2000 Honorable Mention Personal Narrative

Maybe Later

She’s sitting there, a blown-out shell as hulking and vacant and lifeless as the enchanted castles of my beloved fairy-tale stories. The television cries for attention, but her eyes refuse to acknowledge even its blatant wail. Behind tinted glass—is that smudged dirt or a protective coating?—eyes finally flutter open, the first sign of life. Are they blank? Do they beg for help or scream of past and present pain? I can’t say—I haven’t the courage to look.

The world rotates around its axis three times an hour and I run with it.

“Soccer cleats, water bottle, there you go.”

“Fine—I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Okay, groceries, post office, soccer practice . . . hmm . . . what do you want for dinner?” Family members dance around the kitchen in the ultimate test of agility to avoid tromping on another’s toes.

“There’s nothing to eat!”

“Love you—bye!”

“Come back here! Pick that up right now!” A slap of the cupboard door, dashed kisses, and a sprint for keys—trip! crash! yell! A mad cacophony—entirely normal, unsettling, and dear.

Grandma sits there. She has not moved. The eye of the storm? Or merely forgotten by time?

Dad and I walk away from it all sometimes, releasing frustration in fruitless lament. Sometimes we laugh bitterly. Sometimes his words are a painful reminder of a happier and more carefree time. “I just had to get out of the house. Usually I can take it—but tonight!” His stride slows in failure. “I never wanted you to realize how different she is. I tried—I hoped you’d never recognize her illness. And pretending used to work. I’m—I’m sorry you have to see it now. She used to love to visit, you know, and you loved her back.” I strain to remember lost time and attitude.

“Grandma’s here!” A rushing for the doorway and a scramble of hugs and hellos. “Did you bring us marshmallows?” “It’s my turn!” My sisters and I swarm around her, greeting her and begging treats. She bends slowly, always slowly, reaching into a quilted and fraying satin bag and pulling out the gooey marshmallows that are her trademark. It is my turn to carefully count and divide the sticky treat, and I eagerly bend, urging her to more quickly present our prize. Recalling my manners, I wait for formal presentation as she straightens and our eyes meet suddenly. Hers are quiet and simple, but content—she lives to provide these treats. She smiles,
lopsided but warm, and presents the prize. I smile, too, a grin of thanks, love, and friendship before I seize the package.

I did love and welcome her, didn’t I. A painful realization.

Right now I frantically dance in an impossible and hurried attempt to fulfill all assignments and obligations, to put a nice black check mark next to each chore on a list three pages long. I am jerked backwards and forwards, a marionette controlled by a spastic child, as I desperately run from vacuum to homework to kitchen. There’s a movement from the couch and I halt mid-dance. Maybe . . . maybe not . . . yes, feet laboriously search for the ground, and she’s up, tottering on what should be sturdy legs, searching blindly through perfect vision. In my imagination she is a prisoner—this is the Bastille, and she has yielded to the tortures. Gaunt face and decaying clothes mark the time spent in this psychological cell, and blank mind and stare speak of its horrors. But while her vacant expression is entirely real, her well-fed body and hospital-green pajamas belie my bizarre theory as she staggers by the dining room table across a carpeted floor. I look away before she reaches the stairwell. I cannot face that overpowering and grotesque emptiness.

“Grandma’s in bed already!” Ashley’s eight-year-old voice drips with amazement and disgust. “I’m not going to bed for two hours and fifty-five minutes.” Her voice is proud now, lording it over her grandmother. She knows already, feels superiority already. She even lacks redeeming memories of marshmallows. But she turns suddenly introspective, her shrill voice piercing my concentration. “Brookee? Why does Grandma go to bed so early? Is she sick?”

“Kinda, love.” I pause. “We just need to be really nice to her and love her, ‘kay?” Such hope and false enthusiasm in my voice—perfect hypocrisy. She nods, apparently convinced. I can’t convince myself, however. I merely think of Grandma and shrink in dread. What can I do to penetrate that deadness surrounding her? What can I say that she will understand? What can I do to remove the fear and aversion and sorrow I feel in her presence?

Despite my dread, I am inextricably drawn toward her, like a child demanding stories of witches and werewolves and then crying out in the nightmares that follow. I must know the worst, I believe, to accept, to understand, to recapture love. And so I tread reluctantly but persistently up the stairs to her room—running clothes on, load of laundry on my hip, book in hand, lego between my toes. I peer into her bedroom—a cave, purposefully dark and drawn away from the world, damp with mildewed history, silent and completely removed from any reminder of an outside world. Blinds are dusty and drawn, walls barren, and bureau littered with a meaningless jumble of nothings. A bulge in hospital-green has collapsed on the bed, and I strain to hear and count Grandma’s breaths, to make sure there really is existence in her still form. Six seconds, and a breath. Six . . . breath . . . another six . . . and another. Marking time, but not life.

“Grandma?” I wait. “Grandma?” Another pause. “It’s still kinda early, Grandma. Are you sure you want to go to bed now?” All my courage is poured into this one faltering question. “The Brady Bunch is on TV—don’t you want to watch?” Desperately, angrily, I appeal to her single interest. I flip on the hall light so I can see better into her bedroom. Her eyes are wide open and staring blankly at the ceiling. No movement but that of breathing, no sign at all of even hearing. “Grandma—it’s too early to go to bed! It’s not good for you! Please get up!” My desperate words slur to a final wail, a furious plea. Grandma rolls slowly over, face to wall, back to me.

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“Bye—I’ll be back later!” My words, panicked and desperate, are shouted out at whomever it might concern as I tug on tennis shoes and clomp towards the front door.

“Hmm—what?” Mom’s head pops around from the kitchen in a delayed reaction. “I’m going out. I’ve got to get out of here!”
“It’s dark, though. Do you have your mace?” She’s trying to joke, to relieve the strain, but her words seem impossibly even and unsympathetic.

“No—and I don’t care! I have to get out of here, Mom. I’m suffocating.” My anger has melted into tears and a plea. “She’s driving me crazy. She makes me feel so awful—and I can’t take it!” I’m choking on my own emotions now.

Mom’s response is slow, resigned, and immensely tired. “She’s still your grandmother, you know.”

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There is no easy or painless ending to this story. The cursor on the computer screen is mocking me—it insists that there must be an ending, that ending comes with beginning, that this page demands more words. But although free-write scribbles and alternate endings and memos from my English teacher litter the desk, no true conclusion surfaces.

I can offer a conclusion of peace and happiness. Consider a fairy godmother in a white and poofy dress waving a crystalline magic wand and saying the magic words as I am instantaneously granted love and patience and relief from guilt and dread.

But there is no magic wand or sudden connection of love and understanding. There is no resolution of perfect peace. I stare at these words and am instead startled, not by supreme happiness or tranquility, but by a resilient hope. The world does not end with this page. I will push print and the world will go on, and I will continue to create my world. “Happily ever after” is unnecessary. Instead, maybe I will sit down next to her and simply speak. Tonight maybe I will kiss her cheek as she goes up to bed. Maybe I will hold her hand as she struggles up the stairs or joke with her, whether she understands or not. This is no end, and there doesn’t yet need to be—I’m still trying.