

Three

By Abby White

I tried to write about my grandmother's death three times.

The first time, I tried to write about her photograph. As we set up shiva the day after Yom Kippur, I found pictures of Meema that Daddy had lain out. The glassy paper atop the pile toppled me, and I trembled into a seat on the nearby sofa. I sank into the white, dusty cushions as Meema laughed, lips her trademark shade of fluorescent pink, hair the color of sterling, framing the crinkles around her cocoa eyes. Meema was known for two looks: one of adulation, and one of disgust. This photo carried the former. She stood against a pale desert sky, sun searing the sands, but Meema lit the picture. The sun bowed and let her brighten the world.

When I saw that photograph I breathed in, out, out, in, trying to keep steady before collapsing into a lake. But I looked back at her smile, the look she always gave me, and dove into the water. It was an ocean, a warm one, not a lake after all; as I let its drops bathe me I lipped salt. A constant in and out – salt dries me, water replenishes. I set my Meema onto the stubby coffee table, sunk into the couch and cleaned myself in the ocean, hearing its droplets land in pitter-pats beside me. As the ocean seeped from my eyes, the red hue defacing my brown orbs dissipated. I came up for air from the water minutes later, with Mommy's weight familiar on the plain cushion next to me. I jerked away from her outstretched hand and ran from the beach. I didn't look back – looking would mean explaining, and explaining would mean knowing, and I had just washed that from myself.

The second time I tried to write about Meema, I thought about the call. Daddy's cell phone, encased in pink rubber for which the store sold no alternative, buzzed in his pocket as he picked apart my essay. It was my college essay, and it seemed to throb with importance, beaming with the brightness of the future it could grant me. But the phone shone through Daddy's pants pocket, and he set down my essay to answer it.

"Hey, Tom... Yeah. I was going to go down – Damn. Okay."

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I clenched.

“Okay, well if I have to come early, I will... Okay. Yeah.”

I stared at his tapping fingers.

“Love you. Let me know.”

Daddy hung up the phone and bent down, breathing the earth beneath our house’s paltry floors before he faced me. “She’s worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s just crashed. Her blood sugar, her heartbeat – everything they can measure. It’s just crashing.”

I envisioned my Meema’s innards attacking each other, battling the great war they had threatened so often before. Organs, vessels, cells crumbled upon impact and Meema’s body crashed to the ground. Her soul hovered, shocked at its own demise, unsure where to go.

I darted downstairs and found Mommy in her usual seat in the den, cozy with a mug of tea and dark green leather cushions. “Tom called,” I said, and spilled out the rest. I returned upstairs and she followed me, and we sat next to Daddy, who didn’t want to be touched.

The phone rang again, burning the room.

“Hey, Tom... Okay. Damn.”

The clock blared 10:20 p.m. when I buried my head in my hands. I tried to compress my body into a shell so I could hover with Meema, and pull her back down to the earth where she belonged.

“—We’ll talk about that later. Love you. I’ve gotta go now... I’m okay. But my daughter just lost her grandmother.”

At the confirmation I wailed, and felt warm arms around me. They lifted me up although I wished with all my might to crash down.

The third time Meema plagued my mind, I tried to write about us. I typed out vague memories about my infancy, when she let me chase her in her size-four high heels. I relived stronger memories – when I was seven years old and hated strangers, and she was my only

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relative who never made me hug her. I was young and shy and picky, but she trusted me to grow without her help. I did grow up, and began hugging her on my own accord whenever I could. The first time she asked me to hug her was a month before her death, when she thought I was in junior high and she couldn't sit up anymore. I hugged her and lifted her to wipe shit off her nightdress, and I walked her to her keyboard so she could play for me. She could not walk or bathe or eat or drink or hear or shit into a toilet, but she played "Getting to Know You" note-for-note, in perfect rhythm. Through her deafness, I sang along.

That last time Daddy and I saw her was a five-day trip. Every day we went to see Meema, still stubbornly living alone, and every day she turned us away. I'm too tired, she said, can you come later? She was always asleep later. She said this, too, the last time we saw her, the last day of our last trip to see my last grandparent. When we said we couldn't come back later, her face fell. I'm sorry, she said, I wish I could be with you, but I can't. She gave us both her love and held our hands before looking straight at me. I'll come visit you, she said, I promise. Then she fell back asleep. Daddy and I put her hands by her side, left her apartment and collapsed in the hallway, like bawling children. She always kept her word, but I knew she would not visit me.

The fourth time I wrote this, because I needed to write about her. She with the smile that outshone the sun, the revolted frown that marred her last face – she had no clue how to die. The pint-sized woman who trusted children and their naivety, who let music dance through her fingers and lips. Meema is not a photograph or a death, or even memories that traipse through my mind at inopportune moments, dunking me again into that plaguing ocean. She is all of that, a whole, a heartbeat in a vast web of lives, and she is the steady fingers that hold my hand while I quake at night.

The End

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Abby White bio: A recent graduate of Shaker Heights High School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, Abby White is recovering from four years of overworking herself -- particularly through classes and her wonderful school newspaper, The Shakerite. She adores her parents, whom she thanks for any success she achieves. Those accomplishments include awards for Abby's journalism and essays, but no published work yet. Currently, she is a rising freshman at Columbia University who hopes to study creative writing and psychology, although she is interested in literature, religion and history as well.