

Blue Eyes

I remember walking down the halls of the nursing home. I remember the linoleum floors. I hate linoleum floors. I hate the way the light reflects off of them. The whole place smelled of sickness and old people. I remember how my mom looked at me to see if I was alright. I wasn't, but I tried for a smile and nodded to her. Tuesday night we had gotten a phone call from my aunt saying that my grandfather had had a stroke, so on Saturday we flew down to stifling heat of Louisiana to visit him.

His door was marked with two names printed on labels that were easily removable. Woodzay Vining and Ava Vining they read. Inside the ill-lighted room were two beds, horrible wallpaper, and a TV with the LSU football game playing. I looked around the room and decided that I hated the wallpaper as much as I hated the linoleum floors. The flowered wallpaper was in dead shades of green and pink interspersed with winding vines of dark-colored leaves. I stepped closer to the wall to study a picture hanging on it while my dad spoke softly to my aunt. The picture was of my great-grandfather and my grandfather when he was a boy. I remember looking at that boy in the picture and comparing him with the ailing man in front of me. The boy in the picture wore overalls and had strong arms. The man in front of me wore a white A-shirt stained with remnants of past meals on it, and his skin hung depressingly off of his bruised arms. "He's on blood thinners," my aunt explained when she caught me staring. I mumbled a response, but continued to look at his black and yellow arms. Finally I met his eyes and introduced myself in case the dementia had wiped me from his memory. It hadn't. Pawpaw gave me a toothy grin and pointed to a picture on his bedside table. I picked up the dusty frame and looked at the girl in the picture. She had my blue eyes and the wide toothy grin of the man in front of me. It was a

younger me frozen in a happier time that was grinning back at me. I set the picture down and smiled back at him, tears prickling in my eyes. Then came the orderly, a tray of bland food carried carelessly in her hands. She went about her duties briskly, some milk spilling when she removed the lid of the cup, the plate sliding around the plastic tray. My aunt nodded to us, and we left my grandfather in the room with the orderly, TV still on.

The walk to the dining room wasn't far at all. The same linoleum floors mark our way there. Walking into the room, I remember thinking it could have been a living cemetery. The people in the room were alive, but they might as well have been dead for all that they noticed about their surroundings. I looked for my grandmother. She had never been a particularly hefty woman, but now she was nothing but skin and bones. I almost didn't recognize her. "She hasn't been eating," I heard my dad whisper to my mom, "she's down to 90 lbs." I didn't need to turn around to know the look that would be on my mom's face as she watched me study my grandmother. I watched as Mawmaw sat at a table, picking at a fuzzy pink sweater with rhinestones on it. Her slate gray hair was standing up wildly on her head, like someone had charged the thinning strands with electricity. Her eyes struck me. There was no light in them, no semblance that she even knew she was alive. I walked over, trying to delay the moment when she would look at me and not know who I was. I knelt at her side and looked at my mother for reassurance. A small nod and a comforting smile. "Mawmaw, it's me, Caroline, your granddaughter," I half whispered. No reaction. My father knelt down at my side. I looked on as he took the slender hand of his unresponsive mother in his own callused one. "Common ça va?" he asked her with what little of her native French she had taught him all those years ago. No

response. He tapped her nose. An owlish blink and then nothing. “Try speaking to her,” he urged me.

So I started talking. First in English, then in French. I tried to get her to focus on her son who knelt before her, or on me. I tried to get her to remember. I couldn't. I tried talking about the things around her. I spoke of the colors of the sweater in her hands, of how the rhinestones sparkled. I spoke of the weather and how hot it was in Louisiana. “Do you mind the heat?” I asked. I spoke to her of the things I loved. She looked at me. I told her how blue the sky was outside, of how I loved the stars at night. “Do you love the stars at night? Don't they look like the jewels on your sweater?” I asked. She blinked and looked at the sweater in her hands. Then I pointed to my father's eyes “Blue, like mine you see? Blue like yours.” She looked at him. There was a glimmer of recognition in her eyes, and the left side of her mouth went up as she attempted to smile. I remember how Mawmaw's eye twitched as she smiled, the blue iris wavering. As I knelt there, she reached out with a shaking hand that grew steady as she held my face. My vision blurred with tears as I focused on the blue eyes that were so similar to my own. Perhaps she did not truly know who I was, but I know that there was some part of her that recognized me. Some feeling that called to her to remember me. Mawmaw looked at my mother, her own eyes watery with unshed tears. “My mother,” I explained, “Isn't she beautiful?” The recognition faded, and the moment was gone, but it had been there. I sat back as my father tried to get her attention. He tapped her nose, ruffled her hair. Dad picked up the spoon that the orderly had discarded and fed his mother, slowly and patiently. I watched as the roles of nature were reversed. A son feeding his mother like she was an infant. When he was done, she took his left hand and played with the

shiny wedding band. She looked at my mother again. “She’s his wife. She’s my mother,” I explained again, still in French.

The goodbye was hard. I still knelt at Mawmaw’s side, holding her hand in my own, talking about things that I can no longer remember. The orderly picked up the spoon, impatient to continue her job and return home after a long day. Sentimentality had no place in the cafeteria. It was my cue, and I slowly got up to go. I was reluctant to let go of my grandmother’s hand, and it seemed she was too. “Mawmaw, I have to go,” I told her, trying to pry my hand gently away from her own. Her bird-like frame was deceptively strong. She did not look at me, but neither did she make any move to release my hand. In the end, I was the one who pulled away, urged by the orderly and my mom walking away. I can’t remember if I looked back. I hope I did.