

The Hardest Goodbye

Earlier this week I walked into room 608 of Baptist Memorial Hospital in St. Louis, the room where my grandmother would die. It was a chilling thought warmed only by the bodies who occupied the space – My grandpa (married to my grandmother for 62 years), mother, uncle, aunt, cousins, great uncle, and great aunt. We spent this week sitting by my grandmother’s bedside, watching her breathe and seizing moments when her eyes would open and we could sit in her line of sight and tell her that we were here, that we loved her, that she was not alone. As my grandfather said, “I knew this would be hard but I had no idea it would be so terrible.”

The room is pleasant, but the air has been saturated with jarring words like “palliative,” “expire,” and “aspirate.” Death is ugly and sounds like deep, wet breaths for air. I know my grandmother will die but I did not think she would die like this – lingering between worlds, one of which she desperately still longs to reside. While this massive stroke began stealing the right side of her body and progressed up to her mid-section she told my grandfather, “I want to live.”

Extraordinary. It’s a word I’ve heard many times across the last few days, all used in stories to describe my grandmother. Judy lived a rich life, a life it is hard to imagine was contained within such a petite woman. She had a happy childhood, experienced a first love and a first heart break, she saw art and learned music. She also saw horror and death, dodged bullets, dug trenches, starved, contracted illness, was treated like an animal, and lost her entire family save her brother. What is extraordinary about Judith is not these horrors, but how she chose to live after seeing and experiencing evil. She returned home, reunited with her brother, attended medical school, met the love of her life (a man who was bold enough to kiss her before her final exam and fall in love with her fortitude after she got injured but kept walking during a hiking date; “I survived the Holocaust, what’s a sprained ankle?” she later said), started a family, orchestrated her family’s escape from Czechoslovakia to come to America, started a new life (yet again), went back to school, continued to practice medicine, saw her children start families of their own, became an all-star grandma, and through all of this living, she told her story. She lived her life with a mission, to speak about the Holocaust and make sure people knew the truth. Even if she had reached age 110 I don’t think she would have wanted to die because she is the extraordinary Judith, and she would want to live as long as she could speak. It is heart wrenching that in these final days she lost her voice; she was robbed of the one skill she valued above all else. I am so grateful that her story has been recorded in books, film, and audio, but that doesn’t make it any less sad that students will no longer be able to sit in an auditorium and see my grandmother, small but powerful, sitting on stage, legs crossed at the ankles, hands resting on her knees, telling her story.

Nana Judy experienced the best and the worst of life, and after surviving more horror than I care to imagine, she transformed tragedy into love, compassion, influence, and significance. She has left an imprint on this world. I know because I saw it in the roomful of people who came by her bedside to express their love, and the dozens of e-mails and phone calls from around the world lamenting such a monumental loss. And that is what losing Judith is, a truly monumental loss. Sure, we will all suffer without her daily presence. But the world will suffer, too, especially all of those who were not blessed

enough to have met her and heard her story. For that is what Judy brought to those around her, her story, and by default, hope in humankind and each of us to persevere over our own struggles with compassion and understanding.

She started every talk saying she did not want people's pity. She spoke to a much higher purpose than that, and frankly, as she said, she didn't need anyone's pity. She had a phenomenal life overflowing with love. So in that vein I choose to think of this monumental loss like this: we are all so lucky. We are sheltered by four walls, we have a roof over our head, we are warm, we are clothed, we are not hungry, and most of all, we have known and felt the most beautiful embodiment of love and compassion by having had Judy in our lives.

OCTOBER 28, 2013 (8:44 AM)

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