

Fill in the Blank

"It was once," Grandma Karin Ober whispered.

"Oma," Annika's patience buckled. She looked around the dingy hospital room. The little Christmas tree in the corner added little cheer.

This is the last place I want to be.

Grandma was battling dementia, and Annika didn't need a bedtime story.

What do I need? Love, support, money?

The list went on.

"Mama called. You have something to tell me?"

They were interrupted by Anneliese, Annika's toddler, who was trying to press buttons on Grandma's oxygen machine.

"Oh no you don't!" Frustrated, Annika pulled her daughter away.

Grandma Ober's eyes caressed Annika's face. Prematurely, life had etched worry lines in charcoal gray.

"Liebling, no shadows cast, eh?"

Sigh, "I don't understand you," Annika rubbed at her temple. "What did you need?" Her tone cracked.

"What do *you* need?" Grandma parroted.

A father for my little girl.

"Wishes are paper airplanes around our apartment. Can't fly to the moon on one, can you?" Annika conceded.

It was difficult to watch her granddaughter reliving a version of her own ancient history.

Perspective framed the pain now.

"Großpapa. You don't know."

Oma's mind must be gone, "I knew Opa my whole life," Annika closed her eyes. "Liese!" Furiously, she started washing the mountain of hand sanitizer off her daughter's hands.

"No Anni, not Opa, Großpapa Richter."

She had two grandpas?

"You remarried?" Annika pulled the latex glove out of Anneliese's mouth. "Here, watch 'Giggletime.'" Liese grabbed the outstretched phone eagerly.

Grandma Ober remembered the brief year of marriage to her first husband. He had been cruelly dispatched from life two weeks before Christmas. Only two things remained from their relationship: their son and *it*.

"Richter," she spoke reverently.

"Yes?"

"He flew!" Grandma Ober's eyes shone before dimming.

"Yes." Annika furrowed her eyebrows. "Lay down and rest, Oma. Liese, get up off the dirty floor!"

The toddler scurried up so fast she dropped her mother's phone. The screen cracked.

"No, don't drop my things!" She picked up the broken screen pieces. There was no money to replace it. *That's just my life.*

Liese started to cry.

"I'm sorry." Annika tried to patch her unkindness, guilt churning in her stomach. *It's Scott's fault. At least I stayed.* It didn't ease her conscience, but it did leave a bitter edge to her voice.

"I have to go." Annika gathered the contents of her purse, the remnants of Liese's purse-exploring expedition.

Grandma Ober grabbed Annika's hand firmly, "Merry Christmas."

Her cloudy blue eyes traveled over to the little tree.

What is that? Annika wondered. There was a present wrapped in old, brown paper.

Annika picked it up. It smelled like musty basement.

"For me?" *You shouldn't have. Really.*

"Richter," her blue eyes cleared.

"You never opened it?" Annika scratched at her blunt bangs. Liese pulled at her jeans.

"You keep it." She tried to hand it to her grandmother.

Grandma Ober knew what was inside: forty years of marriage, a little girl, a lifetime. It had been wrapped so nicely, but she never got to open it.

"No," she turned her head away.

"Merry Christmas," Annika repeated, feigning warmth. "I'll come again next week."

"No," Grandma Ober repeated.

Poor Oma, Annika thought. *She really doesn't know what's going on.*

Grandma Ober smiled at Liese as they slipped out the door.

"She flew!" Grandma Ober whispered with finality.

Back at their one bedroom apartment, Annika was quick to hide the musty present under their tree. It didn't mask the smell.

"Mami, open?" Liese pointed to the gift.

"No darling, that's Oma's secret. I'm going to keep it."

Liese picked up a book upside down, pretending to read it.

"You lil' chicken," Annika tweaked her nose, "This way." She turned the book.

"Shwella," Liese managed to say.

"Yes, Cinderella. You tore the ending out!" Annika's disapproving look melted into a shrug.

"Me read story."

"That's right," Annika swallowed at the bitterness choking her. She couldn't even afford a present for Liese, "Prince Charming turns into a rat and disappears."

When Liese looked up at her sadly, Annika forced a laugh.

"Mami kidding. Fairy godmother, everything all better. See, pretty dress!" Liese beamed.

"Mami make lunch." She wearily walked to the kitchen. The sound of ripping paper brought her back quickly.

"No! No open!" But Liese had already torn the paper and started to open the yellowed box.

"Mami?" Liese looked at her mom with big eyes.

Annika just stared at the contents in shock.

All she could say, "It was once-"