

Shades of Grey

My grandmother died the day of my 9th birthday. It was my first real experience with death, a matter that I seemed to think about more than the average 9 year old. It often crept into my mind when I was alone at night, paralyzing me under my kitten-print comforter. After a few minutes of torment, I would force myself out of my bed and run to the comfort of my sleeping mother.

“What’s wrong, Penny?” She would ask groggily as I slid into the opposite side of the bed.

“Can I sleep with you?”

“Sure, you okay?”

My head relaxed into the pillow as I curled up under the sheets.

“Yeah.” I’d lie. “I just can’t sleep.”

She’d reach over and rub my back until I faded into the intangible world of my unconscious.

Despite my occasional death-related panic attacks, I was not terribly saddened by the news of my grandmother’s passing. She wasn’t the sweet and loving type of grandma that smothered you with hugs and butterscotch candies. Her approach to grand-parenting was much more abrasive, and the only things she gave me were pinches under my arm if I forgot to take my shoes off in her house or put my elbows on the table during dinner. Everything me or my sister did wrong in her eyes was a reflection of our mother’s poor parenting.

My grandma did occasionally read me stories. They were always from the bible, and with each one, it seemed I was supposed to be learning a lesson of some sort. But I had never been to church or learned much about religion, so I usually just got caught up in the adventures of each character. The fight between David and Goliath was my favorite. I asked each birthday and holiday for a slingshot so I could be prepared if I ever had to face a giant. And each time my mother refused, saying I was too young. My sister secretly got me one for my birthday, and it was hidden behind my dresser.

The call about my grandmother came in the morning. My mom had taken the day off from work and was cooking French toast for breakfast. I sipped a mug of chocolate milk, pretending it was coffee, and watched cartoons on the TV above the refrigerator. When the phone rang, my mom

set the spatula next to the stove and turned to answer, “Hello? Oh, Bobby, hi.”

He was my mom’s younger brother by 10 years. My mom was already out of the house when Bobby was my age, and he had succumbed to my grandmother’s stern religious ways when he was young. I figured he was calling to wish me happy birthday, and because he felt it was his duty to check in and make sure I didn’t get into trouble. There was still hope for me, unlike my rebellious older sister. A few months ago, Amelia had dropped out of her senior year of high school to live with her 20 year old boyfriend. I held my breath and hoped my mom didn’t hand me the phone.

“Bobby, slow down, what happened?” Her brow tightened with concern and she walked into the dining room to continue the call in private.

I exhaled a sigh of relief for successfully avoiding an uncomfortable conversation, but my apprehension was immediately replaced with curiosity. What didn’t she want me to hear? The dining room was separated from the kitchen by a short hallway. I flicked off the burner on the stove and quietly walked towards the hallway. If I was caught, I could just pretend to be grabbing a plate from the cupboard.

“Mmm hmm, mmm hmm, oh no.”

I could just barely hear her, but it was obviously bad news. My mind raced through the possibilities. Was it something with my sister? No, he wouldn’t be the first to know. Maybe he was calling because he lost his job again and needed money. No, that didn’t seem right either. My mom sounded too distressed for something that usual. It had to be something with my grandmother.

I lingered in the hallway, listening to a one-sided conversation, trying to fill in the holes. She was leaning on the dining room table trying to calm my uncle down. “Bobby, slow down, where are you now?”

I pictured him in my grandmother’s living room pacing back and forth clutching a rosary.

“Which hospital?”

She must be sick. My mental image skipped to her lying in a hospital bed and Uncle Bobby doing nervous laps around the room.

“I’ll come right now.”

I wondered if my mom would take me with. Sometimes she tried to keep me sheltered from things she felt were too “grown-up”. I’d usually end up finding out about them anyways, from either my sister or my

eavesdropping habits. But I could not eavesdrop if I wasn't there, so I hoped I'd get to go.

The only other time I was at the hospital was when my sister dislocated my shoulder. We were playing "windmill", where she would grab my hands and spin me around so fast my legs would fly out and my body would be horizontal to the ground. I giggled uncontrollably, until my shoulder popped out of socket and my laughter turned into wailing.

I sensed the conversation winding down and sat back at the kitchen table.

"We'll figure that out, just stay there." My mom made her way back to the phone receiver. She exhaled heavily. I pretended to watch cartoons, waiting for her to tell me what happened.

"That was your uncle." She eased herself into a chair to my left. "He was calling about Grandma Margery."

My head shifted from the TV to my mother. I was surprised to see she had been crying. Her eyes were still glossy with tears.

She reached her hand out and gently touched my arm, "Penny, your grandmother has passed away."

An awkward lump swelled in my throat. Not because I was upset, but because I had no idea how to react. My mother's sorrow had caught me completely off guard. It seemed like she expected me to start crying, but I could not muster any tears. I felt no sadness. I stared at her blankly, my mind fumbling for something to say. Finally, I managed to mumble, "How did she die?"

"She had a stroke. She was rushed to the hospital, but it was too late. We have to go meet Uncle Bobby." She let go of my arm and stood up. "Go put your shoes on."

I ran to the front hall, leaping over our cat Henry. I did get to go! A spark of excitement rose in my stomach, but I shoved it back down. It was wrong to feel happy at a time like this. I grabbed my tennis shoes and slipped them on. My mother was waiting for me at the back door.

"Should we tell Amelia?" I asked as she closed the door behind me.

"We can't track her down right now." She jingled the keys in the lock aggressively.

We shuffled down the flight of stairs that led to the back hall. The summer heat had finally arrived, and the sun baked through my navy t-shirt.

“She’s probably at Jimmy’s.” I suggested. My sister’s boyfriend lived above Scottie’s Pub, which he also bartended at.

“Maybe, but we don’t have time to check.”

I slid into the front seat of our mint-green Volkswagen Beetle. The thick, sultry air that was trapped in the car immediately smothered me. I cranked my window down and gasped for air.

“But we could pick her up!” Hope filled my voice. I missed having Amelia around. She hadn’t been home all summer, and had gotten in a fight with my mom just before she left. It ended with her kicking a hole through her bedroom door then storming out of the house. “Please mom?”

“We don’t have time.”

“It’s just a few blocks away.” I pleaded.

“Penelope Louise, this is no time to argue.” Her harsh tone was not something I was used to. She cranked the key in the ignition and the car groaned to life. The tiny Beetle roared as it accelerated backwards out of the driveway and onto the street.

My head darted towards the passenger-side window. I closed my eyes and let the warm summer air brush my face. It smelled of lilacs and freshly cut grass, with a hint of steaming asphalt. My mom’s moodiness made me uncomfortable and I wished I was alone, outside riding my bike or playing basketball in the backyard.

Her relationship with my grandmother was anything but loving, so I was confused about why she was so upset. The divide began long before I was born, when my mom met my father and moved out when she was 18. My dad refused to convert to Catholicism before marrying my mom, so Grandma Margery refused to attend the wedding. It would not be recognized by God, she believed, therefore it would not be witnessed by her. Nothing but a charade, she muttered repeatedly at various family functions. For the first few years of their marriage, she was around for only the major events- when Amelia and I were born, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthdays. My mom didn’t want to cut her completely out of our lives just because of their disagreements. But Grandma Margery’s disapproval of my parents, my father in particular, loomed with each visit, and it was obvious she blamed him for stealing my mother away from God. It created a tension

that spread beyond the forced family interactions, and permeated my parent's relationship. My dad was always a heavy drinker, but he started spending more time at the bar than at home. It became too much for my mom. I was 4 when she kicked him out. While my mother struggled to pull herself out of depression and raise 2 children, Grandma Margery preached how it was proof that a godless marriage could not endure, and my father was destined for hell. She was delighted to have been proven right, and my mother never forgave her.

Aside from the rumble of our car, the rest of the 10 minute trip was silent. I stared out the windshield, watching the ripples of heat rise off the road. If I looked far enough ahead, the road appeared to be wet. But the heat was full of deception, and the water disappeared before I reached it.

We arrived at St. Charles Hospital and wound through the parking structure until we found a spot. I followed my mother down the ramp and into the elevator.

"Which floor is Uncle Bobby on?" I asked, waiting to press the button. She reached over and hit the 1, it glowed a pale yellow. "We'll have to ask at the front desk." My mother sounded distracted.

I followed her off of the elevator and through the two glass doors that parted as we approached. It felt like I was stepping inside of a giant refrigerator. The bright florescent lighting bounced off the shiny white floor, and the chilled air smelled of stale cafeteria food. We walked up to the reception desk and my mom began talking to the man behind the counter.

My attention wandered to the people roaming around the lobby and the hallway. An elderly woman in a baggy white gown staggered alone down the hallway behind me. Her weathered knuckles were clasped tightly to the walker in front of her. A lost expression hung morosely on her wrinkled face. To my left, a younger man, not much older than my mother, sat slouched in his wheelchair with a clear tube leading from his nose to a metal canister next to him. An attractive young woman with raven black hair and a ruby stud in her nose stood behind him. She gently pushed him closer to the window that looked out to the hospital patio. Probably his daughter, I thought. At least he had someone, unlike the woman with the walker. I wondered if these people were going to die, and the somber atmosphere made me feel helpless.

"Penny?" My mom's hand brushed my back pulling me from my gaze. "You okay?"

“Mm hmm.” I nodded.

“We have to take the orange elevators to the 2nd floor.”

We stepped onto the elevator and I pushed the button marked 2. “Will grandma still be there?”

“Her body will be, honey, but her soul is no longer on this earth.”

That was the first time I had ever heard my mother speak of a soul or anything having to do with religion. It seemed she had held onto some of those beliefs her mother had enforced so militantly throughout her life.

The elevator doors parted and we stepped out. The smell of antiseptic saturated the hospital hallway and made my stomach uneasy. It also didn't help that my breakfast was still sitting in the pan on our stove at home. I traipsed behind my mother as she examined the signs on the wall. After a few turns, we entered another reception area.

The heavy-set woman behind the counter looked up. Her eyes were underlined with dark circles. “How may I help you?”

“Hi.” My mom forced a smile to be polite. “We're here for Margery Murray?”

“Your name and relation?” The woman rasped, not returning my mom's fake cheer.

“Louanne Marques, I'm her daughter.”

The woman typed on her computer for a few seconds before answering. “Okay, go on back to room 2101.” She directed, handing my mom a plastic rectangle with a clip on it. “Make sure you return your visitor badge before leaving.”

The room was smaller than I imagined, and crowded with medical equipment. Two burgundy vinyl-upholstered chairs were crammed on one side of the bed, next to a large machine that was steadily beeping. Uncle Bobby sat in one of the chairs, hunched over on the hospital bed holding my grandmother's hand. I didn't understand why she was hooked up to that machine if she was dead, was my mother wrong? Did they bring her back to life?

“Bobby, we're here.” My mom rushed to his side, “How are you doing?”

He startled at the sound of my mom's voice, and then turned to greet her. “God help me.” His voice was weak with grief.

“She is with him now.” My mother sat down in the empty seat next to him.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” His head collapsed into his hands. “I don’t even know where to go now.”

Uncle Bobby had lived with my grandmother in her small 2 bedroom apartment ever since he lost his job at Wilson Family Roofing Company 2 years ago. Like my grandmother, he had a habit of pushing his religious beliefs on everyone, including customers. The last straw was when Bobby laid down in a customer’s driveway reading the bible in protest. The customer was trying to leave for work, but Bobby wanted to talk to him about God. Since the man refused, my uncle chose to block him from leaving. When Bobby returned to the office an hour later he was fired before he even stepped through the door.

With no job, and no savings, Uncle Bobby couldn’t afford his rent and got kicked out of his apartment. My grandmother welcomed her son into her home with open arms, proud of his efforts to save the heathens from damnation. He has lived there ever since.

“Can’t you stay at Mom’s still? It’s a nice apartment.” My mother suggested.

“I can’t afford it.”

Her head tilted back as if she were thrown off by what he said. “I thought you were working for that moving company? Doesn’t that pay pretty well?”

“I’m not there anymore.”

“Oh.” Her response was terse with disappointment.

I was standing in the doorway listening to their conversation and staring at the lifeless lump of blankets on the bed that was my grandma.

A nurse appeared behind me, “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt.” She apologized as she brushed beside me to enter. “Dr. Krolly needs to speak to Mr. Murray for a moment.”

Even though the nurse asked for my uncle, my mother was the one who answered, “Okay, should we come into the hallway?”

“Sure, that will be fine.”

My mother stood up and led my uncle out of the room. “We’ll be right back, honey. Just have a seat for now.” She said as they passed me.

“Okay.” I responded timidly. I was hesitant to be alone with my grandmother. The room was silent, except for the rhythmic beeping of the

machine next to the bed. I inched towards one of the chairs. My grandma's face was slack and pale. Her eyes were shut but I felt an irrational fear that they would suddenly pop open. Goosebumps rose on my neck and arms. I sat down and watched the green electric line on the monitor jump with each beep until my mother returned.

"Penny, do you want to say anything to Grandma Margery?" She asked, sliding into the chair next to me.

"I thought she was already dead?"

"They used these machines to keep her body alive a little longer, honey, so we could have a chance to see her one last time and say goodbye." Her soft voice eased my apprehension, but my goose bumps remained. The brisk air of the hospital made me wish I had brought a sweatshirt.

"I don't know." I mumbled, shrugging my shoulders.

"It's okay, you don't have to." Her hand lightly rubbed my back. "They'll be coming in soon to turn off the machines, so let me know if you change your mind."

I knew I wouldn't. Anything I could think of saying would be generic and forced. It seemed better to just say nothing. A few minutes passed, and my uncle came in. A priest followed behind him, carrying various items in his hands. His long black tunic looked warm and I wanted to use it as a blanket.

"Good afternoon Louanne." He smiled sympathetically at my mother as he set his supplies on the small table next to the doorway. His face was slender but wrinkled, and his white hair circled his head like a halo. I wondered how he knew my mom's first name.

"Good afternoon Father."

"Is this Penelope?" He remarked stepping further into the room. "I haven't seen her since her baptism. She looks so grown up."

Baptism? I never knew I was baptized.

My mother backed up so the priest could see me. "Yes. She just turned 9, today is her birthday actually."

"Oh, Penny, I'm sorry this happened today of all days." They both turned their eyes to me.

This sudden attention on me made my cheeks warm. I looked to the floor and shifted out of his line of sight, leaning behind my mother.

"She's very shy." His eyes squinted with a smile.

My mother patted my back, "She certainly is."

I hated when adults talked about me like I wasn't there. It made me feel smaller than I already was.

My silence seemed to cue them to move on. "I suppose we should get started." The priest announced.

My mother and uncle met him at the bedside. I remained sitting. Watching.

He grabbed a small glass bottle of holy water off the table.

"Let this water call to mind our baptism into Christ, who by his death and resurrection has redeemed us."

He sprinkled the water over Grandma Margery. "My dear friends, we are gathered here in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who is present among us. As the gospels relate, the sick came to him for healing; he loves us so much that he died for our sake. Let us therefore commend our sick sister to the grace and power of Christ, that he may save her and raise her up."

It all sounded very scripted and emotionless to me. I didn't see the point. He continued with more lines and prayers. My mother and uncle joined in at times with rehearsed responses. Then he brought out a vial of oil, which he rubbed on my grandmother's forehead, as he said a final blessing. The entire ritual seemed bizarre to me and I was glad when it was over.

Once he finished, the priest stepped into the hallway to get the doctor.

My mom glanced over to me, and extended her hand, "Penny, come stand next to me."

I stood up and stepped beside my mother, unsure of what was going on.

"The doctor is going to come in soon to let your grandma pass on completely." Her voice was delicate and calm.

I didn't say anything back, because, again, I didn't really know what to say. A moment later, the priest returned with the doctor behind him.

"Is it okay if we stand by the bed?" The priest asked Dr. Krolly.

"Of course." He stepped around us to turn off the beeping monitor. Then he moved around to the other side of the bed and took out a small vial of clear liquid.

I looked up at my uncle. He had his head bowed and his hand rested on my grandmother's forearm. The priest was next to him, clutching a silver cross with both hands close to his chest.

The doctor took a syringe and drew up some of the liquid from the vial, “This is just a sedation to keep her muscles relaxed.” He explained, injecting it into a tube that was connected to my grandma’s arm. “I’m going to remove the ventilator, but she won’t immediately pass on.”

“How long does it take?” My mother asked warily.

“Usually just a few minutes, but it varies with each patient. It can take hours or even days in some cases.”

We stood around my grandmother’s bed, waiting for and wanting her to die. It made me feel uneasy. Hoping for a person to die seemed wrong, and didn’t fit with everything I had been taught before. The next 10 minutes seemed to expand beyond the normal restraints of a clock, like a rubber band stretched around an elephant. Time was funny like that. It was supposed to be constant but it never seemed to obey the rules, speeding up or slowing down whenever it pleased. Was there even such a thing as time? Or was it just something we created to try to make life make sense.

It took much longer than 10 minutes. My mom awkwardly escorted us out of the room, not knowing what to do. The doctor said it could take hours. Grandma Margery died at 3:33 pm, the exact time that I had been born, 9 years ago to the day in the same hospital.

I wasn’t close to my grandma, and I had gathered enough from my mom to realize she was far from the perfect person my uncle Bobby believed she was. But I couldn’t help but feel a sadness for her, imagining her body all alone, decaying, devoured by the earth. It was at that moment I decided I never wanted to be buried.

Most people are so terrified of being alone, even the introvert and recluse craves a connection to some living being in one form or another. Yet in death, there is no choice. You are completely utterly alone. Even if you are surrounded by people, you are ultimately alone. And I think that’s what terrified me from a young age. What made me run into my mother’s bedroom in the middle of the night. I had no control over it, one day, no matter what I did, I would end up like Grandma Margery.