

The Next Fifty Years

by **Stephanie Lennon**

Once Grandpa's heart gave out, there was no point in Nana continuing her treatments.

"Stop the dialysis and she'll be gone within a week," the doctors had said.

Five years prior, at their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Grandpa had joked that the next fifty would be much easier. We were all hesitant to laugh, knowing even then that neither of them were in great shape.

A family meeting was called. Nana wasn't "fully there" anymore, so she didn't have much of a say in her own damn demise.

She just knew that she wanted to be with Grandpa.

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The nursing home moved her into a private room. Hospice workers from a nearby center were assigned to check on her. A nurse. A priest. A social worker. To help Nana *transition*. And to help us watch her go.

Apparently it takes a village when we die, too.

The first few days felt like a giant family reunion. Without the stress of dialysis, Nana was almost herself again.

She even flirted with the priest from the hospice center. Said he looked cute in his collared shirt.

Nana had never been afraid to speak her mind. Hell, at Grandpa's funeral she looked straight-faced at the attractive EMT volunteering his time to escort her and said "I'm single now, you know."

For days, family members rotated in and out of that tiny room, taking shifts as if Nana were a dangerous criminal plotting her escape.

Every now and then, she'd open her eyes and look around the room. Each time, it brought me back to dinner at her kitchen table.

She would always ask “How many are we?” when deciding the seating chart for the evening.

Surrounded by her favorite people in the world, Nana radiated happiness. She was the reason we were all together. She was the sun, and we were the planets in her orbit, unsure of where we would go once her light went out.

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Every two hours a nurse would come to kick us out and pull the curtains closed. Turns out when you spend all day every day in bed, your skin slowly eats itself if left unchecked.

My uncle would take this opportunity to sneak out for a cigarette. One time he came back with a Snickers bar for Nana, who had been diabetic for as long as I could remember.

Whenever we visited my grandparents’ old house, my mom would give Nana a hard time about the ice cream in her freezer or the Ring Dings in her cupboard.

“You cheating again, Mom?” she’d say.

“I’m old. I can do what I want,” was her readied response.

She’s right, of course. After a while, what’s the point? Especially once you find yourself staring up at the last ceiling tiles you’ll ever see.

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She didn’t have the strength to tear open that Snickers wrapper, but she sure wouldn’t let it go once she had it.

One bite. Two bites. A quick nap to regain some strength for the third. A solid grip, even with her eyes closed and her stomach struggling to remember how to digest it. She never did finish it.

We sat in a circle around her hospital bed. Made horrible jokes about the death grip she had on such a long-lost comfort food. Her rosary was nestled in her palm beneath it. It seems comfort comes in many forms.

My cousin slid a goofy-looking pair of wireless headphones over Nana’s ears, deflated gray curls settling underneath.

Through the Bluetooth on his phone, he cued up Nana's favorite: Elvis Presley. We watched as her shoulders shifted up and down and her lips moved along with the words, a star in her own silent movie. Joy in its purest form.

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Her most lucid day came toward the end of the week. I sat next to her bed, holding her wrinkly hand in mine.

I knew this was going to be my last chance to ask the world's wisest lady the world's most important questions. With fifty-five years of marriage under her belt, I knew exactly what to ask.

"Nana, how did you know Grandpa was the one?"

A smile spread across her face like a pat of melting butter on Grandpa's hot potato pancakes.

"Argyle socks," was all she could muster before getting lost in her black-and-white-photograph past.

I couldn't help but laugh. I squeezed her hand to bring her back from those early days.

"Special boy in your life?" she asked, each word a struggle.

"Not yet, Nana."

"You'll just know, Stephe-doo. Trust me."

I trust you, Nana.

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As the week came to a close, the hospice nurse told us that we should leave the windows open. This would make it easier for her soul to pass through once she was ready.

Once everyone had had their chance to say goodbye.



Robert and Rita Montgomery

She was stubborn and selfless until the very end, refusing to let go until everyone around her was asleep. Waiting for that perfect moment, as if she didn't want to leave anyone with the burden of seeing it happen.

Nana had been without Grandpa for exactly fourteen days. She was ready to be back with him, where she belonged. To finish up those next fifty years of marriage.



Stephanie Lennon lives, teaches, and writes in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been featured on UbiquitousBooks.com. She is currently writing a middle grades fantasy novel titled *Miss White's School for Vivacious Voices*.