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The Plastic Indian

The last time that I see my grandmother alive is on a white, snow-furrying day in late December. I am with my four-year-old son, Ricky, who amuses himself with plastic Indian dolls in the back seat of the car. As we drive deeper into the cold north, Ricky lines the chief, squaw and one warrior into a neat skirmish row under the slanted rear window. I see this in the rear mirror. These three Indians face a troop of imaginary soldiers. But Ricky says there are more than three Indians. They are hiding, he says, and I just can't see them.

As I cruise up Interstate I-75, I know that Grandmother has been slowly dying for 12 years. As Ricky begins his imaginary battle, I think of her battle. It hasn't been one with cancer, tuberculosis or a stroke. These we could have understood. Alzheimer's has killed her mind. Only one member of the family—there are eight children and 27 grandchildren who live in the county—goes to see her at the nursing home. This is Aunt Jane, Sister Jane Anthony. She takes communion to Grandma, and prays for her death.

That absent family used to include me, I think, as I watch the dotted centre lines blur past the hood emblem. I had the best relative excuse by far, living in Cleveland, 400 miles away from the nursing home. Yet, I had been home over the years.

Slowing, but never stopping, always driving past the entrance to the home.

Today, after a long, eight-hour drive we get to a town called Sand Lake. This time, Ricky and I don't drive by the Iosco County Medical Care Facility. I slow, thinking it is the same brake pressure as always, then turn sharply into the parking lot. Tires yelp. The car spins into a half doughnut and I know, as I pull unevenly into a parking spot, that had there been more ice and less snow, we would have crashed sideways into the plowed snowbank.

"Wow," Ricky says. "Do that again Daddy!"

I turn off the car, look into the rearview mirror. The plastic Indians are gone and I can't see Ricky who has fallen down on the floor, between the seats. He giggles, and flings a doll up at the ceiling.

"No," I say, "Daddy didn't mean to do that. He miscalculated."

"Miscalculated?" He gets up, quizzes me with his eyes. I ask him if he is okay and he nods.

"You were supposed to be wearing your seat belt," I scold. I tell him to put the tipped over Indians into his coat pockets, we're here to visit Grandma. He says that Grandma's back in Ohio. It is then that I realize: he's never seen *this* woman.

"This is your great-grandma," I say as I get out, and open the back door. "She's *my* grandma. When I was your age, I went over to her house and played."

"Does she have any toys?" Ricky says. "Toys I can play with?"

"Not now, buddy. She's too old. Your plastic Indians will have to do."

He slides out of the car, and I lock it. I take his hand and we walk, father and son or great-grandson and grandson if Grandma is watching. I think this as we go toward a flat one-storey building from the 1960s. Ricky wants to know if this is Grandma's house, if this is where she lives.

"This is a hospital," I say, opening the front door. "Grandma is sick and this is where she lives now."

Ricky puts both hands deeply into his coat pockets, as we go inside the vestibule.

As we linger in the warm vestibule, I think of the reports that I'd heard from some of those absent relatives on how Grandma was thinning, no longer speaking, and ready to die. How they could know this was never explained. I had guessed, during those long-distance calls or short

letters from uncles and cousins, that these family members saw nurses at Carter's IGA, bingo or at church, and asked their questions.

I didn't worry about death until Aunt Jane wrote me, two weeks ago. She told me that Grandma was 91 years old and 89 pounds thin, the first time her weight had dropped below her age in 90 years. Grandma, Aunt Jane said, was failing and ready to go any minute. She said that Grandma's body and mind had *both* completely deserted her. Her death would be a blessing because she was nothing more than a perpetually sleeping frame that had difficulty breathing. She hardly moved. Her food was pureed. Her skin flaked off in silver dollar-sized chunks, and didn't grow back. Grandma's fingers were gnarled, her mouth oval. Her eyes, Aunt Jane said, never closed.

While this type of death-would-be-a-blessing talk greatly upset the family, Aunt Jane insisted that this wasn't the same Grandma that used to let me win at pinochle, who played the bass notes on the piano while I played the treble, and pulled up firm carrots from her garden, wiping the earth on her apron before handing them to me. The eye twinkle was gone. Aunt Jane said she'd understand if I decided to remember Grandma the way that she used to be. She didn't hold it against any of the others who couldn't bear to stop by the facility.

I *knew* that she wouldn't hold it against me.

But I also knew that I couldn't remember Grandma in such distant, simple terms from the past. Aunt Jane, the perceptive one, knew enough to write the letter, and that I would have to come back to the county. She knew why I had to come back, and that I would do more than drive past the entrance.

Ricky and I linger a few more minutes in the vestibule, reading the flyers on the bulletin board, and waiting. Then, we walk through a second set of glass doors and into the facility itself. There is a sterile smell, like new paper and floor wax. We go past a glass case where brightly-colored residents' crafts are displayed, knitted toilet paper roll covers, soft yarn dolls and potholders. We continue to a nurse's station that's brimming with six stout women dressed in tight white smocks. As we approach, they all flock away, except for one nurse. She's about 50, and her glasses dangle from a chain around her neck.

"I'd like to see my grandmother," I say to her. "Norma Worshum."

"Oh, yes." She puts her glasses on. "And who's this handsome young man?"

"Tell her your name," I say.

"Ricky," he says. "Did you see my dad miscalculate?"

"Miscalculate?" she says.

"The parking lot," I say quickly. "It's icy out there. We skidded."

"Oh, we had a bad storm last night," she says, looking out the window. "Looks like another one is happening. I'll tell Ron to salt it down again."

Ricky digs into his coatpockets. "Look at my Indians!" He holds them in his hand.

"Well, now." The nurse flips through a roster of patients. She finds Grandma's page and nods her head. By her expression, I think that Grandma must be feeling okay today. "Did you know, Ricky," she says, "that your great-grandmother is part Indian?"

Ricky looks at me and shakes his head *no*. I look at the nurse and tell her that I didn't know it either.

"Around here we call her the Ogemaw Princess. *Her* grandmother was an Ogemaw Indian Princess. The Ogemaws were a peaceful tribe in northern Michigan."

"That was your great great great-grandmother," I tell him.

"Sister Jane Anthony researched your family tree." The nurse takes her glasses off. "We only found out last week. We were all so excited! A real Indian princess in our midst. We weren't sure how to react. One of the nurses braided her hair. I hope you don't mind, it seemed like the thing to do."

"I'm sure it's beautiful."

A lanky man comes out of a side room, and wheels a tall, steel food cart by us. He rolls his eyeballs at the ceiling and mutters to himself. The nurse calls him Ron, and tells him about the parking lot.

"I'll do it, right after lunch," he snaps.

"You should probably wait in the dining hall," the nurse says, to me. "That's where they'll take her, now."

"Is there somewhere I can leave this guy?" I point at Ricky. The nurse tells me there's a waiting room, but Ricky says he wants to be with me.

"She's really quite harmless," the nurse says. "The most exciting thing she does is mumble. I don't think there will be any problems."

I thank her, and walk slowly away with Ricky. Even at this sluggish pace, we are faster than all the residents who trail behind Ron, the food cart man. They walk crookedly, struggling with aluminum walkers or pull themselves along in their gliding wheelchairs, using the tips of their toes.

When we get to the dining hall, there is a sweet, warm milk smell. Heat wafts at us from a ceiling vent. Instead of regular tables, haggard men and sagging women sit in a crooked circle of wheelchairs, slanted hospital beds and straight-backed seats, with their elbows on the tables. Some look alert; others slump; two sleep. Everywhere, eyes pivot hopefully, watching TV, looking at Ricky, following the falling snowflakes. Even the sleepers' eyes move, rapidly. They dream. I can't help but wonder, what it is that they're dreaming about.

When Ron peels foil away from multicolored trays, all the eyes become trained on him. Ricky fidgets. We stand just inside the doorway where I pretend to watch a religious program on the ceiling-mounted TV. Ron looks at a color-coded clipboard. Green means a low-fat diet, he tells me, even before I ask. Orange is low-sodium and blue is for soft foods. Yellow, he says, is for pureed.

"Hell, you could drink that stuff," he says, cackling.

Ron matches the colored trays with cards that dangle from the residents' necks, then distributes them with the same speed and agility as a blackjack dealer. Soon, the residents pick up forks and spoons. As they begin to eat, the dining hall becomes one giant wave of chewing jaws.

One tray remains on the cart, a dullish yellow one still covered with foil. I begin to count the residents but Ron saves me the trouble, telling me there were 77, last time he checked. Ricky sees what he says are mashed potatoes. "I'm hungry, Daddy," he says.

"You ate on the way up, buddy." I pick him up. "Think you can wait? They got a McDonald's in this town."

He nods as a nurse comes over to us. She directs us to chairs in an area where, she says, Norma will be set up for her lunch. Ricky and I sit with our backs to the wall, and an old man calls to me.

"Elmer?" He looks hopeful. "Listen, Elmer, have you seen mother? God, ain't she something? Don't you think she's something?"

"Your name's not Elmer." Ricky giggles.

"Shhhh," I say, looking away toward the cinder block wall at the far end of the room.

A few minutes later when they wheel Grandma into the dining hall, she's in a prone hospital bed with steel bars on the side. She looks like a wrestler who is being pinned, and madly bridging up off the mat with the strength of her neck. Her face is flushed and pointed, her cheekbones poking at the skin.

Another nurse wheels Grandma over to us, into the space. This nurse smiles and introduces herself as Alicia, the director of the facility. "I understand you're her grandson, from Ohio," she says. "*Grandsons*, I mean. Well," she pauses, locking her fingers together and sighing. "Here she is. *Sometimes* she recognizes people. You can see it in her eyes when she does. How you feeling today, Ogemaw Princess? You remember these guys?"

Alicia props up the back of the bed. Grandma sits at a 45 degree angle, stops bridging and gazes at the ceiling tiles. She wears shiny red pants and a turquoise shirt. Her hair, grey and shoulder length, is braided with a feather tucked in. Her eyes jut; one is an untwinkling blue, the other cloudy and grey. Her fingers fist, then relax. They remind me of something.

"She's lost weight," I say. Immediately, I feel stupid, and my face flushes.

"When did you see her last?" Alicia asks.

"It's been a while."

And then I think of how long it's been. I feel so ashamed and I can't admit to Alicia that I haven't been here since 1980. I try to speak those words but they will not come. I try to say that I haven't been here since the day when I moved this Ogemaw Princess, and her two suitcases into this facility. I search deep inside of myself for justification for this prolonged absence: my college, my move away, my career and family. It doesn't help. I feel like a deserter.

I am Steve, at one time Norma's self-proclaimed favorite grandson. I attended Christmas mass with her 12 years ago. After the service, still hung over from the night before, I didn't look and miscalculated the distance between us. I walked directly into the genuflecting Norma Worshum, knocking her down against the cold concrete altar. My only consolation was that her hip shattered when the church was empty. A few days later when she could no longer stand the pain, I gave her that ride to the facility where her beautiful room was all set up.

For what was supposed to be a three-month, rehabilitating stay.

"I *said*, you can't stay beautiful forever," Alicia says, suddenly. I nod.

"We do the best we can."

I look at Grandma, who is mumbling. Her fingers slowly curl into a semi-fist again, then relax. And I remember what they remind me of. They look like a steel-clawed, glass-cased game that Ricky and I played. We went fishing for his plastic Indians, last summer—at the Ogemaw County Fair—dropping them into the chute, one at a time.

Alicia goes over to the food cart, gets the last yellow tray and peels the foil off. She comes back to Grandma and sets the tray in front of her. "We have creamed carrots, mashed potatoes," Alicia says. "Ground beef in a nice brown sauce." She pulls her chair up to Grandma, ties a bib around her neck then dips a spoon into orange mush. She slips it between Grandma's lips. Grandma instinctively chomps. Alicia gives her another spoonful and Grandma licks, gurgles, swallows then makes a face.

Her hands become fists.

"She doesn't really like the carrots that much," Alicia confesses. "But they're so good for her." She spoons potatoes, then beef, then potatoes again, working it between Grandma's lips. I can tell by the way her fingers move—it's as if they're stroking an invisible string instrument—that she likes the potatoes and beef, much better.

Suddenly Alicia asks me if I want to feed her.

"I'm not sure," I say, "that I know how."

"Oh, sure you do." She points at Ricky. "With that little guy? I bet you've had lots of practice."

She says it would help her, she has to check on another resident. And so, I take the spoon from her. Alicia says she'll be right back, goes over to the man who called me Elmer. I dip the spoon and scoop creamed beef. Ricky makes a face.

"I'm *not* a baby!" he says. "That's gross food. Daddy, I don't like this place. It smells. I want to go home."

I tuck the beef, then potatoes inside of Grandma's mouth. I say that Alicia didn't mean it that way. Grandma swallows. I spoon more potatoes and beef as her fingers grasp the steel rails. Suddenly, Grandma's jutting eyes look directly at me. I see that look, the one that I think means she is recognizing the person in front of her.

I look back into them and feed her, doing the best job that I can.

After I've fed her everything but the carrots, Alicia comes back and asks me what I want to do with Grandma. I look at Norma the ancient warrior, then the wire of a wedding ring, the chin hairs and pointed elbows and eyes that seem to want to close but cannot. I wonder what else there is for poor Norma, besides this.

"Usually she takes a nap until supper," Alicia says, sensing my apprehension. "But since you're from out of town, maybe you'd like a picture?"

"A picture?"

"You know, the three of you. We could try to get her attention."

"I promised this little guy a *Happy Meal*. Maybe we could come back later today." Ricky holds my arm, buries his head in my side.

"That would be okay," she says, lowering the bed.

"Why don't I take her back to her room?"

Alicia takes the bib off, and puts the tray on a table. She gives me directions to Grandma's room. I go around to the front of the bed, standing tall over Grandma's unlooking eyes. I wheel her out of the dining hall, into the hallway then push the bed down the corridor.

Ricky holds the side and plays with the Indian squaw on the blanket. Grandma snoozes. We walk past rooms where televisions flicker. Hopeful eyes glance out. When we get to Grandma's room, I wheel the bed into a space below the masking-taped wall that says, *NORMA WORSHUM*.

I fluff her pillow, kiss her on the forehead. Ricky won't let go of me, won't look at her. While her eyes are not closed, they are not open either. They are somewhere in between, and she is resting. I can tell by her diminished breathing, that she is resting. I kiss her again, then gently pull her eyelids down with my fingertips. To my surprise, they stay closed.

"Goodbye Grandma," I whisper. "I'm so sorry."

Her hand opens one last time—with great effort—and moves on top of the blanket like a drying, wrinkly crab that will never make it back to the ocean. I think the fingers are looking for my hand. I try to hold her's. She will not let me, and her fingers dance away from mine. Instead, they find that plastic squaw where Ricky left it on the blanket.

They close tightly around it.

"Let's go," I whisper to Ricky.

He tries to wrest the doll from her but the grip is too great.

"Let her keep it, buddy. C'mon, you've got more."

We walk out of the room, past the dining hall and the nurses' station which is now empty. On our way out, we don't linger in the vestibule, reading what is for sale or what is wanted. We rush outside, get into the cold car and leave the facility. This time I drive with precision. I do not miscalculate on the slippery pavement. The car gently glides onto the highway, but instead of driving over to Uncle Joe's or to one of my cousin's houses, I find myself heading back down I-75, toward the border.

That is the last time that I see my grandmother alive, on that day with snow flurries madly plunging at the windshield like moist exploding bugs. My biggest miscalculation, I know, was expecting to find something that no longer existed. The last mental picture I have of her, is one of those fingers slowly closing around that plastic Indian squaw. The celebrated Ogemaw Princess of Iosco County, I think as I watch the dotted lines pulling me ever further away from it all, was simply holding on for one last time.

And after a while, as Ricky sleeps in the back seat, having been lulled by the humming of the tires on the pavement, I understand that Norma was simply holding on for one last time to something that was as real as she was herself.