

How to Arrive a Few Minutes Late for Your Grandmother's Death

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I.

Wonder, when your mom first texts, if it really is time. Your mom can be Alice's white rabbit, disappearing anxiously down black holes, muttering. There's been a lot of paw-wringing lately. But there's also been an uncomfortable lull in family conversations where the words *It's only a matter of time* have come to mean *It would be a goddamn gift*. This Irish nihilism pricks at your childish self, hunkered behind your diaphragm, howling about fairness.

II.

Take a shower, as though someone might be able to smell you over the "long-term living" environment, a fug of bleach masking the perfume of entropy (rot, damp, urine, boiled vegetables, unmentionable smells you know viscerally and try hard not to name). Slap on tinted moisturizer to cover the startling bags under your eyes, but don't blow-dry your hair. That takes deathbed vanity one step too far.

III.

Drive like an asshole. You took time to moisturize, but now you're in a hurry. Ride bumpers, cruise through yellows. It's four days until Christmas, and traffic is an anxiety-fueled centrifuge. Merge onto I-95 like a cruise missile but cede territory to CT State vanity license plate "CUPCAKE," who cuts you off at Mystic like a blizzard of glistening white paint and gleaming hot pink chrome rims.

Make an obscene gesture. Tell people about the gesture, later, and watch them not believe you. You drive to work every day griping the wheel at ten and two. You can't blame them for thinking you don't have an obscene gesture in you, but you and Cupcake know the truth.

Marvel at the cleanliness of Cupcake's car. Your dirty black Jeep still has your son's sunscreen handprints melted into the finish, arrayed on the side panel like new wave finger paintings. Watch Cupcake text while driving five miles under the speed limit in the left lane in front of you and wonder about the cleanliness of her life.

IV.

Think about how it was only a year ago that your Gram started skipping like a record, lost in old grooves, jumping some songs altogether. On the Alzheimer's checklist: burners left on all day, food rotting in the refrigerator, a bank loan for the roof forgotten.

Deceptively prosaic checklist item: *confusion with time and place*.

She'd forget you if she left a room with you still sitting in it, forget whether she was in Wisconsin, Illinois, Connecticut. She would talk about picnics with her parents at the lake as though they happened yesterday, were still happening, time growing muddy, looping sloppily. She'd forget who was alive and who was dead, would wait for her husband Ray to come home after he'd been in the ground 35 years.

You feel like a garbage human, one who wakes up each day to tell her something new she doesn't want to hear: son, husband, parents, sisters, house. Gone. So is Connie from bridge, Sylvia from water aerobics, and her sweater with the strawberries on it.

When the health aide commented your Gram was dragging her feet, you'd thought *ofcourseshefuckingis*, because you'd all conspired to kidnap her and trash the belongings she'd spent a lifetime accumulating. It wasn't her fault that after childhood circa the Great Depression, 87 cloudy flower vases shared space in her basement.

It took you time to realize the aide was warning you all Gram was literally dragging her swollen feet, a broken hip two weeks in her future. You understand your grandmother is 94 in a way separate from all the new things you're learning: pericardial effusion, edema, decubitis.

V.

Pull into town on a rising tide of anxiety, a subconscious sense that you are running out of time. Jerk into the parking lot and realize that the one and only spot left for your Jeep is blocked by a septic truck pumping the tank for the long-term living complex. The driver raises his hand, the universal *just a minute* shield. Wave and smile as you tell yourself it will not be just a minute.

Think about how you're always following the rules, even old ones, even ones that don't serve you anymore. How you're smiling, even now, with your hands shaking on the wheel. You've believed those rules would protect you from mess, misfortune, mass casualty. Wonder what would happen if you left the Jeep in the parking lot, engine running.

Past a certain point, your Gram was circumspect about rules. *Rob the cradle*, she'd told you, before you met your husband. *You'll have a better chance he'll outlive you. You don't want to be alone so long. Like I have been*, she didn't have to say. That part was understood.

Your grandmother had done everything right. Got hitched to a handsome Irish salesman who could talk a good game, had six kids and raised them well, paid her taxes and wrote all her checks in swooping textbook cursive, taught herself to drive in the half-moon paved strip of her driveway in Wisconsin, cooked three meals a day from scratch with real things like lard and whole scoops of sugar, wore heels and pearls until her swollen feet needed wedges, then flats, and finally, in a way that made her mouth purse and turn down every time, Keds.

Still. She lost one pregnancy falling backward through a rotten porch rail. Another baby, stuck in the birth canal, would have lifelong cognitive deficits. Her husband's heart gave out and another of her sons was gobbled down by a stealthy cancer. You think about past Christmases when she'd had all six kids around her, her husband on the couch, noise and mess and torn-up wrapping paper. You think about how there are no guarantees.

VI.

Realize you don't know where the front door is. You've attended every family party and joined every outdoor gathering in order not to see your Gram living here. Bumble through digital registration because your hands are sweating and your body temperature is chronically low, but you can't explain that to the chest-high robot machine in front of you that simply wants to scan you for a fever before admitting you into the ward of people who are fragile and frail. The robot machine is not sure you're human. After five failed scans for measurable body temperature, you're not sure you're human either.

Receive a text that says she's gone.

Realize you still have to find her room behind a maze of locked doors.

VII.

Find your sister in the hall. Feel a combination of gratitude and keen nausea that she was there while your grandmother died. Hear her say it was peaceful while wondering if it's true, if she believes that, if anything about this place could be considered peaceful.

Try to focus on the plastic Christmas tree in the corner of the room instead of the open hollow of your grandmother's mouth without her false teeth. Feel immeasurable gratitude for the ornaments on the tree: the Marshall Field's clock, the Eiffel Tower, a smug flamingo. Proof your Gram had been places other than here. Realize simultaneously that you might be in shock and yet you don't want to sit down on the tiny couch or anything porous, really. Think about burning your clothes later to get rid of the smell.

Your grandmother's room is so small that there is less than a foot between her bed and the bathroom. You can't believe it was enough space for her to break her hip in, but it was.

VIII.

They say there's no such thing as dying. There's only living until the moment your heart stops. But your Gram feels long gone. The husk she's left behind looks like someone you never knew.

When you were born, your grandmother gathered four generations of your family to sit on her worn, striped couch: father, grandfather, and your great-grandfather, holding you in his arms and staring owlshly at the camera. Four generations. A triumph, survival, worthy of commemorating. On the back of the photo, in her beautiful script, your grandmother wrote their full names and then, for you, *The Star of 1981*, like you were a rare meteor shower. Your whole life she orbited you like an adoring planet, her face turning toward you like the sun when you walked into a room.

Later, you will think about how many times she sang you to sleep as a child with *Desperado*, pushing back the darkness with her voice. One moment, you would be coiled awake, snappish, sure you would never sleep, and the next, you would wake up to the morning, light with bone-deep relief. In part, your grief will be that you weren't there to do the same for her.

IX.

The Irish side of your family is good at calamity, at turning the volume all the way up and saturating the colors. You grasp for this trick with both hands, trying to turn suffering into a story you can bear to tell. A story that covers the shame you feel that you looked away when the hands that shaped you started to shake.

Your Gram had little patience for the dissembling her children perfected, her voice cutting through the storytelling rivalries with the plainspoken pronouncement, *That's enough of that*. These last months, when she was lucid, she would pray for release from the cage her body had become.

From this, too, you turned away.

X.

Drive home in the dark, looking at the weak glow of Christmas lights. Feel a kind of benevolence toward everyone who cuts you off or drives too slowly. Feel a kindred anxiety for those who are speeding. Maybe they're on their way to an emergency. Maybe they get there in time.