Don’t Forget

The nursing home reeks of rotting flesh. It seems to hover in the air, swirling around us like an early morning fog. A janitor has tried to cover the smell with pine-scented cleaner, but it doesn't help. I hold my grandmother's hand as we march down the stark hallway, and though I am fourteen years old, I am not embarrassed.

Right away, I hate the name 'nursing home'. Let’s just be honest and call it what it is: It’s where you go to die. The whole idea of living out your final years with total strangers is depressing. Why can't these saggy, old people's families take care of them? I don't ask my grandmother this question because I am afraid that I already know the answer: nobody wants to take care of them. And I can't say I blame them, these families who have lives to live that don't include changing bedpans (or worse, diapers!) and spoon-feeding toothless patients. My great-grandmother, the one who lives and dies here, is no exception. She has been, in a sense, cast away from our family, her problems deemed too severe to be handled by my grandmother, her only child.

My grandmother's heels click-clack on the gray-flecked tile and I sing along in my head, the rhythm of her shoes keeping time to Whitney Houston's “I Wanna Dance With Somebody.” This is one of my quirky habits, finding songs that fit the rhythms around me. (Once I had a Huey Lewis song playing on repeat in my mind for two weeks. It was maddening.)

“Here we are.” My grandmother stops abruptly outside of Room 116, and the song in my head comes to a screeching halt, as if a record needle is suddenly and carelessly lifted. Party's over. I peer inside and see Nan, my great-grandmother, sitting on a recliner that was probably once blue, her head slumped down, a thin, stretchy line of saliva hanging from her mouth. I sense my grandmother's disdain in the way her voice becomes sharp.

“Oh, Mother,” she drops my hand and rushes to wipe the offending spit from her mother's mouth and lap. I am both terrified and fascinated at the sight of her, like unexpectedly stumbling upon

the maggot-filled cat carcass on the sidewalk. I am repulsed but cannot look away. My stomach turns.

"Can't they put a bib on her or something?" My question is serious and well-intentioned, although it probably does not sound that way.

"Allison, really!" My grandmother turns her head toward me. "That is ridiculous. Nan's not a baby."

She is not a baby, but she cannot speak or walk, and I am pretty sure she is wearing a diaper. So a bib sort of makes sense to me considering the big picture. I envision it: soft, white terrycloth with "World's Best Great-Grandmother" stitched in hot pink thread. I keep this to myself. Her room is bleak, white walls with white tile. I suppose it's meant to look sterile, but the effect is utter hopelessness. Perhaps a nice light blue paint or a crisp linen curtain would cheer the place up a bit. The cheap, seventies-style dresser is adorned with pictures of our family—there is one picture in particular that always gets my attention. In it, I stand erect, wearing Nan's long, flowing wedding gown, which is permanently suspended in the breeze. A crown of white azaleas sit loosely on top of my head. The sprawling vines of Nan's okra plants are spread out near my feet, which are bare and tanned.

My thoughts turn to three summers before, the summer the picture with the okra was taken, the summer I turned eleven. I would be starting middle school that August, and I'd become quite the irritating, giggly, dramatic, know-it-all preteen. My parents were taking a cruise (how cheesy!) to the Bahamas and decided to drop me off at Nan's house, which was on the way to the port in Charleston.

I had vented all of this the night before over the phone to Stacey McMaster. She was the most popular girl in our grade and I spent countless hours daydreaming of ways to impress her. At the same time, I secretly hated her. Looking back, I think I hated her because I wanted to *be* her, but never would come close with my frizzy, mousy brown hair and my skinny legs. Frankly, I was shocked that she was even paying attention to me, as I had nothing to offer her that would promote her social status, which was, of course, every middle schooler's main concern. (She realized this as well, though surprisingly, it took her almost a full month. I was demoted to mere acquaintance upon returning to

school in August.)

I found the fact that my parents wanted to spend time alone 'totally gross and weird', as I had told Stacey the night before on the phone. She pretended to listen, but I am pretty sure she was concentrating on fixing her bangs. I heard the soft *whoosh* of the aerosol spray can. "Aw, sweetie," she'd said, "that's funny." But it wasn't. I wasn't joking, and I knew that someone my own age who called me 'sweetie' would never take me seriously. Something had happened that year among all of us kids. Something shifted in our understanding of ourselves, each other, the world. The change was subtle at first, like a breeze that carries the faint smell of a familiar perfume. But it ignited something in us, something profound and as old as the ocean, causing us to look at each other in a new way, part fear and part fascination. Suddenly, all that mattered was to matter. And here I was, trapped in my parents' car, on my way to spend two weeks of my precious summer with an old lady. I stared at the back of my mother's head, loathing her coiffed chestnut brown bob just because it belonged to her, and grinding my teeth in passive-aggressive contempt. How I wished my eyes could shoot bullets.

My mother, from the front seat, reminded me for the thirty-sixth time, "Allie, puh-lease remember to help Nan out with the dogs. She says she can handle them, but I know for a fact that Sugar got out last week and was gone for two days because she forgot to close the gate."

I'd overheard my mother's hushed conversations with her mother, my grandmother, about the declining state of Nan's mind. It had been happening for years, slowly and subtly, ever since my great-grandfather died when I was eight, but Nan insisted it was normal, just another depressing gift of growing older. She liked to joke about it. "Hell," I'd heard Nan say to my mother on the phone, my hand pressed firmly against the mouthpiece so she wouldn't know I was listening, "maybe one day I'll forget how old I am."

Helping Nan remember was not my mother's only request. For weeks leading up to the trip, she'd have a new reminder for each day: "Puh-lease remember to clean up after yourself, scrub underneath your fingernails, wash your pajamas every other day, make your bed, not pick your toenails,

blah, blah, blah." Up until then, I had only spent a few sporadic days with Nan, mostly holidays and all when I was in primary school, but from my mother's list of rules, I deduced she had inevitably morphed into a prissy, decrepit old lady whose idea of a fun afternoon was polishing her tea set and practicing her posture. Wasn't that what happened when you grew old?

When I arrived, stretching and yawning from my catnap in the backseat of the station wagon, I saw a slight, but sturdy woman standing in the front yard, her arms outstretched as if she were hugging the sunlight. Her hair, pulled in a low bun, was the color of a new moon, gloriously white. I thought she looked magical, like a good witch.

What I discovered about Nan that week was that she didn't own a tea set (actually, she'd given it to her daughter, my grandmother, when she married), and her posture was perfect thanks to the two hours a day she spent playing her piano. I'd sit at her feet and watch, starstruck, as she lost herself in something rolling and deep. She let me go for long walks by myself through her neighbor's property, which had the feel of an enchanted forest. The only instructions I got were, "Just come back when it starts to get dark. Have fun."

We cooked supper every night with fresh zucchini, squash, and tomatoes from the giant planters she kept on her porch. Everything about her was beautifully wild and seductive. I was fascinated by the way she sat with her girlfriends on the front porch, rocking back and forth, drinking sweet wine and laughing loudly when one of them made an irreverent joke about men. I'd stifle a giggle quietly from the wicker sofa where I was pretending to read. "Oh, Allie, just act like you didn't hear that," she'd say. But she was laughing when she said it. I fell in love with that woman. She was so alive, so much more alive than my mother, who, over forty years Nan's junior, insisted on pantyhose and hair clips and slips underneath everything. My mother was only thirty-seven at the time, but she may as well have been eighty-seven for all the life she'd missed out on every day. She was so full of rules and Nan, by contrast, was so full of freedom. It emanated from her, and I wanted to catch it and take it home in one of the Mason jars she used to pickle okra. When I stood in her driveway two weeks later, teary-eyed

and already nostalgic for her, Nan held me close and whispered, “You are so special, my love. We are kindred spirits, you and I. Don't forget who you are.” Don't forget.

I cried for the entire week after I left Nan’s house. I should have been agonizing over a boy who didn’t like me or not making the cheerleading squad, but here I was, an awkward pre-teen, locked away in my room, pining for my great-grandmother. I remembered the way she made me feel: honest, normal, full of joy. She was just that special.

Now, barely three years later, I stand in the room with Nan, my beloved great-grandmother, waiting for my grandmother to say something to break the eerie silence. Finally, she does. “Mother, you look so pretty! I *love* what the girls have done with your hair. And that nail polish is *per*fect for your skin tone!” I know for a fact that Nan hates nail polish and she would die if she knew they had curled her hair. (Shouldn't her own daughter know this?) She gushes over Nan. I have been here every Sunday afternoon for a month, and each time it's the same. She rushes about, talking to Nan as if she expects a response. And then she says it:

“Allie, go give Nan a hug and a kiss.” My stomach turns again, sharper this time.

“Uh, I gotta go to the bathroom.” This is my go-to excuse, and it buys me at least five minutes. I experiment with all of the cheap, powdery soaps and lotions lined up on the sink, but I can only stall for so long. I even pour more Pine-sol in the toilet and give it a quick scrub with the brush I find in the corner. Somehow this makes me feel better, more in control.

Tossing the damp, brown paper towels into the trashcan, I take a deep breath and push the door open. My grandmother is gone. Nan's empty stare is fixed on the wall just above my head. I want to make a run for it, but worry that any sudden movement may get her attention and her glassy eyes will find and paralyze me. It’s not that I’m afraid of Nan; I am afraid of what has taken over her mind and body. What kind of parasite is it? Where did it come from? Is it contagious? It has drained the color from her hair, her skin, her eyes. It has stolen everything that made her who she was. She stares and stares, yet sees nothing. Her eyes are useless globes; they may as well be gumballs. I stand, frozen, the

air heavy and tense with my fear. From down the hall, I hear the muffled click-clack of my grandmother's heels. They become louder and sharper as she approaches the room. *Hurry, hurry, hurry*, I think, with each footstep.

"I just can't believe they let these flowers get so dried out. Honestly, for what I'm paying them..." She is mumbling and holding a crystal vase full white of daisies, their petals thin and papery, like the skin that covers her hands. She, too, is getting older. Placing the vase on the thick concrete windowsill, she speaks without looking at me. "Allie, you really should give your Nan a hug and kiss."

It does not occur to me to lie. "I need some water," I say, and head toward the door. My grandmother swivels around catches me by the arm. She pulls me to her, nails pressing slightly into my skin, so lightly that it might just be my imagination, until I'm just a few inches from her mouth.

"Go...give...your Nan...a hug...and kiss." Each word stings. I see her jaw slightly clenched and I know that I am defeated. Her face and her grip on my arm soften simultaneously. "She loves you so much," my grandmother says quietly, her voice sad with remembering.

For the last month, I've had nightmares about this moment. In them, I sit on Nan's lap as she slowly turns her head towards me. Then, laughter, wild and demonic, erupts from her mouth. It is not Nan; rather, it's the monster inside of her that's taken over, trying to get me too. It looks at me from behind her eyes and mocks me for my own mortality. In my dream, I try to jump up, but notice that I am literally glued to her lap. So I sit there, frozen, until I wake up sweating, a strange tingling feeling in my feet. I know that in reality, this is impossible, that Nan hasn't uttered a sound in over a year, but the dream is *so* real that I wake up smelling Pine-Sol.

I swallow hard and inhale shakily, terrified to touch her. Her fingers, bony and twig-like, lay useless on her lap. But I can picture the demon inside reaching slowly for my throat, morphing Nan's vacant expression into a chilling smile.

My grandmother is studying me with her arms folded over her chest, which means I have no choice. Inching towards Nan, my breath becomes short and ragged. She thinks I am being defiant, that I

am embarrassed by Nan, to have to touch her skin and hold her hand. I hover above Nan's lap as if I'm squatting over a toilet in a public restroom. Any moment, it will grab me, it will snap its head up and start the low howl just like in my nightmare.

"Allie, sweetie, are you okay?" My grandmother questions. She looks genuinely concerned. I don't want her to know that I am afraid. That I am afraid because I don't know Nan anymore. That I am afraid because the last time she spoke to me, she called me 'Susan', her younger sister who died from typhoid fever as a child. I used to sit on Nan's lap all the time, but that was before her eyes began losing their color. Now, they remind me of cold steel.

I realize I am holding my breath. Hot, burning tears well up in my eyes and I try to choke them back. Squeezing my eyes shut, I peck Nan's cheek at lightning speed. Humiliated, I spring from her lap, full of shame and adrenaline. I exhale loudly.

"I'm fine," I lie, hiding my trembling hands behind my back.

Nan dies on a Friday. Just like that, the monster has won. Or maybe Nan has won. I will never know for sure. On Saturday, practically and efficiently, we clean out her room. As we pack her gowns and sweaters into plastic bins, I feel relieved that she is gone. She is somewhere, I suppose, though I can't imagine where. I picture her with outstretched arms, walking through her neighbor's enchanted forest.

"Let's put these sweaters in that yellow container," my grandmother tells me for the third time, and I obey. She must have had a hundred sweaters. It seems that old people are always cold. My grandmother speaks. "Allie, do you remember her? I mean, do you *really* remember what Nan was like?"

"I do. I remember how her eyes were so clear and sparkly. And blue. She used to let me sneak ice cream for breakfast when we visited for Christmas." These things are true, but mostly I say them to make Nan feel better. "And remember those blueberry bushes in her yard? She taught me how to tell when they are the perfect ripeness."

I watch her pick up an emerald green scarf from the pile of sweaters and hold it to her face. She breathes in the leftover scent of Nan, and I feel awkward, like I'm watching lovers kiss goodbye for the last time.

"This was her favorite." She smiles as she says it and her eyes look lonely.

We work quickly and within an hour, her closet is empty. I halfway expect to see boxes containing Nan's memories stacked against the back wall of the closet. I imagine them labeled in chronological order according to how they were stolen from her: *Important Dates, Names of Family Members, What I Did This Morning, Talking, Walking,* and finally, *Swallowing Food.*

I cannot understand where it has all gone. How can someone's very spirit just disappear? In my Physical Science class, I have learned that energy, spirit, or whatever you want to call it, changes shape and form, but is not destroyed; it is merely transformed. So if this is true, what shape has Nan's smile taken? Where did her laugh go? I am desperate for something tangible, something I can see or touch that looks or feels like what was once Nan's glory. Maybe I can see her in the brilliant colors of the painted bunting that stops at our bird feeder every afternoon around five-thirty or smell her in the balmy air after a long rain or taste her sweetness in the ripe tomatoes that I have vowed to grow in her honor. This makes me mad at God, who seems to keep assigning beauty and love and joy and then taking it back, as if there's only so much to go around. Why can't God make more? As far as I'm concerned, there should be enough for everyone. I think Nan deserved more. The world needs more of her. I need more of her.

"Now, where did I put my purse?" my grandmother asks again, forgetting that she hung it from the hook on the back of the door. I point to the door, and her face twists into a grimace of frustration. "Oh, right. Can you hand it to me, Allie?"

I don't know if it's my imagination or if my grandmother's hands really are shaking. Tired and deflated, she collapses into the dull gray-blue recliner and closes her eyes as I set her purse on the floor at her feet. Her breathing becomes heavy and even, and I wonder if she has fallen asleep. She opens her

eyes and looks at me, but says nothing. Something passes between us. I can't help but notice that her eyes look different. My heart sinks in my chest as I realize what is happening.

This is my first real taste of fear. It seizes me in an instant, like a hawk snatching its prey in sharp, gnarled talons. The sudden understanding that we are all dying, slowly rotting, is terrifying, yet oddly comforting to something deep within me, mysterious and very far away. I picture myself fifty or sixty years from now in the worn recliner, dripping with drool and snot, as my own daughter wipes my face tenderly, the same vacant stare from my eyes. Somehow I know that this understanding will change me forever. We leave the room.

“Bye now,” says a young, pretty nurse, with the cheerful enthusiasm of someone whose shift is almost over. “Y'all take care.” How easy it is to be happy when you are young and pretty. I can still picture her heart-shaped face, a small scar above her top lip.

Walking down the hallway towards the door, I grab my grandmother's hand. She pulls me close to her and I lean into the soft, familiar curve of her body. There is no song playing in my head, only the dull hum of the air conditioning unit and the faint, hypnotizing buzz of florescent lighting.