

All The Pretty Little Ponies

By: Kelsey Peterson



Ann Peterson 1930

Abstract:

How does one simple children's tune have anything to do with Alzheimer's? My grandmother died of severe Alzheimer's disease when I was seven; she forgot basic, everyday things and she lost all bodily function, but she never forgot me. How is that possible? After threading through my memories of my grandmother, interviewing my father and sister, and compiling a significant amount of research, I found the answer. I sang "All The Pretty Little Ponies" to her while she laid on her deathbed, and she remembered. Music was a significant part of my grandma's life and after diving into my most colossal memories, I found that when the brain interprets the electrical patterns produced by music, acoustical energy is turned into neurological activity, producing within us emotions and feeling. Those feelings, brought about by music, triggered the memory of an antique woman, which saved the soul of a seven-year-old girl. By stepping into the past through a journey raw with emotion, I was able to ignite the flames my grandma left behind and discover something not even the doctors could explain.

Scratchy sheets caressed her pale, crinkled skin. The dull walls that imprisoned her reflected the expression spread across her face, like a blank canvass drained of all color and recollection. Her breathing slowed by the second and beneath her glazed eyes she was fighting, screaming to get out. But I did not see any of this. I did not see the mangled hip she'd broken from falling off her bed or the black and blue indents along her frail body from all the times she tried to escape, kicking the fence down and running away; one time she made it all the way across Wadsworth before anyone realized she was gone. No, I did not see these things. I only saw Grandma Ann with her fiery red hair and stubborn Irish blood. And she was smiling at me in recognition, just as she did all seven years of my life.

I heard the word oldtimers circling round and round in my head. I didn't know what it meant or how bad it was. Didn't all old people get oldtimers?

Daddy looked so sad, but I could tell he was trying to be brave for Courtney and I. He spoke sweetly to her. The doubtful nurse who led us in watched intently. I'd seen her interact with Grandma Ann during previous visits, but Grandma Ann always looked right through her. It's like there was a light behind the nurse that Grandma Ann was trying to find, but just couldn't see. The nurse introduced her to Daddy, Courtney and I.

Wait . . . introduced?

She was my Grandma it's not like she didn't know me.

I thought the nurse was acting silly. Grandma Ann looked over at me and muttered something as if she were speaking to an imaginary friend. I saw a flicker in her blue-green eyes and a smile greeted her painted red lips. She was fine. I didn't know why they stuck her there in that awful, dreary cage.

Daddy suggested we sing. So we chose to sing the song we had just been listening to in the car.

*"Hush a bye
Don't you cry
Go to sleep my little baby.
When you wake
You shall have
All the pretty little ponies."*

Alzheimer's. It began as forgetfulness and developed into dementia. It went from forgetting a conversation to losing awareness of self-identity. The innocent oldtimers I'd once thought about had transformed into a brain engulfing disease. According to the Alzheimer's Association, "Alzheimer's is a type of dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking and behavior." Scientists believe it triggers a loss of ability for nerve cells in the brain to do their jobs and eventually kills them, causing irreversible changes in the brain. Once you lose control of the body, your mind is gone. There is no regaining function of the body or the brain. Your body fails and all your memories (your past, your recognition of faces, your life) blow away with the passing wind.

After her symptoms got worse enough that my family had to put her in a nursing home, Grandma Ann's body deteriorated rapidly. Then, just like that, she was gone. With the snap of a finger; in the blink of an eye. Grandma Ann's passing was the first real loss I'd ever experienced. I didn't even cry, couldn't shed a single tear. She'd drifted off to dreamland and that's all I knew. She was with all the pretty little ponies. Daddy left that night to go talk about adult things; so Mommy, Courtney and I had a sleepover in the big room made for adults. We set up two sleeper chairs on the ground. I was excited. I'd never slept in

the big room before. I could tell my excitement was out of place. Courtney couldn't stop crying. Mommy sipped back gentle tears as sweet as honey; she'd always been an elegant crier. I think more than anything it hurt her to see us hurt.

But I didn't hurt. I didn't understand.

I felt so conflicted. I tried to be sad because I knew it was the right thing to be feeling, but I just couldn't cry. Before I knew it the lights were off and I was sliding into dreamland, off to visit Grandma Ann.

*"In your bed
Mamma said
Baby's riding off to dreamland.
One by one
They've begun
Dance and prance for little baby."*

Grandma Ann was a musical painter.

She played violin and piano, she sang, and she painted, but most importantly, she sang while she painted. She could have sold her paintings they were so brilliant and she could sit down and read music like it was her first language. There was something about the music that just made her brighter. Music was always in her. She'd hum every time I saw her paint and it was like the tune guided her brush across that blank canvass, spinning out color and expression.

Every minute stroke was so precise; every movement so visibly intentional. Her hands were so ancient, yet so steady. She painted the crevice in my cheek with such pleasure; those little dimples that were so overwhelmingly recognizable. I sat as still as my giggles would allow and moment by moment my face emerged on her canvas.

She painted me a few years younger than I was. I am characteristically smiling and wearing a baby blue button-up blouse rimmed with white lace that hugs my delicate neck. My fine brown hair falls short on my head and my eyes are brilliantly blue and gleaming.

She allotted time for my portrait to dry and gave it to me the next time I saw her. In that moment I failed to realize how important that portrait would become to me; how it would become the only living memory I would ever have of her; how it would follow me everywhere I went for the rest of my life; hang on every wall whose room I would occupy; how if my house were to catch on fire and I had time to grab just one item, her portrait would be the item I'd grab and cling to for dear life.

Everyday I stare at that portrait and remember those brief moments that linger in my memory. I remember the laughter and the joy of those sunny afternoons spent painting at Grandma Ann's house. I remember her gentle touch guiding my small, chubby hands across white canvass, helping me turn beauty from nothing with the hum of a tune. And then I think, who would I be without those memories? I can't imagine ever forgetting, forgetting her. Every time I look into my brilliantly blue painted eyes I see her face, smiling back at me, encouraging me to follow my heart.

*"Blacks and bays, dapples and greys
Running in the night.
When you wake
You shall have
All the pretty little ponies."*

Fling! Water pounding my head. Fling! Water drenching my clothes. Fling! Water burning my eyes. They called it holy water. I was squinting into the sun. Water pounded me every time he flung that huge wooden spoon. At least, I hope it was water. I didn't know what

made it holy, and that worried me. Who was he? I didn't know. He was some crazy old man in a funny looking robe that had asked me to hold a bucket. Being the nice little girl I was raised to be, of course I said yes. Plus, that day wasn't about me. It was about Grandma Ann. It was about saying goodbye to someone I loved. That much I understood, but I still couldn't comprehend why it was I had to say goodbye.

Fling! Fling! Fling! When would the craziness end? Every second was so obnoxiously uncomfortable. I thought about the beautiful experience I'd had just moments ago:

Mommy and Daddy kept telling Courtney and I that we should have something to present at Grandma Ann's funeral. Cousin Mark had played his saxophone, Cousin David sang a song, and Courtney and I each prepared an acoustic poem. We spelled out her name vertically: G-R-A-N-D-M-A--A-N-N, and filled in a word for each letter. Every word was meaningful. Every word represented our relationship to her. One by one we stood to present our poems, preserve our memories, and honor her soul. I felt so proud of my poem and read it just so.

Finally, the discomfort from the holy water ended and that was it. It was over. Just like that, she was gone. Lowered into the cold, hard ground, her body was left to rest right next to her husband. Grandpa Allen died of prostrate cancer before I was born. I never met him, but all my life I've felt like I'd known him just as well as anyone else. She was with him now. They were together. And as little as I was, I could picture Grandma Ann waking up next to her greatest treasure, Grandpa Allen. Some deeper understanding assured me from within that everything was okay, and that made me happy. It was Grandma Ann, reminding me that

she had to leave me behind so she could be with him. She had taken all the time with me that she could and in that moment I absolutely understood; she had to follow her heart.

*"Can you see the little ponies
Dance before your eyes?
All the pretty little ponies
Will be there when you arise."*

Music can bring us to tears. It can make us laugh, break our hearts and then mend them. There is something so powerful about music that people can feel, yet not completely understand. At the intersection of neurodegenerative diseases and music, symptoms can be ameliorated. When music touches the brain it releases dopamine, a feel-good chemical associated with addiction and good food. According to Valorie Salimpoor, a neuroscientist at McGill University, dopamine is involved with motivation and addiction. Salimpoor and colleagues conducted several studies that prove the relationship between dopamine and feelings of motivation, reward, and pleasure. They found that when the brain interprets the electrical patterns produced by music, acoustical energy is turned into neurological activity and that is why music makes us feel so strongly.

Grandma Ann was always playing music. It filled her house like there was a symphony just around the corner. Courtney and I listened through the screen door. We sat on the very edge of two opposing swings that stood facing one another on the porch, stretching to touch our feet together. Back and forth. Back and forth. Swinging to the beat of the song, we were waiting for Grandma Ann to make us our usual porch worthy lunch: mayonnaise chicken sandwiches with the crust cut off just right. After lunch we'd get to search for our eggs. Every day was Easter at Grandma Ann's house. She would hide two or three eggs

for each of us and to our delight we would open them to find tiny, fuzzy, colorful chicks. These were my absolute favorite and they never failed. I kept every single one and would play with them like a new pet.

On occasion, Maggy would try and snatch one away from me. Silly dog; she didn't know that she couldn't eat my chicks. Maggy was Grandma Ann's big fat boarder collie. She loved that dog more than she loved a homemade pie.

One day I overheard a hushed conversation coming from the big room. Apparently, this oldtimers was quite serious. I still didn't know what it was, but whatever it was, I knew Grandma Ann had it and that was the reason Maggy was so fat. This seemed to seriously concern my parents, but I didn't mind; I liked the fat Maggy because there was more of her for me to hug. I listened longer. Then it hit me.

Oldtimers made Grandma Ann forget that she'd already fed Maggy.

Oldtimers made Grandma Ann forget!

"Can you see the little ponies

Shining before your eyes?

All the pretty little ponies

Gonna be there when you arise."

Severe Alzheimer's disease.

This is what Grandma Ann was diagnosed with. The nurses said it was a long process; that it could take up to ten years. First, she would begin to forget little things, like feeding Maggy and watering her plants. Then, she would gradually forget not only her previous conversations, but also how to behave. She would revert to childhood in a lot of ways. She would forget the words to her favorite song, she would forget how to read music and, lastly, she would forget us.

According to M.D. Barry Reisberg, member of the Alzheimer's Association, in the last stages of this disease, individuals lose the

ability to respond to their environment, to carry on a conversation and, eventually, to control movement. At this point an individual's memory is entirely erased.

Severe Alzheimer's disease would cause Grandma Ann to completely lose sight of who she was . . . or so they told us. After that happened, they said it wouldn't be long before she died.

She was just as beautiful as ever, but much more pale . . . and lifeless. She was gingerly placed in what they called a casket. Caskets held dead people. When they first told me, I hadn't pictured it quite like that. I was too short to see inside, so Daddy lifted me up to peer over the polished wooden edge of what looked like a giant, decorated shoe-box.

There she was. Or at least, there her body was. Her corpse was placed into a blue cotton dress that hugged her petite boddy. White lace rimmed her neckline and little white buttons followed her curvature all the way down to her breasts. She was all delicately fixed up, from head to toe, like a porcelain doll. Her limp hair dyed its usual vibrant ginger. Her lips were painted red, but this was not their usual red. This red was darker. A bright pink blush was dusted onto her pastel cheeks. Little white pearl earrings were clinging to her ears and her wedding ring was hugging tightly to the bony ring finger of her left hand.

That was the first time I'd ever looked down on her. It frightened me, sending shivers up my spine. Daddy let me go, but I felt like something was missing. I needed closure. Uneasily, I whispered into Daddy's ear. He lifted me back up and let me dangle over the coffin. I leaned in closer with the intent of kissing her cheek.

Closer,

closer,

closer . . .

I couldn't do it. I couldn't kiss the body of cold, limp Grandma Ann whose soul was no

longer present. I pulled back, wriggling out of Daddy's grasp and my feet hit the ground. I walked away.

Why? This was the question that haunted my dreams for years after.

Why? This was the question that tore at my insides and ate away at my guilt.

Why? This was the question that dumped such a large burden on such a little girl.

Death is the one thing in our lives that remains certain. No matter who we are or where life takes us, death waits for us at the end. What is it that makes us fear death? Does it stem from fear of the unknown? Or a fear of all the things we didn't do in life? Human beings as a species are so uncomfortable with seeing a dead body. I think it's because when we are dead we are all the same. There is nothing to distinguish us from one another when we are dead; no beliefs, no values, no memories, no stories, no personality, no life. So, we hide from death and when we see it we walk away.

Why did I walk away from death? Twelve years later and I've finally found the answer. The last time I made contact with Grandma Ann she was alive. She was alive and breathing. Her heart was beating as I sang to her that innocent children's song that has come to mean so much more to me. I play that song, I close my eyes, and I can picture Grandma Ann. I can visualize that last time I touched her. She was not dead in a box. She was beautiful, spirited and alive, and she was smiling back at me.

*"Hush a bye
Don't you cry
Go to sleep my little baby.
When you wake
You shall have
All the pretty little ponies."*

As the disease wore on Grandma Ann's body became weak and frail, but her mind lingered like the melody of a catchy song. She grew skinnier, older, and more bent. She experienced all the symptoms the experts said she would . . . all the symptoms but one. Her body deteriorated so rapidly, but she remembered. She remembered music and when I sang to her she remembered me. Sure, her mind was affected and she acted weird, but her memory remained intact. This was next to impossible.

Grandma Ann was very unusual in that respect, and this was the reason for the bewilderment behind that nurse's eyes the last day I went to visit. She knew it and she saw it, but the poor nurse just couldn't understand it.

Grandma Ann could sit down and play piano by reading the music in front of her just weeks before she passed. Mentally, she could have played music until just days before she passed, but physically there came a point where her body would no longer allow her to sit upright at a piano. She forgot many things, but she never forgot music and she never forgot family.

Grandma Ann had **severe** Alzheimer's disease. So, why was it that she couldn't perform basic tasks, yet whenever I entered the room her eyes would settle on me with such familiarity and comfort? Why was it that she was always so confused and forgetful, while mine was a face she remembered?

I believe it was the music. I believe the music kept her from completely forgetting. A study done by Sylvain Clement, a psychology professor at the University of Lille in France, tested the long-term effects of musical interventions of severe Alzheimer's disease patients. Though it did not improve their memories, she found that through just four weeks of music therapy these patients had

improved in emotional well-being. This, in turn, improved their quality of life.

Music made Grandma Ann happy. It played a large role in her life from start to finish. Music was able to communicate emotions to her that plunged so much deeper than the simple recognition of a word or task. That is why music matters. That is what helped Grandma Ann to remember.

"All the pretty little ponies."

Daddy suggested we sing. So we chose to sing the song we had just been listening to in the car.

Daddy suggested we sing. And so . . . I looked at Grandma Ann for the last time, a grin gleaming behind my inviolate eyes . . . and I sang.

"All the pretty little ponies."

- "All The Pretty Little Ponies Lyrics." *LyricsFreak*. LyricsFreak, n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2012.
<[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/k/kenny_loggins/all the pretty little ponies_20077803.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/k/kenny_loggins/all_the_pretty_little_ponies_20077803.html)>.
- Clement, Sylvain. "Music Perception." *Music Perception*. 29.5 (2012): 533-541. Web. 25 Oct. 2012.
PsycINFO.
- Halpern, Andrea. "Music Perception." *Music Perception*. 29.5 (2012): 543-545. Web. 25 Oct. 2012.
PsycINFO.
- Peterson, Andrew. Personal Interview. 4 Nov. 2012.
- Peterson, Courtney. Personal Interview. 4 Nov. 2012.
- Sohn, Emily. "Why Music Makes You Happy." *Discovery News* (2011): Google Scholar. Web. 11 Nov 2012.
<<http://news.discovery.com/human/music-dopamine-happiness-brain-110110.html>>.
- "What Is Alzheimer's?" *Alzheimer's Association* (2012): Google Scholar. Web. 11 Nov 2012.
<http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_what_is_alzheimers.asp>.