The first time I found Grandpa wandering, he had been standing barefoot in the center of Heritage Estate’s parking lot. My headlights flashed onto his pale skin, smothering him in an iridescent white, practically indistinguishable from the snow dusting over his long underwear. I slammed into park, causing my car to slightly jar forward, startling him. Grandpa slowly cranked his neck in my direction, finally recognizing my vehicle’s presence. Surprised by the bright beam that greeted his eyes, he nervously raised his hands before ultimately turning from the car, trying to figure out the best way to avoid the light. On the other side of the windshield, I recklessly tapped my hand against the side of the driver’s seat before finally ejecting the seatbelt.

Each heated word had streamed out in its own frustrated cloud as Grandpa eyed me: “What are you doing out here?” My boots crunched under the late-November snow, flattened and dirtied by sporadic visitors, about 20-feet away from the senior complex’s entrance. I wanted to check my phone, to call mom and let her know what was happening.

Grandpa lifted a bony finger, hazily pointed at empty parking spots. “I was,” he said, looking down at his bright red feet. “I needed to go to work. Couldn’t find my car, Lulu.” He softly cocked his balding head and nodded at me, silently requesting verification. Before I had a chance to say anything, he swung his eyes toward his feet, wiggled his toes. “Where the hell did I put my shoes?” My fingers were trembling when I took his; knees practically buckled while trying to support his lanky body as he latched onto my shoulders, dragging his feet as I pulled him toward the passenger side.

“It’s okay, you’re okay.” Mom would have said that, right? It sounded soothing, so I kept repeating it, prayed it was serving as more of a comfort to him than it was to me. I waited to close the door until he buckled himself in, guardedly watched him through the windshield as I made my way to the driver’s seat. Seconds after I started driving, Grandpa became aware of his outfit choice, flashing an apprehensive look in my direction to see if I had noticed as well. Embarrassed, I kept my eyes forward, silently checking for other forgotten seniors that had wandered away from their homes and into parking lots. Grandpa scrambled to cover his underdressed lap with his
arms, leaning over in the leather seat as far as he could. A sit-down restaurant was out of the question now; McDonald’s drive-thru would have to work. “You sold your car last year, Grandpa, remember?” I said when the stillness in my cramped car felt too stuffy. I stopped at the driveway of his apartment complex, waiting for traffic to pass before turning. “And, you haven’t worked in a long, long time.” The turn signal’s repeated clinking broke up the silence. Grandpa unfolded and sat up straight, staring forward with a furrowed brow.

“Yes, that’s right.” He nodded slowly and carefully. Pieced together his recollections, stitching together the truth behind my words. “I guess I forgot.”

For the past year and a half, 6-7pm was an hour reserved for Grandpa. Originally, it was only supposed to be a once-in-a-while thing. Like, when my mom got caught up at the dentist office and couldn’t drop off his pre-cooked mostaccioli dinners (with extra sauce tucked away in a clear Tupperware) and vanilla Ensure milkshakes. And, at first, I really was okay, excited even, with the idea of going over to his apartment every once in a while. Grandpa had a reputation in our family for being the adventurous type; only two years ago, his life had been a young man’s fantasy. Before the move, Grandpa lived in a swanky bachelor pad just a few miles from the heart of Las Vegas. He spent lavished afternoons shamelessly flirting with casino-waitresses and smoking fat cigars off the balcony of his apartment, painting his own puffy, gray clouds onto the colorful, casino canvas.

But, when his children pulled him out of life in the city to settle down in a quiet retirement home close to us in suburban Michigan, Grandpa lost some of his glow. At first, I had just thought it was Grandpa’s bitterness toward the move that left his words stuck together and jumbled but, as the months went on, our family recognized his inability to form sentences as more than homesickness.

It was really difficult when we first found out. I started to fall asleep to the lullaby of mom’s gentle cries, longer and heavier than they usually were, especially when Grandpa started forgetting her face. The doctors had warned us of the common symptoms of a patient with Alzheimer’s disease: general memory loss, agitation and shifts in personality, difficulty in communication, wandering…the list went on and on. But, they hadn’t told us it was going to be so painful.

After her quadruple bypass recovery hit a plateau last spring, mom told me she needed me to start going over to his apartment every night. Since I had recently transferred home for school, it seemed like a scheme to get
me out and doing something; an easy way to give her a break from hanging out with her mopey, teenage daughter and forgetful father. And, to be honest, I was terrified to spend more time over his bleak apartment. After overhearing the endless horror stories Mom exchanged with her younger sister over the phone, I wasn’t sure if I had what to took to be a full-time student and a part-time caregiver to my grandfather, who was starting to feel like a total stranger.

When I first started going over weekly, he had seemed relatively harmless. Grandpa and I developed an unspoken routine that we worked out between the two of us and, when executed correctly, I quickly realized that we could do accomplish what we needed to make Mom happy while still living our lives the way we wanted to. I didn’t want to be there; hated seeing the emptiness cloud under the film of his eyes when I fearfully poked a spoonful of puréed food against his sealed lips, tried to allow him to cling to some pride while I completed the job no one else offered to.

Grandpa didn’t want to feel challenged. He hated when someone asked him memory-based questions, coarse reminders that images of the past had slipped beyond his recollection or that he had lost the ability to form elegant sentences. I always made sure to toss open-ended questions his way to build his self-esteem: “How is your day going so far?” “How do you like the movie?” No matter what his response, typically sour or incomprehensible, I agreed with him or miserably nodded at his pessimistic comments, tried my best not to upset him even though he was upsetting me.

It was a dreary night in mid-February when Grandpa wandered again. The clouds hung low, drenched in a melancholy grey, against the creamy, black sky. When I slipped into Grandpa’s apartment, he was curled up on his lazy boy recliner, as he typically was. Frank Sinatra’s soothing voice slid into static on the record player as Grandpa’s voice faded to snores. I pushed down on the couch cushion in the living room, making sure it wouldn’t squeal and wake him when I decided to sit down. As I waited, I surveyed the familiar room, drumming my fingers along the discolored seam of the couch. Rising and falling with each crackling breath he took, my eyes finally settled on the largest and only decorative piece hanging on the wall: a yellowed portrait of my grandmother.

I had seen the photograph many occasions before; Grandpa used to have it, among hundreds of other framed family pictures, hanging in his old Las Vegas apartment. Encased in a golden, Victorian-styled frame,
Grandma shone; a divine glow traced her silhouette, each golden curl illuminated as if dunked in a sunshine pool. Perched above plump cheeks, wide eyes, colored like almond butter, gazed upon Grandpa’s apartment’s screen door and fell upon the pines below the balcony. Soft and distracted, doll-like. A cherubic beauty in her time, I’d put money on that.

I remember being glad I couldn’t remember her the way she looked in the photo, all done-up like a movie star. I didn’t understand it when I was seven and, truthfully, I hardly understood why it happened as I examined her portrait that night. Just like the portrait hanging, Grandma’s skin was yellow when she died but it wasn’t for an artistic portrait effect. One by one, each angelic strand had flown off her scalp and away from her. Cancer had carved away at her liver, leaving her a 90-pound heap of bones before I even entered second grade.

“Lucille, did I ever tell you about the first time I saw your grandmother?” Lost in the distance of my grandmother’s milky eyes, I flinched at the unexpected sound of Grandpa’s voice whistling and crackling from his recliner. His eyes were still closed.

“No,” I answered. He mustered up a heavy yawn, his eyelids rolled back like a theatre curtain. And, for a moment, I feared he was going to fall back asleep and forget he ever offered to talk about her. Once his drowsy eyes rested on mine, I shook my head silently and politely, reiterating that I hadn’t heard the story of how my grandparents met.

Grandpa’s gaze slid away from mine and he stared forward. I followed his line of vision even though I knew exactly where it was leading. Once again, I was mesmerized by my grandmother’s youthful portrait; tried desperately to understand and to lock eyes with hers, wistfully detached from the present moment.

“You shoulda seen her, Lulu.” Grandpa swallowed slowly, started rubbing the top of his left thumb with his right. “Your grandmother, she. God. When she danced, she lit up the floor.”

Grandpa hardly ever talked about my grandmother. I always figured he had either forgotten his time with her or that it pained him too much to talk about. But, as I sat quietly, picking at loose strings of fabric dangling from the armrest, I grew desperate to hear more about her. I tried to decide on a statement that would keep him from recoiling by the time I shattered the silence and finally settled on a simple: “Tell me about the first time you saw Grandma.”
As if two wires had been connected, a spark ignited smack dab in the center of his crinkled nose, the electricity spread scrupulously across his temples and swept the dark moons under his old eyes. Grandpa looked inquisitively in my direction. For that brief moment, my heart felt pinched by the delicate fingers of optimism; I couldn’t help but entertain the notion that illuminating the concept of my grandmother could be enough to save his memories from burning to shards of crumbled ash. Desperate for him to stay with me longer, I allowed my questions to slip out, plunking into the stale air like drips from a leaky faucet.

“What was she like, Grandpa? She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

And, as quickly as it came on, I watched him slip away from me. Creeping on painfully slow, an explosion of emptiness clouded his eyes as he stared blankly through me. Still clutching onto the hopeful notion that he would return, I inspected his eyes for any sign of comprehension. My breath shuttered as I exhaled, waiting. Heartbeats felt singular.

Lub.

Dub.

“Who?” Grandpa tripped over the word genuinely; draining the life and color out of his wife’s image, my grandmother’s memory. How could he forget the world they had shared together? How could he simply fail to remember the joy that must have swelled inside him on their wedding day or after the birth of their first child? It wasn’t fair that I sat here with my memories swallowing me up whole, and he, sitting not even 2 feet away from me, could hardly recall one.

Discouraged, I excused myself to the bathroom.

The splash of cold water felt good against my cheeks, burning a horrible blend of disappointment and guilt for making him think he could remember. As I listened to the water trickle down the porcelain sink, I stared into my own eyes reflecting from the mirror and attempted to fix them there. Don’t look. You’ll just be disappointed. My eyes quickly flashed toward the black-faced digital clock glaring from the medicine cabinet above the toilet. 6:08. Grandma’s yellow eyes met my own when my gaze returned to the mirror.

Ever since I was young, cognitive processes had fascinated me. Maybe I had figured learning about the emotions and emotional deficits humanity faced, as a united group, would help me feel like my internal battle
wasn’t so…abnormal. But, as I grew older, I found that studying psychology and memory stripped away a lot of the mystery that had originally intrigued me so much about people. For instance, psychology taught me that people view our past experiences in a much more romanticized sense than they actually were in the moment. Like, you might remember your sixteenth birthday as this perfectly-warm-without-being-too-warm spring day where you got to wear a fantastic navy dress with three flawless and shiny gold buttons down the center of the bust. Or, you might remember how sweet the raspberry mousse filling tasted against the fluffy vanilla cake. How your best friend curled your hair until you couldn’t tell the difference between yourself and a prospective pageant winner and how your mother surprised you with the pastel yellow, floral record player you’d secretly been wishing for since October of the previous year.

But, that memory is a lie.

Well, more like a fabrication. Or a sort of inflation, I suppose.

Because, yeah, all those things might have happened and they might have been pretty great. But, what this psychological theory suggests is that humans suppress the shitty stuff that happened too. How you accidentally dropped a glob of raspberry mousse right on the lap of your dress and had to change into jeans. How only half of the people you invited actually showed up and only half of those people seemed like they really wanted to be there. How you overheard your mother softly whispering on the phone to her sister the night after your party ended; how you could practically see the muffled tears shed over the daunting consequences of being a single mother, “I don’t know if I have enough money to pay the mortgage this month.”

When I returned to the living room, Grandpa was no longer lounging on his recliner.

The stillness of the apartment was haunting. After cautiously swinging open every door and inspecting all the rooms in the cramped apartment, only to discover them empty, my throat tightened. I hardly recognized my voice, strained and frightened, as I howled his name, nervously revisiting rooms examined just minutes before. The image of Grandpa from only a few months prior burned in my mind: his icy skin shuddering in the middle of the parking lot, searching for a car that he’d never find so he could punch in for a job that didn’t exist.

I was already halfway out the apartment door, ready to search the parking lot, when I heard his muffled
groaning, just barely audible over the whistling of the heat sweeping through the vents. Following the sound, I ran toward the back of the living room, frantically shoving the blinds away from the glass door leading out to the balcony. Grandpa stood in the corner of his apartment’s wooden balcony, three stories off the ground, with his back facing toward me. As my eyes drifted to his bare feet, temporary relief slipped away.

“Grandpa, come inside,” I slid open the screen door and offered my quivering hand from the doorway. “I’ve been looking for you.”

I watched as Grandpa’s flushed face slumped into a downward progression, deeply shivering and moaning as tears pooled in the crevice of his eyes. “I don’t feel anything,” he kept repeating until the tears clogged his throat. His long arms slashed through the air, swatting the snowflakes. I stepped outside and grabbed hold of his hands, trying not to show my fear as I spoke. He wouldn’t look at me, even when I touched him.

“That’s because you’re outside.” Frustrated, I let my words tumble freely, falling flat against onto the balcony’s landing. I wrapped my arms around my stomach and pointed upward. “It’s snowing and you don’t even have a winter jacket on.” My condescending tone tasted bitter flicking off my tongue; I’d never spoken to my grandfather that way. At first, I didn’t think he’d notice but his hollowed, brown eyes finally turned and narrowed in on mine, shaking his head slowly back and forth. “Why did you even come out here? Your hands are frozen.”

Ignoring my question, Grandpa violently shook off my hands and sunk his own into the mound of snow piled neatly on the balcony’s edge. “I needed to come out here. Told the nurse I’d meet her. She,” he opened his mouth several times in an attempt to speak, bobbing his head forward like he was choking on the silent message. “She’s been stealing my money.” I placed my half-trembling hand against his thin, cotton t-shirt and tried to lead him inside but he kept shaking me off, huffing and childishly scrunching his face, one touch away from a full-blown tantrum. Struggling to twist his body away and squashing his hands into little balls to avoid mine, his arms suddenly gave up on him and dropped to his side. I wanted to call my mother. My breath was quick and compressed now. Tight.

“Grandpa, please.”

His arms stopped flailing when his eyes did not; they darted about as he quivered from what was either
fear or cold, I couldn’t tell. Terrified, Grandpa curled his body in an attempt to escape my touch, bumping into the corner of the balcony railing. We both watched as the mound of snow from the rail majestically fluttered downward—a shimmering tragedy, a glittering suicide. Below us, welcoming streetlights glowed behind the veil of white.

We were silent; followed the flakes with our eyes until they reached the bottom of the apartment complex, intertwining with the soft glow of streetlights lining the streets until the falling snow was indistinguishable from the light cascading out from underneath the lamppost. I felt myself leaving grandpa’s childish look of desperation and the balcony behind, reality sweeping away under the pressure of the blinding sea of white.

I am twelve-years-old again.

A child standing awkward and barefoot in a mound of fresh snow piled at the top of my mom’s driveway, shivering from both the icy winds whipping against my cheeks and an innate sense of helplessness. His headlights’ glare at me, scowling and gleaming through open slits between snowflakes and space. The snow drops down hard against my face. Burying me, making my pale skin invisible amidst the storm, and, for a moment, I think this is the place I’ll die; won’t leave this spot until he promises to come back inside. Clinging to my airy nightgown, I take a step toward my father’s silver Saab perched quietly at the end of our driveway. Don’t cry, I beg. The tears are pouring out now, uncontrollably rolling off my icy cheeks as I lift my hand forward and toward his car, the shadow bounces back in my direction. Foreshadowing. My bare foot inches a step closer to the vehicle.

Grandpa’s howl snapped me back to reality; his shoulders heaved until heavy drops stained and pierced the chest of his shirt like fresh bullet holes. His profound cries echoed like thunder against the bitter air, bouncing between the sage pines as they swayed back and forth under the weight of the sound. I knelt and lifted my hand out of my pocket and toward him, an offering. “Come on, let’s go back inside.” He eyed me skittishly at first and, though I expected him to swat me away again, I sucked in my breath as he gently picked up my hand and rubbed it between both of his. His eyes refused to meet mine when the tears nearly stopped falling.

“I want to jump, Grace.”

I froze at the sound of my grandmother’s name. His heavy, cracking voice bore deep into my flesh and
split through my ribs, making it even more difficult to breathe. It felt as though I had flown off the balcony alongside the glamorous flurries: a clumsy, plummeting distraction from their aesthetically appealing exit. I looked toward the charcoal sky and sank my teeth deep into my tongue, blinking repeatedly as I swallowed his words. Jump? Did he actually mean that or was this just another phrase confusion? Mom had mentioned his threats before but this was the first time I had ever heard anything like that slip from his lips. I stayed silent when my own tears gathered, temporarily leaving my grandfather a pale blur as I contemplated how to react. He limply dropped my hands and continued to sob into his wrinkled palms, leaning against the lumps of snow as if they served as more of a comfort than I did.

The summer after I had watched my father’s taillights fade away for the last time, my mom took my younger brother, Tony, and I to visit Grandpa, who was still living in Las Vegas at the time. She had read an article somewhere that said, during the first few months, children of divorce really need positive reinforcement from family members; Tony and I apparently needed to be incessantly told that we were loved and appreciated.

On our last day in Nevada, Grandpa took Tony and I to a park a few streets away from his apartment while my mom packed up our suitcases. Tony, six-years-old, bumbled ahead of us as Grandpa and I walked quietly side-by-side. The sun reflected off Grandpa’s aviators as he coolly slid his glance down, eyeing my crossed arms and sullen face. “I know it’s hard, doll, but you’re gonna learn to let him go. You have to.” He took a long drag of his cigar.

I stayed quiet. Kept my head up and my eyes focused ahead, even when the tears slipped out. The gravel crunched beneath my sneakers; a sour reply to his suggestion.

He sighed, pressing his cigar against his lips before he finally spoke. “One day, you’ll get it,” he looked toward the bright sun, rays bouncing off his glasses and reflecting streams of light onto our path that disappeared before our feet could reach them. Another puff. Smoke circled his cheeks and danced above our heads as he exhaled slowly. “He’s a damn fool for leaving such an amazing couple’a kids behind.” Grandpa lifted his chin toward Tony and squeezed my shoulder with his calloused fingers. He stopped walking. Grandpa turned my shoulders until I faced him but I chose to keep my eyes locked on the ground as he spoke, as if neglecting eye contact would hide my tears. “I promise you, he will never forget a pretty face like yours. How could anyone
forget my Lulu?”

And now, ten years later, they had both forgotten me.

Don’t cry.

Whatever you do, do not cry.

I wanted to tell Grandpa how I didn’t magically get my fairytale ending delivered to my doorstep once I decided to give up on Dad. I wanted him to know about the dwindling hours I spent in therapy after my father dissolved with those headlights on that horrible frosty evening in January. About how the silence of that 8x10 asylum-blank, concrete dorm room made me feel trapped and practically killed me this past semester; how insecurities and numbness and throbbing memories were reborn in that quiet room and clawed at my mind every time I closed my eyes to sleep. About how damn inadequate I felt when I couldn’t go through with it either.

Grandpa weakly tugged on the sleeve of my coat to show me he had stopped crying. I nodded diligently and, to my surprise, he immediately accepted my hand after I moved it toward him. I felt him looking at me as we turned away from the snow and toward the apartment. His eyes, once unable to meet mine, could not disengage from my general direction; a soundless but pleading apology for the scene I had just witnessed. I focused my gaze on the door handle, questioning if he realized I was purposely ignoring his stare.

When I finally slid the door open, the heat clouded over our icy faces, warming our eyes and hugging our thin arms so tightly that we dropped each other’s hand without hesitation. I quietly panned my hand toward the door, gesturing that he go ahead of me. Grandpa nodded and, gaining support, placed his thin hand on my shoulder. I swallowed the tight lump that had gathered in the back of my mouth as I watched him struggle to lift his left leg, and then the right one, over the short, rubber track that held the door in place.

After draping an afghan over his legs, rattling inside a pair of brown, flannel pajama pants pulled up just below his chest, I sat with him on the squeaky couch, flinching every time he lifted his hand to scratch his leg or cover his mouth after a cough. Grandpa’s eyes stayed fastened on the swirling flakes dancing behind the glass door.

“Grandpa?” My voice sounded so small in the empty living room, echoing off the minimal, graying furniture.
His gaze twisted hauntingly until I was the focus of his vision, but I knew he was not fully with me. Expressionless, his eyes reflected off of my own, hazel and petrified, although I couldn’t tell if he was waiting for me to finish my thought or if it was just more convenient to rest his eyes where I’d forced them.

My words anxiously clung and burned against the back of my throat, refusing to be made vulnerable. Stuck. Caught between choices: should I give into the role of the tearfully frustrated granddaughter who witnessed something far too daunting and mature or accept the challenging character: the accepting, worldly scholar—completely competent enough to understand and comprehend that this situation is just ‘real-life’? Neither felt right.

Selfishly, I wanted to turn this into a teaching moment; it felt right to explain his disease to him and how, while he sat clueless and empty-headed in his small apartment, my mother sat up late at night, cross-legged on her bedroom floor with her laptop, researching and discovering new, and eventually disappointing, ways to trigger his decaying memory. I wanted to lay down, cry on top of his breaking, bony lap and ask him what it felt like; just what did it feel like to have your memories melt and converge into disorganized and indistinguishable lagoons?

Grandpa’s stare sailed away, his attention coasted from the room and shifted back toward the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony. Exhausting his strength, he pushed against the couch’s ledge and clumsily rose to his feet, scooting toward the balcony to get a better look of the snowflakes.

It seemed strange, in a way. Felt odd that the snow hadn’t stopped falling, that time hadn’t frozen, while he and I sat on this couch. No, life went on outside the apartment. Snowflakes kept falling, jumping, begging my grandfather to join them on their magical flight downward. I stood up and cautiously stepped toward him, carpet whimpering under my clunky snow boots.

“Just, you see how they’re moving? She looks like a, well…oh, isn’t that nice?”

His finger aimlessly pointed at and followed the fresh snowflakes, flashing like stars against the black sky. I slid my hand into his and squeezed firmly. His fingers instinctively wrapped around mine but, otherwise, there was no reaction. We stood in silence, staring forward; Grandpa watching the magnificent snow fall in sheets, glinting against the clouds, as I examined our reflections in the glass. My eyes watered as I silently accepted what I’d been neglecting for the past two years. It was obvious he’d rather be out there with his
cascading, white angels than in his apartment, safe with me. “I’ve got to go now, Grandpa. Mom’s expecting me home.”

He didn’t move.

I turned on my heel and drudged toward the small kitchen to prepare his dinner before I left. As I reached into the brown paper bag Mom had packed for him, I bitterly snatched the Tupperware of her homemade fettuccine alfredo and slapped it onto a plate. Shoving it into the microwave, I slammed the door; immaturely wishing the crash would snap Grandpa out of his enchantment. No luck. As I watched the noodles spin, crackling and popping under the heat of microwave, I poured him a glass of Ensure. Grandpa’s voice clattered from behind me, steady and slow.

“Tell Lulu she’s a good girl for me.”

My hand slipped and the milk pooled, creamy and cold, splattering onto the checkered linoleum. I froze, suddenly conscious of how quickly my breathing was. It had been so long since he’d said anything, even relatively, close to my name with such confidence. I let the words hang in the stale air of the apartment’s, cramped kitchen; allowed the statement to pick me up and cradle me the way he did before he got sick. Reminding me that, even if just for a moment, we were both doing okay. We were in this together and we could conquer and reign over our own situations, no matter how beat up we felt.

When I turned to look at him, I could have sworn I saw the suave man from the black-and-white photos mom had framed on our mantle grinning back at me. Tan skin glowed underneath rippling, black curls, messily piled on top of his head. He looked so cool and so happy to be standing there; thumbs tucked snugly in the pockets of dress pants rolled to his ankles, athletic biceps relaxing against a cotton crew. Shooting a crooked smile in my direction, he inquisitively squinted his clear eyes. Lost for words at the image that stared back at me, I cautiously stepped toward him, nervous that any sudden movement would cause this healthy and fantastic memory to vanish before I was ready to let it go.

“I love you, Grandpa.” I wound my arms around his stomach and buried my face into the belly of his shirt. The room stayed quiet, allowing us to have our moment with only our humming breaths and the wall clock ticking as accompaniment. Grandpa silently wrapped his heavy arms around mine and squeezed; resting his head,
seemingly restored of its memories, on the back of my own. He rocked us gently back and forth.

For the first time in a long time, I like to think we both felt safe.

Unexpectedly, his arms drooped to his side and he limply backed away from me. When I opened my eyes, I was met with his all too familiar hazy stare. “How did you get in here?” Three sloppy steps backward. “I don’t,” his breath clawed at his throat, causing him to stutter as the tone escalated. “What are you doing here?” He squinted his eyes out of frustration, struggled to understand why a complete stranger had hugged him in his kitchen. I couldn’t find words as he backed away from me. As quickly as it arrived, the youthful facade melted away to reveal a sunken face, wrinkled and sullen brooding beneath limp grey stray strands of hair. His memory had been strangled and wrung out like a dishrag in a matter of seconds, consolidating with the wasted milk that converged around my feet.

My desperate attempts to explain who I was were greeted by a forceful shove, followed by a broken rendition of the phrase “I don’t think I know who you are.” At the risk of being pushed again, I surrendered, tearfully lifting my hands and retreating to the hallway. I decided it was best if I just left without trying to summon a hug or goodbye; he wouldn’t understand even if he complied with my requests. I took a deep breath of stale air when I stumbled into the hallway of the senior housing apartment; for once, relieved by the mix of pungent perfumes, mothballs, and impending death. Overcome with emotions, I limply leaned against his heavy, wooden apartment door as it clicked shut behind me.

The hallway was lined with identical wooden doors, most of which displayed mini white boards with the resident’s name spelled out using rounded, colorful, refrigerator magnets. The room slipped away from me as I shuffled past blurs of Margie’s, Ethel’s, and Harold’s, all reduced to an ironic display of individuality through primary colors.

I staggered toward the elevator but pathetically dropped to my knees as the hallway continued to spin. Mom crying over bills. Grandma’s spacey, yellow eyes. My back slammed against the floral wallpaper, progressively slumping downward under the weight of my wilting head. Dad’s brake lights reflecting off the snow bank. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, mocking me as I hyperventilated between bursts of tears that slipped between the cracks between my fingers that covered my face, trying to hold it all in. But, in that moment,
every memory I tried to repress came rushing out, furiously shattering my composure and leaving me a scrunched human ball trembling in the center of orange carpet. I imagined Grandpa leaning on the balcony; silently staring out at the snowflakes as they invited him to jump, a wooden railing separating him from ending his nightmare, his life.

But, could you even call what he currently had a life?

He had been dealt a bad hand. Over a short number of years, the optimistic songs of winning casino slots had abruptly transitioned to uncomfortable evenings spent strapped to hospital machines, wailing with the slightest movement. He unheedingly traded in comfortable waitresses for crabby nurses, cigars for bottles of Ensure. Half the time, he couldn’t tell you if his own wife was living or dead, even though he had a 50/50 shot at getting the right answer. Retirement homes became a phrase synonymous with memory care facilities, though Grandpa couldn’t formulate or verbally produce a coherent opinion on the potential residences, even if he was trying to.

He would jump if I didn’t stop him.

Hell, I would.

Tearing into my pocket, my hands trembled as I juggled my cell phone. Deep breaths, I instructed myself. Calm down. Slowly and methodically, I punched in mom’s phone number. She would know what to do. She had to. I set the pre-dialed phone in my lap and stared down the hallway leading to his apartment, wondering if he was pacing inside between the balcony and the kitchen, or if he was already outside. The tears poured out heavily again. Was it even my place to determine whether he jumped or not? How was I expected to know whether or not living was supposed to make him happier than not living? Isn’t it more selfish to assume his wants align with mine than to trust his judgment? I looked down at the bright face of my cell phone, mom’s black digits gloomily scowling at me against the white screen.

Shivering with uncertainty, my finger hovered over the send button.

And, outside, the snow still continued to fall.