

Taken

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Taken

Jachyn Collier

You were taken from me. Taken from us. You were ripped away and I did not even know until two days after the fact. Why did they have to take such a beautiful soul?

The news was a shock to my body, like stepping outside barefoot into a blanket of snow. I was in the beautiful Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala. The sun warmed my skin and glistened on my darkening blonde hair. As I glanced to my right, the monstrous but dormant volcano, Agua, towered over the muted colors of the closely packed colonial buildings. To my left, in the distance, smoke from the peak of Fuego puffed into the sky.

It was the first full day we had on the cobblestoned streets of Antigua. I was aimlessly walking around in my new, and clunky, tan and teal hiking boots, when my roommate, Maha, and I peered down our host family's street. Standing at our door, we found our trip leader, Dr. Vance. He looked at me first with concerned eyes: "There has been a death in your family," he said plainly. "Your mother wants you to call her as soon as you can."

Immediately, my thoughts raced to Grandma. I would've been devastated but my heart had already prepared itself two years prior. Ever since her stroke, she had been suffering in the nursing home and having visits in and out of the hospital. A broken arm. Physical therapy. Pneumonia. Health problems haven't been new for her. Not to mention, emotional issues. Along with her physical health, her over-the-top, bubbly, and shining personality was taken from her. She had become merely a pile of skin and bones—she was lifeless. I was ready for her suffering to stop.

Though, this past year, a flicker of hope revived in me. In all of us, actually. The highlight of the year with her was this Christmas. Her liveliness and overly-honest comments about her relationship with you burst out of her mouth as if she was never in the two-year trance. Jackie Stamps was back. The baby-loving, God-praising, emotionally-driven, overly-positive mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother had returned.

But, I know how this world works. It drowns your body in darkness just when you start to feel the warmth of the sun.

I thought that she was the one that had to be taken.

I heard the words of my mother vibrate into my ear through my phone but I refused to believe what they whispered. “Grandpa?” I repeated. No, it couldn’t have been you. You weren’t supposed to go first. You were fine. Strong. Your health seemed to be better than Grandma’s. Why did you quit fighting? She needed you. I needed you. We all needed you. I was not ready for it to be you. I had just seen you around Christmas time. You were just next to Grandma kissing, laughing, and holding hands. You and Grandma just celebrated sixty-five years of marriage. Your marriage couldn’t be over yet. You guys were the perfect couple; the couple I admired. The living existence of true love. I knew you had the ultimate relationship because of you and your actions: you visited Grandma every day in the nursing home, even after she would call you at night to rat you out for not calling the night before. Once for Valentine’s Day, you gave her a heart-shaped box of chocolates, her favorite thing in the world, the size of a toddler. To propose, you cracked and shelled Diamond walnuts, placed the ring in one, and re-glued all of them with precision so that she wouldn’t know. Most importantly, even after Grandma and you both lost your youthful looks, I saw you guys both kiss frequently, as if you had never lost your spark. She was your sweetheart. Your everything. I am glad you taught and showed me what it means to love someone. I’ll never forget that.

I listened to the rest of her call and I replied with cracked and constricted sentences. My throat’s lining tensed up, fighting back the arrows my heart flung at my voice. Each second I spent with my mom on the phone was a war against my tears. They pooled in my eyes, ready to show themselves, while my mother worried over the funeral plans. I held the forming droplets back by batting my mascara-covered eyelashes. My mother’s sanity was my only motivation against the brewing storm of my emotions. She couldn’t hear me cry. She didn’t deserve to hear me surrender to the shock when I knew her heart was already beaten black and blue. I hoped the mere strangers near me wouldn’t see me wave my white flag either.

My brick wall crumbled down as soon as I hung up the phone. As I delivered the news to Maha and Dr. Vance, my body released the storm. My eyes, red from exhaustion, welled up with a flood of salty tears, streaking down my cheeks. The smooth marble complexion of my face transformed into a blotchy red and cream. I summarized the news, word by word, after pathetic

gasps of air escaped my throat. The shock of your death had finally pinned me to the cold and unforgiving ground.

The reality of the news never really clung to my thoughts until I was alone. Once the bustle and light of day ceased in my room, familiar rivers of tears stained my pillow. I couldn't comprehend why it had to be you. A good man like you did not deserve to go so unexpectedly. I knew you were in a good place but that did not fill the void left in my heart. My chest felt lighter—empty. Your death carved out my organs, my feeling of life, from my chest so that the only thing left was just a mere shell of skin and bones. I felt hollow. Nothing felt right.

Your funeral was a whirlwind for me. Your casket was centered in the gloomy room, surrounded by bouquets of flowers. A bird's eye view of your little farmhouse, full of red, orange, and green, peered down over your colorless face. I remember looking at your body in the casket. They didn't do it right. Your face was lifeless, cold. They caked too much makeup on your face. The sunspots and familiar wrinkles I had memorized were erased as if they never existed. Your overly large ears and earlobes, drooped with age, rested lightly on the white bed of the wooden casket. Your lips were sealed shut. They reflected a deathly purple and blue hue, the same hue that your rough and structured fingernails now displayed. Your lips appeared fuller than I'd remembered. I always remembered how your lips would slide up into a smile and crinkle at the corners when you laughed or how your top lip curved slightly inward and over the bottom. And, just like your lips, your eyes were shut tight and guarded by the unruly fragments of salt and pepper hairs arranged in a soft line. I will now only have to rely on my memory to revive your dark and hazy brown eyes that contained so many memories and experiences well before my time. I never heard all of them. I wish I had. The morticians damped the whiteness of your hair when they greased it back on your head (you were one of the few who actually had a full set of hair). You never wore your hair like that. You let it fall like a cloud to the left of your head, never restricting it. Those people did not know the pride you had in your hair. I know that I loved it. They did not do your hair right. They didn't make you look right. It wasn't you.

You looked sharp and handsome in your suit, though I would have rather seen you dressed in your usual jeans and flannel or khakis and a polo. I always thought your lean and tall figure could rock those outfits with ease. Despite your leanness, I remember you walking with

such confidence and strength as if your feet were attracted to the floor. It wasn't until the end when you starting using your wooden cane with a snake's face engraved on the handle. But even then, I was never quite aware of how weak you were getting. Your magnetic feet shuffled slower than before yet they were still strongly secured on the ground. I wish I could've seen that you were getting weaker. Maybe that would have made your death less of a shock.

I try to destroy the image of you laying in the coffin from my mind because I know that's not who you were. You weren't weak. You weren't fragile. You were a man. A perfect man. You had goliath hands, roughened from years of stripping tobacco leaves, fingers worn with calluses from the factory line in Alcoa, and nails hardened and rigid like a tortoise's shell. Those weren't the hands I saw wrapped so neatly on your lap. Those hands couldn't have made the grip that previously could have broken my delicate and smooth child hand with ease. We used to compare our hands, and I remember how my pinky was maybe a fourth of the size of your index finger. We also played a game where you would grab my finger and I would try to escape from your finger jail—you'd always let me win after a few minutes of squirming like a worm. Your hands were one of the few ways I saw your strength and I always stared at them in awe. I never really saw you do much else to show your muscles. You weren't the type to brag.

At the funeral, I still felt your calming presence. In my eighteen years of existence, I never heard you raise your voice out of anger or lash out impulsively. Thanks to you, I know what a real man is or perhaps even a perfect man. He isn't emotionless, angry, egotistical, or as big as the empire state building. He is exactly what you were: kind, smart, sensitive, physically and mentally tough. An overall good man. I know now that I shouldn't settle for anything less than that, than what you were. A good man, or perhaps a perfect man, does exist. I hope I am blessed enough to marry a guy like you. Maybe that will help me cope with the loss of such a beautiful soul. I was lucky to call you my grandfather.

What scares me the most is what lies ahead for my family without you. I think about Grandma the most. I fear losing Grandma sooner than I want. You were the other half of her soul.

I peered into the viewing room to find my grandmother's wheelchair stationed in front of your casket. My mother or uncle knelt alongside her with one of their hands resting on the black

wheelchair handle and the other clutching to the inner rim of a gray geometric Kleenex box. I kept my distance so that I wouldn't stir up the thick fog of grief that sat in the room. Intimate whispers were exchanged between them. With each comment, Grandma nodded and let her thoughts weigh down her face with sorrow. In other moments, I saw her grasping for her sweetheart's hands. She held onto your rounded fingers with hers as she spoke softly to her children. With her same arthritis hand, she brushed her rigid knuckles across your smoothed face. She peered at her husband, the father of her children, with sorrowful eyes and weakly pushed against my mother and uncle, trying to stand up. She tried to absorb every detail of your body, of your face, and she tried to engrave the touch of your skin onto hers. Your physical body was the only thing left of you. She wasn't ready to let go of the last part of her everything.

At the funeral, Grandma was more composed than any of us thought. Her wheelchair was locked at a forty-five-degree angle from your chest as she greeted her friends. Yes, she had her tearful outbursts but when she greeted your visitors, she locked her head upright and extended her mouth to showcase her usual toothy grin. With each new soft-smiling face, my Grandma flowed with life. It was as if God was flowing through her veins. Kind words flew out of her mouth, though they were shortly followed by a slight head nod and sorrowful eyes staring at the gray carpet. I saw her sneak multiple longing stares towards the man in the casket. She missed you already.

Now, she's the only one left from the dynamic duo of smiles, love, warmth, and comfort. I know she's sad. She's lost actually, without you. She calls my mother on the phone, dazed, and asks if you have passed. She usually has trouble remembering what she ate for breakfast or if you came to visit her that day, but your death haunts her thoughts. I bet she wants to die. I don't blame her for wanting to. I know that she will likely be happier dancing in heaven with you, her siblings, and parents, but I selfishly want her to stay here with me, my sister, my mom, and my uncle. She's the only reminder of the goodness she and you both possessed.

I fear for my mother. I fear she will never be the same. She is such a strong woman yet she conceals her pain. I know she's hurting because the nearly perfect man that I called Grandpa was her father. She had many more years to witness the way you composed yourself with grace, the way you restrained yourself when arguing with Grandma, the way your arms felt in a warm

embrace, and the way your eyes twinkled when you were proud of her. I am sure my uncle feels the same way. People say they see a lot of you in him. I am glad another version of you still exists on this planet and I am glad that I can call him my uncle.

And what about all these other people, your friends, and colleagues, that you left behind? I fear for their well-being as well. I saw at your funeral a middle-aged man, your friend Keith, tormented by his own tears. Did you know that you had that big of an impact? I thought I was going to be as distraught as many of the visitors at the funeral were. However, as we made a long journey from Boonville to the snow-covered fields, I felt a concentrated warmth in my chest. As I peered out my window, I was filled with awe. The beauty of the sunset sky over the naked trees and patchy white ground entertained my eye during the ride.

My cousins, uncle, and Dad lifted your casket out of the hearse. Their long dark overcoats flapped in the wind and provided me a sharp contrast to the bold red and blues of the flag over your casket. Although it was cold outside, the warmth of my chest remained.

After your twenty-one gun salute, they carefully folded the American flag that was draped over you and handed it to my Aunt for Grandma. I was especially proud to have called you my Grandpa at that moment and I know that having the American flag being apart of your burial would have made you beam with pride as well. After that, Pastor Bob gave his final words and then one of the soldiers stated lowly that family members could take a rose off of the bouquet if they pleased. I immediately knew I wanted to. I walked up to the soldier, reached for the rose in her hand, and gently grabbed it with my knitted pink mitten. I quickly stepped out of the tent and into the cold air, rose in hand. I danced around slippery spots of ice and into the warm car. As we drove away, I longed back towards the tent where your casket laid. I twirled the rose in my hand, laid it across my covered lap, and rested my bright pink mitten on top of the stem. My hand rested there for the rest of the ride.

During the ride back, I kept glancing at the rose. The petals reflected an earthly dark red and wrapped themselves around each other delicately. The pinkness of my mitten complimented them perfectly whereas the darkness and sorrow of my dress dulled the petals' brightness. Just like the beauty of the fields and the sky on the way to the burial, the beauty of the rose consumed

my thoughts. I played with the stem with my pale and delicate fingers just to feel the warmth of your presence flow through my arm and back to my chest. I knew that you were with me at that moment.

Although I realize that you are buried in the cold ground, in front of a tombstone, in the middle of a cornfield, I know that I will still feel your presence within me. I like to believe you'll be watching over me, my mom, my uncle, my sister, and Grandma from above and protecting us from harm. Although my beliefs have not been confirmed, I do know that you will continue to be in my life. I know I will greatly miss seeing your weathered face with a tuft of cloud-white hair at Christmas and Easter, but I also know that you'll be there for me when I need it most. Despite the date that is engraved onto the cold slab of stone above your head, I know that you, our memories, stories, and special granddaughter-grandfather bond, will never be taken away.