

Seth Harwood

Michigan

“Michigan,” she said, softly. My grandmother. She held my hand with her limp post-stroke fingers and looked up into the T-shirt I wore. “Michigan,” she read, again.

“Grandma, I’m here. It’s Noah.” I squeezed her hand.

“Mi-chi-gan.” She read slowly, as if exploring the yellow letters on my blue shirt, hunting for their meaning, and of course there was none, just an old T-shirt I’d pulled from a drawer. Her eyes roamed in their sockets, floated like floating candles. She would not meet my eyes, only stared up at my shirt as if trying to solve a puzzle.

“Grandma,” I said.

She rolled back to the center of her pillow and looked straight up at the ceiling.

“I’m here now, Grandma.”

Her wrinkled lips hung over her small gums. Without her dentures, her face looked narrow, thin, her mouth almost beak-like. She had thrown up all over her clothes last night and lost her dentures while she lay on the floor of her bathroom, kicking for help until morning, when one of the aids came to find her after she missed breakfast.

I had never seen her without her teeth. A dark liver spot had taken over the right side of her upper lip.

“What happened, Grandma? Where are Dianne and Uncle Al?”

She looked up to the TV set, though it was off. “Five ABC, Seven CBS,” she read from the sign on its front. “Four NBC,” she said.

I sat down in the chair beside her bed, an orange cushioned number that slowly released air from its plastic cushion until it had settled under me. “That’s what the TV says,” I said. “Those are the channels.”

“Seven CBS,” she said.

I looked around the bright room. A fresh-made bed by the window had a blue sheet and blanket identical to my grandmother’s, turned down and folded back to perfection. The large window let in mid-afternoon, late-May sun. I stood and walked to the TV, reached up to where it was fastened high on the wall and touched the front of it, ran my fingers over the raised lettering of the sign she’d read, and turned back toward her. She saw me, I believe, and I waved. “Hi, Grandma,” I said.

She did not move or respond; her hands remained by her sides.

I went back and sat next to her, lowered my hand then to touch hers as it lay on the covers. I brushed along her loose knuckles and the plane of soft, spotted skin below where a tube ran into her arm. She turned to look up at me and for a moment her eyes scanned my face before they fell back to the blue and yellow of my shirt-front. “Mi-chigan,” she said again, softly.

“Grandma, it’s just a shirt,” I said. “Michigan basketball. It’s a college team.”

Her head rocked back onto her pillow. She looked straight up, her lips moving slightly, her silver hair disheveled, as if she were searching for something above her, something to help her understand what was going on. I wanted to explain that I was her grandson come to visit before attempting to drive across the country in a van purchased with a few other friends. I wanted to tell her that this was the last time I would see her in a while, or have her ask me to stay, ask me to abandon my adventurous summer and stay

here to help her. Ultimately, though I didn't know it at the time, this was the last time I would see her alive.

I wanted to say so much more to her, to help her and do *something*, but there were only five more minutes of visiting hours and I didn't know what else to do.

I held her hand. Her face looked thin on the light blue pillow. I told her it was just a T-shirt. I told her I was her grandson and that I loved her.