



Graphite by Jake Driver

Warmth in a Cold Hospital Room

By Savannah Bullard

It's a Friday. All my friends are in school, making plans to hang out later, wishing the time would pass quicker so class will end. I'm in an Indiana hospital room, ceasing all plans for the next week, wishing time would stop.

It's been almost a year since my grandfather was diagnosed with lung cancer. For so long we held out hope that mortality was false, but now there was no longer any definitive chance that he would make it to my graduation. But when his kidneys and liver unexpectedly failed and pneumonia landed him in the hospital over and over again, we now feared he wouldn't make it to Thanksgiving.

He had on a respirator mask this week because his lungs could not stop filling with fluid. The mask was taken off earlier that day after his brother made it to town, and

the waiting game began.

He could be gone in any minute.

I sat to his left, carefully watching his labored breaths fall in and out of his body, each threatening to be the last. I'm shivering; it's barely 30 degrees in Evansville. My mother and I drove up to be with our family as soon as we could leave school and work. My grandpa turns to me, coming to consciousness for what I assume will only be a minute or two. He doesn't have his dentures in, so his lips are practically nonexistent. But through a shallow breath, he speaks.

"Who the heck are you?"

I let out a laugh, along with a tear or two. "You know me, Grandpa. I'm Savannah."

"Ah, Savannah ... yes ..." He pauses to catch

his breath. "Your hair."

I realize why I'm unrecognizable. Since I saw my grandparents last, I donned chestnut brown hair and wore contacts. Now, almost a year later, I have fire-red hair and large brown glasses that cover nearly a third of my face. I'm a stranger to him now.

Regardless of his confusion about my identity, he reaches up and uses all his finite strength to grab my hand.

He's freezing.

My aunt, constantly trying to suppress her sobs, pets his head and asks if he needs anything, if he is in pain, does he want a drink of sweet tea, is the television too loud, is he hot, cold, tired, sore... the questions never end. It's been a merry-go-round of "do you needs" and "can I gets" for nearly a week in this hospital room, and everyone is a bit restless.

All Grandpa replies is a little moan, almost as if he just added a touch of vocals to an exhaling breath. He's obviously tired of being in a hospital bed, losing all control of his life. But his little sounds are all he has the strength to give.

My aunt tries to console him. "It's okay Daddy," she says, "you're gonna be okay."

He's silent.

My grandma sits on the other side of the hospital bed in a taupe vinyl chair that has

substituted for her bed for days. She watches her husband, her other half, the love of her life, struggle in and out of consciousness, growing weary of witnessing him withering away. There are never less than three people in Grandpa's room; nobody wants to leave for very long. Empty boxes of tissues litter the counters, all reminders of the tears that were shed and why we are all here. Some cry silently, some have complete panic attacks; but Grandma stays rock solid.

Grandpa turns his head to look at her.

"Hey Buddy," Grandma said. The look on her face is one of admiration and sorrow, marking 46 years of love and devotion to this man, truly through good times and bad, in sickness and in health.

Grandpa opens his mouth to speak.

"Henrietta, am I dying?"

My heart fell in unison with my tears.

"We're all dying, Buddy. You're just here because you got a bit sick," she said. Her eyes are dim; she realizes that he knows what is going on.

I sat there and watched his chest rise and fall, my hand in his, begging all my warmth to transfer to his icy fingertips. Everyone is desperate to find a solution to this problem; a strong shake to wake us all from this nightmare. The television plays another episode of Grey's Anatomy, perfectly appropriate for a hospital visit.



I sat there for what felt like an eternity and a millisecond all at once, holding Grandpa's hand between my two smaller ones. Every time I shifted, I noticed my hands getting a little colder. I realized that all the warmth I had was transferring to my Grandpa. His hands, after a while, felt a little less cold than before. I thought to myself, this is what he has done all his life. He was a war veteran, Army brat, head of household, grandfather, father, brother, friend, loving husband, avid church member, along with so much more... as the quintessential man's man, my grandpa always gave his whole heart in everything he did. He transferred his warmth into the lives of so many people, and now, sitting in this hospital room on a painfully cold Indiana afternoon, it was our turn as his family to return the favor he had done for us all our lives. I was suddenly overwhelmed with so much grief and gratitude; heartbroken because I was losing my grandpa, yet so thankful for all he had done for me.

I felt the brittle bones in his fingers and adjusted his bedsheets as Grandpa drifted off to sleep again, for what we feared would be the last time, but no. He's strong. Capable.

He had four more days.

In loving memory of John Coley II.



Photograph by Christa Flynt