

Quilted by Grandma by Brooke Mckenzie

The inside of my body resembles a sieve. The biggest hole is buried deep beneath my aching soul. The rhythm of my heart seems to skip a beat with each breath that my lungs consume. As I stand at the front of the church entrance, I can feel the weight of my body shift from side to side. At any moment my legs may give way and buckle beneath my emotionally tired body. The warmth of the bodies from the room brushes past my face sending a flash of heat down my spinal cord. My plain, black suit hugs tightly against my body, constricting each movement that I take. I force my lips to replicate a smile as I greet the mourners at the door. I am the one that they are worried about the most; I am the one who has suffered the greatest loss and you can see this concern printed across their faces.

Quilt: a coverlet made by stitching two layers of fabric with padding in between (Anderson, 687). It lies there, alone, with the vibrant colors illuminating the room that contains the beautiful masterpiece. It is carefully folded on the foot of the bed being made sure that there are no wrinkles present. It lies limp, engulfing the colorless sheets that serve as its background. If one were to pass by the room and happen to glance in they would notice that the center of attention is focused on this breath-taking quilt.

March 1989: I was five years of age and would anxiously await the arrival of my Grandma's car. It was there to sweep me away to a world filled with cookies and milk. I peered through the bottom section of the window, grasping the sill with white knuckles. As soon as her car rounded the corner I would run over to the door, violently thrust it open, and bound down the driveway. My blonde curls would bounce in my face as my little plump body greeted my Grandma. After I arrived at Gram's fairy tale like house, she would inform me of the golden rule of her room. Absolutely, in no way was I to sit, stand, jump, eat, drink, or let alone touch Grandma's quilt. My mind, which was filled with baby dolls and candy, never really fully grasped the whole idea of not even being in breaths touch of the quilt, but I soon disregard the statement and trotted outside to my awaiting friends. After a few hours of play I would trudge in, secretly hoping for a snack before dinner. Gram would pull a few cookies from her pocket and then shoo me to the kitchen table. After a tummy filling dinner I would rush into her awaiting room, excited to hear the story of the night that would put me so soundlessly asleep. But having the capability to only think about me, myself and I, I would rush into the room and pounce on the peaceful quilt, not even thinking about the rule. Gram would follow me in and remove the quilt from the bed, delicately placing it on the chesterfield beside the bed. She would just look at me and smile at my toothless grin, resting the quilt where it could not be bothered.

I sat at the front of the church, about six feet away from the wood craved casket. I was so close that I could smell the cedar fumes penetrating the air. It seemed as though there was not an inch in the room that was not covered in some sort of flower arrangement. Centered on a table in front of the pastor was a picture of my Grandma. As usual she was dressed in an expensive colorful suit, with one of her broaches pinned on the right breast of her jacket. There was a sparkle in her eye that could eliminate any room. Her soft, silk like skin encompassed a woman like no other. Why was a woman with some much strength and wisdom taken away from me so quickly? Seventeen years was not nearly enough time.

August 1997: It was not until I reached the age of fourteen that my Grandma decided to fill me in on the importance of a quilt. She first started off by telling me the history of the quilt that lay so eloquently on her bed. My Grandma decided that she wanted to construct something that was so beautiful that if you touched it, chills would be sent crawling down your spine. She sewed for days on end, carefully picking patterns and cross-stitching endlessly. When my Grandma talked about the quilt and the passion that she put into it, she glowed from excitement. It took her exactly one month to create an artwork that captured the lesson of her life and soon to be mine.

It was my turn to speak. As I walked up to the podium a sense of tranquility passed through my body. I paused at the microphone and peered out across the people that sat before me. There was not an empty seat in the five hundred seating church. Each face seemed to be telling a story, a time they had experienced with my Grandma. A tear slowly drifted down my face. My stained red

eyes were not crying from sorrow now, but from pride in the fact that my Grandma had touched so many lives. She was a great among the ordinary, one who looked for the extraordinary in life.

December 1998: Gram and I sat across from each other at the kitchen table. Her long gray hair glistened in the light from the beams of the adjacent room. In the past years I have not looked at her the way that I was at that moment, I mean really looking at her. Her face and hands seemed worn out from rigid everyday work. Her long night coat hung delicately on her frame. The aging frame that I had not noticed until now, or maybe did not want to notice, sat before me. She told me of a quote that she once read in one of those “how to live your life books.” She repeated it slowly so that I could grasp the whole concept, “may you never take one single breath for granted” (Sanders, 12). She said that she realizes now that the years fly by without you even noticing. She hoped that she could open my eyes to this concept before my years were gone. As we sat there and talked about all the things that my Grandma had done with her life (from sailing, to running her own business, to drinking fine wine in Europe), we began to examine mine. I have always dreamed of going to the Olympics and my Grandma told me that anything is possible. If I treat every day as special and worthy of my full attention, then who knows what may come. As long as I believe in myself then anything can come true. She said as long as I hold the fire of a dream, no one can extinguish that flame, but my own loss of desire.

As the funeral ceremonies came to a close I began to realize that this should be a time to celebrate the times that I had with my Grandma. Although I will never be able to be with her again I still have the memoirs and no one can wash those away. The memories of my Grandma and I should be the stitches that hold my soul together. Even though my heart may be a little ragged after her death, it is still the same me, just hemmed in a different way.

February 1999: As we sat there sipping our freshly brewed tea, Gram pointed out a fact that I still carry with me today. She said people are like quilts. All are differing from each other, but hold some of the same basic characteristics. Quilts are an organized patchwork of patterns that come together as one. Each one holds the essence of the creator. People all carry varying qualities but are meshed together in a mass of one. At times a quilt’s seams may stretch or give way but the whole quilt will never unravel. Although everyday may not be the best of days, there is always the next to look forward to, so don’t let your life unravel.

I have been sitting here for hours now. The quilt that once draped over my Grandma’s body now lies in my lap. Man after woman has come up to me and shared with me simple, loving memories that each of them will carry with them in their hearts. These stories help to patch up my still aching heart. One old man told me that he was extremely sorry about the death of my Grandma and that he may have been the one to blame. Confused and a little startled I told him that she ran her car into a tree. He started to tell me about the death of his wife and how he was not able to go grocery shopping any more. His bones were getting too soft and so my Grandma would go once a week for him. She was on her way to the store, when the crash happened. I gazed into his sincerely hurting eyes and saw a truth. I said to him that that is the way my Grandma would have wanted it. She was never one to be waited on and her year’s left were running low. She died while helping another and not in a nursing home. She controlled her life until the very end and that was what she wanted to do.

January 2003: I lie contentedly in my bed, covers pulled up to my nose. I glance down to see the faded, but still brilliant quilt stretched across my bed. Used. Used many times. My Grandma has been gone for three years now but I still carry her with me. I remember the time she told me to never take one single breath for granted and realized that more times than not, I don’t, which is a step in the right direction. I vow that I will live by the guidelines of my Gram and breath in and out everyday, with purpose. The quilt has served its purpose. It has protected me at night and decorated any room that it was in. The quilt may not cover me now looking brand new, but it covers me with a story of its own. I shut my eyes and drift off to sleep, quilted by Gram.