

Grace and God-winks

Bianca Wargo

Jesus was in her boat.

My queen-sized Sleep Number was neatly done beneath me for a moment. I'd been sitting there within the turquoise walls for at least ten minutes, listening to a recorded message on YouTube that was given two weeks before at Texas A&M. I folded the corner of the pink-white-and-orange, over-washed, fuzzy-ish blanket over my legs and rolled onto my side, simultaneously wrapping my legs in more blanket and moving my laptop from my thighs to the bed. My eyes were heavy, yet frozen open.

Sadie Robertson Huff read her testimony from printed sheets of paper. Reciting what she had previously written word-for-word isn't common for her as a speaker and she was honest about that; in a way, it made what she had to say more intriguing. Having heard several messages and clips from her speaking before and knowing her typical style, my attention was captured and even enthralled in this break in her pattern. It's like she knew or she was told that someone needed to hear every detail of what she had to say.

Though her story is in many ways different from mine, it's also very similar.

Though it had nothing to do with what my family and I were about to endure, yet it also had everything to do with it.

So it came as no surprise to me that after one of the most powerful messages I'd received, I was also hit with one of the most powerful blows to my faith. What was surprising is that the blow came before I even finished learning from what Sadie

had to say. Regardless of the timing though, the Word that she read and taught from after reading her testimony carried me through.

I clung to every word. But at some point I had to go to class, so half of the message was put on hold.

We had an open-notes test that day on grief and its effects on psychological development at different stages of life. We'd talked about several coping mechanisms and the things that make people resilient and healthy through the processes of devastation and loss. I scrolled through the PDF of the textbook I downloaded for free a couple months ago when the semester started. The pictures throughout the chapter were almost entirely of smiling, vibrant elderly faces, with few exceptions.

Before I got too far into the test though, a pop-up notification displayed at the top right of my laptop screen. It was Dad. I clicked it so I could respond as quietly as possible so the professor wouldn't think I was trying anything.

Wednesday, October 26th, 2022. 12:59 PM.

FYI your grandmother is in the ER

Is everything ok? What happened?

Call your grandfather. See how he is doing.

I do not have a lot of details

Kk will after class

This short text conversation came only days after she was last released from the hospital for a dementia-related seizure. The silence in the room as the class worked on their tests nearly muffled the thud and fracturing of my heart falling into a grave-sized pit below me.

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November 11, 2011 at 11:11 AM, my mom received a call from the hospital where Abuelita, her mom, was staying. We were still a few hours away from Orlando, driving down from north Jersey. I was eleven years old, and still in denial about her not making it out of the hospital solely because I'd prayed and prayed that God would keep her here on earth long enough for me to say goodbye in person. I was so in denial that when I was handed the phone, I simply said "Hi, how are you?" as if it was just a typical phone call, and as if we would understand one another (because she could only speak Spanish and I can't). It dawned on me after the phone made its way around the car to my brother, my dad, and back to my mom that I was wrong. That was it. God didn't answer me the way I wanted.

I cried myself dry that trip and the week following. People at school made fun of me for the journal I carried everywhere, and the fact that after the first couple times my teachers asked if I was ok, they figured out that I needed to be taken out to the hallway to be asked that question anymore. Every night I would look out my window and ask the Lord *why me?* as the faith I'd been taught about dwindled. One kid on the bus even took my journal, taunting me and announcing "Hey look,

it's that journal about your *dead grandma!*" He proceeded to tear pages from it and throw all I wrote onto the grimey bus floor. Not a single person stood up for me.

Even when I got home, my mom's simple response sunk into my mind in a way she did not intend. She listened to what happened, and simply said something along the lines of "People are mean, and sometimes it's more worth it to suck it up and keep going than it is to fight."

I think that's the moment I decided I was an atheist or some sort of agnostic— in the middle of a season of complete silence from God, when it felt like I was losing everything and kept being kicked while I was down, and when what I believed was not because I believed it but because it's what I was taught. I swayed between the two but that decision stuck with me for almost a decade; that's a story for another time.

So from that day on, I almost never cried. It's still physically difficult for me at times even though I can be a bit on the emotional side. Sure, there are times when that's really useful, but it's also made it extremely difficult to hold together the floodgates when I need to or to let out what I'm feeling when I need help. If you ask me, I'd rather be the one that cries too much again.

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I called my grandpa and got no answer. I tried twice on the fifteen minute drive home from school. I got nothing. I'd assumed that he was at Morristown Hospital, hoping maybe the lack of signal there was why he wasn't picking up. All I could

think to do once I parked in the driveway was to pray. *Why, Lord?* But I knew why. I wasn't this upset or worried last week when Grandma was in the hospital. I knew why. I wasn't crying the last time she was in the hospital. I knew why. God's blessed me with that gift of intuition, though at this particular moment it felt a lot more like a curse. I knew.

Once I finally dried my eyes, I grabbed my backpack and stepped out of my bright red Civic and lugged myself and my bag into the house and straight to my room. I hopped onto the vibrant, over-washed blanket and rolled myself up in it again, intending to start a short homework assignment for the class I just came back from. Though I could argue that this happens often, I couldn't manage to stare at the blank page illuminating my laptop screen. I had to write something, but my mind was so overwhelmed with somnolence that my eyes teetered up and down until I decided to readjust and at least be productive for myself if not for school. The cursor hovered over several other tabs before landing on the one I clicked at the top right of the screen, causing the paused face of Sadie Robertson Huff mid-sentence to appear. It's like clicking play ripped the fatigue from the windows to my body and tied open their accompanying drapes.

Sadie explained what it meant that Peter allowed Jesus to preach from his boat before he and his brother and a couple of their friends were invited to follow Him. That boat, the nets, and the fish that he caught were his life. Peter allowed Jesus to use his life to teach and to shine the Light into the darkness of the world.

This was the part You wanted me to hear so badly, huh?

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Thursdays are busy. I get up at 4:30 in the morning to go lifeguard at the local YMCA by 6:00. I barely function at that hour, and if I eat too much my stomach can't manage either. My eyes could barely manage with how dry all of yesterday's crying left them. So I grab a tiny snack from the kitchen with a glass of orange juice and wash my face a few minutes later.

Every bit of me did not want to go in that morning, but I did anyway. The stale white lights of the pool deck and the bleak blackness of the early mid-fall morning outside peering into the windows did little to wake me up. Once evidence of the sun began eradicating the darkness, there was still no change in my interior state. I barely managed to crack a smile to silently say hi to some of the regular lap swimmers or to muster enough will to move around from the high chair I sat in, except to test the pool chemicals each hour. Besides that, I got up one other time to swim towards the end of my shift; the endorphins moderately aided to cheer me up and get me ready for a tedious, stressful drive to school, but it barely lasted until I got to my car twenty minutes later.

I called my dad to see what he knew. She had another dementia seizure on Tuesday, but this time she inhaled some of the fluids that came from her mouth. That was what he knew. So I called my grandpa to check up on him and see what the updates were. He said that on Wednesday he took her to her regular doctor's appointment, but the doc told him to take her straight to the ER after checking her lungs. Sounded like fluids in there, he said. Sure enough, she developed pneumonia

too. It's not like this hasn't happened before, but this time happened so much faster and carried a lot more urgency from the doctors. From the perspective that I wanted to take without thinking about it, things were not looking up.

I'm the type of person that will blast worship music and sing along to it as loud as I can without breaking my voice when I'm driving by myself. I blasted that music. I needed to keep myself focused on the Lord and prepare for what I refused to admit was coming. I needed to remind myself that she believed and lived it too. She had hope, even in her final days being strapped down by sedatives and tubes.

But I couldn't bring myself to sing along as I usually do. I was having trouble believing in the promise she lived for. So maybe I should've pulled over, but I cried— trying not to all-out sob for safety's sake— and I felt like people were seeing me as a crazy person because I was speaking and raising my voice at God in all my pain, but they could see no one there to yell at. I usually don't speak out loud when I pray, and that's kind of why: fear of looking insane. But I was in too much pain to care about that right then or for that entire hour-long car ride to school.

As much as I loved my Thursday night class, I dreaded it that week. I wanted to skip class and just go visit Grandma in the hospital and see how Grandpa was doing since he was most certainly there every second they would allow visitors. The hospital's policy is to only allow two visitors up at a time anyway. I'd likely end up waiting in the lobby for a few hours until closing time if I went, since my dad, aunt, and uncle were likely to be taking their turns seeing their mother, her arms swollen with fluids and mouth clamped around a tube that was stuffed into

her throat so she could breathe— seeing her in an induced coma because she would probably yank at the intravenous tubes and needles in her active and fidgety confusion. I could go tomorrow, I told myself. Grace Irene doesn't give up that easy.

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Typically the weekend is packed with work. Friday nights are for coaching swim practices. Saturdays are for setting up chairs and cleaning at church. Sundays are for services in the morning and youth ministry in the afternoons. There's often still more to it between everything else.

Not this week.

I wanted to push through everything and try to make it to work on Friday for the kids I get to coach, but I felt like I could barely make things work for myself. I wanted to help set up church on Saturday, but I could barely get myself up out of bed. All I had energy to do was drive myself to my grandparents' house and clean a few things up with my parents. Grandpa hasn't always been the most organized guy (if ever), and while somehow he still knew where everything was if it remained untouched by Grace Irene's illness, it often got in the way of keeping things clean.

So my parents and I helped to do just that. We swept, we vacuumed, we let caked food on the stove soak in about half a bottle of Windex, and tried to at least organize the kitchen some. I wasn't sure what to do with some of the spices on the

counter though. I'd never seen half of them used, yet they were still sticky on the outside. The contents of each bottle was just loose enough that it was clearly used a little bit, but still fairly solid. Some of the bottles had little brown nuggets on top of the barely-closed red caps. We all figured we should throw them out and Grandpa was unlikely to notice while we ordered some spices and bottles to replace them all. He noticed the next day.

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Friday, October 28, 2022, around 2:00 PM. I recorded what I observed as I sat beside her, losing hope that she would be healed in the way I wanted her to be. I wanted her physically healed, but I've heard it said before that no matter what happens a true Christian is healed— if not physically on this earth, then by being called home into the presence of the Lord. I think I decided to record it all in case I was wrong and there would be some miraculous recovery, though why I did it as part of my project for my Thursday night class I'm not sure. As it's always been, writing it all down was cathartic— grounding, almost. When it felt like things were being torn from underneath me, the Lord knew I needed something like that— like the gift of pen and paper (or at this age my own laptop and a blank Google Doc), that He graced me with as a kid that I never quite understood at the time. I do now.

beep... beep... beep... and the steady-ish sounds of your breath pumping in and out of the ventilator.

you kind of sounded like Darth Vader.

my sad attempt at making myself laugh, even just a little bit

it didn't work.

under the corner of the bed by your feet: a near-full bag of yellow.

on the opposite side of the bed, nearest to the door: two racks with fluids dripping into what seemed like dozens of snaking iv tubes.

to my left: Grandpa sat beside me, his phone about 2 inches from his nose and text so big that only about two or three words fit on the screen at once.

on my lap: my Bible opened up to Psalm 22 and Psalm 23.

in my head: thoughts of how I should've brought a few flowers.

somewhere in the depths of our thoughts: the way God had shaped the three of us through our high school years, decades apart but in the same place.

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Saturday, October 29, 2022, around 5:45 PM, I continued to record all I saw.

beep... beep... beep... and, once again, the steady-ish sounds of your breath pumping in and out of the ventilator

the smell had not gotten much better.

your arms swollen with all the fluids they had dripping into you through the clear snakes that hung from bags that were hanging on a couple rolling metal poles.

they were preparing to transport you for more scans.

things were not looking up for your health, but I at least could see that if this was it, you would be home in Heaven.

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And again, Sunday, October 30, 2022, at 1:02 PM.

beep... beep... beep... and again, the steady-ish sounds of your breath pumping in and out of the ventilator

BP is slowly fading.

Grandpa stepped outside for a moment to be on the phone.

once again, my Bible is open on my lap.

he told me a few minutes ago that the doctor "didn't see a positive outcome." all I could think is it's not one we want, but either way it's a positive. you either come home to family, or you go home to the Lord.

no one saw a positive outcome either on that friday or saturday, but then He rose again on sunday.

you may not rise again exactly like that, but I know you will rise to a better life. you had Jesus in your boat.

I don't know how I pictured your last days... I'm not sure any of us did. even through these past years of declining health– or even just these past few days– you still fought. you haven't given up. that's a big part of the person God made you to be. that's one of the biggest lessons I've learned from you over the years: don't give up on who God is calling you to be, or what He's calling you to do.

This was the last time I saw her alive. I went to youth that night at church still, trying to maintain my sights on the Lord before the teens that I help lead and trying to see His hand through it all.

Under the bleak blanket of dim evening light, I came home to my mom sitting on the couch by herself in her pajamas watching some corny Hallmark movie.

“Where’s dad?”

“The hospital.”

“This late?” (It was about 10:00 PM).

“They waiting on the doctors. I feel bad not being there with him—”

“The room is only so big, Mom.”

“I know but you cousins there too and Tom—”

“We’re there with him more than you think. We don’t have to be in the room for that.”

Neither of us sobbed by any means, but as I bent down beside the couch to hold my mom for a moment and she held me too, there were a few silent tears for both of us. What I said was just as much for me as it was for her.

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My family had been preparing for this for just short of a decade already. Once a steady light, an independent entrepreneur, a local “flower lady,” a wise and loving free-thinker, and a steadfast believer, we’d seen her decline to mutters of sometimes random words or, on a good day, a sentence or two that made no sense in the context she said them in. It was painful, to say the least. It’s immensely difficult to see someone who you love and that once so fiercely loved you wither away.

I remember the last time I walked out of that hospital— the last time I’d seen her alive, though she was barely so, hanging on by ventilation tubes and several

needle-pointed snakes biting into her hand from the two racks of bagged fluids. Of course there was a part of me that asked God why He would allow this. There was a part of me that didn't understand how things as painful as this were allowed to happen under His watch. Yet at the same time, every part of me understood.

I'd spent the last three days reading and re-reading Psalms 22 and 23 because I knew I understood, though it felt like I didn't; I just needed to be reminded. I'm not sure which psalm I read more of, but as high-contrast as they seemed at first, I noticed that they spoke from the same heart. Yes, both came from King David— but the literal heart is not the heart I'm really talking about. What I mean by the same heart is a posture of gratitude even for promises yet to be fulfilled. What I mean is a heart of Hebrews 11 faith: *...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

And still knowing and fully believing and understanding the promises of God regardless of how immediately evident, I struggled not to let the floodgates burst. My goal was to get to my car and be alone with all my pain, but I suppose the Lord knew I needed to be reminded that *where two or three gather together as my followers, [He is] there among them* (Matthew 18:20). I needed to be reminded (and maybe my aunt did too— that I may never truly know) of that call to *bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ* (Galatians 6:2). I met my aunt in the lobby to give her the pass to get up to Grandma's room, and she knew.

"How're you holding up?" She asked genuinely. I felt as small and embarrassed as I did when my sixth grade teachers asked me this when Abuelita passed away. I

half expected someone to start laughing at me. No one did, my aunt simply hugged me as she saw me trying to fight the tears back. We've had our disagreements in the past, but we both knew where she was going and how the road ahead for this family was going to feel quite empty without the steady and active personality of Grace Irene Wargo. I made it halfway to my car, almost to the hospital doors. The lobby was mostly empty aside from two attendants at the front desk in their scrubs, my aunt, and me. The shame of crying in front of strangers set in for a moment. But none of them knew what I'd just heard from the doctors, and my aunt at least understood that time was just about up for her mom as much as I understood that it was for my grandma. I wasn't alone. It's not even about me, nor was it ever.

"She'll be in a better place," my aunt reassured the both of us as we hugged and we sobbed together. I know a lot of people take that as an empty reassurance— how can anyone on this side of eternity ever *know* with full confidence where someone is going after they die, if they even go anywhere? I get it. I was in those shoes some years ago when I didn't have an understanding of the Gospel and who Jesus is for myself.

My abuelita, my maternal grandmother, passed away when I was eleven years old. I don't exactly know whether she truly knew the Gospel for herself, but I could mainly attribute that concern for her soul to our language barrier since she only spoke Spanish and I could only ever pick up a couple words here and there. I don't doubt that she did though. My mom occasionally mentions how she had a taste of several Christian denominations growing up in Puerto Rico— especially recently

she's spoken about this since my family has started going to church again. But I didn't understand how any of it worked when Abuelita passed. I had no idea where she was going. I just knew she was gone. That "better place" was at the time an empty promise to me. It wrecked me. I cried out to God and felt so broken and unheard and abandoned. How could You do this to me? I got no answer until this time around with Grace Irene, but for eleven years I had no answer.

So the question still remained: *God, how could You do this to me?*

But the truth is, it was never about me. I understood that this time around. That "better place" is now something I understand to be real, but I also understand that it's not about the place at all— it's about the *presence*. So when my aunt kept repeating those words to me, my tears flooded more and more with some sorrow, but more and more with abounding joy that she would be in the presence of Jesus.

I have that assurance because I know she believed in Jesus and the power of His death and resurrection by the way she lived. Jesus was in her boat.

And no, Grace Wargo was not much of a sailor on her own— whatever boats she had were more of something that she and my grandpa, Joseph, bought and would bring out on the water with their three children: my dad, also Joseph, my aunt, and my uncle. Years before we even suspected the slightest bit of Lewy Body, I even recall going out on Lake Winnepesaukee with her, Grandpa, Dad, and her sister Audrey with her husband— my uncle— Dick. I don't think we were on that sailboat long, but we were out there. I think that was my first sailing experience. My point is, her boat was most often not an actual boat, but Jesus preached from it anyway.

Her boat was more like flats of flowers that most Jersey growers wouldn't typically sell. Her boat was selling potpourri and unique wreaths and flower arrangements. Her boat was Holland Mountain Farms. Even before I knew Jesus for myself or understood His words, I was seeing glimpses of Him through her business, through her life, and through the light she gave people so freely— her boat, her net, and her fish. Much like Sadie Rob Huff had explained from the moment Peter decided to let Jesus preach from his boat, which was his livelihood, in that sermon I held onto so closely in the weeks leading up to her passing.

There's a news clipping that I took a picture of at her funeral that includes a few words about one moment that sums up how she ran her business in such a way that I would say it's impossible to not see the light of Jesus in her life— especially when you know Jesus for yourself. I don't know exactly when it was published, but I can credit *The Daily Record's* Debra Scacciaferro for describing this moment that I can't even say I was there for, but I'd seen many like it that I almost feel like I was there. I tear up even reading it over again, to be honest.

So when Lisa Martin of Jeffersonville and her daughter Alexi, 5, pulled up to choose flowers for their deck, Wargo presented Alexi with a pot of purple pansies.

“Would you like to take these home?” she asked.

Alexi looked for a moment, then announced, “I like pink plants.” Her mother grimaced, but Wargo, used to four grandchildren, just laughed and switched it with a pot of pink impatiens.

I was one of those four, which eventually grew to five grandchildren at least a few years after this was most likely printed. We were all loved in much the same way that she showed love to Alexi that day, and then some. She and Grandpa were always so generous, loving, kind, and honest and still tough when it was needed. Grandpa still is, as she also was, always willing to share knowledge and help research whatever our latest interests are for grandchildren and other children alike. But more than anything there was wisdom between the two of them. Not the kind of wisdom that the rest of the world might expect from a couple of grandparents, but I'm talking about the kind of wisdom that goes beyond even their own years. The kind of wisdom that only comes from the Holy Spirit dwelling within a person. She shared it freely, probably often without realizing it. Grandpa still does, likely also without realizing it sometimes.

Joseph Wargo, my grandpa, is the often silent provider and leader. He doesn't often express when he's hurting, though since Grandma's diagnosis and as her language and motor skills deteriorated he's learned to let people in some more, especially his children. I don't blame him for wanting to be the strong leader his children and grandchildren could look up to and always count on. Even when he's not at his best though, he's still exactly that for us.

And I wanted to stay after the doctor came in and suggested that they put Grandma on what he called "comfort care" (which essentially meant they would take her off the ventilator and start giving her drugs to ease the pain until she passed). Grandpa being Grandpa (and a loving husband that I never previously imagined apart from

Grandma), he asked all the questions that most people wouldn't know to ask because he's done a bunch of his own research and wanted to gather more information to ensure the best care possible for his wife. He would have done that for any of his family, and he would give that list of important questions to any friend that might've asked him. But in this case, there was a tone to his voice that became slightly more apparent with each question— if the circumstances didn't make the pain obvious, I'm not sure anyone in the room would have noticed.

I wanted to stay. I didn't want to leave Grandpa alone at her bedside, even if it was just for a couple minutes while I went downstairs to the lobby to hand off the visitor pass to my aunt. So I gave myself two more minutes after the doctor left, I stood up, held Grandma's frail, swollen-with-iv-fluid hand, and silently prayed Psalm 73:26 over her. *My heart and my flesh may fail, but my God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* I could swear that after the first time I recited that verse in my mind, her finger twitched or something— as if she was trying to tell me keep going, goodbye, or I love you. So I repeated the verse again and again, each time with more tears that I was trying to hold back until I got to my car. Only a couple massive boiling tears escaped my eyes before I left. I dried them from my cheeks before turning to Grandpa to quickly say goodbye before I had the chance to start bawling. I felt bad for scurrying out of the room. I didn't want to leave.

The elevator was only going down two floors, but standing there by myself and trying so hard not to cry that my head began throbbing made it feel as if it were taking me from the top of the Empire State Building to the ground floor, stopping

at each floor without a single person getting on. Even after I stepped off the lift and turned to my right, the hallway seemed longer than it had the previous two days, and still longer with each step I took towards my aunt who was waiting in the lobby.

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Stepping into the room where she lay in a casket wearing her nicest jacket, a purplish-pink suede, was surreal. The aroma of the mostly magenta-and-pink flowers gave such an element of life to the space that every time I looked at her it seemed as if at any moment she was about to gasp for breath and start speaking again, asking if the past few years were a dream. *No, unfortunately they were not.* I wish they were, to some extent, but I'm also not sure I'd be quite as prepared to handle this without the time God provided to prepare.

Sure, death is bound to happen at some point on this side of eternity, but nothing really prepares you for it— nothing but the inexplicable peace, steadfast hope, and abounding joy that only He is able to provide. He provides it in ways we often wouldn't expect, like the years my family and I had with her as she declined in health and mental faculties. Those years were each an eternity by themselves. Without Christ in my life through the last two years, I don't think I'd ever have found the joy or the provision in any of it— I'd likely have ended up as angry and hurt and alone as I felt when Abuelita passed away.

To see how every detail was less somber and depressing and more of a genuine celebration of Grace Irene Wargo and who she was... it brought tears to my eyes

that God would work through people to bring together so many small details. There were countless flower arrangements. Before even stepping into the room, the vivid aroma flooded my mind with peace knowing she was surrounded by so much of what she loved. All but one of the arrangements matched her magenta jacket, the only one standing out being from her only surviving sibling. To me, it fit that the last of the Lee's would stand out, although Aunt Audrey no longer holds that surname and hasn't since well before I was even born. The arrangement she ordered included hints of pink, but also yellow and orange lilies with plenty of greenery and a pale yellow ribbon with shimmering letters reading *Beloved Sister*. It was placed by the head of the casket, the only one closer to her being a magenta arrangement with light pink ribbons and glitter on them that read *Sweetie Pie*.

To the left of those flowers was a poster board with her high school photos, some of which I'd never seen before. Beside her senior portrait were details about her that I forgot I knew, and some that I just didn't.

She aspired to be a gym teacher, but when she and Grandpa became pregnant with my dad, things changed. She also wasn't a huge fan of the college scene down south at the time. She loved Jersey too much and was too bluntly honest for the polite facades she faced where she went to college for a semester. She tried to continue college at William Paterson, but that's around the time my dad happened.

She was a part of the women's basketball team. I don't think I ever knew her to be involved in sports at all, but it made sense because no matter which sports we play, Wargo's work hard at it. She very much gave off the discipline of an athlete, even

in the not-so-athletic parts of life. For her, that meant in her business growing and selling plants and arrangements. It showed in her daring choice of plants to grow and sell— things that not only were difficult to successfully grow, but also in the fact that she never used pesticides or anything manufactured of the sort. Challenge and discipline and trust in God's design— she definitely handed that down the line alongside Grandpa.

Art club makes it make more sense how I ended up more of the artistic type. My mom used to be more of a math person in her younger years— she'll often admit that language was never her strongest area other than the fact that she's bilingual. My dad took the engineering gene from my grandpa, and will also admit that his writing isn't the strongest. He's made it one of his goals since Grandma's funeral to work on that some. While neither of them were left without a creative gene, art wasn't the primary mode of its expression for either of them even as good as they both are at it. Me? I guess I got it more from Grandma and working with her as a kid, helping her make potted and fresh-cut arrangements to sell and sometimes to take smaller ones home to Mom.

Walking across the hall into another room there were more pictures of her. Not many of them included Grandpa because he was most often the one behind the camera, but a majority of them I had never seen before or were from when I was so young I barely recognized myself. It was at the far end of that room that I found Scacciaferro's *The Daily Record* article on Grandma's flower nursery.

I stared at that board for much longer than it took to read that article three times over. Each picture was of her surrounded by flowers, either working on her own, making arrangements with Mom, or posing with my cousins and I surrounded by mums. And to think that this dream that she had and the business that she built would not have happened if she didn't take time off from pursuing a teaching career. I'm sure she would have loved doing that too, but I know she loved more being the fierce advocate she was for her kids and the rest of her family. She loved more being surrounded by nature and tending to it. She loved expressing and creating in a way that helped others.

I barely sat the whole time we spent at the funeral home, but at one point I sat in the front row in front of a woman I didn't recognize who was probably at least a decade younger than Grandma was. She was one of the few people Grandma hired to help her take care of the flowers; it'd been a number of years since the last of the two or three times I'd seen her since she stopped working at Holland Mountain Farms. She told me of a time that Grandma serendipitously came across an opportunity to do flower arrangements for this woman's friend's wedding. If I remember the story correctly, this friend of hers was a stranger to Grace Irene, but that didn't stop her from providing the last-minute floral support this person needed. The wedding was in Connecticut, so it was far from an easy or quick drive from Jefferson, New Jersey, but that didn't stop Grace Irene and her generous heart and hands.

Jesus was in her boat. The evidence is in her business, her gifts, her love, her life, and how she used it all in the disciplined, wise, and unsparing ways she did. She knew that God's grace wasn't something to be earned, but rather something to respond to. So she did. She responded. And she was one of many to plant seeds into my life that grew and led me to Him too.

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The next day was *something*. I guess it's always something, to say the very least, when you have to bury one of the most influential people in your life. But to do that, go to the repass, have the first sip of alcohol you've had in months (though it was only a single glass of wine), catch up with family you haven't seen since you were a little tike, and then go straight to church still dressed in all black for a youth retreat you're one of the leaders for (even though you were reminded several times you didn't have to push yourself through that hard), then end up on night watch that night... *that was something*. And that still isn't the whole story of that day.

The viewing and the funeral was the first I'd seen or heard of my brother in what had to be months. I didn't push it too hard because it was a hard week for all of us, but the gentle reminder was there that it shouldn't take someone's death for Mom, Dad, and I to hear from him. That reminder hasn't gotten us very far since then. After that short message to him, we all drove together as a family to St. Thomas the Apostle Church, less than ten minutes from Grandpa's house, along Berkshire Valley Road.

The last time my family had gone to this church I'd just turned seventeen. Great-Grandma (Grandpa's mother) had passed away the day after Christmas, and at that point I didn't feel as chaotically broken as I did after Abuelita. It was more of a numb brokenness. I didn't yet know Jesus, but I'd just learned a bit more about Him because I'd been going to the same Catholic high school where Grace Irene met her Joseph. Soon after, my high school theology class had ruined the progress I'd made towards the Lord because, according to the Catholic theology I was taught, the *mortal sins* I've committed essentially bar me from heaven entirely. I had yet to read the Bible for myself at the time though, so I hadn't realized how wrong that doctrine was. I was nonetheless hurt by it. As was my brother after Grandma's funeral service.

Bryan hadn't been to a Catholic church for well over half his life, and he's over thirty. Nor did he have the same experience I did of going to a Catholic school and having mass every month. Baptized as a Catholic or not, he shouldn't have been expected to remember exactly what to do when he brought the gifts up, nor should he have been confronted about his faith before our entire grieving family and denied the grace that Christ poured out for everyone. Should we be reminded to examine our hearts before communion? I believe so. But I do not stand for individually calling someone out before a crowd. God knows our hearts, and God is more than capable of defending Himself if need be. Who are we to stand in the way of His grace that was "poured out for [me], and for many," as is recited during every communion rite? Even Peter asked himself that question after he has his vision in Acts 10 when God tells him "What God has made clean, do not call

common.” This was about more than just the food he was shown, and Peter even expresses that (Acts 10:28).

Speaking of grace, I know that Grace Irene must’ve been rolling around in that casket for that very reason. She’s always been a fierce advocate for her family, and even as a proud Irish Catholic she understood that doctrine is not the beginning and end— God is. If she were in the pews with us at that moment, she would’ve glared at that priest and had a stern word with him after the service. Dad was well aware of that, and though Bryan is not biologically his son, he loves him as his own and cared enough to write to the priest later on when he had a chance to collect his thoughts. This was much like Grandma would’ve done not because she had to, but because she wanted to and loved us enough to stand up for us. This was much like Jesus who got up on that cross for us not because He had to, but because He loved us so much that He wanted to, even as His flesh protested so much that He sweat blood and collapsed (likely due to cardiac issues) on the way up the hill of Golgotha.

That’s really what made that day something. I was furious for a moment, but because I had such a busy weekend ahead of me it hardly struck me until my dad asked me to edit his letter to the priest. It hardly struck me until we had my brother on the phone some days later and he actually said it made him less want to go to church again. Sure, it’s not about going to church. It’s about spending time with the Lord. *[But] let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not*

neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25).

...

It's strange going to a youth retreat dressed for a funeral. There's really no other way to describe the feeling that people are looking at you like how is she still here, dressed like that? I know no one was looking at me like that, but there are some feelings you just have to brave through because it's impossible to shake even with the facts of the situation. I got there and received a couple excited hugs from a couple of my senior girls, and the youth pastor and another leader pulled me aside at separate times before we left to ask how I was doing. I was ready though. For the time being, this retreat would be my boat, and my grief would be the nets.

For the time being, I could hold my life out to God as a place from which He could speak to and with people. I could hold everything else I had out to Him so that maybe— just maybe— He could catch one fish, or many. Just like Grace did.

I'd spoken to the youth pastor about speaking around the Saturday night campfire some weeks ago, and as things started to decline for Grandma, I started to tell him I might need to split it with someone. This idea of Peter's boat and nets were heavy on my heart. It just felt like something that the Lord was asking me to be brief and easy on myself, but share it. So I did.

There was one part of Saturday before the campfire that made me want to change the message, though I knew I didn't need to. Because I didn't end up changing the message, I never told anyone but my parents this part.

On November 5, 2022, the day after the funeral, the youth leader group chat received a message from one of our other youth leaders who was unable to make it to the retreat because she and her husband (who is also a youth leader and was not at the retreat either) were expecting. *Grace Elena*.

I don't believe in coincidences. God doesn't do things just for kicks. Sure, in this case one could argue that Grace is a common name, but Elena sounds a lot like Elaine and the way that it is spelled in this case is also very similar to Elaine—the last Lee sibling to pass away before my grandma. One could argue that Grace Elena's mom and I lead the same group of girls together, so she likely knew what I was going through. Really, she knew as much as any of the other leaders. She did not know family names or my family's history. She did not know how much my grief was stirring up a struggle in me to believe that God still saw me in my pain. Yet there was a sweet little picture of Grace Elena on my phone as I was studying Luke 5 and John 21, which Sadie Robertson Huff spoke about in that message that I was holding onto the past two weeks now.

See, what's interesting about John 21 is that Simon Peter goes right back to fishing after Jesus died. He's scared of persecution, so he goes and hides where he is most comfortable. But just like the day of fishing in Luke 5 when he left it all behind to follow Jesus, he had no luck catching anything. Just like after Jesus preached from

Peter's boat, Jesus told Peter to cast his net out one more time. Once again, the net was so full of fish that the men on the boat could not haul it all in. It was by His Word and deed that Peter recognized Him, and he was so excited to see Jesus again that he jumped out of the boat and swam back to shore where Jesus was.

I recognized God in the same way. Yes, my parents brought me up in a Christian household, but I admit that the first time I recognized Jesus was through my grandma and all the little moments she spent making flower pots and arrangements with me when I was a child, no matter what battles she was facing. It still took some time for me to accept Him for who He is, but she kept casting her nets out as Jesus called her to, because I think she recognized that no matter how many fish or how heavy the fish, her net would not tear as Peter's did not either (John 21:11). And it's because God sent Grace Elena that I started more and more to recognize and live the same. It's because God revealed Himself to me through my grandma, Grace Irene, for years and kept working at my heart and preparing me for it that I could finally rest truly assured that she would be in a better place.

It's not an empty promise, it's a conditional one. While God's love is unconditional, our status as a child of God is. ***If** we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But **if** we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **If** we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **If** we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **If** we say we have*

not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:6-10). In other words, when Jesus is in your boat, preaching from it, given permission to use your nets to catch fish (because God does not force His way into our lives, as Revelation 3:20 tells us), we are receiving that promise. Grace Irene received that promise—the evidence was in all she did. She was a James 2 kind of Christian. Jesus was in her boat.

...

And perhaps that's where I should end the story, but I want to make one more thing very clear about Grace Irene: she was not simply on the shore watching Jesus do His thing. If she was, she would have been a mere "hearer of the Word," as James puts it. How could she be a James 2 Christian if she only heard the Word and never applied it? How would Jesus have truly shone a light so generously to others if she did not live the very Word she claimed to believe in?

I'm fully convinced that Grandma could not have run the business or led the life she did without the free spirit she had—free because of her active faith in Jesus and because she lived to the best of her [still human] ability as she was called and designed to by God. I'm fully convinced that Peter could not have done all he did for the Church in its infancy without the freedom he found in Jesus. Peter was not just on the shore listening. He let Jesus into his life, and found in Jesus a true friend that he could trust with everything—Someone he could place faith, confidence and assurance in fully and completely, even with his entire life. Grace Irene found the same thing in Jesus as she was much of the driving force behind "two successful

businesses,” as her obituary often reminds me that it was not for nothing that she chose to do all she did, but “her confidence, faith and perseverance... allowed her to take that step each time.”

I often wonder how she held on to her faith so well, thinking of moments she might have questioned His plans or faithfulness. The faith that she held and she nurtured and cultivated even more than she did her plants— or maybe it was often through cultivating the thousands of plants she did each season— often wouldn’t have made sense to the average person. Often it didn’t make sense to my younger self, even with a more child-like imagination. But even now that I see and can make more sense of it all, I still wonder what it was like for her. I wonder how she wasn’t always so exhausted just from the thousands of flowers she seeded, transplanted, and sold every year; somehow there would still be time and energy enough to love and care for us grandchildren and to support her kids in raising their families.

Immediately I can recall many times my dad has quoted this simple rule from both Grandma and from Great-Grandma: “Don’t get tired, and don’t get old.” While in the physical world these things are not necessarily things within human control, “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). The human spirit can keep going and stay young when it is cared for, and who better to care for the human spirit than the One who created it?

I’m starting to realize more and more that this rule might be less about the flesh than I’ve taken it to be. After all, walking by faith rather than sight (2 Corinthians 5:7) often requires fighting the urges and instincts of the flesh. Are there fleshly

instincts we should follow? Of course, if your body wants to pull your hand away from a fire, you listen to it. But we are often like moths when it comes to sin, attracted to light so much that we may end up flying into a fire.

Rather, this simple rule that Grace Irene lived by applies more to faith so that the rest, including the physical, might flow from that. The spirit is willing. A spirit with childlike faith (Matthew 18:2-4; Mark 10:13-16) is a spirit that truly and fully accepts and trusts God, from whom life and inexplicable joy come from (1 Peter 1:8-9). That's how she kept pushing through— her spirit's submission to the Holy Spirit.

I write this essay in many ways so that I can work through my thoughts, pain, grief, and doubts. I share this piece of my journey with you though so that you might understand even just a bit of what the Lord has done in my life and can do for you too. I share this with you also to make it clear that faith in Jesus can do a lot for you, but the heart of that faith should never be transactional. It's not about getting something out of it— Grace Irene gave so much to her business, family, and to others and there was often little worldly value to what she got in return. *Why would she do that?* Because what she did was never about her in those moments with people like Alexi. Instead, it was about something infinitely better: the ability to boldly stand before the Throne of Grace, before God, and eternally be in His presence, in awe and in worship— to stand before Love itself (1 John 4:8). *How could my heart **not** be glad for her that she's now in His presence forever?*

I thought little of the prayer card I saved from her funeral when I picked it up. Sure, it had all the imagery of gardens, flowers, trees, and light. That fit well into her life. But now I re-read it months later and see with less tear-blurred vision how it fits her specifically.

One line repeats that says *Come, meet me in the garden, Lord*, and that's where she would wait for Him, talk with Him, and spend time with Him. Another line says *the day is fresh and bright*, as each day was to her by her simple rule of "don't get tired, and don't get old." *The flowers, indeed, are blooming all around, and the trees are tall and grand*. She tended to them all, even the kinds of plants that were a challenge most growers were not willing to take on. I would never know of my favorite plant, pineapple sage, if it weren't for her. It's not a common plant to find, but she had it and continued to grow it as long as she could because she knew it was my favorite. But *how happy* I'm sure she is now that the Lord has *uplift[ed her] heart and soul with joy, and set [her] spirit free!*

I wonder how aware she was of her condition in those last few years. She couldn't express it in words, and I don't think she had the chance to create in the ways she once did. Instead what we got were several "butter rolls" where she would shove a stick of butter into a brand new toilet paper roll, chopped up candles, and scattered junk mail and utensils. That was all the dementia, but her need to move around, keep going, and keep her mind active was still very much her.

I wonder if that's still the case where she is now. I wonder if she continues to do what she loves in constant prayer and awe of His presence, or if she's come to a

place where she remains still, *endow[ed]... with new hope and peace* beyond what anyone on earth could ever comprehend.