A Denial of Death - Essay
Kayla Bachmann

"I am thinking of the moment something dies and how we instinctively know it. And how we try not to know what we know because we do not yet understand how we are to negotiate change."
- Alice Walker, Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart

My grandma had been sick for as long as I could remember. She never joined in on the Thanksgiving meals or afternoon outings to the park. She simply sat in that same spot on the couch, day after day, year after year. She had always seemed so bitter, miserable, unhappy and in such great pain. Her bouts of coughing and wheezing grew stronger as the years progressed. As sick as she was, she’d always been around and the thought of her dying had never once crossed my mind. I knew of course everyone dies eventually, but when it came to the death of someone close to me, I had just assumed it would not happen.

After forty-five minutes of driving, we pull up to the curb and my mom shifts the van into park. I hop out of the passenger side and feel the humid air fill my pores. The whole world is asleep except for our family who is caught in this moment, this moment frozen in time. I turn around to observe the emotions of my parents and my sister as they prepare for the worst. My dad’s eyes are half open and he appears annoyed to have been dragged out of bed and all the way here. I look away quickly, ignoring what I saw, hoping that I only misinterpreted his emotions and he wasn’t as detached as I had thought him to be. We start walking towards the entrance of the nursing home and I know this will be our last visit here. I reflect upon all those times when I made a scene about coming here. All those times I searched for excuses not to come. I resent myself for being so awful and selfish. I look at my little sister and wonder if she is feeling the same pangs of regret and remorse that I am.

As I watch my grandma fight for her life in her small and cluttered nursing home room, I find myself in denial of the event, and unable to negotiate this sudden change that will impact my life forever. What is happening felt surreal. My mind is unable to grasp the idea of death, this absurd idea of disappearing from this world and moving on to the next. I am in denial that this will be the end for her. Despite the fact that I can clearly see her body lying there, and the presence of death lurking in the room sent shivers down my spine, I am still in denial. Pure denial.

The grimy faucet drips and draws my attention away from my grandma. The sound resonates in the silence of the colorless room. I return my gaze upon her and simply watch her in bed, her face filled with confusion and agony. The bright fluorescent light shines like a spotlight upon her face. It’s as if she’s the star of a show and we are her audience. We stand there, observing and anticipating, waiting to find out exactly what will occur next. We can easily predict it, yet at the same time we are each silently hoping to witness an unexpected turn of events. I feel like if I look hard enough, I can see right through her. Millions of thoughts rush through my mind but I am at a loss for words. I sit there motionless and look from parent to parent for a sense of direction.

I am given none, as this is just as new for them as it is for me. Their faces are blank, with eyes like mine, searching for answers they know they will never find. We look at her propped up in the stiff hospital bed. Her body, so delicate, is there in that bed, but my grandma is not. I match her expression of confusion and continue to watch her suffer. Occasionally, she mumbles silly nothings that make us laugh and momentarily ease the tension that fills the room. She stops talking and again cold, hard silence fills the room. An hour passes of sitting, watching and praying. It is getting very late, this was emotionally draining, and everyone is tired. We decide it’s time for a break.

“Who wants to stay with her? Just in case...” my mom asks.

Everyone shuffles around nervously trying to avoid being the only one who doesn’t get a break. Why is no one offering to stay with their dying wife, mother and grandma? I am filled with anger as I watch each person search for a legitimate reason as to why they need a break. I feel like screaming, “Are you serious?” But I bite
my tongue instead and take a deep breath.

Suddenly, I swallow hard and my mouth begins to open. Before I even realize what I’m saying, the words flow out with more ease than I had expected. “I will,” I say with confidence. I feel somewhat obligated to stay by her side. If I don’t, then who will? So, I step out of my comfort zone and surprise myself by doing something I never thought I would do. I now find myself, alone, trapped in this small room, forced to make the transition from life to death easier and more comfortable for my grandma.

Again, I sit staring at my grandma in her bed. I watch her fragile body, nearly motionless, her chest moving ever so slightly with each small breath. Her soft hand suddenly reaches out for the reassurance of someone being there with her. It is as if she suddenly realizes everyone has left and she is too scared to be alone. Her face was filled with fear and her body, frozen, and panic stricken. Instinctively, I reach over and place my hand on hers. I whisper softly that I am here with her and I love her. She inhales deeply and at once she relaxes and returns to her calm state of being, floating upon the horizon where life turns into death.

It grows completely silent for a moment and again a drop of water escaping from the faucet catches my attention. I let one drop escape and slide silently down my face but do not yet turn on the faucet. Now is not the time. The silence that fills the room becomes unbearable and I am afraid to let it flow through my nose and into my body; afraid that this unbearable silence will poison me and forever weigh me down. I lose all sense of time and any relation to things existing outside these four walls. I am only aware of the silence.

Unexpectedly, her bluish gray eyes fly open and slowly close. My heart begins to pound in fear. I look around for that same sense of direction I was searching for earlier. Again, I find none. I am completely and entirely on my own and feel this solitude like a heavy weight upon my shoulders. I have no clue what to do. Her breathing grows sharp and I feel a quick squeeze on my hand. As if on cue, a nurse comes in and notice the difficulty my grandma is having with breathing. She tells me she will be right back; she is going to get an oxygen mask to assist her breathing. She comes in and out of the room routinely and without the same sense of desperation that I feel. This strange and unfamiliar situation is alien to me, yet quotidian to her.

The moment the nurse leave, I already know. My body is numb but in my heart I know. I try to pretend I don’t know and continue to sit here, my actions unchanged; waiting to hear the words so I know it is real. Her face has gone from white to gray, and she is finally at peace. I clearly see and feel what has just happened but I am not ready to accept and understand it. So, I do what is familiar. My hand stays on hers and I am glued to my chair. The nurse, with a kind smile returns calmly and her soft eyes grow wide as a surprised expression crosses her face. She lifts up the soft blue blanket and touches my grandma’s skinny arms and legs and said, “Oh... she’s already gone.”

The peacefulness and serenity that is upon my grandma’s face gives me the reassurance I need. It is time. I allow my faucet to turn on and tears rush from my eyes. I remain seated in my chair, still uncertain of what I should do. The rest of my family is informed and quickly rush into the room to say their final goodbyes to their wife, mother and grandma. Eventually, I leave the room and sit in the hall just outside the door, leaning against the wall. The breath taken away from her was then given to me and I inhale deeply. I too am now at peace. The uneasy fear that filled every inch of me is now gone. No longer am I in denial of the event.