

Carmen Murray

JCM 542

(251) 281-4376

Narrative Essay

The Things I'll Never Get to Know

The beginning of the end of my grandmother's life began with a fall. Juanita Murray was a woman who had been falling her entire life. She fell in love with her husband, she stumbled into taking care of her kid sister, she dove into becoming a Jehova's Witness with my papa strapped to her back like a parachute, she slipped into becoming a caregiver for her first grandchildren. I was witness to her last fall. I gripped her bicep as she knelt on the floor. She was without the modesty she wore as frequently as her gold hoops. Cancer had taken that away, along with her hair and a variety of other things. The clumsiness that began as youthful ignorance and transformed into familial obligation had quickly spiraled into aging fragility. My grandmother was no stranger to falling. I feared for her and sometimes I feared I would become her.

Days after she fell, she was sent back to our home from the hospital and put on hospice care. My mother would tell me that she was embarrassed about her fall, and she said in the hospital, "I'm sorry my Carmen had to see me like that." Overnight her home had become a rented hospital bed in the middle of our slightly dusty family room. I didn't really speak to her once she arrived in the ambulance. I was what they call chicken. I viewed her from a vantage point by the stairs until I learned that she was in a deep slumber from which she would never wake up. The oxygen hooked up to her nose made her snore like she hadn't slept for forty days and nights. She had been in pain and uncomfortable for months. I have memories of her with eyes closed in her bed over on Kent Road. My dad would walk into their room and tenderly dab

the tears off of her face with a napkin. Grandmother hadn't slept well in awhile. Thanks to the morphine trickling down her throat, she now slept like the dead.

When I finally got over my fear of being near her deathbed, I sat hesitantly in one of the pretty but stiff chairs. I could only stay for moments at a time, it was difficult to see this hollow final shell of my grandmother. When I was finally able to stay in the room for more than a breath, I would sometimes take long glances at her. My grandmother had never considered herself a small person. She constantly complained about her midsection or the fact that her ankles were the same size as her calves or the fact that her arms wiggled when she walked. In my final moments with my grandmother, I realized she had become tiny in a matter of months. The diet that she had thought she needed for years had come. It had taken her spirit along with the weight and now they floated somewhere out in the middle of the Gulf.

I would sit, now with my feet curled underneath me, and journal some silly story I would never finish. In between writing I would stare into space, a habit that often left people wondering if there was something mentally off with me. I thought about my grandmother. I wondered if she was dreaming or if she was having nightmares. I, throughout my life, had a recurring dream in which she was the evil twin version of herself. When she finally left, I wondered if those nightmares would forever be lost as well. I wondered if every moment of her life played out in her mind like a movie. She would begin with moments with her Mother and then end with memories of her great-grandchildren. I wondered if she was in limbo like a tv character and would get to see her Mother and her brother, Julius, again.

I've been told throughout the years that I am the female version of my father. This is the explanation that others give as to why we haven't agreed on anything since before I developed an astigmatism. Since coming home, I came face to face with the fact that my grandmother and

father were cut from the same burlap sack. Didn't that also make me the flipped side of my grandmother's coin? I could see it in her senior yearbook photo. She had a face that I always thought had rounded later in life, but it had never quite lost its cherubicness from youth, like mine. She was a woman with an affinity for cooking and eating, which was part of the reason why she bemoaned her body. I had taken my obsession with food a step farther and now took grocery bags of junk to my room and binged approximately every two days. It wasn't all bad, I probably got my love of television from her. In my twenties I had come to understand the inane pleasure that watching Chip and Joanna Gaines brought. I'm sure she wished that I had adopted a reverence and admiration for Jehova from her, but I stopped going to Kingdom Hall around the same time I stopped listening to my father.

The time I really felt like I was looking in a mirror was a night I was watching over her. She was doped up on something that fogged the reality of her body's condition. Grandmother was telling me things, and I had never heard her be so honest in all my life. She was a woman who played the game of life with her cards close to her chest. There was a lot she didn't give to the world, much like her tight lipped granddaughter. She told me with a quiet rasp, "I wish I would have traveled more." I had always thought my grandparents were just neurotic homebodies who would live and die in Mobile. In my mind, they had no yearning to go much farther than the streetlight on the corner of Kent Road. Her relatives going on vacation left her with so much anxiety. She wanted a call when we got there and a call when we were safely locked away in the house. Grandmother had secretly wanted to dip her toes in Floridian waters and spread the good word on other continents. Most days I wanted to get so far away from Mobile that it would take me boats, planes, trains, and buses to return.

My grandmother and I were a lot alike, jumping and falling into things we probably had no business being involved in. I stumbled into musical theatre in college, even though I knew it wouldn't support me in the manner to which I'd become accustomed. I had a habit of falling into an undiagnosed depression and eating the Walgreens down the street out of house and home. Some days I couldn't stomach looking at myself in the mirror. I wondered if every one of her days was like one of those tea parties she loved to throw. Every person she met was a guest at her carefully crafted dinner table. Was she too consumed with the need to be likable and palatable for every person she met? Did she too sometimes want to beat her head in with her copious amount of china and crystal? There are a lot of things I'll never know about my grandmother. What I do know is that we both were stubborn. We both had flaws. We both had dreams. I just wished I would have come to that realization sooner.

Many visitors came to see grandmother over those final days. Some were relatives I hadn't seen since before I graduated highschool. Some were people who had taken advantage of her and taken her for granted, myself included. They all filed in, sitting on the chairs and sofa that hadn't been lived in after ten years of us occupying the house. One of my cousins walked out of the door one night, tearful and shaky voiced saying, "This is so surreal." She had held a grudge against my grandparents for years for what I'm sure boiled down to an insignificant reason. Now she was crying at her deathbed like a scene out of *The Imitation of Life*. My grandmother's best friend stood outside the window calling out to her, "I love you friend!" Kingdom Hall music, songs I hadn't heard since I was very small and let adults dress me, filled the tiny room. Only she could draw a crowd like that. For as much as she liked to gossip, she was also a well loved person. My mother had often said to me during this time, "Juanita Murray has

never met a stranger.” At her funeral a week or so later, a crowd of people would gather to send her off on her way. All were people she had taken care of in one way or another.

In the coming months I would often wonder where my grandmother was. Was she a spirit trapped in our house watching my parents argue and my papa stare listlessly at *Perry Mason*? Was she with the Jehovah that she believed would take care of her when her life on Earth was done? I knew her body was in a carefully selected coffin on Dauphin Island Parkway. It was scattered with the white roses she dreamed about much like the trips she wished she would’ve taken. I hoped she was somewhere that looked a lot like the house she ruled over for decades, cooking and waiting for the seat at the glass kitchen table to be occupied by my papa.