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Category: Short Story

The Last Vote

It was a fall morning, so *was* cold but Ruth was bundled up as if it was the coldest day of the year. Her skin was thin and heat escaped it easily. Her hands were covered in gloves. Her head snuggled with a cotton hat. Her body wrapped with two, maybe three jackets. Her face shielded with a thick mask. It was a miracle she was even able to breathe.

She took a couple deep breaths and sighed. Her bones felt weak, but she was happy. She was admitted to the hospital a few weeks before, but they had released her after running a few tests. They said it was just old age; nothing was particularly wrong with her, but she knew her time was almost up. Her husband had left her a few years back. Cancer, they told her. They had given him two months to live, but he lived five more, which was a miracle—at least that's what she always told people.

Ruth hobbled into the small building, made of only four wooden walls. The line had been formed for hours, but she was told to go to the front. Her daughter, Elizabeth, held out her elbow to help. They walked past the people, old and young. At the front of the line was a young girl with a middle-aged woman. That was her, only a few years back. She was standing with her momma in line, all giddy to vote for the first time.

"It's my first time voting." Ruth had told the poll worker. Her momma had giggled a little because everyone could tell it was her first time. She didn't have to tell them that.

Momma had told her exactly what to do until it came to filling out the ballot. "Vote however ya think is best." She said. But they both knew who each other was voting for. On that autumn night in 1960, Ruth fell asleep before the president-elect was announced, but momma told her Kennedy had won when she went down for breakfast the next morning. *Kennedy*. Ruth thought. *Poor Kennedy*.

Now, Ruth looked around the room filled with people younger than her. She must've been the oldest one there. It was weird to her how she used to go places and see all her friends. She didn't anymore. Maybe they didn't go out or maybe they weren't around—that wasn't any different to her.

She flashed them her driver's license, scribbled her name on the tablet, and sat down.

"Fill 'em in. Whatever ya think's best." Elizabeth said as she placed a black ink pen through one of her gloved hands and the ballot on the surface in front of her. The doctors had told her to stay at home, to mail it. "Ya can just do it at home. It's that easy." They told her when she was released from the hospital. "Ya need your rest ma'am. Ya needa stay at home 'til it all passes." But she didn't want to stay at home. She wanted to get out there; she had to get out there. She knew it was her last time to vote, and maybe the last time she'd get out and about.

She filled out the ballot and shoved it into the machine. Elizabeth held her arm and guided her back to the car. Ruth breathed grey smoke into the air, and her eyes shone between the mask and hat. She was driven back home, tucked into bed, and told to read a book or watch T.V. She stayed in bed and knew her muscles were getting weaker. Her breath was growing slower. Her face was losing color.

Maybe she did it because it was tradition. Or maybe it was an excuse to walk around a little. But Ruth liked to believe she woke up early on that cold fall day because she still cared. Not really about who the president was but that there was one. She had lived through more presidents than she could count now; they all blended together. The inaugurations. The arguments. The issues. They didn't seem to matter much.

She remembered sitting around the family television with her brothers and sisters when they were all little. They listened as the president was announced on her sister's 15th birthday. Her momma smiled. Her daddy may have even grinned, but she would never know. She laid in bed now with the covers past her chest. The news anchor announced as results poured in, but Ruth didn't listen. She wouldn't be here to watch the next inauguration. She wouldn't be here to see what the president did. All she thought about was her momma handing her that ballot. That's all that seemed to matter.