

Runny Mustard

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Grandpa used to bring a kind of warmth into this house, a feeling of clean sheets around me after my bath, a feeling I used to get from the house I lived in with my parents before they died.

He was always so sweet--he put up with Granny like he knew he had to because he married her or something. Grandpa's smile that showed off his dentures made Granny's talks about God go a lot faster. With him around I could sleep easier when the lights went out and shadows from monsters moved a little when they thought I wasn't looking.

Even though some things and feelings are just so cozy, like they should keep on lasting, nothing can make them stay that way. About two years ago something made his heart stop beating. Granny was praising televangelists when he turned a strange shade of purple; the color of a dried up old plum. He plopped over onto the wooden floor holding his chest like he was keeping his heart in with one hand and pointing at the telephone with the other. Granny started in on the Lord's Prayer and I took my cue and dialed nine eleven.

After that he was sent to the hospital and put on machines with plastic tubes going in and out of his nostrils and his mouth. Granny would just sit by his hospital bed holding her Bible that had wispy pages and pictures of little glowing angels. I felt really bad when I saw him like that, like I ate something rotten and it was burning holes in my stomach, like I wanted to just puke it up or bawl my

eyes out. Red dots were flashing and carrying on and liquids with little bubbles were going through the tubes to Grandpa's body. He had on this mask that got all foggy and made a loud scary sound when he took breaths in and out, the same as wind going through tunnels, or the way Darth Vader sounded.

I couldn't decide what to do when I saw him so I just froze and stared, as if I didn't have any emotions--kind of like one of Granny's chalky busts at the house. When it sank in about what happened to him, I started to panic and cry real hard, until my body shook and my face got red and splotchy and hot. I ate lots of ice-cream and other things with lots of fat so my arteries would get as clogged as his were. I thought that if he died I could go right along with him to Heaven, where people float around half naked in the clouds just like the picture in the back of Granny's Bible. The more I thought about it, the more I just wanted Grandpa to go up there with them. And I thought he deserved to go, he was so old and white looking anyway.

Dr. Oates told Granny that she could keep Grandpa, but he'd have to stay on those humongous machines until he could breathe for himself. He said it would take a miracle if he did start breathing, which was the wrong thing to say to Granny, my Granny that believed God would do anything for her if given the chance. Just like some kid taking home a puppy, she took Grandpa home with a twinkle that started in her old made up eyes and went to her veiny hands that were always shaking.

For two years he stayed in there, looking dead, collecting dust between his yellowish toes. He just turned into this big lump of old skin taking up space in his bedroom. When he first came home I used to cry when I had to touch his leathery skin or comb his hair that felt like straw. His face reminded me of my dad's face that night

when I thought that he was just sleeping and he could hear me but really couldn't.

Deep down in my heart I knew that Grandpa was like that, dead inside. He was just another spooky thing in this house.

And the summers here with them had to have been the absolute worst. I've heard lots of stories from Granny about fiery pits in Hell where ~~had~~ people go to live with some big devil with sharp horns, which sounds pretty bad but I think that summers at this house would top that.

With my school being out for three whole months and all, I had just about twenty-four hours to spend indoors with them. Granny would sit and crochet all day and talk about God even though she wouldn't go to church because she wouldn't leave Grandpa home alone. Granny likes to talk, like she just wants to hear herself over and over. And I know that sometimes she even talks to herself even though she says she doesn't. But no matter how much she talked back then I still felt like I was all by myself, like there was something black in the house that covered me when I walked in the door. The air always felt so heavy and dusty and it formed a cement ball in my heart.

Alone in my room I'd look in the mirror that was cracked and speckled with black dots that made my face have measles or moles like the ones covering Grandpa's body. It was old, just like everything else in the house. I just wanted to see myself, to see what kind of changes were coming about, to fix my hair just like every thirteen year old girl, to be like Heather Corbin who was so neat and pretty like her name. I would whisper Heather in front of the mirror, until it was like breathing, like a sleeping baby with a pink mouth or a dog panting with his tongue hanging out. Heather Corbin was like one of those girls on TV shows who wore clothes like soap opera stars

and whose picture the boys always looked up first in the yearbook. Heather Corbin walked around Prospect Jr. High always laughing and tossing her hair with little curls over her shoulder. She'd sigh like the way I said her name when she told us in the bathroom that her curls were *natural*.

Light would seep in through my windows and bounce around in my room full of Granny's weird antique things. I'd look up and see the ceiling with rough bumps moving in on me and the dirty gold chandelier that at night turned into serpents from Bible pictures that tempted and later ruined the first people on earth.

I'd look around and miss what I knew of my old house—the smell of my mom's perfume from the frosted glass bottle with lilacs stenciled around the cap or sweet fabric softener on my sheets and my clothes, and the house always being so breezy from the back door always opening and closing. A feeling like love was always with me, a feeling that I thought I would always have, like boxes jammed full of souvenirs that you hope and pray doesn't get burnt up in a fire.

From the first time I saw Grandpa in the hospital I knew that I could never be normal. I had seen more in my life than all of the girls my age that followed girls like Heather into bathrooms or the mall, and bumped into each other when someone would stop.

I had other things to think about, like my Grandpa being held down by tubes that kept him alive.

It was a super hot day that kept coming in through open windows where june bugs were making tapping noises on the screens. I was putting the drippy warm mustard on hot dogs when Granny started talking about my mother. She laughed like some old witch when she

brought out faded brown pictures of my mom and me together, on vacation at some beach with mountains sticking up behind us. There she was holding me on her lap, her chin sitting on my shoulder, smiling bright for the camera that my dad was probably holding, turning it on its side to get the angles right.

I wanted to cry right there over the hot dogs. It wasn't fair that Granny had so many happy memories of my parents. It wasn't fair that she laughed instead of cried when she thought about them. I wanted to be able to whip out pictures in a flowery scrap book and say here, here's my mom and dad, this is the time when we went to the beach, this is the time when my mom held me so close that I got her perfume on my neck and went to sleep smelling just like her. I wanted to be the one to laugh when I saw those pictures or when I thought about the times I had with them.

Yellow mustard ran over the sides of the hot dog bun and I kept squeezing and squeezing. I felt crazy, like one of those weirdos they lock up forever in a rubber room. I wanted to scream because of everything that seemed to be hitting me at one time. I couldn't stand the thought of rubbing Grandpa's body down with alcohol when he couldn't tell if he was clean or dirty, or clipping moldy toenails that made me gag and gave me the chills.

I started down the stairs to the chilly basement when Granny plopped down in her rocking chair. The lights were on and humming but the corners were dark where someone could've been hiding.

My hands were shaking fast right along with my breath. All of my old stuffed animals with shadowy faces

that were lined up on a shelf were telling me not to do it. It was like they knew it was a sin --one of the biggest sins-- and they didn't want God to punish me for it. But something strange was happening; I was cold, like the dampness that breathed in the corners clouded around me, seeped into my pores and crept through my veins. Layers of cement seemed to be poured and hardened over the rock that was already growing in my heart.

Long winding snake-like cords were guarding the fuse box covered in dust and dirt and I wanted to turn around and run. I spotted a handle that I reached out to pull but then I stopped myself. I remembered the padded rubber rooms and the Hell that Granny warned me about. Then I saw Grandpa's dead looking body and the tubes and fluids and the Preparation H.

The humming noise from the fluorescent lights stopped the same time the creaking in the floorboards under Granny's chair stopped. Spiders could've crawled into my mouth and died for all I cared, I just stood there with it hanging open, staring at the handle pushed down with dust buzzing around it.

And then I just plain started laughing, until my eyes filled up with water and my side hurt for the first time in a long time, laughing loud enough for even Granny or the devil to hear.