

## Eileen

By: Melissa Lee

Over. Under. Over. Under. The pattern of Eileen's hands stayed with her granddaughter, even now, like the faintest echo of her heartbeat. How many times had she sat beside Eileen, watching her fingers dance through fabric, marveling at how something so simple could become something so beautiful? How many hours had she spent, not just learning how to stitch, but learning the quiet wisdom of life itself from the rhythm of those hands? How many things had Eileen taught her without ever saying a word? What lessons had the granddaughter missed, hidden in the folds of the cloth and the silence between each stitch? Was she too young then to fully understand the depth of those moments, or had she simply taken them for granted, thinking they would always be there? How often had she let her mind wander, assuming Eileen would never change, never leave? And now, what remained of all those quiet exchanges—what threads could she still pull from the fabric of the past?

Holding Eileen's cold, lifeless hand, Melissa's tears fell freely, each one a silent scream for the woman she was losing. In that moment, the weight of the past settled over her like a heavy, suffocating blanket. She remembered, with painful clarity, the very first time her grandmother's hands had become the most important thing in her life—when she was just six years old. She could still see it, that day stitched in her heart forever. Eileen, with her soft smile and eyes full of endless patience, had sat her down at the old oak table in the kitchen, where the light seemed to shine warmer than anywhere else in the house. It was there, in that gentle light, that Melissa first felt the quiet power of those hands, teaching her, guiding her, making her feel safe in a way she could never fully explain. The ache of their absence was unbearable.

“Come here, Melissa,” Eileen had said, her voice like a gentle invitation. She reached for a piece of white fabric, already taut in the wooden hoop, and the small bundle of threads beside it. “I want to teach you something. It’s called cross-stitching.”

Melissa had scrambled up onto the chair, her tiny feet dangling beneath her, eyes wide with curiosity.

“What’s that, Grandma?”

Eileen chuckled, her eyes twinkling behind the silver-framed glasses perched on her nose. “It’s a way to make pretty pictures out of thread. You’ll see. It’s like magic, but with needles.”

She handed Melissa the needle, its sharp point gleaming like a little sword in her hand. The child had been fascinated, unsure of how something so delicate could create anything at all.

“Now, let me show you,” Eileen said, guiding Melissa’s small fingers carefully as they held the thread. The pattern was simple—a little heart, stitched with red thread.

“Over. Under. Over. Under,” Eileen said slowly, her hands moving with the same rhythm, as though the words themselves were part of the dance.

Melissa repeated it, fumbling at first, her stitches uneven, the fabric crinkling as the needle poked through.

“Don’t worry,” Eileen reassured her, gently adjusting Melissa’s grip. “You’ll get the hang of it. Just remember, the thread has to go over the fabric, then under, just like that.”

They worked in silence for a while, the only sound the soft rhythm of Eileen’s voice and the gentle swish of the needle as it pulled through the fabric. Melissa’s eyes were focused on her grandmother’s hands, hypnotized by how fluid and skilled each movement was, the way the thread seemed to just *flow* with each careful stitch.

“How do you make it so neat?” Melissa had asked, looking at the perfectly even stitches Eileen had already made, so delicate and precise.

Eileen smiled softly. “You have to be patient, Melissa. And sometimes, you have to take your time with things. It’s about making each stitch count.”

Melissa looked down at her own work, at the clumsy, uneven stitches. But Eileen didn’t seem disappointed. Instead, she just kept going, her hands moving in the same fluid rhythm.

“You’ll get better with practice, my sweet girl. And one day, you’ll make something beautiful.”

As the day wore on, Melissa’s stitches became a little neater, a little more controlled. Her concentration grew, and she could almost hear the rhythm of Eileen's voice in her head: Over. Under. Over. Under.

It wasn’t just about the art of cross-stitching. No, it was about the space between the stitches—the pauses, the moments of stillness when Eileen would look up from her work, her eyes soft with some thought only she could understand. Sometimes, she would share stories of her childhood, her voice taking on a wistful tone. “You know,” she would say, her fingers stilling as she gazed out the window, “when I was your age, we didn’t have much, but we had the quiet of the countryside. My mother’s garden was my playground. I’d sit for hours, just watching the flowers bloom, the bees buzzing around. It felt like time moved slower back then... I think that’s why I still love taking my time now.”

Melissa would listen closely, her young mind trying to piece together the world Eileen had known—one of simplicity and silence. Sometimes, Eileen would tell stories of her late husband, a soft sadness in her eyes as she spoke of him. “Your grandfather... he always said, ‘The

world moves too fast, Eileen. Slow down and savor the small things.’ I think I’ve spent my whole life trying to do just that, dear.”

Now, as Melissa sits in the quiet room, stitching the unfinished bear, her grandmother's words echo through her mind. Every “over, under” is a thread of love, of patience, of memories woven between the stitches. And even though the chair across from her is empty, even though the once-warm kitchen is now just a shadow of the past, Eileen is still there, woven into every thread, still teaching, still guiding, still reminding her to take her time, to savor the small things. The rhythm of those stitches is a comfort, a reminder that some things—some love—never truly leave.

And there were days when Eileen would simply remain silent, the only sound the gentle rhythm of her needle through fabric. She didn’t need to fill the air with words—her presence alone spoke volumes. Melissa would sit there, feeling the warmth of Eileen’s silence, content in the shared stillness. It wasn’t until much later, after Eileen’s hands had grown still, that Melissa realized how much she would come to miss that silence—the unspoken connection they shared. How much she would ache for those moments when nothing needed to be said.

When she was young, the granddaughter always thought there would be more time. Time to ask questions, time to appreciate her more, time to make up for the times she had taken her for granted. Time was something she thought she had in abundance. It wasn’t until Eileen was gone that she realized how precious every single moment had been. Eileen had always been there, in the background of her life, stitching together the fabric of their family with her quiet strength. But in her pursuit of her own life, the granddaughter had let those moments slip away, like grains of sand through her fingers.

There's a peculiar kind of grief that settles in when someone realizes they've let someone slip away, even while they're still alive. It isn't the sharp, immediate pain of losing someone suddenly—it's quieter, more insidious. It's the slow, persistent ache that grows over time, a deep recognition that you weren't truly present when you had the chance. It's the regret of knowing there were moments you could have shared, conversations you could have had, but instead, you let time pass, thinking there would always be more. This was the space that grew between the granddaughter and her grandmother as the years went on. As she grew older, Melissa drifted away, gradually. Eileen never pushed, never demanded, never pulled her close, but she also never withdrew. She accepted the distance, silently, with that quiet strength that had always defined her. She never asked for anything. But the granddaughter wasn't there, not in those final, fragile years when Eileen grew sick. She didn't realize then that what her grandmother needed wasn't just someone to check in, but someone to sit in the silence with her, to stitch alongside her, to listen to the stories she had so patiently shared before, or simply to be. In her busyness, Melissa hadn't understood how much those small, shared moments meant. And now, with the space left empty, she saw too late what had been missed—the unspoken longing in Eileen's eyes, the quiet invitation that had always been there, waiting.

Watching Eileen grow sicker, weaker, over the final month of her life felt like witnessing the world itself slowly unravel, one fragile thread at a time. It wasn't just the visible decline in her grandmother's health that was so painful—it was the quiet unraveling of all the things Melissa had left unsaid, the unspoken words that now weighed heavily in the space between them. Each passing day, the silence felt heavier, and the questions that had been pushed aside for years began to flood her mind. She wanted to ask her grandmother everything—to learn the stories she hadn't thought to ask about before, to hear the lessons Eileen had lived and carried

with her. But more than anything, Melissa longed to apologize. She wanted to pour out her regrets, to beg for forgiveness for not being there sooner, for the time lost, for all the ways she had taken Eileen's presence for granted. But as the days slipped by, all she could do was watch. She could do nothing but witness, helpless, as her grandmother's breath grew shallower, the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest becoming increasingly labored. Each cough that wracked her frail body seemed to slice through the room, a stark reminder of how little time remained. In those moments, Melissa felt as though the weight of everything—every missed opportunity, every unspoken word—was pressing in on her, suffocating her as much as the air grew thinner around Eileen.

The sound of her grandmother's desperate pleas tore through Melissa's heart, each whispered cry for release a jagged shard of grief she could hardly bear. "Let me go," Eileen's voice quivered, thin and fragile with exhaustion, every word weighted with a longing Melissa could never fully comprehend. "I want to see Gene again." Gene—the love of her life, the man she had lost years before, whose absence had carved an empty space in her soul. Melissa felt the depth of that ache, a sorrow so profound it seemed to echo in her bones. In those broken words, she could hear the raw, unspoken truth—Eileen was ready to leave this world behind, ready to reunite with the one person she had loved most. And in that moment, Melissa could do nothing but witness her grandmother's quiet surrender, the unbearable reality that she was slipping away, drawn toward the love she had lost a few years ago.

And still, Melissa stayed, trapped in the weight of time, unable to make it stop.

The granddaughter remembered one day, after a particularly hard argument with her mother, she decided to call Eileen. The fight had been sharp, words exchanged like daggers, each one deeper than the last. Melissa, only nineteen at the time, had told her, in a voice trembling

with both anger and fear, that she was pregnant. “What do you expect me to do?” she had yelled, pacing in the cramped living room. “You always tell me I’m not ready for anything—this baby will prove you right, won’t it?”

Her mother had stood there, arms crossed, eyes hard and unyielding. “You’re not ready for this,” she had said, her voice steady, almost cold. “You’ve always run from everything. Every responsibility, every challenge—you run. How can you think you’ll be a good parent when you can’t even face your own life?” Her words had stung, each one a blow to Melissa’s confidence. “You’ll be a terrible parent, Melissa. You’re not ready for this.”

Melissa felt the familiar ache in her chest. She remembered when she was twelve and had run away from her mother. They had been trapped in that house with her stepfather, whose anger and cruelty filled the air like a storm, making their lives a constant nightmare. Melissa had been trapped, but she knew she couldn’t stay there any longer. She had run, scared, alone, but determined to find safety. She hadn’t known where to go, but there had been one place that always felt like home—her grandmother’s house. Eileen had welcomed her with open arms, offering a safe refuge from the chaos of her life.

Her mother had stayed behind, never leaving, accepting that life would never change. Melissa had always felt that distance between them since then, like there was something her mother could never understand. It wasn’t just about the physical separation—it was the emotional void that had grown wider with each passing year. Her mother had chosen her every time, over and over again. Melissa had needed more than just a place to stay; she had needed peace, warmth, and love. Eileen had given her those things freely, without hesitation. With Eileen, Melissa had found refuge—a safe haven from the storm of her past. It was in Eileen’s

quiet presence, her patient love, that Melissa had found the strength to rebuild her broken world, piece by piece.

Now, standing in front of her, with her mother's cold words cutting through her, Melissa snapped. "I don't run from everything," she said, her voice trembling but fierce. "I just run from you."

Her mother had flinched, but the words hung in the air, unspoken, and yet, they filled the room with years of unresolved tension. The weight of years spent being ignored, unheard, and unloved by the one person who should have understood her was suffocating. It wasn't just the emotional distance—there was the constant betrayal. Her mother had always denied the truth about her stepfather, refusing to see him for who he truly was. Even when he had lashed out at her, even when his abuse had been so obvious, her mother had always protected him, siding with him over her own daughter, over her own flesh and blood. She chose him every single time, and it broke Melissa a little more with each decision.

But now, pregnant at nineteen, Melissa couldn't understand why her mother suddenly cared. "You didn't want to be a mother then. Now, all of a sudden, you want to be one to me? Why now?!" Melissa's voice was almost a snarl, raw with the frustration of a lifetime of feeling invisible. "When I needed you, you never saw me. You never really looked at me. You just... stayed. Like it was easier to pretend everything was fine than to see what was really happening. I needed someone to fight for me. You never did. You always chose him. Even when he hurt you, you chose him." Her mother's eyes had flickered with something—regret, guilt, or maybe just the recognition that Melissa was right—but instead of saying anything, she had turned away, her expression closing off completely.

Melissa didn't wait for a reply. She spun on her heel, the words she'd been holding onto for so long finally spilling out, but the weight of them left her feeling emptier than vindicated. Her mother's silence said it all. She slammed the door behind her, the sound reverberating through the house like a final nail in the coffin. As she stepped out into the cold air, her chest tight with rage, she felt a strange mix of triumph and terror.

She couldn't shake the anger, couldn't escape the feeling that, no matter what she did, nothing would ever be enough for her mother. She was so sure she could do it. She would prove her mother wrong. She would show herself that she could stand on her own, that she didn't need anyone to validate her.

But in the silence that followed the argument, in the quiet aftermath where the adrenaline from her outburst began to fade, a deeper, more gnawing fear crept in. The rebellion still burned, but it was suffused with something else—something she couldn't quite name. A recognition that maybe, just maybe, she didn't want to do it alone anymore. Over. Under. Over. Under. Just like the movements of her grandmothers' hands, Melissa reached for her.

The urge to hear her grandmother's voice was almost overwhelming. It wasn't just a longing to speak to her; it was the desperate need to feel grounded again, to escape—even if just for a moment—the tumult of her life. She wanted to hear that soft, calming tone, that quiet strength that had always reassured her when the world felt too loud, too chaotic. She didn't need someone to fix things, to solve her problems. She needed a reminder of what true love felt like—of what it meant to be cared for unconditionally, without expectation, without judgment.

With trembling hands, Melissa dialed Eileen's number, praying that her grandmother would answer, that she would once again provide the calm she so desperately sought. But the call went unanswered. She tried again the next day, desperate to feel that sense of peace, to return to

the safety of her grandmother's presence. She drove to Eileen's house, hoping to find her there, hoping to feel that familiar sense of quiet love that always seemed to fill the space when Eileen was nearby. But when she arrived, the house was empty. Eileen had already gone out, leaving only an echo of her presence behind. There was no warmth, no comforting voice on the other end of the line, just the silence that filled the house, reminding Melissa of everything she had failed to do.

A wave of regret washed over her as she stood there, feeling like the moment had slipped away—another opportunity missed. She had been so focused on her own pain, her own rejection, that she hadn't thought to call Eileen back, hadn't realized how much she needed to be there for her grandmother, too. She had always counted on Eileen to be the steady, unwavering force in her life, but she hadn't realized that she needed to be that for Eileen as well. Now, in the emptiness of the house, Melissa felt the full weight of her absence in her grandmother's life. Another chance to connect, to share, to offer comfort, had passed her by, and all she was left with was the crushing knowledge that she hadn't been there when it mattered most.

It's funny how grief works. It doesn't wait until you're ready. It shows up uninvited, like an unexpected guest, and suddenly, you're face-to-face with the weight of everything you didn't say, everything you didn't do. After Eileen's death, the granddaughter found herself overwhelmed by the thought of all the things she never told her. How she never asked her about her life before her. How Eileen always spoke of her childhood —stories about growing up in this very house that they were living in, about long summer days spent staying up cross stitching and writing stories, about the secret garden she had planted with her mother (Melissa's Great Grandmother)—but the granddaughter never truly understood the depth of those stories until it was too late to ask. What had Eileen's life been like before she became the woman who raised

her? What dreams had Eileen had before she set them aside for her family? These were the questions the granddaughter now longed to ask, but the opportunity was gone.

Melissa could still see Eileen, sitting at the kitchen table, her hands working methodically at some project, the radio humming softly in the background. It was the simplicity of these moments that had always drawn her in—how Eileen never seemed rushed, never overwhelmed, even when life was chaotic. She had been a woman of quiet strength, always there, always steady. Eileen had never raised her voice, never seemed impatient, and yet, everything Melissa had learned about patience, about love, about resilience, had been taught to her by that very woman. The rhythm of her hands, the way she would sigh and adjust the fabric just so, was like a language Melissa had come to understand without ever really learning it.

And then there was the fight. The fight that ended everything. The one that Melissa wished she would have calmed down and walked away from. The one that happened on Christmas. That moment when the granddaughter brought her “new” boyfriend over to Eileen’s house, eager to share her happiness, only to be blindsided by the presence of her ex-husband. The man who had broken her heart, the one she had spent so many years trying to forgive.

Brandon—her ex-husband—was not just the man who had betrayed her; he was the father of their child, a constant reminder of what had been lost. He was only two when they split. It had been bad enough to deal with the pain of his infidelity, but the fact that their son would never truly know him as a family was what had gutted her the most. Brandon’s betrayal had cut deep, but it had been the way he’d betrayed her that made the hurt worse: when he was deployed, he had cheated on her with another woman—another soldier. And she’d only learned the full extent of the heartbreak much later. Melissa had always wondered why she was never invited to military events, never included in the camaraderie of the other wives and families. It wasn’t until

years after their divorce that she discovered the painful truth: he had always gone with her—the mistress.

Melissa never told anyone the truth about how her marriage to Brandon had started. She'd never told them that he hadn't proposed, that it wasn't a romantic gesture. He hadn't asked her to marry him because he wanted to build a life with her. No, one day he had just woken up and said, "*Let's get married because you're pregnant, and I want to enlist in the military.*" It was a decision made in haste, not out of love, and yet, she had felt she had no choice. She hadn't wanted to be alone, and she had convinced herself that this was the best decision for their child. Her family didn't see the hard decision she had to make. They didn't know the pressure she had been under, the sense that this was the only way to preserve some semblance of a family. But even then, she could never shake the feeling that it wasn't how it was supposed to be, that it wasn't what she deserved.

Every fight with Brandon, every glance that felt colder than it should, the way he seemed more like a stranger than a partner, she couldn't help but bring up how she wasn't good enough. She wasn't good enough for a real wedding, like everyone else. She wasn't good enough to be chosen out of love, not in the way that people talked about, not in the way that *should* have happened. The thought made her feel small, insignificant—like a piece in a game she never wanted to play. It ate at her, deep down, a wound that never fully healed, but one that she kept trying to convince herself didn't hurt anymore.

But it did. It always did. No matter how many years passed or how much she pretended otherwise. The fact that their marriage had been built on a lie—on practicality rather than affection, on convenience rather than desire—haunted her. It gnawed at her quietly, always there in the background, making her feel like an outsider in her own life. She was playing a role she

never auditioned for, and the more time that passed, the harder it became to ignore the truth: she didn't belong in the life she had built.

Over. Under. Over. Under. Melissa just let her life fly by, like finishing a pattern, piece by piece, stitch by stitch. No matter how she moved, no matter how much she tried to make the pieces fit, she was still stuck, tracing the same old lines. A life she hadn't fully chosen, a marriage that wasn't built on the foundation she craved. She followed the motions, one step after the other, never fully feeling like she belonged in the world she had woven together.

Eileen, ever the peacekeeper, welcomed Brandon with open arms that Christmas. She didn't see the hurt he had caused Melissa; she only saw the man who had once been part of their family, the man who had shared holidays with them, celebrated birthdays, built memories. But Melissa couldn't see him that way. She saw the man who had destroyed everything—the one who had cheated on her, broken their family, and left her to pick up the pieces. The pain she felt was amplified by the years she had spent trying to build a life without him, trying to protect their son from the ripple effects of his actions. The presence of her ex-husband, so casually welcomed by her grandmother, felt like a slap in the face, and the realization of everything she had been through came rushing back all at once, threatening to undo everything she'd worked to bury.

And then, in that moment, there he was, standing in the same room, acting as though everything was fine, as though nothing had ever happened. The anger that Melissa had buried deep inside her surged forward, and she couldn't keep the words in anymore. But when she looked at Eileen—her grandmother, the woman who had always protected her, always tried to make things right—she could see the confusion in her eyes. Eileen couldn't understand why Melissa was so upset. She wanted to fix it, to make it all okay, to erase the years of pain. But Melissa couldn't explain it. Not then. Not in front of him.

So, Melissa did what she always did when she felt too hurt to speak: she walked away. She left without saying a word, without trying to explain the depth of her anger, of the years of unresolved pain that had festered beneath the surface. And that Christmas, a barrier formed between them—a silent, invisible wall that Melissa couldn't break. It stayed there, quietly festering, never healed, until she lost Eileen forever.

They never had the conversation they needed to have. The one where Melissa would tell her grandmother how deeply she had been hurt—not just by Brandon, but by the way Eileen had opened her arms to him, as though he hadn't shattered their family. That conversation never came. Instead, the distance grew, until it became a permanent space between them. Melissa wanted to go back, to fix it, to explain, but it was too late. There would be no chance for that now.

In the silence of the night, as she sat in her car, still reeling from the pain of the past, Melissa knew she couldn't go back to the party. Not because she didn't love her family, but because she couldn't bear to pretend. She couldn't explain it all, not when it would make everything worse. Not when she knew, deep down, that the words would fall on deaf ears, and it would only make the rift between her and her grandmother even wider. And she knew that no one truly understood the real reason she had married Brandon, or the devastating truth of why their marriage had ended. There was so much unsaid, so much buried, and it was easier to leave than to try and explain it all in a moment when no one would really hear her. They had no idea of the desperation she had felt, the crushing weight of the decision she'd made, or the years of heartbreak that had followed. Trying to lay it all out now, in front of Brandon, in front of her family, would only make her the villain in their eyes. So, she chose silence, the easy way out, and drove away, leaving everything behind.

In the years that followed, her visits became shorter. She would drop off her son, and then leave—rushing to get back to her life, to her own troubles, leaving Eileen in the quiet of her house. The weight of it all pressed down on her, heavier than she could have ever anticipated. Every time she stepped through the door, she was reminded of the distance between them. The distance created by years of unsaid words, of silent fights, and that Christmas when she had walked away from Eileen, not realizing that it would be the last time they'd have the chance to truly talk. The hurt with Brandon, the betrayal, the confusion of seeing him again through Eileen's eyes, haunted her. It was a weight she couldn't face—too much pain and unresolved anger, all tangled together. So, she did what she had always done when faced with something too difficult: she avoided it.

She'd clean Eileen's kitchen, sort through her things, but couldn't bring herself to stay and just be with her. She couldn't face the weight of everything unsaid, of all the things she had let slip through the cracks. And all the while, the rhythm of cross-stitching continued—over, under, over, under—but there was no connection. No conversation. No healing.

And then, after everything, came the moment that would haunt her for the rest of her life—a moment that could never be undone, no matter how much she wished it could. The fight with Eileen, the one that shattered their bond, had led to the deepest regret Melissa would ever carry. She had gone to Hospice, her heart full of sorrow and a desperate need for closure, to say goodbye to her grandfather, Gene. But the weight of the argument with Eileen, the raw, unhealed pain that her grandmother had been carrying, twisted into something unbearable. In the midst of her own agony, Eileen had lashed out at Melissa, her voice a weapon as sharp as any blade. "Get out," Eileen had screamed, the words ripping through the air, each syllable cutting deeper than any physical blow ever could. Melissa stood there, frozen, her chest tightening, as the love and

connection they had shared for so many years seemed to vanish in an instant. The finality of Eileen's words shattered her, and in that moment, all the years of love, all the understanding, and the fragile thread of their relationship unraveled.

Heartbroken and crushed beyond words, Melissa had left. She didn't fight it. She didn't stay to argue or beg for forgiveness. She just left, tears blurring her vision as she walked out of that room, knowing—deep in her soul—that she had failed her grandmother in the worst way possible. She had left when Eileen needed her the most, when there was nothing left but pain and desperation. But the guilt didn't stop there. Melissa had failed her grandfather, too. Gene, the man who had always been her steady, unwavering anchor, had been lying there, dying, and she had turned her back on him as well. The thought of him slipping away, without her by his side, was more than she could bear. That final goodbye—so rushed, so incomplete—was all she would ever have, and it wasn't enough.

The last words she said to Gene, her beloved grandfather, were "I love you." And then, just like that, she turned away. She ran out of the room, out of Hospice, her footsteps echoing in the empty hall as her heart shattered with every step. There would be no more hugs, no final whispered promises, no sense of peace. That was it—the final goodbye. The words that she had thought would bring comfort and closure felt like a cruel reminder of all that was left unsaid, of all the moments lost.

Melissa never looked back. There was nothing left to say, nothing she could do to change it. The chapter was closed, and she could never reopen it. The weight of that moment—the one she could never undo, the one she couldn't make right—would follow her for the rest of her life. She had failed them both—her grandmother, whom she loved so deeply, and her grandfather, the man who had given her so much. It was all over a stupid argument, a fight that she would give

anything to take back, to turn back time and make the choice to stay. But she couldn't. And the burden of that would never leave her. It was a wound too deep to heal, a regret too heavy to carry, and it was something she would take to her grave.

But as time passed and Eileen's health began to fade, she knew she couldn't stay away forever. She had no choice. In the quiet, when Eileen could no longer speak, when her hands were too weak to stitch, it was the granddaughter's turn to take up the needle, to finish the projects Eileen had started. She remembered the day Eileen began that fish project, her fingers nimble, threading the needle, her eyes focused, determined. She wanted it to be perfect, and for a moment, the granddaughter saw Eileen the way she had seen her when she was little—invincible, indomitable. But then Eileen's hands began to tremble, and the granddaughter knew it was time for her to take over. The fish was hers now, just as so many of Eileen's projects had become. She felt the weight of it, the weight of Eileen's love and the responsibility Eileen had passed on to her, without even saying a word. Over, under, over, under. It was her turn to keep the pattern going.

The day Eileen passed, the granddaughter was there, holding her hand. February 1st, 2024. Eileen was weak, but there was still strength in her eyes, still love in the way she squeezed the granddaughter's hand, even as she let go. The granddaughter promised her that she would never stop making beautiful things—that she would finish every project, complete every stitch, no matter how long it took. She promised Eileen that she would carry on her legacy, that her love would never be lost, not as long as she kept stitching.

Holding Eileen's hand as she passed was the hardest thing Melissa had ever done. It felt as though the weight of a lifetime—of all the words left unsaid, the moments she had taken for granted—was pressing down on her. Eileen's body, once full of life and energy, was now frail,

fighting against the inevitable. For seven long hours, Melissa sat beside her, never moving, never leaving. She watched her grandmother struggle with the finality of death, heard the soft, strained cries as Eileen begged to let go. *"Please, let me go. I just want to be with him again... Gene."*

Each word broke Melissa's heart a little more. She felt helpless, trapped between the urge to comfort her and the painful reality that nothing she could do would ease Eileen's suffering. There were no more stories, no more words of wisdom, no more soft chuckles as they shared their quiet moments. Eileen's hands, once steady and sure, now trembled as she reached for the edges of life, but no matter how much Melissa squeezed her hand, no matter how hard she tried to fill the space with comforting words, it wasn't enough.

Melissa watched as the pain twisted across Eileen's face. Her breath hitched and faltered, but still, she clung to life, begging for release. It was a cruel kind of torture to see someone so beloved in such agony, to know that even though she wanted nothing more than to make her grandmother's suffering stop, there was nothing she could do. Eileen's cries were unbearable, each one more desperate than the last.

When Eileen's final breath finally came, a sharp exhale as if the very life had been drawn from her, Melissa felt the earth tremble beneath her. A part of her—something deep and irreplaceable—shattered with it. There was no way to prepare for this. No way to prepare to lose the woman who had been the center of her world, her guiding light, her constant presence. The empty silence that followed her grandmother's passing felt like it could swallow her whole. She sat, frozen, the tears streaming down her face as she held onto the hand that had once been so strong, now cold, now still.

Melissa's chest ached, her heart breaking into pieces. It wasn't just the loss of Eileen that tore at her; it was the crushing awareness of how little time they had left together. How many

times had she taken for granted the quiet moments they'd shared? The stitching side by side, the comfortable silences, the laughter that had filled the room? There would be no more of those. No more opportunities to ask the questions she had never voiced. No more chances to make things right.

In those final moments, Eileen had worn the necklace Melissa now wore around her own neck. It had been a small, simple thing—a small diamond heart on a gold chain, well-worn, its edges rounded from years of wear. But to Eileen, it had been something sacred, something that held memories of a life lived, a love lost. As Eileen passed, she had slipped the necklace from her neck and placed it gently into Melissa's hands. With a soft, almost imperceptible smile, she had said, *"For you, my dear. So, I'm never far away."*

Now, the locket rested against Melissa's chest, a weight she could not ignore. The necklace felt heavy—too heavy—and yet, she couldn't bring herself to remove it. Eileen's presence lingered there, a constant reminder of the woman she had loved, the woman who had shaped her in ways she had never fully understood.

It was a full circle, in the truest sense. Eileen had been there when Melissa took her first breath, guiding her into the world with soft hands and gentle whispers. And now, Melissa had been there when Eileen took her final breath, holding her as she slipped quietly into eternity. The same hands that once cradled her as a child now held Eileen's frail ones, offering the same comfort, the same love. In those last moments, Melissa became the caretaker, the protector, just as Eileen had always been for her. But as she sat there in the silence of the room, the weight of grief pressed down on her, thick and suffocating, threatening to break her entirely.

The sorrow felt unbearable, like a heavy fog that would never lift. The silence that followed Eileen's passing was louder than anything she had ever known, a deafening stillness

that seemed to fill every corner of the room. It was as if the world itself had paused, holding its breath along with her. In the midst of that quiet, Melissa realized just how much of herself she had shared with her grandmother and how much she now had to carry forward alone.

But amidst the overwhelming grief, there was also a quiet determination, a fragile thread of connection that refused to snap. So now, with her needle in hand, Melissa sits, stitching the bear she had never finished—the one that had been left behind, abandoned in the middle of its creation. She stitches the fish Eileen couldn't complete, the one that had been abandoned when time had run out. Each thread she pulls through the fabric feels like an act of love, a small tribute to the woman who had taught her the rhythm of life, stitch by stitch.

With every movement of the needle, every stitch that secures the fabric, Melissa is keeping Eileen with her. Each stitch is a conversation she wishes she could have had, a moment she longs to relive—another hug, another laugh, another shared silence. She still has so many questions, so many things she never thought to ask when there was time. She wonders what Eileen's childhood had been like, what memories she carried from those years, what she might have said if she had known how little time they truly had. Melissa wishes more than anything to hear her grandmother's laugh one more time, to see her face light up with joy as she shared one of her many stories.

But instead of those things, Melissa carries Eileen with her in every piece she creates, in every project she finishes. She finds traces of her grandmother in the meticulous stitches, in the quiet focus of her hands. Over. Under. Over. Under. The rhythm of the stitches has become a form of remembrance, a quiet conversation that spans time and space.

And in the rhythm of those stitches, Melissa finds Eileen once more, woven into the very fabric of her being.