

"Poignant." —*Entertainment Weekly*

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THE LONG GOODBYE

Memories of My Father

PATTI DAVIS

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

THE LONG GOODBYE

Patti Davis

A PLUME BOOK

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More Praise for Patti Davis and *The Long Goodbye*

"Poignant."

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"Raw and personal . . . The book isn't sappy, pitiful, or strident, and that's a credit to Davis's ability to tell a story. [A] genuine and heartfelt chronology of one person's passing and its effect on those who are unwitting bystanders."

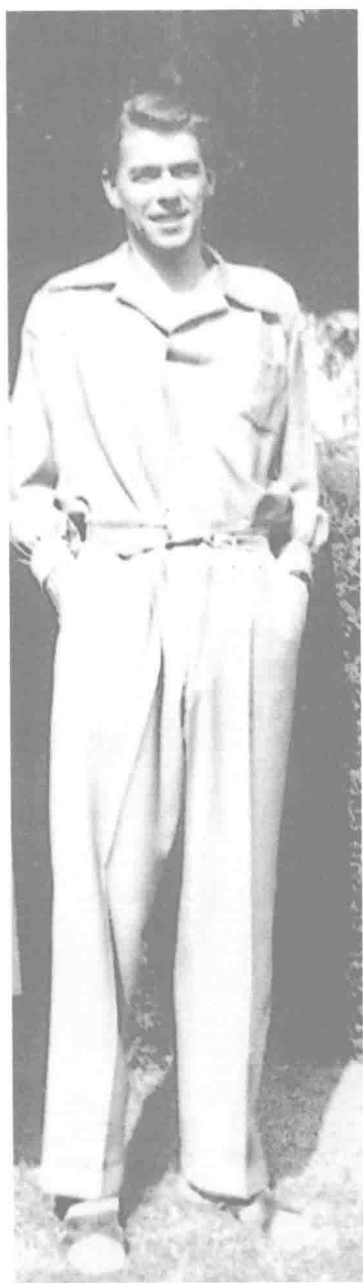
—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Davis's thoughtful and honest reflections make her father come to life again and should foster fond remembrances for readers as well . . . Davis deftly weaves family history and childhood memories into the surprisingly vibrant fabric of her story. The most startling aspect of this effort is its universality . . . her message of love, loyalty, and forgiveness manages to overshadow this 'relentless pirate' of a disease."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Patti Davis is the daughter of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, and the author of five books, including *The Way I See It* and *Angels Don't Die*. Her articles have appeared in many magazines and newspapers, among them *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town & Country*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

THE LONG GOODBYE



Thank you to Victoria Wilson for her insight and wisdom, and for her patience in the long birth of this book. To my brother Ron for his strong arms around our mother's shoulders, and for proving that humor can be passed along in the genes. To my mother for the beauty and courage of her love. And to my father, for showing us the way home.

PROLOGUE

When I was about ten years old, my father and I drove out to the ranch my family owned throughout my childhood. It was a bright Saturday morning and we turned off the Pacific Coast Highway onto the familiar mountainous road that would take us to the open land and undeveloped acres of Agoura. On the way out we talked about his horse, Nancy D, and the foal she was about to have. It wasn't a planned pregnancy; an Appaloosa stallion who had been given to my father had broken through two fences to reach Nancy D and had succeeded admirably.

As soon as we drove into the barnyard of our ranch and saw Ray, who took care of the property for us, we knew something was horribly wrong. Tears streaked his face, his eyes were puffy from crying, and he stood in front of my father with his head down, unable to meet his eyes. Nancy D had died during the night from a virus that no one could have known she had. There were no symptoms, no clues; it suddenly and quickly killed her and the colt inside her.

I immediately burst into tears. Nancy D was the first horse I ever sat on. When I was small, my father used to hold me on the saddle in front of him. When I got bigger, he would lift me onto her back and lead me around the

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ring. She was patient and steady, seeming to know that the small person on her back was young and inexperienced. When I looked up at my father that morning, against the deep blue of the sky, he wasn't crying. He was looking up into all that blue and the expression on his face was sweet and soft . . . and a million miles away.

"Why aren't you crying?" I asked him through my own tears.

He put his hand on my shoulder and met my eyes. "Because," he said, "I'm thinking about all the wonderful times I had with her. We had some great years together."

It was one of my first lessons about death—about looking past it, if only for a few moments, at all the life that went before, all the loveliness and the rich memories. Those are what sustain us, is the lesson my father was trying to impart.

On the day he was dying, I whispered to my father, "You'll see Nancy D again. The two of you will go on long rides just like you used to." I whispered it with the trust he always wanted me to have—that in the stillness of his soul he would hear me.

In the days and weeks since he died, I've often found myself lingering on the image of us standing at the ranch on that bright Saturday morning, my father's eyes tilted up to the sky. His first response to death was to remember the beauty of the life that had passed. The memory comes when I find myself wondering, Where are you?

The larger question aside, I knew one place I would find my father was in the manuscript I had begun in April 1995 and had set aside, after a couple of hundred pages, in February 1997. I'd started writing it as a way to deal with the grief that slammed into me that spring—six months

after my father announced to the world that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I don't know why so many months went by before I crumbled beneath a fate none of us could control. Grief has its own timetable. Maybe there is a mercy to it—a period of shock, numbness. We drift on with the knowledge that life has shifted dramatically but we are unable to fully grab hold of what that means.

In any event, April is when it happened. I began writing a kind of journal—in sleepless nights, in the quiet hush of dawn, sometimes in the back of taxis or at outdoor cafés along Columbus Avenue. I was living in New York and the trees in Central Park were sprouting new leaves. Blossoms were appearing everywhere. The air was warm and billowy. So much new life was around me. Even my relationship with my mother was new. . . .

After many years of a chilly, dispiriting war—one that wounded my father terribly—we had come together lovingly, peacefully, and sadly, joined then in the hard journey of losing my father. It was a journey my mother would call “the Long Goodbye.” When I finally realized I was writing a book, there seemed no more appropriate title.

For almost two years, I navigated the pathways of a grief that was new and unfamiliar. I ricocheted between memories, and fear, and a sorrow so vast I didn't know how it would ever be contained. I made a life for myself in New York, I got to know my mother, finally, as I never had before; I traveled back to California as often as I could to spend time with my father. And I wrote—feverishly and often, trying to make sense of the loss that was tugging at my family, that was claiming us and defining us. In how many ways would we lose my father? Who would

he be after Alzheimer's cruel surgery? Who would we be after years of watching him be whittled away?

During this time, my sister, Maureen, and I also reached past years of competitiveness and jealousy—mostly over our father—and learned how to be sisters. Our long-distance calls became frequent and affectionate.

She had undergone surgery for melanoma and was on a yearlong treatment of Interferon. It ravaged her, made her ill and weak—too weak to travel from Sacramento, her home, to Los Angeles to see our father. I think she suffered more from that than from the cancer treatment.

In February 1997 I put the manuscript aside. The tumult of my grief was starting to abate; I looked ahead and saw months, maybe years of waiting for an ending that was inevitable. Alzheimer's disease locks all the doors and exits. There is no reprieve, no escape. Time becomes the enemy, and it seemed to stretch out in front of us like miles of fallow land. If I kept adding to the book I had committed myself to, I reasoned, I would end up with a tome of a thousand pages. And much of it would be about the long stretches of waiting—waiting for things to get worse, or end—with we, the loved ones, having nothing but helplessness at our fingertips. In the lexicon of the disease, it's called "plateauing." People with Alzheimer's skate along some strangely level course, not markedly different from one day to the next. It can last for many months. But it's the thinnest of ice they are skating on. The change will come. The fall. The next phase. They will get worse, if death doesn't claim them first.

I moved back to Los Angeles in 1997. Closer to my parents, closer to my father's leaving. Over the next seven years, I wrote for magazines and newspapers and occasion-

ally wrote about what we were going through as a family. Postcards—that's how I think of them. I was increasingly aware of how much the world cared and wanted to know how my father was doing, how we were doing. Alzheimer's came out of the shadows during those years. People talked about it openly, without shame or embarrassment. So I wrote postcards when a particular holiday struck me and evoked memories—something many families are haunted by if Alzheimer's has invaded them. Or when some hairpin turn in our long goodbye begged to be recorded.

During those years, the world of our family changed in some dramatic ways. Maureen was felled again by melanoma, but this time, it was everywhere—racing through her body and conquering everything in its path. She was a valiant opponent, refusing to give up. She was in the John Wayne Cancer Ward at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica when our father fell and broke his hip in February 2001 and was rushed to the same hospital. Ron flew in from Seattle. We visited Maureen on one floor and our father on the other. Maureen was too ill to go down three flights and see the father she adored. My father probably wouldn't have recognized her even if she had been able to.

My mother would now have to sleep in their bed alone. Her love, her partner for decades, would now have to sleep in a hospital bed; what was once his office would now be his bedroom. Nurses would have to tend to him, and we were told to expect his death in the next few months. None of us expected him to live for another four years—bedridden, with Alzheimer's as his captor.

Maureen died on August 9, 2001—at home in Sacra-

mento with her husband and daughter around her. Our family was growing smaller in so many ways.

The following month the entire world changed. September 11 destroyed more than two towers, more even than the thousands of lives that were lost on that terrible day. It destroyed faith and hope for the future; it killed something vital in all of us. It ripped at the fabric of life as we knew it and left us with a sense of dread that nothing could ever take away.

My mother and I stood at my father's bedside and told him what had happened even though he couldn't consciously absorb it. "Something awful happened to us," I whispered to him. "We're never going to be the same." I missed him more after September 11 than I had in all the years prior to that day, and I had never considered that I could miss him more. But I did. I missed him as a daughter. I knew he would be able to say something to at least let me look beyond—imagine beyond—tears and crippling sorrow to a time when the pain wouldn't be as bad. And I missed him as an American. Our country had been so cruelly wounded. We desperately needed solace and comfort, a guiding hand and a strong, comforting voice . . . and there was no one who could give that to us. My father's voice was silent. The man occupying the Oval Office had no idea how to soothe a grieving nation.

There was a service at the Bel Air Presbyterian Church, and my mother and I went. We sat in the same pew my parents always used to sit in; I sat on the aisle as my father always did. He was claustrophobic; he insisted on aisle seats. I share that affliction with him and was glad to take his seat. When the choir sang "America the Beautiful," tears broke in me. I wept for this country that my

father had loved so deeply, the country I had shaken my fist at in the sixties and resented in the eighties for taking him away from me—for making him its father, and for being the more important child. I wept for the man lying in a hospital bed a few miles away, unable to help heal the nation he loved so profoundly. I wept for every person who was suddenly and brutally faced with the loss of someone they loved, cared for, thought they'd see tomorrow. I wished I could tap into what my father would say—I knew it would soothe somehow the wide, raw wounds that were everywhere—but I couldn't. His wisdom, his ability to comfort in times of crisis, had been pirated away by a disease that doesn't care what you can offer the world; it's simply come for you because you were in its path.

TEN DAYS AFTER my father died, I took a box of pages from my bookcase, pages I began in April 1995 and had titled "The Long Goodbye." The morning was foggy; it reminded me of my father's last day—the soft white beginning of it. Slowly, over hours, I read and went back in time. I returned to the daughter who was just starting to grapple with the huge loss of her father—the hole in the world that would never be filled when he left. I didn't know then to what degree Alzheimer's would be a slow prelude to dying, a blurring of everything that was uniquely, essentially my father. In 1995 not too many of us knew what to expect from the disease. We knew it was a wasteland, but what did that mean? We imagined stumbling upon oases, spots of lush green in all those acres of dying. In reading through these pages, I have found moments when both Maureen and I held to that illusion.

The truth of the journey through Alzheimer's is that it doesn't happen like that. Alzheimer's is a scorched earth disease. Nothing you think will remain does. But as soon as I tell you that, I must also tell you that if you are with someone who has Alzheimer's and you pay close attention—if you open wide your heart and your mind—you will see that the disease can never cross the boundaries of the soul. For years I had gentle and true conversations with my father—between his soul and mine, sometimes in total silence. There will be people who say that didn't happen, that it can't happen, it's just a wishful fantasy. Don't believe them.

When I began this book in 1995 I had the naive idea that it was not a book about Alzheimer's—only a book about grief. I was wrong. Alzheimer's is a haunting presence in these pages. The relentless pirate. The thief that steals a human being like nothing else can. The only victory over it is in the realm of the soul. My father proved it in his last moments before dying.

This is still, though, ultimately a story about grieving—about learning how to take those first messy, stumbling steps, about the struggle to keep walking even though the path is shadowy and strewn with unexpected obstacles.

There is some messiness in these pages—I was conflicted about my mother's decision to sell the ranch. I wanted to hold on to everything that belonged to my father, mostly because I couldn't hold on to him. He was leaving. Nothing could return him to us. If I could only hold on to the land he'd loved so much . . .

I was also conflicted about the role of the Reagan Library in our lives. I saw it in much the same way as I

used to see America—an institution that owned my parents in ways I couldn't. There was a part of me, all these years later when I read through the manuscript, that wanted to tear up those pages. But I didn't. It's how I felt then, in the tumult of early grief. The story remains as it was in the first telling.

My father is now buried at the library; my mother will be laid to rest there as well. On the final day of a long week of mourning, we stood with miles of sky above us, rolling acres of land below, and I finally understood why my parents fell in love with that mountaintop and why they wanted their legacy to be housed there.

We discover ourselves, assemble our priorities, through beginnings and endings, joys and sorrows. Time carries us like a river and we change along the way. In learning to grieve, we grow into the people we were always meant to be. We look behind to who we were in order to understand who we have become.

We left my father's casket at the library on a blue and gold sunset evening, exactly as he asked us to. But we will never leave him, and he will never be far away from us. The country, the world, will remember a man who loved America, who believed in this land and the hopes it offered. They will remember his respect for the office of the presidency and the dignity with which he treated it.

As his daughter, I will remember his strong arms lifting me onto the back of a horse and how he taught me that one of the most important things was to get back on whenever I fell off so fear wouldn't set in. I will remember him in the ocean, teaching me how to ride waves into shore, or swim straight toward them so I could slide down their backs and make it out to calmer waters. I will

remember how he knew the skies—how he could point out Pegasus, the Big Dipper, Orion . . . and how he always knew where the North Star was. It guides sailors home, he told me once when I was a child and we were visiting my grandparents in Chicago. If you're ever lost, look up and find the North Star.

He taught me to look up—on that clear Chicago night when I was so young that my father could never figure out how I remembered it at all. On a California morning with sun like butterscotch spilling across our shoulders and the horse he loved so much gone, taken in the middle of the night. He taught me to look up.

I'm trying to be a good student. I wake in the quietest hours of night, usually around three a.m. I don't know why, I just do. And like the sailors he told me about, I am drifting, without direction or bearings. I want to know where my father is. So I go to the window and I find the North Star in the sky. That's what he told me to do if I was ever lost and couldn't find my way home.

My father always believed in going home.