Voices of the Past and Present

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Preface

The family lives through the work of women. Strong female voices carry the values and feelings of the family. For this reason, I have chosen to write about the experiences I have had with the women in my family. Some of the stories I include are better when heard from the voice of my mother, so at times I have done my best to assume her voice. I would like to dedicate this work to the women in my family, especially Ruby Pearl Figgatt (1914-1990), Dorothy Arlene Fitzgerald (1933-1993), and Barbara Ruth Foster (b. 1949).
Sonny Boy

Sept. 14, 1950
composed by Eliza Winter Fitzgerald

In the bright sunny south there's peace and content
and the years of my boyhood I carelessly spent.
But I never shall forget when I took them by the hand
and started in defense of our native land.

Grandmother, Grandmother for me do not weep,
for your kind advice I ever shall keep.
You taught me to be brave from boyhood to a man
and I'm going to fight for your old native land.

Oh Helen, dear Helen for me do not weep.
Way in some far mountain I expect to sleep.
Through danger of all I expect for to bare.
Through sickness and death I expect for to share.

Oh my brother looked sad when I bid him depart,
Grandmother embraced me with oh aching heart,
and beautiful Helen looked pale in her woes,
but she kissed me and blessed me and told me to go.

Grandaddy, Grandaddy for me do not weep.
I'll be just one less that you'll have to keep.
But ah, I'll remember my old childhood home
though I'm out in this world to wonder and roam.

Ah Daddy, ah Daddy stop drinking I pray,
for if you don't you will sure go astray
and Heaven above will not be your home,
but sin and destruction will sure be your doom.

Oh I once had a mother, but she went astray,
she was like my daddy, they both lost the way.
But I pray to our savior who is up above,
that they will meet at the throne and be happy once more.

Well, said Sonny, it is time I must go
to the banks of the old island where many pines grow,
and when I return it will be in the spring
to see the war lights...hear the nightingale sing.
The poem "Sonny Boy" was written by my Great, Great Grandmother, about my grandpa as he was leaving home to join the military. He has the original handwritten copy of this poem, and it is a family treasure. We don't especially consider Eliza to be the greatest poet we've ever read. We do, however, appreciate the fact that she lived in a shack on the side of a mountain, raised several of her grandchildren and still managed to find the time to express her emotions through poetry.

Eliza is the first person in a long stream of wonderful women in my family. Her grandson, whom she called "Sonny," is my Papaw. He married my Grandma Dorothy, and their first child was my beautiful red-haired mother. I am thankful to Eliza for keeping my grandfather when he was a child. Although Papaw has several stories that include the phrase, "up hill both ways," at least he made it. Making it through everyday life is a challenge for everyone, and I have found that my family handles it especially well.

New Heights

My mother claims that I did not have a wonderful childhood. I'm not sure if I did or not. I know she had a difficult time when she was a child, but I don't know how you would classify my childhood. Mom was an
alcoholic for a time, but it never really caused me much trouble. Mom's father was a violent alcoholic during her childhood. He was also a military man, which led to a certain kind of discipline for his kids, much stricter than the average family. In comparison to hers, my own childhood seems rather tame.

My brother and I spent much of our time playing in worlds we created: treehouses, Barbies, and other imaginary games. Mom never really set rules for us, so we might play in the woods until we became frightened of the dark and wandered home. Fortunately we lived in a reputable neighborhood, and our friends were also the independent children of rich alcoholics.

Lack of discipline led to wild teenage years, but a mother who conquered her problems became more involved in my life. By the time I entered junior high, Mom had left my stepfather and quit drinking. Suddenly she was making dinner, taking care of my brother, and telling me what to do. It didn't affect me much, but I became sneaky. Fortunately my friends were sneaky too. My teenage years were fun, and I felt lucky to have my mother interfering in my business.

The Multi-Purpose Cable Tower

"I'm not going first!" I exclaimed. Before I attempted this daring
feat, I wanted to be sure my friends made it down alive. Sherry moved to my side as she shook her head. Tracy rolled her eyes at our chicken-heartedness, and then all eyes turned to Brandi.

Having inside connections to Tracy's notorious slumber parties was not to Brandi's advantage tonight. Being Tracy's cousin, Brandi often appeared at functions that were intended to establish a more Three Musketeer-like camaraderie. Tracy was taking sweet revenge on her cousin tonight, and Sherry and I were happy to let the fourth-wheel Musketeer take the lead in this adventure.

Tracy spoke for all of us, "Brandi, you're going first."

As Brandi commenced whining, Tracy began directing Sherry and me, "I'll have to go last so I can shut the window. Remember--be quiet, my parents are right downstairs." She slowly eased open the window then left us with one reassuring thought, "It's really not that hard; just don't look down."

Sherry and I were still giving each other wide-eyed looks when Tracy beckoned to Brandi. As poor Brandi cowered in the bedroom corner, I glanced around the room thinking about how much safer this plan had seemed three hours ago. As night had fallen this little scheme had gotten more involved. Our secret plans were still calling loudly enough to lure us
out of this third story bedroom window.

Brandi was frantically whispering that she shouldn't have to go first, but Tracy had already gripped her wrist and was pulling her toward the window. Somehow Brandi came to her senses and realized that a silly fear of heights wasn't worth Tracy's wrath for spoiling this plan. Bravely, she stood up and faced the open window. Looking straight ahead, she reached out her arms and attempted to reach the cable tower. When she realized that she wasn't even close she faltered, but Tracy had already placed a firm hand on her back.

"Lean!" Tracy encouraged in a loud whisper. Brandi bent forward at the waist, but ended up staring straight at the ground.

"Don't look down!" we all cried in stage whispers, but it was too late. Tracy gave up and let her cousin fall back onto the bedroom carpet. Brandi lay on the floor as if she had just dropped three floors and lost a few years of her youth.

Taking a breath Sherry stepped forward and said, "Oh I'll just go; it's no big deal!" Shamed but relieved, Brandi rolled aside, and Sherry approached the window. She climbed up on the window sill, swung her arms out, and, with only a moment's hesitation, leaped onto the tower.

After Sherry's easy escape, I realized this was a stunt that had to be
done quickly, with a bare minimum of thought. And when my mom found out about this stunt, which was virtually inevitable, my plea would be temporary loss of all thought. Tracy's face was beginning to show her impatience, so I quickly climbed up on the window sill. Tracy was silent, listening for any sounds from downstairs. The tower looked so far away, but Sherry had made it safely to the ground, so I knew I had to go.

I reached my arms out into the cool night air and stretched as far as I could. With two inches remaining between my fingers and the cable tower, I leaned just a little further, and my body fell away from the window. After just a split second of flight, my fingers grazed metal. As my hands desperately clutched the tower, the rest of my body came crashing behind me. I was finally out the window, and the tower was swaying under my weight.

From the ground, Sherry whispered, "Don't look down!" Immediately I glanced down to see what she was whispering about, and I caught sight of the ground, three stories away. Briefly my heart stopped, then I began lowering myself. I could hear Tracy wrestling Brandi onto the window sill, and my pace quickened. I didn't want two of us dangling off this tower at once, I would be safely on the ground when Brandi came flying out the window.
Soon, I reached the earth. I joined Sherry, and we watched in amazement as Tracy grabbed Brandi around the waist and threw her toward the tower. Brandi clung on whimpering, but soon realized that it was best to get down before Tracy came after her. She scurried down the tower, attempting to reach the ground before Tracy jumped.

Tracy, who had practiced all day while her parents were at work, agilely swung out to the tower, and shimmied down. Once we were all on the ground we peaked into Tracy's parents' window, where all was dark. Giggling, the four of us ran toward the cornfield to begin our adventure.

Years later Tracy and I readily tell the story of our escape. It has become a myth in our minds, even though as we flew through our teens there were many more interesting and dangerous escapades. I've always thought that the irony of the story is that no one remembers why we were so desperate to get out the window. Our destination must have been something important in our minds, but it didn't have the lasting effect of the escape plan.

Of course, we were caught. A few days after the slumber party, Tracy's dad was painting the house and discovered footprints at an impossible angle under her third floor window. The angle wasn't entirely impossible, if you were hanging onto the cable tower, so he called his
wife out for her opinion. It didn't take long to figure out our scheme, so Tracy's mother called our parents and told on us all.

Fortunately my mom didn't particularly care. I thought Mom would have done the same thing, had she been in my place. Her brother, Marvin, said he and Mom kept lawn chairs under their windows so that they wouldn't get their clothes dirty when they jumped out their windows at night. Sherry's mother was pretty upset about the whole incident, but unfortunately Brandi's parents weren't too concerned, and she remained on the permanent invitation list for all of Tracy's slumber parties.

Although it is true that Mom snuck out of the house just as much as I did, she had more reason. Papaw imposed strict rules, and Mom never felt like he was letting her live a normal childhood. As the only girl in the family, she was handed a lot of responsibility when my grandma began working afternoons at the grocery store. After school Mom had to make dinner, do the dishes, and start her homework before she could go outside.

**Kids in a Tree**

I had just finished my homework, and at least an hour of daylight remained. Letting the screen slam behind me, I ran down the driveway to find my brothers. For such a warm evening, the street seemed deserted. The old Craig couple was walking their retriever, but no one else was in
sight. Marvin and Kenneth weren't in the Johnson's yard as I had expected, so I continued down the block.

By the time I had walked up and down the whole street I was becoming discouraged at not being able to find them. I headed home, cutting through to the back yard, but they weren't there either. I sat down in a thick patch of grass to think. Plucking at the faces of some fat dandelions, I tried to think of any other places I could look for my brothers. They were probably hiding from me on purpose; that would be just like them. I laid back in the grass and watched some clouds float lazily across the sky.

Just as I decided to quit looking, I heard yelling from far off in the woods. Jumping up to investigate, I listened closely to locate the sound. Before entering the woods I checked the sky to assure myself it wouldn't be getting dark soon. I wasn't afraid to enter the woods, but I wanted to track them down quickly because it wouldn't be much longer before we had to go home.

I could still hear the yelling, and I just knew it had to be my brothers. I followed the cries to a clearing and found Marv and Kenneth and three of their friends dangling out of the largest tree in the whole woods. Even by tilting my head all the way back, I still couldn't see the top of this
tree. Marvin swung down and came over to me.

"Don't even think about getting up there," he pointed at the monster tree. "I doubt if you can climb it."

"Well I climb every other tree that you climb, don't I?" I asked, feeling indignant. He was already making it into a challenge that neither of us consciously recognized. I realized it was a tall tree, but it had a number of good climbing branches.

Kenneth yelled down from a high branch, "C'mon Marvin, Barbara!"

Marvin shook his head as I approached the tree. Before he could start back up the tree, I had already begun crawling up the branches. I can honestly say that I climbed up as well as any of the boys, and I didn't feel frightened at all. I reached Kenneth's level with no problem. My trouble began when I looked at the ground.

I could see Marvin staring up at us, and he looked surprised. I think our faces mirrored each other because I felt pretty surprised at where I found myself. Just as I was beginning to realize that I might be in a sticky situation, I heard a piercing whistle. That quick shriek set my heart pounding, and my palms began to sweat.

At the sound, Kenneth began swinging down from the tree. Marvin started to run off, but didn't get two steps without realizing that it
wouldn't do him any good to leave me behind, stuck in a tree. If I got in
trouble for being late to get home, so would everyone else. We all knew
what it meant when Dad whistled. We were to get home as fast as
humanly possible because he wasn't going to stand there for long without
becoming angry.

Hopelessly Marv called, " Didn't you hear him? C'mon!"

I wanted to reply, but couldn't catch my breath to speak. Twisting
my hands against the trunk, I tried to picture letting go and climbing
down. I quickly concluded that it wasn't going to happen that way.

Kenneth had reached the ground, but stood looking up at me.

I could hear their desperate conversation as Kenneth pleaded, "Can't
you get her down?"

Marvin looked at me and shook his head, "I don't know; maybe you
should get Dad."

Kenneth would have rather I jumped out of the tree and risked a few
broken bones. He looked from me to Marv and then back up to me. Marvin
stood his ground, and Kenneth realized he was going to have to be the one
to go and break the news to Dad. I forgot my own predicament as I felt
sympathy for my brother. I knew the reaction that would greet Kenneth if
he came home with the news that I was stuck in a tree. Since Dad went
crazy over little things, I sure wasn't going to give him a real reason to be angry.

"Wait!" I called anxiously, "I'll get down, just hold on."

Marvin and Kenneth watched me, and I wanted to keep us all out of trouble if I could. In just a few minutes we would hear the second whistle and that would be our last chance to get in safely. I took a huge breath and slowly started down. My brothers' faces encouraged me because every bit I lowered myself brought relief to their eyes. Fear of my dad's anger was really no comparison to a fear of heights.

Although the descent seemed to take forever, my feet finally hit solid ground. I grabbed my younger brothers by the hands, and we all began running furiously. Thankfully, we didn't hear him whistle again until we were already at the edge of the woods. We would make it just in time to avoid a seriously angry father. Relieved, we ran through the backyard to the house.

Once she entered high school, Mom expected to gain some freedom, but she never did. Her boyfriend was not allowed to come in the house because Papaw didn't like him. Other male friends would come pick her up, as if they were going on a date. Mom would get out down the block and
meet her boyfriend to go out for the evening. She always had a good time, but never did all the terrible things that her parents wanted to shield her from.

She was late getting home once when she was seventeen, and Papaw was furious that she missed her curfew. He accused her of being drunk, which upset her a great deal. Embarrassed by his accusations and tired of his constant hatefulness, she locked herself in the bathroom and swallowed half a bottle of aspirin. Then she laid down, hoping to die.

The aspirin didn't kill her, but it made her sick. Papaw found her throwing up in the bathroom, and make a remark about not having any sympathy for her if she couldn't hold her booze. He would never have believed that Mom never drank until after the death of my father when she was twenty-five.

All the trouble Mom had with her parents was resolved after the birth of the first grandchild. My brother followed me two years later, and the family members were finally being civil to one another. Papaw finally stopped drinking, but he could still make hateful comments on occasion. Mom would put up with him because she wanted Michael and I to be close to our grandparents.

Throughout my childhood, I was very close to my mother and her
parents. A serious tragedy lay ahead of us when my maternal great-grandmother became very sick. Grandma went to Virginia to be with her mother. She stayed there for several months, while Papaw waited with us at home. Great-Grandma's health became so bad that the rest of the family members traveled to Virginia as we were able.

A Reminder of Great-Grandma

After Great-Grandma was buried, we all returned to her tiny apartment. Everyone was anxious to get inside for an evening of rest before the tension of the twelve hour ride home, from Virginia to Indiana, began the next morning. We loosened ties, kicked off tight shoes, and made a quick meal out of the pounds of cold cuts, various casseroles, and pies that had been offered as condolences by friends of the family. Even after we all had eaten, Grandma continued to putter around her mother's kitchen, rearranging dishes and brushing at things with a dishtowel.

In the living room, the family was packed tightly onto the couch, and each chair was shared. The kids covered the floor, sprawled out with schoolbooks, desperately completing homework that had been neglected. Everyone tried not to move too much, so as not to bump a knickknack or tip over one of the many flower arrangements that held a card reading, "In loving memory of Ruby Hall Figgatt."
The uncles were quiet, squirming to get comfortable. They seemed unreal; none of them joked, pinched, or teased any of us. Red-haired Kenneth sat in the corner holding his five-year old son. Kenneth owned his own business, installing furnaces. He and his boy were constantly dirty from being in the garage; today they sat starched and white, in matching suit coats. Kenneth’s two brothers sat on the couch. Raymond was my youngest uncle, Grandma’s baby. Today when Grandma turned her back, Raymie didn’t become obnoxious, poking us or tugging on our hair; he barely said a word.

Marvin, my crazy uncle and Mom’s best friend, sat primly beside Raymond, with his legs crossed and arms folded. Marvin was known to be quiet, but it was usually due to a hangover. When Marvin did speak, he usually said something so funny that we would laugh until tears ran down our faces. Throughout the funeral and the preceding days, he had only spoken when Grandma and Papaw weren’t in the vicinity; he knew they considered him incredibly offensive. Now with the whole family sardined into the living room, Marvin opted to remain silent.

My brother sat beside Marvin on the couch. Michael and Marv looked so much alike, and they were good friends. They both were quiet, thoughtful, funny people. Together they would have serious discussions
about topics that others would only laugh about: prime colors of tie dyed T-shirts, new Haywood Banks tunes, or their favorite TV show, The Simpsons. With an algebra book open on his lap, Michael sat next to Marv without speaking.

My stepdad, Kenny, fit in well with the uncles. Normally we could see all four men, lounging on Grandma's porch, with brightly colored flannel bellies hanging over their belts, laughing and smoking cigarettes. Kenny had married my mom a year before. Everyone had been intimidated at first; Kenny was nine years younger than Mom, his hair reached the middle of his black leather jacket, he wore a gold hoop in his ear, and he was proud of his recovery from alcoholism and drug abuse. This weekend, he had known he was part of the family when Papaw asked him to be a pall bearer with my uncles. Kenny was surprised at the request, and very nervous, but he agreed to do it as long as he would have time for a cigarette on the ride to the cemetery.

My mom sat on the floor between the couch and her father's chair. I could tell she was depressed and exhausted, and I hoped she wouldn't explode into hysterical giggles like she and I both tend to do in times of tension. She was doing fine for a while, and then the phone rang. Mom answered it because she was the closest, and everyone's attention was
suddenly on her. Grandma even wandered in from the kitchen to see who it could be.

We heard Mom saying, "Donna? No, Donna's not here. I think she had to go back to the funeral home to pick up some things." For some reason, we all realized that the caller wasn't asking for Donna, our distant cousin, but coincidentally had called the wrong number for someone of the same name. Everyone realized this, that is, except for Mom. She had launched into a full scale explanation of who had died, where we had last seen Donna, and what Donna had forgotten at the funeral home.

The rest of the family was howling with laughter; the caller must have been totally confused. He finally apologized for calling the wrong number, offered his condolences, and hung up. Mom didn't know what to think and we were all laughing too hard to tell her. Finally she understood and exclaimed, "Oh, you mean he didn't want our Donna!"

Mom's funny confusion lightened the mood. Marvin, Kenneth, Raymond, and Kenny began to tease her unmercifully. Michael and I began impressions of her: giving lectures about the dangers of releasing personal information to strangers over the phone. Papaw even laughed when he saw Grandma shake her head and smile. Our chatter and smiles made it seem more like one of our normal, weekly family gatherings.
After the atmosphere became more relaxed Grandma came in and perched on the arm of Papaw's recliner. I did a double take when I saw him slide his arm protectively around her waist. I nudged Mom and made eyes at them until she noticed what I meant. Her eyebrows raised at the sight of them sitting there, touching. This was only the second sign of affection I had ever seen between my grandparents. The first had been earlier that day, as they held each other in front of Great-Grandma's casket.

As I thought about how unusual they looked, I became aware of my own body's position. My legs were stretched out so I could touch one foot to Mom's leg and the other foot to Michael's leg. My back rested against Kenny's knees. My eight-year old cousin, Jessi, was curled up in my lap, with her back against my chest. I felt more comfortable touching them all than I did if we each occupied our own personal space. It was nothing for me to chase Michael or Jessi down to give them a noisy kiss on the cheek; in fact, Papaw often chased me down and did the same. But Papaw kissing Grandma...it was unthinkable!

After a while, everyone began preparing to go back to the motel to get some sleep before the return trip. Papaw was trying to get specific times of departure so he could figure out exactly how long to worry before
assuming we had all been killed in a highway pile-up. None of the men would obligue because they were all secretly planning a cross-country race; first one back to Indiana was to be proclaimed driving champion of the family. The children were all arguing, claiming their dad was the fastest. Michael and I had ridden with Kenny enough to know that our uncles had no chance of beating him. Papaw was getting angry, trying to explain why everyone needed to leave in intervals, so if one family wrecked the next family would be along within an hour. Marvin made it worse by asking, "So are you and Mom kind of like 'clean up' since you're leaving last?" My mom assured Papaw that we would leave in one hour shifts, much to the dismay of her brothers and husband. They moaned about it, but quickly started organizing a way to time each family's trip, so the driving champ would still have his glory.

The ride back to Indiana was twelve hours of total boredom. Michael was stretched out in the front seat, dozing and reading a Star Trek book. Kenny was driving and humming along with the Led Zeppelin blaring from the radio. An hour later, Mom would be riding home with Marvin and Jessi. I was alone in the back seat, struggling to fall asleep.

My mind kept drifting to some memory of the weekend. I thought about how Papaw had pulled me aside earlier that morning to ask if there
was anything of Great-Grandma's that I would like to have. I thought that was a morbid question and politely told him no. Later I overheard Kenneth's wife whispering to him that the antique rocker would look great in their kitchen. I hated them for wanting something of hers, yet, on the other hand, there was something I should have remembered.

There was a matching hairbrush set, with a gold plated brush, comb, and hand mirror, that Great-Grandma used to keep on her vanity. She used to brush my long, straight hair when I was little. Later, when I was older, I would go back to her bedroom and climb up on the piano bench in front of the mirror and brush my own hair, listening to her at work in the kitchen. I regretted not thinking of this sooner, Papaw surely would have given it to me.

As the ride home from Virginia ended, thoughts of my family drifted away, and I began mentally preparing myself for the switch back to normal life. Midterm exams were coming up, then the prom, then graduation. I had much to look forward to, and my Great-Grandma's death would soon become only a fading memory in my life.

When my mom arrived home an hour later, we were busy unpacking and cleaning. She brought in a small paper bag and said, "Arin, this is for you. I don't really know what you'll want with it, but Papaw thought you
might like to have it. I don't know where he got that idea. Just take it and put it away if you want; it's not really worth anything."

Not surprisingly, that golden hairbrush set was worth the world to me. Proof of a memory, that I could actually hold in my hand. Of course, Papaw hadn't had any way of knowing I wished for that hairbrush set. As I reached out to take it I had the eerie sensation that there was something greater involved. Somehow, magically perhaps, without even knowing it, my grandfather gave me a reminder of my family and how strong our bonds remain from one life to the next.

Great-Grandma's death had an enormous effect on the family. It was like both Grandma and Papaw's mother had died on the exact same day. They were both heart-broken, but time slowly began to heal their wounds. I understood the loss they felt, but I didn't experience it in the same way. All I could compare was the way I would feel if my own mother died. As a teenager, it is so difficult to imagine that your parents would ever die.

A few years passed, and we went on with life, although Grandma and Papaw mourned Great-Grandma's death for a very long time. It was much too soon that tragedy struck us again, taking another of the important women out of our lives. This time the loss was even closer to home for
me than it had been with the loss of Great-Grandma Ruby.

A Family in the Hospital

I still remember the look on my mom's face the day she told me. It was summer vacation, and she had just driven an hour to pick me up from the dorm. I was settling into the car for the ride, when I brought up something about my grandparents. It must have been unimportant because I don't remember exactly what I said; maybe it wasn't even directly about them. But Mom's reply was unforgettable.

"We're taking Grandma to the hospital tomorrow."

I was surprised. "She had to have more tests? I can't believe that! Why can't they just figure out what's wrong with her? What's she going to have done now?" I felt indignant that it was taking this long to cure my Grandma of whatever it was that was making her feel so weak and sick.

Mom was smoking. I noticed that she was concentrating very intently on the road; too intently. She finally answered me, "She's not really going in for tests."

The atmosphere in the car seemed familiar. She was trying to tell me something, and I knew what was going to be. I had been wrapped up in my freshman year of college, new friends and adventures. No one had even
told me that it was this serious.

Mom's reply was calm and practiced, "She's not getting better. I don't really know why she had to be in the hospital. I guess they have to watch her. She's not going to get better, I don't think."

I looked at her unbelievingly. There weren't even tears in her eyes, so it couldn't be true. Or at least she didn't believe it. Neither did I.

* * *

There was nothing in Dorothy Arlene Fitzgerald's personality that would have led us to believe she might someday die. With Papaw, we knew it would happen eventually, but it seemed as if she would just live on without him. She looked like a bird, frail and pretty; she sat like a bird, perched on the edge of her seat. Her fingers were long and thin, with beautiful, oval nails. She liked flowers, and fruit, and animals. Her frailty was only skin deep.

One time I heard her call a relative's wife "a brazen hussy." That had taken place at a funeral...Grandma's own mother's funeral, in fact. She didn't care; she thought it was true so she said it. We all giggled at the crazy things Grandma did. She wasn't, by any means, a senile old lady whom everyone pitied and ignored. She was never out of her mind, but she was always doing something to surprise us.
When I was eight or so, we took a trip to Virginia with my grandparents. By the time we hit the mountainous stretch of the trip, Papaw was getting sleepy, and he reluctantly turned over the wheel to Grandma. As he dozed off, Grandma merged onto the shoulder of the road. The ride became bumpy enough to wake Papaw, and he was startled to see us driving half on, half off the road in the middle of the mountains. Her completely cool and serious reply to him was, "It's there; I don't see why I can't use it!"

Even in times that Grandma should have seemed weak, she maintained herself. Perhaps it was the southern belle inside of her. The best example of her power was the day she fell. For some reason she chose a beautiful sunny day to clean her house. After being cooped up, she was excited to get outside. She stood on a railroad tie, by her garden, smoking a cigarette and surveying her prized flowers and tomato plants.

Somehow she lost her balance and fell off the railroad tie, twisting her back. It hurt too much to get up, she said, but it wasn't so bad crawling. On her hands and knees she crawled across the yard, onto the porch, and into the house. Once inside, she realized she still had a burning cigarette in her mouth. Crawling through the house to the kitchen, where all the ashtrays were drying in the dish drainer, she put out her cigarette.
She telephoned her youngest son, an EMT, to ask what she should do for minor back pain. Raymond rushed over, stopping only to call for an ambulance, for which he knew he would pay dearly. He arrived just as the ambulance did, and he was no sooner in the house than she was denying any pain or need to get in that ambulance. Raymond finally convinced her to go, if only for him. Nothing was broken, but she had pain in her back for the rest of her life. It was the first and one of the few signs of her vulnerability.

* * *

My first visit to Grandma in the hospital was unnerving. I had no idea she would actually look shrunken and thin, like a sick little old lady. There were tubes in her nose, intensifying the fear I felt upon seeing her. Tubes were not a good sign, but she began talking as soon as she saw me. She made fun of the way I smiled at her, saying it was a huge "cheesy" smile. The latest running joke in the family centered on me being a camera hog, with a huge smile. She had never joined in on the teasing before; I suppose I must have looked fake, grinning at her like that. It was hard to understand her words when she spoke, I felt sick when Mom had to interpret what Grandma was saying. I couldn't even understand my
Grandma; had I really been away that long?

Living an hour away from my grandparents was difficult for me; it didn't seem like my friends who had gone to college cared about their families very much. I had been spending every Sunday with Grandma and Papaw since I was baby. Even in my last years at home, when I was finally getting late curfews, less rules, and independence, there was never much question about where I would be on Sundays from 3:00 until 8:00. My friends often wanted me to go to matinees or pool parties, and they found it hard to believe that I would rather eat dinner at my Grandma's.

The Sunday atmosphere at Grandma's was festive, like most people experience at family holidays. It could be the hottest day in August and Grandma might fix an entire turkey dinner. All my cousins would be there with their parents. On warm days we would play silly made-up games in the backyard, even though my brother and I were much older than the rest.

On cooler days we would play in the garage or watch TV. My cousin, Jessi, and I became engrossed in the movie, "Shag" one Sunday, and from the kitchen, Grandma listened to us laugh and talk about it. We knew the love scene was coming up, and Jessi and I looked anxiously at each other, not wanting to change the channel, but not wanting Grandma to hear the slightly dirty scene either.
As the characters got romantic on the screen, Jessi and I got louder in the living room, until we noticed that we hadn't covered it very well. Grandma was standing right behind us saying, "I'm not sure this is an appropriate show to be watching..." Jessi pleaded that she'd seen it several times before, how could one more hurt. Grandma just shook her head and returned to the kitchen, disgusted that both our mothers let us watch such trash.

Later, when our moms came in from outside, we tried to pull one over on Grandma, shouting, "Mom, Mom Grandma let us watch 'Shag'! We've been wanting to see this forever, and Grandma let us, can you believe it?" Grandma poked her head around the corner to give us a stern look, then returned to the kitchen. She never fell for our tricks.

The best activity was to go into Grandma's bedroom and look through her drawers. She had old clothes and jewelry, and pictures of everyone. We made up games and stories and kept the younger cousins entertained until dinner. When we sat down to eat, kids ate in the living room at a card table. Over dinner we teased and laughed, the adults listening from the kitchen. There was nothing I would have rather done than to be there.

Once Grandma went into the hospital, we realized that no matter how much of our lives we had spent with her, it was not enough.
Fortunately, the hospital staff understood our desire to be with her; they withdrew all visiting hour rules for us. The entire family was there nearly every waking moment. The nurses let us eat in their lounge so we wouldn't have to go downstairs to the cafeteria.

At night, my mom and her three brothers took turns staying in Grandma's hospital room. My mom never wanted me to spend the night; she always insisted that the rest of us go home. Papaw only went to his house to take baths and change his clothes. After about three days in the hospital, we all expected Grandma to be released. Instead the doctors said she was getting worse. It was the most miserable week of my life.

My mom became involved in a complicated triangle with my uncle, Kenneth, and his wife, Beth. Beth worked as a secretary for an internist, so naturally that was the doctor who treated Grandma. The problem was that Mom argued with the doctor constantly, and many of us felt that he wasn't even giving Grandma adequate care. We were all wondering if Grandma had cancer, but the doctor wouldn't answer the question. If he answered yes, he would be asking for a malpractice suit, since months before he had said it wasn't cancer that was making Grandma sick. If he said no, he would have been lying to us all.

Grandma struggled on with this doctor, and the relationship between
Mom and her brother became tense. Time was running out, but Kenneth wouldn't admit that Grandma needed a doctor who would treat her for cancer of the pancreas.

On her fourth night in the hospital, we received bad news. I was at home for dinner, when the phone rang. It was Raymond, crying. He said Michael and I should come to the hospital right away because Grandma's nurses didn't feel like she would live through the night. Of course we made the six minute drive in about two. Mom and Kenny, Mom's three brothers and their wives and children, were all crammed in Grandma's room. Papaw was by her bedside holding her tiny hand.

Everyone in the room had tear-stained faces; most were sobbing. Looking at the red blotchy faces, I realized that this was the first time many of us had cried together. A few of our favorite nurses came in and explained the situation to all of us. They told us that Grandma had slipped into a coma, and would not come out of it. I studied Grandma carefully; she appeared to be asleep.

Michael and Kenny left the room; the situation was too uncomfortable. My uncles sent the youngest of the grandkids out of the room because they would be more comfortable in the waiting room. My aunt Carol followed them out into the hall. Carol was finally pregnant
after years of trying, and as she got up and left the room, we all realized that Grandma would not live to see her next grandbaby.

The remaining family in the room crowded around the bed to say good-bye. After many tears and hugs, we started to spread out to the waiting rooms. Everyone felt relieved that we had a chance to say goodbye to Grandma. Raymond was outside thanking the nurses for helping us get the family there in time. Kenneth was in the hallway talking with two men in suits; I later found out they were from the funeral home and were looking for some business. Mom and I wandered down to our favorite waiting room with the rest of the family.

That evening Mom approached Kenneth and immediately began crying. He just hugged her and said, "I don't want to fight anymore." We were relieved that they had made up, and that Grandma would finally be out of her misery. Later that same night, Mom and I walked into Grandma's hospital room to find Papaw. He was crouched over Grandma, talking to her. She had her eyes open and with much difficulty, was talking back.

Papaw looked at us frantically, "She says she wants pudding...tapioca pudding."

Mom just stood there and stared, so I quickly took off toward the nurses' desk. The nurses were astounded when I told them of Grandma's
request. They all ran to her room to see for themselves, and eventually found her some pudding. I sat by her bedside and slowly fed her a few spoonfuls. None of us could believe what had happened; it seemed like she had awakened from the dead. In all our mourning, we had completely underestimated Grandma’s strong will. Little did we know we would be unjustifiably called to say our final good-byes four more times in the next week and a half.

Papaw and Mom requested that the doctors suspend the painful breathing treatments that Grandma had to undergo. Raymond took the initiative to remove an oxygen monitoring device from her finger because she said it hurt. One minute Grandma would be in a deep sleep; the doctors assured us several times that she was in a coma and would not awaken. Somehow she kept waking up.

As the days went by, we all became even more exhausted, and it seemed that time had been suspended. We all began acting weirder than usual, in ways that could be expected. Papaw would wander down to the nurse’s station and begin telling poignant stories of his marriage to Grandma. The nurses were sympathetic, but Mom looked at him once and said to me, "Is he talking about this family?" I agreed that he was forgetting all the bad times that had taken place. Mom, on the other hand,
was having trouble forgiving her dad for all the times he had come home drunk and screamed at Grandma. We kept her feelings between the two of us.

Mom and Papaw spent the most time in Grandma's room. The other family members were free to roam the hospital. Marvin was falling in love with one of the midnight-shift nurses. Carol was rapidly becoming a nervous wreck, and she began to stay home more. Raymond had friends who worked in the emergency room, so he would usually wander downstairs. Kenny, Michael, and I hung out together, often drinking coffee or pop in the cafeteria. We ate a lot of fast food and mindlessly watched hours of TV; two behaviors that come automatically with a crisis in the family.

On the day that Grandma died, we all gathered in the tiny chapel inside the hospital. I don't really know why we did that, but no one seemed to offer an argument. There were so many of us that my brother and Marvin had to stand in the back of the room. The hospital's chaplain spoke to us, but we didn't really hear what she said. We were all quiet and calm; after sobbing for over a week, everyone seemed temporarily out of tears. There would be rivers of tears to come in the future.

Leaving the hospital gave us a strange feeling. We said good-bye to
the nurses. Marvin chickened out and didn't ask the cute nurse for her phone number. Michael and I walked out into the sunlight with our cousins. Everyone stood in the parking lot talking for a few minutes. I realized that it is fortunate that funerals are so elaborate because they give everyone something to think about besides the death of a certain Grandma. After the funeral the pain would begin again, and the family would struggle with this loss for years to come.

As we began to, once again, fulfill our daily routines Papaw was the only one left without a normal life. Doing her best to compensate for his loss, Mom began spending long hours with him. She took care of him and the house, much in the same way she had done when she was very young. Mom began to cook dinner at his house nearly every night. She finally achieved some of the closeness that had never existed between them before. Although they were making it through each day, they were still struggling with grief and deep loss. All at once, Mom realized that her dad was not adept at dealing with his feelings, and he might be in a dangerously lonely situation.

Dad's Intentions

I had been waiting all afternoon for the right time to talk to Dad
about his medicine, but I kept getting distracted. Jessi was bouncing through the kitchen, practicing cheers. Marvin was in and out, working on the motorcycle and half-heartedly attempting to keep Jessi entertained. Dinner was a mess; I fried chicken because Dad liked it, and it was something he couldn't make himself. It was also the most dreaded thing to make, with the grease popping all over the kitchen and me. When the dishes were finally almost done, I got enough of a break to call him into the kitchen to hear what I had discovered.

"Okay, Dad, I talked to the doctor at work about why you're feeling so sick. Here's what he said. Can you hear me?" I got out the notes I had taken at work about the possible reactions between all my father's various medicines. Arin and Michael always made fun of me for my interest in medicine and health, but I knew if I didn't help Dad figure this out, then no one would.

He turned in his seat so his good ear was toward me and nodded.

I continued, "Here is the name of the medicine that you need to quit taking, even though Dr. Estes keeps prescribing it," I handed him a slip of paper with the name of the medicine prescribed for his stomach aches written on it. "I know your stomach's feeling better, so you don't need to be taking this anymore; the side effects are too harmful. The reference
book at work says that this medicine causes depression and suicidal tendencies."

Just as I was about to continue down my list of changes he needed to make he spoke. There were tears in his eyes even before the words came out of his mouth.

"I have been thinking about that a lot lately," he said.

It took several seconds before I understood what he meant. When I realized what he had said, my first reaction was to look in the other room to see if Jessi had heard him. She was sitting silently in the doorway watching him cry. The look on her face must have mirrored mine. My years of training in dealing with deep depression flew out the window as I frantically searched for some way to change the subject.

Even though I knew that was the worst thing to do, I hurriedly began talking about some of his other medicines. I could deal with ten drug addicted children threatening to kill me and themselves, but there was no way I could listen to my dad tell me that he wanted to die. He wasn't really paying attention as I continued to talk to him, but I saw Jessi go back to the TV in the living room, giving me the feeling that the situation had returned to normal.

Marvin took Jessi home an hour later, and I was left alone in the
house with Dad. I was getting ready to leave too, and I gathered my dishes and purse. We walked out on the front porch together. My hands were full, but I patted him on the back as he walked me to my car.

"The effects of that medicine will wear off in a few weeks, probably about two, and you won't feel so depressed anymore. Please, in the meantime, don't do anything stupid," I said, expecting reassurance from him. Instead he scared me even more.

"This isn't how I planned. This isn't the life I planned for," he explained, as he began crying again. He turned from me, and rolled up the windows of his car. Then he walked back up the driveway, all the way into the house.

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For a few days I told no one about what Dad had said. Jessi knew, but the only one she would have told was Marvin. Since Marvin was always a little suicidal himself, he probably wouldn't have been very concerned with it. I was panicky, and I had to tell someone. One evening I stopped by my youngest brother's house. Luckily, both Raymond and Carol were home, and they had the baby out in the middle of the living room surrounded by his toys.
It felt like the small talk about the baby and work took forever. I sat on the edge of the couch feeling shaky and sweaty. Eventually I was able to turn the conversation to Dad, and I told Raymond that Dad said he was feeling suicidal. Carol's open face looked horrified, but Raymond was harder to read. He seemed sad and disappointed, but not surprised.

The next thing I suggested was protecting Dad from himself. I was especially worried about a gun that was hidden under the pots and pans in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. It had been there, untouched, since we were little, but it seemed like Dad would choose that if he suddenly decided to end his life. I asked Raymond if he thought there was a way to sneak it out of the house. His reply brought an angry lump to the back of my throat.

"Well, I'd worry more about the gun Kenneth gave him."

"What gun?" I asked shocked.

Raymond explained what had happened, "A few weeks ago when Dad heard shots outside the house, he started saying he wanted to get a gun. He asked me, and I told him it was a bad idea. I guess he went to Marvin, but Marvin told him he shouldn't be messing with a gun when he can't even hear. He went to Kenneth, and Kenneth gave him one."

I felt sick. Kenneth never thought before he did anything.
was no use sneaking the old rusty gun out of the house. There was nothing more I could do to make a suicide difficult since he already had the weapon under his bed.

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After talking to Raymond, I was even more worried. The longer I thought about it, the more problems I remembered. Just the week before Dad had been so upset with the bank. He was trying to get a certificate of deposit signed over to me. The money was intended to pay for his funeral. The tellers were having trouble getting the paperwork right, and Dad was frenzied all day. He was greatly relieved when the money was signed over.

The other thing that bothered me was Dad and Arin's upcoming trip to Virginia. Arin knew how badly he wanted to go, but he could never travel alone. She and Michael had decided to go along over fall break. I would have expected Dad to be excited about the trip, but he seemed grouchy about it. The strange part was that he had arranged to meet with all of his living family members, for what I was afraid would be the final time.

Worrying about all these situations in Dad's life wasn't doing any good. I still had my own grief to work through since it had only been a year since Mom had died. After her death, Dad's personality had become
more gentle, but now it seemed he was going back to his old self: Hostile, rude, and uncaring. This new turn of events was causing me to feel like I couldn't deal with him anymore, and only time would show if our improved relationship would last. My biggest fear was that I would lose my other parent so soon after my mom's death.

As time wore on, Dad's mood slowly picked up. He would clean the house, go shopping, and take Arin out to eat when she came home from school. Just as I would begin to think he was recovering from his intense grief, he would begin to lapse back into it. Gradually I noticed the cycle revolving around Mom's death. In my own way I experienced a similar cycle. As the anniversary of her death approached I would begin to feel more apprehensive and grouchy.

No one really mentioned the thought of Dad committing suicide after the initial concern. Perhaps I thought about it more because Rex had killed himself in our garage, leaving me with two young children. Or maybe I thought about it more because I could understand Dad's feelings. I had experienced many days in which I felt I could not go on with life.

My one relief is that my Dad continues to carry on his slow and painfully boring life. He sits and looks at pictures of my mother and reads the grocery list that was in her purse when she died. It breaks my heart,
but he searches through her belongings thinking that she has left him a
note. Somehow, he manages to continue living, and he intends to see he
grandchildren grow up.

Sayings never really make anyone feel better, but they are often
true. We're told after the death of a loved one that 'time heals all wounds.'
It's somewhat exaggerated, but also true. Time certainly helps all
wounds. Some of us work through our grief more aggressively, like Mom.
She reads and likes to talk about her feelings. Fortunately she shares
much of these with me.

Mom's Dream

"I had the weirdest dream the other night," Mom started. It seemed
strange that she brought this up; she never told dream stories. There was
only one thing it could be about...

"Grandma," she continued. "Your grandma and I were in the high
school gym. The gym...just the two of us. We were just sitting there, in
the bleachers. Just like we were at..."

Michael's graduation, I thought, as her voice drifted away. She
picked up her book and continued treading as if she hadn't mentioned the
dream. I watched her until she lowered the book. I wasn't quite sure how
to encourage her to continue. Actually, I squirmed a little and then, for the briefest flash I hoped she wouldn't.

"I think," she paused and looked away. "Do you think she might be trying to communicate with me?"

"About graduation?" I asked.

"Yeah, like that she'll be there with us. In some way. Or something like that." She began to ramble, "I know it sounds crazy, but what if Grandma really was trying to communicate with me? Then wouldn't she be getting frustrated if I didn't believe in it" Or what if she's not, but she knows I dreamt that? Will she try?"

I had never heard he speak so fast, and if I didn't know her so well I would have been really confused. As it was, I actually followed every word. I asked, "So do you really think that's what it was or not?" Just by the look on her face, I could tell that she believed in it, and she wanted, more than anything for it to be true. It didn't matter how, or when, or about what, as long as Mom could talk to Grandma on last time.

She picked up her book again and finally answered me, "Oh no, not really! It's just something to think about." I watched her eyes, and it was several minutes before the again focused on her book. Finally, she began reading as if the conversation had never occurred. She was lost in one of
many books about cancer, death, or afterlife; it seemed that she wanted to read as much as she could to prepare for any move from Grandma.

Only for the briefest second did I wonder if my mom might be going a little crazy. Then I realized it was desperation I saw in her eyes, not madness. I felt that if anyone could find a was to reach out to a spirit, Mom would find Grandma. The scary part was that when it finally happened, she might not tell me out of fear that I wouldn't believe her. But of course I would; I had the same feeling of wanting just one last conversation with Grandma.

"Hey mom," I started. Her attention turned back to me and I took a breath before I could continue. "It was probably like you said before."

Mom's face relaxed, and we looked at each other for a few seconds. Her face looked relieved, yet not actually happy. It would be a long time before I saw her look really happy again. We both thought about what I had just said. Then she nodded and agreed, "Yeah, probably."

Every day that the family lives brings another story and memory to our legacy. It is a legacy even though we are just a regular family with no excessive fame or fortune. By now, my mom and I realize that we are part of a normal family, even though it has quirks and black sheep. We consider
ourselves successful because we manage to hold on to each other, even through the worst experiences. Our closeness and love make the family special to me.