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Tell Him You Love Him

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TELL HIM YOU LOVE HIM

Outside the hospital window, a tree of lightning planted itself. Seated in her lumpy lounge chair, Judy tries to ignore the storm, but thunder rattles the windows. Thunder, Grandpa doesn't call it thunder. He says, "It's just God, banging the pots and pans around, to let you know he's still there." She wonders if he hears the storm in his room above, or if the heaving respirator and bleeping monitor block it out. Looking around the lobby at doctors consulting at the nurses' station, she is frightened, not of the storm, but of Grandpa's death. What if he doesn't live?

The click-clack of a gurney distracts her only for a moment. He has a remedy for every situation. What would he tell her now? He'd say, "Judy, when you're scared, close your eyes, and think of something happy. When you open them, whatever frightened you won't be as bad as you thought it was."

Thinking, she chews her lower lip, and then closes her eyes. Pictures of a red pinata, her sister blowing out candies, and red roses fill her mind. Listening to her mother and grandma gossip in the kitchen, she had turned away to look at her Grandpa through the spindles which separate kitchen from family room. The embers still sparked red and blue from the log Grandpa put on the fire, and now he sat cross-legged on the plaid loveseat, gazing at the family album.

Stepping down into the room, she felt plush carpet ooze between her toes. Although his cigarette smoke stung her eyes, she continued to the far corner of the room. When she nestled in close, he didn't say a word, his eyes never left the pictures, but his arm reached to encircle her.

Together, they turned familiar pages, cloudy black-and-white family portraits, sisters and brothers splashing in the lake, Mom outfitted in her new ski wear. At one photo he stopped, looking longer at it than any other. The caption read, "Summer at Rouge Park, Detroit, 1939." The woman's curls fought against the wind, the handkerchief in her breast pocket flowered out, and she clutched a man's hand close to her tweed. The man, in his fresh Army haircut and pressed uniform, shone like ice caught in the sun, he looked happy.

"Who are they, Grandpa?"
"That's your grandmother and I, a week before our wedding. Even then, she was the most loving woman I'd known."
"How'd you find her?" He looked at Judy, and then took her hand guiding her through his memories.
"Every Friday she came to my father's grocery, and after our first few meetings I started sending her love notes in the sacks she took home, so she would think of me when she'd gone."

As his stories unfolded, she understood why Grandma fell in love with him. "Once I bought the perfect red rose for her corsage; she was perfect, what else could I have done? Anyway, I didn't have a car so I rented a horse and carriage to take us dancing at the Veteran's Hall. I called her Cinderella, she was so beautiful, but when the clock struck twelve, she didn't run away." He turned and tickled Judy. She loved it.

"Whenever a new Clark Gable movie came out, she had to go; he was her hero, you know. I never liked the idea of his having part of her heart when I wanted it all. I decided to grow a mustache like his. I refused to see her for a
week while I grew it, and before I went to pick her up, I looked in the mirror expecting to see Cable's double. When she saw it, she paused open mouthed, and touched it saying, 'Oh, Frank,' Well, I've still got my mustache, and I'm never going to shave it off.' He fingered that coarse, dark hair, and Judy snuggled closer, smelling roses on his blazer.

When she opened her eyes, she wished she had said she loved him. A nurse, wheeling medication, stops as thunder booms. "...close your eyes and think of something happy. When you open them, whatever frightened you won't be as bad as you thought it was."

Just as her father and grandfather used to do, once Judy spent a whole day fishing with Grandpa. Grandma drove them to Island Lake; he never had a driver's license. "Be careful, remember not to stand up in the boat, keep your feet dry. I'll be back at six, and, Judy have a great time."

"I told you, didn't I, that Uncle Teddy has a cottage here? Right over there, see it?" And he pointed to a flaking cottage, not really a house, more like a couple of rooms, weathered and comfortable looking, just right to escape to.

"There's the boat. Tied to the dock. Come on let's get out gear and load her up." The boat and dock blended into the cottage, a mass of brown. As she walked over the rickety planks, she worried they would break beneath her. The boat creaked when Grandpa stepped in, but it didn't sink, so she followed.

She watched the sweat forming on his muscular arms; his blue jeans soaking up water from the bottom of the boat, and the grin across his face. Zooming past, a speedboat rocked their boat. "Hey, Grandpa, how come we aren't using a speedboat? It'd be a lot easier."

"Scare the fish, hon, and we don't want to scare the fish." She watched the water drip from the oars as he lifted them from the water.

Out of the two original bamboo poles her father and grandpa used, only one remained, and Grandpa couldn't bring himself to buy a fiberglass one. "Put the hook through the worm once and then again." Judy looked at the cottage cheese container of worms.

"You want me to touch the worms?"
"That's the only way you're going to get them on the hook."
"There's no other way? No, I guess not. Okay, no problem."

They shared that one pole, by trading every half hour. On Judy's first turn she didn't catch anything, but she wasn't disappointed; she was with Grandpa. Casting out his line, Grandpa immediately got a bit, but when he reeled it in, only a clump of seaweed hung from the hook.

"Guess I'm a bit rusty, eh, Judy? Well, the sun's directly above us, so by my calculations, it's time to eat."

From the brown bag, he pulled salami sandwiches, Kool-aid, and homemade molasses cookies, her favorites. At the edge of the boat, a swirling fin appeared, then sank. Grandpa elbowed her. "Watch the water."

The fish swam near the surface again, and she saw the crystal, gumball eyes, the slow fluffing of its gills. Quietly, it disappeared, and then burst from the water. The sun turned each exposed scale to a rainbow.

"Hon, if I were a musician, I'd try to capture that in my song."
"It sure was beautiful. I'd come here everyday if I could see that scene again."

Crumbs had caught in the bristles of his mustache; laughing, she brushed them away, and he wiped her red Kool-aid mustache. A half hour passed before
the bobber jerked down.

"Hold on, reel it in slow...okay, he's hooked, bring him in fast...what a beauty."

"Look, it's the one we saw before. Oh, Grandpa, we can't..." They watched it silently and she felt the swaying of the boat their movement had caused, and watched the ripples reaching to the shore, never quite getting there.

"Yeah, well, I guess...." And, like a surgeon in open heart surgery, he extracted the hook from the fish's mouth, then let it slip back into black, murky waters. Into the tackle box went bobbers and hooks. "That's it, hon." They sat feeling the lake.

Later, their pantlegs rolled up, they splashed along the shore. Grandpa stopped; his fingers grazed the bottom, and finding the perfect stone, he called, "Watch how many times it skips across the water." He fingered it lightly, stood sideways, brought his arm all the way back, and let the stone fly. It skipped five times.

"Grandpa!" She squatted down and picked among the rocks, and then imitated his motions. The stone sank on the first jump, and so she tried again and again but never got past two skips.

"How come you can do that so good and mine won't even skip three times? My rocks are just as flat as yours."

"It's a skill that improves when you get old, and I'm gettin' old." Turning back, they saw Grandma waiting for them, her head leaning against the car window.

"Catch anything?" she asked when they reached the car. Judy and her grandpa grinned.

"Not a thing."

Riding home, she stretched across the seat using Grandpa's lap for a pillow. As she drifted to sleep, drugged by soft conversation, his thick hand stroked her hair. She heard him chuckle and looked up to catch his eye, but he was looking at Grandma. Judy sighed and hoped he knew she loved him.

"...think of something happy..." And she did.

When Judy spent the night, she joined Grandpa and Chi-Chi, his dog, on their walk. Through the cracks in the sidewalk grew weeds, city flowers. The houses surrounding them were all the same, even the maple tree in each front lawn.

Grandpa let her hold Chi-Chi's leash while he picked a bouquet of dandelions, happy and yellow.

"You know, pretty soon you'll be sixteen. Have any plans?"

"You and Grandma will probably come over for dinner."

"No dates?"

"No, none."

"I know a guy, not bad looking, who'd love to spend the entire evening with you."

"Who?"

"Me. I was thinking we could go to the Hyatt Regency for dinner and dancing."

"But I don't know how to dance."

"Nothing to it, with an old pro like me to teach you, we'll be like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire." She didn't know who they were, but if Grandpa said they were good, they were great.
"The steps are easy, it's back, side, step, back, side, step, come on you can do it."

Before long they were waltzing down the sidewalk-ballroom, Chi-Chi trailing behind, the bouquet pressed between their palms. When they got home, he swung Grandma around the kitchen.

"Frank, you old fuddy duddy, put me down. Dinner's almost ready."

"Well from now on you're going to be known as the girl who turned down Fred Astaire! I guess it'll be Ginger and I, tripping the light fantastic in the living room. Come on, Ginger."

"Sure, Fred." And they swirled around the furniture until Grandma called them for dinner.

"Judy." Grandma's hands touch her shoulders, and she turns away from the room of people reading old magazines, and the sound of a gurney wheeling down the hall.

"Come on up, hon. We've arranged for you to see him."

The elevator doors open to a crowd of people inside. Judy stares at the walls, and looks at her grandmother, who gives a reassuring squeeze.

Dimmed almost to darkness, the lights shadow her parents leaning over his bed. "He's fallen asleep again. Why don't you wait here until he wakes?" her mother whispers.

Easing into a yellow vinyl chair, she watches the up and down motion of the respirator, the tubes in Grandpa's nose and arms; fearful again she begins searching for another happy time. Once she had the chicken pox, and Grandpa couldn't come to her room because he never had them. Instead he stood outside the window, flowers in hand, mustache curled in a grin, cheeks round and full.

"Sleep tight, hon," he said. She'd been too young to know she should have told him she loved him.

Looking now she sees a nurse has shaved the mustache off, probably to make caring for him easier. "Oh, Grandpa, your mustache, what's Grandma gonna say?"

His face has thinned to an empty bag, wrinkled where the rolls used to be. She reaches out to erase the lines. The touch causes his lids to open, and dried lips crack her name. She kneels quickly, whispering, "You'll be okay, won't you?"

"You just have your dancin' shoes ready, Ginger, and I'll take care of the rest."

"They'll be ready, Fred... Grandpa, you know I love you, don't you?"

"Yeah, I've known for a long time." He tweeked her nose before he closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

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