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The Trouble with Empathy

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The Trouble with Empathy

Author Bio

Morgan is a sophomore at Gettysburg College. She is an English major with a Film minor, incorporating all of her interests. She has loved to write for many years, and she hopes to write for a career after college. During her senior year of high school, she had the opportunity to write for a teen column in her local newspaper and that experience not only gave her a taste of a career in journalism but reaffirmed her love and writing and reminded her why she wants to be a professional writer someday. In addition to writing, she also loves to read, watch films, and spend time with family and friends.

The Trouble with Empathy

Morgan Marianelli

The first time I set foot in my grandmother's house after it had been stripped of its soul, I felt like a voodoo doll as a thousand pins prickled my skin. Where was the piano music to greet me as I walked through the door? My senses searched for the melodic notes wafting through the windows and front door, the silhouette of my grandmother rushing to her piano at the sound of our car pulling up, and the shuffling of her music to delve into an intoxicating swirl of notes. I poked my head into the family room, half expecting to see her swaying to the piano's sonorous voice, with her eyes closed as her hands danced over the keys. Then she would jerk back to reality only after she had finished her piece. She would look up from the keys, and greet me with glittering eyes and a beaming smile. My hands tingled as I conjured up the childhood memories of all those times we would sit side by side on the piano bench. She would place her gentle hands over mine as she taught me to play "Chopsticks." Instead, a dark shadow of a room met my eyes. A few pieces of forlorn furniture were awkwardly strewn about with the piano sitting in its usual spot, like a dormant figure yearning to be revived.

I walked next into the dining room where I willed myself to remember the heavenly aroma of a Christmas feast. I could see every family member seated around the expansive table in conversation. My grandmother was seated at the head with a contented grin on her face as she took in the moment.

I silently glided into the living room next, stepping into a hazy cloud of twinkling Christmas decorations, blissful laughter, and eager children tearing through wrapping paper. The adults were perched on the long sofa and the various armchairs. The women were balancing china cups of coffee in their hands as they leaned forward to watch their children hold up their gifts with triumphant grins. The men—especially my dad—were snapping away with their cameras to capture every cherished moment, shouting, "Look over here, honey! Hold up your present so I can see! That's it! Smile for the camera!" My grandmother smiled proudly at the scene unraveling before her eyes from her chair in the corner. As the cloud faded away and I fell back to Earth, I was left with the image of a cold, lifeless room, devoid of personality.

The cheery sun-soaked porch could no longer be a place of blithe

summer days without my grandmother's rich laughter ricocheting off the walls like a pinball. Where were the detailed memories she would share with me that rolled through my mind like filmstrips as we sat side by side on her creaky old rocking bench? I could almost see our silhouettes on that bench from where I stood, on the step down from the dining room, onto the porch. We had our heads turned to the right, gazing out the floor-length screen windows to the street beyond. We were playing "the car game." We would try to guess what color the next car that drove by would be. When I was really little and naïve, I would always choose pink because that was my favorite color, and my grandma would pick something practical like silver or blue, even though her favorite color was green. As I matured, I started to realize why I always lost the game, so I usually tended to choose red, the next closest thing to pink. Other times my grandma, my sister, and I would pretend to be firemen on that bench, which served as our fire truck for the time being. We would frantically rock the glider bench back and forth as we rushed to the scene of the fire. Or on lazy summer afternoons, my mom, sister, grandma, and I would sit around the table out there and play school, where I was always the teacher, and my grandma played the annoying student Jasmine, who would raise her hand, and interrupt my lessons by chanting, "Teacher, teacher! I have to go to the bathroom!" We would also eat pizza around that table from Grotto's, my grandma's favorite.

In the kitchen, I stared at the wooden table. Cleared of its chairs, it now looked so small. We would sit there just to talk or to eat meals together. We would often play board games at that table; the best was a children's version of Bingo that used pictures instead of numbers. Every time we played, my grandma would mix up the "chicken" with the "bird". And every time, it was as if she made the mix-up for the first time, because we would all explode with laughter, doubled over trying to catch our breaths between giggles that wouldn't stop until our stomachs started to hurt.

After I perused the shell of every room downstairs, I returned to the dark foyer, and made my way up the creaky staircase. Rooms that once had so many items to characterize them seemed to be confused spaces stripped of their identities. I looked into my grandma's empty bedroom and conjured up the memories of when we would sit on her huge bed and play dress-up with the silky "babushkas" from her dresser drawer, or say prayers on the rosaries she kept in her nightstand drawer. The best part of her room was the dolls she kept on shelves: beautiful handmade rag dolls given to her as gifts over the years. They had yarn hair and rosy felt cheeks, dexterously stitched dresses and dainty little shoes. I would point to the one I wanted to hold, and my grandma would take it down and tell me the doll's name—my grandma named everything, not just dolls, but pretty

much every object she owned—and the story behind it.

The room right next to my grandma's certainly couldn't be called a playroom anymore without all its toys; it was just a room. As kids, my sister and I would spend hours in that room playing with the tiny dolls in the ornate wooden doll house, tossing a ball back and forth, riding Playskool tricycles out of the room and racing them down the long wooden floor of the hallway, or playing school with the huge blackboard built into the wall.

I proceeded to stumble, drift, and pace through every room of the house, knowing that every doorway led to a foreign encounter, but hoping that somewhere along the way I would be greeted with a familiar embrace.

The whole time I took this final walking tour through my grandma's large home, I tried to drown out the smashing and crunching sounds coming in through the open windows from the driveway. I wanted to avoid going outside at all costs, because I knew what the adults were doing out there. The huge dumpster they had rented was being fed with the discarded remains of objects that had made up a life. Chairs, tables, old documents, books, clothes stained with age, random knick-knacks, all being smashed, shredded, and shattered into unrecognizable bits and pieces and piled into the belly of the great iron monster. The rest of the things were either bagged up for Goodwill or claimed by my mom or one of her siblings to take back to their homes. Only a very small fraction of the items that were sucked out of Grandma's house were set aside to go to her, simply because she wouldn't have much space for anything in her new apartment at the assisted living center.

No, my grandma didn't die, but it certainly felt like she had as I walked through the barren rooms and hallways of the spacious house that played such a pivotal role in my childhood. My grandma lived on her own in her big house, as my grandfather had died before I was born. She eventually only occupied the downstairs rooms as she got older and feebler. She was rushed to the hospital after getting really sick one night, and almost died. Miraculously, defying everyone's bleak expectations, my grandma pulled through, and gradually started to recover. Nevertheless, she was still too weak to ever be able to return to her home and take care of herself. Everyone seemed overjoyed that she had pulled through and could still be a part of our lives. However, my mom later admitted to me that while she monotonously helped smash up items to feed to the dumpster, fighting back tears, she had the horrible thought that it would have been easier having to get rid of so many of her mom's possessions if she had died. At least then there wouldn't be all the guilt. I was initially shocked when my mom told me this for the first time, but looking at the situation from my mom's perspective, I think I know what she means. My grandma, disoriented and heartbroken over being forced to leave her home of over 40 years

and part with her possessions, continuously asked where things were. My mom had to lie to her own mother and assure her that everything was safe, even though she knew that some of the items my grandma asked about were given away or smashed up for the dumpster. What my mom had to do was, in a sense, killing her mother's spirit. Feeling responsible for the horrific transition in her mother's demeanor was far worse to her than being free of guilt if sickness or old age had been responsible. Most of the time, a person's house isn't cleared out until after their death. So every time my grandma asked where something was or asked to go home, my mom felt a sickening wave of guilt wash over her. None of that would have been there if her mom had died, she told me.

Eventually, lonely and bored, I braced myself and ventured out to where my parents, aunts, and uncles were at work around the dumpster. What I saw there made my breath catch in my throat and I wanted to scream for everyone to stop. What? How could they get rid of that chair? I used to sit on that chair! That's such a nice desk! Why are they smashing it up? Thoughts like that ran through my head as the incessant destruction of items that were once so customary to my life bore on. The worst part was seeing the smaller items that used to have so much meaning bagged up, or worse yet, thrown in among the splintered pieces of wood and shards of glass in the dumpster. My mom held out a garbage bag to my sister and me and had us sort through what was inside. I peeled back the folds of plastic and felt like someone had punched me in the stomach when I saw what was there. In the bag were all my grandma's special dolls, each with her own story that my grandma had so joyfully enlightened me with, thrown across each other like limp rags, looking up at me with their unwavering smiles, completely unaware that they were about to be snatched from their home forever, never to return to their cozy shelves. Some would be boxed up in a closet, too special to be given away. The others would go to Goodwill, where they would either sit lonely and neglected collecting dust, or if they were lucky, maybe they would be adopted by someone who would cherish them as my grandma had. My sister and I convinced my mom to let us keep most of them, but a few had to be given away, as there were just too many.

As I sorted through the plethora of objects that were thrown my way and watched the adults move like unfeeling machines as they continued to feed the dumpster, I paid particular attention to my mom. I wondered how she could do it, how she could remain so stoic as she watched her mom's things being chopped to bits and disposed of. Important pieces of my mom's childhood were vanishing before her eyes as well. Her sky blue eyes welled over with tears and her hand went up to wipe them away, but she kept her composure. She didn't break down and become a sobbing,

hysterical mess, as I think I probably would have if I were in my mom's place.

When I talked to my mom recently about what this day was like for her, her voice cracked with sorrow several times as she tried to explain to me what she felt as she sorted through her mom's things and had to get rid of most of them. My mom may have kept her composure for the most part that day, but that's only because if she had let all her emotions spill out, she may not have been able to pull herself back together. My mom told me she was a wreck inside. She felt like she was throwing parts of her mom away. It was not just objects she was getting rid of, but things with real sentimental value—things that had become synonymous with the person who owned them. In my mom's words, her heart "bled" as she watched objects that were such crucial pieces of her life and her memories being broken and tossed aside, pushed out of reality, and existing only in her memories. She told me her brother felt like he couldn't part with his parents' things because it had their DNA all over it.

I can see now that, like an onion with layers that must be pulled back only to reveal more layers, vacating my grandma's house before we sold it affected the people to whom it meant something in multiple ways. It created layers of emotion in everyone who was affected. My grandma herself was the most obvious victim, as the sparkle left her eyes and the excitement went out of her voice for a while. Her vitality for life came back very gradually, in tiny increments, though never all the way. But then there was everyone else whose suffering was not so obvious. My mom tried to keep her grief bottled away most of the time so that she could be happy for everyone else and get on with her life. My mom's sister and two brothers reacted in much the same way. I could tell they were making an effort to remain calm, composed, and cheerful when I saw them, but it was obvious that what they had to do had taken a toll on them as well. The only person's grief that I will ever be able to understand all the way is my own. I am acutely present for every memory that pops into my head of the times spent in my grandma's house, and the tight little ball of grief in my stomach that always ensues. Sometimes, I try to put myself in my grandma's place. Like my mom, I feel so terrible that so much was taken away from her. To cheer her up when I visited and she was so somber, I would try to tell her that she still had a family who loved her and that she should try to make the best of her situation. But I know that I can't ever really understand anyone's feelings but my own. I can hear what they have to say, but I can never experience it. Who was I to tell her that everything would be okay? Gradually, things did start to get better. I think the jumble of emotions that accompanied the clearing all her things out of her house started to fade as my grandma became more adjusted to her new residence, although she

continued to emphasize that it would never be her home.

My grandmother has now grown even less capable of dealing with her pain, and has been moved out of the assisted living center to a nursing home. We are all reliving a pain we thought had finally started to chip away when my grandma's spirits started to recover. My grandma seems to be more depressed now than she has ever been before, and her once agile mind is starting to deteriorate. Her short-term memory has become very weak, as she often needs things repeated to her multiple times. I know that just because my mom tries to put on a happy face most of the time doesn't mean she isn't suffering immensely. I can hear the pain in her voice when she talks about her mom. I can tell her that everything will be okay, and hopefully it will, but I have found that what a person feels can ultimately only be controlled by that person.