IMG 2604: This is Ah Ma’s pill box. She is on medication twice a day for dementia and an existing heart condition. Due to her dementia, she would sometimes forget that she had already taken her medicine. As a result, she would throw tantrums, and accuse my aunts of hiding her medicine. Since those episodes, my aunts would take videos of her whenever she eats her medicine, to act as proof whenever she gets angry.

IMG 3207: On a typical weekday where her daughters are out at work, she spends a lot of time drifting off into space. I sit beside her on the couch and break her reverie: “Ah Ma, what are you thinking about?”

IMG 2602: We sometimes talk about the good old days, and whenever we do, Ah Ma would always bring Ah Gong up. He passed away in 2002, when I was four years old. Since my memories of Ah Gong are faint, I take the chance to ask her what kind of person he was.

“Your Ah Gong is a responsible man. He takes really good care of his children, and even doted on you all (grandchildren). Remember how your Ah Gong always carried you, and brought you around the neighbourhood? You loved it.”

I wonder if he watches over Ah Ma from above.

IMG 2634: Sometimes she peers out of the house, and tells me that she enjoys people watching. She can often spend hours just watching the world go by. On some occasions, she would catch a familiar face, a friend, or a family member walking past.

IMG 2378: Saturday is finally here, and it is Ah Ma’s favourite day of the week. This is because our family would all gather at her house for dinner. It has been like that for as long as I can remember, and this keeps all of us closely knitted. This is the one day in the week where her cozy three room flat really comes alive. Ah Ma still prepares her food with much love and fervor, with the only difference being… she is no longer the main chef. Since the onset of her dementia, my eldest aunt has taken over the helm for preparing Saturday dinners. Nevertheless, my aunt still encourages Ah Ma to remain active in the cooking process, as it helps to stimulate her mind.

IMG 2421: “Ah Chye, how is my cooking today?” My Ah Ma asks my eldest uncle. “I thought Ah Choo (my eldest aunt, 1st from left) was the one who cooked dinner today?”

Ah Ma replies cynically: “No la. How can Ah Choo know how to cook this,” not remembering sometimes that she is no longer the main chef. Most of the time, the rest of the family would play along anyway.

At the end of the day, we also secretly thank my eldest aunt for the sumptuous meal cooked. “I don’t mind that she takes credit, the most important thing is that she is happy,” my eldest aunt told me.

IMG 2633: Ah Ma likes to make sure that everyone has eaten before she starts her own dinner. Despite her dementia, she still firmly sticks to her traditional Teochew roots, always eating Teochew ‘muay’ (porridge) instead of rice.

IMG 2394: My aunts created this photo wall to remind Ah Ma of all the happy times she has had with all of us. The photo wall contains family portraits from our yearly Chinese New Year celebrations and pictures of our overseas trips. Sometimes she stares at the photos with a pensive look, and at other times, she gets loud and boisterous, proudly showing off the photos to us. I am glad that we have a photo wall to crystallise these happy moments. When Ah Ma’s memory fails for her, I hope these photos can do some of the storytelling to retain some of those happy fragments.

IMG 2556: Alas, the weekends are coming to an end. As we leave her house, she makes it a point to send us off at her gate. Reluctant for her Saturday to end, she prolongs the conversation at the doorstep. Here, Ah Ma asks my sister to study hard at school, but in truth, my sister has already graduated. My sister gently reminds her that she is already working, to which Ah Ma exclaims: “Aiyo! So fast ah, good good! Why you never tell me earlier?” (My sister had already told her multiple times before).

IMG 3138: The cycle repeats, and she is back to the mundane weekdays again. Ah Ma once told me that her memory was getting worse, and that she’s scared she might one day forget me. I am frightened at the prospect of being forgotten, or even getting dementia as well when I am older. I even wonder sometimes, if deep down inside, she feels scared that she might forget even herself?

IMG 3198: Ah Ma checks her watch every now and then, lamenting how time passes so slowly. She rarely take off her watch, she even wears it to sleep. The only time she removes her watch is when she showers, in order not to spoil it. This watch is a gift from my youngest aunt, with one of her first few paychecks many years back. Even though some of the diamond studs have fallen, she still wears it proudly, telling people that her daughter got it for her.

IMG 2600: This radio accompanies Ah Ma throughout the day, when my aunts are out at work. It has probably been around for many years, as I’ve seen my aunts fix it on numerous occasions. I suppose they do it for Ah Ma, to preserve the familiarity of her surroundings as far as possible.

IMG 2651: Ah Ma loves her coffee. During her time as a full time housewife, she had frequented the provision store in the neighbourhood to get her supply of coffee beans. She would always say: “They would give it to me at a discount, that’s how close we are!”

The provision store has since been replaced by an NTUC Fairprice outlet. Nevertheless, she says it confidently, “When the coffee beans run out, I’ll make a trip to the provision store again.” She forgets that the provision store is permanently closed, and exclaims whenever she realises that the store has closed down. I guess this piece of old news will always be breaking news to her.

IMG 2574: Ah Ma is an extremely active person, and can never be seated down for long. She enjoys long walks around the neighbourhood – I have been on such walks with her. It still amazes me today that she has friends all over the estate. “Your Ah Ma has lived here for 40 years, boy!” her friends would say.

IMG 2337: My eldest aunt always tells me that Ah Ma’s pride has always been centered upon two things in her life – her family, and the garden in her backyard. Ah Ma loves admiring her beautiful flowers, and her green fingers have seen through a steady supply of starfruits for our family. These days, we no longer get much starfruits from Ah Ma, as she claims that passers-by have been stealing her starfruits. (I got angry at the immoral passers-by, by my aunt has since updated me that Ah Ma has been the one prematurely plucking the starfruits in her excitement, rendering them unfit for our consumption.

IMG 2645: At lunchtime every day, my youngest aunt calls home to ensure that Ah Ma has taken her morning medication and lunch. Ah Ma sometimes gets angry as she feels like she is being treated like a child and has been put under supervision. My aunt ends off every phone call with an “I love you, Mama”, which explains her cringing. Although Ah Ma finds it overly mushy, I am sure it warms her heart.

IMG 0390: On Wednesdays when there are no lessons, I make it a point to visit Ah Ma for lunch. I do so to relieve my eldest aunt from her caregiving duties. My “granny-sitting” provides my aunt with some respite, as she is able to do some shopping and spend some me-time reconnecting with herself. Despite my weekly lunch with Ah Ma, she never fails to say “Kenneth! I haven’t seen you in a long time!” I had just came down on Saturday, has it really been such a long time for her?

IMG 3187: I sometimes get tired of the looping conversations dementia has dealt upon us, but I remind myself that Ah Ma would not have wanted this as well, if she could have it her way.

I always wonder how it is like to exist in the mind of a person with dementia. On one hand, it must be disorienting and helpless to have your memories slip away from you gradually. But on a brighter side, it seems not so much of a bad thing to experience organic happiness repeatedly, especially when old pieces of good news are treated like they are new.

Since the onset of dementia, Ah Ma has become a more mellow person than before. While some aspects of her personality have endured, there are other aspects that have changed. I look forward to getting to know this new side of Ah Ma more.

“Ah Ma, say cheese!”

IMG 3299 (extra, not part of story but has a caption): Ah Ma, even if dementia causes you to forget me, I will never forget you.