Prairie Flowers

by Antonia Malchik

Mom turned into the graveled hilltop parking lot facing the usual gray skyline made ragged by the Rockies.

"Could you carry this?" She handed me her purse and dug in the car for her hat. Irritation rose, as it always did, at the way she rooted through her piles of roadside geology books and sketchpads and fishing tackle, but I bit my tongue.

"Grandpa'll be glad to see you," she said. Reluctance made her voice sound pinched.

A mixture of bad light and drab green carpeting kept Grandpa's room gloomy, despite the "cheerful environment" the home had boasted to my mother the month before. Grandpa was lying in bed reading a travel guide on New Zealand. He was always reading. As a kid he had run away from the family farm and shoveled coal back East to put himself through college. Now he was just another old man in a nursing home, desperate for a drink, his blue eyes bleary, a sticky goo filming at the corners of his lips.

He heard us come in. "Well," was his usual greeting. "And how are you? Letta? Pat?" He smiled at both of us, glad, as he always was initially, to have company.

"Fine, Grandpa." I kissed him on the cheek. "How are you doing? How's the book?"

"Well," and here his Eastern Montanan accent crept in, the one that made his 'well' sound like 'wee-ell.' He watched my mom set her stuff down on a chair. She dug in her purse and put on Chapstick. Pushing himself up on his pillows, Grandpa said, "Good. There were some things I missed when I went to New Zealand." He had flown around the country in a small aircraft five years before.

"Really?" said my mom. "Are you thinking of going back, Dad?" Her tired voice forced a cheeriness that neared on the nurses' condescension. She straightened his toiletry items on the cupboard next to the window.

“No. Don't think I can afford it again.” He looked at the wall as he said it.

“Reading anything else, Grandpa?” I asked him. “Professor Humbert was asking about you.” Humbert was a history professor at the university where I was taking math classes to supplement what my high school offered. Grandpa had taken a couple of classes with him in the past few years, but couldn't knock off the bottle long enough to finish the Master's degree he'd started.

“That nincompoop. He wouldn't understand Talleyrand if the prince came and shook him by the hand. I can read for myself.” Grandpa's resonant voice drove through rooms as if he were shouting. I never knew whether it was the voice God gave him, or whether it grew that way from years of working around the wheat combine on the ranch. It always gave my mother a headache. She winced, but didn't tell him to quiet down this time.

“True,” I said, and couldn't think of anything else. I didn't know anything about Talleyrand. “How are they treating you here?” I asked an instant before I realized it was the wrong question.

“It could be worse,” he said, looking at my mother, “but for what I'm paying it could be a lot better.” Her arms gripped each other as if she were bracing herself in a wind. “The food is terrible, the nurses are dirty, the view is ugly,” here he waved toward the window, which, rather than being pointed at the mountains, showed an active gravel pit and the parking lot, “and someone else is forking over my money so I can live in this dump.”

“Dad,” she interrupted. She was trying to be calm, her voice even. “Dad, I haven't done anything with your money. I'm not interested in it. Neither is Pat.” But he kept talking, right over her. It was an inherited habit she often indulged in: neither of them listened to others.

“You all just want a piece of the money. Well, you aren't gonna get it. Not one cent.”

“I know that, Dad. We didn't come for your money. We don't expect your money. You've made damn sure of that.” Anger seeped into her voice now, frustration at having the same argument with the

same brick wall, more tension burrowing into her narrow shoulders.

I sat on a chair, frumpy in my down winter coat.

“All you want is the money. That's all you've ever wanted. I'll make sure you can't get anymore.”

“Dad—”

“Well, I don't want to hear it. You've already stolen it all, so you might as well keep it.”

“Dad—”

“I suppose you've come here to ask where the rest of it is, eh? You know where it is, since you've been stealing it anyway.”

“*Dad*, I'm not trying to—”

“Well, there's no need for you to shout.”

“I'm not shouting, Dad. I'm trying to get a word in edgewise.”

They argued like this every week, until a nurse came in to change the sheets, or give Grandpa food or pills, or do whatever it was the nurses did each of the hundred times they came into the room during the day. Grandpa said he had no privacy, and I could well believe it.

I never had anything to say. Grandpa lived in a trailer and existed on canned soup and tequila. What money?

“Dad, I never wanted your money. All I wanted was for you to keep the farm.” My mother was close to his bed and her voice choked. “I just wanted a little piece of the farm. So I could go back home, to the prairie. Someday.” I waited in the tiny pause that followed, seeing if he would respond, and he might have if she hadn't added, “But you sold it all and made damn sure I couldn't have any of it, didn't you.”

The nurse came in. I excused myself to the bathroom. Instead of going back to the room, I wandered around the halls until my mother came out looking older than usual.

“You talk to him,” she said. “I'll be in the car.”

I went into the room and stood with my back to the window and my hands in my pockets. Grandpa asked how my math was going. Fine, I said. I'm applying to UW and I've sent them some of the research I did at that math camp last summer. They say they'll let

me do the higher-level classes. Oh? Are you going to leave them in the dust? I'm working on it. Well, keep working at it. I will. Bye, Grandpa. Yup.

Outside, my nose stung with winter. Mom was standing near the car looking out at the mountains. She took deep breaths, as I did, to clear a sluggish-feeling mind.

“Coffee?” was all I said.

She nodded at the mountains. “Coffee sounds good.”