

A woman raised by her grandparents keeps a vigil by the hospital bed of her grandfather, remembering his kindness and love.

The Final Farewell

by Dennis Herrick



MY FIRST memory is vague, like peering through fog. I'm a little girl, not quite four, and a policewoman releases my hand and lets me run to my grandpa. I can still see him through a child's eyes, a kind giant lowering himself to one knee to greet me. He is sobbing.

It might seem strange, but that event marked the beginning of the happiest days I can remember.

My parents had died in a car wreck the night before grandpa welcomed me into his arms. My father's parents already were gone, so my mother's parents—my grandparents—set their

retirement aside and devoted the rest of their lives to raising me.

Mom and dad's photograph hung above my grandparents' fireplace mantel. I often studied the picture of those strangers. An attractive couple: she trim and smiling, he tall and with mischievous eyes. At times I could almost remember them.

Grandmother and grandpa would tell me stories about them while I was growing up, especially about my mother. And often, whether I was naughty or nice, grandpa would sigh and say, "Ah, Kathy, you're just like your mother."

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Now I'm twenty-eight years old. And all of last week, like his daughter would have done, I kept watch over him in the hospital.

On grandpa's first day, a retiree volunteering for the hospital fussed with his bed's pillow and sheets, trying to ensure everything would be right for him. She was humming Billie Holiday's "Summertime" and smiling all the time. Finally, she paused and asked him, "There, is that better?" Satisfied that he was safe, she patted him on the arm and left his bedside.

After she walked out, I told him, "She reminds me a little of grandmother."

"I was thinking the same thing." He lay in bed watching the doorway where she had disappeared. He rolled his head and looked at me. His words came slow and labored. "Of course, your grandmother would have insisted I eat some soup."

I laughed. Grandmother was convinced that chicken soup would cure anything. He and I had lost her fifteen years before, when I was a seventh-grader.

Grandpa frowned as he picked at his hospital sheets, so I tried to brighten things up.

I swept open the curtains of his hospital room window. "Look at the lake. Grandpa, you've got the first hospital room I've ever been in with an actual view. Can you see?"

"Bring me my glasses and I'll be able to."

His arms were festooned with a spaghetti of IV tubes, so I placed his glasses on his nose. He looked toward the lake and his face relaxed.

"Remember when your boat ran out of gas in the middle of a river? Grandmother scolded you for at least five minutes. Then she got another boater to tow us in. Remember how upset she was, grandpa, and how she scolded you?"

"I remember it even better than you do." He said it with a chuckle because a laugh was

beyond his strength. Then he coughed and added, “I was on the receiving end.”

“I thought it was a wonderful adventure,” I said. “When we got home, I told all my friends. And I wrote about it in my diary, but I added a few tornadoes and pirates—you know, just to make it more fun.”

Grandpa gave me a fragile smile. I imagined he was remembering my mother writing in her girlhood diary like that too, a long time ago.

He shivered. I pulled a blanket over him, found another one in the closet and covered him with that one as well, tucking it around his neck to block drafts. Why are hospital rooms so cool, I wondered? The air, the colorless walls, the smooth steel, the low conversations in the background. It all seemed forlorn.

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When I was a kid, my friends resisted bedtime like prisoners ordered back to their cells. But I considered bedtime a comfort. Grandmother would read me stories, and in those days it was grandpa who tucked me in. He and I would talk about the fun I had that day and then he would snap out the light.

As he left, he would say, “Night-night, Kathy. I’ll see you in my dreams.”

Even after I got older and put myself to bed, sometimes he would tease me with that line. Of course, by then I found it silly, not reassuring.

Later, as a newspaper’s investigative reporter, dealing with felons and would-be felons, with secretive people and their financial conspiracies, there were times at night when I yearned for the calm of grandmother’s stories and the promise of grandpa’s dreamtime reunions.

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Nurses and doctors pricked grandpa with needles, scribbled on his charts, and spoke to him in

grave tones. He had a bad heart. And at his age, past eighty-five, there was little they could do except prescribe drugs and medical vigilance. Once he stabilized, they promised, he could return to my condo where he has lived for the past three years.

I returned home every night, but I dedicated each day to keeping him company in his hospital room. Even when he'd fall asleep, I'd remain beside him reading books and magazines in the quiet time. I was the first person he saw every time he awoke.

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When we're children, grandparents are ancient as soon as we meet them. It's hard to imagine them ever being young men and women once like us, with the kinds of dreams and hopes and fears we have.

When you're raised by grandparents, who might start out sixty or so years ahead of you, it seems they could never have been young like you.

And yet, there's the photograph.

Grandpa slept through most of my visit on the fifth day. He seemed to be sleeping more and more. It's the drugs, the doctors explained, plus he's so old. I'm grateful they don't use that fearsome word, weak.

I took the World War II-era photograph out of my purse. It showed a handsome young rogue in a sailor's uniform with his cap cocked at an angle.

In the room beyond the photo, grandpa's frail form was a mound under the hospital's blankets, his chest rising and falling with each breath as he slept. Tubes snaked to his liver-spotted, bony hands, and the skin on his face looked like thin paper in the fluorescent light. His white hair curved like wisps of smoke over his head.

I lifted the photograph and pushed it out to arm's length. As I looked, I used the photo of

the sailor's face to cover grandpa's face in the bed—the young man's face superimposed on the old man's body. The same man.

The grin on the sailor's confident face was the same grin I have always known on grandpa's face, even though six decades separate them. It struck me that I was older than the man in the picture. Either I was falling into the past or grandpa was advancing into the future as I held the photo between us.

* * *

When grandpa awoke on the sixth day, I was there waiting for him. I teased him about ignoring me the day before.

“You slept the whole time, grandpa. I missed nagging you about forgetting your pills.”

He managed to turn his face toward me, and there was that sailor's grin again. Feeble now, certainly, but still with a swagger.

“You can nag me now.” His voice sounded raspy from sleep and drugs.

I had to lean forward to hear him. I held one of his hands with both of mine. I caressed the back of his hand.

I smiled at him. “You're a tough old buzzard.”

“Don't talk about buzzards here. Bad luck.” He winked.

“I was looking at an old Navy picture of you yesterday.” I lifted the photo from my lap and held it before him.

He moved his eyes to look at it, too drained to move his head again.

“You know, even I was young once.” He said it as if he didn't expect me to believe him. His eyes looked away.

“You've always been young at heart to me, grandpa.”

“That war. I never expected—”

He closed his eyes and then opened them again.

“—to survive that.”

“Thank goodness, you did, grandpa. You were able to raise me.”

“And now you’re taking care of me.” He sighed.

We spent the next hour with me reminiscing about our twenty-four years together. Grandpa just listened until he dozed off. Grandpa always had done his best to be a regular dad for me. We’d ride bikes together, but as I got stronger he got out of breath faster. He never missed any of my high school and college volleyball games—a gray old man in a gallery of middle-aged parents. He helped me move into my first apartment, but he had to rest after each box he carried. He did everything for me that any dad would do. Just slower, that’s all.

I remembered these things for both of us, talking quietly, the beeps and ticks and hisses of the hospital room filling the pauses.

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There’s laughter tickling the years. I dreamed that night about grandpa playing board games with me, joking at restaurants, laughing at movies, taking me for boat rides, and car rides, and roller coaster rides, and once even a balloon ride as we soared above the Earth, marveling at the scenery as we drifted like a cloud. I was pointing down, laughing. A flock of sparrows were fluttering along, but they were flying below us.

Grandpa and I were walking along a beach. Our heads touched as we sat together at a table pondering school lessons I’d forgotten a day earlier and he had forgotten more than half a century before. We held hands as we walked to my kindergarten class. We cried together at grandmother’s funeral. We celebrated my graduation from college.

But the final day had to come. Now that day seems hidden behind a mist of time. A nurse rose to meet me in grandpa's room, her figure stark against the white walls. She told me he had suffered another attack during the night and had fallen into a coma. I pulled a chair next to his bed. I smoothed the old man's hair as I would pet a kitten.

When his heart surrendered an hour later, the nurse returned and stood with me. She hugged me until I stopped shuddering with sobs and could stand there with just the tears marking his passage.

It was time to move on, as grandpa always used to say.

I paused at the doorway and looked back. I was a sharp-edged reporter, but now I felt like a small girl again, alone and unsure of the future. This time I had no one to run to.

It was then, at that point of vulnerability, I understood.

“Goodbye, grandpa,” I whispered. “I’ll see you in my dreams.”

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From the author:

I hope you enjoyed this story. If you have any questions or comments about it, you are welcome to contact me by going to my author's website at dennisherrick.com, where you will find my current email address, bio, and other writing projects.

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- [The Woman with a Rain Pot](#) (5,300 words, this story is dedicated to the combat veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.) An Iraq veteran who sacrificed a leg for his country returns, becomes a detective, and sets out to find the killer in a year-old cold case.
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in history led America's first Indian war—the Tiguex War—against Coronado's expedition to the Southwest in 1540.

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- [It Only Cost Two Teeth](#) (11,500 words, too long for most short story contests and magazines) A humorous mystery involving an eccentric newspaper columnist.
- [Missing](#) (2,450 words, winner of the 2010 Society of Southwestern Authors Writing Contest and published in *Story Teller* magazine.) A Pueblo elder with cancer chooses to live out his final days in the mountains instead of a hospital.
- [Spirit Journey](#) (5,900 words, published in the *Wapsipinicon Almanac* literary magazine) Based in Iowa, the story deals with today's illicit trade in Indian artifacts looted from Indian and public lands.
- [Hunting Season](#) (2,500 words, winner of the 2004 Tony Hillerman Mystery Writing Contest and published in *Cowboys and Indians* magazine.) Was the Pueblo hunter's death an accident or was it murder?
- [Woman Without a Name](#) (8,000 words) The refurbishment of the B61 nuclear bomb draws spies to Los Alamos, New Mexico. When a National Security Agent is killed, a woman NSA agent is sent to find out what happened and to stop nuclear secrets from being stolen.
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- [To Steal What Is Sacred](#) (3,950 words) An ancient katsina mask sacred to the Puebloan religion is stolen from a museum. An Albuquerque police detective from the Acoma tribe is assigned in this short story mystery to find the person who killed a museum guard in the robbery and took the mask.

BOOKS (forthcoming)

- ***Esteban: The African Slave Who Explored America*** (in-progress nonfiction) The true adventures of an African slave who crossed the continent in a 1528-1536 odyssey, and who guided the first Spanish exploration north into Arizona and New Mexico in 1539.

BOOKS (published)

- [Winter of the Metal People: The untold story of America's first Indian war](#) (historical novel) This book presents the first account of Coronado's Tiguex War of 1540-41 written from the Puebloan point of view. It follows a young Pueblo warrior who reluctantly takes leadership of his people in a time of crisis, overcoming self-doubt to lead Puebloans in successful guerilla warfare against Spanish conquistadors and their Aztec allies. Available as an ebook or paperback.
- [A Brother's Cold Case](#) (mystery novel) When the murder of Andy Cornell's brother is still unsolved after two and a half years, Andy enters the hidden worlds of cartel violence, street people, and Pueblo secrets to find justice. This is available as an e-book or as a paperback.
- [War of the Planet Burners](#) (science-fiction novel) Aliens from an unknown planet have suppressed Earth's electrical ability and killed 99.96 percent of the population. Fires ravage Earth and plant growth accelerates. But humanity wouldn't give up. How can humans without electronics or nuclear capability fight back? Combat veteran Joel Birchard inspires a diminished military with his determination.
- [Farewell to the Master](#) — Reprint of the 1940 sci-fi first-contact novel by Harry Bates with my new

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- [*Guest Bedroom: Collected Stories*](#) (245 pages) Perfect for putting in your guest bedroom, this book is a collection of short stories that your friends can read a little at a time. In the book they'll meet detectives, American Indians, heroes, villains, and ordinary people striving to solve life's problems.
- [*Pueblo Mysteries*](#) (56 pages) A collection of four short stories available as an e-book or as a paperback: *Hunting Season*, *Missing*, *The Ancestor*, and *The Woman With a Rain Pot*. This is available as an e-book or as a paperback.
- [*Successful e-Publishing for Authors*](#) (e-book only) Written by an author for other authors, this book provides numerous tips and links to help writers who are new to publishing e-books or self-publishing paperbacks.
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- [*Media Management in the Age of Giants: Business Dynamics of Journalism*](#) (textbook, second edition) Okay, you're probably not going to be interested in this unless you're a college journalism student. It's a book about the takeover of local media by corporate conglomerates with tips for beginning managers on how to deal with the new face of media. Available as e-book or paperback.

—Dennis Herrick