



Watching My Grandmother Die

by Olivia de Winter

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The smell is killing me. Damian says it is not too bad. And if he says so, he's probably right. He is much more sensitive about these things than I am. Never liked to play with the dogs because of their smelly fur even when he was little.

Our grandmother is dying. One of her kidneys failed, and now her own body is poisoning her from within. The doctor said it would be two days max. But we know her better, and are not surprised that she is still holding on more than a week later. Still, nobody bothers to put in her teeth any more. And her hair shows almost an inch of white roots. The family has finally given up pretending she might survive this, it seems. So we take shifts at her bed.

It is the first time that it is Damian's and my turn. Our parents know that neither of us is a suitable bedside companion for an angry old woman who won't even recognize us any more. Damian hardly knows her to begin with. Not much of her personality was left by the time his memory set in.

It's different for me. I remember her as the towering figure of our family life in my early years.

But now, I sit in this hospital room and watch my grandmother turn more and more yellow, curse the world and her god, constantly running her white rosary through shaky fingers. She has lived almost a century, survived two world wars and all of her friends. And here she is, fighting death at 97. It seems such a pointless endeavor. I listen to her ramblings and curses and start to wonder if so close to death you reveal your true self. If so, my grandmother is a pretty unpleasant person. And a tough one, that's for sure.

At the same time, she looks so fragile and tiny in her hospital bed. She's down to 5 foot something and little more than a hundred pounds. Her arms and hands are swollen and discolored as if someone has beaten her up badly. I know it is from all the failed attempts to find access for the IV. She has mobile veins that curl away when you try to hit them with a needle. Drives the nurses mad. I would know because it is one of the things she and I have in common. One of quite a few. Though I have a hard time seeing any similarities between us right now.

Damian and I sit at her bedside, unnoticed by the person this is all about. These days she only talks to people who are long gone. Mostly to her brother Henry who died in World War One somewhere in Poland when he was only 18.

When I was 18, I was quite the 'salon communist' and I collected

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postcards from the time of the Russian revolution. I found several beautiful ones at a flea market in Vienna that year. Back home, just as I was about to put them in frames, I saw that one was addressed to my great-grandfather's pub. It turned out to be the last sign of life from Henry before he got killed. I gave that postcard to my grandmother. She took it, thanked me and went to her apartment without any further comment. For the next three days, she wouldn't leave her bed or touch any food; she just lay there, crying and praying, never letting go of that white rosary. We were all convinced that she was preparing to die, like those Indians in children's books who leave their people when they feel their time has come. On Day Four, she got up and joined us for lunch as if nothing had happened.

I was relieved to see her at the table. I knew everybody would have blamed me for giving her that postcard if she had actually died. My grandmother pulled through. This time she won't. But it won't be my fault either. I am definitely not responsible for kidney failure.

Damian's and my shift is two hours, and the hands of the clock don't seem to be moving at all. We sit there and stare straight ahead, cracking a few embarrassed jokes. I am bored shitless, and so is he, I'm sure. But we don't talk about that. We have some deathbed manners after all. And speaking of our boredom in the face of death would only make us feel even guiltier about our lack of empathy, our lack of love for this angry old woman.

She has always been much easier to adore than to love, not to mention like. And I am pretty sure that she has always loved her business more than any of us. Obviously, this is another thought I will keep to myself.

Damian tries to hide a yawn. I send him downstairs for coffee to give him something to do for a few minutes. While he is gone, I move over to the window. It is exactly the same view I had when I was here to have my appendix removed almost ten years earlier when I was still in high school. But back then, a week seemed to pass more quickly than an hour now.

The hospital has a nice park attached. Behind it I can see the small parking lot, usually crowded, but right now my car is the only one there. It is midday, and most people stick to their habits for as long as they possibly can. So the suffering and dying will have to wait for consolation until their healthy relatives and friends have had lunch.

The nurse comes in to change my grandmother's diapers. He asks me if I want to wait outside, but I stay. I don't even hold my breath. The smell of feces doesn't bother me too much. I have a cat's litter box to clean out every day. It is the smell of decay that gets to me.

A small eternity later, Damian returns with my coffee and joins me at the window. Our grandmother is clearly not taking any comfort in her indifferent grandchildren by her bedside anyway.

'When is mom coming?' He looks pale against the sickly green of the curtains.

'At two,' I respond and check the clock on the wall again. 'Another hour.'

'Oh man, this is worse than a double session of math and Latin.'

I smile. Damian is such a serious, reasonable guy that I sometimes forget how young he is. Thirteen going straight for thirty.

When our mother finally arrives, she asks how our grandmother is doing.

'Same as always. Still about to die and fighting it.' I shrug.

I can see my mother's impulse to slap me, but she turns away. There is no point in it. I might lack what she considers due respect, but I am right, and she knows it.

She takes a washcloth out of her bag, moistens it and starts to wipe her mother's forehead. The washcloth is light blue with small flowers, all white and yellow and baby pink with tiny little leaves and stems, and much too cheerful for the surrounding and the situation. I recognize it. It is the same thing she used to wipe my face when I was a child and sick at home. It is faded now after 25 years of use. But things are not thrown away in my family until they fall apart. It will probably still be around when I am responsible for easing my mother's pain when her time has come.

She looks up. 'You two can leave now. But I expect you to be back for the midday shift tomorrow again. Noon to two.'

I nod obediently and get the hell out of the room, out of the smell. Damian is right on my heels. We almost run from the elevator into the open. The fresh air is such a relief, and I fill my lungs with life. The sun feels brighter and the birds sound louder than two hours ago when we arrived.

'I don't want to go back there.' Damian does not look at me. He is busy staring at the pebbles of the parking lot he is kicking up. Dust rises and settles on his new white sneakers.

'Maybe we don't have to.'

He knows what I mean.

'That would be better for everybody,' he responds level headedly, and I feel the shame rising, the shame over rather seeing her dead than returning to this hospital for another bedside wake.

Our grandmother dies later the same day.

When my mother gets home, she gives me two things: The first is my granduncle Henry's postcard. Turns out my grandmother had folded it in a square and always had it with her in her wallet. The other one is her white rosary. I don't know what to do with it, but my mother feels I should have it so I put it in my handbag.

For some reason, it is still there, all these years later. It has moved from handbag to handbag, to new cities and new countries with me, always reminding me of this one afternoon in the hospital, and of the smell of a final goodbye.

Olivia de Winter, born and raised in Germany, received her M.A. in literature, history and communications from the University of Munich. Now living in Seattle, WA, with her husband and their cat, she works as a translator and coach in addition to pursuing her writing career. Her first women's fiction novel, *Mopskusse*, was published in 2009 by Random House. Her second novel in German, *Wann Wenn Nicht Jetzt*, was self-published in September 2014. She is currently working on the English adaptation of this novel as well as on short stories and non-fiction pieces in English. She also writes about her experiences as an expat on her blog, Breakfast at Starbucks (www.breakfastatstarbucks.com). When she doesn't write or read, she is training for her first marathon.

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