

Hail Mary, Full of Grace

(For Margaret)

The week before last, I held my grandmother's—Nanny's—hand while she died in a quiet room at Mercy Hospital in South Buffalo, New York. My aunt and uncle stood on her other side. She had seen her mother, she'd said.

“It's ok to go with her, Mom,” my uncle said. “You did a good job. We love you. We'll see you again.”

We thanked her for her life and waited with her, repeating our words as the time increased between each of her shallow breaths. My uncle led us in a litany of Hail Marys, and our words ran together where we whispered the prayer over her spare breaths. “Hail Mary, full of grace/ The Lord is with thee/ Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus/ Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death/ Amen.”

Her eyes were open and I believe she knew we were there. I hope she heard us. After some time—twenty minutes? Five? An hour?—she closed her eyes as a more full breath escaped her and she was gone.

There had been a flurry of activity around her until the moment when, after a hurried trip back home, the DNR papers were presented and a change came over the nursing and hospital staff. Unlike the moments before, which had required only their efficiency, their hurry, their knowledge about making people well, all became tenderness in their quiet exit from the room.

A young nurse had begun her shift during my grandmother's last hour, and she had hooked up the IV that my aunt, also a nurse, recognized as treatment for pneumonia. We had not

yet seen the doctor, so the nurse was careful with her answers to my aunt. My grandmother, another nurse, knew their code, and her eyes widened at the news I only sort of understood. She was gone within the hour.

Afterward, the nurse returned to check on us, and my aunt noticed her nametag.

“Look,” she said. Her name was Angel.

Afterward

Nanny’s death was not a surprise, not the unexpected trauma so many have to face without warning or the chance to say goodbye. In fact, I thought I would feel only happiness for her, knowing she had been ready to go all summer, when I had been staying with her to assist in recovery from a leg injury.

And still, I could only miss her when I awoke in her empty apartment the next morning. In the days that followed I imagine I acted as strangely as everyone else does in the irrational immediate behaviors of grief. I could not stop touching or kissing her wedding ring, which my aunt had taken from Nan’s finger in the moments after she died—as if she were actually inside the band of gold she had worn for more than 70 years. I snapped at a friend who moved the bag of clothes she’d been wearing that night, from behind my passenger seat to another part of my car. He accepted that I was upset but didn’t understand why it mattered. I didn’t either.

“It just does,” I said.

The next day I was confused, asking myself multiple times throughout the morning the same thing she’d asked of me so many times. “Isn’t there something I’m supposed to be doing right now?”

There was. I should be recording her vital signs using the machine that walked us through the process every day in a polite, mechanical GPS-like voice that Nanny would gamely respond to on good days. “You’re welcome!”

I should be setting out breakfast and checking her medicines. I should be wrestling with her insufferable leg stockings we loathed for the effort it required to squeeze them on every morning. I should be receiving the kicks in the face she delivered while trying to help, and joking that it wasn’t nice to take out latent aggressions on one’s granddaughter.

I should be chasing her in restaurants, urging her to slow down on her way to the table while she plows through patrons with one arm and attempts to push chairs from her path with her other (The next time you see weakness in a woman behind a walker, think twice. That thing is a weapon).

Our routine had included a litany of questions and answers throughout the day, her attempts at ownership over her schedule and memory. When would we change the dressing on her wound next? Who would be coming tomorrow? The list repeated itself, sometimes every few minutes. Now, I missed being her rememberer.

There were bigger questions too. Though Nan had been ready to go, she had often wondered and worried about how it would happen, if it would hurt, what would happen next, and how she would get there. Afterward, despite my own faith that there is life after this one, I kept wondering just where she was exactly. If she was no longer rattling her walker around to wake up my uncle, telling stories and asking questions about her day, or reading the horoscopes with me while watching the walkers go by outside, just what was she up to? After our frank discussions about death and what happens next, I just wanted to ask her what she thought of the whole thing.

Signs of Life

Loss > Strength > Jedi Mind Tricks

Many often commented on how tiny my grandmother was, and she had a small, high voice to match. But her five-foot tall, less than 90-pound frame was a Jedi mind trick all her own. She was bigger and stronger than most people I know.

She lived through the Great Depression, two world wars and 17 US presidents. She lost a husband to lung cancer nearly 35 years ago after his years working for Bethlehem Steel when the steel industry had thrived in Buffalo. She outlived her four brothers and most of her friends. She knew the pain of miscarriage and diseases that claimed those she loved.

She had four children, 12 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. She was at my wedding and listened me through my divorce, always pushing me to love again no matter how chicken I was. When people she knew experienced loss, she was adamant that healing and moving on were our responsibilities to ourselves.

“People can’t drown in their sorrows forever,” she would say. “You have to go and do and have, live your life. You have to carry on.”

Shopping for nail polish at the supermarket the same week, I faced hundreds of bottles. My eye immediately fell on one, a shade of purple. (To those unaccustomed to nail polish branding, rarely will you see a plain descriptor like “red” or “purple” or even “crimson” on the bottle. I once had a shade called “I’m not a waitress. It was red.”)

I did not browse but went straight for the purple bottle and put it in my cart, glancing at its sticker for the name.

“Carry on,” it said. Ok Nan, I get it.

Not long before her death, I walked through Nanny's neighborhood while she slept. The silence outside, barring the gusts that swept dark Buffalo clouds over her neighborhood, mirrored the quiet inside. Passing a cemetery, I thought about how often she had been sleeping. I thought about her memory and her frustrations living in this in-between place where she was neither fully here nor there. I asked the air what was next. Was her time coming soon, or would she recover from her leg injury and move on?

A crow flew from its perch on a gravestone and swept low across my path, its inky-black feathers catching the light in an oily shine.

Really, signs from the universe? Did you have to be that blunt? Was this the cliché of all foreshadowing clichés, or some subtle archetype I could respect? I learned later that crows are not just harbingers of death but symbols of spiritual power and impending change. They symbolize the Great Spirit in some Native American traditions.

A week after her death on the same walk through her neighborhood, crows were replaced by butterflies, and they were everywhere.

Josh Groban and Fried Green Tomatoes

On my way out for dinner the week after Nan died, I asked a friend to pick the place, and he unknowingly picked her favorite restaurant. The special was scallops and fried green tomatoes, the last meal I had cooked for her. I'd left it uneaten on the table as the EMTs carried her out and she asked through labored breaths if I had remembered to turn the oven off. She'd never had fried green tomatoes before, and I'd never made them. I'd teased her that she had not fooled anyone with her "run for the hospital" trick to avoid trying my new dish. Who knew a plate of day-old, soggy green tomatoes could induce tears to throw away the next day.

As I was telling my dinner companion about this, a Josh Groban song came on overhead. Nan had followed him like a groupie while she was alive, defending him to my uncle whenever he'd railed against the singer's shaggy haircut. We had just reminisced about seeing him perform in Cleveland years before with my uncle and his partner.

Starbucks Angels

After the funeral, I took a trip through Western New York and Vermont with a friend. My uncle had given us some of my grandmother's petty cash, telling us to treat ourselves to dinner as a gift from her. At the end of the trip we went to Starbucks to spend the last of her treat before we returned to the long highway.

When the cashier put our coffees and cookie on the table, I said out loud, "Thanks, Nan!"

"Look," whispered my friend. He pointed at the nametag of the cashier who had served us. Her name was Angela, from the Greek Angelos, Messenger of God, Angel. And I knew she was ok. It would be ok.