

AN
ABSENT
MIND

A NOVEL

ERIC RILL



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*In memory of Norman Rill (1913-1998),
an Alzheimer's patient and wonderful
father, and Lorraine Rill (1919-2007), an
extraordinary caregiver and loving mother.*

"I have lost myself."

In 1901, Mrs. Auguste D., a fifty-one-year-old woman from Frankfurt, Germany, displayed signs of cognitive and intellectual deterioration and became a patient of Dr. Alois Alzheimer. She died in 1906, and, after an autopsy, became the first person diagnosed with a form of dementia that became known as Alzheimer's.

SAUL

THE BEGINNING
OF THE END

I was always considered a bit peculiar, so no one probably suspected anything until a dreary October afternoon when I removed my gray flannel trousers, opened the front door of my house, and ambled down the street. My wife, Monique, must have felt the damp breeze floating through the hallway into the kitchen, at least that's what she told the young resident at the hospital when she arrived at the emergency room.

I remember the astonished look of the bus driver when he refused to let me board, but don't remember crossing in front of a black Audi. A passerby told the policeman I danced blindly

in front of the bus like a kid on his way to the playground, which is amusing considering I am a large man, seventy-one years old, with a belly that strains my belt.

My recollection is that the light had turned green, but to be honest, I really can't remember for sure. It could have been orange, maybe even red. There have been several things that I haven't been sure about lately, like when I was standing in front of the stove, trying to figure out what to do with the pot in my hand. Then I remembered I had come in to make Monique a cup of tea, but I wasn't quite sure how to go about it.

At my last checkup a couple of years ago, Dr. Horowitz told me we all forget things as we get older, that our brains have a defined amount of space for memory, just like a computer, and we gradually get overloaded with "stuff." He said not to worry about it, because that would only make things worse. I took his advice, like always—after all, he had been our family doctor since ... well, for a long time, that's for sure.

Anyway, the young resident at the hospital picked and prodded his way over my body. He stuck his flashlight in my eyes and then pulled out what looked like a silver hammer from his

pocket and banged on my kneecaps. All that was starting to get me upset. But then he stopped and told me to get dressed, pointing to a brown paper bag that Monique had brought from the house.

As I fumbled with the buttons on my shirt, I heard him telling Monique how lucky I was to have only a few bumps and bruises. My blood pressure had shot up, he informed her, but that was normal given the circumstances. What circumstances? I wondered.

Then he motioned her toward the nurse's station, and they began whispering like wartime conspirators under the harsh fluorescent light. He kept jabbering, and she kept nodding. Finally, she walked back toward me, her eyes misty, dabbing at her mascara.

I had finished dressing and stood there holding the brown paper bag tightly under my arm. Monique pried the bag from me, opened it, and pulled out my gray flannel trousers.

MONIQUE
REALIZATION

Saul is sleeping soundly beside me now, his droopy ears hiding under the flat white hair that circles the lower part of his head. He has always been embarrassed about how large his ears are, but I think they're endearing—a slight imperfection in his almost perfect sense of style and looks.

Our marriage has lasted for almost forty-four years—forty-four years of *tsuris*—that's a Yiddish word for trouble or aggravation that Saul's mother taught me. In this case, it's been both.

I am French Canadian and was a practicing Catholic. Some of Saul's friends had married French Canadians, but they all converted to Judaism. There was no way that was going to

happen to me, or so I thought at the time. When we told his mother there might not be a conversion, she said over her dead body would her son marry a *goy*.

We didn't have any Jews in the East End neighborhood of Montreal, where I grew up. I never even saw one until I started working at a department store downtown. My uncle Alphonse, who worked in the Garment District, used to tell us stories of Jewish men with ringlet-like sideburns they never cut and women who wore funny wigs.

About a month after I started work, Saul came into the jewelry department and asked for a Star of David. I had no idea what he was talking about. Not that my English was bad; in fact, it was almost perfect, thanks to the fact that my mother sent me to a tutor after school on the little money she saved from her maid's salary. Saul smiled and explained it was like a cross, but for Jews. As I fumbled through the drawers under the counter, he looked down at me and asked if he could take me out for dinner the following night.

He showed up at my door on Rue Notre-Dame with a box of chocolates. The candy wasn't

for me, but for my mother. I knew she would never approve of my going out with an older man, especially an English man. And I was certainly not going to tell her he was Jewish. But he did—in the first ten minutes. A half hour later, I had to drag him out the door, out of my mother's clutches.

You see, Saul was smoother than silk, like Frank Sinatra—a quality that has worked for and against him throughout his life. Sometimes it was just too easy for him to get what he wanted; sometimes he got it and wished he hadn't.

That's probably how he felt about me. He certainly chased after me, told me what I wanted to hear, what any young girl wants to hear from an older, powerful suitor. And he showered me with gifts.

One day we were walking downtown, and I admired a blouse in a shop window. He told me to wait outside, then barged through the door of the shop and came out with the same blouse in four different colors. Frankly, I would have been happier with a little more affection and fewer material possessions.

I should have realized early on that warmth would not be a cornerstone of our relationship,

but I guess I was used to that from my childhood. I had no brothers or sisters, my father died when I was ten, and mother worked day and night to feed and clothe me.

We married in his synagogue after a two-year courtship, and after I converted to Judaism, but it didn't take long for things to go downhill. There were fights—I don't mean real fights—just constant bickering. But if you ask me if I love him, the answer would be, in a certain way, yes. And if I have been faithful, the answer is yes. And if he has been a good provider, the answer would be yes. Has he been a good father? One of the kids might say yes. Given everything, would I do it all over again? Maybe. Maybe not. But I made my choice years ago, and I am almost sixty-six and a grandmother.

In spite of it all, I thought we would grow old together. We had talked of moving out to Arizona to escape the damp winters because of his arthritis. But all that changed today.

The doctor on duty in the emergency room told me Saul should be tested for Alzheimer's. It's true he had been acting differently for several months—temper tantrums, hiding things around the house, telling the same stories over and over

again, forgetting little things, being suspicious of me. I should have figured it out. And maybe I did and just didn't want to face it, hoping I was wrong. But if I'm honest with myself, you don't forget to put on your pants before you go out if you're normal.

Now, as I lie in our bed, my head resting beside his, listening to more of a purr than a snore, I fear that the rest of his life will be short and difficult. Mine may be long, but full of worry.

SAUL

THE FAMILY

Florence and Bernie came over today. I wish they wouldn't fuss over me like I were some kind of child or old fart. Maybe Bernie feels bad about getting upset with me last Thursday for wetting my pants and leaving a big stain on their good living room chair, although I explained to him that drinking all that water sometimes catches up with you—at least it caught up with me, and more than once.

Bernie is high-strung. You never know when he'll explode. He makes Mount Vesuvius look like a water fountain in a neighborhood park. I still can't figure out why Florence married him. Maybe because I told her not to. Well, I didn't exactly come out and say it, but she got the

message. Next time I have a daughter, I'm going to tell her the opposite of what I think, and then she'll do it my way. Oh well, live and learn!

I haven't mentioned this yet, but we have another child, who is two years younger than Florence. His name is Joseph, but we've always called him Joey. Maybe that's because he still looks like a kid, with his long hair and dimples—and acts like one, too. He and Florence are as different as black and white.

Florence is an old soul—I'm sure she has been here on earth many times before this incarnation. I could tell that the first time I examined the inside of her hand when she was barely two weeks old. There were more lines crisscrossing her palm than there are on a Canadian football field. I say Canadian because a Canadian football field is ten yards longer than an American one and the playing field is also wider, although I don't recollect how many yards wider. But even to have more lines than an American football field on your hand at two weeks old proves my point.

I don't think Florence's pulse or blood pressure ever change. That's probably a good thing. Sometimes when I am boiling over, I just have

to look over at her to find a peacefulness I could never discover on my own.

As for Joey, well, he is like a racehorse, always on the go. Need I say more?

Anyway, I got sidetracked. I wanted to finish up on Florence's Bernie. A real piece of work, as my father used to say. Oh yeah, my father—his name was Lawrence. He had the physique of a boxer, probably lightweight division. Just a little thicker than wiry, but not much. He had six-pack abs until he was almost seventy, and even then he still looked like the kind of guy who could eat nails for breakfast—big ones! Talk about Mount Vesuvius. He could blow like Mount Vesuvius and Mount Etna at the same time. And it would come from nowhere. Like the first bolt of lightning just before the sky blackens. Then just as quickly as he exploded, his famous smile would be plastered over his angular face.

Sorry, I was telling you about Bernie. He started hanging around our old house near the park just after Florence's graduation from high school, or was it before? Yes, it was before, because I can remember him sitting in the first row, blabbing away during the ceremony. Florence was the head of her class—you know

the one I mean—the best one. And that was a big deal, at least to our family. But I guess not to Bernie.

I figured she would get over him and go on to the next one, like we all did at that age—well, almost all—but she didn't, and he became more of a fixture in our house than Roxy, the kids' mongrel dog. I say the kids', but I guess I was the true owner, since I bought her from the SPCA, walked her, fed her, and eventually buried her.

That was a fiasco. I came home one night and told the kids Roxy had died in her sleep. Actually, she was sick. I forget exactly what she had. The vet asked me if I wanted her put down. I figured it was the right thing to do, and it was. Unfortunately, I left the bill that listed the vet's services, including the cost of the stuff he used to put her to sleep, on my nightstand, and Joey found it. But that's another story for another time.

Florence and Bernie—sounds like some kind of bad television show—have two young children of their own. Nice kids, but the jury's still out on whether they will be like him or like her. Pray for the children!

Joey is a confirmed bachelor. Thirty-five, if

I'm not mistaken, and into one thing—money. I swear, if there was a way to get rich from marketing the sweat that drips from my armpits after I wake up from one of those dreadful nightmares of falling into a never-ending black hole, he would be the one to do it. He has more scams going at one time than those guys—what do you call them? The ones who always seem to phone during dinner to sell you something. Anyway, you know who I mean.

Joey's had a few girlfriends, but they don't seem to last long. I liked the one with the curly blond hair, but he said she was a gold digger. At least she had big knockers. I like big knockers. Monique has big knockers.

I used to wonder whether Joey might be gay. You don't blow off a girl with knockers like that because she wants you to buy her a few trinkets. At least I wouldn't. But he doesn't look gay, whatever that means. I used to think being gay meant looking swishy, but Rock Hudson certainly didn't look swishy.

I hope Joey's not gay. That would be terrible. If I knew that for sure, I would probably never speak to him again. Although I remember back in college finding my girlfriend, Susan, in bed

with her roommate, Karen. And I don't mean just in bed. I mean really in bed, if you know what I mean. And I kind of liked that. So maybe I would talk to him after all.

Joey was supposed to drop by this week, but he always has something going on, always some kind of excuse. He only comes by when he needs money, when his deals aren't going well. Monique doesn't get it, because she has never written a check in her life—wouldn't know how. God, if anything ever happens to me—although I can't imagine that, given the results of my last physical. Except for the memory bit, the doctor said I'm in great shape.

I sometimes forget where I park my car when I go to the mall. Florence always kids me that I have Mallzheimer's. But like I said, Dr. Horowitz told me it was normal to lose a little memory, although he did suggest I write things down. I have never written anything down—that's why I've had such a good memory all my life. So I'm way ahead of the game. Even if I lose a bit, I'll still have more than most men my age.