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ENGL 1301

February 6, 2000

Take My Hand

The elevator whirred to a stop and the doors slid open. The antiseptic smell of the hospital assaulted my nose and tickled my eyes. "Quickly, now. Let's hurry," My mother urged. I followed her out of the elevator and into a white maze of corridors, my eleven-year-old legs almost trotting to keep up with her. I tried to take her hand, but at the moment I reached for it she lifted it to brush back the hair from her own forehead. I made another attempt, but she moved her hand to straighten the strap of her purse. I refused to try again. I slid my hand along the white handrail, enjoying the soft screech my dry hand caused against the slick metal. From the sidelong glances my mother threw at me I knew my entertainment annoyed her. Easily – and childishly – annoyed, I jammed my hands in my pockets and began stepping on every crack between the tiles.

I paid no attention to the turns: left, right, right, left, left. I lost count of the number of times we turned, not that I tried that hard to remember. I remember the smell: a smell of old people, rubbing alcohol, and overheated machines. And I remember the doors: big swinging doors that opened by themselves and thumped shut behind us. Finally, we arrived at my Grandmother's room in the cardiac ward of the hospital. Not knowing what to expect on my first visit to a hospital, I envisioned my Grandmother barely able to move, speak, or open her eyes. My mother knocked once on the door, pushed it open without waiting for a response, placed her hand against the base of my neck, and shoved me in ahead of her. My

hair tangled in my mother's ring, but she never noticed. I knew better than to make a fuss. I massaged my head where the hair ripped out and said nothing. My mother's being radiated stress. But the moment I looked upon my Grandmother I realized the error in my earlier thinking. There she sat in her flimsy hospital gown, glasses flashing, her pin-curled hair like a football helmet; she cracked jokes and laughed at them herself.

My grandmother first gave all her attention to me. She loved all her grandchildren and always wanted to know the happenings in our world. She asked me about school, about my friends, and about gymnastics. My life centered around gymnastics at that time. I loved the sport, and my lessons, though difficult, allowed me to show her something new each time I visited her apartment. However, I refrained from exhibiting my latest maneuver – a back walkover – there in the hospital room. Her undivided attention made me feel special and I only hope my animated responses and eager conversation made her feel special in return. Soon, however, my turn in the spotlight ended and my mother shooed me to the side while she took a turn speaking with her mother.

I gave my grandmother a kiss, hugged her as gently as my youth allowed, and pulled a chair up next to her as my mother perched on the edge of her bed. They quickly sank into a deep discussion of my Grandmother's operation, scheduled for the next day. Easily bored, and not understanding a single word of their adult-talk, I snagged the remote to the television and snapped it on. I soon became engrossed in a re-run of "The Facts of Life." Not entirely comfortable in my foreign surroundings, I withdrew deeper into the show. Suddenly, I felt a light brush against my hand, like a fly skipping across my flesh. Startled, I snatched my hand from the bed and gazed into the hurt eyes of my Grandmother. I realized the touch came from her and that she only wanted to hold my hand. She loved to hold hands. I explained my

reaction and she laughed. She always laughed. I laughed as well and again she fell into serious conversation with my mother. I never held my Grandmother's hand that day.

Eventually my mother ended her conversation and declared it time to go. My Grandmother reluctantly agreed. I turned the television off, thoughtfully placed the remote next to my Grandmother, and returned my chair to its original place. My mom kissed her mother goodbye and they held each other for several minutes. After they separated, I leaned down, kissed my Grandmother's cheek, gave her a one-armed hug, and squeezed her shoulder, careful not to disturb any wires or tubes by hugging her. Mother and I left the room much as we entered it, with me passing through the door first. My mother slowly exited the room, walking backwards and waving. As for me, I never looked back.

I possessed no way of knowing that day offered the final glimpse of my Grandmother and the last opportunity to hold her close. The next day, as I sat in the den putting together a mini jigsaw puzzle, my mother stumbled into the house and whispered the news of my grandmother's death. My grandmother died of a heart attack. No anesthesia. No angioplasty. No surgeon. She died before her operation even began. My mother spoke in short, choppy sentences, whispering the entire time. I thought she whispered because everyone whispered about death, but as I grew older I understood more why. She whispered to keep herself from crying, to keep her voice steady while she spoke to us children. I remembered, over and over, that I never let her hold my hand, and that I never reached out first to take hold of hers. A guilt born of shock and grief still lodges in my heart eleven years later, but not without a hard lesson learned. I hold my ten nieces and nephews when I say hello and good-bye. We hug, we talk, and we always say, "I love you." Most importantly, I take their hands when they offer them, but, when not extended, I offer mine.