

GRANDPA'S WAR

EMILY HEDGES

I heard a strange sound through the vent of my parent's guest bathroom. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and tried to clear my head. Then I heard it again. I got down on the floor and put my ear to the grate. There it was, "Help," in a muted tone, almost like a kitten's meow. I jumped up and ran to get Mom.

"Get me the hell out of here," Grandpa growled when the two of us came into his room.

"Dad, just wait a minute and I'll help you," Mom said with the same tone I used when my kids tried to crawl up on the kitchen counter. She had just changed his sheets a couple of hours ago before she went to bed, and now they were soaked again.

"The bed rails are there to protect you, Dad. Why can't you understand that? Remember how you fell and we had to take you to the emergency room? You can't get up alone anymore."

She reached down and pulled the latch on the left side. The metal gate crashed against the metal frame; a sound like gunfire shocked the stillness of the sleeping house. Before she could get the right side down, Grandpa was already trying to swing his legs over the edge. "How'd you do that so easy?" he mumbled, embarrassed, as though he should have been able to open it himself.

As we helped him sit upright on the side of the bed, he reached out and brushed the hem of Mom's pajama sleeve. "It's pink," he said, touching it as though it were a petal. Ignoring him, she pulled back his blanket and we saw that he was naked. His narrow shoulders seem to curl in on themselves like an empty shell. Mom pulled one of Grandpa's white t-shirts from the drawer along with a fresh adult diaper. I put the shirt over his head and together we worked his arms through the sleeves. He flinched at my cold hands. His skin felt like Kleenex. Mom bent down, threaded his feet through the holes of the plastic diaper and pulled it up his wasted legs as far as she could.

"Now stand up Dad," she coaxed. Using both hands, he managed to raise himself up enough for her to pull the diaper over his hips. Then the two of us moved him into his motorized recliner. Mom noticed his feeding tube was tangled inside the diaper. She reached through the top working to free it. He tried to brush her hand away. I wondered if he did that because it was uncomfortable, or was he remembering that he was the one who used to change her diapers.

"Do you want to try to go back to sleep, or do you want to watch your show?" Mom asked. He was still processing the question when she decided for him. She picked up the remote control and called up the DVR recordings: 42 episodes of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. She picked one and pushed play.

"I'll never understand why you like this," she said, turning the sound up. What was it about the gruesome stories that entertained him when nothing else could anymore, not even his beloved Dallas Cowboy football games?

Grandpa obviously didn't know how to answer. He just kept rubbing his eyes, confused again, probably thinking if he could just clear his vision this would all make sense. Mom picked up the lap blanket on the floor and covered his bare legs.

"Good night Dad. I love you," she said.

"Me too Grandpa," I added.

As we were walking out the door, I heard him ask, "Where's Dave?" in full voice, not the whisper we'd grown accustomed to.

Mom turned. "Dave?" she asked. Grandpa's face took on an angry scowl. "Major David Dewhurst, best damn pilot in the 386th Bomb Group," he said, lips quivering, spit trailing from the corner of his mouth. I watched it run down his chin and drip onto the chair's woolly arm. I wanted to go back to bed and sleep. I wanted my visit to end so I could go back to my husband and kids in New Hampshire. I didn't want to see him like this. How must it feel for Mom? Did she still see him standing tall, her Dad, a World War II bombardier who rarely missed his target in 79 missions over German occupied France, Belgium, and Holland, one with Edward R. Murrow riding along? Did she still see him as the responsible provider, a product of his West Texas, dust bowl childhood, whose careful management of money was helping to support all of them now? Did she still see him as the man who used to put up her long, dark hair in ponytails before elementary school?

Mom took a step towards Grandpa and put her hand on his. "You remember, Dad. David died right after the war. Remember that drunk driver killed him?"

He seemed to hear her because his face turned and looked through the TV. Were the dots connecting for him? Did he remember coming home from the war, David's death, marrying Grandma, selling insurance all those years? Did he know where he was? Was he lonely sitting in this room all day? Mom tried her best, but she had Grandma to take care of too. Grandma's dementia made her constantly angry at Grandpa, and he said he didn't want her in his room talking crazy.

"Now remember Dad, if you need to go to the bathroom, don't get up. Remember what the nurse said? You ring this bell and I'll come help you."

After Mom left the room, I watched Grandpa feel around for the button on his lift chair. Slowly he tilted backward, the slow buzz of the motor drowning out the voices on the television, until he was staring at the dingy, off-white ceiling. Maybe the bumpy, irregular pattern reminded him of how the earth looked from the air. Then he glanced at the brass bell and closed his eyes.

Dedicated to my grandfather, Colonel Albert Hill. RIP.