

Portrait of a Sunday Afternoon

by Ann-Marie Martino

Your grandmother has gotten old, in that way where one day you wake up, and you realize that someone you've been looking at your whole life suddenly looks different. Those hands which used to gently place band-aids on scraped knees are furrowed with lines and painted with veins, and how is it that you never noticed the metamorphosis?

Her house now carries with it the faint timbre of a tomb, and each time you step over the threshold, you're reminded of the cool, clinical halls of a nursing home, where sickness and death are prevalent and the only thing a person can do to stave it off is be present.

Which is why when your uncle asked you if you could stay with her some afternoons, you agreed. It wasn't too much of an imposition, and now, sitting upstairs in the room you spent so much time playing in as a child, the air is so still you're almost afraid to breathe.

Downstairs, in a room that used to be a living area but has been rearranged into what is, essentially, a sickroom, your grandmother is probably asleep. She falls asleep with her hands crossed over her chest, closes blue-veined, crinkled-paper eyelids and drifts off just like that, as if her soul is already gone, her body continuing on autopilot.

Daydreaming, the sun shining with the bright essence of summer, you arrange the dust motes into patterns only you can see. Heat seeps through the pane and into the room, bringing back

memories of nights spent restless in this very bed, unable to sleep from the oppressive heat.

Because the baby monitor is silent, the buzz of a fly beating its wings against the glass of the window disrupts your reverie.

There was a time when this room was filled with the happy, carefree energy of children playing, but the cobweb stretched across the corner near the door—thin and nearly invisible except for the slight breeze from the central air that keeps causing it to puff forwards, then drift back—belies that time.

The curtains are old, yellowed and frayed. The room itself feels faded, as if the years are causing it to slip away.

You close your laptop lid. It's mid-afternoon and you expect to be here at least another three hours, and if your grandmother is asleep, there's not much for you to do.

You set the laptop on a little table by the bed, turn the alarm clock with its large red numbers towards you and set it for ten minutes.

When it blares at you, you'll open your eyes and listen, intently, to see if she's woken up.

When she hasn't, as is often the case, you'll push the snooze button and allow yourself to close your eyes for another ten minutes.

Sometimes the entire afternoon passes this way.

Today, when you lie back, the ceiling looks jittery, as if your eyes don't want to focus.

Beneath your head, the pillows are piled up as best you can to

be comfortable enough to rest. The pillow cradling your head is extraordinarily soft where it touches your cheeks.

Under your body, the blanket is one of those bedspreads that is faintly coarse, like cheap motels sometimes use. When you move, it makes a scratchy, fretful noise, and if you aren't careful, your fingernails catch in the fabric.

Today, the silence is so oppressive that it feels like pressure on your eyes, your head.

Why the peacefulness has been disturbed, you don't know. Where it's gone—you don't know that, either.

You don't sleep. You don't coast away on dreams. You simply lie there, trying to force relaxation, but instead there is only anxiety juddering your bones.

What is it? Is there something wrong downstairs, creeping up and permeating everything until it makes you shudder?

With this distressing thought in mind, you throw your legs over the side of the bed and find your shoes.

Walking gingerly down the carpeted stairs, you avoid certain spots because of how badly they creak.

The central air doesn't cool very well and the house is brick on the outside, so between nerves and caution, your forehead is damp and the backs of your knees are as well—you rub your hands on your shorts to dispel the perspiration.

In the distance, you can hear cars cruising down the road in front of the house; there's the chatter of children playing down the street.

Even though your ears pick up the ambient sounds, you're focused within the house.

Is she breathing? Is this the day you tiptoe down the stairs to avoid waking her, and it turns out to be unnecessary?

The thought terrifies you. You like this 'job', if it can be called that; you don't mind making sure she doesn't fall on her way to the bathroom, or making the tea that she likes.

At lunchtime, you make sandwiches for yourself and your grandmother; it reminds you of the sandwiches you used to eat at the beach.

Still, always scritchng at the back of your mind is the concern that, one day, you'll find her lying with her hands folded on her chest, but they won't be moving from the gentle compression and expansion of her breathing anymore.

When you sidle into the room, her eyes are open, directed towards the ceiling, which is pebbled and cream-colored. It creeps you out a little, that staring.

The walls are light green, and the door you're slipping through is white, with a full-glass insert and secured white curtains that are dusted with grime from the floor.

You clean, too, but somehow it's always dirty again. It's as if the dust and dirt hide from you when you break out the dust mop, and then sneakily return the moment you're not looking.

Which is fanciful and stupid, of course. Dirt and dust are not sentient, no matter how they seem to collect in every single crevice where you wish they wouldn't.

There's a sticky trail of what is probably spilled tea on the floor by the bed; you know you didn't spill it, but you didn't hear her get up, either.

And following the sweet, sugared beverage is a little train of ants.

You smother a sigh, because if your grandmother is asleep (and not dead, you tell yourself firmly, not dead so don't even think it) you don't want to wake her.

The vacuum would wake her, but something still has to be done about the ants.

In the end, though it's tedious and you feel a little guilty, you find yourself with a few tissues, snuffing the life out of them one by one.

You pick up the carcasses in the tissues and toss them, then sponge up the tea.

You know it's inevitable that you have to check on her, but your body doesn't want to move that way and your mind won't settle on it for long, either.

Every time you get close to the uncomfortable thought, your mind shies away like a butterfly from a child's net.

You remember those days, too: long stretches at the beach where time never seemed to pass at all, chasing butterflies through a wild field of grass that edged the sand.

You recall when your grandmother would make the trip with you and your family as children, and sit beneath the umbrella with a

wide-brimmed hat on, her hands folded in her lap, staring off into the blue vastness of the sky as if it held the answers she sought.

In those days, she was generally lucid. She was coherent enough to carry on a conversation without repeating herself, and she seemed to enjoy the outside air, the breeze that blew in off the ocean carrying with it the hint of salt. Sometimes she'd even take off her shoes and wiggle her toes in the sand.

She liked spending time with all of you—you and your little brother, your mom and your dad.

Back then, you enjoyed the time with her, too; much more than you're able to now. You loved the visits to her house to play with your younger cousin, the moments in her house where you felt safe and protected. Now she's half-gone, lost in a place that exists in her mind: a place where you can't go and she can't bear to leave.

You finally turn to the bed. You lean in close to watch her chest, and as you do you remember teaching your little brother how to catch crabs in the tidepools as your grandmother taught your mother to crochet.

Those days are long gone. You had been a child and if you went to stay at your grandmother's house, she watched you.

Now you watch her, ears tuned for her breath, eyes going blurry and unfocused as you hope her body will shift with her breathing.

Worry skitters in close, invading the space of your sanity—like those little crabs used to do when they'd scuttle sideways on your hands as you held them out to your little brother.

He was always gentle with the crabs, and he said a personal

good-bye to each one as he freed them from their bucket-prison at the end of each beach day.

But the butterflies—he didn't understand how fragile they were. He would try to pick them up and accidentally crush their wings, which was why you so often let them remain free—the fun was in the chase, anyway.

Such is life.

Except this life, lying nearly motionless in front of you. This life is sapped and winging away ever so gradually each day.

There is no chase left in your grandmother. No vitality, no hope.

While you can make turkey sandwiches with cheese and mayonnaise, and pour her tea, sit with her while she's awake—you can't bring back that hope, that spark of life that used to fill her up.

Maybe that's the truth of why you come here. Maybe the mirror of your own intentions reflects back at you: you come and stay not because she might trip on her way to the bathroom.

Not because she needs the floors cleaned, ants killed, or lunch made.

Not even because you think she'd want someone with her when she does die, though you hope it's not you.

No, there's still the hope that you can bring her back from the edge, that place where she hovers as if she knows she's not allowed to let go, yet she's not willing to stay, either.

A car peels past the house, and the sun catches the glossy

finish of the paint and refracts rainbows all along the wall across from you.

It's beautiful, the way your grandmother used to be.

But it's already gone by the time the sound of its tires registers in your ears.

You close your eyes and kneel on the floor, your hands flat on the mattress. You're not praying, though it probably looks that way.

You're actually sketching out the image of the beach in your mind: the glittering ocean; the sun hot on the back of your neck and the sand gritty and scalding the bottoms of your feet; the air inside the beach cottage nearly as warm by the time you get home, browned and sandy, perfectly ready to take a shower.

Your mom made you shower in the outside stall first—the water freezing and immediately dissipating the last of the summer heat—before you could come inside and have a second shower, this one warm and filled with the fruity scents of your soap and shampoo.

In those days, you'd always let your grandmother go first, rinse away the sand on her feet, the sting of the salt from the ocean-air on her skin.

You'd lie awake at night in the bedroom you shared with your little brother, and you'd breathe in the scent of the coast and memorize it so that, years later, you can still conjure it up as if it's tickling just beneath your nose. You do it now, because it's soothing in a situation that is the furthest thing from comforting: How it felt to climb into one of the twin beds; how you and your brother whispered jokes and silliness to each other until your mom would scold you for keeping your grandmother awake.

Buried within those memories is how you took care of each other back then—when your brother saw little congregations of ants in the beach cottage, you killed them for him, much like you've done for your grandmother today.

He'd always been afraid of them—and even though you knew that (even though you would protect him from real ones)—as a child you couldn't resist the opportunity to shove a pile of plastic ants under his pillow while he slept.

He'd screamed—waking your grandmother—and refused to share a room with you after that. In spite of your childish pranks, though, when a spider crawled down the wall in the room where you slept, he always crushed it for you.

He's always had more courage than you have, and you wish he were here right now so you won't be alone if, when you open your eyes, your grandmother is no longer lingering in that no man's land.

But he's away at college, and your mom's at work and your dad's at work and it's just you, so you screw up your courage and open your eyes.

It might be unkind to wake her if she's only sleeping, but just as you reach out a trembling hand, she takes a sharp breath and her hands fall ever so slightly apart.

Now you pray.

