

Growing up, I never really knew Audrey Heim. As one of her sundry grandchildren, I didn't think of myself as particularly important to the matriarch of our unruly and massive family. We passed in and out of each other's lives during holidays and trips back and forth from New Mexico and Maryland, but I'm not sure we made much of a lasting impact on each other.

Fast forward to October of last year – I was spending the weekend in Albuquerque and during my time there, I decided to pick up a slice of pie from Flying Star Café and deliver it to her room at Brookdale. At this point in my life, I was at the ripe old age of 21 and was laboring under the delusion that I had life pretty well figured out, so I marched right into her room and presented the slice of strawberry-rhubarb with gusto, as if it would mean anything to her. As if it could make up for the fact that in the past ten years I'd never once picked up a phone to call her.

Then I sat on the bed and we sank into an uncomfortable silence. She asked what I was studying and I told her. I asked how she was doing and she told me. More seconds ticked by and it struck me that I had absolutely no idea who this woman was. I was suddenly desperate to find out.

“Do you like your life, Grandma?” I blurted.

To my surprise, she barked out a laugh. “No.”

“Do you miss your home?”

“Yes.”

“Would you go back if you could?”

The next answer was less direct. “I can't do anything here,” she said.

“What do you want to do?” I asked, expecting an answer like “take a walk” or “play bridge”. Her answer shocked me.

“I want to die.”

I bit my lip, completely uncertain of how to respond. In my panic, I blurted out, “Do you even like rhubarb pie?”

She barked out another laugh but didn't answer as a Brookdale employee came by to whisk her off to dinner. I gave her a hug and we said our goodbyes. I told her I loved her, but the sentiment tasted sour coming from my mouth. It tasted like a lie.

It was only months later that my father arranged for her to move twenty minutes away from our home in Maryland. I was supposed to help her unpack the following day and then she was to spend both my younger brother's birthday and Christmas Day with us. Do you know what my first reaction was? Annoyance. I didn't want her there. I didn't want to get involved in this bitter old woman's life. But I went anyway and I was in a no-nonsense mood as I arrived and immediately started moving sweaters from the suitcase to the dresser. I must have climbed over the bed hundreds of times as she decided, “No wait, that one should be hung in the closet”.

But somehow, in the midst of deciding where the tenth pair of trousers should go, I found myself feeling nothing but patient with her. I left Brookdale that day in amazement - in a small way, I had begun to understand her.

She would come over for the aforementioned family affairs – she would dig into whatever meal had been prepared as if she hadn't eaten in a week. She instantly took to my crazy maniac of a dog. She watched whatever movie we turned on and observed in contentment as we opened gifts on Christmas morning.

As I watched her rest an arm on my dog's shoulder, I found myself hoping that she did not want to die anymore. Her life may not have turned out the way she wanted – whatever dreams she concocted in

her head about the way her life would end clearly did not match reality, but for now, this seemed to be enough. Enough to hold onto, enough to make her smile, enough to come back alive.

The day after she died, I took off and hiked to the bottom of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. It was an unseasonably warm day and the moment I made it down to the river, the sun moved from behind the single cloud in the sky and engulfed me in brilliant light. I fell back into the sand and laughed – I'm not sure what that was, if it was my grandmother reaching down with tendrils of sunshine to tell me she was finally happy, if it was my grandfather reassuring me they were together again, or if it was merely, and much less romantically, the clouds being clouds, but I can tell you this: that light touched every bit of my soul.

Thank you, Audrey, for the tapestry that you and my grandfather wove together. You are responsible for so many of the incredible people in my life and I am so thankful for the role I got to play in yours. If I doubted it before, I don't now: I loved you and I will dearly miss your delightful and eternally unsatisfied personality in my life.