

Wider

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I slide my arms around my grandmother. I lift her up and out of her chair. Her naked body is warm and soft and heavy. Hugs between us have changed since the stroke, since the amputation, since the wheelchair. No longer simple embraces, they are hunched over gestures where plastic and metal and handles and wheels create distance. I swing her on her good leg, her only leg, and her nails dig into my back.

“I’ve got you, Jama,” I say. I stiffen, my bones made of iron and blood like mercury, and sit her on the plastic gray shower chair. I push Jama’s wheelchair backwards toward the door of the long bathroom. The room is narrow like a hallway, the toilet and small bathtub like afterthoughts against the double vanity with wooden cabinets and rose-colored walls.

I turn on the water. It spurts out of the handheld showerhead. “Is that okay? Is it too hot? Too cold?” I never remember to ask her one question at a time. “Is the water warm enough?”

Jama nods. Her brown eyes, trusting and bright, contradict the rest of her face. Her lips are pulled tight across her round face in a straight, thin line. Her left arm is drawn across her flat, yellow breasts and her right arm clutches the side of the shower chair desperately.

I lean over the rim of the tub to rinse her. I massage her skin. Her muscles are hard, tendons stretched taut. I start to sing.

“Papa was a rolling stone. Where ever he laid his hat was his home...” I time the song with the soft circles I make with my hand. I lather her leg, stump and thighs with a yellow bar of Dial.

“And when he died,” Jama chimes in; her voice scratchy and ancient like an old record. “All he left us was alone.” Her chubby cheeks rise toward her eyes and she looks cherub-like.

I continue washing her; now with a silky, pink bar of Caress. Rubbing soap across her breasts and shoulders and asking her, timidly

at first, to open her legs for me always seems intrusive.

“A little bit wider, Jama,” I ask, embarrassed, though this intrusion is not mine to claim.

She opens her legs. I wash her gently.

Loving my grandmother is an understatement. It goes beyond memory; beyond late night movies and popcorn, past wads of Carefree bubble gum and the way she says, “Sheeeeeeit.” It’s more than the glint of gold outlining that one tooth of her uppers; more than soft hands and a quick smile. It’s all those things and more.

It’s skin on skin, mine against hers; fuck powder-free latex gloves. It’s the worst smell. Shit overruns her Depends and messes the bed. It’s the blood. The lancet snaps when the trigger is pushed. The small sharp point pierces her bruised finger tip. Then the blood, a drop squeezed on a square sensor, digital numbers flashing. The needle, pushed into a thick pinch of stomach flesh. Insulin surges into the skin as my thumb presses the plunger on the syringe. It’s the meetings and the doctor-speak; hypertension, hyperglycemia, retinopathy, nephropathy. It’s calling it what it is: high blood pressure, high insulin levels, blindness, and kidney failure. It’s the time before sunrise. It’s dark and cold and quiet. It’s the listening—soft moans and nightmares. It’s the gripping. The nails in the skin, holding on, digging in, like claws; talons on a prehistoric bird, a pterodactyl, clutching and afraid, unsure and close to extinction. It’s the pain that shoots and radiates, throbs and tingles in hands, wrists, backs and thighs. It’s knots of muscle that scream in the night, echoes of lifting and shifting and bending. It’s nakedness and opening legs, timidly but without shame. This is where my mother came from, where I came from, where we all came from. It’s her past, our present, and my future.

As the water thins out the suds, the dirt and tension rolling down the drain, past becomes present. It all flows into one thing; the right thing, the only thing.