

Baby
By: Alissa Veenstra

I am seven years old and she looms in the darkness, her rather large silhouette contrasts with the light hallway where the adults still talk and watch TV in the living room. She says “goodnight” and I’ll say it back with my mouth half tucked away under the covers. She breathes the ritual “Gramma loves you” and my seven-year-old voice whispers back like always, “Baby loves you too.”

When I’m twelve, I will have outgrown saying it.

When I’m a fifteen-year-old freshman in high school, I will be mature enough to realize the beautiful tradition in it, and will start to say it again. The only difference is she will go to bed earlier than me, so she will say it in her robe in the living room as I’m watching a made for TV movie on her sectional couch.

Baby loves you too. Kiss.

When I’m seventeen, it will be August 22nd when she will die of lung cancer and after the funeral we will sing, “You are my sunshine” on the patio, sickeningly scented with all the funeral flowers. While the floral aroma (so strong it’s a stench) fills my nose, I will sing the verse “Please don’t take my sunshine away”. I will sing this with a red face and in tears. I will always wonder why no one else was crying.

Two months later, I will be a senior in high school and before I walk up the stairs to my family’s apartment, I will retrieve a card from the mailbox. It’ll be a Tuesday in October on my eighteenth birthday. I will look at the envelope and it will be in Papa’s writing, when it was always in hers. My family will greet a sobbing birthday girl at the front door that day.

When I’m nineteen, a baby shampoo commercial will appear between segments of an old rerun of “Roseanne”. The music in the background will sing beautifully and breathlessly, “You are my sunshine” as a baby is happily splashing in a tub. The tears will hit me so

hard and sudden, I won't even realize why I'm crying until my stepfather asks me what's wrong. My mouth will open to tell him, but only more tears will come.

When I'm twenty, I will decide I want to be a writer. Her memory will haunt the pages of my work.

When I'm twenty-one, I will meet a man. He will ask me in our process of getting to know each other, "What's your favorite sound?" I will think about it. I will explain that it is the comforting sound of a thick snore from her neck that reminds you that you're not alone in the toy room. Papa by her side, and the TV still on with a dark night waiting to be slept in the comfort chin of Jay Leno. I will say, I wonder how he, if he, has ever gotten used to the silence in the bed. Perhaps the toy room is all too close for him with the collage making, the meaning making and her finals hours that rolled her out of sight. I will realize that I am diverting, and I will stop talking and let him tell me that it is a beautiful answer. But I will still be thinking about how those decoration apples hang on the whicker white tree effortlessly while he struggles without his bifocals and without a certain thick Italian rattle.

But for now, I'm seven.

As the door closes shut, the comfort of the night-light still glows in the corner.

Baby loves you too.