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On Loss

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On Loss

Abigail Ferguson

*The heart can think of no devotion
Greater than being shore to the ocean-
Holding the curve of one position,
Counting an endless repetition.*

-Robert Frost

“Now, how old are ya?” Nana would ask, her mouth curling into a lopsided grin that resembled my father’s. Seated in her blue LazyBoy, she would lean forward intently, retired from years of holding children and grandchildren, now enjoying a quiet life as the matriarch of an enormous Irish Catholic family within the nine by twelve room at Holy Family Residence. The heavily decorated halls, draped with lights, ornaments and a colorful Christmas tree served as reminders to even those who had lost their minds due to Alzheimer’s that Christmas was next week. As she leaned back into its welcoming arms, my father’s own version of the grin sheepishly crept over his face as he waited for the question to be answered for a fifth time since our arrival only thirty minutes ago.

“Nineteen, Nana, I’m a sophomore in college now,” I’d reply, just as eagerly as the first time that I’d been asked. And every time, she would throw her head back in disbelief. Was it disbelief that her youngest of eight, her baby, had a college-aged daughter, or that a random family of four would take the time to visit her in this strange place? We would never know, but I would like to think it the former.

“You’re my favorite, ya know that? Such a beautiful girl! Hey good lookin’, whatcha got cookin’” She would begin to sing in reply each time. Over the years, I picked up the lyrics to the song, and would hum the tune. I would take any chance that I could get in connecting with her. Growing up, I would hear my friends talk of all the great times that they would have with their grandparents, from cooking to fishing, and I yearned to have something like that with my own grandparents. It had been fifteen years since the family had decided to move her into a nursing home. The Alzheimer’s Association pamphlet that was given to us upon her initial diagnosis stated that the survival period post-diagnosis would be around eight years. Yet, here we were, fifteen years later, spending another Christmas together, and her complete loss of memory aside, Nana was chugging

along just fine. Never once did I encounter her without a smile on her face, or a song being sung at some point in time during visits.

In order to avoid the string of questions to cycle through again, my father popped in an old cassette in the vintage cassette player that rested on the shelf near the door. The nostalgic, deep voice of my grandfather filled the room as Christmas songs, this one in particular, "A White Christmas," came on. I hadn't really known my grandfather in life, only in memory. He had passed away when I was five, but nonetheless, memories of dancing with cousins, aunts and uncles during the holidays that encapsulated the playing of his songs every year allowed me a slight connection with him. Nana rested her head on the recliner, smiling and bobbing along to the notes. I wondered if she knew that it was her late husband who was singing so beautifully, or if the disease and years since his passing rendered him too far gone for her to remember.

As his voice trailed off at the end of the song, my parents made the exiting eye contact hinting towards the door. My brother and I began to follow suit, but as we rose to collect our jackets, I remembered that I had purposefully straightened my hair and coordinated outfits with Joe just hours beforehand. After giving my father a short tutorial on how to take pictures using my iPhone, Joe and I, wearing matching Christmas sweaters, each took a flank of the blue recliner holding Nana, and smiled. It was the last time I would see her alive.

The family had decided to hold the wake and the funeral at Holy Family, because it had, after all, been Nana's home, her parish, her livelihood, for the last fifteen years of her life. Entering the sliding doors for the final time into the lobby of the home, I had never felt so empty. The kind receptionist seated at the door, who always greeted us with a smile, the portraits of various saints, retired nuns, and the Virgin Mary all looking at us from their solitary positions along the walls, the nuns who had devoted their lives in serving the elderly, all smiled at us, this time with a melancholic hue. I raised my upper lip as much as the growing lump in my esophagus would allow, showing my appreciation for the unspoken condolences. As we made our way down the hallway to the room for the wake, the numbness that had blanketed the news of Nana's passing suddenly dissolved, rendering me helplessly heartbroken.

The casket was placed perfectly in the center of the small parlor. As I crept towards it, a sudden curiosity came over me. I had never been to an open viewing before. What if she looked different, different from the photograph I had taken only six months prior that would now be one of the only tangible memories I had of her? I hated myself for having such a strange anxiety in a time like this, but it did manage to mute the pain of

grief temporarily.

I looked down upon my Nana and sighed a breath of relief. Wearing a formal, dark turquoise dress, she was done up just as intricately in death as she would have been in life. Among the plethora of colorful flowers and Mass cards, there was an old photograph nested next to her in the casket. A time capsule back to 1942, the year after she had graduated from nursing school, Nana stood proudly behind a wheelchair with a younger woman sitting, who was also smiling. Dressed in the classic white hat with the Red Cross and the matching white uniform, she smiled with the lopsided grin that I had known. I took my place amongst the other cousins and family members on the floral printed couches in the middle of the parlor, to sit in heavy silence and teary, blank stares.

As I watched the mourners walk by, I saw as my aunts and uncles struggled to keep their composure with every hug. I couldn't bear to watch anymore, but as I rose to leave the room, my father beckoned me over. All eight of the siblings were huddled around an elderly woman in a wheelchair who was coming through the line. Curiosity hit me again as I walked towards the circle. My father unhinged himself from the group and waved me forward.

"Look at this."

In her translucent, veiny hands, the woman held the same photo of Nana from nursing school. For a split second, I thought that this lady had lifted it from Nana's casket, and as I nonchalantly did a double take, I realized that it was a separate photo.

"I was a patient of Jane's. She was the greatest nurse that I have ever had – compassionate, smart, of good faith. She did everything with a smile on her face."

A different kind of numbness had sunken in. For years, the thought of having a connection with Nana ran deeper than just wanting to conform with the idea of being like my friends and their grandparents. All of the stories, the songs she sang, the pictures that I would now gaze at with a heart wrenching emptiness made me realize that I just wanted a chance to be a part of someone's life who was influential in so many ways. When it came time to clean out the nine by twelve room, I couldn't bear to reenter the room and see the blue LazyBoy, forever waiting to hold its owner. I sat in the lobby of the hotel that we were staying at for the night and prepared myself for the funeral, which was only twelve hours away. I couldn't decide if it was good that I had this time to recollect myself, or if it was just worsening the grieving process by delaying it.

My father returned from Holy Family a few hours after the wake had ended. As he walked over to me, the red splotches on his face shone through his silver-rimmed glasses. I knew that I had made the right deci-

sion to protect my heart from any more damage that night. He bent over to kiss me goodnight, but before he rose to find my mom, he handed me a vintage gold necklace with a pendant on it. I turned the heavy gold charm over to find myself as a baby, enshrined under a bubble of glass. She had remembered me.