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Robb Knuepfer  
*Denison University*

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## TO MY GRANDMOTHER

*Robb Knuepfer '74*

The evening of my last day at home before returning for my second year at college, I planned to take Nancy out for dinner. It was actually supposed to be a very special date for us since we wouldn't be seeing each other for several months, probably not until Thanksgiving. I made reservations for dinner at the Brass Rail in Oak Brook, and having showered and dressed by six o'clock, I raced down the stairs and out into the garage, started the car and raced down the driveway, my usual ten minutes late. Screeching to a halt, I pulled the car back up the driveway, hopped out and ran back in the house, having forgotten to ask my parents for the car. They consented with the typical "Where are you going? Be careful! Have a good time." Having eased my thieving conscience, I raced over to Nancy's.

By the back route it is very easy to make it there in roughly 4 minutes and 37 seconds, if you don't stop at the stop signs. Unfortunately there was a policeman cruising ahead of me nearly all the way so I made it in the usual seven minutes. Cursing my tardiness, I finally arrived, and of course Nancy had been waiting for about fifteen minutes.

We hopped in the car and I drove out of her subdivision and entered the Eisenhower Expressway to Chicago. She was sitting close to me, fiddling with the radio.

"Are we going downtown for dinner?" she asked excitedly. I said no and that I wanted to say good-bye to my grandmother. This would be the last opportunity to see her before I left.

I speeded down the expressway and weaved in and out between cars. Nancy uttered her typical exclamation of fright as I began jockeying for position. I promised I'd be careful, just as some guy passed me on the right, mouthing obscenities and honking his horn.

I finally made the Des Plaines Avenue exit, and turning left I crossed over the expressway and headed north in the direction of River Forest.

I glanced at my watch. Six thirty-five. Hope she didn't go to bed yet. She usually goes to sleep early these days. Damn. Wished I would have gone this afternoon. I know she'd have been awake then.

Looking at Nancy couldn't help but cheer anyone up. She had that radiant glow of a person in love with life, and it made me feel flighty inside to think she felt that way for me. She was wearing a sexy dark purple dress with long sleeves and a high neck. A touch of lace at the collar and cuffs complemented her delicate neck and hands. The dress pointed out the attributes of her figure as I followed it down to her hemline at mid-thigh and confirmed my opinion that she had the nicest pair of legs I'd seen. Dark stockings of purple added to the excitement of watching her. Long dark brown hair flowed gently from her head and rested just below her shoulders. She parted it in the middle and it seemed to curve around her face with a sensuous caress. Her lips were painted in a soft color that somehow glistened, and the rest of her light makeup accented her

facial features perfectly. When she smiled up at me the way she always did I felt like melting into her big brown eyes.

Coming down Jackson Avenue approaching Grandmother's house, I recalled how as a boy I used to yearn for the time when I'd be able to drive. When that day came I promised myself I'd go everyday. I used to memorize the route and play an annoying back-seat driver for my father. In those days we only went to Grandmother's house on occasions and at Christmas and Thanksgiving. She always had my favorites: homemade chocolate cake or brownies, "black cow's" which were root beer floats with Dad's root beer, and cookies and candy, in short; any goodies I wanted which my parents were generally reluctant to provide. She always had the neatest toys, I remember I thought they beat anything I had, and I'd play with them for hours upon hours in her basement.

Of course, things had changed. We'd all grown up and lost interest in toys and games and family get-togethers, though never quite in her culinary talents. We saw less and less of each other as it became more and more difficult to get together as a family. As a family--wow-- that meant all 37 of us. Cousins, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great aunts and uncles--- all went to Grandmother and Grandpa's house; 918 Jackson Avenue. Of course that was only the Knuepfer side, and didn't count guests which invariably appeared, but what a time we'd have as kids! It must have been quite a strain on the adults.

Grandpa died about six years ago, and that certainly changed things for the family. He had been the patriarch of the family, and his death was a shattering blow for everyone. Indeed we were all quite lost for a while. I always wondered what Grandmother did about it, but never had the heart to talk about it. I remember it was the first experience I'd ever had with human death, and my first funeral. I had always, and in many ways still do, considered my grandfather my best friend. In those days, we did everything together, and I felt closer to him then than to my father. I was literally crushed with his death. It was so impossible to understand he wouldn't be around anymore. It was so final. I remember his brother coming up to me and putting his arm around me as I stood in the corner of the funeral parlor crying. He said, "Robert, we've lost a great friend, haven't we?" I felt so proud I could be considered a friend of a great man.

The house hadn't changed much since Grandpa died. As I pulled into the driveway, all the familiar memories of snow ball fights, wiffle-ball games, tag, kick-the-can, were revived. It was a huge white stucco house with orange Spanish roof tiles that looked like pipes cut in half, length-wise. Nancy said she'd rather stay in the car, and I promised I wouldn't be terribly long. "Hurry back!" she teased, and she smiled the way she always did. I strolled up the long red brick walkway to the front door. No other cars were there, so I assumed Grandmother didn't have any company. I had a key so I let myself in through the huge wooden door and immediately was bombarded with the nostalgic smells of my childhood. There was a kind of clean or fresh odor about the place, really indescribable, but you knew you were at Grandmother's house. I walked to

my left and looked in the kitchen but no one was there. I walked back across the hall and checked the living room and the library beyond with a glance, but saw no one. From the top of the stairs I heard, "Who's there?" I responded with "It's Robert, Junior" and proceeded to climb the winding staircase to the second floor.

As I ascended the stairs, there were pictures of her family on the wall--- Grandpa, Uncle Jack, Dad, Aunt Marilyn, and of course herself. I remarked to myself how beautiful Grandmother was. I remembered the pictures Mother had shown me of Grandmother as a young woman. She was stunning! I still have one of those pictures in my room. I joked to myself about what great taste Grandpa had--- like grandfather like grandson!

Grandmother was indeed a beautiful woman. She had the most attractive figure for a woman her age I've ever seen. It was remarkable to me, but I'd often heard others say she looked only 45 years instead of 70 or so. I suppose that description speaks for itself. She never discussed age, and bore hers with a gracious dignity. What astonished me most were her mannerisms. She is the only lady I've ever known in my life. Quiet, reserved, pleasant at all times and very dignified. She was the total opposite of my other grandmother, who was plump, jovial, drove a car at age 78, full of life and teasing like a young woman of 30 years.

Grandmother always looked perfect. Invariably dressed up, her hair neatly in place on her head; she always looked as if she just came from the hairdressers. She had clear hazel eyes that sparkled with a sharpness that reflected her intelligence; as a matter of fact, she had graduated with high honors from the University of Wisconsin in 1913. She had a tremendous command of language, and I supposed it was her English heritage that gave her the stoic reservedness I liked. But at the same time she teemed with love, and graciously went out of her way to comfort or help anyone.

I remember Grandpa drove her everywhere after she was 35 because she was frightened by driving automobiles. I guess I never thought about her when I used to race down the Eisenhower Expressway with her to and from my house on Sunday afternoons after Grandpa died. But she never let on it bothered her, and of course that was her style-- an English lady, polite and formal. It dawned on me then that I always called her "Grandmother" instead of "Grandma," as I did my mother's mother.

I followed the curve of the stairs to the hallway at the top and veered to my left and entered the bedroom.

The nurse greeted me complacently and quietly left the room. I turned to my left and there in a special hospital bed surrounded by bottles and tubes and other medical equipment lay Grandmother. I bent over the guard rail and looked into her eyes. She half squinted at me and it was terribly painful to look at her. She was ugly.

Her hair, which was now white instead of the grey-blue color I'd seen all my life, was now sparse and disarrayed. Her eyes were crossed somewhat, and tubes entered through her mouth. Other tubes were taped to her nose. She was as pale as her bed sheets, under which she breathed laboriously. She couldn't have weighed more

than ninety pounds.

My heart was pounding hard as I looked at a woman whom I had admired and loved for nearly twenty years, and it staggered me to see a human reduced to her pitiable state of being. Her legs were curled up around her waist, and the doctors had said gangrene had settled there and was moving up her body. They were like petrified rock. I moved my hand down to touch hers, which was locked in a clenched position around a splint to prevent her nails from cutting her hands. I gently stroked her soft hand, and looking at her shriveled body sent chills up my spine. Her mouth gaped open, and her tongue lay out one side, as gums bleeding to the rot of her teeth, she continually attempted to swallow. Tears came to my eyes as I told her I was going back to college tomorrow and that I would miss her. I promised to see her first thing at Thanksgiving. How dumbfounding it is to speak to yourself in that situation.

She groaned and exhaled a snore-like breath, then she rolled her eyes to meet mine and I just stood there holding her fist, praying she knew how much I loved her, and how much I'd miss her. I prayed to God she could hear me-- but she just lay there, gurgling, blinking her eyelids, and staring at me curiously.

I swallowed hard as the tears streamed down my cheeks. I knew she couldn't understand what I was saying, but perhaps she could feel me. Her eyes began tearing again from being open so long, and I sadly realized that all these life-signs of blinking, tearing, and swallowing were merely involuntary physical functions. I stood there thinking about what she would do if she ever knew how she was. But she'd had a "stroke" and been in a coma for over four months now.

I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and whispered "good-bye." I left the room to the sound of her peaceful snoring. As I walked down the stairs I mumbled a good-bye to the nurse, and once outside I wiped away my tears.

It was getting dark as I took out the keys to the car, and ironically, I remembered my boyhood promise of coming to see Grandmother everyday as soon as I could drive a car. As I started the car and backed out of the driveway, I glanced back at the house and whispered "I love you", knowing I'd never see her again, and Nancy smiled up at me the way she always did and then rested her head on my shoulder.

February fog scooves in  
Twining around earthy appendages  
Protruding barren from the ground.  
Left over Santa snow crusts the  
brown bitten green grass.  
A marble squirrel listens to the silence  
and waits for spring.