

SINGER AMY GRANT

# *Caring for my Father*

THE GRAMMY WINNER FACES THE GREATEST CHALLENGE—AND GREATEST LESSON—OF HER LIFE AS SHE NAVIGATES THE ‘NEW REALITY’ OF **A PARENT WITH DEMENTIA** AND EMBRACES THE UNEXPECTED GIFTS IT BRINGS

by EILEEN FINAN photographs by ED KASHI



# A

If you break those, new ones will grow better." He smiles, uncomprehending. "I guess," he says.

Dr. Burton Grant's memories—of the blooms, of his daughter's singing, and everything in between—have been lost since dementia began to unravel the 80-year-old's mind about four years ago. Now, like so many people her age, the Grammy-winning Christian-pop singer, 51, is experiencing a role reversal as she and her three older sisters care for the man who once held them in his arms. They pay his bills, cook meals and spend time with him as often as possible. "He might not know my name, but I sense familiarity," says Grant, whose mother, Gloria, also suffered from dementia and passed away last year. "Early on I was angry and feeling overwhelmed, like, 'It's not the way it used to be,'" she says, holding back tears several times as she tells her story. But her new role has yielded unexpected gifts. "A friend told me, 'This is the last great lesson your parents will teach you.' That changed everything. I've learned even tough situations are beautiful."

Once a prominent radiation oncologist in Nashville, Dr. Grant began showing signs of a failing mind in late 2008,

my Grant holds her father's hand tightly, leading him toward a bank of yellow lilies swaying in a breeze on her Franklin, Tenn., farm. "Daddy, these are the flowers you planted with me," says Grant, picking off some dried buds. "See the dead ones?

as his wife's dementia was already advancing. "I finished a fall tour, and when I came back, I saw such a marked difference," says Grant. "My dad was always in control of everything, and he waited on my mom hand and foot, but he was losing language." When they'd drive somewhere, she noticed he would repeat directions and the speed limit to her. "When you don't know dementia is in the game, it drives you a little crazy," she says. "That was the most confusing time." A series of uncharacteristic decisions on her father's part, including the impulse buy of a house up for auction, led Grant and her sisters to urge him to get a CAT scan. "I said, 'Dad, it's like somebody put you in a room and water is coming up, and it's at your knees,'" she recalls. "You're losing words every week."

The scan revealed their worst fears: Despite no family history, both parents were now suffering from dementia. Their conditions were not hereditary ("When the doctor told us that, I think I hugged him," she says), but the diagnosis "felt like a double whammy," says her sister Kathy Harrell, 60. "It was so very unfair. You feel like you've been robbed. It was stunning to realize this man I'd gone to for counsel, that part of him wasn't there anymore."

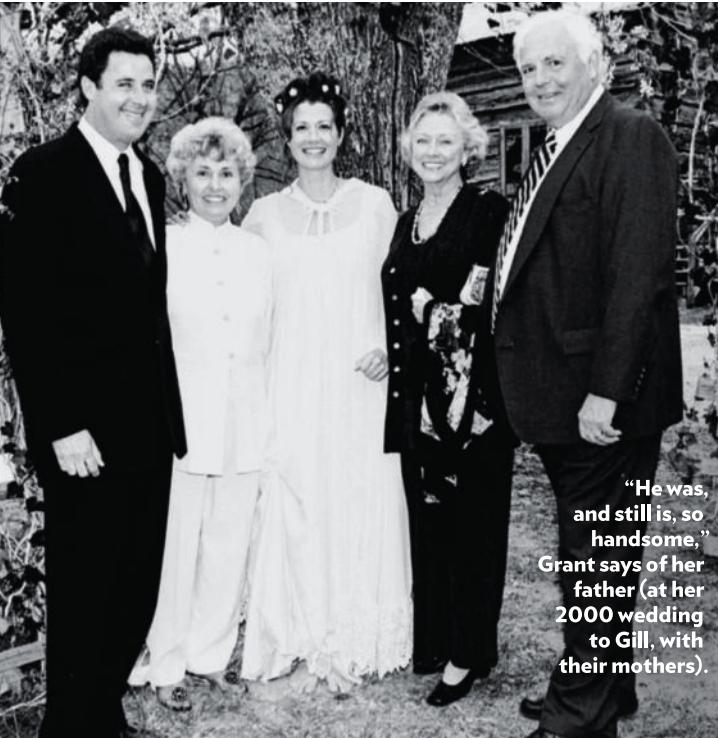
As their dad lost more and more of himself, the sisters moved their parents into an assisted-living facility and began dismantling the independent life the couple had built together, transferring power of attorney and retiring their father's

medical license. "Watching his brilliant mind go away was tough," says Grant, whose experiences led her to join with



## Daddy's GIRL

"We grew up singing hymns," says Amy (with her dad ca. 1963). "He had a beautiful voice."



"He was, and still is, so handsome," Grant says of her father (at her 2000 wedding to Gill, with their mothers).



"It's heart-wrenching, but Amy still finds joy in all things," says Gill (in 2008), especially their blended family of five children.



the National Association of Insurance Commissioners to promote long-term care planning. But "if my ultimate goal is to respect and love my dad, it doesn't matter what the dynamics are."

In her mother's final days, Grant and her husband, country star Vince Gill, 55, moved her to their home while Grant's father remained at the facility. "To watch those girls care for their mom and their dad at the same time, that round-the-clock sisterhood was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my life," says Gill. There was some comfort knowing that their dad wasn't fully aware of losing his wife, Grant says, but he still feels her absence, even in his new rental apartment, where he resides with live-in caregivers. "My mom's walker is still there," she says, "and he'll pat the handle and go, 'Hi sweetie, are you okay? Can I do anything for you?'"

The challenges of the year since their mother's death have been great and small, funny and frightening, everything from their dad's emerging wearing three polo shirts

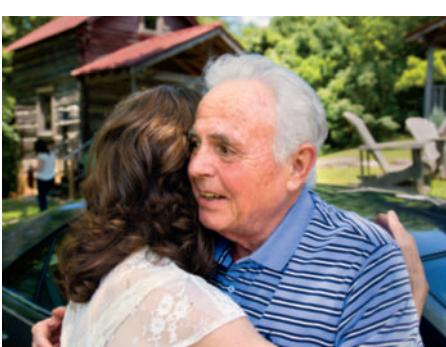
WHO HE IS  
NOW DOES NOT  
*take away*  
*from who he was.*  
IT DOESN'T  
CHANGE THE PAST"  
—GRANT

or insisting on brushing his teeth for an hour, to a 4 a.m. call from the police saying he was found wandering barefoot. "But whatever confronts those girls, they don't run from it," Gill says of his wife and her sisters.

Back at the farm, the singer faces another challenge after she takes her father on a ride in a golf cart. "How do I do this?" he asks, gripping the steering wheel from the passenger

seat. "Do I turn this?" Gently Grant coaxes him down: "Step out, Daddy. Take my hand."

After kissing her father goodbye, Grant sits down with a cup of strong coffee. "That's not really my dad. My dad didn't have trouble letting go of a steering wheel," she says. "But it's a new reality." She understands the futility of reminiscing with him, or even asking what he had for breakfast, but the ritual is soothing. "He doesn't make sense, but it's the comfort of hearing him talk and talking back to him," she says softly. "I wouldn't have guessed this is the way my dad's life played out. But I wouldn't change it. The unexpected and hard aspects of life draw us together." ●



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See Amy through the years