TYLER HENDRY

Tyler Hendry is a graduate of Hampshire High School. He is a member of many clubs and organizations, including the Honors Student Association and the Actuarial Science Club. He is also interested in sports and puzzles. Tyler is an actuarial science major who hopes one day to work as an actuary for a major insurance company. This essay holds special meaning to Tyler because it pays tribute to his grandfather and conveys the devastation of Alzheimer’s disease.

Tyler wrote this essay in John Bradley’s English 105 course.
White covers the cornfields around the church. Trees are bare. The wind stings repeatedly, like a swarm of bees. The scene outside is lifeless in the midst of the most depressing season of the year. At any other time, I would be delighted to be within the walls of a warm, heated church, but not today. Today, I am attending my first funeral. Each grandkid was asked to prepare something special for the funeral to show how much we cared about him. I keep running the piano piece through my head, hoping for perfection. My legs are shaking uncontrollably. My turn is next.

The weather was warming up in the springtime, just enough so I could ditch the restricting winter coats and reintroduce my comfortable sweatshirts to the great outdoors. Trees and plants began sprouting buds, showing signs of life to come. My family and I were headed to my Grandma and Grandpa Hendry’s house for some Chinese food and dessert. It had become a regular tradition in my family. Shrimp fried rice was always my favorite, especially when it was mixed together with various pieces of meat that I picked out of the little white boxes. As for dessert, there was nothing better than the chocolate Dilly Bar from the local Dairy Queen. Vanilla ice cream, coated in a disk-shaped chocolate shell, all positioned perfectly on a stick. My sister was four then, and, like most kids that age, her attention span flipped like boring television channels. With chocolate smeared all over her face, she left her Dilly Bar half-eaten on the table to go play on the swing set. At the age of four, everyone always thought that you were cute no matter what you did. So like always, my family followed my sister as if she were a celebrity. I reluctantly followed the crowd to watch my clumsy sister on the swings.

The sun shone straight into my eyes, blinding me. A combination of its brightness and its brutal warmth proved that it was summer’s turn to reign upon the Midwest. My grandma Hendry called my parents yesterday, asking if my brother Troy and I would like to get paid to do some yard work around her house.
My grandpa was a man who loved nature and everything about it, so both of my grandparents usually did the yard work without hesitation. In the past couple of years, my grandpa’s illness had swept away most of his hobbies and interests, stripping away much of his great personality, like the medal of a dishonest Olympian. Soon enough, my brother and I reached our destination and immediately started our work. We began taming the wild bushes, exterminating the irritating weeds, and controlling the numerous ant populations all around their property. Slowly but surely, my brother and I groomed their yard to a tolerable extent. We earned our generous wages through our time, effort, and, most of all, sweat.

Right now, my brother is at the podium reading a report that he had written a couple of years ago: a biography of my grandpa. My brother tells my grandpa’s life story: how he grew up in Minnesota; about his family roots in Scotland, his military days in World War II, and his high school teaching experience; and how he met my grandma. It is so interesting to hear about the background of my own grandpa, who I thought I knew so well.

“Who is that on the swing set? Have I seen her before?” my grandpa asked me.

“Silly Grandpa, that’s Teagan, my sister,” I replied, laughing at his attempt to be funny. I expected his typical chuckle in return, but instead I saw a blank face staring back at me in confusion. I began to get a little confused myself. Maybe he didn’t hear my response. People his age were always hard of hearing.

“That’s Teagan, Grandpa!” I repeated louder this time so that he could hear, but still confusion remained. I didn’t understand what was happening. Grandpa had known Teagan since she had been born. He had to be joking. All of a sudden my dad rushed past me, and my mom grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around.

“Your grandpa isn’t feeling too good, Ty,” she said, leaving me more confused than ever.
At last, my grandma yelled out, “Time to eat!” Music to my ears! I relished the refreshing air conditioning as it attempted to reverse the last two hours of the sun’s heat. To my stomach’s delight, there on the table sat a thick, juicy cheeseburger topped with fresh, green lettuce on a sprinkled sesame seed bun. As soon as I sat down, I was a predator devouring its prey, eating the burger as fast as I could, with some sips of lemonade in between to wash it down.

“Peter, I made some food for you! Please sit down and eat!” my grandma said loud enough for my grandpa to hear. My grandpa only looked back at her with the confused look on his face that I have seen way too often lately.

My grandpa replied back in frustration, “I can’t remember your name…” My grandma stepped back in shock like a deer in headlights. “I know that I love you … but for the life of me, I can’t remember your name,” my grandpa repeated. I couldn’t believe it! I stood there shocked, soaking up the saddest words that I had ever heard.

It was a cold night in late autumn. Colorfully assorted leaves drifted effortlessly in the wind. My whole family walked with fifty extra pounds of sadness weighing them down. I could see that I was not the only one having trouble with our next destination: the hospital. Grandma was at the front, acting as our tour guide through the massive building. My grandpa’s condition had reached the point that he could no longer live on his own. He was restricted to a lonely hospital bed. A mask covered his face, monitors were beeping all around, tubes were extending in all directions, and his eyes lacked the spark of life that we all had grown accustomed to. He had forgotten the most basic function of life: how to breathe.

Alzheimer’s had flipped the pencil in my grandpa’s mind, slowly erasing the narrative of his life and everything that had been written in his memory. Over time, my grandpa had forgotten all seven of his grandkids, all three of his kids, and many daily routines that people take for granted, such as getting dressed, taking showers, and eating. I never thought I would see the day, however, when my grandma was wiped from my grandpa’s memory. Just one year prior, our family celebrated my grandma and grandpa’s fiftieth wedding anniversary. Each of us flipped through over fifty years’
worth of photographs, fifty years’ worth of memories. They had squeezed their entire lives together into one large scrapbook for their relatives to see the enjoyment they had together. It was full of all of their unforgettable moments: moments that should have lasted a lifetime, moments that my grandpa would never again remember due to the cruel illness known as Alzheimer’s disease.

My brother starts to fight back tears. For most of the grandkids, this is the first time a family member has ever passed away. My dad rushes to his side, helping him through it as the tears are becoming contagious and infecting the whole crowd. When I was four, the doctors had diagnosed my grandpa with Alzheimer’s disease. The deadly disease ensured that I never had the chance to see my grandpa the way all of the stories describe him. He was energetic and inventive, he had a sincere love of nature, he was a great teacher, especially in math, he had a great sense of humor, and, most of all, he valued his family more than anything. Before I know it, it is my turn to get up on the stage.

My face is wet, like I just splashed it in the river. My eyes are red, as if I have a grain of sand scratching them. I sit down to play a piano piece that I worked so hard on. I look at the crowd full of somber faces. I only hope I can honor my grandpa for all of the memories he has given me.