

Going, Going, Gone

MARCIA WALKER

Il s'agit d'une histoire de nostalgie et de perte vécue par une mère, sa fille et la grand-mère qui est en résidence et qui vit le dernier stage de la maladie d'Alzheimer.

"This place smells," I say, making a face and shoving my nose into the shoulder of my mom's thick wool sweater. It's something I could have gotten away with when I was younger, but now that I'm fourteen my mom shrugs me off.

"Shhh," she says.

"Like pee," I say, even louder.

"Keep your voice down."

"Why? Everyone's deaf."

The doors make a smooth electronic swishing sound behind me like they're sucking the breath out of the place. It's called "Wandering Pines Retirement Home." I guess they think that sounds relaxing. What a joke. They should call these homes something more realistic like "Last Stop Manor" or "My Husband Died Five Years Ago and I'll Be Joining Him Soon Home-Care Centre." I suggested these to my mom on the drive up and she told me to stop talking. Not in a mean way, she's very polite about it. She said, "Stop. Just stop talking. Please."

It was a long three-hour drive.

"We won't stay long," my mom says. She visited my grandma two months ago. I was supposed to come but faked a headache at the last minute.

"It really stinks." I plug my nose but somehow the smell seeps in. Screw people hearing me, it would be good for them to bathe. When I don't shower, it means I've given up on the day. This place reeks of people who've given up for a lot longer.

They've got the music playing low, piping it in, but you

can still hear some guy moaning down the hall. There's an old woman sitting in a wheelchair with crackers on her lap. She stares, nodding at my boots. I got these great old black army boots for twenty-five cents at the Goodwill. Best. Deal. Ever. Usually if anyone does a double take I'll tell them everything about my steal, but I don't feel like it now. I wish I'd worn something else.

My mom recognizes the nurse at the main desk; they went to nursing school together about a hundred years ago. The nurse has these outrageous long nails. They have happy faces painted on them, which she is tapping on the counter when I walk up. Happy faces, like that is going to make any difference. I look back at the woman with the crackers on her lap and she's still staring at my boots. Maybe she used to have a pair. Maybe they remind her of World War II. Maybe she stole a pair from a dead soldier and still feels bad about it.

The nurse and my mom are talking about someone they know who just died.

"It was sudden. She went to bed tired and never woke up," the nurse says.

"That's awful. That's awful," my mom says.

"Her son found her."

"That's awful. It's awful."

When my grandma lived with us, back when she could take care of herself, before my aunts and uncles had the big fight about where to put her, back then, I'd hang out with my grandma in her room. It was my favourite place. She had the best stuff: crazy long ropes of pearls, mirrored jewelry boxes, folded tissue-thin handkerchiefs, heavy crystal perfume bottles. In the top drawer of her

dresser she had six nightgowns, long beige silky things. One had a stain on the bum but she wore it anyway. She kept her dentures in a glass tumbler on top of her dresser. If I showed up early enough I could watch her brush them.

One night, before she had taken out her teeth, I was watching her inch her way out of her girdle, peeling it off.

“Ah,” she’d say, each time she pulled it down a little more.

“Hey grandma, do you want some help?” I said.

She looked up. “What are you going to do? Pull my pants

the cream down her back and squished it onto her arms until it was all used up. Then I slopped on some more and massaged it in. Soon the cream was all gone but I kept rubbing her skin. My hands ran down her spine, to her sides, over the rolls and above her girdle. I forgot I was even touching her and closed my eyes. It felt like I was touching a part of myself, something underneath my skin. My fingertips tingled.

I stopped moving my hands and laid them open on her back, my fingers spread out like fans.

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down?” She laughed and went back to wrestling her girdle. “Whew, no, no. Never mind, this will be you one day.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m going to let it all hang out.” I stuck out my belly as far as it would go. Then I flopped back on her bed. “Hey, is that a new one?” I pointed to a large dark brown mole on her shoulder.

“Where?”

“Right there.” I put my finger close to the furry spot.

“No, no, that’s not new, they don’t just sprout up over night,” she said, sitting on the bed. “Can you get me my cream? Whew, I’m sweating up the sea.” She tapped her hands on her cheeks and then fanned herself with her fingers.

I went over to the dresser. There were seven jars of cream clustered on top but I knew the one she was talking about. It was the cold cream in the fat blue container.

“All right,” she said. “Now spread it on my back.”

“Me?” Usually my mom did this. I’d seen them through the opening in the door. They’d talk with their voices low so I couldn’t hear their words, only the murmur.

“Of course you. Don’t be stingy. I need a lot of cream.”

“I’ll put on lots.” I scooped a wad of cream onto my palm and flung it onto her back. It smacked harder than I expected.

“Go ahead, rub it in,” she said, shivering.

“I know, I know.”

My grandma had hundreds of moles on her back and shoulders. Some were large with spiky hairs, others were bumps on top of bumps. I smooshed the cream around her back, my fingers grazing over the hairs and lumps; some were hard, others were spongy like cake. The cream oozed between my fingers. My grandma sighed. I smoothed

“How’s that, grandma?”

“Well, Maggie, that’s about as good as it’s ever going to get. Now come help me with this girdle.”

I don’t know if the man has stopped moaning or if they’ve turned up the music. The saxophone solo is almost worse than the moaning. My grandma’s room is at the end of the hall, where the sprawling spider plant hangs. On my last trip the nurse gave me a clipping but I forgot it in the backseat of the car and it dried up like snakeskin. My mom and I don’t say anything as we walk down the hall. I can’t talk about how much I miss my grandma. I hate coming here I miss her so much. It’s like I’ve lost a whole language. It’s trapped somewhere inside my grandma. We stop in front of her closed door. My mom roots around her purse and pulls out her lipstick.

“Mom, she’s not going to care if you’re wearing lipstick.”

“That’s not the point. The point is I try.” Then she lowering her voice, she adds, “If she’s not wearing her dentures, don’t say anything. The nurses took them away because she moaned whenever she wore them. Her hearing is just fine though. So, if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it at all.” My mom’s hand shakes as she slides orange lipstick along her thin lips. I chew my bottom lip hoping to fatten it up. I’ve got the same scrawny lips. My grandma has them too. It doesn’t matter how much lipstick we wear, there’s barely any lip separating our chin from our teeth. My mom keeps slathering on the orange lipstick. It’s not a good colour for her but she uses it anyway because she got it free from a promotion at the Bay.

My mom smiles at the metal door and then opens it in

one quick motion. The room looks like a hospital room, white walls and a bed on wheels. There is a purple and green quilt on the bed that my mom brought last time. My grandma sits in the corner chair, slumped. She used to get her hair curled but now she's almost bald. What's left of her hair hangs in a few strands down her back. I'm glad my mom warned me about the dentures because half her face has been sucked away. There is a dark trench where her teeth should go. She turns to us but doesn't say anything. I almost look behind me because I don't know

"Fine," she says, and then limps out of the room taking all the sound with her. I look back at my grandma. She's still staring at the space beyond me but I wave anyway. Then I walk over and wave my hand in front of her face. "Hey, Grandma, it's Maggie." She stares, unmoved. "Grandma," I say again. Then I jump up and down. Her eyes follow me but they have no expression. I crash out in the chair beside her.

Her window faces a park. There is a swing set, a red teeter-totter and a metal slide. A father pushes his kid on

I look over at my grandma but her eyes are turned towards the wall. The thing is, I know if I asked her, she'd give them to me. I reach into the glass, my hands gripping the teeth and plastic, and scoop them up. They're not squishy like I expected. Her lips have turned up. I could swear she was smiling. She won't tell my mom, even if she could.

where she's focusing. It's like we should get her glasses except she's already wearing them.

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Grandma."

Our voices sound loud and fake. Already I'm embarrassed. We both go over to her and I copy everything my mom does. She bends down to kiss her on the cheek so I bend down to kiss her on the cheek. It's her but it's not her. I want to hug her hard like I used to but she's bony and brittle. Her girdle would fall off her now. I back away to the door and want to run for it. My mom peppers her with questions.

"So what have you been up to? Have you been keeping busy? How are things? Linda was here yesterday, did you have a nice visit? You look well. How are you feeling? Is that sweater new? Are you eating well? Did they stop giving you the pink medication? I talked to them about that. I brought you some new sheets. Let me show you." She rustles about in the Sears bag next to her and pulls out purple floral sheets. "What do you think of these? Mom? Betty? I know how much you like purple. Is the temperature okay in here for you? I bought you a new nightgown as well. It was on sale, it's here somewhere." My mom digs deeper in the bag. "Where is it? Did I leave it in the car?" She looks over at me and I shrug. She checks the bag again. She's almost got her whole head inside the bag now. "Oh great. I must have left it in the car. Margaret, you wait with grandma." She turns too quickly and stubs her toe on the metal bed frame. She wants to swear but she won't because my grandma's there. That stuff still matters to my mom. She whimpers as she holds her foot.

"Are you okay?" I say.

the swing while holding a coffee in his free hand.

"Remember how I fell off the slide that time?" I say. "The giant one that you rode down on a potato sack? I fell off and landed on my back and couldn't breathe. Everybody came running towards me. Even you. I knew it was bad because you never ran. Then I blacked out." I don't look at my grandma. I'm staring at the kid in the swing. He keeps yelling at his dad to push him higher.

"When I woke up, your face was right above me and your eyes were this terrible blue. Freaky blue. You were looking down, searching for me like I was lost. Remember, I said, 'Grandma, I'm right here.' After I spoke your eyes went back to their regular colour. You turned off the engine when we got home, and said, 'for god's sakes, Maggie, don't tell your mother about the fall.'"

"I didn't. I never told her. You were so scared but I never told her. I won't. Even if my back hurts, I just say it's puberty."

My grandma's silence makes the room feel larger. Her body doesn't take up any space anymore. I think about our secret and wonder if secrets are stronger than love. The more I think about it, the more I want a part of her. Something I can hold onto. I look around the room to find something of my grandma, some piece that could take me to her or bring her back to me. I wander over to the dresser in the corner. The drawers are stiff but I get them open after a few tries. Her shirts are folded, like professionally folded with no sign of hands rustling and shoving things in and out. Nothing overflows. Skirts and pants are in the next drawer. Sweaters in the bottom. All pressed. None of her old stuff. Not one silk nightgown.

The top of the dresser is clean, shiny and bare. The only

picture in the room is above the bed, a framed picture of kids sledding down the hill. I think it came like that from the store but I stare anyways to see if there's someone I know. I look for me but see only strangers smiling in the snow. I'm feeling crazy but I need to find something. I check the bedside table and it's empty. I rip back the quilt, desperate to find her old red satin sheets, but there's just the white scratchy polyester kind.

Where's your stuff Grandma, I want to yell and then I see them. Her dentures. Sitting in a glass next to the sink are her old teeth. She used to let me watch her take them out at the end of the day.

I glance at the door. My mom will be back any second. Then I look over at my grandma but her eyes are turned towards the wall. The thing is, I know if I asked her, she'd give them to me. I know she would. I reach into the glass, my hands gripping the teeth and plastic, and scoop them up. They're not squishy like I expected. I tuck them in my sweatshirt pocket and run back to the chair beside my grandma. Her lips have turned up. I could swear she was smiling. She won't tell my mom, even if she could.

My mom sweeps back into the room carrying two bags. "I'm back. Sorry about that," she says as she pushes the door open and wedges the doorstep underneath. "Let's let in some fresh air. I think it's going to rain. Have you two been visiting? I used to call Margaret your shadow when she was younger because she never left your side. Right, Mom? You remember Margaret. Of course you do. Margaret come closer to grandma."

The teeth have soaked my pocket.

"Margaret, bring the chair closer."

Holding onto the dentures in one hand, keeping them safe in my pocket, I drag my chair so it butts up against my grandma's. I can't seem to let go of the dentures. Now that the door's open we can hear the guy down the hall moaning again. My mom unwraps the new sheets, flapping them in the air.

I look over at my grandma but her eyes are glazed. She's rubbing the sleeve of my coat between her fingers. I take my free hand and rest it over hers. They look the same but hers feel soft and moist. I rub my thumb along her bones, over her wrist and down her fingers, back and forth. She used to tell me she was big boned but she was wrong. She was always small and breakable underneath.

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RENEE NORMAN

These Women

I am making a list
women in middle age
who rose
no floated
to that cliché ceiling
& seeing their image there
the double chin
lines around the neck
skin tags the first signs
of flabby arms & wiry
stray black hair
in their chin
like some old crone

were grateful
for the occasional blur
of progressive lenses
determined, strong
mindful of lost time
goals to achieve
took their place there
with the fierceness
only years of invisibility
grow

Renee Norman is a poet, writer, and retired educator, currently offering workshops and teaching courses on a freelance basis. She has worked as a university professor, education consultant, and classroom teacher. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia and her published dissertation was about women's autobiographical writings. Her three books of poetry were published by Inanna Publications: True Confessions, which received the 2006 Canadian Jewish Book Award for Poetry, Backhand Through the Mother, and Martha in the Mirror.