

A is for Alzheimer's (ALZ)

Alzheimer's (n): a disorder of the brain resulting in a progressive decline in intellectual and physical abilities and eventual dementia. Often shortened to Alzheimer's.

My mom taught me my ABCs, then lost all of her words *apparently* to ALZ.

A proud Acadian, she taught me French, English, and Chiac* – her mother tongue. “J’tai mailer ta lettre” or “J’ai mower la lawn,” she’d casually say. Words came naturally to her. Since she had several languages to choose from, there was always a word at the ready. Whether that word came out in English or French was the only real *surprise*.

Speaking of surprises, she also lived near the Atlantic Ocean where undertows are known to lurk.

At first, her words started floating away, washing in and out like the tides that lined her shores. Sometimes her words would wash back in, sometimes they...

Before her words were completely swallowed whole, there was a period of time that I’ve come to refer to as *The Thing* or *La Chose*, because that’s what she called everything: “The thing is on the couch.” “Have you seen the thing?” “Tu sais. La chose!”

One day when we were driving, I told her to go left. She went right instead. Right left; left right. “Where’s the *thing*?” she said. “That way,” I said, pointing to the left.

But here’s the real thing: those were excruciating times. How do you tell your mom, the person who taught you how to read and write, right from left? How do you tell her that driving is no longer *right* when everything seems better *left* unsaid? *Right left; left right*.

While my mom was losing her words, tears were stifling mine. When I came home to visit, we often sat across the table from one another and, with no words left, I’d just cry. Sometimes I tried to pass them off as tears of joy, smiling them away. But if I felt a huge surge, a wave I couldn’t control, I’d scurry to the bathroom and shut the door. Safe behind the walls, I’d flush the toilet and let out my grief.

She passed away over a decade ago, on June 29th, 2004.

I wish words hadn’t failed us both in the end. I still wish I could say goodbye, tell her, “Je t’aime.”

Chiac is commonly spoken in Moncton, New Brunswick. It’s an Acadian French language that includes a lot of English words.