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## The Best Thing

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*Gettysburg College*

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## The Best Thing

### Author Bio

Hannah Rinehart is a Junior English with a Writing Concentration Major with German Studies and Math minors. She loves to read and write and work on the staff for the Mercury literary magazine.

# The Best Thing

HANNAH RINEHART

My Grandpa Rinehart was a gentle, quiet man—the type of grandfather to walk down the far, grassy slope of his front yard to smoke a cigar away from his grandkids. Some of my earliest memories were of him surrounded by dark smoke that would curl around his neck in the wind, dissipate, and reappear. When I was a child I didn't understand why he didn't just quit like my Grandma Rinehart; the day I was born, ahead of my other cousins, she'd quit. She always said she wanted to be there for our graduations. Her wish was not granted, leaving Grandpa and the rest of our family in the resulting emotional turmoil. This encouraged Grandpa's wish to quit smoking, which was encouraged further when two cancerous spots revealed themselves on his tongue. Those events all led me to this spot, last summer, sitting at their dining room table, listening to Music Choice's seventies playlist, stirring up a dixie cup of crushed pills and water.

“Grandpa! It's eleven!” I called, scraping the end of my spoon on the cup's bottom. I set the cup down in front of the large pitchers of water and liquid nutrition.

I heard an affirming grunt to my left, where grandpa sat by the windows, reading the paper. He didn't sit much during the day, but when he did it was always by the sunlight, despite the intense heat of July that filled the living room whenever we left the blinds open for too long.

My father had been staying with Grandpa ever since he got discharged from York Hospital about a month prior. He had driven himself to his radiation appointment, and the nurse who checked him in noticed he looked severely dehydrated. She was right; he wasn't eating or drinking, physically couldn't eat or drink because of the radiation sores on his tongue. The nurse had told him he looked as white as a ghost. The radiation center admitted him as a patient, got him an IV, and pumped him with painkillers. He hadn't been taking those, either.

Before his diagnosis Grandpa was completely independent; he lived fully on his own, did his laundry, cleaned his home, visited his brother across town, and visited us in Maryland. He exercised regularly, and we never had any worries about him being an hour away, living on his own.

When I first saw Grandpa when my father brought him back to his home from the hospital, his shirt hung much looser on him. Grandpa never had a large, protruding belly, but seeing the fabric hang around his torso looser was a discomfoting sight. The skin on the outside of his neck also appeared to be flaming, which I later learned was results of the radiation appointments. His neck was often a deep pink and glistening from the many topical creams he applied to keep the skin less irritated.

Grandpa sat down slowly in the chair across from me and waited with his palms on his knees. He gave me a smile, his eyes studying my movements carefully. I was living with him for now, but I was going off to school in a matter of weeks. My father—who was the only relative who was able to stay with him at first—had to return to his classroom in September, and my uncle couldn't drive up from Raleigh, North Carolina to take care of him while my father had to be at our home, in Maryland, to teach.

So, Grandpa calmly lifted his shirt, and I removed the tape holding his G-tube to his stomach.

The doctor's solution after nearly a week of Grandpa being unable to get nutrition through his mouth was to send him home with a thin, clear tube that connected right to his stomach. The hole was directly under his belly button, guarded with a thin plastic ring that held the tube in place. We stuck some gauze around it to prevent any bacteria from getting anywhere near the actual hole opening.

I grabbed one of the wide, plastic syringes that rested next to us on the table while he opened the first, then second lock on the tube. He held the nozzle up for me, allowing me to slide the empty syringe into the opening. I held it upright with my right hand and grabbed the large pitcher of carefully measured water with my left.

Twenty-five milliliters water. Meds. Fifty water. Nutrition. Fifty, then twenty-five water. My father's instructions replayed in my head. When it was just him and Grandpa before I came up, my father typed up detailed instructions on how to complete a G-tube feeding, five times a day, and all the different types of medication grandpa had to take, and when to take those. Every three hours from eight in the morning to eight at night, I adopted his system. It had only been about three days since my father left to go back home and resume his summer camps he was teaching, and I was still steadily consulting the medication list.

"You ready?" I asked Grandpa.

"Yup," he mumbled back, giving me a thumbs-up. I began to pour twenty-five milliliters of water into the hollow syringe.

"How's your pain after taking your OxyContin earlier?"

“Same as yesterday,” Grandpa would utter, in as few syllables as possible.

“Seven?”

“Seven.” Ten was the worst, one was the least. He told me nothing but sevens and one six particularly the day after my father got him to take the OxyContin that he hadn’t been taking.

His voice had startled me at first; you never expect someone with cancer to struggle with speaking, let alone eating and drinking. His words were slurred, and nearly unrecognizable. I had to take a moment to understand that he was speaking by barely moving his tongue, so his words weren’t as pronounced, or as loud. Grandpa’s cancer was located on his tongue, leftovers of the cigar smoke, and while he was being treated, it was destroying his abilities to use his tongue—in more ways than just eating. He would tell me that breathing through his mouth was a pain unlike anything he had ever experienced. At its worst grandpa spoke like he was grunting at me with hints of vowels all slurred together.

My Grandpa and Grandma Rinehart had what my father referred to as Pennsylvania Dutch accents (more accurately Pennsylvania German). They didn’t speak German, but their families originated from the German immigrants who emigrated to Pennsylvania. Their dialect when they spoke English was like if my dialect was melted like soft butter. Grandpa was my only living family member with that accent. It was what I had always recognized as his presence, as his love.

Once the water was poured into the tube, I waited. After a moment, I gave Grandpa a hint: “Your turn,” I smiled.

Grandpa looked up at me, unsure, but then his eyes widened. “Oh, yeah!” He unclicked the third and final lock on the tube, and the water flowed down, and into his stomach. Once the syringe was empty, I waited for Grandpa to click the lock back in place. *Make sure Grandpa always knows when to click and unclick his locks, my father’s reminder echoed, he needs to learn how to do all of this on his own, very soon. We most likely will have no choice but to leave him by himself once school begins again.*

“Good job!” I kept my right hand on the syringe, holding it upright, as I grabbed the dixie cup. “Time for your meds.”

Grandpa watched me pour the foggy water into the syringe. I shook the cup slightly, making sure all the ground up pills would make it into his belly. He unclipped his lock, the medication receded. He clipped it back.

I felt the need to fill the empty space with words, and my eyes landed on the framed photo of me, Ethan, Ben, and Sky as children that rested next to his blood-pressure monitor.

“How did you and Grandma meet?” I asked him. I poured more water into the syringe, measuring to fifty milliliters. *Click*. I watched it recede.

“Hmm,” Grandpa hummed. I immediately ridiculed myself for posing a question that insinuates a long discussion, requiring him to use his mouth to speak. I thought at first that Grandpa was a little overwhelmed with my constant presence, my constant words that kept spilling out of my mouth. I felt, at the beginning, that if silence stretched between us it would be awkward; our silence was mostly filled with Grandpa coughing, or clearing his throat, and shouting in pain afterwards. I had never had so much one-on-one time with him before, I did not know him as the man that existed to himself every day next to his wife’s urn—I only knew him as my grandpa in the presence of my father and brother.

A few moments passed, and to my surprise, he continued, “I was going to a friend’s house with a group and when I walked through the door I saw her sitting on a couch across the room. I thought *oh, shit*, and she saw me and thought *oh, shit*. And that was that.” Grandpa never failed to talk about her every day, but I had never heard the story of their origin together. In a sense, a piece of *my* origin.

“You thought she was pretty?”

“She was beautiful.”

A beat passed. I hummed, getting grandpa’s attention. His eyes had wandered off over my right shoulder, where grandma rested in their cabinet.

“Oops! My bad.” He clicked his lock back into place.

I stood up from my chair and stretched my hand around the pitcher full of light brown, thick liquid that smelled like someone dumped protein powder into chocolate milk. I remained standing to slowly pour the nutrition down the tube. Grandpa released the lock, and the liquid began flowing down.

My grandparents had just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary when grandma was notified of concerning spots on her lungs. Lungs turned to liver; liver turned to lymph nodes. It was the beginning of Spring when we knew, and it was the second-to-last day of August when we lost her. I was just beginning my sophomore year of high school; my brother and cousins were in middle school and fourth grade. A part of me felt guilty for being the grandchild with the most memories of her, since my brother and cousins were twelve, eleven, and eight years old, and I struggled with the thought of graduating high school first without her. I pictured an empty seat, next to Grandpa, as my family watched me walk

across the stage in my white cap and gown. However, two years later, when the day did arrive, it was a joyous one. I knew that Grandma Rinehart passed knowing we all would graduate successfully, starting with myself, and it would lead us into lives worth living. I just wished that she could have been there to witness the celebration of the beginning of our futures, and I know that grandpa wanted her to experience that, too.

I thought back to all the birthday parties, graduation parties, celebrations of any kind over these past six years. Grandpa would often take some convincing to make the hour drive down to our home, and even when we brought parties halfway to him. In the middle of my freshman year of college I had my family drive up to the New Freedom Restaurant right across the state line to hold my nineteenth birthday dinner with Grandpa. I remember asking him if he was having a nice time, and he just looked at me, and slowly said, “Joan would have loved this.”

Once the nutrition was drained, I added more water to rinse the tube out. On the second dosage of water I added a little more water than normal; I poured up to about thirty-five milliliters.

“You cheater, you’re gonna make me pee!” Grandpa exclaimed, pointing a finger at me.

“It’s my job to keep you hydrated, unless you want to start drinking it all out of your cup!” I joked.

Grandpa had started practicing drinking again out of one of those short, paper cups; he always winced strongly after sipping from it, sometimes even groaning in pain, but he kept at it. His doctor heavily encouraged as much fluids as possible, and that trying to use his mouth again couldn’t hurt his progression. Grandpa didn’t have to attempt to drink as much water through his mouth as he did, but I saw how much he wanted things to go back to normal.

I pulled the syringe from the mouth of the tube and carried it over to the sink. I washed my hands before returning to grandpa at the table. He was holding the tube upright for me.

“Thanks, Grandpa,” I said, and waited again. “What’s left?”

He wondered for a moment, staring at the tube. “Ah!” He exclaimed excitedly, turning the first, then second lock, then pushing the orange lid over the end of the tube. “I figured it out eventually.”

“Yes, you did,” I giggled and gave him a thumbs-up. I liked making the air feel lighter around us—and watching Grandpa smile was a grace I felt kept me going, too.

I cut two strips of white fabric tape and we adjusted his tube, so it was curved around the hole at the center. When it stuck to his belly with-

out any issues, Grandpa pulled down his shirt.

“Thank you, Hannah. I really appreciate it.”

“Not as much as you’re going to appreciate me cleaning your bathroom next!”

“No, no. I can do it. You go on and rest.”

“Let me help you, Grandpa,” I took the two empty pitchers and brought them over to the sink. “Please?”

“Oh, all right,” he agreed, “just let me get back there and clean up before we start.”

As I rinsed the remaining tools from his feeding Grandpa made his way back to his bathroom. He was incredibly agile for an older man—he never had any stumbles or falls—which he chalks up to walking up and down his stairs leading to his guest bedroom multiple times a day.

“I used to be able to do six times a day,” he told me when I first arrived, “but now I’ve been so tired I can only get to two or three.”

I followed Grandpa into his bedroom that leads into his bathroom, but when I walked by his nightstand on the right, something stopped me.

As I heard Grandpa rummaging through his bathroom, most likely washing his hands, and removing his medications and special creams from his two-sink counter, I picked up a small picture frame of my grandparents. Grandma had her full head of hair, and they were standing under their large maple tree on the property of their last house. They were embracing each other and smiling at the camera. Resting on the table in front of where the frame sat, there was a handwritten note in my grandfather’s handwriting that said: *The best thing that ever happened to me.*