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Darkness at Dawn

by Angela Kovalak

"I'm sorry, sir, but this is a non-smoking car. Should you still care to smoke, you may do so in Car Two, directly behind us."

Felix looked up from the lighter in his hand, obviously frustrated at its uselessness. He apologized abruptly and put his cigarette case away. The gentleman sitting to his left, next to the window, had fallen asleep. The man's loud snoring had already begun to irritate Felix. Every time Felix felt sleep come near, the man's unusually loud snorting noises would waken him again. The attendant tried to arrange a seat for him elsewhere in an extra seat but the people sleeping peacefully nearby were not to be disturbed. Felix resorted to just sitting. This last leg of his trip, by fault of the snoring man, proved the most exhausting. He glanced at his watch. Three more hours to endure.

The train slowed to a stop at his destination. The snoring man had already awakened and stretched his arms next to him. Felix pushed himself up weakly. The sudden stiffness in his neck made him cringe. Reaching into the pocket inside his suitcoat, he drew out his glasses. Unlocking his overhead compartment carefully, so as not to cause an avalanche, he pulled out his worn leather backpack and proceeded to throw it over his shoulder. Everyone waited anxiously to get off the train.

Bag in hand, he stepped out to the curb in front of the station and whistled. A cab driver spotted his raised hand and made a sharp swerve to pull up next to him. Situating himself in the back seat, he gave the driver his destination. The driver nodded in confirmation and pulled out into traffic.

He remembered the first time he made this trip. At nineteen, he

worked to earn money to put himself through college. His parents had recently divorced and neither parent appealed to him. He pushed college further into the back of his mind, hoping someday he might get there. When he left to find his own place, he still hadn't raised enough money. As each year passed, his future looked dimmer and dimmer. That's when his grandparents took him in. This trek to see them, oftentimes, had been his only bridge to sanity.

As the cab crossed the river, the sun was just rising and its splendor nearly brought a tear to his eye. Gram loved the sunrise. She would get up at ungodly hours of the morning to view the terrific sight from the roof of her building.

The driver pulled up to the diner where Felix meant to get out. Felix almost mechanically pulled out a crumpled and worn scrap of paper from his pocket. On it was a barely legible telephone number. This same scrap of paper had seen him through some rough times. He pushed open the diner door and the jingling bells overhead sounded his arrival. He surveyed the customers. Stepping aside to make way for a bustling waitress, he settled on a seat at the counter. A waitress promptly took his breakfast order and poured him a cup of coffee. The procedure had always been the same. Next, he made the call. He dialed the familiar number on the crumpled scrap of paper. An elderly man's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Pops. It's me, Felix."

"Felix. How are you?"

"Good. I'm down at the diner."

"Well, what are you waiting for? You know where to go!"

"All right. I'm coming!"

Felix paid his bill and thanked the waitress graciously. She paused a moment to smile at him. He pulled up his collar and stepped into the bright morning sun. He had realized long ago that he didn't really need to make this stop at the diner. But if his grandmother had taught him anything, it was how to be a gentleman. She believed that manners made the man. It didn't matter that they lived only about a block away.

He rang the bell and from behind the door's frosted glass he could see

the figure of his grandfather coming to let him in. The door swung open and Pop's arms reached out to embrace him. He pulled Felix close. At first, Felix felt uncomfortable with this open display of affection, something he wasn't used to. But this was Pops. His grandfather reached for his bag.

"No, I got it, but thanks."

"Okay," he said, tousling the young man's hair.

Felix began mounting the steps, two at a time. When he glanced back and saw Pops trying to keep up, he slowed. He had forgotten that pops wasn't as fit as he used to be.

"You okay, Pops?"

"Are you kidding?" he proclaimed in his heavy Irish accent.

"Just checking!"

Felix arrived at the door at the top of the stairs and reached for the knob. He could already smell the aroma of frying bacon wafting up from the bottom of the door. Once inside, Pops started asking all kinds of questions about his mom and dad and what was going on in his life. They talked easily about the past few months. Pops made an enormous breakfast platter for him. Felix's stomach already regretted eating at the diner. He smiled to himself. This was home for him. He hadn't felt loved like this in a long time.

Pops had made no mention of Gram yet. Felix hesitated to ask. Pops had called him a week before and asked him to come as soon as possible. The voice that had always been full of life and brought comfort to Felix had become resigned and tired. Deep inside, Felix knew why Pops had called. So, that's why he had hopped on the first train he could right after finals ended. He could wait no longer. He had to ask the looming question.

"How is she?"

Pops lowered his eyes. His face turned pale. Afraid Pop's knees were going to give way, Felix reached out and took hold of him. He sat the old man down at the table and quickly got him a glass of ice water. Then, he sat down across the table and looked him in the eyes.

"What is it, Pops?" urged Felix. The man remained silent. Finally he spoke.

"I'm losing her, Felix. I'm losing her and I can't do anything about it."

Felix slumped back in his chair. He knew this day would come but he could never have prepared himself. Gram got sick about a year and a half ago. She was diagnosed with lung cancer. The doctors did what they could but gave her only six months to live. The news devastated Pops. He loved his wife more than life itself. The thought of losing her was incomprehensible. Pops handled the situation the best he knew how. He devoted his life to her. Every day he was at her side in the hospital room. He bore every pain she suffered. Sometimes while she slept, she would curl herself up, writhing in pain, due to the medication. They couldn't give her anything now that would help her. Pops could only hold her hand and watch as tears of agony rolled down her face. The doctors told him to talk to her, that she could hear him. He could think of no words that could ease her suffering. So he simply told her how much he loved her. Words of encouragement gave hope. He read her poems and stories, sometimes the newspaper. They would spend hours listening to the radio. Every week he brought her flowers even though she hardly ever opened her eyes to see them. Each morning, at five-thirty sharp, he arrived in her room. Sitting next to her on the bed, he would slowly lift her frail body. She laid in his arms like an infant. The nurse would open up the curtains on the window. And together they would wait patiently for the sun. As it rose above the horizon, Pops would describe it to her. He would tell her how beautifully the light filled the sky and how all the shadows darted into hiding. The sun's dancing rays would fill the room and they would sit, like a parent and child, with the warm sun kissing their faces.

After dropping Pops off at the door, Felix circled the hospital parking lot for nearly forty-five minutes. Beyond frustration, he resolved to park across the street and three blocks down. As he walked back to the hospital, he began to prepare himself for what lay ahead. This was not unexpected, and yet he could not begin to comprehend the situation. He drew in a long breath of the crisp December air. He looked up at the shining sun and pulled his jacket a little closer. He could feel its heat between the gusts of wind. It was almost as if the sun pointed a finger at him. He shook away a chill and shivered.

Inside, Felix proceeded to the hospice floor and asked the nurse for

Gram's room number. He took his time going down the hall. His knees were so weak he was sure he wasn't going to make it. Something inside him kept him moving. When he finally arrived at the room, he hesitantly stood in the doorway. The curtain around the bed was partially drawn and he could not see her face. He approached the curtain and slowly pushed it aside. He caught his breath. He was sure that this was not the same Gram he knew. She lay in a pitiful state against the propped up pillows. Her arms and legs had wilted and her hair was nearly gone. All the character that once possessed her face had been replaced by sunken eyes and narrow cheeks. He bent over and kissed her forehead.

"Gram, it's me, Felix. Remember? Your grandson. I came to see you." Felix watched for some response in her face but none came.

The two spent the day at her side. Felix talked about college, how funny his roommate is and how difficult his classes and professors are. He told her how strained he felt to succeed, how he had to do well in order to keep his scholarship. Pops told jokes and they did a production of Who's On First?. At eight o'clock they decided to get some dinner. Unsure of whether or not they would return after eating, they said their good-byes. On the way home, they stopped at a little Italian restaurant just around the corner from the apartment. Pops and Felix ate in silence.

After dinner, they contemplated going back to the hospital. Felix noticed how tired Pops looked and refused to let him return. Pops protested with all his might but he surrendered to the thought of a good night's sleep. They went back to the apartment and immediately got ready for bed. Pops dozed on the couch while Felix watched the evening news. Rather than waking him again, Felix grabbed a blanket and gently laid it over him. He retired to his old room and soon fell asleep, exhausted from the long day.

Felix slept restlessly. He tossed and turned all night. He would cover himself up only to kick the blankets off again. He awoke several times. At about five o'clock he was shaken from his slumber. He sat up in bed. Silence. He rubbed his face and yawned. Crawling out of bed, he tiptoed past the couch and into the kitchen. He turned on the faucet and let it run cold. He filled a tall glass and gulped it down. As he tiptoed past the couch on his way back he realized something was wrong. He could not hear Pops

snoring. He peered over the back of the couch and pulled back the crumpled blanket. Pops wasn't there. Felix checked the bathroom and the kitchen. He searched the balcony and the stairwell. Pops was gone. Suddenly, it occurred to Felix where to look. He bolted back into the apartment. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater, grabbed his coat and the keys to Gram's car and raced out the door.

He raced down the deserted streets. Lights were just coming on in some windows. The early risers were putting on coffee in the kitchen. Felix was not surprised that there were actually parking spots, being that it was 5:15 a.m. He hurried as fast as he could up to the seventh floor. As he approached the desk, Gram's nurse rose.

"I'm so glad you're here. He's in there with her now." Felix thanked her and proceeded to her room. Being quiet so as not to let his presence be known, he slipped through the doorway. Pops was sitting on the bed holding Gram gently in his arms. He was slowly rocking her back and forth. They were waiting. Waiting for the sun.

At about 5:30, Pops leaned close to her ear and whispered, "Here it comes."

The sun peeked up from just above the tree tops. Around it was a halo of orange light. The sky was a pale crimson shade. The two watched in silence. After about five minutes the sun had risen to its perch in the sky. It bathed everything in sight with its gentle radiance. Pop's face was all aglow. Felix looked to Gram. A weak smile came to her face and for an instant she opened her eyes.

"I love you," Pops said.

Gram's eyelids slowly fell and outside a cloud blocked the sun.