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POST-MORTEM

tori paquette

"for life's not a paragraph
And death i think is no parenthesis"
– ee cummings

I am wearing a teal eyelet dress with a skirt that spins out 40's style. The neck is higher than I usually choose, but the elegant lines frame my waist into an hourglass I didn't know I had. I know how my grandmother will react before she does. She coos over me, sings praises—as always, the perfect, proud grandmother.

(The image isn't happy. It should be happy. It should be a grandmother adoring her granddaughter, sharing family pride—simple as that. But when your grandmother believes everything is someone else's fault, loses control over her temper and her spending and her drinking, poisons herself with the seeping stain of alcohol and can't remember she's told the same story five times—when every conversation is an excuse or self-depreciation or avoidance of the truth—she becomes the relative whose words you laugh at because otherwise it hurts.)

I'm graduating, finally, in my pretty teal dress, with my family in the audience and party food waiting at home. Today is my day to celebrate with my homeschooled compatriots, my parents, my siblings, my grandparents. My grandmother is perhaps proudest of all. Her smile is for me, only me, as if she didn't notice all the other well-dressed homeschool students on the podium. She has seen me through every stage. She loved me when I was a diaperless baby with the same buttcheek-birthmark as hers, when I was two years old and lined up my baby dolls from smallest to largest and added my baby brother at the end, when I wore my father's work boots coated with sawdust and Mr. Potato Head glasses. She loved me when I was a child who screamed with excitement to see her, anticipating the hours we would spend gluing paper crafts together. She even loved me when I was a teenager who remained distant, uninterested, kept conversations at surface level.

(...because that's all they could be. Because she didn't want to talk about why she left every family gathering early, about the bottles waiting for her at home. Because she didn't want to remember the New Year's Eve when my parents drove her to rehab in Massachusetts and she decided she couldn't stay, made them come get her on the one night they should have been celebrating with my brother and me. Because she didn't want to acknowledge how often that scene had repeated itself, the detox in the hospital, the search for a new rehab facility, the frantic phone calls to come home until one day my mom said she wouldn't pick her up any more. After the kicking, yelling, manipulating—"You don't love me!"—she paid for her own ride home.)

Each graduate takes the stage in turn, their parents coming alongside, diplomas in hand, with teary-eyed pride. Each has a story. Each gets to share a slideshow of their life, and as the images of my childhood slip by on the screen, I don't have to look at the audience to see the smiles and tears on my family's faces. One picture in particular I have selected carefully: my grandmother, my brother, and me in the safety of our home, arms around each other, happy, ignorant of anything that could ever go wrong in our world.

(I told her to stay. I told her I wanted her at my graduation, my wedding, the birth of my kids—wasn't that enough for her? Wasn't I enough for her? I was fifteen. I was fifteen and I wanted to believe she could choose to stop drinking, to stop killing herself, to get better and live longer and become someone normal. To become my grandmother again—the magical woman of my childhood who always had boxes of crafts, tea parties for my dolls, and a new present for every occasion. The woman I thought I knew, but could no longer see, as if the veil of childhood had been torn away. The crafts were the taste of old ladies who liked naked cherubs and cabbage roses, the tea parties had been abandoned, and the once-magical gifts had become sparkly accessories I would never use. And the grandmother behind them had lost her creative spirit to conversations about her weight, the comfort of her yoga pants, the cars she backed into when driving at a not-quite-functional capacity. I think I knew she would never get better—and I believed it was her fault. Her choice. The drink, that sweet sapping away of her pain, of the little girl who never grew up past her father's belt—she chose that drink over our family. Over me. But if she had only chosen differently...)

She would give me a hug after the ceremony and congratulate me, and she'd laugh with that cackle that annoyed my mother—an annoyance my mother would later feel guilty for. Then she'd hand me a card with words that made sense and didn't gloss over the tension, and there wouldn't be tension, and her hands wouldn't be shaking. Her hands wouldn't shake and her skin wouldn't be flushed and her muscles wouldn't tense-and-release, tense-and-release as if, if they stopped, they'd never move again.

(Peace like this only comes in death. But we never saw her peaceful: only contorted, purple, dirty in her own waste and three days gone in her own bed. Mattress still brand-new. My mom found her decaying and I never saw her at all. There was no peace. But I wish I could have seen her like that, finally still. Because without seeing her, she kept moving in my mind, kept laughing, kept buying ridiculous gifts and telling the same stories and pretending everything was fine while her body died around her writhing soul. Without seeing her, I never saw her free.)

It's my graduation and my grandmother isn't in the audience. But I have one last, perfect gift. Two chandelier studs, blue and purple and teal: a pair of earrings found in her apartment as we parsed out her belongings. The only item with a name on it, a Post-It stuck to the jewelry box: Tori.

(I wanted her at my graduation but I wanted a version of her that no longer existed. Not just alive, but free: free from the alcoholism that shamed her for so long, the childishness in every word, the hands that simultaneously clung to every crumb of approval and shoved away what was too hard to hear. I wanted my crafty grandmother, my fun-loving grandmother, the miracle woman I once believed in. But I never knew her free. And, until she died, I don't think she did either.)