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Doughnuts

by Lauren Nardella

What is it about doughnuts?

Is there some unwritten rule that says you're supposed to bring doughnuts over to a person's family to express sympathy?

Because I've never heard of that one before.

My little sister made a sign that said, "NO MORE DO-NUTS!!!" but my mom wouldn't let her put it on my grandma's front door.

Grandma's house was where we all were. Well, almost all of us. Those in the area were always around, and Aunt Vinnie had flown in from Reno, Aunt Marianne was up from Atlanta and Uncle Len was down from Albany.

But we were waiting. Still, we haven't heard from Aunt Cathy. It's been four days. And if anyone brings us more doughnuts, we are going to throw them out the window. I don't think I'll ever be able to eat doughnuts again.

So we sit. And wait. That's all we do. And those family members who feel guilty about wasting food and not eating the doughnuts eat them. The rest of us are losing weight faster than if we were on liquid diets. I guess there are two extremes – eat everything in sight, or don't eat anything at all. I fall into the "don't eat anything at all" category. And to make conversation, everyone comments that I look like I have an eating disorder. So I complain and attribute it to the awful college food, and then they all try to get me to eat the stupid doughnuts.

Grandma's house hasn't changed much

during my 20 years, and I doubt it changed much before that. The living room abounds with much-outdated blue and gold décor. The couches are so worn you can see indentations long after a person has gotten off. Flanking a coffee table are two club-style chairs on wheels, ready to fall apart any minute. Framed pictures line the piano that hasn't been played in years. Cathy's picture had been moved to the front.

Then there are the flowers. In addition to the doughnuts, everyone is sending flowers. It is an allergist's nightmare in the living room. I'm sure we have more flowers than the florist. At one point, my mom and Marianne decide that something smells awful. After careful sniffing of all the arrangements, it is determined that the baby's breath has gone bad.

"The baby must have eaten a whole lot of garlic," Uncle Joe says.

No one laughs.

The women in our family always pride themselves on the fact that they age well. Grandma, at age 79, never has looked a day over 65. But today, today I barely recognize her. Her hair, usually perfectly coiffed thanks to her weekly visit to the beauty parlor, lays limp against her head. Her face is expressionless, and white as a sheet.

Grandma tries her best to keep busy. She insists on cooking, even though there is more than enough food in her kitchen to feed the entire state of New Jersey. She vacuums the floor underneath us. She refills

the room's wine glasses. My dad can't stand seeing her running around like that, especially since nothing needs to be done, and he coaxes her to sit down. We make room on the couch, and she gingerly lowers herself to the cushion. She sits straight up, and crosses her bare feet at her ankles. She kneads her gnarled fingers together for a few minutes, and then jumps up.

"Have to check on the potatoes," she mumbles and leaves the room.

A 4-year-old had just nonchalantly told us what no one had dared to let themselves think, much less say, even though we all knew it in our hearts.

My Aunt Grace follows her into the kitchen. Grace is not the emotional one. She's the youngest of my grandparent's eight children; in fact, she's closer in age to me than to my dad. I'm sure she's feeling it all on the inside, but I'm impressed by her ability to hold it together – a complete contrast from my other three basket-case aunts. Grace just got married this summer. The news has completely diminished the "blushing bride" glow that she wore so happily just days before.

We continue to sit, and wait, and make idle chatter. Grace's husband is Hank. We're still not comfortable enough with him to call him Uncle Hank, but he's a pretty good guy. He's been around every day to wait with us – not bad for the new kid on the block, I guess. He tries to keep the mood light by picking fights with Grace about every two seconds, and saying that he doesn't ever want to have any kids. Grace

tries to ignore him, but the fights usually end with her reminding him about her ticking biological clock.

Hank says he'll settle for a dog though. Grace says she wants one of those little "yippee" dogs, the little ones that yip all the time and never grow too big for your purse. Hank says "No way!" He wants a tough dog, like a bulldog or a rottweiler.

We all sit around and mindlessly turn the pages of the various magazines and catalogues that lay around the house. In one of them, we find the perfect stuffed yippee dog. His name is stated in big black print as Coconut. You can even buy accessories for Coconut, ranging from a pink doghouse to a Christmas set complete with miniature candy cane and reindeer ears. We leave the page open on the coffee table to taunt Hank.

My dad gets bored with being well, bored, and decides to prey on Coconut. He draws a beard on the poor, defenseless glossy picture. Then he adds antennae, fangs and slippers. We all get a nice forced laugh out of it. But at least it is laughter.

The news blares constantly in the house. My grandfather is deaf, but I don't think there is a need for all three TVs to be on at full volume. You can't go anywhere in the house without hearing the minute-by-minute accounts of the tragedy. We can't stand it, and we pretend to not hear it. We can't turn them off though. We are still waiting.

Then there are the visitors. They are old neighbors, friends, schoolmates, Girl Scout leaders. They come from all over, but it's the same with each visitor. They knock on the door. Grandma invites them in, but when they see all 16 of us in the living room, they don't venture past the entrance-way, promising they won't stay long, that they just wanted to stop by. They start to

cry, which makes Grandma start to cry, which makes the living room start to cry. They all come bearing the same advice: Don't give up hope. Miracles do happen. We're praying for you. The advice is in vain, because all of us know that all the rest of us know that there isn't much left to hope for. They then share their favorite Cathy stories, or just tell us about the last time they saw her. That's the hardest part. We don't want to hear them. We simply can't bear it. And that's usually when the whole living room is bawling and then the visitors tend to back slowly out of the house.

One particularly soft knock comes at the door. Another visitor, we think. Without waiting for the door to be answered, in walks Matthew, Grandma's neighbor from across the street. Matthew is four. Apparently, he comes over often, as he gets attention at Grandma's house that he doesn't get at his house because his mom just had a new baby. And today was no exception.

First, he shows us how he can jump on one foot. We are delighted by the distraction. Matthew jumps over pillows. Matthew jumps high into the air. Matthew jumps onto the couch. We just can't get enough. I understand why Grandma says that he comes to visit often. He definitely gets all the attention over here.

When he gets tired of jumping, he starts running around in circles and making car noises to amuse us.

"Matthew, have you been watching the car races this week on TV?" Hank asks him.

"Nope," he says as he stops running. "I've been watching the buildings fall down."

You could have heard a feather drop on the carpet in the room.

"Did you cry?" he collectively asks the group.

Marianne, who is starting to tear again, answers him. "Yes," she says in a strained voice. "I did cry. It was a sad, sad thing."

Matthew slowly looks around the room. "Cathy died in there," he says.

We gape at him.

A 4-year-old had just nonchalantly told us what no one had dared to let themselves think, much less say, even though we all knew it in our hearts.

We sit, still shell-shocked and watch as Matthew resumes the identity of a car.

A few minutes later, his dad stops by to take him home. He says he hoped Matthew wasn't much trouble, picks him up, puts him over his shoulder and whisks him out the door.

"Out of the mouths of babes..." Vinnie murmurs.

* * *

My sister Lex and I were waiting outside the church.

It was freezing outside. The first cold day we've had this year. I could see the Parkway from the front steps of the church. Cars just flying by, not a care in the world.

Cathy's best friend Maura came to talk with us on the steps. We had never met before, but she knew who we were from pictures Cathy had shown her. She couldn't stop crying, and telling us how much we looked like Cathy. She said to be strong, because Cathy was watching us from heaven. Maura went back into the church. Lex burst into tears. I stood there, letting the wind pull my hair across my face.

"She can't be watching us from heaven," my sister cried. "That would mean that she was really gone. She can't really be gone. They haven't even found her body!"

I tried to calm her down. "This is why we're

having a memorial service," I said. "We're going to remember her life, ok?" I tried to give her a weak smile.

She sniffled. "But I miss her," she said quietly.

"We all do," I said, and I pulled out a travel pack of tissues for her. I got her cleaned up, and we went inside.

My shoes echoed in the church. It was the biggest church I had ever been in. I couldn't pay attention to the service. I just kept looking around. We had a picture of her from the wedding this summer enlarged and put by the altar. She looked so happy there.

Everyone was crying during the whole ceremony. People went up, and told more Cathy stories to the congregation. But I didn't mind so much this time.

The priest said what an asset Cathy was to the church. He said how she was always willing to open her checkbook and give up her time to help out, and how she often went to more than one mass a week so that she could be a lector, a eucharistic minister and a choir member.

One of the choir members talked about how much Cathy loved to sing, even though after being in the choir for nine years, she still could not read music. She reminisced about the choir's trip to Greece the summer before, and how excited Cathy was to leave the United States for the first time. She laughed when she recounted how Cathy would come straight from the train after work to choir rehearsal, and how she'd always rush in, all disheveled, because the train was late nearly every day.

Someone from Cathy's company also got up before the crowd. He said that Cathy was not just an anonymous number of one of the 200 lost from the company. He said she was very involved at work, but that she

always put her family first. He said that everyone on her floor of the office knew all about her mother and father and brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews, because she talked about them all the time.

I imagined what I would say if I went up there. I'd say that I remember when she drove 45 minutes up to our old house one year just to show my sister and me her Halloween costume. I'd say how she was always the one who came and baby sat us for a few days when my parents would go on business trips. I'd say that she loved working in the city, and loved looking out the huge glass window in her office on the 103rd floor and seeing the world below. I'd say that I made her feel really old once when I was 6 or so and announced to the Christmas dinner table that when I grew up and turned 20 years old, she'd be 40. And I'd say that I missed her. A lot.

When it was all over, we turned to walk out of the church. I smiled when I saw that the service ended up being standing room only.

Everyone went next door to the church for a reception after the ceremony. We all stood in a line to greet everyone coming in. It was so awkward. Tons of people I didn't even know coming up and kissing me on the cheek, and telling me that everything would be okay. And it took forever. Those that we did recognize had trouble identifying all of us ("Wait, which one are you?" "I'm Drew's oldest." "Oh, Drew's daughter!").

It was a short reception. People came in, said their respects to the family and then got out of there. After they left, we just stood around and looked at each other and looked at the mess. And realized that the cleanup hadn't even begun.

* * *

Lex went over to Grandma's fridge and pulled out a box of doughnuts. I groaned. I didn't even want to look at them. But I didn't want to leave her either. She pulled out a glazed one and put it on her plate. But she sat there staring at it for a while and didn't eat it.

"Something wrong?" I asked. I felt like throwing up just seeing the doughnut sitting there.

"Nope," she said, still staring at it.

"Come on, what's up?"

"Nothing."

"Is there mold on it?"

"Nope."

"Hair?"

"Nah."

"So, what?"

"Well, the doughnut is kind of like us."

"Like who us?"

"Like, our family us," she said, her eyes filling up with tears. "We just have a big hole in the middle now."

The tears spilled onto her cheeks, down her face and on top of the plate. I went over and hugged her and she cried on my shoulder.