

"The Lost Button"
by Maegan Jong

When Eric was six, his grandma was sixty-three. That was when she would always bring him his favorite Firecracker popsicle when she picked him up from school every Monday. He thought it tasted better melted after being kept in her purse for too long. He devised a little ritual of wrapping his fat, sweaty hands around the wrapper all throughout the ride home, holding his sticky prize as long as he could before opening the wrapper and drinking the slush, feeling the syrupy sweetness warm around his tongue.

He was still small enough for both of them to squeeze under his pillow fort. Sometimes she read him stories in there. He would sit in her lap as she kept him safe within her arms. That was when it would be dark and silent except for a small, faded light from the flashlight and her voice reading *Corduroy*. Eric thought she was the world.

Bright was the word to describe his grandma's eyes. Pale, blue, vivid, and clear. Like water. Hidden behind a thick pair of glasses, her vibrant eyes were complemented with long, beautiful eyelashes that would always flutter whenever she laughed. Her face would crinkle near her eyes as she smiled. Eric loved seeing his grandma smile.

There was a thunderstorm one night. It was as if the darkness had swallowed their entire home in an instant. The wind and rain thrashed and knocked their siding. Eric hid in the bathroom to wait for the misery to end. It was then that his grandma took him by the hand and brought him to their fort. She held him in a warm embrace as they read book after book by flashlight. Eric fell asleep to the sound of the flipping pages and her soft voice.

When Eric was ten, his grandma was sixty-seven. That was the first Monday Grandma forgot to bring Eric home. After all his classmates were picked up, Eric began to imagine that his

grandma was caught in traffic, but that didn't stop her, so she had got out of her car and was running to his school right at this moment. He trusted her and knew she would come any minute now. When Eric saw his dad's car emerge around the corner, he started to cry.

Grandma stopped by that night and apologized to Eric for forgetting. *I didn't know it was Monday. Please forgive me.* She took Eric's hand within hers and placed a worn button in his palm. *Don't let me lose my button, okay?* She held his hand tightly, and Eric could see her bright blue eyes watering.

When Eric was thirteen, Grandma was seventy. That was the year she began to forget more and more. His parents had decided for her to move into their home. She began to spend time wandering around the house and mumbling strange phrases to herself. Sometimes, she would return to being her spunky self for a few moments then relapse. It tore at Eric's heart.

Eric sometimes stared into his cup of water to try to remember what his grandma's eyes used to look like. He could barely remember how her eyelashes would flutter when she smiled. His memory was fading, just like hers, and, each time he thought of her, it hurt more than the last. He dreamed of drowning in a pool of water that night. A woman was on the side, reaching and telling him to hold onto her arm. Eric kept grasping for her hand, but it was too slippery. He was sinking, and the lady seemed farther and farther away.

One night, Grandma couldn't sleep and panicked. She called out for Eric, his parents, anyone to save her from the darkness, but Eric hid in his room. He stayed in bed but felt his pillow dampen. He held the worn button close and rubbed it. *Alzheimer's is what they call it. What a strange name,* he thought. Eric never dared to speak of the disease because his parents' eyes always saddened at the mention.

When Eric was seventeen, Columbia University asked him who his role model was. He

wrote about his grandma. That was before he tore up his copy of *Corduroy* because the memories were unbearable. That was before he gave up remembering the grandma he missed so much. He wrote about his grandma who was healthy and brave. He wrote how she took trips to over 150 places near and far and was never afraid of exploring because age couldn't stop her. He wanted to be just like her, he said, and beat the lottery of life so he could live his dreams to the fullest. He was hopeful that Grandma would be strong again. Columbia accepted him.

A few weeks after move-in day, Eric received the call. He still remembered the disappointment he felt when he couldn't bring himself to say his last good-bye to Grandma before leaving. His mother told him that Grandma had fallen the night before and hit her head against the cupboard and was unconscious at the nearby hospital. Eric booked the soonest flight home and rushed into the hospital the next morning. His parents guided him to Grandma's room. *She's awake now but in critical condition*, the nurse said. The heart monitor beeped steadily in the background. He sat by her side. *Eric, you're here. I missed you.* Her eyelashes fluttered as she smiled. Eric took in everything he loved so dearly about Grandma. *I missed you, too*, he thought, cradling her hand. The memories he spent so many years trying to forget rushed back at that moment. He took out the button and placed it back into Grandma's hand. *I'll never let you lose your button*, he promised. Eric bent down to kiss Grandma's cheek when her bright blue eyes closed for the last time. He felt the firm grip of her hands slowly lessen. It was then when he finally let go of the embrace he was never willing to release all those years. A steady pitch rang throughout the room.