

1st place — prose Grip

BY BRIANA COLLINS
HAFFER

"I'm going to disappoint you. But you knew that already."

The doctor's words echo in my head as I push the food around my tray. An orderly scribbles away on his plastic clipboard. I ignore him as he puts it on my table for a moment to bend down and tie his shoe.

"Is there any chance she'll improve?" I'd asked.

I look at the woman across from me staring through emptiness as her nurse stands watch, and I know that Dr. Rudkin is right. *"She can't come back from this."*

I'm jolted to the present as she bursts from her seat, grabbing the clipboard and slamming it with vigor on the table.

I bring my arm to my eyes as pieces of the clipboard break apart and fly towards my face.

"Where am I?!" She quivers. Her nurse reaches for her but she's holding a shard of the clipboard and flailing it about like a flag in her hand. It's hard plastic, but broken in such a way that the palm of her hand begins to bleed as the sharp edge digs into her tight grip. "Stay away! I want to go home! Where's my daughter? Where's Leslie?!"

Her eyes fall upon me.

Someone has hit the alarm and I can see nurses helping their patients while staff shuffles visitors towards the exits.

I begin to stand but she tightens her hold, blood dripping out of her hand, so I remain.

"Les ... Leslie?" She wavers,

aiming her grip toward me.

I can see her nurse reaching up toward her and two male orderlies the size of Mike Tyson inching toward her small frame. I wave them off.

I'm not worried she'll hurt me. I'm worried she'll hurt herself. I know this routine. It's happened with Mom twice before I moved her into the facility. It's why I moved her here. *"Be receptive,"* Dr. Rudkin has coached. *"Take her lead. Try not to correct her. Let her be present in whatever might be her present at that time."*

"Leslie?" She repeats. Her eyes plead for an answer. I look at her lovingly and offer a smile.

Her face softens and her mouth twitches.

"Lesslie ..." she sighs.

"Where have you been? I miss you. Look at you. Look at your hair. Why'd you dye it red? My beautiful toe-head. That's what we called you, remember? Your brother, too. He was so blonde. Have you talked to him recently? Have you seen John?"

I look to her nurse who lowers her eyes and shakes her head.

My heart aches with the too-recent memory of Mom asking last week if my father, who'd passed away six years ago, would be joining us for lunch.

"It's OK to tell a white lie about someone she loves to avoid upsetting her," Dr. Rudkin said.

I hated lying then, and somehow felt even worse about lying now.

"He ... He will be by later."

She smiles and reaches out for my hand with her free one. The nurse interjects her arm, and the Tyson Twins jump to intercept.

I shake my head at them. "It's O-K." I mouth.

Her grip belies the frail withered look of the hand that directs it. I wrap my other hand around hers, holding it between both of mine.

The last time anyone held my hand this tight was at the hospital a year ago.

"It's Younger Onset Alzheimer's disease," the doctor said, just as plainly as one might tell another that it was snowing outside.

His words reverberate through my body before settling into the back of my throat.

"No," I argue. "Mom's not

even 60 yet. It can't be that."

"It's a common misperception that Alzheimer's only affects the elderly. I know this is difficult to hear ..."

"You're wrong. We'll do more tests. We'll get another opinion." I'm on my phone and already typing: "Best neurological doctors ..."

I feel the sudden grip of her hand around mine, pulling me.

"My darling." My mom is still sitting. She has remained silent until now. Her voice is soft but firm. "Please sit."

"Mom!"

She looks at my phone. "Put that thing down. Please. Sit with me. Do this for your mother."

She wraps her hands around

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Grip

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mine and squeezes them, pulling me toward her. Our foreheads greet each other, the red curls we share intertwining as our heads bow together and tears roll down our faces.

The doctor runs us through next steps. My mother faces him, her chin chiseled, her posture upright, eyes glossy but resolute.

She doesn't let me go.

The woman before me now looks nothing like my mother. Her chin trembles and body shakes as her eyes roam the room aimlessly. But I want to believe — no, I need to believe — a mother can remember her daughter.

"My darling," I say to her. "Please sit." She jolts and for a moment I think I am a stranger to her again, but then she shudders and whispers, almost in awe:

"Les ... Leslie?"

I look at the shard in her hand. "Put that thing down," I say. "Please. Sit with me. Do this ... do this for your daughter."

Silence swallows the air. Then, she collapses into me, dropping the broken piece and resting her head on my shoulder, her long graying hair intertwining with my red curls. "Oh, Leslie" Her eyes close, her breathing slows to a gentle rhythm, and she sighs as she grips my hand tightly.

Seconds pass. I feel her

head lift from my shoulder and her grip loosen on my hand.

She lets me go.

"Hello. Who are you?"

I feel a pinecone in my throat and realize I am welling up as she reaches over to my face and wipes away a tear.

"Are you hurt?" She asks, but before I can answer, she looks at the top of my hand and says "Oh dearie. You're bleeding. We need to get you fixed up."

I return her concern for me with a soft smile.

Her nurse approaches and the Tysons surround her. Surprisingly, they lift her like a delicate eggshell, one placing a cotton pad on the palm of her bleeding hand.

"Would love to stay and chat," she begins cheerfully, "But looks like I have to go. Someone will help you with that cut?"

"Should we escort your charge?" one of the orderlies asks the nurse.

"Yes. North Wing. Room 42," her nurse answers. "I'll be right there."

She puts on sterile gloves and reaches for my hand to clean off the blood. I'm a robot as I let her maneuver me to a seat.

"It's not mine," I stutter, and I realize I'm shaking. "It's ... it's from her hand. I'm fine."

"Procedure," she answers, wiping my hand off with some sort of solution,

"Is she ... Will she ..." I stammer.

"She'll be OK," her nurse says. She pauses, then adds: "You did the right thing."

I guffaw.

The nurse stops and looks at me.

"You're new here. Your mother was just admitted a few weeks ago?"

I'm still trembling but manage to nod.

"You did the right thing," she repeats.

"But I'm not ... I'm not even ..."

"It doesn't matter. She remembered. For a few seconds, she remembered her daughter."

A longing overcomes me, and I suddenly have the urge to run down the hallway to my mother's room. My heart aches to be near hers, and all I want is for the nurse to let me go.

She follows my gaze as I watch the Tysons escorting their "charge" ever so slowly down the hallway.

"Go now," she says, as though reading my mind. "Go be with your mother. I'll fill out an incident report and leave a copy at the front desk for you."

She squeezes my hands tight. I utter a choked "thank you" before jumping from my chair and hastening down the hallway.

At the cross-section, I stop. I look to my right, and

my mind is burdened with thoughts of what my future ... my mother's future ... our future ... may hold as I watch them disappear down the North Wing corridor. I look to the left, and the longing in my heart moves my legs to race down the South Wing corridor for the grip that my hand so desperately seeks.

I find room 112.

Taking a breath, I lift my chin, right my posture, and knock lightly before peeking my head in.

My mother's red curls barrel out from the covers of her

bed. She's right where I left her before lunch. I try not to wake her but the door creaks as I step in.

"Andrea?"

The sound of my mother's voice saying my name opens the gate at my throat, letting the words pour out.

"Yes, Mom. It's me. I'm here."

She smiles and reaches out her arms. "Come. Come sit with me."

I do. And as I bury my head on her shoulder, our curls intertwine and her hands grip mine.

She doesn't let me go.

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