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# PAPER BOATS, PAINTED STONES, AND PARKINSON'S

MEGAN LEE

On Saturdays you'd pick me up, and we'd spend the day playing and painting. You brought rocks to life with a few strokes of your paintbrush, transforming them into little woodland creatures or steepled churches as we ate Tootsie rolls and Werther caramels all day. Your sweet tooth was mine, though your artist's hand was not. My clumsy five-year-old fingers would move bright red paint over oblong stones to create what could almost pass for ladybugs, and you would smile and hold the messy product in your palm like it was a Monet or a Michelangelo. You taught me to fold paper boats out of newspapers, and filled the bathtub so I could watch them float, fill with water, and crumple into a wet mess. Do you remember?

I'd stand on your couch and admire your paintings on the wall, tracing images of trees, water, sunlight, and boats with my hands. I would pause over the portraits, sensing the love in each brushstroke - your likeness done by Grandma, and hers done by you - and I'd crawl into your lap so that I could match the laughter lines from your painted face to your skin. You'd show me pictures of myself as a baby, and tell me about how I would sleep on your chest, a tiny infant folded securely into her grandfather's arms, and asked me if I would remember these stories when you were gone. I didn't want you to talk about being gone. I wanted to paint stones and fold paper boats. At the end of the day you would take me home and kiss me on the forehead, and I'd wipe it away and give you a hug. I wish I hadn't wiped away those kisses. I hope you don't remember.

Your living room was filled with photos and paintings, with plants and papers you could never seem to throw away. Your packrat nature was mine, though your green thumb was not, and when you showed me paper boats you'd saved from years ago, I showed you the clumsy ladybug you'd helped me paint. I kept it on my desk instead of the plants that I could never seem to keep alive. We both remembered, and though we didn't go out every Saturday anymore, you still kissed my forehead at the end of each visit. I didn't wipe it away anymore, but I still gave you a hug, and you smelled of Tootsie rolls and Werther caramels. You didn't ask me to remember your stories when you were gone, but, a little older and a little wiser, I knew that your Parkinson's would take away your stories. I knew that soon it would be me telling you stories and asking you to remember.

When Grandma died, we all mourned, and remembered her as she'd lived. You had both struggled so much, your health and hers declining, but both of you stubbornly insisting that you'd continue to live together on your own in that little apartment filled with paintings and plants. Her body looked peaceful, and I believed her soul was at peace too. But at her funeral we both knew - that wasn't your wife, wasn't my grandmother. My grandmother was in the paintings and stories

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and photos and memories. I've always been told I have her hands, and now at the end of every visit you clutched mine and gave them an extra kiss. Then you'd look at me, and mime cradling a baby on your shoulder, and I would smile so that you knew I remembered. When we went out to restaurants I would fold little paper boats out of the napkins, and you would nod approvingly, proud that I had remembered. I hated to think that you wanted me to remember for when you were gone. I just wanted to remember you for your paper boats and painted stones.

My visits got fewer, and your strength grew less. You fell more often, you forgot more often, you called and I avoided your calls because your words would slur through your dentures and I wanted to remember when you would tell me stories and take me out every Saturday, not when you could barely walk a lap around the house or feed yourself without your hands shaking. Your laughter lines remained, but new lines appeared - lines of pain, lines of age, lines that carved their way into your skin that was not the skin I remembered tracing years ago. But it was still you beneath the skin, still you behind the cloud of Parkinson's that made you forget. I wish I'd taken your calls or written you letters. I wish I'd reminded you that I remembered.

Parkinson's makes you forget, but you always remembered my name and my face. You forgot where you left your little battery-powered radio, but you remembered your love for art and music. You forgot where you left your glasses and your hat, but you remembered making paper boats and holding me as I slept. You forgot how much time lapsed between my visits, but you remembered holding my hands as I tried to walk before I could crawl, and you remembered taking me out every Saturday years ago. You tried telling me stories again as I pushed your wheelchair up and down the halls of the nursing home, and I tried to listen and remember, because deep down I knew soon that would be all I had left. And at the end of every visit, you still kissed my forehead and I still gave you a hug. You smelled of medicine and sweat instead of Tootsie rolls and Werther caramels, but I still gave you a hug, and then I'd tell you I loved you and that I'd see you next time.

But next time was always far away, and while I was far away at school my next chance for next time disappeared. When I found out I folded a paper boat and I cried and I remembered. The next time I went home I couldn't bring myself to visit your grave, couldn't bring myself to think about the freshly turned plot of earth next to Grandma's, because you aren't there either. You are in every paper boat I fold and every memory I hold. You are in the little bamboo plant that now flourishes on my desk in place of the painted ladybug. So I won't mourn you, because I can't admit that you're gone. I just fold paper boats and collect stones to paint for next time. I eat Tootsie rolls and Werther caramels, and I remember.