

# Grandma's Dying

*Margaret Blair Young*

MY EX-GRANDMOTHER-IN-LAW IS DYING UPSTAIRS. Her being with me was my ex-husband's idea. He said I could have the house if she stayed in it.

I reminded him that Gran hated me.

He said, "She hardly remembers you now. Besides, she should be with family when she dies."

"I'm not family." I displayed my de-ringed left hand.

"You're the closest thing."

"I'm ex-family."

"Look at it this way, dear. Why here's a chance to show your religion in action. You Mormons believe in love and kindness, remember?"

"Not like your apostates."

"Hell, maybe after your example, the whole family will come back. We'll have a mass re-baptism in the Pacific Ocean. You can stand on a rock and get your feet kissed when we're done."

"You know how I feel about Gran."

"Feelings don't count, remember? It's the truth that counts. Familiar? So. The truth is this: I'm going to be living in a one-room apartment. Gran won't fit."

"Can't she go with your mother?"

"My mother would end up killing her. You want my mother to go to prison?"

"Is that where you want me?"

"Give yourself credit, my dear ex — my ex-dear. Have a little faith, for Crissake."

I tell my friends I got the house, the Chevy, and the old lady. They say, "What's she doing with you?"

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I say, "She's wearing out her angst."

They think I'm brave and noble. Their good thoughts are an aggravation, since I know the truth. I am not brave. I hate the old woman. My ex relishes that fact. He's laughing at us all.

I do not mention this to my friends. I do not tell them how unfair this deception is. I do not tell them how often I think of unfairness. Preparing oatmeal, I rehash my divorce. Microwaving milk for cocoa, I wait for the buzzer and envy my inanimate appliances. I say to the stove, "Life's a bitch." I go to get dressed and tell my closet, "There's no justice here." I tell the john as I flush, "Things are not fair."

Gran is the best example of unfairness I know. It is not fair, for instance, that she should have this time to come to grips with mortality. It is not fair she should have this special dispensation to contemplate the eternal, to imitate Hamlet, to have her brain lobotomized, tenderized by her lazy heart. It is not fair she should have become so pitiable.

Her husband — who deserved some time to ponder and make sweet, long goodbyes — died instantly, on the highway. He was discussing which case a pronoun should take after a preposition, and sideswiped a chicken truck. Gran loved to tell about his death when she was coherent. She loved to talk about that chicken truck and all the bloody feathers. She loved to tell how everybody had eventually left her lonely, or ripped her off, or trailed dirt through her kitchen, or scuffed up her kids. She had loved to talk about me too, when she was herself. I once overheard her say to my ex, "Why couldn't you have married a real woman? Patti Toledo would have been all right. You wouldn't have had a pigsty if you had married Patti Toledo. You're too good to live in a pigsty, did you ever think of that? Did you ever think you just might have got a bad deal?"

"I've thought about it," said Mr. Ex.

I was sitting on the bed where she's dying now, putting photo albums together. Listening. Not believing in her strength.

When she needs me, she rings a bell. I come. She asks me to help her to the bathroom or feed her some broth. Lately she's been asking me to pray. She is deaf without her hearing aid, which is broken. Yesterday I prayed: "Dear Lord, wouldst Thou believe it — the old woman is still here. Take her fast, Jesus. Amen."

Her chin trembled up. She whimpered, "Amen. Amen. Prayer over?"

"Yes, Gran," I shouted.

"Over?"

"YES!"

"Amen," she said.

She didn't believe in God until her heart got tired. Her father, the honorable Judge Jesperson, was one of the first atheists in Utah. After the Mormon Church usurped the family mill, Judge J. decided Brigham Young was not a prophet of God but a son-of-a-bitch. And since Mormonism was the best reli-

gion he'd found, there was nothing left for him but nothing. His unbelief was a tradition his daughter, Gran, passed on to her children. Atheism and anger and Ajax cleanser in the kitchen corners. When my ex went to church with me during our courtship, Gran said, "It's the churches and banks control the world, you know." As though she were waxing profound. Then she compared Albertson's tomato prices to Alpha Beta's and listed which meat cuts were on sale.

Gran always memorized the specials. It took her five hours to buy her groceries and another day to evaluate them. "I don't think this grapefruit is worth half what they're asking. It's a rotten deal, and I'm taking it back," she'd say. She usually returned at least one item from any grocery load for a refund. Occasionally, she'd type a list of complaints to substantiate her returns and head into the store with a bag full of bad stuff. Mealy apples. Mold on one green pepper. Soggy sprouts. "If the merchandise is bad, you return it. You take it or send it back." She believed in good deals.

Grandpa, now he had a more conventional religion. He liked to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus" in the bathtub, slapping the faucet to make the kettle drum beats.

"I need to go," she whispers when I answer her bell. She reaches up to me with both hands. I let her use my neck for a brace and put my arm around her ribs. We limp to the john.

"I don't want to be alone," she says.

"Most people don't." I lower her to the seat.

She says, "I'm stronger today than I was yesterday." She is waiting for her water.

I nod and smile. I say to her deafness, "No you're not."

Grandpa liked me. Said I was the best thing ever happened to his kooky family. "Teach that husband of yours to communicate," he said. "Teach him that right now. He's a good boy and a fine musician, but he's had a hard life." He looked at the old lady. "He'll need a lot of love."

"That I've got," I said.

Grandpa never knew about the divorce, having been killed between a preposition and a pronoun.

Gran saw the marriage end, and she was proud. Getting rid of me had become her favorite battle. She didn't make my ex hate me, just made him angry at the world. The earth wasn't good enough for her seed, and everyone wanted her money.

The marriage ended when I sold my sewing machine to pay tithing.

"What is this? You making a down payment on heaven?" said my ex.

"My family pays tithing," I said.

"My family already gave," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"The mill."

"Oh yes. The famous mill."

"You want to give up mending, don't you, my dear. Give up mending and win a few points with the bishop. Bishop's a stud, isn't he?"

"I pay tithing because it's right."

"Right. If you don't give enough money to Bish and his fellow bastards in Salt Lake, why they just might kick your ass," he said. He even looked like her when he spoke this way. He said, "What a rotten deal I got."

"It won't come." Gran looks at me with wide, gray eyes. A child's eyes. Her hair is matted and dirty orange. The roots are white. She reaches for me.

After she is in bed, she looks out the window. There are white spots on the glass, from the last storm.

"Open," she says.

I unfasten the window latch. She sniffles.

"My husband," she says. Her eyes water on cue. "One minute — here." A breath. "The next — gone."

"Did you like the orange juice this morning?" I say. She can't hear. I have to write it down on her little chalkboard. She squints at the words and at me, on the verge of recognition. She nods.

I BOUGHT IT ON SALE, I write. FIFTY-NINE CENTS A CAN. AT ALPHA BETA. She closes her eyes. "Sleep," she moans.

Her medical problems are apparent; her legs are twice their normal size. When you press her knee, your thumbprint stays.

"Music," she says.

She wants Mozart in the room with her, despite her deafness. The vibration of the stereo is what she likes. I could give her David Bowie and she'd never know the difference. She'd let the drumbeats soothe her, thinking they were magic flutes.

My ex played Mozart. He made his money rebuilding pianos, spent his sensitivity playing them. He could give the old masters life but was otherwise a jerk. He had a keyboard laid out in the front room the night before Grandpa's funeral. Gran was at our place, talking about how hard widowhood would be but how maybe she could put her finances in order at last, since "HE" wouldn't be around. The funeral, she said, was costing a mint, even with the cheapest, unvarnished coffin. It was hard enough losing "HIM" without losing all that money.

She muttered like that all day. When it was night and she was alone in the front room, she walked across the keyboard and snapped seven dowels. My ex said he would have killed her if she weren't so tragic already.

"She's not tragic," I answered. "Only the great are tragic."

"My grandma," he said, "kept her house spotless. That's more than you can say." He picked up the broken dowels and swore. "She could have broken her neck in the fall," he said, cursing her soul under his breath.

"You wish it had been me, don't you," I said.

"Been you what?"

"You wish I had broken the dowels and my neck."

He glared at me, but it was the truth. He wished I were dead. He had told me that many times. He had a dream once that the government had assigned him to exterminate Khadaffi, so he tied a missile between my breasts and launched me to Libya. He laughed. "It wasn't exactly a nightmare," he said. "I was a hero. And you were worth your price. It was like getting a refund with interest." More laughter.

He was getting his refund now. And Gran was the interest.

The bed in this room has been here since we bought the house. This is where I had slept when I wanted to be alone. It was my bed. My books are still in the filing cabinet. I used to sit on my bed, holding some Victorian novel, and look out the window.

The apple tree is directly below. In blossom now and full of bees and yellow butterflies. With the window open, you can smell spring. Grandma told me yesterday that she had an apple tree when she was a child. She asked me to bring her some fresh blossoms and some buttermilk. I said I would. But she didn't ask again.

There are still flowers in the room. Three shades of wilting lilacs — white, lavender, purple. Tomorrow I will replace them with plastic daffodils.

She sleeps for only a few moments at a time, then awakes with a start. Sometimes she asks for food, sometimes rings the bell, sometimes clutches my hand.

Her body is small, a childish mound under the sheets. She is shivering. "Are you all right?" I say.

The eyes flutter open. The mouth gapes lopsidedly, as though the lower lip were caught on a fishhook. She stares at me.

I write: ARE YOU OKAY?

"Scared," she says like a hoarse cat. She lapses in and out of consciousness, in and out of sanity. This morning she was singing a Mozart lullaby:

Birds have all gone to their nest  
Even the bees are at rest . . .  
Sleep little dream prince of mine.

My ex used to play it on the piano. Mozart could make him weep. Mozart touched that whole family, actually, the same way Wagner moved Hitler. Mozart was our go-between, our intermediary, like Cyrano was to Christian. There were times it seemed Mozart had possessed my ex, was coming through his fingers. Sometimes he *was* Mozart, and I was the humble, weary, ephemeral Constanza, loving him there at the piano, knowing the end from the beginning, hearing the dead ivory respond to his touch, witnessing the miracle of music. So basically, I got screwed by Mozart. Then the Marriage of Figaro turned into divorce; the Magic Flute got warped; the Queen of Night got her fondest wish: Zorastro was murdered by a truckload of chickens. Sometimes when I looked at the piano, it grinned back with those dead teeth like it knew me, inside and out.

Gran, singing the lyrics this morning — about long rests, sleep, the birds and the bees — was childlike, pathetic, mawkish. In my Mormonest of hearts, I wanted to love her. I wanted her to be tragic and fearful and me to be full of benevolent pity. What a journal headline it would be: “Consummate Bitch recognizes the folly of her ways and begs forgiveness. Victim (Yours Truly) embraces her and has a catharsis.” Hell, it could be a Church film! Norman Mailer could even write it up to sell on the national market: rich people in filmy nightgowns saying Forgive and Forgive and Forgive and No Cause, No Cause.

No use. No use. The banal do not die tragically. I tried to tell that to my ex. I said, read Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Only kings can put out their eyes and get anything for them: self-knowledge, forgiveness, a free trip to Colonus.

“Take care of her, dear,” said my ex. “I love her very much.”

Mozart on the phone, fibbing his pants off. The truth is, he hates Gran worse than I do. He’s hated her for years. Since she unpacked his bags to iron his shirts and made him miss the plane to Europe. He’s hated her worse since she holed up in the rest home and insisted that he and the others of my ex-family pay her bill. He wants something for his money, now, this god of dead ivory. And he’s getting it. He knows how common we are. We have given up on being kings and queens, priests and priestesses. We are not great enough to bring about catharsis. Not one of us is great enough for that.

Once when Gran visited, she sat for hours looking at our *Time* magazine. She read no articles, but she thought Casper Weinberger was very handsome. “He looks like Gregory Peck,” she said. “Doesn’t he look like Gregory Peck? But what a strange name. Do you suppose he’s Jewish?”

“Secretary of Defense,” I said.

“He’s better looking than the last one.”

She twists her head towards the window and smiles. Her teeth are gold-framed and gray. “Mama loved apple blossoms,” she says in the same little-girl voice that parodied Mozart this morning. “Beside the apple tree was — a brook. We cooled milk and buttermilk in — the brook.” She breathes hard between phrases. “Mama. All gone.”

I write: ARE YOU THIRSTY?

“No.” She is still watching the blossoms. Her mouth moves. I can’t hear her.

I write: CAN I HELP YOU?

“Pray,” she says.

“Our Father which art in heaven,” I say, and some unidentifiable memory moves inside me. It is a poignant memory, one that would make me cry if I could see it clearly. But I can’t.

“Hallowed be thy name,” I say. She is staring at me with those pathetic eyes. God, she wants me to save her. She wants to rip off the last vestige of my faith and ride it to heaven.

"Hallowed be thy name," I say. "And so on. Lord," I say, "Lord, she should have had a heart attack at a checkstand. Over the high price of yogurt. Amen. AMEN."

Then she is looking at me hard, reaching for me. She pulls my ear to her mouth.

"Do you need to go?" I say. I can smell her tinny breath.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Did you wet the bed?"

"Sorry." Her legs move under her covers. The dot of wetness spreads.

I scrawl: DID YOU WET THE BED?

"No control," she says.

SHALL I CHANGE YOUR SHEETS?

"Please." Again she reaches. Again I give my neck and set her on the chair. She twists around it, clutching its back, and watches the bees on the apple blossoms outside. As I fluff the pillow, I hear her slide to the floor. She is on her knees, her cheek pressed to the seat.

"Jesus," she says.

I lift off her wet nightdress. She is naked underneath it. I get her one of my nightgowns, one I kept in this room during my marriage for nights when I wanted to sleep alone. She puts her arms out to accommodate the sleeves. And when her face is covered and my gown is half on her, I shudder deep and beg God to finish his work. I tell him I will not last the night. Some things, I say, are too hard to be borne.