Harold Ethington

Hepner

FD ENG 101

4-19-11

**Grandpa**

Thanksgiving had rounded the corner again. Thanksgiving means time spent visiting family. This year, instead of inviting him home, we visited Grandpa Art in the Care Center. I had only visited a few times after he moved in. It was a quaint place hidden by a row of trees along the street, which, in the fall was made more foreboding because of the dying leaves that clung to the little time they had left. We stayed long enough to finish a single plate of turkey dinner and chat for a bit with Grandpa and his talkative neighbors. After a pause of uncomfortable silence at the table, Grandpa said his second coherent sentence of the day,” Do you work here? I’ve finished, I’d like to go back to my room.” With defeat on our faces, we wheeled him to his room and left him with the normal hug and “Take Care!” I wondered all the way home if he had recognized us at all, at least for a brief moment. My conclusion was never found. It wasn’t always this way.

When I was very young Grandpa was healthy and strong, although I didn’t know why he limped all the time. I thought Grandpa was the best at everything. At that age everything was fishing, which is what Grandpa loved to teach me about. We would go to fish a lot. The days I remember the most were the bleak overcast days. It was never about what we caught so much as the stories we brought home. On one of these days, while walking on a narrow waterway, my older brother almost fell all the way in to the water. Grandpa was able to pull him up and out with no problem. I was awed that Grandpa could be a hero like that. I wondered if anyone else had such a great Grandpa. We would come home and tell the stories to Grandma over a refreshing glass of tang. Grandpa would continue and joke about the stories. He would always make Grandma laugh; I thought they were best friends.

When we moved away, I thought I would see them every so often just as before. I didn’t understand time then. I found out that as time moved forward I really missed them both. I hadn’t forgotten a thing. It was strange to me that I couldn’t see either of them whenever I wanted. When Grandma got the “Cancer”, we visited more often, which I thought was great at the time. It was an afternoon full of sun on the first beautiful day of spring, when the call came that shook me in my childhood. My mother explained to me that the “Cancer” had taken Grandma away. The color disappeared from the sky; the warmth of the sun couldn’t comfort me. It didn’t occur to me that everyone else in my family felt the loss, but I felt miserable inside and thought it was going to stay that way. I didn’t realize how much this would affect Grandpa.

Muff turned into Grandpas best friend, the dog my sister gave him. We visited now and again with Grandpa, but like a black hole the loss of his wife sucked the life out of him. The stories were now told to the dog. Grandpa acted like he was waiting at a bus stop, biding time until he would be taken away. Little did Grandpa know that his bus was delayed for some time. Our family was having some difficulties for a couple years; my father’s job security was up in the air. It had been almost two years since I had seen Grandpa. We were caught up in the troubles life so much that we had overlooked him in our lives. It was as if the time that passed had left him behind. Another phone call came; Grandpas home teachers had taken him to the hospital for emergency surgery; His gall bladder had burst. The doctors said he would need to live in assisted living. The house was opening up as my brothers and sisters were getting married and going to college; we had a spot for Grandpa. This was an unexpected change that would shape my teenage years.

When I saw him, I was bewildered. He was using a walker; his polio had crippled him after all the years. I saw the pained look on his face which was caused by more than the struggle with his walker; there was something wrong. The hero that rescued my big brother could barely make it to the door. The adjustment to my new living situation seemed fast, but bumpy.

The doctors had mentioned that he was a little delusional during the recovery process in the hospital. We thought that the stress of the move had caused the tension we noticed all over his countenance, we were only half right. Grandpa had anxiety attacks. He told us he didn’t want to be a burden on anyone, especially family. He had an anxiety fit about that. I couldn’t comprehend how it all happened. He told the story to his best friend, Muff, and that treated it. He settled in and accepted where he was at in life after a month or so.

It was awhile after that we realized Grandpas memory was failing him. He would ask the same question three or four times in an hour. He had a thought in his mind, but it was like a skipping record. He would sit for hours outside passing the time telling stories and be oblivious of how long it had been since he had eaten. I began to wonder what it would be like to live like he did. Would it be bliss? Or, would I be afraid of reality running me over? He didn’t have anywhere to be, he had no schoolwork to be done. I could only see the benefits of his condition. He could forget time, and pay no consequence. It was a long wait at the bus stop. I thought life must be easy for him.

After a few months of living with us, he was diagnosed with Dementia; quite similar to Alzheimer’s disease. Grandpa and his stories were deteriorating before our eyes. They say that this was brought on by a traumatic event in his life, for example, a loved one dying. My parents were told some of the things to expect. It surely wasn’t all we encountered with Grandpa. His body seemed to give out at the same rate as his mind. There were many late nights and early mornings responding to his cries for help. The bathroom was the most difficult for him. For a while, I dreaded opening the door to help him. I thought “Why do I have to be the only one home most of the time!” In my teenage mind I was comparing myself to what my friends had to do in their families. My conclusion was that it was unfair. There was a lot of growing for me to do, things would get harder.

Just after New Year’s Day, Muff died. Grandpa was losing everything he had ever cherished. It was not easy telling Grandpa three or four times a day that his dog had died. Every time seemed increasingly difficult. I assumed that he had forgotten about Muff entirely when he finally stopped asking. He slipped into a delusional state every now and again. He imagined little boys talking to him. A nice woman visited him that he had dated when he was young and strong. I assumed that it was because of all the books he was reading. Often times these delusional states were followed by fits anxiety, or tremors. I was worried constantly about what my friends would think if they witnessed the situation.

I was an active teenager; many of my friends would come to my house. It was difficult for him sometimes with a lot of people in the house. I occasionally felt limited by his presence. Growing up with Grandpa around taught me about responsibility. I’m the youngest of nine in my family, so classically I was the spoiled one. I didn’t realize at the time, but I learned many life lessons with Grandpa. Being responsible for someone’s life made me grow.

My mother had earned a vacation for herself, my father and me. We were obligated to check Grandpa into the Care Center for the two weeks we would be gone. For many it’s a place you don’t get out of easily; Grandpa was a victim of this place. We came back from a bright relieving vacation to Brazil, to cold and wintry eastern Washington State. I had enjoyed the visit, but I was more than ready to go back to life. It felt like more than dark clouds were in the air when we went to go pick up Grandpa. While we were gone, he was put into a wheelchair. Because Grandpa was put into a wheelchair, he could no longer do anything independently. He would lie in bed until someone could help him up. It was discouraging to watch his whole being degenerate. It was not an easy position; the difficulties of life had caught my family again. Options were limited on caring for him properly. The decision was difficult, but he was admitted to the Care Center, this time to stay. I felt really bad for him, time and the struggle of life had taken away his family. Grandpa begged to stay with us now; he was scared of the “Hospital”. He didn’t like strangers.

It seemed that Grandpa wasn’t with us anymore. His face was blank and expressionless, but it was only because everything had escaped him. Confusion is what I assumed to see on his face. Grandpa didn’t know who he is--or was--anymore. He was incapable of knowing where he was, much less how long he had been there. Being older now, I recognize that memories are the escape routes from a steam rolling reality; reflecting on the past can lighten the crushing present. My mother would tell me,” At least we know who he was.”