

Years 7 & 8

2nd Place: Matilda Hewson

Year 8, John Wollaston Anglican Community School

Never Truly Gone

My braids flew out behind me as I pedalled down the hill. The cold autumn wind bit at my face as I began to pick up speed. Tears pricked at my eyes as I feared the worst.

The salty sea air filled my nose as the flat sandy fields gave way to the summery blue beach houses with white trimmings and neat gardens. As I flew over the hill I was greeted with the sight of the teal blue ocean, the light dancing off it playfully. I felt my legs burn as I whizzed past a few startled pedestrians. I turned down Sea Spray lookout and rode past the surf and tackle shop. The nice old lady who ran the place was fixing something out of the front when she saw me.

“Evie dear! How have you been?” she called out kindly.

I had no time to spare, and I was forced to zip past without a word.

The sun beat down on my back as I pedalled. I almost instantly regretted wearing my short-sleeve yellow blouse, it left my pale arms bare and exposed to the sun's rays. I could feel the back of my neck and my arms reddening from the exercise and the harsh unforgiving rays of the sun. Tiny beads of sweat formed on my forehead and cheeks. I pushed through the pain, determined to make it there on time.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of riding, I turned down the slip road that led to my grandma's old beachfront house. The house was an impressive two-storey building that was sky blue with a wrap-around porch. The paint was weathered from years of exposure to the salty air. Upon the balcony was a bird feeder where the seagulls and magpies that my grandmother loved so much, ate happily on the seeds. In the front yard sat a proud old oak tree, and from its branches hung a painted tyre swing. The wide leaves of the oak tree cast a cool and welcoming shade onto the green grass below, the perfect place to seek refuge from the harsh summers.

Off to the left sat an old bush-beaten track that led down to the soft golden sands and calm turquoise waters. The cove was sheltered by tall cliffs lined with caves and bush, it was peaceful and away from the hustle and bustle of tourists and beachgoers that the serene waters of sunny and historic Lancelin always seemed to attract. Secret Cove, my cousins and I liked to call it, away from it all, our own slice of paradise. I could hear the sound of the waves and the wind blowing gently through the trees, the screeching sound of the horse weathervane on the roof, and the calls of the birds and the soft nickering of the horses that my grandma kept were so inviting it felt more like home than my own home.

It would have been a welcoming sight, one that would have been a blissful grace for me, if not for the obvious absence of my grandma in her wide-brimmed straw hat, with a massive smile on her kind face holding the storybook tight to her chest, waiting for me to come home.

Breathless, I ditched my bike in the front garden, I desperately raced up the porch stairs and opened the door. I stepped into the front entry, and it felt different somehow, the wallpaper was still the same, the gumboots and shoes lay still, and the German Shepherd, lay on her bed peacefully watching me with her intelligent eyes. But the feeling inside was empty, hollow and scared, the usual smell of cookies and books had all but left, replaced with the stench of worry.

I walked into the living room; my mother sat on one of the worn leather couches sobbing quietly. She looked like she had just come from work, she still was wearing her nurse scrubs, and her long wavy brown hair had fallen out of its bun and hung limply around her face like a curtain. My dad sat next to her trying to comfort her as best he could, across from them on one of the armchairs my aunt sat mindlessly rocking my baby cousin Molly back and forth. She was constantly readjusting herself; her face was deathly pale, and her eyes were puffy red. My uncle was pacing back and forth around the couches, his eyebrows scrunched together with worry. He seemed to be lost in a trance as he never looked up from the floor. I could hear my cousin's laughter echoing through the back door as they played with the animals, darting around the hedges, and climbing on the old swing set.

The adults regauged me with cold sad eyes and worried faces.

"Eve," my mother said quietly, offering me a weak smile "Why don't you go play with your cousins? There are snacks out there as well."

I shook my head, firmly planting my feet on the ground, no words were needed. The adults all knew that I had been the closest with grandma, and I was not leaving.

We stayed there for what seemed like hours even if only a few minutes had gone by. Everyone was scared, even Maggie, the dog, came out and slightly padded over to where I was. She lay down at my feet, her strong tail banged softly against the floorboards.

People came and went, my cousins came inside to go the bathroom, and my aunt turned on the radio, but I stayed firmly where I was. My mother offered me fruit and lemonade, but I ignored her, my eyes never leaving the clock. My uncle never stopped pacing and my mother never stopped sobbing.

Finally, the silence was broken. Dr Hillary came down the stairs, in his hand was a fistful of paperwork. He looked at us with a grim face as he relayed the news to us. "It's true," he began. "She's gone."

My mother sobbed harder, and my uncle paced quicker, the room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. After a while, my uncle stepped forward and gestured for them to step out the front. I could overhear them talking about the payment.

The thought was depressing, thinking of my grandmother, the kindest and brightest person you would ever meet, would have all the life sucked out of her, that's not her, that's not right. My grandmother was an adventurous woman who travelled the globe and traversed to the most far-flung places. She would never leave me, or Mum, or

Uncle Tom or Aunt Mindy, she just couldn't. The world spun and tipped as these thoughts swirled up inside of me like a hurricane of doubts. This was some sick joke, it *had* to be. The world sounded like it was underwater, masked by the adrenaline rushing through my ears. I did the first thing I thought to do.

I turned and bolted up the stairs. People called after me, but I still ran. My grandma's door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open gently. Walking into Grandma's room was like walking into another world. Bookshelves lined the walls and not a speck of dust was in sight. In any place available lay memorabilia from her travels, photos of her and my late grandfather, seashells from Peru, golden necklaces from Paris, nesting dolls from Russia, and a masquerade ball mask from London. The room smelt like the ocean and fresh lavender, the curtains were flung aside, and the glass sliding doors that led to the balcony were open, letting in the sea breeze. I looked out of those doors at the sun setting over the ocean, casting a sparkly light to reflect off the water and into the bedroom.

She was gone.

I sobbed. I sobbed so hard I fell, I curled up on the floor of my grandma's room, choked by my own tears. That night, on Grandma's balcony overlooking the ocean, I thought I heard a faint laugh. In the dim moonlight, I glimpsed Grandma leaning against the railing, her presence fleeting yet comforting.

"I thought . . . you were gone," I choked out, tears streaming down my cheeks. She laughed—a sound I had missed dearly—like wind chimes on a sunny morning.

"Ah, my dear," she said gently. "My body may move on, but my spirit remains with you. My memories live on within you, stronger than even in my own children."

Happy tears mingled with sorrow.

"I loved you then, and I love you now," she assured me, touching my cheek tentatively.

"Remember, those we love never truly leave us. They wait patiently until we meet again."

She faded into the night sky, becoming one with the stars, her presence lingering in the memories she had woven into our lives.

In her place sat a book, a collation of fairy tales, the very same ones that we used to read together all those happy memories ago, opening its faded cover and scanning over the yellowed and crumbling pages, smelling its faint scent of vanilla and ink, touching its rough spine, tracing my fingers of the slightly raised letters of the front cover. It was almost like she was here sitting next to me and reading our beloved stories together.

The End