

## **A Postcard from the End**

by William Keiser

A week ago, my grandma stopped eating. She is ninety-seven and a half years old. On the phone with my parents, I shriek: “Can we get her on an IV?” My flight to Florida is in a few days, and, okay, I get it. She is ready to die. But if she’s going to starve herself, couldn’t she at least wait until I get there? I’m a really selfless person.

My mother, ever serene in the face of screeching adult man-children, calmly replies that humans can live almost a month longer without food than without water. When I hang up the phone, my family puts grandma on hospice. Two days later, she starts eating again.

Upon arrival, I formulate a plan to spend every moment I can with her, to say goodbye. But I actually end up spending about seventy percent of my time floating on a noodle in the Atlantic Ocean, twenty percent of my time driving in afternoon thunderstorms, and ten percent giving her back massages while she falls asleep. When I first get there, she is very happy to see me. Her face lights up, and she cries out from her chair across the room, “Oh! My brother!” Her brothers died years ago. But then I get closer. “Oh, Robbie,” she exclaims. “It’s wonderful to see you.” Robbie is my cousin, a different grandson.

To be honest, I don’t quite recognize the person I’m visiting. Her body, which was always petite, is now skeletal, doll-like. Her salt and pepper hair is just salt, and its signature swoopy sides hang limp. Two aides sit at her bedside around the clock. They crack jokes and coax teaspoonfuls of piping hot soup and mashed-up chicken into her mouth, which she (mostly) refuses. Then they hold napkins to catch the bits she spits out. It’s hard to believe that this body once founded a college that became the largest

employer in the state of Florida. That this body went to work into its nineties. That it bore children and went through divorce. Now it has trouble swallowing grains of rice.

The sleepy creature I see before me is familiar, but it's not grandma. Trying to engage her in the conversations she would have loved even a few months ago is as futile as demanding a three-year-old sell you a mortgage. Creature-formerly-known-as-grandma has two main moods: gratitude and fear. The former is nice, but a dead end, conversationally. "Oh, I'm so lucky. What a beautiful day." Yes, it is a beautiful day. "I'm so happy to see you." I'm so happy to see you too, grandma. The other mood, fear, is harrowing. "I'm scared." What are you scared of, grandma? "I don't know. I've never been scared like this before. I have to move." When she says this, I look at the aides with fear in my eyes; she wants to move! It's as if she is waking up, as if the past years of incapacitation are a terrible phantasm which is now lifting. The aides are unimpressed. "Ok, you want to get up, mama?" I hold the wheelchair. The hospital bed, which replaced the four-poster, is more decked-out than James Bond's Aston Martin. It whirrs and lowers her perfectly down at an angle. Then we position her in the wheelchair. "You moved! Do you feel better now, grandma?" But she has forgotten the terror of moments before. Now she wonders why she's in the chair. Why am I here? Where am I going?

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You'd think someone at the precipice of death might have a certain wisdom to share about the next life. Instead, when people get old enough, they seem to unlock a special bonus phase of life, a hidden deluxe feature. They become desiccated toddlers. Instead of telling you secrets of heaven, they look at you and ask, "Can I pee?" as if their twenty-five-year-old gay grandson holds the keys to the functioning of their bladder. You become brother, masseuse, son, therapist, catheter. If there is a next life, it doesn't send seniors a promotional postcard.

I love my grandma. I love the woman who would chuckle conspiratorially with me at the end of the table, the person who could tell you about hemoglobin and rhesus monkeys

and her trips to South Africa and the Solomon Islands, the person whose reply to my anxious coming out was “I wish I were gay. My problem is that I like men.” This woman, this person, no longer exists, in the same way that the six-year-old version of myself has vanished into the ether. Do I love this ancient child? Do I feel love when I hold her hand? Yes, so much. But what to do now? How to be when there’s nothing to do?

Most of the time, the moments we commemorate are major life events and accomplishments—weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, funerals. We get a script and a role for each: Wedding? Happy. Funeral? Sad. Baby shower? Anticipatory. But for this stage, we don’t have a script. The goal in life seems to be to keep living, but if you live long enough, no one is actually prepared for what you become. No one is prepared for you to act eerily similar to the way you did at the beginning of life, or for all the things that that signified your personality to change. Perhaps this stage makes accepting death easier. Or perhaps it makes it harder, making loved ones go through a thousand demi-deaths before the body finally lies still. All I know is that for what it’s worth, there’s a child in grandma’s apartment that is still alive.



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