



2019 Winning Essays

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Dear Reader-

It is with great pleasure that I share these winning essays from the 2019 Kraemer Intergenerational Story contest.

We had 150 entries from 28 countries!

The stories were divided into several groups. Each group was carefully considered by two judges from different generations. One story from each group was selected to move onto the finals. These stories are contained in this document.

Five more judges, again representing different generations, reviewed the winning entry from each group and made the final selections of winner, runner ups, and honorable mentions.

All of these stories remain in their original state without any editing.

I believe the varied submissions showcase the breadth and depth of intergenerational relationships – across cultures, beyond the intergenerational stereotype of child and elder – as well as the boundaries of blood and marriage.

I hope you enjoy them as much as the judges and I did! We considered it a privilege to read and evaluate these exceptional stories.

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Winning Essay: **Hugs** by Prachi Shah

Indu hugged her teenage daughter, Sonal, who gave her a bigger squeeze in return. They heard a soft sigh and burst out laughing. Indu's mother, Varsha, was shaking her head, her brow furrowed. Varsha had never been one to express love physically and just watching them made her uncomfortable. She was visiting Indu, who was suffering from severe arthritis since a year making all movements painful and exhausting.

But it didn't stop her from giving Sonal constant hugs and kisses. Varsha got irked by their tactile displays, much to their amusement. Ever since she had arrived, Indu and Sonal kept hearing a lot of "Jeez, stop it you two!" and "Okay, that is enough."

However, as the days passed, Varsha grudgingly became accustomed to it since she began to strongly connect with Indu. Even with all the pain, her daughter was so spirited, managing to always keep things light with jokes and laughter. The pride she felt helped her ignore the sheer volume of hugs shared between the mother-daughter duo.

"I can't remember ever hugging any of my kids, not even as babies," she said to Sonal one afternoon. Sonal's eyes widened.

"Seriously, Grandma? Why?"

Varsha shrugged. "Never had the time. There was always cleaning and cooking or some other work to do. And in those days, cuddling your child was considered silly...stupid."

Sonal frowned. "That's horrible, Grandma. You should try it with mom now."

Varsha crinkled her nose. "No no. I don't like it. Although I can tolerate you two, it is still too much for me to even see you hugging all the time."

Sonal laughed, but her heart went out to her grandma. Hailing from a tiny village in India, her grandma had married at the tender age of 13 in a huge family. Although she had birthed five sons and two daughters, she had never played with her children, had conversations with them or listened to their stories. Her heart was full of love, but years in a strict household had made her tough too.

Thus, she found physical displays weird. However, she took it in her stride and even chuckled about it with Indu and Sonal. A month soon flew by. In retrospect, Varsha would be eternally grateful for it as Indu died just five months later. The arthritis had spread to her organs leading to heart failure.

Once again, Varsha found herself standing outside her daughter's home for the funeral. Sonal opened the door. Both women stared, looking for Indu in each other. Suddenly, Varsha enveloped her granddaughter in a hug. Her stunned granddaughter hugged her back fiercely,

tears pouring down her face. The hug was awkward but also soft, warm and familiar. It felt like home.

“She hugged you like this, right?” Varsha asked softly. Sonal could only nod as she buried herself further inside her grandma.

Time stopped for a few moments as a mother and daughter stayed in an embrace, mourning the loss of a wonderful daughter and mother.

Runner-Up: **Grandpa Shreve** by Susan Hardesty-Ritenour

Tucked away in the attic of my mind, are cherished childhood memories of Forest Shreve, a man I knew as Grandpa. He wasn't a grandpa by blood, but he was my stepmother's father and the only grandpa I ever knew. The times I remember the most were when I was in 3rd and 4 grades and we moved to a house right beside of his. After school each day, I would run over to Grandpa Shreve's to see what he was up to.

My favorite times were evenings spent on his enclosed porch. I would sit on the old metal glider, and he would sit on the metal rocker near the windows and smoke his pipe while telling me stories of times in his life. Across from the glider was an old singer sewing machine cabinet covered with a plastic lace tablecloth, holding a collection of fancy large glass bottles full of colored water as blue as the ocean. When the sun would shine in, it made interesting light reflections on the wall

Grandpa Shreve was a hillbilly through and through. He owned an old metal jaw harp and I can still picture him "twanging" out a tune while he kept to the beat by moving his feet, almost as if he was doing a Snoopy happy dance.

Summertime was a fun time helping in his big garden. We planted so many varieties of vegetables; cucumbers, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and green beans. In the fall, Grandpa and I would pick bushels of apples together from the trees out back on the hill, anticipating Gran's best applesauce that no store-bought brands could match.

Grandpa Shreve was a simple man in simpler times. Although money was tight, it was fun back then, even if we were doing chores or just hanging out together on his sun porch. Although he had 10 grandchildren, he still had room in his heart for me. Living beside him afforded me the opportunity to spend quality one-on-one time with him that his blood grandchildren where not able to do. It doesn't take blood to be a good grandparent, just someone who will take the time to be a good friend and show love as if one of their own.

Runner-Up: **Her Little Grandpa** by Jenniefer Andersson

Sitting in the church, her mind flashed to a thousand images of him. Images of him throughout the years of her growing up, his smile and his hug, the way he'd smell just after he'd shaved. The way he poured whiskey into a glass when she was old enough, how he laughed along with her parents when she made a face as the amber liquid went down less smoothly than she had thought. Her mind flashed to the last few months of his life, and her heart ached. Her little grandpa, always so full of love and life, wasting away. Sitting there, she should have been grateful to have had the extra time with him, but all she could do was regret the months where he had been in pain, where he hadn't been able to reach for the stars the way he always had before.

Mourning seemed easy. Letting go? Oh, that was much harder.

She'd been barely more than a toddler when he'd stood on a stool in the kitchen by the stove, one arm around her back as they watched the boiling potatoes. He pushed a fork into a potato, and smiled. "Almost done, now."

"How do you know, grandpa?" she asked, her words a little broken up with trying to get them right.

He smiled wider. "See how the fork comes out easily instead of getting stuck?"

She made a noise in agreement.

"Here, be careful. But try." His hand wrapped carefully around her smaller one as she stuck the fork into the boiling water, careful not to burn herself, before pushing the fork into the potato. It released easily, and she giggled in reply to the action.

"It's almost done when it feels like that, grandpa?"

"Darn tootin."

She grinned, and put the fork down on the counter. They waited another few minutes, before he moved the stool with her on it, and then pulled the pot of water away from the stove. Letting the hot water wash into the sink, he plucked the potatoes out, and put them in another bowl. From the fridge he grabbed butter, a bit of milk, and salt and pepper from the shelf above the stove.

"Now, this is how you do it, little one," he said, holding the potato masher in one hand. "You have to be careful, and make sure there are no lumps. You don't want lumpy mashed potatoes," he told her, and she shook her head, her little nose scrunched up. They both knew how she hated lumpy mashed potatoes.

Behind her she could hear her aunts' snuffle, and she tried her hardest not to look to them. The memory faded fast and the harsh reality of where she was and why came back to her. She could hear the minister talking about what a caring, generous man her grandfather had been, and the words seemed perfectly inadequate to sum up his life and the man he had been.

Runner-Up: **Still** by Grace Lo Porto

I remember
The feeling
Of watching
My mother's
Hands shaking.
And I, me, we...
I do not know.
My grandmother sits
And waits, and eats, and thinks she is a nurse still,
And my mother's hands shake, and I?
I do not know what time will do, except this...
You asked for a skipped
Relationship, but
This is not--and is.
My mother, with her shaking hands, is the link
Between my grandmother, sitting, waiting, growing older, dying,
And me.
And how I wish it was not. How I wish
For the time when my grandmother was young,
And savvy,
And free to walk out the door when she pleased, and the time
When my mother's hands were steady.
Ah, but I did not know what I had.
And yet perhaps...now I know what I have.
For as my mother grows old, I know
That what she is still is a gift,
Just as my grandmother was,
A gift,
A life,
Shaking hands,
Lucid mind,
Open heart.

Runner-Up: **Ten Again** by Taria Karillion

Fred stared at the ice-blue walls and clutched his stomach. What was wrong with him? A young man being terrified of a wee old lady was just crazy.

Beyond the frosted glass door, the distorted outline of the dentist's chair seemed to expand and contract for a moment, whilst beside him, cartoon toothbrushes seemed to be laughing at him. He skulked by the magazines – all very neat, just how she liked - and looked out of the wisteria-framed window, their nodding petals and subtle scent soothing him until a soft voice interrupted.

“It’s okay, Mr. Harris...’ The receptionist reassured him with a gentle, Aberdeen lilt. “- or may I call you Fred?... You know, Miss MacLean’s not as fierce as she seems.”

Fred tried not to laugh. He had thirty years of memories to the contrary, and not one of them involved Agnes MacLean smiling, just sharp words, raised eyebrows and tightly pursed lips.

He let out a long breath.

“Ever since ten-year-old me giggled at her surname and decapitated her precious flowers, I’ve been persona non grata... I was actually glad that I never grew much, so I didn’t have to face her over the garden fence!”

Fred checked his breath and straightened his clothes. But even trying to recall the serene scenes of his African VSO trips, his chest still felt like it was hosting a ceilidh for kangaroos.

“I said, ‘Good MORNING, Fredrick!’”

Fred flinched. He hadn’t even heard the door open!

As Agnes looked him up and down, he felt all of ten years old again.

Then, something peculiar happened. Agnes MacLean gave a slow, crinkly smile

“It seems you’ve turned out okay, laddie. I’ve heard a-a-all about your volunteering.” Her knobby little hand patted his arm. “Your mum would’ve been proud. And...” she lowered her voice, “So am I, y’wee rascal.”

Fred tried to speak, but just made a little gurgle of astonishment, before Agnes prodded him and pointed at the door.

“Now then, we’re two minutes late for my appointment. Let’s see if you’re as good a dentist as the neighbors say!”

Honorable Mention:

Being an Immigrant Granddaughter by Waasia Basheer

“HeIII....lloo.....”, I hear her voice crackling through the phone- an attempt to sound louder and clearer. She doesn’t realize that currently, she’s loud enough to be heard by the entire neighborhood. I see her face blurred out by the camera, two eyes popping through the lens, trying to recognize the people she’s talking to.

It’s annoying how my mom keeps nudging me, reminding me to smile, when I want to smash the phone on the wall. Yes, perhaps I am not very close to my grandma; the reason being the sea parting us into two different countries, or the fact that the distance is even more than that probably since she doesn’t even recognize me anymore. Being an immigrant granddaughter, the only connection I have with my grandma is the phone screen, which is almost equivalent to having none at all. Mom is grateful to the fact that at least grammy can press the green button and show herself once in a while.

“Oh, how I miss you my sweet Tilly! You’ve grown up and changed. Why don’t you talk more often? It’s been so loooong....I missed you sweet pea!!”, she smiles between sobs. This may have been enough to bring tears in my eyes, only if I was Tilly. Tilly is Matilda, my cousin; and I’ve never understood how I resemble her in any way possible. Forcing a stretch across my cheeks, I smile and say, “I missed you too grammy. How are you? Take care of yourself. Goodbye!”, swallowing parts of my words. I didn’t even care to correct her and introduce myself since grammy usually doesn’t hear what we say, and “Hello! Can you hear me?”, makes the major part of our conversations.

Yesterday, I spoke to my cousin and narrated it all to her. She seemed to be glad listening to it. After all, why wouldn’t she; but I wasn’t ready for what she had to say, and maybe I would never be. She told me I should’ve expected grammy to mention “Tilly” since she had talked to her the very day before thinking it was me. She told me how grandma said that it’s really hard to see nowadays and that she feels upset about not being able to see anyone properly.

“I know Sisi, you are very angry since I don’t recognize you often, but don’t you ever think I forgot you. I love you so much precious. See, today I recognized you well, didn’t I? I am still waiting for your vacation next month so we could spend time together. Come home soon. It’s been two years, and I miss you so much. I will be waiting for you”, is what she told Matilda.

Grandma’s memory may have failed her but her love remains unchanged. Her love is the bridge that keeps us connected across two different countries. Nowadays when she calls, she sees two eyes staring through the screen, my eyes, in an attempt to engrave her face in my heart forever.

Honorable Mention:

Marvyn and Mynnie by Kathryn Sadakierski

“One day, I just looked, and that tree had lost all its leaves. Every day, I saw all the yellow leaves, shimmering like little gold coins, dancing in the wind. Then I turn my head, and the next minute, it’s all white branches, a web like lace strands connected in a doily. Turn your back on nature, and it wisps away into a ghost, just like that.”

“Grandma, you told me that story yesterday, too, and I still don’t get it. Anyway, look at how high I can jump now. Mom says that before long, I’ll be clearing hurdles in track.”

“Why, I can still jump, too. Look. These old bones are strong.”

Mynnie leaped as gracefully as she could, hovering above the ground slightly, like a bird learning to fly, a hesitant ballerina on the cusp of pirouetting. Marvyn bent his knees, launching himself into the air with all of his seven-year-old might.

“Not bad, Grandma, but I still think I won that contest.”

Mynnie settled into her bench, sitting down in gradual movements. “My, some days, being here in my garden is just like being in the park. Time is funny like that. I can never keep track of it. Like you jumping. One minute you’re on the ground, and the next you’re in the air, but blink your eyes, and you miss it.”

Marvyn sat on the ground near the chrysanthemums nodding their golden, sunlit heads. “Why don’t you go to the park anymore, Grandma?”

Mynnie sighed, a rattling exhalation of breath. “I may be able to jump just like I used to, but I get tired out, Marvyn. I couldn’t walk all the way there. But I sure do miss seeing all the seasons change, looking at the freshly-cut grass, then seeing it covered in snow. And all the people! I met everybody, with their baby strollers, or walking their dogs... they all would say hello. Why, I got such a kick out of feeding the pigeons and ducks. You should’ve seen them waddling around, like little royal soldiers proudly protecting their bread.”

“Why don’t we make you a park here, Grandma? You do all those things here anyway. Seeing the leaves fall, smelling the flowers. And I like watching the birds with you, especially when they’re in the houses you made. Let’s just bring everything to the front so people can see you. Then you can say ‘hi.’”

Marvyn carried the potted chrysanthemums from the backyard to the front porch, then the birdhouses, and helped carry the wooden bench.

“Nice day, isn’t it?” A power-walking woman called out to them, in their perches on the porch. “Beautiful flowers you’ve got there.”

Mynnie smiled. "Thanks. I planted them myself. I take good care to see every flower grow." She turned to Marvyn. "Sometimes, out in the sunshine, I don't feel frail like the leaves, and time just pauses, so I can enjoy it. Why, it reminds me of a tree I would see out my window..."

Honorable Mention: **Remember** by Ramon Paolo Alfar

An old man settles on a park bench. 65 in age. Wrinkled skin from his face to his arms. Bald cap exposed. And his wardrobe is like he is out for fishing.

He recently retired as a doctor of psychiatric study. And he hopes to see his children for a long time. He invited his children - his two sons and his two daughters - for a meetup in the park and lunch eventually.

But in the meantime, he simply rests on the warm bench, but he soon utters these words:
"John, Trudy, Trey, Florence."

He repeats, "John, Trudy, Trey, Florence."

And repeat, "John, Trudy, Trey, Florence."

And repeat, "John, Trudy, Trey, Florence."

Until one girl notices him from a park bench at the right side of the man. 16 in age. Bright-skinned but colored in heritage. Her hair lowered. And her clothes blend well to the dark, but make her frightening at sunlight.

She overheard the old man repeatedly chanting out his mantra. "Hey mister, you've been uttering gibberish for long time now. Can you keep it down?"

"Sorry, I thought this is a public park," he replies.

"Well, people will think you as crazy. And some people need no noise."

The old man is taken aback by the girl's harshness. But he keeps quiet. Being a forgiving man, he turns his head at the girl, to notice the scratches and scrape marks on her wrist.

The man notices the girl's hands are shaking. Her face trembling. And her breathing is almost like heaving. He knew there is a lot more to her.

He softly repeats, "John, Trudy, Trey, Florence." But he shares to the girl, "You know, they are my kids. John, Trudy, Trey, Florence. Every second I call out their names, I had to love them the same way."

"What do you mean?"

"I would always call out their names always. I never did count the times I've been with them. But I always call them out."

The girl has no choice but to try to make sense of the old man's story. "I'm sorry. Correct me if I am wrong. But have you and your kids been close?"

"Not really, but we still talk."

"Okay? But do you see each other?"

"Well, it's been a long time since I can remember. But we will still meet up for lunch here in the park."

"Why in a park of all places?"

"Because...uhmm...." The man suddenly trembles as he tries to remember what he and his children had spoken about. "I know I am supposed to meet them here. John, Trudy, Troy, Flo? Laurence? Doris? No! It's John, Tru...what's her name? Craig? Florence? John? John!"

Seeing the old man about to break down, the girl wraps her arms around the man to calm him down. He tries to break out, but the girl tenderly consoles him.

"Mister, I don't know why. But I know what you are going through. I'll help you remember, okay?"

He nods his head.

Honorable Mention: **Wedding Dress Blues** by Pamela Bruschi

Aunt Beba, I called her, childless, but not by choice, welcomed me to share in her evening tasks as frequently as opportunity allowed me to. I relished this quiet escape from the clamorous characters of my brothers and sisters. I was seven or eight-years-old and sat mesmerized as she ironed sheets and pillowcases and second-hand dresses she bought for me. Her capable hands miraculously erased the damage done by the old wringer washing machine. The clothes were rinsed with bluing, evenly sprinkled with water, rolled up and placed at the end of the ironing board, waiting their turn to be attacked by the iron under the supervision of Aunt Beba.

Her smooth forehead, in sharp contrast to the wrinkled clothes, was creased in intense concentration, her features set with a mingled look of vengeance and determination. With proud finality, she'd hold up her victory, a smile displacing her sweaty brow and lighting up the whole room.

I felt special as I listened to her; a silent witness to personal stories, family history, secret dreams, reflections, and priceless memories; her belief that even though someone may no longer be with us, they are not forgotten and their love and presence are always with us.

Sometimes I thought she had tears in her eyes, but she attributed the wetness on her face to the steam escaping from the old iron. She told me a story one night and at times I believe she forgot she had an audience. She talked about the love of her life - how handsome he was and how he treated her like a princess. How she had walked arm-in-arm with him beneath the leaves of the chestnut trees, proud to be under the protection of this tall, distinguished soldier. They would talk for hours and hours, sharing their dreams, laughing at nothing, unaware of the smiles of passersby who couldn't help being affected by the happiness of the couple who were oblivious to anyone but each other.

Her heart was broken when he left for the war, but he promised he would return. The letter came a month later. She placed the hand made wedding dress she had so meticulously sewed into her hope chest; a chest that was now empty of hope.

She made me promise to keep her story a secret and that when she was no longer here I was to take the dress and treat it with love and handle it with care. It would be a reminder to me of the sacredness of love and the importance of courage and fortitude and endurance.

Beba died at the age of forty-four, stricken by cancer. When I open the hope chest, the odor of mothballs does not assault me - I welcome it! The folds of the now-yellowed dress are as crisp as the day she last pressed her love and hopes and dreams into them. I recall her blue-stained fingers and get blue for a while, missing how her smile touched me.