Rice Pudding
Rachel Balla

My grandma’s breathing came quickly although she was asleep, curled on her side on the hospital bed they had brought into our home. Her skin hung off her bones like moss off of an ancient, whithered tree. Her quick breaths ceased and mine caught in my throat. Silence filled the room. Was that it?

No. Grandma let out a big sigh, and the quick breaths started again. Her skinny chest barely moved under the labor. I let out my breath, too, and lowered my head. This old, beloved woman could die right in front of me, any minute. I saw how sick her sagging, dying body had become, and I watched her fighting for her breaths now, but instead of choosing to see those things, I turned my mind back to her rice pudding. When I was a child, she had concocted the most delicious rice pudding, piping hot and spicy with cinnamon, nutmeg, and mace.

“Eat around the outside,” she would tell me, back when her white hair had been a big, curly mass, instead of the spare, short, straight style she sported now. “The middle is still too hot. The outside, Rachel.”

I remembered her backyard, a hill, which my sister and I would roll down, grapes growing at the top and a swing set at the bottom, raspberry bushes on one side and green beans and tomatoes on the other. She would garden, her once-plump form hunched over as she tended the fragile young buds, a hunch that would later be exaggerated by severe osteoporosis. Beside the swings, there was a tiny wading pool painted with cartoon fish where Grandma would bathe my baby brother while he splashed, dumping water on his blonde locks with a laundry detergent scoop.

Her hands, now bony, gripped a tissue for familiarity’s sake, as I had gripped the pink blankie with blue teddies she had sewn for me as a child. I remembered those hands flipping cards while we played Slap Jack at her kitchen table, back when even her short stature had still towered over me by two head’s height. Her hands had cut out “Toast Soldiers” for my entertainment at breakfast time. Her hands held mine as she walked and I skipped to the park.
on each visit.

I suddenly felt the compulsion to do something for her. For all we knew, at this point, she was brain dead, in a coma. I probably would never speak with her again. She had all the painkillers she needed, so she wasn’t making those groaning noises any more. A blanket covered her skeletal shoulders, and we had placed a pillow between her bony knees. We had done everything we could do for her body, but I still needed to do something.

I grabbed my laptop from where it sat, in sleep mode, the blue light blinking. I opened up a word document and placed my hands at the keyboard. I looked up at Grandma again, now a fragile sight, and then started to capture all the life and memories of her on the blank page.