

## **The Last to Go**

by Julia Van Buskirk

Outside in the garden, a scrawny robin tugged at an uncooperative worm until it got just the right tension and then, with a frenzied slurp, snapped it from its' hole. Grandmother did not see it. The distant look in her eyes told me she had not seen what went on around her for a long time.

"It's sunny out today, Grandma. What do you say we take the winter chill out of our bones?" I pushed her wheelchair from the solarium towards the lobby. "Let's go for a drive; maybe we can go by the cemetery."

But we only got as far as the vestibule door where she grabbed the brake on her wheelchair and abruptly locked it in place.

"Grandma," I implored, "we should really change the flowers on Dad's grave. The cemetery people don't like it if you leave the plastic winter wreaths past Memorial Day."

And then, from a place so deep inside her, so guttural she barked. "No!"

I reached down to unlock the brake. She was his mother, for God's sake. I was not going to allow her to pretend he never existed. His memory was the fragile link that bound us; without it, she would be alone. I pulled up on the brake as forcefully as I could.

A hard slap met my hand.

I took a deep breath, leaned back against the wall, and closed my eyes. It wasn't supposed to be like this. My grandmother would never have allowed her hair to turn to the charcoal gray tufts that now framed her sagging jowls. She would not slouch in a wheelchair in a faded floral house dress. She would not lie in bed and stare blankly at the television all day. My grandmother would not forsake the memory of her own son.

The grandmother I had known lived on a brick-paved street in a rambling, mustard yellow clapboard house in which China cabinets and aromatic cedar chests

virtually burst open with dozens of treasured possessions collected from a lifetime of adventures.

My grandmother was a fat, laughing alto with sky blue eyes and chestnut hair, whom my father described with the greatest respect as “a great old broad,” usually just after he had made her laugh, which was often. My grandmother donned frilly floral polyester dresses on top of piles of lavender-scented lingerie and stockings with garters and black patent leather pumps too small for her swollen feet. She smelled of drug-store face powder beneath a slash of crimson rouge for which my father teased her. Her nails glistened blood red under the weight of diamond rings on fingers that were short and stubby like my father’s. Her lips puckered for grandmotherly pecks on the cheek of each of her eight grandchildren. A sensible if exuberant talker, she was funny, even witty. My grandmother loved crossword puzzles which she did in ink, card games, a good slightly off-color story, and one highball with two unpitted green olives right before dinner. Just like my father.

Except my father is dead. And the vacuum his absence created, along with that of the two other sons and three husbands she had buried, gnawed at her sense of purpose until the grandmother I had known became less and less recognizable, and then ultimately, disappeared.

Then, piece by piece, her treasured possessions were taken away by daughters-in-law and grandchildren until there were but a few—her youngest son’s honorary discharge papers from the Navy signed by the President of the United States, a high school football trophy her star athlete middle son had earned, and assorted framed photographs of three great-grandchildren she had never met. A seamstress cousin took the fur coats for safe-keeping. And the rings were put in a safe deposit box at the bank; they would bring enough to bury her.

Once she was settled into the county nursing home outside of town, the possessions that remained from her lifetime were only enough to fill a shoe box. There was nothing of my father’s. Like the puddles of urine, I had sopped up from beneath her wheelchair during visits past, she refused to acknowledge him as well.

I looked down at Grandmother. A cloth harness was wrapped around her chest and tied to the back of her wheelchair to keep her from falling forward onto the tile floor. Her head drooped forward like that of a ragdoll's. A trickle of saliva trailed down her whiskered chin and onto her baby blue nightgown. Her hand was frozen on the brake. She was snoring.

I did not try to wake her. I did not call her back to me. I did not try to reason with her or insist she go to the cemetery. A shameful ache of betrayal clutched at my heart, but when I released the brake on the wheelchair, I turned her around and pushed her back to her room.

For the next eight years, I still traveled the 450-mile round trip to see her every two months. I still refilled her candy jar with the peppermint candy she so loved even though I knew the nurses ate them. I still took Valentines on Valentine's Day and pumpkins at Halloween and her favorite angel food cake for her birthdays. I still brought her updates on her life-long favorite team, the St. Louis Cardinals. I still carried a pack of playing cards in my purse—just in case. But even though I sat with her through those long, uneventful afternoons, trying to start a conversation, desperately hoping to spark an interest, helplessly watching life slowly seep out of her—her eyes never met mine and I never spoke my father's name.

When the nurse warned me over the phone, "There's been a change," I challenged her. "I was just there in April. Is there really that much of a difference?"

She replied solemnly, "Yes."

I couldn't imagine it. Grandmother's deterioration had been gradual over the years; the loss of hair, the loss of weight, and finally the loss of light in her eyes. She had indeed changed. But the nurse's explanation, "She has not taken solids for over a week," was unsettling.

"She gets her fluids," she informed me. "She has a cannula twenty-four hours a day. We keep her clean, of course, and comfortable, and then, a bit defensively, without me even asking, "You must understand, we do not let them suffer."

'You must understand.' I wished I did understand. I wished I understood why the look in my grandmother's eyes was so far away. I wished I understood why I kept going to see her even though, visit after visit, she did not acknowledge my presence. I wished

I understood why the bleak landscape that framed the ribbon of highway I traveled to see her was appropriate company for my loneliness. Why, on that desolate road, the sight of bare tree limbs etched against bird-less skies washed away all thoughts but those that prepared me to enter her world. Why the change of seasons did little to alter the landscape within my heart.

Would this be my last visit? I trudged the narrow hallways that connected the dark, stench-filled cubicles of rotting flesh; past rows of hopeful eyes trapped in fragile, aged bodies; past heads too heavy to lift even if those they waited for ever did arrive. I cursed the absent sons and daughters for whom those lonely souls waited in vain.

My stomach cramped as I approached her room. From the doorway, the small heap on her bed appeared to be nothing more than a tangled pile of sheets and blankets waiting to be folded. It was Grandmother, though, lying in the fetal position that, I was informed, had come to be her only pose. Her head delicately rested upon the crisp white pillowcase. She couldn't have weighed more than sixty pounds.

Her only remaining personal memento and the only testament to the fact that a life was once lived before these walls imprisoned her was a framed needlepoint which hung over her bed and simply read "G R A N D M A" in big colorful pastel block letters on a lime-green background. Each of her eight grandchildren's names was interwoven into a different letter of the moniker. It sagged beneath a crude hand-made sign that demanded my attention: "Turn me at 2:00 o'clock."

A nurse's aide I didn't recognize, whom Grandmother would have called a "big girl," followed me into the room. She drew back the heavy black-out drapes and cranked open the louvered window next to Grandmother's bed. She went right to work.

"I'm the Beth in the 'N.'" I introduced myself to her and pointed to the needlepoint. She was busy tucking in the sheets that encased Grandmother. "My sister, Ruth..." I paused until she looked up, "the one in the 'A', needlepointed that."

"Well, that's nice." she said, not paying much attention. She was immersed in the work of finding Grandmother's blood pressure. "Honey, if you don't mind, I have to close the door to hear it. Miz' Thornton is banging on her chair again and it's just too soft to hear it otherwise."

I watched Grandmother lie as still as a possum playing dead, oblivious to the breeze that played across her forehead and eased the sweat on her brow. I tried to reconcile the fact that this was the same woman who, in her own plush, rose-colored living room, sheltered from the summer heat by frigid air conditioning and behind fluttering curtains, regularly entertained the ladies of the bridge club with slides from all of the forty-eight states she had visited. That this was the same woman who served delicious hand-made finger sandwiches and delicate desserts on her rose bouquet China tea plates and piping hot Earl Grey in her matching tea cups to the Daughters of the American Revolution as they swapped stories about their children and children's children. None outdid my grandmother; she made sure of that.

But she had lived in this nursing home for eleven years, during which time the ladies of the bridge club and the D.A.R. had either died, moved into similar homes in other counties, or stopped coming to visit when they were met with indifference, when there was nothing left to share.

Her family stopped coming when she stopped apologizing for not having any freshly-baked cookies to offer, when she stopped planning what she would do when she got "out of here," when she stopped talking about going back home. By that time, though, whether she knew it or not, the old house she once called home was not there for her to go back to.

I stopped sending cards and letters when I learned they weren't being opened. At the end of each visit, I stopped making promises to return. I tried to stop caring when I thought she had.

"Callie, Beth's here." I heard the aide say as she brushed back tufts of Grandmother's gray hair with a child's hair comb and tried to tame them into manageable clumps. Grandmother would have hated being called "Callie." Her Christian name was Calandra. But she did not protest. Save for the torturous breaths that rocked her wizened torso, she lay motionless as the aide ministered to her.

"You know it's Beth, don't 'ya, Callie?" The nurse's aide spoke loudly yet she sounded reassuring, like a mother cooing to her baby. Her statement sounded absurd. Even if Grandmother knew who I was, she had acted as if I wasn't there for eight years.

“Well, let’s see if we can get a reading on this arm.” The aide almost shouted. And with that, the sheets and blankets that kept the extent of Grandmother’s deterioration a secret from me for years were pulled asunder. I had seen her shoulders, been warned of the sharpness of their angles as they jutted out from beneath the rim of the chenille bedspread that always covered her, but I was not prepared for the decay that now lay before me.

Great accordion folds of bruised purple flesh hung in wattles from underneath Grandmother’s arm. I remembered how frightened I was by a small strange red spot on that same arm I first saw as a child. I didn’t know at the time it was a tiny nevus and I feared I would acquire one just like it in old age. That birthmark was lost now amidst yellow and orange bruises. I searched for it until my eyes came to rest upon her hands. They were my father’s hands. The curve of the nail, the half-moon of the cuticle was identical to his. Had I not grown with the changes in her face, and had come to see her for the first time after many years, I would have recognized her when I saw her hands; his hands.

“Hmmm.” The aide mumbled to no one in particular as she saw to her chore. “I guess I’ll see if I can get a reading on her leg.” And with that statement, she yanked the bedclothes further back, pulled away a large soiled diaper, gently spread Grandmother’s legs as if they were those of a marionette’s, and inserted a thermometer. I had to see the act completed before it registered in my brain what I was looking at. Surely, she couldn’t have taken her temperature through normal means; Grandmother’s jaw lay askew on the pillow, the bottom a good two inches out of line with the top. Yet, save for a flimsy pink and white checked hospital gown, Grandmother lay naked before me in a way I had not ever seen her, had not ever thought of, and did not ever want to.

The aide adjusted the blood pressure cuff around Grandmother’s thigh. I tried to look away. I tried to remember Grandmother’s once taut flesh, firm in its own construction, if for nothing else but that the weight of it stretched amply across her bones. I looked at her legs now and saw limbs three times older than my own, limbs that had once spread to give forth life—my father’s life, the life she refused to acknowledge.

The words, “Cleave unto me.” whispered through my brain.

I tried to imagine how this same body could have, at one time, given pleasure to another, birthed three sons and nursed them, hugged spouses and children and grandchildren, only to come to the point of acting like she had never done so. But as I stood over her, monitoring her every movement, I saw that this was not the same body. Like the child in her whose essence had to die before she could be transformed into the adult she was to become, perhaps, now was the time for her to cast off the confines of her physical body in order for her spirit to be rendered free.

The aide stopped fiddling with the blood pressure cuff and said aloud to no one in particular, "I just can't get a reading."

That, too, seemed hard to imagine. I had always envisioned the blood that coursed through Grandmother's veins to be as strong and determined as she was. Now, her labored breath was painful to listen to. She gulped air in great gasps as if she was drowning. Each gasp seemed so final yet each gulp of air worked its way in and out of the aged lungs that had kept her alive for ninety-four years.

"Have you told her you're here?" the beleaguered looking aide addressed me. "You know", she continued, matter-of-factly, as she examined the thermometer, "Their hearing's the last thing to go."

I realized I hadn't spoken to Grandmother since I arrived.

"Their hearing's the last thing to go?" That aide couldn't be right, could she? And, if she was, and Grandmother could hear me, why didn't she respond?

The aide sighed, shook down the thermometer, slipped it back in its case, and wrapped up the blood pressure kit.

"Well," she said as she lumbered out the door, "I'll see if the nurse can get this reading." Then, as an afterthought, she turned her head and as if she was warning me, said, "We'll be back."

"Cleave until me." The words echoed in my head.

As I monitored each of Grandmother's exhaled breaths, I grew more and more aware of how arduous the process of dying can be. The next time I would see her she would no longer be laboring to breathe. Hints of the death rattle would no longer emanate from her throat. Death would have come and taken her in my absence. Like it

took my father. And it would not have mattered that I tried to be with her when it happened no matter how compelled I was to be there, by her side.

The nursing staff buzzed in the distance. Grandmother's roommate, Mrs. Thornton, blocked the doorway with her wheelchair. She stared wide-eyed at the silenced metal cup she clasped in her gnarled hand.

I sat motionless for several minutes, studying Grandmother. My eyes flashed back and forth—from her to my watch—and back to her again. 1:00 P.M. 1:08 P.M., 1:22 P.M. The tick of each minute was excruciatingly long. But I couldn't leave. Not yet. She could die any minute.

I riffled through the metal night table beside her bed. Amidst plastic cups and aspirators, Polydent, greeting cards and dentures, there was a book. It resembled the Bibles placed by the Gideon Society in hotel rooms except it contained only Psalms. I ran my hand over its cover and opened it, gently.

I scanned the index, hoping to find something familiar. But this book was indeed like much of the religious material I had seen in the past—brutal in its unforgiving nature. I searched for the only Psalm I knew and then, read each word carefully. The words offered the same comfort and reassurance I felt when, at Grandmother's insistence, the minister recited them at my father's gravesite.

I leaned to within inches of her face. My voice was low and hoarse at first; it came out a raspy whisper. I began, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,"* and I envisioned the Jesus I learned of as a young schoolgirl, the kind man in a shepherd's garment, staff in hand, gathering in all of the lost souls.

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

*He leads me beside still waters;*

*he restores my soul."*

"Cleave unto me." rang out all around me.

*"He leads me in paths of righteousness*

*for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;*

*For thou art with me;"*

Grandmother wheezed and sputtered.

*“Thy rod and thy staff,  
They comfort me.”*

I heard it echo again. “Their hearing’s the last thing to go.”

*“Thou preparest a table before me  
In the presence of my enemies;”*

Grandmother’s eyes flew open,

*“Thou anointest my head with oil,  
My cup overflows,”*

And locked onto mine.

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall  
Follow me  
All the days of my life;”*

I knew then she was looking at a stranger.

*“And I shall dwell in the house of the  
LORD”*

Grandmother had not been pretending. She had made me a part of her past, a past she had buried with my father.

*“Forever.”*

But I also knew; Grandmother *could* hear me. I bowed my head and silently began to pray. I prayed that she would know that it was I, Beth, Cal’s daughter, in the room with her. I spoke softly, partly in shame, for I was asking help from a source I had forsaken; beseeching that greater force to empower Grandmother to release her tenuous grasp on all that bound her to this earth. For even though this most private and primal of journeys had to be made by her alone, I believed that this was not an end, after all, but simply a horizon.

Like the hand Jesus promised would guide her through the “*valley of the shadow of death*,” I knew then that some part of me must have believed all along that the closer she was to death, the closer she was to him; that she would soon see him; that he would come to take her hand, as his father and brothers had come for him, and deliver her to the same Jesus in a shepherd’s garment I had envisioned as a young girl.

And though I could not form the words, as I laid my hand on hers, my heart cried out, "Let go." I wanted my grandmother to die. I had wanted her to die since the day she refused to go to the cemetery, but I hadn't known why. Grandmother's breaths fell across my arm. They came now in great gasps. I could tell, each one weakened her more.

A shaft of early afternoon sunlight poured in through the opening in the drapes and burst from behind my shoulder onto Grandmother's face. Once again, her clouded blue eyes swam back and forth in yellow pools behind half-closed eyelids. I stroked her tattered gray hair.

The image of a deer I once saw lying mortally wounded on the side of the road flashed through my mind. That sad and lonely frightened doe, stunned by the headlights of passing cars, had filled me with a sorrow so deep, I ached. I ached for her agony, for the destruction of such a majestic creature, for the offspring that would wait in vain for her return. I ached because I was helpless to release her from her torment.

As I cupped Grandmother's hands in mine, I felt just as powerless to bring her peace. But for the first time, I saw it was not up to me to end the struggle within her because she did not seek salvation from her surroundings. She wanted to die there.

I, too, wanted her to die when I saw that she had forsaken the memory of my father. Yet, the serenity of acceptance that belongs only to the dying allowed her to surrender that which I could not. As long as she was alive, she had to abandon the memory of my father, for, like the doe, her anguish could only be resolved in another world.

"Cleave unto me." I wrapped the words around me. They soothed the sting in my heart. But whose voice guided me? Whose words did I hear? Was Grandmother's fragile spirit still strong enough to offer me hope?

In that last quiet moment, there was to be between us, I let myself believe that it was her voice inviting me. I let myself believe that her silence had been tacit approval of the communion I sought. I let myself believe that she knew I had cleaved unto her in the hope of accompanying her to the edge of that beckoning abyss, and with only a heartbeat to separate us, touch my father one more time.

Her cold limp hands were still, entangled in mine. They were my father's hands, aged in a way his were never meant to be. I stood up and leaned over her. My cheek rubbed against the whiskers on her chin.

I whispered in her ear the words I had not known I had come to say, the words that had lain beneath the shameful ache of betrayal that clung to my heart for eight years, the words I believed she could hear.

"Tell Dad I was here." She had to abandon him. But I did not.

I freed her hands. She did not stir. The ugliness of the necessary ritual of dying would keep its pace. Its own rhythm had to be honored; my timing was inconsequential. Death would come as peace, or as access to heaven or hell, but it would come on its own terms and in its own time. I walked out of the room. I did not look back.

She had not wanted to see what she had already said goodbye to and I did not want to say goodbye to what I had seen for the last time.



**Julia Van Buskirk** began her writing career in the fifth grade when she penned her first play, which she also directed, produced, and starred in for hundreds of attendees from local school and community groups. Since then, she has focused on essays and short fiction. She has been published in *The Chicago Sun-Times* as well as in numerous publications in the business world. "The Last to Go" is her first national publication.