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King Kong

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Michelle Joy Horne

King Kong

My Grandfather sleeps with a nightlight on — when he finally goes to bed. I must have been about six when I first found out.

We had all watched King Kong together on Gramps' big TV while we ate his famous salmon casserole. Mom and Dad had gone away for the weekend. While they were gone, all of us kids — Kelly, Sam, Anna, and I — slept over at Gramps' house. Everyone else had calmly enjoyed their meal while I huddled in the corner of the couch hoping that no one would realize how scared I was from the movie. I didn't move and couldn't eat as I watched the flickering screen. King Kong's black body could climb even the tallest building. His inescapable hands shattered a window, picked up a screaming woman, crushed her, and ruined her pretty white dress. I was so relieved when the movie was over that I gobbled the salmon casserole without even separating the salmon from the mashed potatoes like I normally did.

For the first time at Gramps' house, when bedtime came I thought about begging to stay up just a little longer. When we had sleepovers at Gramps' house I was usually the first to run to bed. Long ago we had started a tradition — whoever reaches "our" bedroom first gets first pick of the two double beds. But that night, I didn't even want to think about sleeping in a dark bedroom with three large windows above the beds. I could just see King Kong's huge hand smashing through the bedroom windows, picking me up by my hair, and ripping my body apart with his huge hands. I definitely wanted nothing to do with sleep that night.

But I wanted to get teased by Sam even less. His eleven-year-old taunting would never let me forget that I was the baby of the family and that once again, I had acted like it. I hated it when he called me a baby. I hated it when anyone called me a baby. Anyone but Gramps. Gramps called me Baby as if that were a compliment. I liked the way it sounded when Gramps said it; it made me feel special. When Sam called me a baby, I didn't feel special at all. I felt like I was too dumb to be brave. I decided that even if King Kong did eat me, at least Sam wouldn't have the chance to make fun of me.

With grim determination, I changed into my favorite white nightgown, wishing that it didn't look so much like the dress the woman had been wearing when she was crushed by King Kong. I crawled into bed but refused to let myself fall asleep. I remembered how hard it used to be to stay awake. Gramma would

softly play her organ to lull us to sleep. Gramps would say that her music made the angels in heaven jealous. She had always played happy music — music that made us fall asleep with a smile.

But no one has played the organ in a long time. Gramps didn't let anyone. Not after the day that stranger had played the organ at the church — the last day I saw Gramma. The stranger had played sad music, music that almost put me to sleep — but without the smile. Since that day, Gramps had covered the organ. And that night I was relieved that Gramma wasn't playing her organ music because without it, it was easy to stay awake. Gramps then tucked me in, Kelly came to bed; Anna, and finally Sam all got into their beds and fell asleep. But I stayed awake. Wide awake.

After what seemed like hours had gone by, and after Kelly had finally stopped breathing loudly through her nose, I accidently fell asleep. A long time later I woke up. I quickly looked around the room. Everything was quiet; everyone was sleeping. No hairy arm was reaching toward me to pull me out of bed, at least not yet. I lay back down, stiff and uncomfortable but unwilling to allow myself to fall back to sleep. Eventually I decided that going to the bathroom would give the sun more time to wake everyone else up. The hallway leading to the bathroom always had a light on, so I knew that if King Kong tried to get me, at least I would see him and be able to run away.

Quickly I got out of bed and headed into the light. As I was just about to step onto the bathroom's cool tile floor, I peeked to my left — into the living room. I saw Gramps sitting on the hardest chair in the room, watching TV. His little bit of white hair was sticking up, as if he had been scratching his head, unconsciously, all night. His left hand was rubbing his stubbled chin and his right hand was holding tightly to the arm of his wooden chair. His body was hunched forward and it almost seemed that he was looking through the TV screen instead of at it. Every light in the room was on, making the old western rerun look dull in the light's glare.

I grinned at him and explained what I was doing. He smiled back his understanding, kind of uncomfortably actually, and watched me go into the bathroom. When I came out, the TV was turned off and all of the lights were out except for the tall one in the corner. Gramps was standing in front of the blackened TV turned partly away from me. He was facing the covered organ against the far wall.

My mom had always said that no other house had an organ in their living room. But Gramps had always wanted Gramma to have her organ where she could play and he could listen. Now he never went near it. He never let us kids near it either. I thought he was afraid we'd hurt ourselves on its sharp edges. Right then he was looking at the organ as if it would hurt him too. I flinched as I pictured the organ miraculously approaching Gramps. I could almost see it getting

closer, closer, closer. But in my mind, Gramps couldn't move! It was about to hurt him and he was too weak to stop it! Having fully scared myself, I ran into the darkened room and wrapped both of my arms around Gramps' leg and hugged hard. He looked down at me, blinked a few times, and finally saw me.

"I guess I'd better go to bed before the sun comes up, huh, Baby?" Gramps asked as he guided me back down the hall to my bed. Then I got an idea. No one had tucked Gramps into bed since he was about my age. I would tuck him into bed! I was so excited that I turned around, grabbed his hand, and began leading Gramps to his room before I had even explained what I wanted to do. After motioning for him to get into bed, Gramps smiled understandingly and hung his bathrobe on the rusty hook behind his door. With a quick glance at me, he then crossed the floor and flipped on a small light above the wooden baseboard. I looked at him in amazement as he took off his slippers, placed them under the dresser, and climbed into bed.

"You sleep with a nightlight on? Sam says that only babies sleep with nightlights on. He teased me every day until I finally told Mommy that I was big enough to sleep in the dark. But I still wish that I had a nightlight sometimes, especially when I get scared. But *you* couldn't be scared, Gramps. So what do you need a nightlight for?"

He motioned for me to begin pulling up his covers. I did it as best as I could. I wasn't quite tall enough to pull both sides of the covers up so I had to keep going from one side of the bed to the other. I think I even pinched his arm when I tucked the sheet under him, but he didn't say anything – not one word until I had him tucked in the way I liked to be tucked in. Slowly, he started to answer my question.

"Sometimes, Baby, I get scared of things too. Things I don't know too much about scare me."

"Scary things like King Kong?" I asked, eager to find out that I wasn't the only one who had been scared by the movie.

"Kind of like King Kong. I know what the bad guy is, only it's bigger and scarier than King Kong. Sometimes I get afraid that if I'm all alone, turn out all the lights, and get into bed, sad music will start to play and it'll get me."

I nodded seriously at Gramps. I didn't know what "it" was, but I knew all about being scared.

"I love you Gramps. But see," I pointed to the corner, "your nightlight is on. 'It' can't get you tonight." I tip-toed up to kiss his prickly cheek. As I reached behind me to close his door, for the first time that night, I noticed Gramma's empty bed. Empty ever since I was four.

Four years old and suddenly without a Gramma. It seemed so long ago. I just remembered sitting in the front of a dimly-lit room. That soft sad music, so

different from Gramma's, had been playing in the background. I remembered because it had almost put me to sleep. Sam had elbowed me in the side the whole time to keep me awake. Gramps had even cried. I think that's why I remember that day. I had never seen Gramps cry. My mom said he cried because Gramma was with Jesus. But she wasn't. She was lying in front of all of us with a frilly blanket pulled up to her chest.

I looked away from that empty bed, glad that I hadn't seen Gramps cry since that day. Then I blew Gramps a kiss, making sure he caught it and placed it on his soggy cheek. After catching his return kiss, I pulled his door shut, ran back down the brightly lit hallway, and slipped into bed. Somehow I had forgotten all about King Kong.