

“What do you want to do tonight?” Mom calls out from the couch. The couch and her seem to be one these days. Her shoulders molding into the sofa’s backrest as her stomach juts in the air and her legs splay out across the cushion.

“Movie?” I suggest.

“Nah.”

I sigh relieved. My brain feels like mush every time I look at a screen after watching so much news and staring at my computer. The thought of fixing my eyes and mind on a movie seems less enticing than doing my taxes right now.

“Read,” I offer.

“Nope,” she says flipping around on the couch.

My mind reels for more options. I feel like I am trying to entertain a toddler.

At this point it’s been three days inside. I just moved back from out of state after being alone for far too long. Mom, Grammy, who is my ninety-four-year old grandmother, and I are learning how to live together again, just the three of us, in Grammy’s house, rather intensely I might add because in these few days at home it have been 24/7 togetherness due to this pandemic.

I look out the window, but the sun already sank below the horizon and Mom hates walking outside at night.

“How about a game?” I offer.

I wait for the no as my mind scrambles its internal shelves for another idea.

“Ok.”

“Really?” I stop searching.

“Sure. See if Grammy wants to play,” Mom says standing up. She stretches her body up and back before stepping over me sitting on the floor. She disappears to the back of the house moving with more haste than she has in days.

I arise from my spot on the floor to look for Grammy. Grammy’s house has two rooms, four doors and is less than two thousand square feet, but I can never seem to find her. I swear she has secret tunnels in the walls that she hides in during the day.

I look in the backyard then her bedroom then her bathroom before I find Grammy in the room behind the kitchen sitting hunched over a stack of papers. She likes to sort and read. Mom calls it putzing. Grammy calls it research. I call it pilfering. She looks through sales ads, magazines and newsletters all day. She says she’s looking for the “good information”, that’s what she calls the stuff she likes and wants to keep, so she can learn.

Most of the papers are about health. She wants to live to be one-hundred and twenty years old and has a room full of health supplements to prove it. Mom and I could easily turn her back room into a natural foods store and people would not even know they were in someone’s house.

She used to send me articles and clippings of info when we didn’t live together. Like when I was a teenager, I had a pretty bad case of acne and she was adamantly against me taking any kind of medication for it. She told me this anytime we talked on the phone or saw each other in person. And if that wasn’t enough, she sent me envelopes full of information about alternative ways to get rid of acne along with jars of honey to rub on my face. She was like a pit bull with its prey in her jaws, intense and unrelenting.

So, there she sat behind her stacks of papers burying her head in her ‘work’.

“Hey! Mom and I are going to play a game. Want to join?” I holler in the direction of her desk.

I get nothing in response. She and her desk are tucked behind the kitchen island, a filing cabinet and paper stacked over two feet tall on the ground. There is no way for me to get to her.

Her pit bull instincts must have made it through the bloodline because I don't relent.

I flip the light switch on, which she keeps off all the time. She wears hearing aids and frequently turns them off during the day. She says it's because they hurt her ears, but Mom and I wonder if she just doesn't want to hear us. Turning the lights on and off sometimes catches her attention. The room brightens with the fluorescent glow. I flip the switch off and it returns to the darkness lit by the soft glow of her desk lamp and the LED flashlight she holds in her hand as she reads.

No response.

My blood pulses through my veins and I flip the light on again. She pokes her head up above the desk, like a gopher coming out of its hole, peering over the top of her librarian style glasses.

“Hi sweetie,” she says to the wall.

I take a deep breath, calming myself at the painstaking process this has become. Patience, I tell myself.

“Mom and I are going to play a game. Want to join?” I ask clearly, not loudly. I've learned that clearer works better than louder. She continues starting in what she thinks is my direction but really is the wall for longer than I feel comfortable.

I open my mouth to ask again, but she speaks first.

“That sounds great.”

She stands, and I stare amazed. It has been days since I saw her stand up.

Two for two, I think.

I walk through the kitchen to find Mom sitting at the oak table. The lights are on, Rummikub tiles are spread out on the table and a board is set at each seat. Behind me, Grammy practically pushes me out of the way to get to her seat moving with more speed and haste than I knew a woman over ninety could. No sooner does she take her seat than she and Mom rattle off the rules to each other.

I stand in the kitchen and stare, baffled.

“Aren’t you going to sit down?” Mom says looking at me through her glasses.

Grammy turned too, and I saw something new. The blue in both of their eyes sparkling.

“Yeah,” I say taking my seat.

We all grab tiles, counting out our lot. Grammy counts out loud and Mom rolls her eyes and tells Grammy to shut up and count in her head. Grammy either doesn’t hear or pretends not to hear and continues counting out loud. Mom’s face goes red and she grits her teeth. Once Mom gets angry she usually leaves, so I prepare myself for this and begin recording the moment of glistening eyes into my memory as good.

But, that doesn’t happen. Mom looks up from her board to me.

“How was your day?”

My eyes must have bugged out of my head because she repeats the question and then asks if I am ok.

“Yeah,” I say, and we start talking about nothing of any depth or importance, just talking. The turns pass as we lay down tiles. I get a good straight and Mom lays down tiles from her hand while we chat. Grammy studies the board as if studying a petri dish for new cultures. But, Mom and I don’t mind. The conversation keeps going. Grammy chimes in too.

It has been silence, complete and total silence in the house before this. During the day, I sat in the efficiency apartment working on job applications and finishing the first draft of my novel at my desk under the window while Mom worked from home in the alcove and Grammy did I don’t know what. Maybe travel in the secret tunnels of the house sorting papers all day? At night, we turned the TV on and Mom and I talked about whatever was on it in the general direction of each other. Grammy popped into the living room every now and again before retreating away.

But, tonight, it’s nice to just sit and talk. Mom leans back in her chair and I see a smile spread across her face. I see her again. My mom.

She got divorced for the second time a decade ago. After I went to college a few months following the divorce, she started driving between where we used to live and Grammy’s house, which are a thousand miles apart from each other, constantly. I felt concerned about her wondering most nights where she was when it really should have been the other way around. Six months after doing that she moved in with Grammy after Grandpa died. She seems more settled here, less erratic. She says she’s happy. She’ll cackle and laugh at the TV sometimes. But as her daughter, I know her laugh and smile when it’s real. This fakeness she has been selling I’m not buying, even if she bought it herself. I don’t worry about her as much, but I do wonder if the divorce was harder on her than she lets on.

So, seeing her true smile spread across her face tonight feels like sun against my skin after its been hidden behind the clouds for days.

I lean back in my chair taking it all in. I spent the past five years post college observing and trying to figure everything out. But being in the moment was so much better. I realize now that being alone is not better than being with. I am not meant to do life alone and I don't have to. I feel a weight lift off my shoulders and this thought gently comes to me mind; we are going to be ok.