

Years 11 & 12

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## Familiar

Coffee sat on the table; its steam floating into the air like wisps of smoke. Bread toasted on the stove, sending a homely fragrance into the house. Mozart played through the vinyl record player. The smell of pine trees and wet leaves floated through the window, the scent of autumn. George Miller sat on the old, floral couch, Charles Dickens in hand. It was early in the morning, the start of a new Wednesday. He looked up from his book at the pictures hanging on the wall, the ones of him and his wife over the years. She had died seven months earlier, and every day he missed her more than words could express. George's wispy white hair rustled in the breeze that blew through the window and he stood up, tucking his weathered bookmark into the book and placing it on the table. He let out a long slow sigh, adjusted his small, round glasses, and pulled his toast off of the stove, placing it on a blue and white patterned plate. Two square centimeters of butter, just the way he liked it, spread evenly, with a lukewarm cup of coffee. George looked at the calendar. It was the 15<sup>th</sup> – his day to go out to town and buy groceries. It was what his dear wife Fredrica had done, and so what George would do as well.

When his toast was finished, the plate washed and his brown loafers fastened on his feet, George took his keys from their hook by the door. He grabbed his satchel and buttoned his black overcoat, his wrinkled fingers fumbling with the rough buttons. He locked the door behind him and breathed in the smell of autumn all around him. He crunched through the leaves littered on the path and listened to the birds singing in the trees, the wind softly breathing around him. Down the street he stepped, his mind calm, remembering moments with his wife, thinking of his favorite books. And now life carried on each day, the same pattern, the same routine, yet without Fredrica. That was the part about her death that George simply could not get over. How could life keep going on the same if she wasn't there?

He turned down the lane, opening the rusty gate and stepping under the low tree branches. He knew the way to the train station. He'd been walking it for 75 years now and it was as familiar as Fredrica's soft smile, pressed into his memory forever. Before long, George had reached the door of the train station. A few people walked in and out of the station, eyes fixated on their phones or listening in earbuds. Only a basket of newspapers greeted him at the doorway. George stooped down, the bones in his back creaking, and picked up a paper. He tucked it under his arm and took his place in line at the ticket office. As he stood there, George took notice of the young man lined up in front of him. The man was small and weedy, with a close shaved haircut and an ill-fitting suit jacket which featured a large stain on the front. A black, modern satchel was strapped over his thin body, and he was speaking to the ticket lady in a high pitched, raspy voice.

*What's with this generation and their sloppy clothes?* George thought, looking over the man with a hint of distaste. *In my day, we would wear suits that fit well and are clean and we would comb our hair!* He shook his head and stepped to the front of the line as the scrawny man walked away.

"Morning George!" chirped the woman at the ticket desk. She reached out a pudgy, wrinkled hand to collect George's cash.

“Just the usual ticket to Braymes township? It's the 15<sup>th</sup> today, is it not?” she squawked loudly, pulling out a ticket and handing it to him.

“But of course, Julie,” George replied with a smile. Julie worked here every day and seeing her each time was part of the life that George was used to.

“Have a lovely day!” Julie called.

“You too!” George tucked his ticket into his breast pocket and headed to the correct platform, his feet following the usual path.

When the train pulled into the station, George looked at his watch. 8:15 precisely, just like normal. Breathing out a deep sigh, he stepped over the gap and onto the train. Sounds overwhelmed him instantly: the noisy clatter of the train's engine, the muted conductor's announcement, the whoosh of the doors shutting behind him and the busy conversation of people of all kinds. George stepped past a woman and her baby and in between a pair of teenage lovers. He finally stopped in front of the worn orange and blue seat that he sat in each and every time. Another sigh of relief. No one had taken it. Just as the thought entered his mind, the scrawny man from the train station zigzagged in front of him and plopped himself down on George's seat. George was appalled.

*This generation! So rude! They simply have no respect for us older folks. Quite impolite!* George thought, shaking his head. He sat down on the seat next to the young man instead, his back creaking again as he sat. George pulled the newspaper out from under his arm and placed it on his lap, dusting off his wrinkled hands. The train lurched to a slow start, with a loud grinding and clunking. George winced as his hearing aids made a loud screeching. He adjusted them gently, his rough fingers knocking his wire-framed glasses. The train began to chug along the track, the steady motion a familiar experience to George as he read through the headlines. Yet he couldn't help but feel a niggling of sadness. His perfect, normal morning had been upset. This rascal had stolen George's spot and set his entire morning into disarray. And there that youth was, tapping away on that *screen* of his, with no respect for the older gentleman next to him!

*It really is disgraceful. Children must be taught to respect their elders, to let them have the seat, to open the door for them. Well in my day, we always treated our elders with respect! I know what the issue is – all this confounded technology! My my, I really can't believe the youth of today! What is happening to this new generation? Lazy, ungrateful little* – George's angry thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a loud, wet cough from the young man next to him. George could hardly contain his annoyance and breathed out a heavy sigh. He aggressively flipped to the next page of the newspaper, the pages crinkling noisily. As he did so, George suddenly felt a wave of guilt. He remembered something his wife had said to him, only a few hours before she passed away.

“Now George, I know that you like things to be the same way day in and day out . . . but sometimes you just have to let things be.” Fredrica's face had been so pale, her skin so cold. George remembered the way her white hair had hung like a halo around her face as she lay in the hospital bed, surrounded by tubes.

“I'm going to . . . I'm going to die George. But don't you . . . don't you forget this alright? Things have to change sometimes, that's the way of life.” She breathed in shakily. “And don't you forget to be patient with the youngsters, you hear me?” Her voice was so soft, so weak, but a smile lingered on her lips. George remembered the tears that freely flowed down his cheeks, the sadness that burned like fire in his heart.

George shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. Tears pricked in his eyes. Fredrica was gone now. That had been the worst change of all. And she would never be here again to tell him what to do, to encourage him and to live their normal, unchanging life together. Now he had to face every day without her.

*And I suppose all I can do now is use what she's taught me . . .* George thought. *Fredrica wouldn't want me to be impatient with this lad. She would tell me to be kind, to make conversation.* He breathed out slowly and folded up his newspaper, placing it on his lap again. With a hint of a smile on his lips, he turned to the young man with his ill-fitting jacket and screen-focused eyes. George cleared his throat loudly. The man looked over, dropping his tablet down to his lap. George smiled.

"Hello there, young man. How are you?"