

Love, Unconditional (essay excerpt)


The night Nana passed away, the dimming light colored the California sky cobalt. I measured the movement of the moon between the dusky branches of an oak while more than two thousand miles away my grandmother lay still. For months she had lingered at a skilled nursing care facility in Cleveland, hardly eating but alert. Her refusal of sustenance was her only recourse to expedite the inevitable. My grandfather, steadfast in his devotion, sat and sat by his beloved's side. Only at his daughter's urging did he reduce the hours of his daily vigil. Perhaps it was his absence that allowed Nana to release her final breath, untethered. Returning to her bedside, Grandpa wept at the sight of his dear Alice, companion of sixty-seven years, her mouth and eyes agape, staring but unseeing, as if astonished to meet her maker.

My grandparents met in 1935, when she was sixteen and he was twenty. Jack served as the sports editor of his high school paper and dreamed of being a writer, but graduated early to help support his nine siblings as a bookkeeper during the Great Depression. While delivering the rent to the apartment above, my grandfather first set eyes upon his wife-to-be during one of her elocution lessons. He liked to joke that the visit cost him.

Alice was a fashion plate who believed a lady looked best stylishly dressed. Silent home movies show her flirting with the camera in red lipstick and lacquered nails with an outfit to match. In the final frame, she settles behind the wheel of a white convertible, pulls a silk scarf from her patent leather handbag, and covers her head.

My grandmother had her hair set once a week. Her iconic Ann Landers hairstyle changed little over the decades; like the advice columnist she was a strict grammarian, quick to correct and offer counsel. She gradually had her hair lightened from dark brown to blond, until her final year when she let the strands go gray. By then, still living in the home they inhabited for nearly six decades, she spent her days and nights downstairs in an upholstered armchair. After her first hip fracture her body followed a steady decline. I remember, when I last visited, how Grandpa urged her to do the exercises assigned after rehab. "Come on, dear. You cannot just sit there," he repeated in exasperation. But there she remained, her head bowed and body slumped in satin pajamas. After a second fall required permanent residence at the nursing home, their daughter took her to the beauty salon downstairs to get her hair done. For the first time in weeks, Nana applied lipstick and smiled as she held a hand mirror to her face.

After two sons, Alice's wish for a daughter was fulfilled by my Aunt Judi. Out of seven grandchildren, I was the only female. Unlike my aunt, I emulated the defiance and independence of my father who fled to the west coast after graduating from Ohio State. Throughout my adolescence and early adulthood I rolled my eyes at her admonitions to "sit like a lady" when she caught me slouching with my knees apart. I rejected the ruffled dresses she selected during shopping trips, preferring my faded 501 jeans and flannel shirts to the flower prints she pulled off the racks. Much to her dismay, I felt restricted by high heels and other trappings of traditional femininity. No matter how hard she tried, Nana could not refine me.



She was meticulous in her housekeeping, quick to fluff pillows and wipe handprints. “In this house we take our shoes off before entering,” she explained to my older brother and me. But after two generations Nana softened her stance. My father, who also was required to leave his boots at the door, who spent his upbringing sitting stiff on her plastic-wrapped sofa, watched with amazement when her great-grandchildren were given free rein to run amok and spill crumbs on the carpet.

It wasn't until visiting Cleveland for the first time on my own, just before I turned thirty, that I noted admiration in my grandmother's eyes—whether it was her recognition or my own realization, I cannot ascertain. From my Datsun hatchback I pulled out the tent I used for camping on my cross-country road trip and demonstrated how to assemble the rods. As I pitched the little yellow dome next to their white picket fence, Grandpa held his chin in his palm and shook his head in wonder. Then he humored me by crawling inside. I have the photo Nana took of us, kneeling together, our arms around each other: he in his golf shirt and pressed plaid pants, me with my backwards baseball cap. Each time we talked afterward they mentioned that tent. Nana, whose travels had taken her only as far as Bermuda on her honeymoon, must have identified a freedom long denied. Later she remarked to her daughter, “That woman has a great life.”

I hadn't seen my grandparents for nearly a year when I planned to visit Nana one last time. In mid-February I bought a plane ticket for early March. “You might not make it,” my father warned. He knew dying does not cater to the will of the living. I did not yet understand that death offers no second chances. One week before my scheduled arrival, Nana was gone.

Our family joined my grandfather in his bereavement. In the living room I relayed a dream I had, a few nights before Nana died, when she walked up the stairs of their house to greet us. Aunt Judi leapt up, flapping her hands like little propellers, and said she had the same dream that night. We bonded over our parallel vision, or visitation. All agreed it was how Nana would want to be remembered.

“I hope I don't have to set foot in that place for a long, long time,” Grandpa said. “All that sickness around.” Now our stalwart family patriarch, no longer strong enough to lift a bowling ball, was released from the burden of full-time caregiver. Over the course of his married life he had answered his wife with a dutiful Yes, dear. We wondered what would drive his days in her absence.

“I have no friends now,” he said, “They're all dead.” He lamented the loss of Sol, his best friend for eighty years.

“Everything changes,” Grandpa said with a sigh. “Oh, what I'd give to be told now to take out the garbage.”

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