

Are You My Grandmother?
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Even though my nose protrudes like my father's, people tell me that I look like my maternal grandmother. They say I have her blue eyes, thick hair, and way with words, but I don't remember much about her. She was the person I mailed my Christmas list to when I wanted something that my father's paint-stained hands couldn't afford.

Beyond holidays and birthdays, the few clear memories I have of her involve the church she founded. In its heyday, Living Water Church filled to capacity every Sunday with a multi-hued congregation. They spoke in words and in tongues, all led by a thin, blue-eyed woman with a golden-brown permanent wave. When I mimicked the gibberish they called tongues, they said, "He has a gift from the Spirit! Just like his grandmother!"

Some Sundays, the church erupted in song and dance. Music filled the church, and gospel voices sang, "Hallelujah, he reigns." My grandmother would come down from the stage, take my hands, and dance with me. When I tried to escape, she'd place my hands on her hips and we'd conga until the line encompassed the entire church, wending our way over the green carpet and through rows of black, vinyl-seated chairs in a serpentine fashion.

My dad always thought there was something serpentine about the way the church members followed my grandmother. Her "disciples"—my grandfather included—revered her too much for his liking. He called her church a cult.

Whatever the case, their reverence kept us fed during my grandmother's Yuletide stay at Hospice of the Upstate. They brought gifts of good tidings and Chex Mix: a gift more precious than frankincense. Each time they came, my grandmother said a few gentle words to them. By this time, pancreatic cancer had reduced her to something more skeleton than human, but we still had Christmas gifts. Sitting cross-legged on the hospice floor, I opened the last few books I had requested. I remember wishing I had asked for one more. It seems greedy to me now, but maybe I just wanted one more thing to remind me of her.

One day, my siblings and I found a small chapel surrounded by trees on one side of the hospice property. I sat on one of the marble pews. Bowing my head in deference, I prayed for more time to know my grandmother, to understand myself through her.

She died not long after. When they released the doves at the funeral, one circled back and roosted over the casket in the pavilion's rafters. "Look at that," her disciples exulted. "She must be with God."

Seven years later—my grandfather can still tell you down to the hour—at age nineteen, I sit on my grandfather's porch under the hot South Carolina sun and ask him about her.

"I think she was one of the few truly good people who ever lived," he says. "You remind me a lot of her."