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Room 32, Winner 1st TRU Creative Non-Fiction Competition, 2017

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Room 32

By Bronwen Evans, Winner 2017 TRU Creative Non-Fiction Competition

The window, open to let in the warm ocean breeze and bird song, is still decaled with the colourful hummingbirds I helped to put up years ago. Pictures of my family and I are pinned to a corkboard on the wall. The refreshingly salty air smells like wool blankets and the sea. People walk past in the hallway outside the wide door. My great-grandmother's room in the care home looks just like it did when we visited last summer, other than the bed, which has been moved to let us sit in a horseshoe around her. She is dying.

We pack as soon as we get the call and leave first thing the next morning. The mountain pass is dangerously slick; at times, there are no tire tracks on the road ahead of us. Thankfully, we aren't forced to turn around because of the weather. As we drive, we watch the sunrise, as pink as the soft blanket we had given Great-Grandma just a few years ago. It cascades over the mountains, illuminating the seemingly endless forest that stands between us and the Island. The drive feels longer than usual.

When we walk into her room, we are shocked by her condition. Her breaths rattle. At times, it takes her body almost a minute to work up the energy for another. They're awful to listen to, but we're told that it's normal and that she isn't in pain. Most of the time, she sleeps. She is no longer eating. Nurses visit often with pain medication or to turn her to prevent bed sores. We all spend time sitting around her bed, keeping her company and making her comfortable.

For almost a week, there is always someone in the room with her. During the day, we squeeze in together and sit on black wicker chairs. At night, my dad, aunt, and grandpa sleep on the floor. My dad doesn't leave her side; she has always been very important to him.

We learn that hearing is the last sense to go, so we share memories with her from different times in her life: her house in Ontario, her job as a “bomb girl,” her late husband, and the “man's job” at Kodak that she was fiercely proud of. She had a stroke before I was born, so I never got the chance to speak with her. I learn a great deal about her over this week.

In the long and uneventful hours by her side as she sleeps, I have time to look around the room. The knobs on the dresser are broken, and some drawers refuse to close completely. The top is piled with fake plants. The room is sparse, even though she's been living here for ten years now. Some rooms in the facility look cozy and homey, but hers is institutional. I wonder if she liked it like this.

Sometimes she opens her eyes and squeezes our hands. We remind her that we love her and that we are here. Eventually, everyone gets used to her breathing. We learn that it's part of the active dying process, which can take days—the body does not relinquish life easily.

During the long hours spent in that room, I am given time to think. This is the first time that I have witnessed the death of a person. I have held dying pets before, and found a bird lifeless at the bottom of a cage, but I have never seen a person die before. It makes me reflect on my own life. If I only have so much time left, what do I want to do with it?

At my age, I am making big decisions that will affect me for years to come. I consider what career I want to pursue, and what post-secondary education I am going to need. I think about what types of cities I want to live in and what lifestyle I want to have. I also wonder a lot about what kind of person I want to be. What can I learn from others? What should I aspire to be like? What difference can I make before I die?

Eventually, I find myself wondering what questions all of those who have come before me have asked themselves. The asking itself seems universal. Humans have an arguably unique and unrivaled sense of self and consciousness. That we would question the world and our place in it is a vital part of our experience, and something about us that we share only with each other.

What else do we share, I wonder?

Across the world, billions of people live billions of separate lives. We pass each other on busy streets, in shopping centres, and in quiet hallways, but we are always alone within ourselves. Everyone has different thoughts and feelings, talents and interests, and memories and plans.

What, then, connects us? What is our shared human experience?

Perhaps it is our cruelty. We let fear and anger influence the world on such a massive scale. From harsh remarks to wars, humans have an astounding ability to harm one another without regret or remorse. We are easily blinded by difference, letting ourselves get carried away by hatred. We behave selfishly and kill each other. Worst of all, we often know that our actions are wrong, but we refuse to change. Time and again, we are guided by the desire for personal gain rather than ethical values. Avarice and carelessness run rampant across the world, causing immeasurable suffering.

This side of humanity shows itself in the children on the playground who mock and exclude one another. It is in corruption and financial collapses fueled by greed. It is in headline news stories and mundane family arguments. Evidence of our failings and of our shared inadequacies is everywhere. We are flawed.

This isn't all that there is to us, though. In an ironic twist, the one animal capable of the greatest evils is also capable of unrivaled levels of selflessness and empathy. The same creatures who spill each other's blood are also the ones who sit and comfort each other through death, as my family is doing for my great-grandmother. As much as violence is a part of the human experience, so are moments of peace and genuine kindness. We support one another. From small compliments to enormous sacrifices, we show compassion towards each other throughout our lives. Humans are a cooperative species. We want to connect positively with others. You see this in children who are willing and happy to share toys with one another. It is in communities that rally around people in need. It is in surprise gifts and thoughtful words.

This kindness is the glue of our societies.

The conflict between these different potentials is part of what makes our experience so unique and complex. We are neither wholly good nor wholly evil. Our choices are what determine our impact on the world. We all share the struggle of being deeply flawed and living in a world where others are deeply flawed alongside us.

Along with this conflict between good and evil, part of what characterizes humans is our drive to understand our place in the Universe. What is our purpose? Why are we here? What are we to do with the time that we have? There are as many answers to these questions as there are people asking them. To wonder about one's place in the Universe is a deeply human pursuit.

Resilience is also a part of our collective experience. The resolve of individuals, groups, and the human species as a whole is what has driven us so far from our humble beginnings millions of years ago. Determination to solve problems has been, and continues to be, a fundamental part of our experience. We dream big, and then incredibly, almost miraculously,

when we work together we achieve what we set out to do. This has allowed humans to accomplish what seems impossible at the start, from building the pyramids to putting people on the moon to running modern democracies.

Humans are capable of and experience cruelty, kindness, curiosity, and determination. This is what connects us, and what has the ability to unite us in a very divided world. Understanding that we all share fundamental experiences, regardless of who we are, can deepen our compassion for one another. Our shared human experience can be the starting point for understanding those around us, and across the globe.

As my great-grandmother lies dying, we hold her hands, stroke her hair, and tell her stories. I wonder about her life and her experiences, and I am frustrated that I never had the chance to have a conversation with her myself. In the stories, I learn of her joys, sorrows, and accomplishments, and I am witness to her resilience until her last breath. When she does eventually pass, she does so in comfort, surrounded by her family. I think to myself that this is the best of people. The love and the devotion to stay by her side, for as long as she needs, and to make sure that she is in a peaceful place, shows what we can be. Her passing is sad, but it is also beautiful. We are here. The window is open.