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## He Shed His Summer Skin

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Class of 2008

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# He Shed His Summer Skin

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**Author Bio**

Heather Simons is a sophomore English major with a minor in Writing. This is her first piece published in the Mercury. Next fall, Heather will be studying abroad in Lancaster, England, and she hopes that her time in Europe will provide inspiration for further submissions to The Mercury and elsewhere.

## He Shed His Summer Skin

When I found out that my grandfather was succumbing to cancer, I was in my dorm room at the University of Pittsburgh. Not even a month had passed since I entered college in the city, and already I regretted my decision to attend a large university so far from home. I missed my family and my home in eastern Pennsylvania in a way I never had before. Even so, when my mom regretfully informed me that mid-September afternoon that my grandfather's health was deteriorating and I would need to come home to say goodbye, I was at a loss. Having had no prior experience with death, I did not trust my reaction. I felt slightly numb, as if my emotions came not from my heart, but from a place in my head that dictated the correct response to the situation. I wanted so badly to feel the intense sadness of impending loss. I yearned for authentic, unadulterated sadness to seep up from my soul and roll down my cheeks in big, fat tear drops. Nothing came.

I was far too removed from his condition, the product of never before dealing with death and a less-than-close bond with my father's father. Our relationship lacked intimacy. The memories I have of my grandfather include frustrated conversations with the television, unremitting negative commentary, Pabst beer, and ham and cheese sandwiches on white bread. My mom used to say he worried himself sick, that his constant negativity brought on the worst. My grandfather never made a concerted effort to talk with me or show any interest in my life. On recent visits, though, I had noticed a change in him. He seemed calmer, softer around the edges. The last time I saw him, he uttered three words I had never before heard in his presence. He hugged me goodbye and said, "I love you." His eyes had seemed wetter, more caring. Still, there was a distance between us, an undisputed reality in my family. The reserved demeanor of nearly every relative kept a short yet noticeable distance between us all, making close connections rare and family reunions fairly awkward. Nevertheless, I loved my grandfather, and to imagine him fighting for his life and losing was a reality I could not begin to comprehend, in spite of our distance.

I can recall one instance in which my grandfather spoke directly to me. It was Christmas, a holiday that warranted an annual visit to my grandparents' house. Not yet a teenager but ambitious as ever, I had, as usual, worked my way into an adult conversation. Suddenly I was seated on the couch beside my grandfather who held a Bible in his hands. His face was flecked with tiny white stubble and his flannel shirt rubbed softly against my arm as he read, tracing each line of text with a pale finger. That night he recited to me the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the bloodiest ruler of Babylonian times, who was permitted by God to enter heaven after repenting his sins and pleading for forgiveness. The simplicity of being allowed into heaven by asking sincerely, no matter the number or severity of sins one has committed, baffled me, and I joined in the ensuing discussion. My acceptance into the conversation validated me and my participation made me feel mature. But my grandfather

had made me feel special. Such a simple memory, a simple story, but he taught me something that night. Perhaps I had yearned all along for my mysterious grandfather to bestow upon me a piece of his hidden knowledge. I wouldn't get the chance to discover more about him, such a solitary man swathed in privacy, until the Saturday morning I was to say goodbye.

Slowly, quietly, my mother, brother and I made it up the creaky wooden staircase to the spare room where my grandparents waited, one in bed, the other beside it. My steps were hesitant, apprehensive; I kept my head down. The rug on the stairs was olive green, familiar, the worn spots along the edges patched with strips of silver duct tape. Reaching the top, I glimpsed my image in a large mirror hanging on the wall. For a split second, I studied my eyes and couldn't help but wonder if they were emitting sadness or fear or stony resilience. Everything in the bedroom was exactly as it had been when my aunts and uncles slept there as children. The room was dim and stuffy, and through the windows I could see tree branches swaying in the late-summer breeze. The faded dresser top along the wall was a cluttered collage of objects from my aunt's and uncle's childhood, books and knick knacks rested on a tiny book shelf, a small record player sat on the windowsill. And in the middle of the room, where a rusty twin bed once sat, was a hospital bed, standing four feet off of the ground, a sturdy contraption tilted and lifted for comfort.

My eyes were drawn directly to my grandfather's skeletal face, his bright white hair. For years he had lived with cancer, and for years the disease had continued to spread. Only now did it show itself outwardly. I could see the sickness in his frail body, his hollow face. He was undersized and limp, like a marionette on slackened strings. I didn't want to stare and I didn't want to look away. Suddenly I felt the urge to sit beside him in bed, to say things to him I had never said before. I wanted to forget that we were never very close, because I was willing in that moment to become close to him, to forge the relationship we never made time for in the past. I wanted him to tell me another story as he had so long ago, to enlighten me with all that he had learned in his years. I wanted to ask him if he was happy. I wanted him to be proud of me. All of these desires bubbled up inside of me, but I couldn't speak, and I couldn't move. My mouth was dry, and when I managed a word or two it felt all wrong. My attempts at conversation were trivial and meaningless next to all he had been through and still had to confront. I wanted him to know how much I cared for him, how sad I really, truly felt. I no longer worried that I wouldn't know how to react, for now I didn't know how not to react. My emotions were of tidal wave force, breaking and churning inside me. Still, I was outwardly paralyzed, seized by my racing mind until my head felt light and my tongue went numb. I wanted to speak to him, to hold his hand, but my mouth stayed shut and my hands stuck to my sides. Though my mom's high-pitched phrases pierced the quiet room, more suited for a child than a grown man, I needed to hear her voice. She broke the silence as my brother and I stood awkwardly in quiet desperation. I tried to smile. I tried to speak to him with my eyes. I hoped desperately that he could see through me.

The cancer had broken his body, but not his spirit. Though his face was gaunt and hollow, his wide eyes shined a blue so bright it was as if they were lit from behind. His slender figure slumped beneath the bed covers, wilted with the kind of exhaustion that comes from decades of existence. His bones seemed almost to break through, their delicate structure visible beneath skin as thin as paper. His physical being was failing, but his eyes revealed the character alive within him, twinkling as only the spirit of the dying can. He was helpless, like a child who bears the knowledge of generations. His piercing eyes had the ability to glimpse the future while looking back on his life.

I had never, until that day, given much thought to the subject of death. I knew that death was heartbreaking and distressful for those left behind, but until I saw my grandfather struggle just to find comfort beneath the covers, I hadn't thought of death in terms of the dying. I pictured it a quick and painless release that happened in sleep. I realized that afternoon, as I stared into the eyes of my grandfather, that death is a living, breathing entity, slowly and painfully taking over, winning control. I imagined death as it consumes the physical body, creeping into the bones, situating itself in the chest, in the fingers. And then I thought of the fearlessness in my grandfather's eyes. He sensed death drawing near, and he was not afraid. There is a way to find beauty in a long life culminating in one final breath.

My grandfather had a den filled with books. At the top of the stairs in my grandparents' twin home was a small and windowless room to which my grandfather often retreated. The unspoken knowledge that his den marked forbidden territory kept me for years from seeing but a hint of its insides through the crack of an open door. After saying goodbye, I crossed the invisible boundary at last and entered into my grandfather's private sphere. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sunlight pouring in through the room's single window. Particles of dust danced and swirled in the air, illuminated by the rays. The room held the musty smell of aged wood and after-shave. Books were stacked everywhere- paperback, hardback, leather-bound, all packed into one neatly cluttered space. Every version of the Bible, in several languages, crowded the shelves. Novels by Jane Austen, James Joyce, William Faulkner and so many more familiar and obscure writers were squeezed into bookcases.

As I scanned the room, my grandmother watched in the doorway with her hands tucked in her pockets, shoulders hunched forward, her eyebrows perched on her forehead. She was holding up well, as usual. My grandmother was known for her ability to do it all. A truly remarkable woman, I always admired her, though she never showed an ounce of vulnerability. She sensed my curiosity and remarked that he had read every page in the room. Then, taking her hands from her pockets and tugging on the chain around her neck, my grandmother told me I could borrow anything I wanted. What was his was now free to be shared with me. Since birth I had spent time with my grandfather and I had never known that he and I possessed a common bond, a love for literature and a thirst for knowledge.

I was inspired and yet deeply regretful that it took so many years and one awful disease to discover that piece of my grandfather I held within me.

I learned much more about his life in the following days. My grandfather earned a degree in Business from Drexel University, while traveling home every weekend to my grandmother's family farm in Oxford where he helped to raise his family. After graduation, he became father to five children and was the youngest person ever named a partner at a large accounting firm. Shortly after his promotion, he was plagued with anxiety so intense he had to resign after a nervous breakdown debilitated him. As I let the details of his past sink in, I began to better understand my grandfather's pessimistic outlook on life- he lived each day haunted by his inability to keep his job and provide for his family. He had it all and he lost it all, and yet he continued to read voraciously, absorbing whatever he could. Quietly religious, he kept his faith to himself. That is what the priest said about my grandfather at his funeral. A reserved man who kept his emotions inside, he was a mystery to me for many years, a mystery I hadn't known I wanted so badly to solve.

I was standing at a bus stop on a busy street corner when my cell phone rang. It was the Wednesday after I returned to school in Pittsburgh, and I answered my mom's call as cars and buses raced by in rush hour traffic. She told me he had passed away in the night. It was September 22, the first day of fall. He had promised he'd live through the summer, and he had, right up until the very last moment. Tears were in my eyes at once, and before long they were spilling down my cheeks. I tried at first to wipe them away, discreetly so the people around me wouldn't suspect my sadness, but I sensed they understood. They could see the grief in my eyes, and in their lack of shame my own melted away. I cried on the corner that day, hugging my arms to fight the wind, wiping tears from my face. My grandfather had been released from his tired body, his soul freed to heaven like Nebuchadnezzar's, and I was going to miss him.