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EN 111: Imitative Non-Fiction

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My Tile Floor

All I saw was her small grey frame shattered against my bathroom floor. Face down, no arms up to brace herself—the aftermath of what happens when frail bones meet hard ground. She was turning to put on her lipstick of all things and fell over. The sink was hissing cold water; no sunlight was coming in through the open window. The AC vent was chilling the white floor tile upon which she laid. My mom rushed in: “Wipe up the blood so I can see where she’s hurt.” I snatched at the closest roll of toilet paper on the floor and swept up as much as I could. It smelt sickeningly like warm iron and had pooled all around her. “What hurts Nan? What hurts?” My mom wrapped her arms around Nan’s waist and scooped her onto her feet in one heave. We used the cold water from the sink to clean her face. She gurgled out some sounds but nothing I could understand.

I said, “What hurts? Can you hear me? What happened? What hurts?”

Nan said, “My nose.”

She always had a bit of a hooked nose. For as long as I can remember, her graying skin had crackled into thick drapes that hung into jowls and her slanted eyes were a watered-down blue. But gravity and my cold tile floor had flattened her nose, and her eyes became sunken to the point where they were barely slits between drapes on her bruised face. “I’m fine! I don’t want to go to the hospital!” she yelled. She started to tilt backwards when I caught her and held her close.

Holding- *verb* 1) to support in a position or stop from falling; to take the weight of: to support; 2) action placed on a captive or executed by a captor.¹

In almost every picture I have of my grandma, she's holding someone. I have pictures of her cradling me in one arm looking down and getting a kick out of how there was finally another baby in the family. She was wearing a bright sweater with a small towel on her shoulder. She had wrapped me in a white blanket. Her cheeks had a pink glow to them back then and those pale eyes were upturned in a smile. I can hear her wheezing out a laugh. I also have pictures that predate color of her in a black polka dot housewife dress, standing proud with her first baby daughter perched within her one arm. Here, her high cheekbones are outlined in rouge and I can see her hair was once a dark auburn before it washed away into that greyish silver I have always known it to be. As she looked down and started to smile, her hooked nose resembled that of an arrowhead.

"Mom, hand me a towel so I can stop her nose from bleeding!" Mom handed me a bath towel and I half walked, half carried Nan to the closest chair. I had her in one arm, propping her up around her waist and held the towel below her nose so she wouldn't be covered in her own blood. She barely moved her feet and slouched on me as if she wanted not to fall, but for gravity to somehow work in reverse and let her float away. She wheezed through her mouth and barely moved as I nestled her into the front seat of the car to go to Saint Joe's. I rode behind her with one arm out to help her with the towel. My mom turned the radio off.

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Tomb- *noun* associated with mourning and grief. 1) An enclosed space below or above ground that houses a burial and/or commemoration of the deceased, place of worship or remembrance.²

Nan and I declared fine the songs by Randy Travis: “Forever and Ever Amen” and “Digging Up Bones.” We’d always listen to those two songs at her house. She hates most all forms of music besides Christmas melodies and a select few country artists- Randy Travis being on the short list. We’d sit at her dining room table and she’d tap her foot till the lyrics got to “and I’ll love you when your brown hair turns grey” when she’d yell “Bullshit!” For weeks at a time I would be driven to Nan’s back-woodsy neighborhood, down the long dirt road with potholes so big they would crack the windshield and scratch whatever CD you had in the player. I really had no other place to go when my parents were working and it was easier on everyone if I lived with her periodically. She would cook up pancakes and eggs for breakfast and I would concoct dinner and we’d take turns cooking lunch. She always went for the turkey TV dinners that had been in the freezer since ’95. They smelled like burnt plastic when they were put in the microwave and I swear the mashed potatoes in them looked like plaster that could patch drywall. She’d offer me one and I’d politely decline with a “No thanks, I’ll just make some toast.” Her kitchen was the only happy room of the house she and her husband built in the mid 40’s. Fake flowers, bland spices and a thick layer of dust seeped into the carpet and onto the plastic blinds. She had those horribly tacky plastic blinds that you find in the standard grandma’s house, hers always slammed closed casting linear shadows everywhere. A dark must had taken over every square inch of her

² Merriam-Webster Dictionary

house and that smell would linger in your nose for days after you visited. I couldn't tell you when exactly her home turned into a tomb for her but she liked it that way.

Depression- psychological &/or a physiological disorder; the imbalance of hormones in the brain that create feelings of dread, despair, exasperation or commonly negative emotions; a seeming detachment from life. (Related) *Manic depression*: commonly known depression with sporadic transitions to feelings of happiness and elation with no set cause.³

Lying on the hospital bed, she seemed mummified. She would say "I'm so cold. I'm so cold" under her breath and I would run into the hallway and try to find the rolling cart that held the heated blankets. I'd grab two and then run back to the room and wrap her with the lukewarm and thin sheets until she sighed with relief. We waited in that room and many more cold white rooms for around eight hours. A man in a lab coat wearing a nametag came in and said she had broken her neck as well as her right arm and that she was lucky that she wasn't paralyzed. He acted happy with himself on how he was trying to seem like he cared. He put a plastic brace around her neck and said we'd have to wait for someone else to come in and then wait for that guy's specialist to come in and then wait for the specialist's team to come in and then maybe she'd be in an actual admitted room by early the next morning and then they could give her pain killers. Her face was twisted in a disembodied type of agony the entire time. At one point they flattened her bed out so she wouldn't put any pressure on her neck. Since she couldn't lift her head, she couldn't see my mom or me and reverted to crying out how she was so alone. "We're

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

right here Nan, it's gonna be okay. Don't cry. I'm sorry you have to go through this, please just hang on." She'd say "Why me? Why me? Why did this happen to me?" Her bruised eyes leaked out tears. The whole room seemed to be crying in a sterile kind of way—tears not from the sting of physical pain but from being in a realm she didn't want to be in anymore. "Just let me die, I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go home." She had chosen to live in a tomb decades before my bathroom floor and that hospital room. She had been saying how she wanted to die ever since I could remember. My sympathy became mixed with frustration and anger at some point hearing her moan and wish for death again. "You have family and loved ones that are still here Nan, don't think like that" was the only thing I could think of saying besides trying to physically shake life back into her. She stuck out her bottom jowl and admitted a groaning "No! No! No! No!" that snapped at me. This world is not the one she wants to be in and she still makes that clear today.

"No!" Nan yelled as we leaned over a pot on her electric stove. "Yuh add the cornstarch after the blackberries so it makes a thicka' syrup, not before." Blackberry dumplings are my Nan's specialty. They tend to be a bit gritty—a lot like Nan: a mix of bitter and hard seeds and delightfully sweet syrup. "Now keep stir'n until I get the sugar. Don't burn those sweet little hands," she said as she gave my arm a little nudge with the spoon and smiled. It was dark outside and it was dark in her dusty kitchen except for one light over the stove that illuminated enough to encompass Nan, me, and that pot of blackberry dumplings. The yellowish light reflected into the pot of syrup that bubbled off a sweet smelling steam. The warm aroma distracted from the musty stench that lingered and lurched through the rest of the house.

Someone down the hall had opened up a honey bun from one of the vending machines and the sweetness wafted into the room as they walked by the open door. I leaned next to the bed under the night-light that was attached to the headboard. It was enough to glow in the circumference around Nan, me, and the bed. “Do you want some ice chips Nan?” She had finally been admitted into a room on the top floor and had been given a morphine IV. We could finally leave the chaos of the freezing white rooms downstairs behind. Nan opened her mouth and I placed two small ice cubes on her tongue for her to swallow. She turned her left eye to look at me and asked where I had been this whole time.

I said, “I’ve been with you this whole time Nan. Remember?”

She replied in a flat, “No. I don’t.”

“I do have to leave soon though, it’s almost 2 am.”

“Fine! Leave! Everyone leaves me,” she said.

I couldn’t blame her for not wanting to be alone. “Nan that’s not true, I love you and I’ll talk to you in the morning.” I leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek and started to walk out. Her heart monitor beeped steadily and she let her pale eyes close. She murmured, “Love you, talk to you in the morning.” I looked back and could see some of the color return to her cheeks.

Somewhere in that tomb she still finds a reason to live. I walked out and I talked to her in the morning.

