Abscission

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One of the last times I saw my Grandma Judy, when she was 91, she was in a wheelchair. Her socked feet hung like a rag doll's a couple of inches above the floor in the book-lined foyer of my grandparents' Upper West Side apartment. A home health aide had parked her there. She was oblivious to me, oblivious to time: dementia had taken her mind and her faculties. But moments of lucidity came here and there, as though some intrinsic Judy was trapped inside trying to wipe a fogged-up window to see into the outside world.

My Grandpa Gerry, her husband of sixty-seven years, rounded the corner with his heavy limp, acquired after a car accident in 1987. Judy opened her eyes, the *clomp-clomp* jolting her into alertness.

"Where do you come from?" she said in a shaky voice. A question meant literally or figuratively, the correct words intentionally chosen or not, I didn't know.

"Mars," Gerry said.

A pause, as my grandmother looked at him, stone-faced. She just stared. "I know you from a long time ago," she said.

It was a beautiful moment, one that seemed to transcend memory itself, and was followed by a smaller flicker of lucidity several minutes later.

"Oh, what a cute baby. Look at that cute baby. Hell-ooo ba-by, hell-ooo ba-by," my grandmother cooed as she came face-to-face with her first great-grandchild, my sister's three-week-old son, Nathan, supine on a blanket on the dining room table. That Nathan was her great-grandson was too complex a concept for my grandmother to grasp. All she knew was that this was a precious little soul in front of her.

No one was sure how much longer my grandmother would hang on, so there had been an urgency to the visit. Even if Nathan would never *know* his great-grandmother, and even though his great-grandmother would never really know him, it was important beyond measure that they meet.

I pulled out my cell phone to capture the moment on video. I wanted Nathan, one day, to be able to watch this meeting of which he would have no memory. I wanted to preserve it as a portal into the past. But how sad, I thought, that my grandmother could only ever be some nebulous figure in some vague past for him. That he'd never know her as more than a fuzzy sketch, a doddering old woman, rather than the family linchpin she had been.

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When she passed through Ellis Island in 1931, my Grandma Judy was three years old. My Great-Grandmother Rose had taken the family from Hungary to the United States to rejoin my Great-Grandfather Benjamin, who had immigrated a year before. I always assumed they were fleeing Hitler and rising anti-Semitism. In fact, I learned recently, they were fleeing debt. Benjamin had lost all the family's money gambling and had moved to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where he started a noodle business.

As an adolescent Jewish boy, I was proud of my grandma's immigrant story, regardless of whether I had the details quite right. On a school field trip to Ellis Island in third grade, I made a charcoal rubbing on tracing paper of the name *Judith Lenovitz*, where it was inscribed on the wall with hundreds of thousands of others. A memento. That rubbing is long gone now; I wish I had thought to save it.

My grandma was a slight woman who wore her hair in a poofy cropped style that made me think of Ronald McDonald, only not bright red. Her curls were shoe-polish black, and she never went gray—much to my mother's chagrin, who has been dyeing her own hair for decades.

Whenever I visited my grandparents' fifteenth-floor apartment growing up, it was with a mixture of trepidation and excitement, a reflection of their different dispositions. My grandfather never smiled and spoke in a stern manner. I wasn't afraid of him, but neither did I look forward to seeing him. My grandmother, though, was all hugs and warmth. I loved taking the elevator up up up, buzzing the old-timey doorbell and knowing she was waiting for me. She'd open the front door in faux surprise, and plant a big wrinkly-lipped kiss on my cheek.

Once I was over the threshold, things were cozy and familiar. On the limited shelf space in the foyer in front of my grandfather's thousands of volumes, dozens of photos in a hodgepodge of plastic, wooden, and metal frames obscured many of the titles. In one photo, circa 1980, my mother and her three siblings, all wearing Coke-bottle-bottom eyeglasses and shoulder-length hair, stand in the same entryway where the photo now leans against a copy of Bellow's *Seize the Day*. Beside that one is a photo of Great-Grandma Rose, whom I never met, sitting who-knows-where and god-knows-when.

Most of my memories of my grandmother are inextricably linked to the apartment. Though the kitchen was tiny—more of a hallway, really—I spent as much time in it as any of the other rooms over the years. I liked to keep my grandmother and my mother company there while they *kvetched* about my uncles, whose professional and personal lives were forever in some sort of turmoil. From the kitchen window there was a clear view of triangular Strauss Park in the middle of Broadway and, farther off, the worn-denim-blue ribbon of the Hudson River. I would look down on the street below and pretend the Lilliputian figures scuttling about were part of some strange, tiny world, a constant stream of gossip in the background.

The kitchen had a gravitational pull during bigger family gatherings. The smells of my grandmother's broiling brisket or frying latkes drew people in, and there they'd stay, leaning against the wooden countertops and chatting until we migrated to the dining room for the meal. Such crowds meant constant shuffling atop the black-and-white tiled floor: If Uncle Daniel wanted a beer from the fridge near the door, or Aunt Wendy needed to get to the sink (already piled high with dishes) closer to the window, it became a game of Tetris. What with all the bodies and the heat from the stove, unless that lone window was opened, the space soon became a sauna.

In that cramped kitchen, my grandmother could do sweet just as well as savory. She was a tremendous baker, whipping up buttery *pogácsa* cookies that

reminded her of Hungary. When my mother was a teenager, my grandmother tasked her with delivering batches of these baked goods to Great-Grandma Rose, who lived in an apartment on the ninth floor. My mom loathed the chore, she later told me. Rose had a brusque manner and spoke poor English; my mom thought her scary.

My grandmother was constantly pushing those same sweets on my sister, cousins, and me, or else showering us with little trinkets she bought at museum gift shops, and exhorting us to be careful. I can still hear her sharp intake of breath when a grandkid slipped on a rug or bumped a head on a table as we cavorted around the apartment.

This protective instinct—it was the nurse in her. She had graduated from Mount Sinai School of Nursing in the early 1950s, and it remained one of her proudest pillars of identity through the years, long after she retired as a high school nurse. The first line of her headstone reads NURSE MOTHER. A family debate over whether punctuation belongs in epitaphs is to blame for the absent comma, but I've come to think the effect is oddly appropriate—as though family and taking care of people were both of such importance to her that they became one and the same.

One of the last clear exchanges I had with my grandmother came at a Passover seder six or seven years ago in my family's house in Westchester. By this time, she didn't know who most of us were and was not *compos mentis*, but she still spoke in intelligible sentences tethered to reality, if only just. As everyone milled around pre-meal and the scent of matzoh ball soup filled the dining room, I saw my grandmother looking at the dark-wood breakfront against the wall. It was full of china, and had clawed feet and lion head finials, I think, though I'm no longer certain. My grandma's brow was furrowed as she stared at the piece of furniture. Then her eyes flitted around, from one person to another, as though suspicious.

"What's up, Grandma?" I asked her. She looked up at me—though only five foot five, I towered above her.

"This used to be in my mother's house," she said, placing her knobby arthritic fingers on the wood. In her voice there was confusion and anger. She mumbled on in an accusatory tone, and I was able to pick out the phrase "stole it."

And she was right. The breakfront wasn't stolen, of course, but it had been in my great-grandparents' house in Wilkes-Barre. Later, it was in a house in Connecticut that my grandparents owned. When they sold that house in the

mid-1990s, they gave the piece to my mom, and it had been in our dining room ever since.

The process of retrogenesis, whereby those with dementia lose their memories and physical capabilities in reverse, has a macabre poetry to it. A closed-book sort of circularity. At the end we find ourselves at the beginning again. There is an arboreal quality to the roughly backward order in which memories disappear, like a tree losing its leaves. As we grow up, memories accumulate, like thousands of buds blooming in spring. Examined individually, each leaf or memory is singular, brittle; from afar, they appear one interwoven network. Come the autumn of one's years, those leaves of memory grow frail. Some fall off early; others become a bit rougher around the edges but cling on.

Eventually just a few remain.

What would those final frail leaves of memory be, I wondered, in my grandmother's case? She had already forgotten her career as a nurse, her grandchildren, her children. Perhaps once her recollection of the breakfront faded, next to go would be any memories she had of standing in line at Ellis Island, then of sleeping in the steerage of a big ship chugging across the Atlantic. And finally, if they had ever existed, her earliest memories of being a toddler in the Hungarian shtetl where she was born.

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I'm thirty-two now. In a turn I never could have guessed, these days I spend more time in my grandparents' fifteenth-floor apartment than I ever did as a child. My girlfriend, Eloise, and I live in a one-bedroom on the third floor in the same building. My grandfather rented it toward the end of my grandmother's life, when she required around-the-clock health care. He thought he needed more space. In total, he probably only spent a few nights down on the third floor, but I guess he just liked the idea that it was there if he wanted it. When my grandmother died, he hung onto the place. I think getting rid of it would have been one more acknowledgment that she was really gone.

So, when I moved back to the city after years living out West and needed a place to live, I began subletting 3G from him. He's now my grandfather-cum-landlord. I take the elevator up up up to chat with him a couple of times each week.

Visiting the fifteenth floor now, I'm prone to wistfulness. When it's just my grandfather and me, I can see that he wonders what to do with all the hours in a day. During holidays, the scents from the kitchen come from catered or store-bought foods. The gatherings in that tight space feel too ordered. When I look toward the kitchen window, I think of my grandmother: In her final dementia-dogged years, she was happiest sitting there and watching boats slide by on the Hudson.

Recently, my grandfather made the biggest change to the apartment that I can recall during my lifetime. He got rid of a turquoise suede armchair. It had occupied a central spot in the living room, and I had always loved it, garish or not. Before putting it to the curb, he asked me if I wanted it for the third floor and—to my own surprise—I said no. Sure, the stains had something to do with it. But it was also the sense of dislocation involved. To move that chair from the apartment was to unmoor it from a dock of meaning; put it anywhere else but in the center of that living room and it would just be an ugly art deco chair.

Changes jar me. My mother has always said that I'm averse to change, a simple truth that I never could see without her outsider's perspective. As I grow older, I realize how right she is. Loss, whether of a person or the status quo, no matter how major or minor, upsets my internal balance. I'm precious about the way things were. Maybe it's a latent fear of things left undone, or a nostalgic yearning—that sinking feeling of not being able to go home again.

After the one and only meeting between my grandmother and little baby Nathan, we all went down to sit in Strauss Park while my grandmother remained upstairs with the aide. We sat on a wood-slatted bench and watched a couple of kids doing laps on scooters around the ring of uneven pavement. Some pigeons strutted nearby. My grandfather pointed to a bronze sculpture of a reclining woman at the southern end of the park. A fountain trickled into a basin beneath it.

"Do you know what that sculpture is?" he asked me. "She is the Greek goddess of memory," he said—Mnemosyne. I walked over to it and let the stream of water wash over my fingers.

In the two years since my grandmother's death, my grandfather has asked me that same question several times about Mnemosyne. There is something about him not being able to remember asking me about this monument to memory, that, well, I find impossible to forget. I've taken his proddings as an ongoing invitation to ponder the subtleties of family history and the uncanny ways that

a stream of collective memory seems to flow through it. Memory, I've decided, isn't just preservable like an insect in sap, but transmissible. Sure, Nathan will never really know his Great-Grandmother Judy; but just like I never knew my Great-Grandma Rose, her stories and bits and pieces of her legacy have imprinted themselves upon my present, ghostlike, through photos, recipes, mementos, furniture, and, of course, people. She echoes through the halls of apartment 15A and now 3G.

I can't help but hear those reverberations from the past resounding in my daily life. Eloise, like my grandmother was, is a formidable baker. Whenever she starts in on a new confection in the kitchen of our apartment on the third floor, she makes sure to bake enough to share with my Grandpa Gerry, and then barks at me if I forget to bring it up to him. Unlike my mother delivering sweets to Great-Grandma Rose, I look forward to bringing tins of cookies up to the penultimate floor of the building. I linger longer than the task requires. My grandfather, usually seated in the big leather armchair that replaced the turquoise one, enjoys the company. He has softened in his tenth decade. The stories flow out of him.

In a few years, I'll be able to show Nathan the video of the time when he met his great-grandmother. And I find myself pondering the following hypothetical, which some might find morbid, but I find touching: Suppose Nathan, many decades from now, when I myself am long gone, were to fall victim to the same cruel fate of dementia as my grandmother. He, too, might then see his memories disappear one by one, that same process of abscission. His memories—possibly of a future partner, children, and grandchildren, of a career, of me—would continue to drop away, until just a few stray hangers-on were left. Near the end, perhaps, as the process of subtraction reached its inevitable finale, he would remember that clip of meeting his great-grandmother: someone he knew from a long time ago.