

Reader's Guide

THE LAST OF HIS MIND

Introduction to the Reading Guide

by John Thorndike

Only weeks after I moved into my father's house to look after him, I looked around to see what others had written about caring for people with dementia. I read John Bayley's memoir

Iris, and Eleanor Cooney's *Death in Slow Motion*, and Elizabeth Cohen's *The House on Beartown Road*. These books showed what lay ahead for me and my father, and each went off in me like a bomb. I read another, and another. Some details were repetitive, but I didn't care. Every story was vivid, every one showed a hard trial and a painful loss, and book by book I felt joined to a deep community.

Almost from the start, I knew I had to tell my father's story. I began keeping a daily journal, pure descriptions of how my father's mind was falling apart. Later came flashbacks and family stories such as the day he took Marilyn Monroe waterskiing, or the day he resigned as managing editor of *Life* after a spat with Henry Luce. But most gripping to me was the subtler and more devastating story of what was happening now in his house: how his mind, once such a formidable instrument, was flying around like a chickadee in a windstorm. His memory was going and his nouns deserting him. He told me that he and my mother had once driven to Australia. He forgot that his underpants were meant to be worn under his trousers. He was convinced that the governor of Massachusetts had come to visit us, and now we had him in the refrigerator.



Recently, with enormous affection and curiosity, I've been watching my grandson Max begin to speak. He's sixteen months old and so far has only about ten words, yet when I call my son and we talk over the speaker phone, Max shows how astute he is about language. As Janir and I draw our conversation to a close, saying things that would seem beyond Max's ken ("Good, then we'll talk next week," and "Great, give that boy a hug for me"), Max pipes up with one of his words. "Bye," he says. "Bye bye." Somehow, through our tone or cadence, he has understood that the conversation is coming to a close, and he beats us to the punch.

This is amazing to me, and delectable. How much lighter it is to watch a child learn than to track an old man as his language, memory and self-awareness fall away. Yet in truth, I found my father's decline no less fascinating than Max's growth. As my dad came apart, I couldn't take my eyes off him. Though there were times he was miserable that made me miserable, I recorded his losses with the same wonder I feel about Max's progress. Both rise and fall are compelling to me, and though the rise may be more pleasant, my own stake is actually greater in the fall that lies ahead.

I spent a good year with my father, and even during his painful last week I was happy to be with him. That's not exactly the right word, but almost. I was involved, I was curious and watchful and that to me is a kind of happiness. I'm glad to have shined some light on my father's life, but at the heart of this book is a raw trial that millions of families go through every year, a change as primitive as death and as subtle as the human brain. It's a struggle worthy of Odysseus, but which unfolds domestically, in living rooms, bedrooms and bathrooms, and in our hearts. Of course I had to write about it.

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1 Both the author and his father show an aversion to nursing homes and assisted living. Joe Thorndike wants nothing to do with them, and John has his own reservations about such homes. Do you feel this is just a quirk? Are nursing homes as bad as the author portrays them? Do you have a relative or friend in a nursing home—and how would you feel about living in one yourself?

2 The author says on page 74, “Coercion is the topic that fascinates me.” He resists the neuropsychologist who thinks his father should be taken to the senior center, regardless of whether he wants to go or not. Do you feel that the author was right to urge his father to get out of the house, knowing that his mood would improve when he did? Do you agree with John’s brother Joe, who claims that there are times when Alzheimer’s patients need to give up and stop rising to the occasion?

3 Thorndike wants his father to open up, to talk. He wants to know how his father feels right now, and how he felt years ago about his wife, the author’s mother. This pressure is also coercion, as the author explains. Do you think he had the right to press his father for stories about a troubled marriage, or should he have accepted that his father did not want to talk about it?

4 On page 152, Thorndike’s friend Elisabeth says of her father that at the end of his life she embraced him in spite of his stiffness. “Even if my hugs were not shared, I’m happy I did it. I know his heart felt like doing it.” Thorndike’s

father showed no signs of wanting to be hugged or touched. He didn’t complain about people touching him, but he never sought out physical affection or seemed to respond to daily touch.

Should Thorndike have hugged him anyway, as Elisabeth did her father? Or should he have kept his distance, respecting his father’s apparent desire for autonomy and physical isolation?

5 An old conundrum is quoted on page 26: If your house were on fire and you could save only one of your parents, which one would you choose? The author is blunt in his response. At least in retrospect, he would have chosen his mother. Have you ever pondered that question? Have there been times in your life when you had to choose between parents, or siblings?

6 “Not many sons or daughters,” Thorndike writes, “want to hear what their parents have done in bed—or perhaps worse, in bed with others. But I do.” He goes twice to visit his mother’s lover, and elicits several intimate stories from him. “I wish I knew everything,” he says. “I am that strange guy who would like to see, through some magical *Truman Show* process, the complete video of my parents’ lives, every delicate or searing moment.” Do you feel this is perverse, or exaggerated? If you had the complete video of your parents’ lives, when would you turn it off? Would you want to see your parents arguing? Kissing after dinner? Splitting up? Taking a nap together on a summer afternoon? How much do you want to know about your parents?

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- 7** In this book about the author's father, his mother keeps making an appearance, and there are times when her stories hijack the narrative, wrenching us out of Thorndike's daily life with his father. Do you feel this is disruptive to the book, or does it add another dimension? What do you feel is the book's true subject? Is it Alzheimer's? The story of Joe Thorndike's life? Or is it the author's own story?
- 8** The author is determined to have his father die at home—and if possible, with no one else present. Neither one of them wants anything to do with hospitals. When his father dies at 10 PM, John tells no one except his family. He doesn't alert Hospice or the funeral home. He lies down on his father's bed and holds him in his arms. Does this make you uncomfortable? Is this something you would do? Have you imagined your parents' deaths—or talked about it with them? Or your sibling's death, or a friend's?
- 9** Joe Thorndike feared the life he wound up with in his last month: incapacitated, incontinent and dependent on others. To prevent this—or so his son guesses—he stocked up on Nembutal, a drug sometimes used for suicides. But even a week before his death, when he began to ask for help, when he wanted to “get out of here, I need to get out of here,” his son couldn't help him. He couldn't feed his father the drugs that would end his pain and give him what he was asking for. What do you think held John back?
- 10** Some say Alzheimer's robs people of their lives, and that the death of the mind extinguishes the patient's essence. Others feel when looking after their loved ones that the patient's true being is inextinguishable, and the person they always knew is still there. Are these caregivers describing two entirely different patients?
- 11** The moment of death could not have been more concrete for the author, whose hand was on his father's chest when his heart stopped beating. Yet somehow the truth of the moment escapes him. The author feels that in spite of his attention, he has missed the essence of it. What is it that makes such an experience so difficult to absorb and hold on to?
- 12** Most of us hope to avoid winding up like Joe Thorndike in his last weeks: incontinent, prostrate and almost speechless. The author reports that, like many other people, he has told his friends, “Just shoot me.” But who is going to pull that trigger? Is it fair to burden anyone else with such a request? Have you made any plans yourself to avoid living and suffering in a broken body?



John Thorndike is the author of two novels, *Anna Delaney's Child* and *The Potato Baron*, and a previous memoir, *Another Way Home*. He lives in Athens, Ohio.



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