

Grandma Stella

by

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A shiver ran through my body when I got the call two weeks ago from my mother.

“Tracy...”

I knew right away it was bad news from the tone of her voice.

“Grandma Stella had a stroke last night, and she’s in intensive care at Summit Hospital.”

“Mom, tell me they can fix this. She is going to be all right,”

She hesitated. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Our family, my parents and brothers and my uncle and his family, quickly made up a round-the-clock schedule so someone would be with her at all times. It was the only way we would have peace of mind, knowing she had a loving advocate there to speak for her. It’s my shift to sit with her this afternoon. I did not have classes but brought some work along. I took BART from Berkeley to the hospital in Oakland.

I dreaded that walk down the fourth floor corridor inhaling the now too familiar combination of hospital smells and leftover lunch from the stacked trays at the end of the hall. The fourth floor had the intensive care unit and a unit for patients who were in less critical condition.

Efficient nurses, streamed in and out constantly tweaking the machines and monitors that closely kept track of her vital signs, adjusting her IV’s and entering data on the computer monitors now replacing the old fashioned paper records. To them, she was another elderly patient clinging to life surrounded by an annoying family demanding miracles. To us, she was the fulcrum of our family, the balance point for all of us. Her doctors were not optimistic

about her recovery, but the family was not ready to give up hope and maintained a constant vigil.

I needed to prepare for midterms coming soon, but I knew I would not be able to concentrate. Intensive Care was its own alternate universe, where patients tethered to sophisticated machines, bags and IV's hovered in a gray zone, between life and death. I know she sensed I was there, even if she could not communicate. I was sure of it. I reached for her hand, small and lifeless caressing it gently, her usually flawless red glossy manicure now chipped and pathetic.

"How is she today?" I asked the young nurse whom I had seen several times before.

"Not much change, but she is stable so that is good."

My grandma Stella was like a collapsed balloon which had once soared high and proud. The drip of the IVs and the hiss of the ventilator mocked her. The words of her favorite song repeated in an endless loop in my mind.

I sang it to her hoping she would wake up. "Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end." We'd sing and twirl on her linoleum kitchen floor. She was so much fun. She loved the Twist, the *Tvist* as she called it. I even showed her how to salsa, and she was good at it.

Though she was no more than 4'11", she would say she was 5'4" and gave the impression of being taller. Grandma carried herself regally proudly showing off her ample chest emphasized by tight sweaters and tops. She wore high heels, every day, rain or shine. She prided herself on her collection in every color, size 5's lined up like soldiers on the bottom of her closet. I loved putting them on to play dress up when I was little and strutted around the house. Then my feet got too big and I couldn't wear her shoes. She eyed my shoe preference now, comfortable Birkenstocks or Doc Martens, with a sniff not getting why I opted for clunky comfort.

“Dahling,” she’d say, “high heels make a *voman* sexy. Don’t you *vant* to be sexy?”

She also *tsk-tsked* I was flat-chested and did not take after her in that department either.

I kept up my sad one-sided conversation. “Grandma, it’s me, Tracy, you’re favorite granddaughter. Wake up. Please wake up Remember how I played dress up with your shoes?”

She told the six of us we were all her “favorites.” My brothers and cousins relied on her advice, and she fancied herself our family “Dear Abby.” She never missed the column and would discuss it at length if she particularly agreed or didn’t go along with the advice of the day. Though she did not have much formal education because of the Nazi occupation, she was wise and taught us that when we had problems everything would work itself out which seemed to be what usually happened. She was an optimist and held that attitude her whole life.

I thought of her as the *godfather* of our family, as she made all the important financial decisions and was an astute investor. My late grandfather was like a puppy dog trailing behind her and deferred to her on everything. She was shrewd and someone who should not be underestimated, and if you thought you could put something over on her, you would be rudely mistaken.

Going out to dinner with her was an event. A few weeks before she got sick, we went to Alfredo’s, her favorite Italian restaurant to celebrate my mom’s birthday. The *maitre d’* Gino kissed her hand and made a big deal over her. She loved being the center of attention and would turn her head from side to side, as though she was strolling down a red carpet with paparazzi and adoring fans clamoring for her autograph. At the end of the meal, because she was treating which she insisted on doing, she tallied the bill in her head in German and saw it was wrong, in fact off by \$12.

After she looked it over her eyes turned hard for a second. She called the waitress over and whispered to her that there one entrée was charged two times. The flustered waitress apologized profusely and grandma paid the bill and left a huge tip for the waitress anyway.

I longed to put red lipstick on her translucent, papery lips. Without her badge of red, she was like a negative of a photograph missing its vivid, showy colors. Her bathroom drawer was filled with red lipsticks in every shade you could imagine. When I was little and slept over, I liked to open the drawer and take out lipsticks and smear them unevenly across my lips.

“Grandma, do you remember when I put on your lipstick and got it all over my face and you laughed? I was afraid you’d be mad but you weren’t. You showed me how to put it on and press my lips together and blot with a tissue.”

I avoid makeup and am fine wearing my jeans and a tee shirt every day. That’s how my boyfriend Eric likes me anyway. Many girls at Berkeley go for this natural look so I fit right in. Grandma doesn’t get that I don’t like makeup and never lets up nudging me.

I can hear her. “Dahling, you need color. Put on a little blush and lipstick. Boys go for red lips.” I know enough not to argue with her. I nod and smile and say to her, “I’ll put on makeup grandma. I promise, next time.”

I smooth her hair, uncharacteristically dull and flat. She is forever a frosted blonde, and likes her hair “full” and sprayed to stiff cotton candy perfection. Her Wednesday morning trip to the beauty parlor to see Mr. Lloyd for her color and blow dry is a part of her weekly schedule that no one messes with. When she could no longer drive, the family took turns getting her to her appointment. As soon as she entered the salon, Mr. Lloyd rushed over to kiss her on the cheek.

After the kiss, her inevitable comment was, “Dahling, you must make me ten years younger.” He humored her.

“Grandma, don’t worry, as soon as you’re better we will take you to Mr. Lloyd to get your hair done.”

She knows how to embarrass me. Grandma is a serious flirt... waiters, firemen, bank tellers, salesmen; she notices any good looking man. When I am out with her, I prayed I could make myself invisible.

“Grandma, remember when you told the shoe salesman at Macy’s to ask me out. OK, I’ll admit he was hot but I wanted to disappear in the seat. Good thing you bought three pairs of shoes from him.”

The doctors told us that a major blockage of her carotid artery in her neck had caused her stroke. She did not like going for regular check ups no matter how much the family prodded her. “Doctors are for sick people,” she said. She said she was “wonderful” no matter how she felt, though in the last month she had been mentioning occasional dizziness, and we were concerned. Grandma hated the thought of being an invalid and having to be dependent on anyone.

There was a doctor’s appointment scheduled for her and my mother was going to take her, by force if necessary, but she collapsed at home the night before the appointment. Fortunately My Uncle Harvey was over putting in some lightbulbs and called 911. The paramedics came in minutes, and she was taken to the hospital by ambulance but slipped into a coma despite efforts to break the clot.

When I think about it, I know she sensed something was wrong. I should have realized she was ill. I should have done something.

“Tracy, I’m getting tired. It’s time for me to join your grandfather.” I was floored when she said that to me. She was like the Energizer bunny, constantly in motion.

“Grandma ,” I scolded, “ have you been staying up late watching old movies?” She was a night owl and often was up into the early hours of the morning. When I slept over, I

crawled in her bed to keep her company. Even though it was so many years ago, she had nightmares about her years in Nazi Germany and keeping herself awake kept away her bad dreams.

My grandma had been through so much. She spent six years in labor and concentration camps in Germany and Poland which had stolen her precious youth. She was brash, outspoken and said what was on her mind. She didn't learn etiquette and propriety or how to be subtle and beat around the bush. Because she was so charming, she got away with saying things that most people could not.

I stood by her bed. "Grandma, remember when you told that lady at Safeway she should go to Weight Watchers. I thought she was going to cry but she thanked you. "

How could this frail shadow I saw before me be the gutsy teenager who went to the Gestapo on her own to plead for the life of her father. She never talked much about the war and her experiences, but one time she told me a story I will never forget. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. My grandma was furious at me. I had come to her house because I had a big fight with my parents that afternoon. My friend Morgan got a tiny butterfly tattoo on her ankle for her sixteenth birthday, and I wanted one in the worst way for my birthday too.

I was pouting and carrying on because my parents freaked about it. Grandma always took my side but this time she was harsh and annoyed with me. She felt strongly about tattoos as well.

"Tracy, stop acting up. You have such an easy life. You want a tattoo? Here take a look at mine. Then you can decide. If you still want one, I will drive you myself."

She pulled up the sleeve of her blue sweater; she never wore short sleeves, and I saw five numbers, 17869 on her inner arm for the first time. I didn't know what to say and started crying. She got a far away look in her eyes.

Sit down and I am going to tell you a story. I was just your age, fifteen. The Nazis had come in to power in Berlin and they had taken away my father in a daytime raid on his dry goods store. He had been gone for three weeks, and we did not know his fate. We were so scared.

My sister Hannah had nightmares. Mama was shattered and didn't know what to do. I had to take action.

Hannah, I must go to the office of the Gestapo. I have to find out where they took Poppa, but you musn't tell Mama.

I was Sheindel then, not Stella.

She was shaking. Sheindel, you can't go there, it is much too dangerous. You might not come back!

I tried to calm her. I'm going to tell them he was a brave soldier and was wounded during the first war. I will bring Poppa's old medals. Surely they will release him for his past loyalty to the Vaterland. I'm going to dress up to look older, and I can pass for an Aryan with my blond hair.

I rummaged through mother's closet for her newest high heels, the last pair she bought before all the trouble started. They were the latest style, black suede with fancy buckles. Mother loved those shoes but did not wear them because there was no place for us Jews to go dressed up fancy. I found red lipstick and applied it carefully then fixed my wavy hair copying the style of the fashionable women I saw strolling on the Kurfürstendamm. acting like they did not have a care in the world. I wanted to look confident and bold and not appear like the scared fifteen year old girl I was. I took a long look in the mirror gathering courage.

I hugged my sister. Hannah, be brave and pray for me. I love you and I will return. I promise. I grabbed my coat, got on my bike and peddled to the offices of the Gestapo on Prinz-

Albrecht Strasse where the red and black swastika flag of the new Reich was boldly flying outside the building. Just seeing it made me shiver.

Commented [J1]:

I left my bike and quickly went up the brick steps. When I entered, I got in a long line of other nervous people anxiously waiting to speak to an official at a desk way across the room. I smelled the odor of fear, and knew it was coming from me too. I had been waiting for over an hour and the sweat was gathering under my armpits. I was stupid to think I could be sophisticated and in control, pretending to be an Aryan Fraulein. Those fancy shoes hurt my feet terribly. I cursed under my breath for wearing them.

I heard a ruckus and four Nazi soldiers came in to the office with rifles drawn. My heart stopped and I thought of Hannah and Mama and Poppa. This was going to be the last day of my life. I didn't want to die.

The guard shouted. Everyone out to the courtyard. Raus. Raus.

I thought I would vomit from sheer terror. I scrambled with the other stunned people pushing through a door which led to an outer yard stumbling on the brick cobblestones.

They screamed at us. Line up facing the wall!

I walked in a kind of trance. We were all in a line. I suddenly was angry that I had not even had a real boyfriend, just that dumb Fritz who followed me around like a mooning puppy. Why God? I didn't do anything wrong. I don't want to die like this.

I practically collapsed when shots rang out. My knees buckled. The people to the right and left of me dropped to the ground with screams and sickening thuds. There were more screams and shouts and I realized I was screaming, but I was alive. Every other person in the line was shot in the back like a dog and the rest of us were left standing. I had made it through with total random luck and was trembling in shock.

Gestapo officers in fancy uniforms and shiny boots came out to view the spectacle and strutted around the rest of us amused and chatting. One of them said, "Now you pigs,

who still has business in this office?" I ran with the others out the door while the Nazis laughed at us. I had wet my underpants. I grabbed my bike and peddled with every ounce of strength I had. When I got home I opened the door and fell into Hannah's arms sobbing. Hannah held me tight and did not ask any questions. A week later, my Uncle Herman bribed some officials and my father was released. We were deported a year later to a labor camp. Mama and Hannah died within six months. Poppa and I survived.

I startled awake and took my grandma's hand. "Grandma it's me Tracy... I love you so much. You were so brave. You can get well. And I promise I'll start wearing lipstick." I swear a little smile formed at her lips.