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Sixty-Four Years

Jessica Scoville

In the spring Grampa used to drag his chaise lounge onto the back lawn for his naps. This spring the chaise lounge was empty, standing in the middle of the grass. I walked up the driveway past the chaise to the back door and pushed it open.

“Grampa?” I called.

“Ello,” Grampa said.

I put my jacket over a chair in the kitchen and walked to the back room. Grampa was sitting on the old leather couch trying to pull on his left shoe. His mass of white hair stuck in different directions and his sharp blue eyes peered out from underneath a curl that was dangling down his forehead. He was wearing a blue mechanic jumpsuit with his name, “Marv,” embroidered above the right breast pocket. A red cotton tie was slung loosely around his neck. He smiled at me.

“Well, Jessica,” he said, patting the couch next to him.

I sat down and gave him a hug. He smelled of peanut butter and car oil. I looked down at his feet. They were swollen to nearly twice the normal size. His toes were like marbles stuck on the end of a balloon. As I watched, he shoved his right foot into the other shoe, grimacing. He tied the laces loosely and grabbed onto my shoulder as he stood up. He turned, picked up his suit coat, and put his arms into the sleeves.

“How about a little walk?” Grampa asked. I nodded.
It was only a few blocks to the nursing home where Grama lived, but it took the two of us nearly a half an hour to walk there. I held Grampa's rough hand in mine, smoothing over the knuckles and joints with the tips of my fingers. Grampa grunted as each foot hit the ground.

The doors of the nursing home slid open for us and we walked past the front desk, taking our time.

"Sir? Would you like a wheelchair?" the receptionist asked.

Grampa paused long enough to raise his hand in a polite decline and continued walking down the hall. Our footsteps echoed on the linoleum floor as we walked into Grama's room. She looked up from the window and smiled.

"Ethel," Grampa said when he reached the side of her bed. He took her hand and pressed it to his cheek. He closed his eyes and stood in silence for a moment.

"How about a little walk?" Grampa asked. Grama nodded. We helped Grama into her wheelchair and tucked the red afghan from her bed around her legs.

"I'll drive," Grampa said. I stepped back from the chair and Grampa took the handles. He pushed her slowly out of the room, leaning on the back of the chair for support. His breaths were deep and heavy, gasping for air. I followed behind as Grampa pushed Grama down the sidewalk to the roses and gardenias. Grampa reached out and cupped a pink gardenia in his hands, pulling it closer for Grama to smell. She bent her head forward and buried her nose in the petals, smiling.

The gardenias had already wilted before Grama left the nursing home again. We brought her home to her living room for the afternoon. She sat near the bookcase in her wheelchair, fussing with the edge of the afghan on her lap.

"Where's Grampa?" Grama asked.

"Still getting dressed," my pa answered. Grampa's heart was failing. Blood and fluid had pooled in his legs and feet making it almost impossible for him to put on shoes or get dressed. Diabetes left him too weak to walk to the nursing home to visit Grama. They hadn't seen each other in months.

The door to the bedroom opened and Grampa shuffled out. He was wearing a wrinkled suit and a tie that I had never seen before. His
back was curved and he looked at the floor as he came into the room. His feet were shoved uncomfortably into a pair of dress loafers and the laces hung loosely at the sides.

"Let me get you a chair, Dad," my pa said, getting up from his seat near the wall. Grampa waved him away with his hand and moved slowly toward Grama. He stopped near her wheelchair and moved his eyes along the length of the room. He smiled, but his mouth was slack, his lips chapped, and his breath went in and out in quick, deep rasps. He lifted one hand, put it on the back of the wheelchair, and kissed Grama. The kiss was long; I felt like a voyeur and looked away.

After at least a minute, Grampa looked up and said proudly, "We didn’t even have to come up for breath."

It was already winter before we saw them again. The chaise lounge in the backyard was frozen into the snow. My pa and I walked up the cement driveway; Pa pushed open the back door and I followed him onto the porch. Pa knocked softly on the peeling wood of the kitchen door. I stood behind him, looking at the yellow insulation dripping out from underneath the eaves. No one answered. Pa knocked again and then pushed the door open. Grampa was sitting at the kitchen table in his underwear, sucking brownish-colored water out of a mason jar with a straw. There were two purple grapes sitting on a little china plate next to the jar of water.

Pa walked over, "Hello Dad," he said, putting his hand on Grampa’s back. Grampa looked up at him with his glassy blue eyes.

"Oh hello," Grampa said and turned his head back down toward the table.

"That is quite a big ouch," my pa said, pointing at Grampa’s left hand bound up in a red bandana, soaked with blood and pus.

"Does it hurt much?" Pa asked.

"No, not unless it bumps something, then yowee!" Grampa said, peeling back the bandana to show a brown crusted ulcer the size of a ping-pong ball.

"Would you like to say a prayer over supper with me?" Grampa asked. Pa and I nodded.

Grampa lifted a grape off his plate and put it in his mouth.

"Father," Grampa said, "I thank thee for the grape in my belly, for the grape in my mouth, and for the grape still on my plate."
He opened his eyes and lifted a trembling hand to put the last grape in his mouth. We watched as he chewed. He swallowed, wincing, and took a long drink from the straw.

"Let me help you to bed, Dad," Pa said. Grampa hung his head and didn't answer. Pa put his arms around him and lifted him from the chair. Grampa didn't protest as Pa carried him into the bedroom.

I sat at the kitchen table, tracing my finger along the familiar brown flowers in the formica. I looked around the kitchen, from the faded curtains above the window to the top of the mustard yellow fridge and the cookie jar in the shape of a cow. A calendar from 1978 hung on the wall with letters from grandchildren and pictures of smiling stick-people families attached to the bottom. Dishes were piled in the sink where Grama and I used to soak our hands in the hot, soapy water until they wrinkled up like prunes.

"Jess," Pa said, "Come say goodbye."

I pushed away from the table, scraping the metal chair across the floor, and walked into Grampa's room. He lay on his side, hugging his shrunken legs to his chest. The pillow and sheets underneath him were soaked with blood—even a lock of his white hair was now a ruddy brown. He had stuffed a tuft of cotton up one of his nostrils to stop the bleeding. I wanted him to see me, but his eyes were closed and a small trail of drool ran from the corner of his mouth.

"I love you, Grampa," I said, leaning against the side of his bed. "That is why we are here," Grampa said without opening his eyes.

My pa wheeled Grama through the snow in the parking lot, up the sidewalk into the mortuary, and then right up to Grampa's casket. Grampa's lips had been stretched and his arms were pinned like straight sticks to his sides. The mortician had tamed his wild locks of hair by gelling them back away from his face.

Pa held Grama underneath her arms as she leaned over the edge of the casket and kissed Grampa on the forehead. She brushed back a few strands of his loose hair and sat down again.

My brother and I decided to visit Grama even though it was late. She hadn't been too keen on living since Grampa had passed away, even
though autumn was her favorite season. While we stood in the doorway, she opened her eyes and smiled at us.

“How are you Grama?” I asked, walking to her and taking her hand in mine. The capillaries underneath her parchment-like skin had broken leaving red spots dotting her hands.

“I’ve been better,” she said. I nodded.

“What did you do today, Grama?” my brother asked.

“I’m so tired. So tired,” she said.

“A lot of therapy today?” my brother asked.

“I think I could sleep forever,” Grama said.

“I think I could too,” I said, laughing.

“Hmmm,” she said, “Do you know what tomorrow is?” My brother and I shook our heads.

“Tomorrow is our anniversary.”

“Whose anniversary?” I asked.

“Your Grampa and I have been married for sixty-four years tomorrow.” She closed her eyes and let her head fall back on her pillow.

“Wow. Sixty-four years,” my brother said.

“Tomorrow is our anniversary. Sixty-four years,” Grama said, with her eyes closed.

“Maybe we should let you rest. We’ll come back next week,” I said. Grama opened her eyes. She reached up, pulled my face down close to hers, and kissed me on the cheek. “Sixty-four years tomorrow,” she said, twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

“We’ll come again in a few days, Grama,” my brother said.

“I love you Grama,” I said. She had closed her eyes again. We started walking away but we turned back at the door. I blew her a kiss. She opened her eyes and smiled.

After a breakfast of hashbrowns and orange juice the next day, Grama settled back into her pillow and closed her eyes, as the nurse explained it. She didn’t wake up again. After the phone call, I drove down to the little white house and parked by the curb. I walked along the driveway and into the backyard. The chaise lounge was still in Grampa’s favorite spot underneath the elm tree. I climbed onto it and sat there with my legs sticking straight out in front of me, crying. They had been married sixty-four years today.