

And No More

Landing at Lindberg Field was always a little dicey. Depending on the direction of the wind, you came in disturbingly low over downtown San Diego. Looking out of the plane's window, I could see the tops of hotels and businesses well above us, and in combination with being unable to see the runway, my already tense stomach was in knots. The thirty minute ride from the airport to Ocean Beach was no better, the 805 jammed with traffic, the 5 interchange a complete mess. I kept the window of the rental car down, and looked for the familiar spire of Sea World that had meant all my life that we were getting close to Grandma's.

It was the summer of 1981, and I was 12 years old. I was alone at home when my Aunt Marlene called, "Is your mom there? No? This is very important—Grandma Annie is sick, have your mom call me as soon as you can."

I have no idea why, but I don't write it down, and I didn't tell my mom, or my dad. My parents had been separated for two years, and my brother and I lived with our mom. I'm not sure why Aunt Marlene didn't call my dad at his place. Maybe she didn't want to talk to Dad's girlfriend, a common feeling among all of us.

Terrible guilt is part of what I was feeling, as my mom, my brother and I flew from San Jose to San Diego, hoping that we get there in time, in time for a few more moments of lucidity with the grandmother I'd always been closest to.

Grandma Annie was Dad's mom. She was tall and thin, brilliant and eccentric. Beyond eccentric. Straight-up crazy. When we were really little, she took us on dinosaur hunts, and taught us mnemonic poems about *smilodon fatalis* and *megatherium*. She smoked like an incense burner, and drank sweet acidophilus Knudsen milk out of half-gallon pink cartons. Her house was a hodgepodge of strange toys, enormous stuffed animals, secret cupboards, and a big band worth of instruments her alcoholic husband kept from his days as a jazz musician. I learned the word "ream" from her. She kept reams of paper on shelves in her sun porch. I never knew why she needed so much paper, but on the off chance she did, she had a steady supply. She seemed to live mostly on carrot juice and graham crackers, and hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

No matter how early I got up when we stayed with her, she was always up first. She'd sit on a high stool at the counter in her kitchen, pour me a bowl of raisin bran and sweet acidophilus milk, and smoke while I ate. Her gaunt cheeks would suck in, and she'd blow smoke out of her nose, her wrinkled skin and sunken eyes enhancing the impression I'd always had that she was a dragon. Even when she was on oxygen, she smoked, and it was the smoking that was finally killing her.

Six months before the call, Annie and her husband, my dad's stepdad Grandpa Larry, had been on a road trip to Oregon. Along the way, Larry had a heart attack, and so did she. He died, but they resuscitated her, and she was incredibly angry about it. She came home, and decided she was done.

She had her caregiver box up and throw away binder after binder of her writing. Years of poetry, gone.

She gave away a good deal of her possessions.

Soon enough, she stopped eating.

And then, the call, and the trip.

I don't know how long we were there. I don't remember sleeping, but I'm pretty sure I did. I don't remember eating, but I'm pretty sure I did.

I remember the dining room, Larry's Hammond organ long gone to charity, his piano pushed to the side, a rented hospital bed against the tall cabinets my dad and his brothers built in the late 1950s. The room was full of light, and silent, but for the hiss of Annie's oxygen. Her eyes were already closed, and she appeared to be resting. I bent close and whispered in her ear, "We're all here, Grandma. We're all here." I wanted to say, "I love you," or "don't go, I'm not ready," but I couldn't.

My mother heard what were probably her last words. My mom and dad had been high-school sweethearts. They met in the cold lunch line at Point Loma High in 1954, when Mom was cold and Dad lent her his

jacket. My mom's parents were always fairly absent, so my mom became the daughter Grandma Annie had never had. She had been a permanent fixture in the house, watching as my dad and his brothers demolished and rebuilt Grandma's shoddy beach bungalow, and Grandma never really forgave my dad for leaving. Mom whispered in Grandma's ear, then bent her head close as Annie told her, "you're a..."

"What is it? What am I?"

"Urinate."

The last thing my grandmother said to anyone was that she had to go pee.

Later in the afternoon, my dad fed grandma a lime popsicle. She was barely conscious, but gummed the frozen confection nonetheless. Dad, ever the practical physician, said he was trying to make sure she didn't get dehydrated, as she had had nil by mouth in nearly two days. She lay back, labored breath aided by the hissing green tank.

I remember looking in one of the cabinets in the living room, as the adults sat around her talking. I found a little toy farm, something I treasured even at 12, and sat on the Berber carpet in front of the low-slung mid century modern green sectional and arranged the barn, the donkey, the horse, the tiny sow with engorged teats and her even smaller pink plastic piglets.

At some point, maybe that day, maybe the next—I honestly can't recall, time seemed meaningless—my dad knew the end was near. He

called us all in, to sit, to wait, for the inevitable. Grandma's breath was shallow and quick.

One breath in, one breath out... a long pause...

one breath in, one breath out... a longer pause...

one breath in... a long pause...

one breath out...

And nothing more. One long sigh of an exhalation, and Grandma was gone.

No more feeding the birds until the people from the San Diego Zoo came to ask her to stop, the birds weren't coming to the zoo anymore. No more straw hats to keep off the sun as we played at the beach. No more cackling laugh descending into a fit of coughing. No more stories of prehistoric beasts trapped in La Brea. No more sitting at the counter watching her smoke. No more sweet milk that wasn't really sweet. No more pinched cheeks for little boys. No more shared birthday.

No more.

Dad looked at his watch, made a note of the time, and twisted the valve on the oxygen tank closed. He placed his hand on her chest, then his ear, and listened to silence.

Mom cried quietly. Tears wetted the corners of my eyes, and ran down my cheeks. Dad was silent, lost in his own thoughts. I'm not sure how much later it was when Uncle Rob and his sons got there, missing his mother's death by maybe 30 minutes. He sobbed, "No!", and held the

empty shell that had been the woman who gave him life. His tears left a damn mark on the light blue, flowered fabric that covered her.

My dad said, “kids, everyone, I’d like you to help wash her.”

He gently removed the clear plastic tubing from her face, and slipped off the flimsy hospital gown. I remember being shocked at my grandmother’s lack of breasts. She had apparently had a double radical mastectomy at some point, which as a young child, I had not been informed of.

Her skin was surprisingly soft as we used damp washcloths to clean her, head to toe. Her arm was limp as I spread talcum powder on my hands and transferred it onto her. I had expected her to be rigid, but apparently that comes later. She was nothing, empty, hollow, light, no longer present.

I don’t remember leaving. I don’t remember the trip home. I remember that last, long, exhaled breath, and no more.