

## I Would Have Liked

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I would have liked for this to be a fond reminiscence; alas, my mind is still raw, and it must not be so.

My grandmother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer this past spring, and she died at the end of July.

A few days before her passing, she had been moved from hospice care to her house for the last week of her life. My sister, a pillar of strength and support, was in Israel, carrying out the wishes of our grandparents for one of their children to see the homeland of the Jewish people. I had just returned from a solo trip to visit my mother's family in Maine. My grandfather was crying silently.

My mother said to me, "You don't have to go see her."

I told her, "I know. I want to."

"She looks much worse than the last time you saw her." The last time, she had already been too sick to hold a conversation. Her thoughts were sluggish and crept through the depths of her fading mind with little clarity.

How would she look today?

"I want to say goodbye." I said.

The three of us trudged up the cream-carpeted stairs I had raced up and pranced down across years of my childhood, adorned in the costume jewelry my grandmother always let me wear. Oh, how I loved her jewelry. She had always taken extra care to make sure it was perfectly coordinated with whatever outfit she happened to be wearing that day, crimson flower earrings for a crimson blouse or chains of Israeli gold to complement simple cream. But I digress.

They had brought a hospital bed into the bedroom. It looked foreign in the comely space, a snarling mass of wires and buttons in stark contrast to the cozy victorian-styled decor, ripe with antique lamps and black-and-white pictures of relatives that had come from across the sea many years ago.

My grandmother did look worse. Her head, which had previously been covered by a bandana, was bared to us, thinning hair spread sparsely across her pale, veiny scalp. Her arms were frail and much whiter than they should have been, the skin sagging as if it had been stretched and then left to hang. Her eyes were closed. Her mouth was parted slightly in what was either sleep or pain.

She was my grandmother, and she was beautiful.

I can't remember much of what happened next. My parents said something. Maybe I was crying. Maybe they changed her waste bag. All I can recall clearly is the heavy realization that my grandma was going to die soon. I had known it for almost a month, but it was now, standing in her bedroom and seeing her for what was almost certainly the last time, that it felt truer than it had since I'd been told she was sick.

My heart thundered in my chest as it dawned on me that I still needed to say goodbye. I stood by the edge of that hulking monster of a hospital bed, afraid to touch her fragile hand for fear it would not touch back. There were two nurses in the room, quiet and unobtrusive, as well as my mother, smiling as best she could, my father, somber, and my grandfather, looking as if his whole world was about to be taken away.

I thought to myself; *I can't say what I want to while they're here.*

A little ashamed, I asked, “Can I have a moment alone with her?” My family looked surprised, but not affronted. They asked if one of the nurses could stay. She was pretty and dark-skinned, unfamiliar. A stranger. I let her remain.

Then I crossed to the other side of the bed. Behind me was a maroon leather armchair, a lamp with a glass, flower-shaped shade. A television. My grandmother’s coveted jewelry dresser.

“Hi, grandma,” my voice was already weak and wavery. I took her hand, relieved to find it still warm. “Everyone from Maine says hello.” It had fallen upon me to tell each one of them that she wasn’t going to get better. It hurt infinitely less than this.

My thoughts were a maelstrom of grief. I struggled to collect them, to make my trembling mouth form the words I needed to say. “I just wanted to tell you,” and the tears started to fall, “that I love you.” they dripped freely from my cheeks to my fingers to the sheets. The nurse smiled sadly on. “And I want you to know that I could have never, ever hoped for a better grandma,” the words tumbled shakily from my lips. I took a breath to steady them.

*I don’t want you to die*, I thought, and it came upon me that that wasn’t what I wanted to tell her. *I don’t want you to be in pain anymore* was closer, but still not right.

Finally, the right words came to mind. “I hope that wherever you are, you’re happy.”

I squeezed her hand, and I would have liked to say that she opened her eyes and smiled at me one last time. Instead, she remained limp and near-lifeless, so I let go and left the room.

I would have liked for this to be a fond reminiscence.

At some point afterwards, my mother said, “That was very brave of you.”

I was perplexed. How had I been brave? I hadn’t even been strong enough to speak in front of my family.

She said, “Not many people could have had the strength to do what you did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You could have let the last time you saw her be when she could still respond. And you spoke to her alone.”

Perhaps there was some truth to what my mother said, but I’d never thought of it as bravery. All I knew was that I couldn’t let my grandma die without telling her I loved her one last time.

I would have liked for this to be a fond reminiscence.