

She Fades Into View

By Katie Vosgien

I stood at the edge of the hospital bed, watching my little cousin, Brianna, take in uneven breaths, letting them out in soft little shudders. Her eyes oscillate behind closed lids, fingers – narrow as pencils and pale as calla lilies – pull at the white cotton bedding as she dreams. The tubing in her nose steams up, moisture building as the steam fades and condensation builds. The effort of her breathing fills the quiet.

My mom shifts next to me, her lips drawn in a tight line as she stifles tears, and my dad grips his weather-worn cap in the way he does when he doesn't know what to do or say. I fidget terribly. I'm a nine-year-old missing an afternoon playing mermaids at the pool and I don't want to be here. I don't to be surrounded by flowers and teddy bears and medical equipment beeping away, a steady and abiding refrain – resolutely watching over its charge while hospital staff moves in and out of the room, weaving deftly around us.

Aunt Mary, Brianna's grandma, sits heavily, her face crumpling with exhaustion. Mom touches Aunt Mary's forearm gently, a reflexive gesture almost imperceptible but as familiar as what makes Mom my mom. Aunt Linda sits stiffly in one of the mauve cloth chairs in the back of the room. Her face, framed by dark curled hair and peely-red with a burn slowly making its way into a tan, is drawn taught. One hand attempts to fan away the summer heat while the other presses

a generic gossip magazine against her khaki-clad thigh. Not that she read magazines regularly – she doesn't – but the waiting demands it.

Aunt Michelle has an arm around Aunt Mary's thin, shaking shoulders. Assurance of and belief in a higher power, of hope eternal, are her accessories. She wears them on her person always, no matter the circumstances. Her hip, rounded and maternal, is pressed into mine, and despite my restlessness and the heat, I don't move away. I glance up at my dad. He's glaring at the vent, as if willing the AC to kick back on again would fix it faster. From the last we'd heard, fresh cool air was about an hour out. In the meantime, a large bowl of ice placed in front of two oscillating fans provided some relief.

We wait for cousin Rachel, Brianna's mother, but it's taking too long. Visiting hours are drawing to a close. We say our goodbyes — hugs and sniffles all around. Aunt Mary, Rachel's mom, stays behind. Her husband John gets off work and joins her at the bedside for who knows how long, then they leave for their home away from home – a small, dingy hotel room smelling faintly of smoke but with decent water pressure and a mini fridge. Not ideal, but it's close to the hospital.

This is the first round of tests and treatments. Brianna would spend most of the day too exhausted from bouts of nausea and depleted lymphocytes to notice the IVs in her arms. She'd often drift to restless sleep, wake with a headache, cry, and ask for her mother. Staff would call Rachel, wait, and reach her answering machine – so instead, Aunt Mary would drive back to the hospital and comfort her.

The nurses brought in preschool supplies, helped change her pull-up and move her to where she was most comfortable. Aunt Mary is a long-time diabetic by now and in the beginning stages of kidney failure. She isn't supposed to lift or do too much. When staff dissipates out the door to make their rounds, she picks up Brianna and holds her tight, rocking her back to sleep, kissing her hair and breathing in her cold antiseptic scent.

We drive two hours back home, to Derrington, a small town in Northern Nevada. There's not much to do or see. It's an inconsequential place to most, merely a place to use the restroom and grab a spot to eat between Reno and Las Vegas. But for us it was everything. Most of my mom's side of the family lives there, raising their kids until they grew tired of it and moved on elsewhere. We are interconnected and woven together not only by blood but shared time and experiences – fighting and laughing and crying together at nearly every barbeque, Super Bowl party, and holiday gathering.

Derrington never really *changes*. Not like Reno or Carson or the spaces in between. The nearly hundred-year-old Rx drug store is as defiant to change as its customers. Its storefront (an off-white cream) and its innards (haphazardly stocked shelves) are the same decades on. My hometown is Andry Griffith, Aunt Bea. The one lone jail cell in Mayberry, housing rowdy inebriates overnight and that's about it. All locals, small-minded small-town gossip, and, with the blink of an eye, long gone behind you.

It grows like its own self-contained petri dish. People die. Their family comes back to mourn the deceased and remark on how quiet and secluded the Mason Valley still is and likely always will be. They decide to stay and raise their children. They take a job at the casino or adjoining bowling alley. Their kids graduate from Derrington High School, get married, raise their own kids, and on and on. Or, they start a career in Carson, maybe Reno. They grow to dislike the housing price hikes and the hustle and bustle and road construction. A parent or an aunt or an old friend dies. They attend the funeral and decide to move back, as did their parents. The cycle continues.

Newcomers move in and never leave, trapped happily in the swollen heat and the noise of the rodeo that echoes up and down the main drag. My family has moved out, back in, out again, and back from that town. We are sucked into and pulled under the current of a perpetual tidal wave.

My aunts, their adult children, and their children's children, meet us at our house the following afternoon. They sip iced tea in wicker lawn chairs on the front porch, gardening journals splayed out on their laps, discussing flower varieties and yard upkeep. My cousins and I devour watermelon beside them. Our tan skin glistens with sweat from the afternoon sun, and beads of water droplets roll down our arms, fresh from a dip in the blue above-ground pool.

Mom, watching me, sighs. She smiles in her sad-wise way and tells me that it'll all be okay. *Don't worry, Brianna will be okay.* I'm not that worried, really – I mean, sure, I am *sad* about it, I think. But, I'm getting ready to go on a bike ride

with my cousins and a neighborhood girl my age, Sadie, and am too busy hooking purple, glittered jelly sandals around my ankles to think much about it.