She heard the telephone ringing inside the house. Its shrill cry carried ominously through the screened window jerking her back to reality. The sound wrought a nervousness inside her—she sensed it was the call. Tensely curled up in the tire swing, gripping its black, rubber sides, she waited.

She couldn't hear what was being said from this distance even by straining her ears. A lawn mower growled softly in the yard next door, and the muted sounds of boys playing army in the fields just below her house rose up on the hot air waves.

Shaking herself a little, Jamie unfolded her thin, knobby legs and let them dangle for a moment before pushing herself out of the swing. The grass felt dry beneath her feet as she walked toward the house. She entered silently, leaving the door open, and halted beside her older brother Todd who was talking to someone on the other end of the line.

"Are you sure?" he asked, running a worried hand through his thick dark hair. "Well, what should I do?" His face and features were tightening up. Little lines pinched his skin at the corners of his eyes and near his mouth as they often did when he was in pain.

"I mean, do you want us to come over or what?" Desperately he looked over at Jamie, his little sister. He took a deep breath, blinked rapidly, and turned abruptly away from the skinny statue-like figure.

"Okay, Mom," he said, gulping past a lump in his throat. "I'll get the kids ready and we'll wait for Dad." Slowly he placed the receiver back in its cradle, pausing for a moment as if he wanted to say something more, then deciding against it, let it fall the last quarter inch.

Before turning back to her, he stuffed his fists into his levis and looked up at the ceiling, taking deep heavy breaths. Keeping his glance on the ceiling, he started to talk. His voice came out low and thick.

"Jamie?" he said almost questioningly. "Jamie, that was Mom. Uh. . . . " He slowly turned to face her. His misty blue eyes sank through her cold brown orbs. "Uh, she said that Grandpa's gone—he's . . . dead." Rushing on as if to get it all over with in one lump, he continued. "She wants us to come over to Grandma's house. Dad's coming. I'll go tell John and Katie."

She didn't respond. She had known what the phone call was about even before she'd come into the house. The dread had been with her, waiting beside her while she sat in the swing. Now it finally burst forth as a cold reality. And yet, she couldn't feel it. Her body was numb, especially in her head where the cold seemed to originate; from there it went dripping down her nervous system.

Her grandpa had been sick for a couple of months now. Her mother said he had cancer. She couldn't comprehend cancer as cells multiplying out of control, only as some evil that had been shriveling her grandpa right before her eyes. Whatever this cancer was, it ate at his power that seemed so limitless. It ate his laughter, his twinkling blue eyes. It devoured him until he was a mere shadow moving about in his blue flannel robe.

"Jamie, you okay?" Todd asked worriedly.

Jamie didn't answer but turned mechanically from him to go back outside and get her red Keds, abandoned in the tire swing. She walked without really seeing where she was going. A breeze whispered by lifting the ends of her ponytail, tugging playfully at the confining elastic, trying to loosen its fierce grip. Jamie walked through its breath in no mood to play.

Climbing back inside the swing, she gathered her shoes and hugged them tightly to her chest. Memories darted through her mind forcing her to acknowledge them. From one of these past experiences a voice called out. It was the voice of her friend Nancy. "It's Grandpa! It's Grandpa!" she cried excitedly. All of the kids on the block called him Grandpa whether they belonged to him or not. "He's coming! I can see his car." Jamie, her sister Jill, and two other friends threw
down their Barbie dolls and bounded towards the front of the house. As they rounded the corner, they saw his red Chevrolet with silver trim lining the wing-tipped fenders just pulling in.

“It’s Grandpa!” they screeched confirming Nancy’s observation. Pushing and giggling, they waited excitedly as Grandpa eased to a halt. The moment the engine shut off the five girls released themselves and barreled to the car, elbowing each other as they pulled open the door.

“Hold on pardners,” Grandpa chuckled, bending down to hug all five at once. “I just might want to use that door again.” The girls giggled, still clinging to him like a swarm of bees.

Grandpa was still a handsome man at sixty-eight. He had black hair that was combed over the top of his head to hide a hairline that had receded in his youth. His skin was tanned a chestnut brown except in the deep creases still white where the sun’s rays couldn’t reach when he smiled or laughed. There was a Godfather look about him from his panama straw hat to the protruding cheeks that looked as if cotton had been stuffed in next to the lower gums. His movie-star-white teeth were showing now as he smiled and said, “Hey, guess what happened to me on the way over here?”

“What?” the five echoed in awed unison.

“Well, I was just passing through the grocery store parking lot when this great big man came running out of the store waving a gun around in the air. He pointed it at me and forced me to stop.”

The girls gasped.

“Well,” he continued, his deep blue eyes twinkling. “Apparently he’d been stealing all kinds of stuff from the store and the police were after him — right on his tail, in fact. He didn’t want to get caught with the goods, so he forced me to take them.”

“What did you do, Grandpa?” Jamie almost whispered.

“What could I do? I took them.” Ten large eyes stared back at him in astonishment. “Here, help me carry the loot into the house.”

Jill was the first to receive a bag. Inside its brown shell were cookies, ice cream, and chocolate milk. “Grandpaaa,” Jill said suspiciously, drawing out the word. She looked up, shaking her head. Picking up on her cue, realizing he had been joking with them but still a little unsure, the chorus chimed, “Grandpaaa-Are you tricking us?”

“Well,” he said stroking his chin. “Maybe just a little. But I couldn’t tell your mother I’d bought all of this. She’d skin me alive for rotting out all of your teeth.” Laughing together, they walked into the house.

Another voice echoed in her head. This time it was Grandpa’s. He was singing softly in her ear. His deep voice vibrated softly with a slight ragged edge. Jamie had been sleeping with her sister Jill at their Grandparent’s summer trailer at Bear Lake. She had awakened, crying with a painful stomach ache. Grandma had given her some aspirin and snuggled her into bed with them both, but it didn’t ease the pain. Later Grandpa got up and held Jamie on his lap. He rocked her slowly as he told ancient Indian legends and sang campfire songs. After an hour, Jamie drifted into a peaceful sleep. She never knew how long he had stayed up, but she remembered faintly stirring once, seeing the gray of dawn and feeling Grandpa’s arms still around her before she settled back into sleep.

Another memory stepped forward on the stage. It was Saturday afternoon in the early spring. Grandpa had taken the gang with him out to the dairy to buy some milk. He bought all of his milk from the dairy—said it was fresher that way.

As they waited for Mr. Turner to fill his order, Grandpa walked down to the pasture. “Now watch this,” he said. Cupping his brown sun-spotted hands together around his mouth, he made a low mooing sound. It started at the very bottom of his stomach and came rumbling out of his mouth. Nothing happened. “Maybe she just didn’t hear me,” he reassured, motioning his head towards a brown heifer who was undisturbedly chewing a mouthful of fresh grass. He cupped his hands to his mouth and mooed again, this time longer and louder. It thundered across the
pasture. The cow looked up, blinked her large brown eyes, and mooed back. The girls gasped in
astonishment and wonder. Grandpa made the sound again, and again the cow responded, but
this time she started running toward the fence. The girls were past astonishment at this man who
could speak to animals. As the cow came nearer on a full run, their wonder turned to fear and
they screamed, falling off the fence in their mad desire to escape the charging cow.

It stopped as it neared the fence, and one by one, the girls' heads popped cautiously up
through the grass blades. Grandpa was chuckling in his sincere way that said he loved them and
was laughing with them rather than at them.

Coming back from the past, Jamie stuffed her feet into her shoes, bending the heels down
so she could wear them like slip-ons. She flapped back to the front of the house and climbed sul-

-fenly into the empty green station wagon, waiting for her brothers and sister to come. Turning her
head, she looked out the window. There was no red Chevrolet and no Grandpa.

Fifteen minutes later they entered Grandma's house. The atmosphere felt sprayed with
muffled tears and sorrow. The house smelled different—it smelled old. Jamie followed her parents
into the back bedroom.

She looked at him, but it wasn't really him. Grandpa was alive and well, laughing his deep-
throated laugh. He was out mooing at cows. He was at the high school track jogging around the
strip with his slow, yet continuous stride. He was everywhere in her mind, but not lying on this
bed, pale and cold. It couldn't be Grandpa, she thought. And yet it still looked enough like the
man she remembered and loved, wearing his pale blue and white checked pajamas, to cramp her
throat muscles.

Without moving her head, Jamie shifted her eyes to see her mother and aunt crying softly
but smiling, small wistful smiles.

"He looks so peaceful," Aunt Louise said, dabbing a kleenex to her eyes. "And thank
heaven, after all he's been through."

"He really does," Jamie's mother replied. "I still feel as though he's here with us in this
room, wanting us to know it's okay. It's like there are spirits here who are so happy to see him." She
put her arm around Jamie and pulled close, murmuring soft comforting words into her ear trying
to reassure her daughter. "Jamie, honey, it's all right," she said caressing her shoulder. "Grandpa's
in heaven now with Heavenly Father and Mother. His mom and dad and brother are up there and
his good friends. And now, darling," she whispered bringing new tears to her eyes, "now Grandpa
doesn't hurt anymore. He's happy."

Again she pulled her close, but Jamie resisted, staring almost angrily into her mother's
eyes. She turned to leave but found her dad and Aunt Louise, still dabbing her eyes with the
 crumbling kleenex, in the doorway. The room was too crowded. Everyone was staring at her
Grandpa.

This isn't peaceful, she thought. This isn't beautiful at all. Don't they understand? Grandpa
is dead. He's gone. Gone forever. Sure, she believed she'd see him again in heaven, but that was
her whole life time away. That was forever. The man whom she loved had left her, leaving this old
body behind and lying so still on the bed.

She felt like the world was closing in on her. Everything in the room was getting bigger,
blocking out her space to breathe. In a desperate struggle to move, she edged closer to the bed. As
if of a will of its own, her hand slowly moved out to touch her Grandpa's cheek.

As her fingers came in contact with his face, she felt a warmth radiating from his skin. For
an infinite second she thought she saw him breathe. Her heart stopped. Her breath caught in her
throat. Her eyes darted wildly from her fingers, still touching his cheek, to his face and then to the
faces of those in the room. Did they see it? For a second she thought—pleadingly prayed—that he
was still alive. The looks she received were looks of pity.

The hope passed and with its passing it dissolved the numbness that had enfolded her
since the phone call. Her whole body began to feel. With one sweeping wave, emotion surged over
her. The frame of her thin body began to quiver, then violently shake. A tingling started in her upper nose and exploded uncaring into her eyes. In a high cry of pain and despair, a sob broke from her unchecked and one after another forced their way out into the quiet sniffling air.

The sobs were loud and uncontrolled, sounding sacrilegious as they broke down through Jamie's well-constructed barriers and echoed throughout the small room.

Her mother tried to hold her but couldn't stop the heaving flood of tears. Aunt Louise looked down at Jamie in alarm and motioned towards Grandma who had started crying again.

Jamie hated them for accepting his death. Why didn't they fight for him like she wanted to? Why didn't they scream at Heavenly Father to send him back? They all stood around the room in peace having already accepted his passing.

She wouldn't give in—No never, she thought. She would hate and resent his death for the rest of her life. As she thought about this she became hysterical, sobbing louder and digging her nails into her palms. Hiccups broke in between her gulps of tears. Finally her Dad, realizing she need to get away, practically carried her outside, stopping after they had reached the cool shade under the oak trees lining the corner of the back yard.

Bending down on one knee without touching her, he said, “It’s okay to cry, Jamie.” His eyes were dry. “Just let it all out.”

She had sobbed herself dry by the time the hearse pulled into the driveway. Two men about college age got out and unfolded a stretcher. The taller one, not noticing Jamie and her father, said, “Well, this is one down—two to go.”

Jamie stood transfixed, following their movements with her eyes which were cold and expressionless. The speaker, finally seeing her, shifted uncomfortably under her gaze and glanced awkwardly at his friend. The friend shrugged, not knowing exactly what to do, and moved on into the house to pick up the body.

Minutes later they reappeared. On top of the stretcher they carried a gray bag containing a lifeless form.

Jamie hadn’t moved. She continued staring at the two men as they rather clumsily guided the stretcher off the porch and into the mortuary car, securing it in place before closing the doors tightly behind them.