

On the Verge Writing Contest 2021, First-Place Fiction Winner
By Charlie Eggeling
Goodbye to Peeling Leather

The hospice my grandmother stays at reminds me of elementary school field trips to the nearby care home. Except there is no bingo and the faces are not so excited to see me.

I walk up to the receptionist's desk. Say hello politely. Wait for any acknowledgement whilst she clack, clack, clacks her way on her computer keyboard.

Nothing. I say hello again. She glances up.

"I heard you. Who are you here for?" Eyes back on the screen. Clack, clack.

"Josie Abington."

Clack, clack, clack. "Relation?"

"Grandchild."

"Name?"

"Jamie. And before you--"

"There's no Jamie listed, here. Only one grandson, Henry."

"Yeah, I was gonna say--"

"Direct relatives only."

"I *know* that," I snap, and pause when the receptionist gives me a look that says she's never been snapped at before. I reach into my pocket for my wallet, slip out my ID. "There was a problem with the paperwork. Look, here. Jamie Abington."

At the very least, she does look--but still shakes her head. "We still need you whitelisted here." She gestures to the screen I can't see.

"Isn't the *patient* more important than a damn whitelist? She'll beg you to let me in, just ask her."

Her brow lowers, looking like a parent receiving attitude from their child. "She's sleeping."

I glare. "Bull. Fucking. Shit."

In my shitty, barren studio apartment, I sit on my second (or third, or maybe fourth)-hand futon couch, trying to remember how much I had purchased it for. Its faux leather is mosaic-like, peeling in a gross sort of pattern. I pick at a piece that's deceptively loose, hanging on for dear life despite itself.

In front of me are an overfilled suitcase and lightweight backpack. The rest of the room is empty, furniture having since been sold or tragically tossed away, leaving too much of what I don't want.

My phone rings and I grab at it, pressing accept without confirming the caller.

"Got my text? Are you up for it?" I immediately ask.

My brother sighs heavily on the other end. "I'm on thin ice with mom and dad, too, you know."

"They don't have to know."

"Just like they don't have to know their own child is leaving the province?"

I swallow. "Just like that."

"Gram's going to be so upset."

"I can't just leave without saying goodbye."

Silence. I can picture Henry chewing at his already too-dry lip. "Tomorrow at noon?"

I close my eyes, slouch in on myself. "Sure, that's great. Thank y--"

Tone. Call ended.

I drop my phone to my lap. Fall to my side on the futon. "Maybe I can squeeze fifty bucks out of you."

"Got kicked out of the hospice yesterday. That's why I needed you."

"Kicked out," Henry repeats, eyes trained on the road as he drives.

"Well, don't sound too sorry for me."

He glances at me. "Not sorry. Angry."

"Why? It's nothing new."

Henry pauses. "The lawyer came to discuss the will the other day, while I was at mom and dad's."

I tongue my cheek, but don't say anything.

"Everything's in our names. Nothing for them."

I feel a strange warmth blossom within me, but I can't tell the origin. Can't tell if it's selfishness or love at the forefront. Perhaps a bit of both. "Oh," I manage.

Henry tilts his head to the side. "Oh, except the tea set. That's for mom. And a few other nick-nacks."

I huff a laugh.

"They argued that she wasn't sound of mind to make that decision, but apparently she wrote it long before she was diagnosed with Lewy bodies." He looks at me, then, smiling softly. "You're going to be alright."

It's supposed to comfort me, yet all I feel is guilt.

I remember, as a child, sneaking into my grandmother's room in the middle of the night to take up space in her bed. With my grandfather deceased before I was born, she was more than happy to oblige. Sneaking into her room in the hospice from the outside window gives me much of a similar feeling, but the urgency is heightened and so are the consequences of being caught.

Henry closes the window behind me, setting the curtains back in place with a sigh. "Might be the closest I've been to breaking the law."

"Don't sugar-coat it," I say, "it *is* breaking the law."

He smiles a bit, which is quickly lost on me as I look about the darkness of the room. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust, and I can't help but wonder what inclines hospices to lock the brightness of the sun away.

My eyes land on a heart monitor as it bleep, bleep, bleeps the life of my grandmother. And then I see her, looking half her true size, showing none of her liveliness. I think the real reason they must have a monitor is simply to remind a patient's visitors that they haven't yet passed on.

She's sleeping, of course, because what else is there for her to do? Her disease won't even allow her the basic pleasures of reading a book when she can no longer focus on its words.

"You can wake her," Henry says. "Last time I let her sleep she got mad at me."

I go to her bedside and reach out a hand. A shaky, uncertain hand. I place it on her shoulder. I give her a little shake, unsure of how deep in sleep she is.

Her head gives a jolt, and her eyes come to life. And when they search the air and settle on my face, I see the fleeting image of who she was. Who she *is*, passed the confines of her disease.

My throat feels too tight to speak, but the words come out without my willing them. "Hi, grams."

"Oh, Jaimie." Her voice wavers like train wheels on their tracks. She moves her arms from the confines of her blanket, slow as her dwindling muscle will allow. Eventually, her hand finds my face. She smiles. "Thank God I get to see you." *One last time* hangs in the air.

"I don't have long," I whisper. "I, um. I'm moving away. I wanted to say goodbye."

Her smile is gone in place of surprise, but even that quickly fades, as if it were too much wasted energy. "C'mere."

She gestures for a hug. I sit on the edge of the bed, leaning over her and wrapping my arms around her as best I can.

"Will you be alright?" she asks.

My eyes burn. I lower my voice to a whisper. "I don't really want to go."

Her arm releases me, urges me to pull away. She holds my face again. "You know your heart. And it's not always easy. One day, your parents will realize."

It hits me, then, that the first person to give me their boundless support is leaving. And I know these last words are precious, but anything of worth is lost on me, so I only say "thank you." Over and over again, hoping it reaches.

“My Jaimie,” she says. And the name was another, once, but it sounds just as loving.

As Henry and I sit in silence on my peeling leather futon, I question why I invited him here.

“Sorry. We should’ve just gone to a cafe or something.”

“It’s okay. Privacy is probably better.”

“Right.”

Silence. The whiteness of the overhead light makes me cold.

My phone buzzes, and I thank its distraction. I look at the notification and can’t help but laugh a bit.

“What’s up?” Henry asks.

I pat the futon with my free hand. “Put this piece of shit on sale for fifty bucks. I just got a text from someone interested.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Ah, looks like they don’t have a way to pick it up, though--”

“I’ll give you a hundred for it.”

I look at him. “Huh?”

He pauses. Doesn’t look at me. “When you left home, this was the first piece of furniture you bought. Right?”

I snicker. “How do you remember that?”

His face isn’t amused. “Mom told me you bought it with money from the black market. I believed her.”

I say nothing.

His voice turns soft. “I never realized they treated you the way they did because you were trans.”

“Well. That’s manipulation for you.”

He looks at me, tears in his eyes. “Stay,” he says. Asks. “We can get an apartment together. I’ll talk to mom and dad. We’ll figure it out.”

And it’s tempting, really. But I’ve spent most of my life catering to others’ wants. I smile softly. “One day, maybe. But right now, I need time for myself.”

He just nods. I reach over, pulling on his shoulder until we’re hugging. His head falls into my neck.

“You can have it for free,” I say, “the couch.”

His voice breaks when, after a long pause, he says, “Thanks.”