12-1-1992

Do Not Go Gentle

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Recommended Citation

Vahsholtz, Angela (1992) "Do Not Go Gentle," The Promethean: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol1/iss1/15

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By the time the train pulled into Vancouver, it was dark. For the past hour and a half I’d been looking at blackness, searching for I don’t know what, but finding only myself and the seats around me reflected in the window’s darkness. Finally, I saw Dad, waiting for me outside the well-lit station just like he said.

“Welcome home, Alex,” he said in a big, broad way. He slapped me on the back the way he used to do when I’d finished a high school cross country race, then took my backpack.

“Thanks, Dad. How’s everything?”

“You mother’s cooking pumpkin pies and you sister’s at the show. I saved the leaves in the yard for you to rake--figured you’d miss that at school.”

“Yeah, they blow ‘em off the campus with these ghostbuster packs. You wouldn’t even know it was fall except for the smoke in the air. Hey, how’s Nanny?”

By this time we were in the car, heading home. My grandmother had broken her hip in June, and had had to go a retirement home because of it. I had gotten a letter from Mom a couple of weeks before, telling me that Nanny was really beginning to get weird. I guess she’d packed her bag one night and walked out the door before the night nurse caught her. When she was finally found in her nightgown and Sunday hat, Nanny said she was on her way to Iowa; it was threshing time, and her father needed her.

Dad put away his “welcome home” voice and got pretty serious. “It’s not so good, Alex. Last week, Nanny tried to break into Sylvia’s room with a butter knife because she thought her father was trapped inside. The night nurse caught her again and asked that we put her in a nursing home right away. She’s at Whispering Pines now.”

“What does Nanny think about this?” I couldn’t stand to think of my grandmother lying in bed all day watching an elevated television, exercising by walking the halls in her nightgown.

Dad shook his head. “She doesn’t even know what’s going on.” His voice cracked a little and I looked away, searching out a black window once again.

I remembered all the Sunday dinners we used to have after church, when Nanny would sit and tell stories about the old days. She told us about her father, a Norwegian ship captain who became a farmer when he emigrated to Iowa. She told us how he used to let her hitch up the horses to harvest and plow, and how the neighbors used to talk about her because of it. I remembered how, when my sister and were little, she used to put us on her knee and sing and find candy the Nyssa had left us behind the ears.

Her lap was always such a mystery; even though she was very fat, her stomach was hard as a rock. I asked Mom about it once, and she told me it was because Nanny wore a corset, whatever that is.

Anyway, I just couldn’t figure how Nanny could go to a nursing home without even putting up a fight. I asked Mom about it once, and she told me it was because Nanny wore a corset, whatever that is.

Dad pulled into the driveway and we were home. I got out of the car.

“Hey, where’d that sweater come from?” -- again in his big, broad voice.

“Erika knitted it for me when she was in Spain last summer. She was so homesick she made three of them, but only one fits me.”

“She did a nice job,” Dad said. “When do we
I don’t know, Dad. We’re just friends, you know?”

We walked to the door, past where the sumac tree used to be. That was so weird last summer -- how Nanny broke her hip at the same time the tree started dropping its leaves in June. It hadn’t even blazed out in red and gold as it always had done in the autumn. It had just sort of shriveled up. “Don’t lose your leaves! Dig down deep and find green somewhere!” I had wanted to scream.

But it was bare by the end of summer. Dad had taken it away after I left for school. Now I entered the house to the smell of pumpkin pie.

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The next day was Thanksgiving, and after I went to church with the family, I visited Nanny alone. My parents had decided not to bring her home from Whispering Pines, even though it was a holiday.

I walked into her room and was hit with air that smelled like old fish sticks. I walked over to her bed. “Happy Thanksgiving, Nanny,” I said.

She reached out her hand and said, “Hello. Now who are you?”

My God, her hand looked like a bird claw. So fragile... “I’m Alex, Nanny, your grandson.”

She began to cry. “I want to go home. Papa needs me. Who’s going to take care of the horses?”

“I brought you some of Mom’s pumpkin pie. Would you like some?”

“It’s too early for pumpkins. If Papa’s in the field and Mama’s not feeling well, who’s going to take care of the horses? They’re so thirsty.”

“Do you want some water, Nanny?” I handed her a glass, and she raised the edge to her purple lips, sipped a little and dribbled it down her chin. I took a tissue to wipe her face, then used it to wipe my own eyes. I had had no idea that she was so gone, even from Mom’s letters.

As I watched, she rolled to her side and shut her eyes, quickly falling asleep.

Sitting there seeing her, I remembered the old sumac. This time I wanted to scream at Nanny, “Don’t lose your leaves! Dig down deep and find green somewhere!”

I thought of a place where the trees could remember my grandmother when she was still young and strong and knew who she was. Leaving the piece of pie by her bed, I quickly walked out of the nursing home, got into the car, and drove to Salmon Creek.

After parking, I took a new trail that wandered through the woods close to her old house, where my dad grew up. He told me the salmon used to run so thick in the stream that he and my uncles could easily spear one with a pitchfork. They used to go skinny dipping there after bucking bales, and I always envied them for that.

I headed toward the wide, open meadow through which Salmon Creek cut. In those quiet gray lowlands, Nanny’s spirit would be close.

But as I followed the trail through the woods, uprooted trees and bulldozed earth surrounded me. In a few places, raw wook glared out where construction had begun. It seemed that the trail had been created more as a marketing gimmick for some developer than as an actual greenbelt. I hated coming home--every time I did, something else was destroyed.

Then I came out of the woods to see Salmon Creek, a shallow silty stream. A beer can lay half submerged in its muck. Only mud-suckers could survive in that water now. Lifting my eyes from the sight, I saw thick hordes of houses standing on the ridge above, watchful of anyone who might even think about stripping down and running naked like a stag through the meadow.

I turned quickly and walked away.