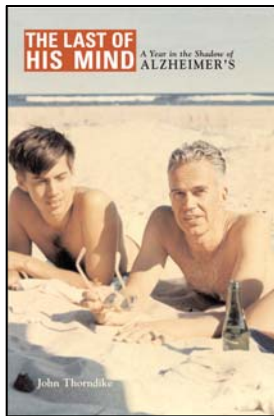
Looking After a Father's Life

The Last of His Mind: A Year in the Shadow of Alzheimer's
John Thorndike
Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2009

So often, we don't appreciate what's before us until it . . . starts . . . to . . . fall . . . away . . . . According to John Thorndike, half of everyone over eighty-five now has Alzheimer's. Five million Americans suffer from the disease, which slowly robs them of memory, cognitive function, and language skills. Those who care for the sufferers live with new losses every day. On the surface, *The Last of His Mind: A Year in the Shadow of Alzheimer's* is about a son living with and caring for a father with Alzheimer's during the final year of the father's life. Taking a sabbatical from his Ohio farm, sixty-year-old John moves into his ninety-one-year-old father's Cape Cod house in order to honor Joe Thorndike's wish. The elder Thorndike wants, above all, to remain in his own home. As the author's lyrical prose beckons us further into this narrative, we find we're also along on a son's quest to understand his own life through the prism of his father's.



Thorndike opens the narrative with the napping old man. Every word rings with reverence; every image suggests the end of a cycle, the beginning of a tender good-bye:

"My father sleeps through the December afternoon . . . I stand beside the bed, listening to his shallow breaths and watching his old face: his half-open mouth, the crust in the corners of his eyes, his patchy skin and tumultuous eyebrows.

"'Dad? Do you want to wake up?'

"He opens his good eye but doesn't say anything, just stares without moving. Outside, the long Vermont dusk is settling."

Joe Thorndike was a managing editor of *Life*, the founder of *American Heritage* and *Horizon* magazines, author of three books, and editor of a dozen more. In the era following World War II, he lived at the center of American cultural life, a background which explains why, as his mind and faculties fail him, his manners remain. The words "thank you" are so hard-wired into the elderly gentleman that they never fail him, not even when the disease has reduced him "to the bones of language," with barely a thousand nouns in his recall. Joe suffers from a string of impairments, one of which is dressing apraxia, "the inability to dress himself according to the usual norms, with shirt beneath sweater, underwear beneath pants, and so on." But even with his full faculties and a reputation as a gracious man, he was never forthcoming, never willing to air his troubles, and this frustrates the author.

Framed as a journal, the memoir spans one year of time, one chapter per month. Along with vividly describing how his father's mind is eroding, Thorndike intersperses flashbacks and family stories, insights into the formidable mind that his father once possessed, and questions that arise

for the author as the disease progresses. Using his father's behavior as an example, Thorndike also shares his expanding knowledge of Alzheimer's:

"Sundowning is the depressed state that often overwhelms the memory-impaired around dusk, and most days my father sinks into it around four or five in the afternoon. He lies on his bed with a vacant stare, unhappy and distant, never a glance my way. This afternoon, when I suggested we go down to Red River Beach, he said 'Not now,' even his politeness drained out of him."

In the sphere of Alzheimer's memoirs, writers have documented many combinations of the caregiver/patient relationship – daughter/father, daughter/mother, wife/husband, husband/wife, and so on. Thorndike's is unusual in that it unfolds from the perspective of son caring for father. As he documents Joe Thorndike's downward slide, John Thorndike honors his father as well as the fraught act of fathering itself. His first memoir, *Another Way Home*, describing the years he spent raising his son as a single parent, runs against the grain of expectations, too. An unusual guy who has built himself a vast emotional toolbox, Thorndike possesses an enviable ability to express emotional truths. No matter how short and simple his journal entries, they have great import, and often stunning poetic lyricism:

"The smallness of our days. Breakfasts and dinners at which we don't say a word. Nights when he's in bed by eight."

"As he gets closer to the end I'd like to hear some blazing revelation about what it's like to be approaching the great mystery—but nothing yet. He lies in bed staring. Sometimes he reminds me of how an infant gazes around the room, soaking things up."

In search of revelation, the author bestows more than a few cameos on his mother, dead some years hence. This diversion from daily life with his father refocuses our attention from Joe Thorndike to Virginia Thorndike, and ultimately, to the real hub of this story: John Thorndike. This is the author's story, his journey to recognize himself.

"I only wish I knew more. I wish I knew everything. I am that strange guy who would like to see, through some magical Truman Show process, the complete video of my parents' lives, every delicate or searing moment. It seems clear to me that if I want to understand myself, I have to start with my mother and father."

As readers, we can't help but think Joe Thorndike would be horrified at sharing such details. As he once wrote John in a letter, "I am not enthusiastic about the uninhibited expression of all one's personal feelings." But then, Joe Thorndike was a journalist, a writer, a historian, and as such, he made an unsigned pact: Story is important. This story is important.

Even in exposing personal details, indelicacies, and days gone literally to crap, John Thorndike still manages to impart his father with dignity. Time and again, the author proves to us that he possesses the rarest and most readable of qualities, true empathy.