

No Heroic Measures

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The Jerome Robins Memorial Award for Creative Writing Non-Fiction and Creative Writing

Short Story

Each time we cut to the front of a line, I went out of my way to gesture to the masses of tired eyed travelers and frustrated TSA officials that I was with the red wigged woman in the wheelchair. “Isn’t he handsome? You know, he’s studying to be a doctor,” chimed Grandma. I could feel hot blood trickle through my ears and cheeks. The TSA official which pushed my grandmother’s wheelchair nodded politely. I checked again to make sure I still had my grandmother’s passport. My heart skipped a beat before I realized that I was holding hers just beneath my own.

I recalled what my father had said to me in the car, at the terminal, before leaving me with one final hug goodbye. He put to words the troubling thought which had presided in my family’s minds for weeks but no one was willing to say. Of the dozens of trips to Israel my Grandmother had taken over her eighty-six years of life, this was likely to be her last. “Take good care of her,” my father added, “you’re my representative on this one.”

“It might be emotional for you,” my mother warned.

“I was there at the *end*,” I reassured her, “I’m going to be okay.” She sent the recording. I sat alone in a small nook in the corner of the Gottesman library, preparing myself for the train ride I was about to take through my grandmother’s life. I was unsure of what exactly I was about to hear.

It had been my mother’s idea— preserve my grandmother’s story so that it could live on forever. At the time at which my mother taped the interview, my Grandmother was eighty-five. It was one year later that she passed.

As the download resolved, I took a deep breath and savored the stillness of the library air. The recording began to play—

“This is our first interview,” I heard my mother’s voice say, “We’re not going to do it all in one shot.”

“And what are you going to do with this?” I heard my Grandmother ask. I had to listen very carefully to make out her words, as she spoke very softly.

“Well it occurred to me that your grandchildren don’t know your story, and that it would be very important...”

“Are they interested in knowing it?” my grandmother interjected.

“I’m sure they are,” replied my mother patiently, “And if they’re too young today, then, when they grow up they’ll definitely be interested. These stories have to be told, right?”

Respiration- Breath: The diaphragm and intercostal muscles contract, expanding the chest cavity. Air floods through the nasal canal and into the trachea. It rushes past the vocal cords, and flows through the larynx, splitting at the bronchi, inflating a forest of minute alveolar sacs. —The lungs expand.

When she had announced to the family that she’d be traveling to Israel for Passover, Grandma had chosen me to accompany her. In the past, I’d tried to play down the pride and confidence which Grandma cast in my direction, but when I saw the reflection of myself in her light brown eyes, I couldn’t help but see a strong young grandson, ready to carry on her legacy.

—We arrived at security.

“Mam— Are you *able* to *walk* through the *metal detector* on your *own*?” asked the TSA official standing in front of my Grandmother, over enunciating his syllables.

Grandma allowed her fury at the question to echo apparent.

“Walk? Yes, I can walk,” she responded so everyone within the roped off security area could hear. I helped grandma lean out of her wheelchair, which was sent with the rest of our bags through the X-ray machine. *I saw their point, my feeble Jewish grandmother was certainly an intimidating threat*, I thought. I held the warm, soft, loose skin of grandma’s hand and guided her as she shuffled towards the hollow grey monolith of the metal detector.

Grandma leaned towards me to whisper something.

I leaned down until I could feel her light rapid breaths on the hairs of my ear. “I hope they decide to frisk me,” she whispered. We both burst out laughing.

“You can’t walk through with her,” said the TSA woman waiting on the other side. I gently let go of Grandma’s fleshy hand and watched as her navy-blue blazer shuffled carefully yet casually through the plastic security arch. The lights flashed green.

“Okay so let’s start from the beginning,” my mother continued, “Your date of birth is... December 25th?”

“...Yes. Deceber 25th, 1931.”

“And where were you born?”

“*Schwäbisch Hall*,” said Grandma, painstakingly instructing my mother on the correct pronunciation. “*Schwäbisch-- Hall*.”

“And were you born in your house? Were you born in a hospital?”

“I was born in a hospital.”

“And where was- *Schwäbisch* Hall?”

“Schwäbisch Hall is in Southern Germany.”

I was an imposter, an economy class citizen, infiltrating the quiet sanctuary of the frequent flier businessman and the wealthy Jewish Heiresses who inhabited El-Al Airline’s, King David Lounge. Grandma and I sat side by side in large faux-leather chairs in front of a deceptively cumbersome table that I’d dragged over, earning some glares from the “high society” occupants of the room. After helping grandma up, the two of us walked over to the buffet where we served ourselves from an array of American interpretations of classic Israeli cuisines. Some grainy hummus drizzled with olive oil, Israeli salad doused in lemon and kosher salt, and white cheese that greatly resembled a smoky sour-cream. I offered to help grandma, but she insisted on helping herself.

On the way back from the buffet, I tossed a bunch of San-Pellegrino sodas into my already weighty bag, knowing there would be no comparison in the back of economy class where I’d be stashed away once we boarded. All the while I refused to take my eyes off grandma as she shuffled back to our seats. I exhaled a sigh of relief when she made it back without dropping anything off her plate.

As we ate our meals, grandma and I talked. She continued to ask me questions about every minute detail of my life, absorbing all my answers with bright eyes and a wide, lip-sticked smile. Grandma reminded me that she could see my school, Yeshiva University, from her apartment in Fort Lee across the Hudson River.

“I’ll head to the roof and wave to you sometime,” I chided.

“You know, when your father was a kid we would drive across the George Washington Bridge to eat in the Yeshiva University cafeteria. At the time it was the only Kosher place to eat out.” I laughed, amazed that this had never come up before. “When I lived in the Jewish German community in Washington Heights,” Grandma continued, “we used to walk to the Bnei Akiva building on 173rd to meet up with boys from the upper west side. Is that building still around?”

I shrugged, amused that she thought I’d know something like that.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

I chuckled.

I did not.

We talked about the weather and politics, and I ranted to her about what I thought about the un-presidential administration which I had strong feelings about, being careful not to make any comparisons between the American white nationalists of 2017 and their German predecessors which Grandma had experienced eighty years before for fear of making an insulting exaggeration.

While grandma had come to many of my baseball games as a kid, spent lots of Jewish holidays with us, and hosted nearly every one of my Thanksgivings, I’d never talked this freely with my grandmother. The parts of her personality I’d gotten to see had been filtered through the presence of my parents and the context of family gatherings. Warm yellows, royal reds, and deep blues began to populate the grey pixels of a polaroid photograph, revealing a world I hadn’t considered before. I looked closely at grandma’s face, and details appeared which I

hadn't registered before. The Grandma I saw now was new and exciting. I even began to catch glimpses of myself, or rather pieces of Grandma which had become part of me.

I brought two glasses of white wine back from the bar, and we clinked them, tilting our heads back in laughter.

"So, going back to your childhood in Schwabisch Hall. Do you remember the town at all?"

"We lived on the main street. There was an inn- a restaurant next to our apartment house. The kids used to play around there— they didn't mind. And they slaughtered the chickens outside. It was interesting for us kids."

"Did you say it was interesting for you guys?"

"Yea it was interesting. Their body went one way and their head went another." I heard my mother laugh. "And they made apple cider there. We would bring a cup, and they would give us as much as we wanted."

"Was the inn a kosher inn?"

"Goyish, goyish, goyish..." Grandma said, "I didn't eat there. And my friends were a mixed bunch. In my part of town, they were mostly goyish..."

"Do you remember school in Germany?"

"I didn't go to school in Germany, I wasn't allowed to. We had a private tutor come to the house. He taught me some things, but I really wasn't too literate when I went to Belgium."

"Do you think you were aware as a child that other kids were going to school and you weren't allowed? Were you aware of antisemitism?"

“I was aware I didn’t go to school, but I wasn’t aware of antisemitism.”

“Do you remember things getting bad for Jews in Schwabisch Hall?” My mother asked, “Do you remember things getting bad for your parents? Larry [my dad] says you were still in Germany during Kristallnacht. Do you have any memory of it...?”

“I remember I was standing on top of a staircase— I think that must have been in my Grandfather’s house... And the police came— the local police. I heard them say to my Grandfather, ‘Mr. Wertheimer, we have to take you with us,’ which was followed by some commotion. They took my Grandfather and they took my father, and I remember my mother asking the police, ‘Shall I pack him a suitcase?’ and they replied, ‘No, no, he won’t need anything.’ So, my mother assumed from that that he would be back very soon. But, my Grandfather came back because my Grandfather was over seventy, so for that reason they sent my Grandfather home but they took my father away.”

Oxygen diffuses across the thin alveolar membrane and into the capillaries. The O₂ binds to the hemoglobin of red blood cells in exchange for carbon dioxide which diffuses back across the thin membrane. The muscles of the chest relax, compressing the thoracic cavity and expelling the carbon dioxide from the body. Oxygen rich blood flows on through the bloodstream.

“Do you remember how long your father was gone for?”

For the first time in the interview a soft pain was audible in my Grandmother’s voice. “He was gone for about five weeks,” she said, “He was taken Dachau. And my Uncle Leo was

taken to Buchenwald, which was a concentration camp in Germany. My other uncles— I don't know where they were or what happened to them. But my mother's siblings were scattered all over the place."

"Was it surprising that your father was let out?"

"Well the Germans heard he had papers to go to America. I guess they were afraid of America. All those who had papers were let go... Not because they fought for Germany in World War I, not because they served honorably or anything like that, but because they had papers to come to America..."

I remembered hearing about my great grandfather and his two brothers who had fought for Germany in the Great War. His two brothers had been killed, but my great grandfather was awarded the Iron Cross, a German metal awarded for courageous acts on the battlefield. His Judaism however, erased all records of his heroism.

Oxygen rich blood floods through the pulmonary veins to the left atrium of the heart. The atrium contracts, sending blood through the mitral valve to the left ventricle. The left ventricle contracts, sending blood through the aortic valve, through the aorta, and into the arteries and arterioles that weave throughout the body.

I woke up somewhere over the Atlantic and got up to visit grandma and to escape the yelling of a sun tanned Israeli couple, violently bickering with a tanning bed Long Island couple sitting in front of them. Brushing past the thin blue curtain which separated economy class from business, I was transported to a new world where cool sleeping silence replaced dim hazy

murmurs. I knelt down in the aisle beside the seat, where Grandma reclined and relaxed. “I went to visit you, but you were sleeping nice and peacefully, so I decided not to wake you,” Grandma told me.

She offered me the rest of her business class meal which heavily resembled the food we’d eaten previously in the lounge. We schmoozed until I was shushed back to my seat by the rest of the business class inhabitants. On the way back to my seat, I marveled at how impressive it was that my frail eighty-six-year-old grandmother managed to navigate her way to the back of the plane, past the sprawled-out limbs of sleeping passengers, dodging large metal service carts to visit me. She shrugged it off as if it was no big deal.

Blood arrives in the capillaries that branch throughout the brain and heart. Oxygen, vital to the process of cellular respiration, is exchanged with CO₂ waste. Heart muscles contract and the nerves of the brain fire chemical-electric signals, driving the bodies function.

“So, he came home,” my Grandmother continued. He had a very short haircut, but he was mostly bald by then anyway. His mustache was gone... He looked strange. He was thinner too...” I remember my Grandmother describing how shocking it was for her as a little girl to see her father so emasculated and abused. “He told [us] about the terrible experiences— it was November. November is cold, just like here. And they were walking around in pajamas. People dropped dead.”

“Clearly your family had experienced the direction that Germany was heading at that point. Why was it that your parents didn’t immediately pick up and move to America?”

“There was a system which America had imposed— of numbers. Your permit to come to the US was solely based on your number being up. It didn’t make a difference that there were German Jews that were going to lose their lives. Those people whose numbers never came up— they perished in a concentration camp.”

“So, I guess your parents felt desperate, they had to send you away at that point.”

“They decided to put me on a children’s transport, but I was the only one going to Belgium. Most kids who went on children’s transports went to England, which was a far better place to be than Belgium.” This was a sacred story, repeated by the members of my family any chance they got. At the age of seven, my Grandmother was placed alone on a train from Germany to Belgium with nothing but a note around her neck, sent to meet a family who pledged to look after her in Belgium until her parents got out of Germany. When anyone brought the story up to my Grandmother, she shrugged it off like it was no big deal.

“Once you came with me to the bus to get Josh on the corner of our block,” my mother recounted. You asked, *‘You wait here for the bus? He can’t walk three houses by himself?’*

‘He’s seven,’ my mother replied.

‘When I was seven my parents put me on a train to Belgium,’ Grandma said.”

Trauma! Peripheral nerves fire. A few ribs are broken. A lung is punctured.

Pneumothorax: Air rushes into the thoracic cavity. The right lung is partially collapsed. The diaphragm and intercostal muscles relax and contract rapidly, attempting to compensate for the diminished tidal volume. Adrenaline glands fire, instructing the body to begin firing on all

cylanders. The heart beats rapidly, pumping blood to the distressed organs. The cycle perpetuates, the body tiring with each burst of desperate breaths.

Normally, when the phone rang on Saturday we'd let it drone on, waiting for a caller ID or a message. As observant Jews, we never used electronics on the Sabbath, but this time when the phone rang, my father immediately picked it up. *Hackensack Hospital*, the machine read. We'd been expecting the call.

For the first time in a week, I watched the tension in my father's lips and brow melt just a bit as he listened to the doctor on the other end. Ever since my grandmother had fallen down the stairs on her way to the ophthalmologist, my dad had been spending nearly every waking hour he in his pediatric office, by the side of my grandmother's hospital bed.

"What did they say?" I asked him as he hung up the phone.

"If her vitals continue to remain stable, they're going to take her off of the intubation today." I knew how big of a deal this was for my grandmother and for everyone in my family. She was reliant on positive pressure ventilations to breath, and if she could not regain the strength to take in air on her own, she might require a surgery that would place her on a ventilator permanently, hospitalizing her for the rest of her life. I couldn't picture the grandmother, who'd traveled to Israel with me only two months before, pinned down by tubes and IVs in hospice care. It wasn't something I even considered a possibility.

"That's great! Right?" I tried to force a smile onto my father's face by projecting a smile of my own. I got no response. "What time is the procedure?"

“Sometime in the afternoon. We’ll leave lunch early to start our walk, they’ll do the surgery before we get there, and hopefully we’ll see Grandma just after they finish.” Despite the positive development, a cloud of leaden stress still hung about my father.

A tube is inserted through the mouth down the trachea. The body is sedated while the surgery is performed. Once the tube is in place, a mechanical ventilator creates positive and negative pressure within the chest cavity, inflating and deflating the lungs, each breath regulated by a few lines of computer code.

My dad and I threw on our raincoats to head outside. The wind was whipping through the evergreens that, and rain came down in sheets. “Are you sure you want to go with me?” my dad asked.

“Yea absolutely,” I replied. Family friends had offered to walk with my dad, but as his oldest child I felt that it was my place to go with him. Of all the places I could be and things I could be doing, the decision to accompany my father felt right. I was certain that no one else could fill the space.

As we walked, I enjoyed the icy wind and rain that battered my face. It awakened my instincts and made me feel alive. I pictured us— two intrepid travelers on an expedition. As we climbed the long slow hill that was Cedar Lane, my dad and I chatted caught up about everything we hadn’t gotten a chance to talk about in weeks. It relaxed me to see the strain of my grandmother’s illness lifted at least partially off my father’s chest. His bright blue eyes shined through the storm as we walked. I told him about how my college finals had been going,

my plans on finishing up my schoolwork, and the classes I was planning to register for in the upcoming semester. This expanded to thoughts of philosophy and the best outlooks to take on life. We talked about TV shows he should watch, *Black Mirror* and *Game of Thrones*, and the New York Giants prospects for the upcoming season. Finally, we'd reached the top of Cedar Lane. We looked out in front of us and agreed that we were about two sevenths of the way there.

"I blame myself for letting this all happen," my dad said, looking ahead through the sheets of rain.

"That's ridiculous. Why would you blame yourself?"

"I should have just made her accept full time help. She shouldn't have been going out on her own like she was. She could barely drive anymore. If she'd had someone with her she wouldn't have fallen down the stairs. It's my fault."

"Daddy, that's not your fault. That was Grandma's decision. She's fiercely independent. She always has been. She used to have Deems as an assistant when Grandpa needed help and even then, she could barely stand having someone in the house."

"Yea but she clearly needed the help. We could have made her get someone... J.H., if I ever need help one day, do me a favor and just say 'daddy you need help.'"

There was a pause.

"Daddy, you need help," I responded.

We both burst out laughing.

By the time we reached Hackensack, the wind had died down but the rain had intensified. We toured the run down back-streets, dense with peeling paint town-houses which had been built and frozen in the seventies. The hospital was at the very peak of the township, a beacon of top notch modernity looking down upon the aging town. We turned left and crossed the main road. The Gutterman and Musicant Funeral Home appeared across the street. I looked at my dad, attempting to gage his reaction, not sure of what I could or should say. My family, including my grandmother who we were about to visit, had attended that same funeral home some five years before after the death of my grandfather. "You know what that is right?" my dad asked.

"Yup," I responded.

Neither of us had to mention how eerie it felt to pass the funeral home for the first time since my grandfather's death. He had passed away in a hospital. Now we were headed back to one.

The body remains calm and sedated, infused with a steady drip of morphine and adrenaline. The tube inserted through the trachea remains in place, maintaining the body's respiratory rate and tidal volume.

Entering the dry lobby of the hulking Hackensack Hospital was a relief. We peeled off our raincoats in the hallway and headed to the Surgical Intensive Care Unit to check on the progress of my grandmother. We had no updates since the call my dad had received earlier in the morning. While my dad had a hospital ID from years of pediatric rounds there, we were

unable to enter the ICU due to the electric doors, and had to wait a long five minutes for a hospital nurse to walk out. We were excited to see my grandmother without intubation. It would be the first time in weeks she would be able to talk to us. I could feel my father's nervousness affecting my own.

I followed my father towards my grandmother's room, past the large cluttered nursing station that dominated the room, towards my grandmother's room in the corner. We were intercepted by a nurse practitioner. "You're Dr. Bauer, Mrs. Bauer's son?" the man asked.

"Yep."

"I'm Matt the NPR on call right now. Let me show you to your mother."

The apprehension as we walked into the room was almost palpable.

"We removed the intubation tube a bit over an hour ago," the man said. "Originally, she was conscious and breathing steadily. She was in good spirits, smiling and chatting with all the nurses, but unfortunately, her breathing has become more labored since then."

Grandma lay in bed, eyes shut tight, gasping for air. The dark blue bruises that covered half of her face from her fall down the concrete stairs outside her Obstetrician's office were accentuated by her pale complexion. I winced each time my grandmother gasped for breath. All the excitement my dad had built up for the moment had washed away and replaced by sorrow. I didn't know what to say.

"How long has she been like this?" my dad asked. The pain in his voice registered with a choked tightness felt deep in my chest. I became aware of the presence of an instinct within myself which told me I needed to do my best to comfort him.

“A bit over an hour,” the NPR responded, “We wanted to have her conscious for when you arrived before we reintubated her.”

I remained silent through the conversation, powerless to alleviate my grandmother’s struggle or to contribute to the dialogue.

“Can she hear us?” my dad asked.

“We think so,” said the NPR.

My dad walked over to the bedside and gripped my grandmother’s hand. “Mom, Jesse and I are here, okay. We love you.” I felt weak, helpless and distant. My grandmother nodded slightly, her head barely leaving the pillow. I could see tears of pain leaking through her eyelids.

I took my grandmother’s cold pale hand, and said the only words I could think to say. “I love you grandma,” I whispered in her ear. I felt moisture building on the edges of my eyelids.

“Mom they’re going to reintubate you,” my dad said, “All this pain is going to go away. My grandmother clenched her eyelids as if to say, *whatever needs to be done*.

The NPR ushered us out of the room. “The surgery should take about fifteen minutes once the anesthesiologist gets here,” he said, “We’ll call you in when it’s over.”

My father walked out of the ICU deflated. I tried to think of what words I could give him to relieve his own pain.

Like a pair of training wheels being taken off, the tubes are removed. Once again, the diaphragm and intercostal muscles have autonomy, gently expanding the thoracic cavity. Air flows through the respiratory system, inflating the lungs. The muscles tighten and relax.

The waiting room had been full, so my father and I leaned against the wall under the bright fluorescent lights of the hallway. I checked my watch again. My father looked extremely worried. It had been around forty-five minutes. "I don't know what could be taking so long," my father said, "This should have been a very quick surgery." I tried to encourage him.

"Maybe they started later than expected," I suggested.

"Maybe," my father replied, unconvinced.

Each time we heard the doors of the ICU swing open we jumped and I experienced a flutter in my chest. Finally, we saw the NPR turn the corner, his eyes sad, his face downcast. He spoke the unsaid language of medical professionals that my father knew well. Without uttering a word, the man had prepared us for the worst.

"There were complications," the man said.

Something is wrong; fluid in the thoracic cavity. The lungs cannot fully inflate. The body panics. Again, the breathing rate increases to compensate for the reduced tidal volume. The heart pounds rapidly to provide a sufficient flow of oxygen to the struggling tissues. There's an electrical malfunction in the heart. The organ can no longer maintain its rapid rhythm. Vital blood carrying oxygen can't make it to the organs— the lungs— the brain. A shock of electricity floods through the chest... then a second... then a third... The heart resumes its rhythm. Tubes are inserted between the ribs to drain the excess fluid in the thoracic cavity. The heart stops and is once again restarted. The fluid is drained. The heart stops again... This time it takes minutes before its restarted.

Grandma's face lit up with joy when she saw her granddaughter in Modiin, eight months pregnant with her first great grandchild. Grandma spent most of our first day in Israel sleeping in the basement of my cousin's home. The effort from the long flight had left her exhausted. We were worried that the trip had been in fact too tiring for Grandma and ultimately a poor idea, but the next day when I came downstairs Grandma was reading the international edition of the New York Times, drinking coffee, and smiling.

We suggested to Grandma that we take the trip slowly, taking every other day off to let her rest and regain energy. She rejected that notion by going on a different excursion each day. First visiting some of her old friends in Jerusalem, then heading to a new art museum which had opened in Tel Aviv, and even taking a trip to the mountains of the Golan in the North.

Every once in a while, after a hearty laugh at meals with her daughter, son in law, and grandkids, I'd look over and see tears glistening in Grandma's eyes. Each time, I'd look away and smile, feeling that Grandma would not want me to see her emotional. For Grandma, the most important element of the trip was spending time with her family in Israel which she so rarely got to see.

After two weeks in Israel, my grandmother and I found ourselves back in the airport. Grandma and I laughed emphatically as we videoed ourselves zipping speedily through the airport on the back of a golf cart. By the end of the long flight, Grandma's energy had begun to fade. Her age showed as she described to a stewardess her lost bag which she was holding. I stood alongside her repeating explanations when necessary. Despite her sharp wit and nearly perfect memory, she experienced spells like this from time to time. I was amazed at how tough she'd been throughout the trip, exhaustion only catching up to her at the very end.

My father picked us up from the airport, and we drove Grandma back to her apartment in Ft. Lee, making sure she was okay on her before heading back home. Looking out the window, I could see my college. I wondered how often she looked out her window and thought of me.

“What do you mean?” my father said in shock. There was anger and confusion in his voice. “It was just a simple procedure! Totally standard!”

“We don’t know what caused it,” said the NPR, accepting the accusation of my father’s tone. “For now, we’ve managed to stabilize her rhythms with adrenaline, but her heart was stopped for nearly eight minutes during the surgery.”

My father’s heart sank in unison with my own. We both knew what this meant. Even if Grandma was stabilized, it was doubtful that she would have any brain-function left.

“We’ll make her comfortable and call you in when everything is ready,” said the NPR softly, and headed back towards the ICU. Shock remained on my father’s face. I hugged him, and he hugged me back. For the first time that day, we both began to cry.

“I love you daddy,” I sobbed. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright J.H., it’s gonna be alright. I love you too. I’m so sorry you had to be there for this.” For the second time in the day I felt the feeling that I was in the exact place that I was meant to be, a place that no one else could take. I was there to comfort my dad.

An adrenaline drip keeps the heart going. Glucose provided intravenously provides nutrition. Ventilators pump the body full of oxygen and remove the CO₂.

We were guided into the ICU, and met with the attending in charge who introduced himself as Dr. Mathis. He was younger than my father, and it was a bit awkward for him to explain my grandmother's condition which my father understood better than him. "It's doubtful," he said, "that your mother has any remaining brain function. Without intervention, her vitals will likely slowly decline until she passes away. We can make her comfortable."

"I understand," my father said, wet tears filling his eyes, "*No heroic measures.*"

The adrenaline drip is halted, yet the body continues to fight.

My father and I sat with my grandmother in her room, unable to contact anyone in the family until Shabbat ended. We waited, mostly watching the vitals monitor, waiting for the numbers that represented my grandmother's heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate to fade. Resisting for as long as we could, we ate the rugelach that my dad had driven over before Shabbat. We had hoped to eat them while talking to Grandma.

My dad and I discussed what would happen next, who we had to call, what plans would be made. I offered to stay in the hospital as long as needed, but my father insisted I return home and study for finals. Grandma wasn't expected to make it until the end of the day, yet by the time the day had ended, my grandmother's vitals had actually improved. It was as if, in a last act of strength and defiance, my grandmother was saying, "No one can take me. I'm as tough as they come." She managed to push on for another two days. While she was in the hospital, her first great grandchild was born.

The muscles relax. The heart beats slower, and slower, until it stops.

“Once you got to Belgium, what was your life like? Who were the people you lived with?”

“Max Hersch and his wife Sophie lived in Antwerp with their three children, and besides that they had two teenage girls living with them, Hansi and Erica. Max Hersch’s father was my father’s employer for years before his company went bankrupt. Eventually the two girls left for, and I was the only refugee left with them. There was a governess and several maids around. They were very affluent. I was friendly with the kids, and they called me Fleury, or *little flea*, because I liked to jump around a lot. Their daughter Lilly was a year or two older than I. My father was employed by Max Hersch’s father. You must be wanting to write a book or something. No child would want to hear all these details.” I smiled, hearing my Grandmother’s sassy personality captured on tape.

“Well I want to write it for our family,” my mother replied, “It’s so different from what I’ve experienced or my kids experienced.”

The recording ended there, with my grandmother living in Belgium, waiting to reunite with her parents so they could travel to America and start a new life together. For a few minutes I sat in silence in my quiet corner of the library, my grandmother’s voice echoing in my head.

From Belgium, Grandma traveled again to England, the Nazis hot on her tail. They couldn't get to her across the English Channel. In England she was reunited with her parents after more than a year without seeing them. After waiting for six months, their numbers were called, and they were granted visas to come to America. In America, she excelled in her education, quickly picking up English and shedding her German accent. She dropped out of college to raise her three children while my grandfather worked in jewelry, but returned to get her degree years later.

My mother once saw a newspaper photo of my grandmother with her class at the Statue of Liberty when she was twelve. My mother said to her, "Oh wow mom! You were an immigrant at the Statue of Liberty."

Grandma replied, "I wasn't an immigrant."

My mother, thinking that she was forgetting, replied, "Yes. You were an immigrant from Germany."

"Oh, I got over that really fast!" smiled Grandma.