

Excerpt: On Her Own Terms (award winner)

My grandmother died a long time ago. She was holding my hand as the nurse wheeled her away for her tests. The light flickered in her clear blue eyes once more, then extinguished forever.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Edward," she called. "And don't worry."

I saw her the next morning. And every morning since, for four and a half years now, as I have been near to remind her to eat and do the basic tasks she had always taken for granted. Even now, she's lying in my room, a plastic tube running from her gut, chocolate milk-colored liquid filtering in.

She is dead. But the law says she is alive. She breathes, she paws the air, she screams. An animal, trapped.

She does not know who I am.

"Nana, can I lick the bowl?" I ask, eyeing the chocolate frosting-covered aluminum dish.

"You *may*, but you must not tell your mother." Eagerly I clean the bowl, catching missed spots with my fingers. My grandmother approves. She sees something that pleases her.

"Your father used to do the exact same thing," she says, looking off into the distance, then down to her watch. "Oh dear," she says abruptly.

Leaning in close, she whispers to me.

"Are you full?"

I nod my head yes, even though my head tells me no. My seven-year-old stomach always wins.

"Good. Because your mother's making mushroom casserole for dinner."

Cringe. Why doesn't she like me?

"Tell you what," she continues. "When your father comes to pick you up, I'll tell him you've already had dinner. Our little secret."

I smile. I've had all this sugar, yet I am devastatingly exhausted. I fall asleep in the hallway, my nose tucked into the crook of my arm.

Both of us do a lot of sleeping now. Chocolate icing has, sadly, lost its appeal for me. I don't miss it, though.

My grandmother weighs ninety pounds. I'm down to 127—my T-cells a fraction of that. I have lost more weight overall, but on her it is so much more striking.

Six years ago in November, when I found out I was sick, she was the first person I told. She shook her head, sighed, then retreated to her swing on the back porch. My grandfather said she cried all night. By dawn, she was ready for action.

I'd been out of the house several years already. First there was college—which I did not finish—then two years trying to "find myself." I came home to Valencia and found work as a financial analyst. It wasn't great work—I'm more the social type—but it freed up my evenings and allowed me to leave my work behind at five o'clock.

Tuesday at five-o-one, she was waiting at my car. My grandmother looked great, as always. Fastidiously coifed blonde hair, long lacquered nails, rings on every finger, still-great legs pouring into high heels. I called it her Liberace look. She took it as a compliment, although we agreed she had better taste.

"Hello, Edward," she sang, planting a bright pink kiss on my cheek. "Did you have a good day?"

"Fine," I mumbled. What was up with her?

"I just wanted to come by and see that you're okay," she said, her voice dropping. Then her voice rose again. "Look! I've been at Harper's Bookstore all morning, and then by Elaine's. You're going to be just fine."

I peered into her car. On the passenger seat was a stack of books. *AIDS: What You Should Know. AIDS, the Mystery and the Solution. AIDS, Passageway to Transformation. Surviving the AIDS Plague.* And, on the very top, a paperback copy of *The Crucible*.

I love this woman, I thought.

"I also got these vitamins. Elaine says they'll make you strong so you can fight off the AIDS," she added, dropping a huge bottle clattering into my surprised hands. The lady was at war. "You're going to be okay, do you hear me?" she said, sticking her face in front of me, her nose touching mine. It was more of an imperative than a question.

"Uh, of course. I'm fine," I stammered. Hell, the doctors were probably wrong. Mix-ups happen every day. I'm healthy. I'm not the wild one. She is.

I imagined her smoking a joint and reading her books in front of the fireplace, watching the election returns and cheering on that nice young man from Arkansas. *That's* my grandmother.

Alas, I was wrong. Elaine's pills weren't particularly helpful, and the books didn't do anything except make me angry, resentful and depressed at the inevitable. I knew the questions; the answers had changed. Who did this to me? Why me? Bail me out of this, God, and I'll

never...never again. Please. Please don't let me die. I don't want to die alone. I'm too young. It's not natural.

And I'll be damned if anyone calls what's happening to Nana "natural." It's barbaric.

I know she's suffering. She's clawed herself black and blue, trying to pull out the tubes. Finally my father agreed to let her go. The feeding was cut in half, then in half of half. The law won't allow it to be withdrawn completely, so now it's just a matter of time.

Once upon that very time, time was all we had in the world. I wonder which one of us has more of it left.