**Third Place: D is for Dementia: The Silent Sufferers**

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Dementia. A distant word you seldom hear in the Arab World. You may ask why that happens to be the case: Is it because there is a fundamental gap in people’s knowledge? Do doctors fail to reach a diagnosis? Or perhaps, is it simply not as prevalent in this side of the world? Three equally valid questions a person might pose in an attempt to connect the dots between the lack of public awareness and the reality of this devastating disease. Dementia and I first met in the year of 2012, as I was finishing my high school education and was about to embark on the next stage of my life. I was swamped with university applications and school assessments to an extent that I was almost blind to my surroundings, but more specifically, to the disease that was slowly yet steadily changing the path of our lives. As I look back now, it feels as if it all happened in the blink of an eye. To my father, it was possibly the most destructive and unendurably gradual process that was slowly taking over his mind.

It is said that dementia is where cancer stood 20 years ago: an incurable disease that affects millions of people worldwide. Luckily, decades of medical research and innovations have made the treatment of cancer a reality. However, with respect to dementia, researchers are still struggling to ensure that the advances that are made are effectively harnessed to transform lives. Not only does dementia research receive significantly low funding compared to cancer and heart disease research, especially given that dementia is predicted to affect over 1 million people by 2025, but dementia is also truly struggling to gain public recognition. In 2012, my father’s mental deterioration forced him into early retirement from his lifelong passion – treating patients’ hearts. In 2013, minor yet repetitive accidents lead us to prevent him from operating a vehicle. In 2014, my father could now only pronounce a limited number of words. Yet, there were no sentences. There was no structure. No meaning. No was a yes and yes was a no. During the early years where my father’s symptoms began to surface more vividly, I secluded myself, as I could not bring myself to come to terms with my father’s illness. I found myself constantly questioning the reasons it had to be my father that suffered this illness. Why did it have to be a man who has given so much to the world? Why a man who has dedicated his entire life to support his family by working countless days and endless nights? Why a man whose name has been echoed by even the most remotely isolated people in the country? I can carry on and on but for what purpose does it serve? This questioning approach I used to find answers to my many questions, yet could achieve nothing by it but bring sadness to my heart and tears to my eyes. It is said that dementia affects the family more than it affects the patient, and I can assure you, it is like constantly living with the memory of someone even though they are physically there.

Fast-forward a few years; amid the emotional breakdowns of clinging to the somewhat ‘normal’ past and the gradual deterioration of my father’s physical strength, I have come to terms. It has not been an easy ride, nor has it been a fun one. Studying away from my family has been rather difficult, as I often found myself unable to focus. Thankfully, I opened up to friends and family at this stage and had the emotional support I needed to overcome all hurdles and graduate with flying colours. At the mere age of 21, I feel like the experiences I gained through this transformative period of my life have equipped me with the tools to face any obstacle the world might throw in my path. In the words of Zig Ziglar, an established American author and motivational speaker, *‘‘ God gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers.’’* Holding on to one’s faith and maintaining a positive outlook is the essence of our survival. To address the initial questions, I must mention that whilst there still may be a gap in people’s general knowledge, I strongly believe that the root cause is more denial and one’s inability to comprehend the fact that mental health issues are scientifically proven. Although countries like the United Kingdom traditionally report higher numbers of people affected by dementia, the apparent discrepancies witnessed in some Arab countries are most likely an issue of under diagnosis fuelled by the lack of awareness and unwillingness to seek professional help. I cling on to the hope that one day the world will be more accepting, supportive, and understanding of people with dementia. I hope that one day I, like many other families, will not have to conceal the true nature of this disease.

I am my father’s daughter. I always have been and I always will be. No illness - no matter how debilitating - can ever change that.

I love you dad.