

Irene – Frankie, Year 6 , NSW

As Irene opened her furrowed eyes the sunlight ripped through the curtains, birds sang and she could hear the other seniors getting up for breakfast, and like every other morning the thought hit her. It made her stomach drop, her heart race, her hands became clammy, she gave a big sigh.

Could this be her last day? The slow marching of time that eventually comes to an end?

In some ways she wanted it all to end, her grandkids never wanted to visit her, she was sick of taking insulin, sick of the ‘how are we Irene?’ that the caretakers repeated every morning, sick of that old crow Mary who cheated in boggle every time. Sick of watching lines and wrinkles form on her skin, sick of vanilla pudding. Sick of that washing detergent that always lingers in the air. She was sick of it.

She sat up reaching for a sip of water, her hands shook. The door creaked open and Brittany, her caretaker crept in. Her pink sparkly nails gripped a bowl of soggy fruit.

“How are we Irene?” she exclaimed sympathetically as she leaned in closer.

“Same old,” Irene chuckled which quickly turned into a cough.

Brittany flashed a smile as she passed Irene the fruit.

“You know what time it is,” Brittany declared. Her sparkled fuschia nails flashed in a blur as she whipped out the blood glucose meter. The needle caught Irene’s eye as it shone in the sun that slivered through the curtains. Brittany’s cold hands held Irene’s. She felt a prick and a velvety bead of blood popped out. She watched the testing strip soak in the red liquid as the meter flickered with numbers. 11.2 it read.

“Slow down on the toffees,” Brittany chuckled.

A smile crept on Irene’s lined face.

“Oh dear! You really do keep me young Brittany,” she muttered.

To which Brittany replied, “I try! Well let’s get you up! It’s 7am.”

Irene gripped her walker as her floral housecoat swayed in the breeze. This was the first time this week that the windows had been opened. Dust rose into the air each step she took. The old people’s home sat in its faded glory. There was the foyer where Isabella the receptionist greeted the visitors. To the left, there was a visitors board, where guests names were marked in sputtering blue marker. Then there was the kitchen. Piles of Costco bags sat on the laminate floor. Out of date food lined up in the fridge and stale biscuits filled the pantry. A thick layer of dust laced the baseboards which led to the rooms. Sterile white paint covered

all four walls, stained sheets tucked into beds accompanied by two eggshell bedside tables. Irene often admired Sue's table which was decorated with flowers and cards from loved ones. Irene's table had a lamp.

Frank waved Irene over to the breakfast table. As Irene mushed her rubbery eggs around the plate, Sue and Mary were chatting about their granddaughters. Irene fiddled with the locket around her neck, Frank craned his neck to take a good look at the photo inside the copper love heart. A baby wearing a frilled dress and a bow was accompanied by a glamorous woman, with colour in her face, honey tinted hair and a gorgeous wrap around dress on.

"Who's that?" Frank muttered.

"It's me and my sweet grand baby," murmured Irene. "I haven't seen her in years. I know I'm unrecognisable now. But back in my glory years I was unstoppable."

Frank chuckled. Irene snapped back into reality, a cough here and there filled the silence.

"Irene, you have to eat," Brittany demanded gently.

Irene hesitantly held the measly spoonful of eggs up to her lifeless lips, took a bite and mushed them around in her mouth before forcibly swallowing them.

"Ugh," she shook her head.

"That's it. Good job!" Brittany encouraged clapping her hands lightly. Prick! The red orb slid down her finger which was like sandpaper from all the tests.

After breakfast Brittany took Irene outside. As she strolled along the pathway Irene started to break out in a cold sweat.

"I'm not loving your colour. Do you need to sit down?" Brittany asked.

They watched the bees desperately scavenge for pollen in the crinkled flowers. Irene took deep raspy breaths.

"Easy now, I need to test you." Irene reluctantly held out her hand and felt a prick. The red globule rolled down her finger as Brittany flicked her blonde hair out of the way.

"11.6? Irene this is getting dangerous, let's get you back inside."

Irene sat down in her armchair, her memories were slipping through her fingers. However one thing she would never forget was the 9th of July. Irene and her daughter had a fight, her grandkids hadn't talked to her since. She'd regret that moment for the rest of her life. She couldn't remember what the fight was about, or what was so terrible, but in that moment the

only thing that seemed important was calling her grandkids. That day Irene felt as if death was closer than it had ever been, like she could touch it, feel it. She knew what she had to do.

She thought about it all afternoon. The old brown phone sat on the table. The oversized numbers leered at her through the screen. She picked the phone up, mottled hands shaking.

“Hello this is Irene,” she practiced. “No,” she muttered to herself, “Hi honey it’s grandma, no I can’t say that!” she whispered. After what felt like an eternity of indecision the time came for her to call them.

That night dinner was as usual. Irene felt like a pincushion, what with all these tests and the trash can filled up with pudding cups. Irene sat down by herself. It was time. She stared at the phone and picked it up her mottled hands shook, dialling the numbers of her grandkids.

“Hello,” she asked, holding her breath as she waited for a response.

“Grandma,” a woman answered the phone, breathing a sigh of relief.

Tears welled up in Irene’s eyes.

“I’m so sorr--”

But before she could finish her granddaughter cut her off.

“No don’t you be sorry. It’s so nice to hear your voice after such a long time. I’ll just go get mum!”

The phone clattered down, her granddaughter’s footsteps echoed through the phone. Irene looked out the window and for the first time in 7 years she felt like things were where they were meant to be.

“Mum?” the voice of her daughter echoed through the phone, as Irene held it she saw her hands were shaking. She tried to find Brittany but the room started to blur. Her heart fluttered in her chest as it rose one last time.

“I love you honey,” were the last words ever spoken by Irene.