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W A Y



After her grandmother passed away, Olivia Stren was left to grieve the woman who'd bequeathed her a lifetime of insecurities.

**MY GRANDMOTHER'S FUNERAL** was the kind of party that she would only have attended over her dead body. The sun beamed down on the cemetery with the gaudy radiance of a Broadway diva, gold-lamé arms outstretched on a blue stage, stealing Grandma's show. The rabbi, beard bedewed with sweat, shared sentimental generics about a woman he'd met only once. My cousin Gary\* sobbed violently, pulling a forest's worth of Kleenex from his pockets. Meanwhile, Cousin Gary's in-laws, the Kardashians of the extended family, seemed to have attended the service as an excuse to wear funeral-chic sunglasses. In a the-more-the-merrier gesture, they'd brought their assortment of toy poodles. Grief takes many forms, and their dogs opted for a life-goes-on coping strategy: sniffing one another's rears and bouncing around to pee festively on nearby headstones.

In a last-ditch attempt to please my grandmother, I tried, and failed, to cry. ►



**GRANDMA (MY DAD'S MOTHER)** loved anything pretty and ladylike: petite hand soaps shaped like rosebuds, the colour pink and Princess Diana. She also loved flowers, except for the field variety, deeming them—with their wild lifestyle and slouchy posture—the unkempt tramps of the petalled world. Her favourites were pink roses, which have all the straight-backed deportment and coiffed femininity of debutantes at court. As she aged and her hazel eyes became enshrouded in cataracts, she glutted her Toronto apartment with enough vibrant flower patterns to vex Giverny: loveseats covered in tulips, china in gerberas, dinner napkins in azaleas. Her lips were always dressed in a glossy bougainvillea-like coral, her nails tipped with a matching hue and her hair tense with spray and disciplined into a pewter crown.

Despite her fondness for a feminine toilette, Grandma didn't care for feminine company. It would be reductive to do so, but one could speculate (and we did) that it was because she'd lost her mother to breast cancer when she was an infant and projected feelings of abandonment, anger and desertion onto women in general. She also belonged to a generation who tended to celebrate and invest in male accomplishment. She was raised by her father and adored him, always speaking of him with great tenderness. But the reverence she had for him was nothing compared to the worship she had for her husband, my grandfather. "He was so clever!" she always said. But she often conflated cleverness with conservatism, which is why she was unimpressed when my father got a Ph.D. in African politics from the University of California at Berkeley—a move she viewed as an aggressive rejection of her and her husband's values. So, after my grandfather died, she'd watch the *MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, enraptured by the hosts' commentary and nostalgic for the company of her father and her late husband and their stubborn ideas.

Maybe because I wasn't a Republican man, or maybe because my favourite colour was yellow, not pink, my grandmother never warmed to me. I struggled to win her affection, but like a dog trying to cuddle up to a pet-hater, the more I tried, the more she would shoo me away. I once told her how much I liked her peach pie: "Your crust is so delicious, Grandma," I ventured sweetly. "You certainly know which side your bread is buttered on," she replied in her vinegary timbre. Grandma's voice had always been high and acidic in pitch, as if her vocal chords had been involved in some kind of secret brining project, and as she aged, it sharpened into a screech.

Since my family was never into athletics, board games or other healthy pastimes, mimicking people served as sport. Doing The Grandma was a dinner-time favourite, and my mom—who was also one of my grandmother's favourite targets—and I had it nailed. It was weak revenge, but re-enacting conversations with Grandma seemed to be our only way of finding any control or joy in the time we spent with her.

Dinners at Grandma's were a singular hell. As I greeted her with a hello kiss, she'd lend me her rouged cheek reluctantly, anxious to reclaim it. Although she did favour men in general, she also favoured my sister over me—a bias she relished making obvious. "You look very pretty today," she'd tell my sister, bestowing on her the queen of compliments. (If, to her, cleverness was the most desirable quality in a man, prettiness was the ultimate attribute for a woman.) After this exchange with my sister, she'd appraise my appearance carefully, only to say nothing. There is nothing worse than the blank stare that follows an up-and-down evaluation. Occasionally she would muster something like "You have your mother's nose," her lips curling in distaste, as if she were negotiating with a piece of gristle that she didn't know how to expel, before shuffling into the kitchen to eat a stewed pear.

Her feelings for me made their way into the dinner seating plans. Until I was about 20, she made me sit at the table on a plastic card-table chair, as if she thought I might soil myself mid-meal. The chair was so low-slung that I'd be eye level with the casseroles. Meanwhile, she perched herself on a Napoleonic-era green velvet throne and seemed to have a bird's-eye view of both the spread and my scalp. The symbolism—literally positioning me lower than everyone else—was so overt that had it been a scene in a play, a theatre critic would have panned the stage direction for being vulgar in its obviousness.



**LIKE SO MANY OLDER** Canadians, Grandma was a snowbird and flew to Florida every winter. She had a condo in Palm Beach, in a conch-pink, pseudo-Spanish colonial-style building called La Bonne Vie, where stuccoed hallways smelled like chlorine and salt air. Once, while on a spring-break trip, we went to her favourite restaurant, Charley's Crab. (Restaurant dinners with Grandma always involved going to some expensive valet-parking restaurant where she'd complain about drafts, the table's proximity to the kitchen or a waiter's supposedly incomprehensible "Chinese" accent.) As soon as we walked in, she waved a bejewelled hand to the hostess and called out "Yoohoo!" in a pitch that could only be heard by nearby dolphins. "I'm here with my granddaughter," she continued, "and we'd like a man."

"I'm sorry, honey?" the hostess asked.

"We would like a male waiter," my grandmother insisted.

The hostess, versed in the quirks of the Floridian elderly, was unfazed. She reached for a microphone and announced: "Male waiter for table six. The Stren party would like a male waiter." Midway through our meal, I noticed that a woman at the

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next table was staring at us. She finally approached us and, in a sunshiny Southern chime, said to my then 85-year-old grandmother, “I just think you’re beautiful!” My grandmother looked at her and spat back, “I think you need glasses!” and then cut aggressively into her lamb. I was perversely pleased that, finally, my grandmother’s contempt wasn’t directed at me.

Like an idiot, I hoped every visit would be different. I’d spend hours preparing, readying myself for a performance I knew she would pan. I’d wear pink or try to impress her with a pretty dress. Once, when I was 17, it worked: We were going to the Breakers in Palm Beach for lunch, and I wore a tidy ponytail and a pale-pink sundress from Benetton. With a boat neck and the tender hue of flushed cheeks, the dress was all girlish modesty. “You look darling!” she said. I was thrilled, certain we had turned a corner in our relationship. But afterwards, she went back to looking at me with her usual mix of disdain and bewilderment—and I went back to hopelessly seeking her approval in an attempt to soothe the insecurity she’d sown.



**IN HER NINTH DECADE**, Grandma began suffering from dementia, deteriorating slowly. The elegance she’d worked so hard to maintain slowly chipped off like her coral nail polish. I would sometimes visit her in her Toronto apartment at lunchtime and sit quietly on the edge of her bed as a female nurse fed her a soggy tuna sandwich. I still dressed hoping for her approval, but when she ate her lunch without question or complaint and looked emptily at my outfit, I knew she was making her exit.

At the funeral reception, everybody—family, in-laws, canines—piled into my grandmother’s apartment like tourists descending on an all-inclusive resort buffet. One of Gary’s in-laws, Lina, who had met my grandmother a handful of times at most, slunk around the place like a cat in heat, wearing an army-green pantsuit that made her look like a cross between Che Guevara and Kris Jenner. She was deeply tanned, and her complexion appeared to darken further when she smiled (something she did alarmingly often given the circumstances), revealing the fluorescent white teeth gifted to her by her celebrity-dentist husband, Lionel.

“I just got them done,” she told me, flashing a smile so bright I felt my pupils shrinking in self-defence. “Lionel isn’t just a dentist; he’s an artist with teeth,” she cooed, gazing at her husband in reverence and biting lustfully into her bagel. Lionel was busy praying in the living room, and Lina, eyes fixed on her husband, continued in a hoarse whisper so as not to disturb his concentration: “Lionel could have been a rabbi.”

Once Lionel had finished his liturgical duties, he settled into a flower-patterned armchair, trying to come down from his spiritual heights. He stroked his gold-flecked hair and sat with eyes half closed, as if exhausted by his own brilliance. He leaned toward me and began slowly: “You know...” He paused. “Life...death.” He paused again. “It’s the Jewish way.”

It seemed to me it was sort of The Way in general, but I nodded. He sighed deeply and continued, “I look around this room, and it’s just incredible.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I look around, and there are some beautiful people with hideous teeth, and some hideous people with beautiful teeth,” he said with the worried brow of a philosopher. I wondered in which category he slotted me and smiled with my lips sealed. “Your grandmother had fabulous teeth,” he continued, redirecting the discussion to where it should rightfully be: my grandmother’s dental work. He then let out a heavy, almost agonized sigh, rubbed his eyes and flipped through the holy book. Gary, his face mottled with tears, took over the religious duties while his poodle began humping a gilt-edged settee. I wondered what my grandmother would have made of this chaos, which seemed somehow like a fresh death—of my grandmother’s pristine apartment and her way of life, with all its flower-accountred order and tidy categories.

As caterers in black dress pants prepared the dessert platters, perfuming the kitchen with the smell of bitter coffee and pound cake, I wandered through the rooms with a freedom I’d never had as a kid, when I was always afraid of moving for fear of breaking something or incurring judgment simply by making myself visible. When I made my way to my grandmother’s bedroom—free of randy poodles and dentists who could have been rabbis—there lingered a sour, sickly smell of medication and palliative care. I sat on the edge of the king-size bed that had once seemed to me as big as a football field and that ultimately served as the boundaries of her old-age life. Though the bed was stripped of its ballet-pink bedding, the glossy fur coats that had accompanied her through Toronto winters, perfumed with her Giorgio and Chanel, still hung in her closet, along with the white pants and floral blouses she had bought at Bonwit Teller on Palm Beach’s Worth Avenue. In the bathroom, where she’d spent so many hours powdering her nose, pill bottles were scattered across the conch-pink counter. Her drawers were still full of her favourite lipsticks, flaming spires cofined in their gilded homes. As I stood amid the last pretty relics of her old-fashioned life, I finally lost any hope of winning her approval, which, I suppose, had only ever been a rose-hued fantasy. Then I caught a glimpse of myself in her mirror and realized that, childishly, I was wearing a dress that I still hoped, somewhere, she might like. ♦

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