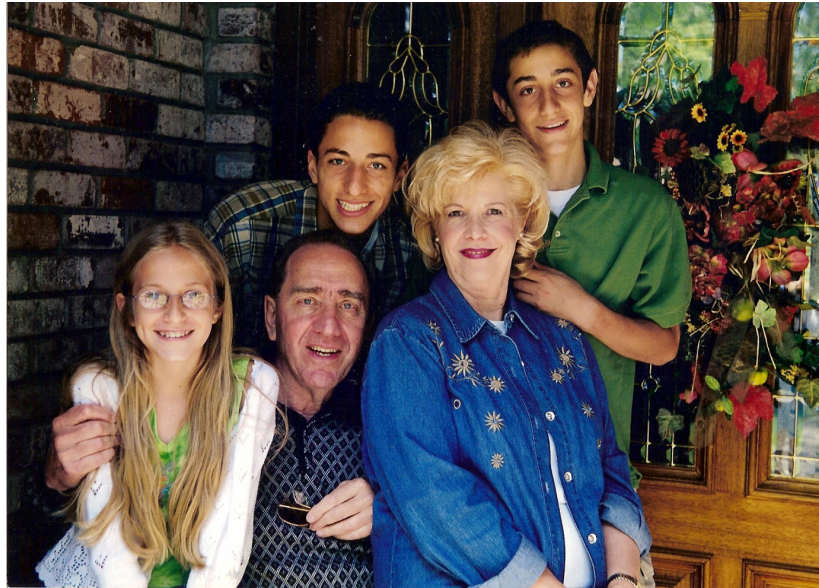


Daggers in My Heart

by Kayla Winters

Even though it was six years ago, I remember the day we took this picture like the back of my hand. My mom said that this would be the last time my grandfather could ever visit us, so we should spend a lot of time with him. The entire time he was with us, he never stopped smiling.

When we took the picture, he had a grip on my arm that was so tight it felt like he never wanted to let go, and I did not want him to. It was as if he knew this was the last time he would visit



us; the last time he would understand what was going on in his grandchildren's lives.

For the last 16 years, my entire life, my grandfather has been sick with frontotemporal dementia (FTD), a disease that slowly kills the brain. My family and I have been with my grandfather through the three main stages of this horrible disease. First, he lost his short term memory; then, he lost his speech and understanding; and finally, he lost the ability to chew and swallow, bladder control, and memory of anything and anyone. I have never seen my grandfather well. One of the hardest things to know is that he does not know who I am, even though I am his granddaughter.

My grandmother has been with my grandfather every second of every day. My grandmother is a strong role model for me to see her live with her husband like this. She is always smiling and having fun; I believe she does this to try to keep her mind off of my grandfather. She is a very loving person and I believe she took her wedding vows to heart.

Over the past six years, my grandfather got rapidly worse. I became more reluctant to visit him with every passing year. Even though I did not want to see him anymore, I had no choice, since my mom had me come along with her so my grandmother would not feel sad. But as I grew older, I knew I would have to make my own decision of going in to see him.

Last month, when my family and I went to visit my grandparents, my mom let me decide whether to go in to see my grandfather. We were on the car ride over when my mom said, “You don’t have to go in to see Papa today – you can make your own decision.”

I knew I did not want to see my grandfather anymore. All I could think about was whether my grandmother would hate me. “But won’t Grams be mad at me?” I asked nervously.

“No, of course not,” my mom said.

“It’s up to you to make your decision,” explained my dad.

I sat there awkwardly, trying to think of what to do. My mind was ready to explode. I did not want to let my grandmother down, but I really did not want to see my grandfather like he was and will always be. I wanted to keep the vision I had of him, smiling and laughing while playing cards with my brothers as I sat there waiting for him

to make another joke. I wanted those times back, so my way of doing this was to not go in to see him sick and dying. I don't want him living like he is any more. I want to remember him with good memories and not bad ones.

When we arrived, before we walked into the house, I tried to take a deep breath to control my emotions. My family hugged my grandmother while I was trying not to show that I was still battling in my mind what to do. With the rest of my family, I sat down in the living room on the couch with peach fabric to match the peach colored carpet. Above me were shelves of books and pictures. I'm always drawn to the pictures of my grandfather when he was young and healthy, because I never got to see him like that.

All I could do was picture him sitting in his room, which used to be my mom's old room, covered with busy blue and white wallpaper with long mirrors as closet doors. I thought of the dresser which holds tons of pictures of all my grandparents' grandchildren, and a 10 inch by 10 inch television that my grandfather stares at all day long. I remember holding his hands and feeling how big and soft they were. He had a heart of gold and hugged like a bear. I will always remember his hugs – I could barely breathe because his grip was so tight.

I followed my belief, which was to keep the vision of my grandfather as good as I possibly could. I knew this decision was to preserve the memory of my loving grandfather. I know my grandfather would understand because he loved me so much, when he knew who I was, and he would understand that I don't want to forget the loving grandfather I once had. I know he does not want to live like this; I can hear it in the noises that he makes.

After we left, I asked my mom if I had made the right decision. She replied, “Whatever makes you feel better is the right one.” I did feel good about my choice, but I thought about my decision over the next week, and I still do not know if I made the right decision. I tried to follow my beliefs so I could keep a good memory of my grandfather. I miss my grandfather tremendously; I miss his smile, his laugh, and most importantly, his hugs. I will never forget him.