

## Hollow Heart

It's hard for me to describe the feeling I experienced when I watched my grandma's casket being lowered into the ground. It wasn't exactly sadness that I felt. It was something else in my heart, but not my mind. My mind felt the sensations of the cool wind running through the cemetery. I felt the hair standing up on my arms as I shivered in the dry autumn air. I could hear my mom crying in my father's arms beside me, and my brother kicking his feet nervously on his chair. I could still taste the fast-food breakfast sandwich that I ate for breakfast as my family drove down south for the funeral. I saw the old tree that had lost all its leaves standing weakly behind the tombstone. My brain was feeling things just fine, but my heart couldn't.

This feeling inside me was inexplicable. It's not like she didn't mean anything to me. I knew her. We were close, but I was still naive when she lost her mind. I have a clear memory of how my grandmother was before she got dementia. I remember the stories she used to tell me when we were on vacation. I remember the night she told me about my grandfather.

It had been a busy day of unpacking at the house we had rented for a summer vacation. I snuck out to the back porch to just get away from it all and watch the stars come up over the ocean. My grandmother was out there too, sitting on a beach chair on the other side of the porch. I remember she chewed her gum loudly. It was at around this time that her mind began to fade and she grew quiet. I didn't expect her to speak to me, but she did. "You know your grandpa used to sail on that ocean?" her voice shattered the silence like a hammer on glass.

"Yeah I've heard stories," I said, watching the waves rise and fall way out at the horizon.

"Did anyone ever tell you what happened to him?" she asked.

"No," I looked at her intrigued.

“He died at sea,” she beckoned for me to come and sit on her lap. “He loved to sail, as you know, and the day he went out to sea, leaving me alone with your mom. She was only six at the time. That evening a storm rolled in from the ocean. It was a really bad one. Thunderclaps like explosions happening around our house. When we woke up the next morning there was water in the streets, trees had fallen, singles had blown off roofs, and your grandpa was gone. He never came back from sailing. The police assumed that the storm had hit him earlier and he had been wrecked, but the boat was never found, and neither was your grandfather.”

“So he drowned?” I asked.

“Most likely,” she said solemnly.

I looked out at the ocean for a moment. “Why did you tell me such a sad story?” I asked.

“Because after he died your mom and I moved away to the city so I could find work. They were hard times after your grandpa died, but we made it through,” She put her hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye. “I think you are at a point in your life where some hard times may be coming up. One day I won’t be here anymore and your mom will be really sad. I want you to know that there is the other side to every struggle and you can get through it. You understand?”

I nodded.

“Good, just a little life advice from your grandma. Now go to bed, your mom is calling.”

I wonder what would have happened if I had been a few years older at the time of the diagnosis. These past six years of my grandmother losing control might not have ruined our relationship. Maybe I could have gotten more of those stories she would always tell me, more wise advice about the turmoils of youth. Maybe the past six years wouldn’t have caused me to lose the close connection we shared. As you grow up your opinions of people become based on

experiences, and if the only experiences you have are bad ones with a husk of a person, you couldn't really care about them. Maybe I would have been old enough to understand what was happening to her and

I looked at my mom sobbing and managed to muster a single tear to drip down my cheek. If these past six years were different, maybe I still would have cared as I watched her get buried. Maybe I would have been able to feel anything other than the hollowness inside my heart. I knew I loved her, and I really did, but it's hard to love someone who isn't even themselves anymore.