

IMMOVABLE MATRIARCH: THE LABOR OF GOODBYE

Adam N. Schelle

“Where is she going?” I thought as I drove with disregard on a February afternoon toward a hospital to see my grandmother for what I thought would be the final time. *Where is she going? Leaving, yes. We know she’s leaving but where is she going?*

She hated hospitals, we all knew that. I firmed up my quivering lip and gulped back the fifteen minute memory-filled car ride as I approached the sliding main entrance doors. The vacuum *swish* of the parting glass began the bombardment of hospital air; that sterile, hope-filled, pallid pleasantry of an atmosphere that flattens everything into neutrality.

“Can you tell me how to get to room 6691, please?” I gently asked the attendant at the reception desk—she didn’t know why I was there, she just replied with a catch-all tone and expression that I’m sure was explained in great detail at some training session. “This tone covers all bases,” I could imagine someone from human resources instructing. It did, and I was grateful.

I hate the sounds that fill hospital hallways—the humming of

machines, the “beep...beep...beep” of monitors, the regular sighing of oxygen pumps; a collection of cold repetitions that remind us how easily our bodies can (and eventually *will*) fail; each room temporarily containing the kaleidoscopic colors of a life’s experience which are white-washed into quiet talks and whispered comfort. Of course there is, too, the chattering of nurses. They’re used to it, desensitized by the turnover of the job that we do not love them enough for doing.

6694...6693...6692...669...one of my cousins stood outside the room—one of three siblings. I haven’t seen any of them in years—*Elizabeth even lives in town*. I would not have recognized them if not for the unforgettable familial awareness of shared DNA looking back at me. I raised my hand in a half wave as they turned with the same delayed recognition. *Is a grinning wave appropriate for such an inauspicious meeting?* “Hi, Adam. It’s good to see you,” Elizabeth said with heavy melancholy. We all exchanged our quiet hellos and refocused on why we’d gathered. “She’s right in there,” they gestured as I pushed open the door.

I saw my sisters, my niece, my father, and then her. Every eye was brimming with tears and gazing upon her weakness, paralyzed by the stun of her departure as it was beginning. I reached her side and so much was different; I was opened by something giant and lovely and terrifying. *Where is she going? She is leaving, yes, we know but where is she going?*

It is something primal and awe-inspiring to see the body of a loved one admit decline, whether quickly or agonizingly slow, as it retreats from the world. Her skin draping and folding around her bones like damp silk looked like it could stretch infinitely just as easily as it could tear at the touch. Her exhausted frame sank into the heaped mass of blankets and pillows surrounding her on the bed. Her head hung heavy to the side as she slept, giving her the look of collapse with her tongue slipping from the corner of her wide-open mouth, foreshadowing the image of a corpse, undignified and real. Each labored breath sang a dirge of impending loss to us all as we watched her protruding ribcage rise and fall—*how many of us were thinking, “Is this the last one?”*

Sitting across from me on the other side of the bed, my father held tight to his mother’s hand as he was battered by waves of sorrow so particular and altogether his. Watching the life they shared pass behind his eyes, I was overcome as a single tear fell upon his cheek. First one, then a second, a third, and finally a break in the dam. It is something foreign and uncomfortable to see your parent suffer, and he, knowing better than all of us, was never more vulnerable, more human in my eyes; I could do nothing to keep from weeping for his pain. We all wept for him and *with* him and his ultimately unique place in the whole thing. So too did we all exist in our individual grieving. I looked around the room, at every face, at every look of weighted thought and realized, “This is my family.” Each of our lives an extension of hers, informed by her strength and made better by her love, dreading the ache of the absence of her, Janet, the immovable

matriarch. She was leaving, we knew that, but where was she going?

“Should we turn on some Big-Band, Uncle Brian?” Elizabeth asked in a whisper. “Yes, I think she would like that,” said my father. As the first whiny trumpet sounded, my body trembled and my head hung low. The music made our memories of her even more vivid and we all began sharing our stories of her with one another. We held tightly to each other with our words, with our shared past and with our willingness to feel together in the present. *Could she hear us? Did she know we were loving each other through it?* It came time to decide who would stay the night with her—it was an understood priority that she not be left alone. My sisters and I shared a glance that conveyed our obvious sense of obligation. We would stay. We did not know if she would make it through the night and we refused to be anywhere else. We settled in; I have never felt closer to them.

I slept at the end of her bed, my body propped between two chairs facing each other, tucked under a hospital blanket. Now and then she would stir and I would open my eyes to see her looking right at me. Just a few moments each time and she would fall back to sleep. I was unsure if she could see me or even recognize me if she could—she hadn’t recognized anyone for days, forgetting our faces, our names gradually. I had slept for an hour at best—a miracle having situated myself in an unaccommodating set of chairs—when she awoke in a panic. The dark, almost

silent room was suddenly filled with her jolting cries for help, “Don! Don, wake up! Don, I can’t breathe! I need my oxygen!” we heard her yell. Her oxygen tube had fallen out in the night. Don, my grandfather, had died more than a decade earlier. Her cries to him as if he were sleeping next to her in the bed seemed another sign of her approaching end. I was frozen in disbelief and fear. Her panic paralyzed me; it was all I could do to watch while my sisters rushed to her bedside to calm her down and replace the tube. “We’ve got it, Grandma. It’s right here. Everything is fine,” they comforted. A break in the madness came when she looked in my direction, her eyes meeting mine as she pointed and said,

“That’s Adam. That’s my Adam.”

“Yea, Grandma. It’s me,” was all I could say.

“He’s been sitting there all night. Every time I woke up he was right there in that chair. He never moved,” she said to my sisters.

“I’m not going anywhere, Grandma,” I assured her.

She had seen me. She knew me. How surreal to know that she was leaving yet comforted by my having remained.

The next day came like an awkward yet joyous silence. She made it through the night and as she began to periodically wake up we realized she was shockingly lucid compared to the night before. Her mind had returned and she knew exactly what was happening. We knew she was leaving; *she* knew she was leaving. Still, we all wondered, “Where is she

going?”

All day she took every opportunity to say everything she wanted to say to each of us. I think it made us all quite uncomfortable to be discussing her impending mortality with her. *It was one thing to be discussing it with each other because we weren't leaving; we could provide each other a sense of togetherness. But to look her in the eye and talk about the near future she would not be a part of was disarming and unstoppable.* She was not turning away from it so neither were we.

“Have they cleaned out my apartment yet?” she asked me, breaking an early afternoon silence.

“No, not yet Grandma.”

“Oh, they have to wait until I'm dead?”

“Well...”

“Don't feel badly. It's ok. Everyone has to do it.”

“I know Grandma.”

Later in the day...

“Brian,” my grandmother spoke, grabbing my father's hand as he sat beside her bed, “I want to thank you. You've taken such good care of me for so many years...and there's been a lot of them, haven't there? You were always so good to me.” He was in tears; I was in tears. The end

became more and more of a reality with every word. Then, the meeting with Hospice.

Because her death was no longer imminent the hospital would not allow her to stay. *They are not in the business of death but of prolonging life, and they had done that.* She would go to Elizabeth's house. I watched my father's eyes as we decided, essentially, where his mother would die. They became glazed and dissociated, like a bomb had gone off and he was waiting for the ringing in his ears to fade before he could regain his footing. I knew my father was terrified of progressing to hospice care. He feared that once she was at Elizabeth's she would pass almost immediately. No matter how many times we were made to face the truth of what was coming, we still clung to any extra time we got. We just weren't ready, but she was, and she told us so enough times that eventually I began to feel at peace with it happening as it would. If she was tired enough, ready to leave the world, then I was willing to not ask her to stay any longer.

She fell asleep in the early evening. It was clear that she would make it through another night—*hospitals are good at what they do.* I decided to go home, take a shower, eat some real food, do things that kept me living my life. I gathered my things and whispered, "I'll see you later, Grandma."

She was moved to Elizabeth's the next morning and we all agreed to give her a day to get settled. *I would certainly want to be alone if I had the good fortune of being able to "settle in" to the place I knew would be*

where I would die. We all went back to our lives for a moment, catching up on neglected responsibilities and being reminded that our lives were not going to end, only change. “I’ll get my mind off of it for the night and go see her tomorrow,” I decided.

It was almost noon when my phone rang. It was my sister, Erin.

“Hello?” I answered, knowing her reason for calling.

“Grandma’s gone.”

“When?”

“About five minutes ago. Dad and Elizabeth and I were here,” she said solemnly.

“I’m on my way,” I likewise replied.

I hung up the phone and got ready to leave the house. “Damnit!” I shouted as I threw my shoes across the living room. *I couldn’t tell whether it was out of disappointment in it having happened or out of anger that it happened before I saw her once more, spoke to her again; I didn’t know the last time was the last time.* I don’t remember the car ride to Elizabeth’s house but I remember it feeling like it took too long. I parked my car and walked through the front door. *I couldn’t escape the thought that I was, with every step, approaching the lifeless body of our family’s leader, the*

wisest and strongest among us, our foundation. Where did she go?

There, on the bed, was a human, undignified and so beautiful. There, on the bed, a lifetime of joy and sorrow and work and memories and love. There, on the bed, was *being*, at its last. Her body only closely resembled her because *she* was not in it. *Where did she go?* I sat next to the bed and held her hand long enough to feel that it was much colder when I finally let it go. I held it, and kissed it, and wept. I wept in relief for her that her hard-earned rest had come. I wept for us that we would be without her, our immovable matriarch, our teacher, our friend. I wept for my father, who sat silently in the corner, who, with tireless effort, had provided her all the best care, companionship and love she deserved. I squeezed her hand and trembled when it did not squeeze back. “Ok, Grandma. Ok,” I whispered. I remembered her saying, “I’m ready to go,” and so I was glad for her.

We had all gathered around her once more, my father, my sisters, my cousin, and me. The room, the moment, the silence was being slowly etched into my mind. Everyone’s eyes were looking far away, likely traveling through memories and conversations with her, the one’s that belonged to each of us alone. Erin broke the silence by telling us a funny story about Grandma, bringing us all back into the room and to each other. We were smiling again, we were laughing again. And then I knew: Where did she go? Nowhere. I could see her, I could hear her speaking. She was

in Elizabeth's sarcasm and quick wit; she was in Erin's irreverence and Tammy's take-action attitude; she was in Brenna's independence; she was in my father's unmatched honorability and steadfastness, she was in my eyes, looking around thinking, "My goodness, look at all this love." And what better tool with which to begin the work of letting go? What better way to start the labor of goodbye?