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## Porcelain

JUNE 1972. *Scarsdale, New York.*

My Grandma Dorothy stands in front of the sink, peers into her mirrored medicine chest, pats beige powder on her fair age-spotted skin. Her white hair matches her slip, that looks more like a short sexy dress with thin shoulder straps. I sit on the edge of her white porcelain tub and watch her apply a dab of blue eyeshadow to her lids. I am ten years old. My grandmother is sixty. I wonder why she powders her soft natural skin. It cracks her face. It ages her. She sprays Charlie on the inside of her wrists, and touches her wrists to either side of her neck. She then sprays Charlie into the air and walks into the fallout.

Her bathroom is small with a white tiled floor, and floral wallpaper—orange, yellow, red, and green on white.

There is an extra appendage under the toilet seat. “Grams,” I say. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” she asks.

“That tube thing under the toilet seat,” I say, pointing to the toilet as if it has a disease.

She laughs. “That’s a bidet.”

“What’s a bidet?”

“A bidet is something that cleans you out. It’s European.”

“They don’t have toilet paper in Europe?” I ask.

“They do,” she says and laughs. “The bidet is special for women.”

“Oh,” I say. “I don’t get it.”

“This is not quite a bidet,” she says. “It’s not just for women. It’s for anyone. It cleans your tush.”

“Yuck,” I say. “How does it work?”

“After you’ve made a poop, you push the button. Water squirts out of that little hole. Then, it’s easier to wipe.”

“Do you use it?” I ask.

“Sometimes,” she says. “But, Grandpa likes it.”

“Can I try it?”

“Sure.”

I pull down my pants, sit on the toilet, push the button, feel the cool water squirt into the crack of my tush. I giggle. “It tickles.”

*April 1973. Providence, Rhode Island.*

I sit on the slate steps—charcoal grey, deep ocean blue, and maroon—in front of our red brick house in Providence, Rhode Island waiting for Grandma Dorothy and Grandpa Hy to pull up in their metallic blue-grey Cadillac, after driving three and a half hours from Scarsdale, New York. I am eleven. My grandmother is sixty-one. It’s early afternoon. Grandma and Grandpa are coming to spend the first few days of Passover with us.

They arrive. Grandpa unbuckles his seat belt, puts his sunglasses into the black leather pouch in his breast pocket, and slowly lifts himself out of the driver’s seat. Grandma is already out of the passenger seat, yelling “Hello! I have to run.” She pulls up her skirt, sprints up the stairs, into the house, down the hall, and runs to the last door on the left. I hug Grandpa, and follow Grandma to the bathroom.

Grandma doesn’t bother to close the bathroom door. Her girdle, yellowed from many years of wear, sits at her ankles on top of her beige orthopaedic shoes. She never closes the door, even when she’s not in a rush. She often walks around her house in a slip, or in a bra and girdle, or in nothing—a private person she is not.

“Hi honey,” she says. “I’m making a sis. I couldn’t hold it in.”

“I know Grams,” I say. “You never can.” I walk into the bathroom and hug her in the middle of her sis. She smells of perfume, sweat, and sis. It’s a long sis.

*February 1977. Scarsdale, New York.*

It’s 11:00 a.m. on a weekday morning. Grandma is in her bathroom, readying herself to start the day that Sarina and I have started hours ago. Sarina and I sit in the wood-panelled den on the thick grey woolen couch watching “The Price is Right,” “Truth or Conse-

quences,” “Leave it to Beaver,” flipping stations, as we wait for our grandmother to get dressed. My sister, Sarina, is eleven. I am fourteen. My grandmother is sixty-five. We are visiting my grandparents during our school vacation. This is the girls’ visit. Sometimes our brothers come without us. Then it’s the boys’ visit.

Suddenly Grandma begins laughing hysterically. We follow her laughter. “What’s so funny, Grams?” we ask when we find her walking around her bedroom in her bra and girdle laughing so hard she can barely speak. Only a few words tumble out. “Grandpa’s eyes.” “My teeth.”

Sarina and I laugh only because Grandma’s laugh is infectious. We don’t yet understand what is so funny. Grams takes us into her bathroom, shows us my grandfather’s contact lenses cooking in a large white oval machine, and two of her side teeth stuck on a metal bar soaking in a drinking glass. She continues laughing. So do we. Even though we still don’t understand why.

*March 1980. Providence, Rhode Island.*

“Grams,” I say, gently touching my grandmother’s shoulder so she will turn around to face me. I am seventeen. She is sixty-eight. We are standing in Temple Emanuel’s black-and-white tiled ladies’ room that smells of disinfectant. We are crying.

My grandmother wipes her tears with a raggedy old tissue that she holds in her trembling age-spotted hands. She is wearing a black knit skirt with a gold, red, black, and white dress shirt, and a black knit jacket. Her powdered face looks worn, old, ghostlike. Her light blue-grey tear-filled eyes stare at the ground. Black mascara drips down her left cheek like a leaky fountain pen. I hug her, and bend down to lean my head on her shoulder. Slowly, she lifts her hands to hug me.

It’s a special day today, March 8<sup>th</sup>. My brother, Ari, will become a bar mitzvah in this synagogue where we belong, this synagogue where my father is the rabbi. An intercom system installed a few days ago sits on my father’s long rectangular oak desk, ready to pipe the service down from the main sanctuary. The intercom looks like an old-fashioned radio—large, oval, brown. It is set up for my eleven-year-old brother, Rafi, who was just transported by ambulance on a stretcher from Rhode Island Hospital, where he has lived since January 1<sup>st</sup>, when he was diagnosed with Ewings Sarcoma, a rare bone cancer.

Rafi was just wheeled down the hall into my father's study by two sturdy, well-built ambulance men. He is wearing a cotton Baltimore Orioles ski cap. His face is pallid, pasty, gaunt. He blends into the white hospital bed sheet, and white hospital cotton blanket that cover his thin, frail frame.

"Hey Raf," I said as his stretcher passed us by.

He stared at me. Not just at me, but at everyone he passed in his stretcher; at Ari, at Sarina, at my Grandma Dorothy, my Grandpa Hy, at Mom, and Dad. Not just at us, but into us. Intently. Deeply. Piercingly. His body is frailer than I remember. His brown eyes larger.

"Okay, honey," Grandma says to me in the midst of our embrace in the ladies' room. She pats me three times on the small of my back. "We have to pull ourselves together and join everyone."

"Wait," I say. "I'm not ready."

Both of us are sniffing.

"Do you cry a lot, Grams?" I ask.

"I cry," she says.

"Do you and Grandpa cry together?"

"No," she says. "When I cry, I go into the bathroom and close the door. I don't want Grandpa to see me cry. I don't want to make him more upset than he already is."

There are two white porcelain sinks in the bathroom, a mirror in front of each sink. Grandma stands in front of one mirror. I stand in front of the other. I stare at myself in my new dark brown leather skirt and vest. My face white. My eyes red. I splash cold water into my stinging eyes to wash away the sadness that, like the ocean, flows without end. The running tap water comforts, like the sound of a vacuum cleaner or an air conditioner. Together my grandmother and I leave the bathroom. Alone.

*July 1987. New Rochelle, New York.*

It's eight years after Ari's bar mitzvah. Eight years after Rafi's death. Eight years after Grandpa's death. I am standing in my grandmother's guest bathroom in her New Rochelle apartment in the white porcelain tub surrounded by yellow-cream tiles, facing the shower, letting the water beat down on my head, face, shoulders. I am twenty-four. Grandma is seventy-four.

"Do you need anything?" Grandma calls in. "Soap? Shampoo?"

"No," I say.

"I've got good shampoo, cleans your head out real good."

"No thanks, Grams," I yell back. I turn around to grab the shampoo sitting on the back ledge of the tub. I scream.

My grandmother is standing outside the tub, holding aside the ivory shower curtain, peeking in. "Grams, you scared me."

"Sorry," she says. "Honey, you know, you have nice legs."

"Thanks, Grams."

"And, a nice figure."

"Thanks Grams. But what are you doing in here?"

"I just wanted to see if you needed anything."

"I'm okay, Grams."

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that I replaced your small towel with the large thick yellow bath towel I know you like. It's hanging on the bar over the toilet seat."

"Thanks, Grams. Now, go do something. Let me finish my shower in peace."

"Okay," she says and heads out of the bathroom, leaving the door open.

"Grams," I call out. "Can you close the door?"

"No," she says. "It's too warm and stuffy in there."

"I like it warm and stuffy."

"Better to air it out."

*January 1995. West Palm Beach, Florida.*

I am thirty-three. My grandmother eighty-three. We are driving in the red Alamo rental car, a Chevrolet Cavalier, to the West Palm Beach Mall, Palm Beach Gardens, on PGA Boulevard. We leave the house several times before we are finally on our way. First, Grandma forgets her cane. "I'm not so steady anymore." Then her sunglasses. "It's bright today." Then, her white cotton sweater. "It might be too blowy in the mall with the air conditioning." Then, her hearing-aid. "What did you say?"

Grandma always dresses up when she leaves her apartment. Today she wears faux gold and pearl clip-on earrings, a white cotton short-sleeved shirt with beige designs that matches her thin cotton beige skirt and beige orthopaedic shoes. The scent of Charlie is seeping out of her every pore. I open my window to breathe. She has painted her lips rose red, simply by applying a small amount of lipstick to her lower lip and clicking her lips together. She's a pro. No mirror.

I am visiting my Grandma in her West Palm Beach condominium in Century Village for what has become our yearly January visit. Our itinerary is always the same. I fly in, rent a car, and we shop, do errands, visit family, and eat. We shop for casual clothes, dress clothes, shoes, sneakers, and bath gels for me. We return library books, pick up postage stamps, visit her older brother, Isidor, and her sister-in-law, Edith, for her. We buy take-out Chinese, chocolate chip ice cream, and M&M's. At Glatt Mart we buy kosher pastrami and smoked turkey sandwiches, sour pickles, chopped liver, and potato knishes. At Charlie's Crab early bird special we feast on salad, hot sour-dough rolls, filet of sole, vegetables, chocolate cake.

Grandma is sitting in the front next to me, sinking into the grey cushion seat, a fluffy feather bed pillow in her lap protecting her from the fastened seatbelt so that it doesn't rub against her pacemaker scar. "Do you know how to get to the mall?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "I remember."

"Good," she says. No sooner do I turn out of her condominium parking lot than she says: "Take a left here."

"I know," I say. "I've done this before." Still, she continues to direct me to the mall.

"Honey, take a right at the next light," she orders.

"Grams, I know," I say. I take a right.

"And at the next light I take a left. Right?" I ask.

"You know where you're going!" she says.

"I keep telling you I know where I'm going. But you don't believe me."

"Take a right here," she says.

When we arrive at the mall, we park where we always park, in the Macy's parking lot "so that we can find our way out." I get out of the car and walk around to open Grandma's door. Though Grandma is moving much slower these days, she still moves quickly. Sometimes she walks so fast she forgets to use her cane. Instead of walking with it, she talks with it, points with it, hits it on the ground for emphasis, like a period or an exclamation point.

We stop in Chicos. I try on shirts—white, army green, pastel purple; two casual jackets—black and forest green; and two pairs of black pants. Grandma treats to whatever we both agree looks good. We next visit the bathroom on Level Two. As we walk, I hold our purchases. I hold the handbag she feels naked without, but which is throwing her off balance. In the bathroom, I paper her seat. I hold her cane. She takes a long time in the bathroom.

“Are you okay, Grams?” I call in several times.  
 “Oh sure,” she says. “I’m fine.”

*December 2000. West Palm Beach, Florida.*

Grandma stands naked in her bathroom at the West Palm Beach Hilton. The bathroom is white. White walls. White tiles. White acrylic tub. White shower curtain. White towels. White plastic garbage can. White bathmat. White shower cap.

My Grandmother’s eighty-eight-year-old body is full of dark brown age spots like amoebas of different sizes and shapes. She stands four feet five inches. She has shrunk over the years, walks with her head bent over like she’s carrying an extra piece of heavy luggage. She wants to shower, but she can’t climb over the tub without assistance. I help her, then wait outside her bathroom for further instructions.

Just a few days earlier, my husband, Seth, our ten-month-old son, Gabriel, and I arrived at my grandmother’s Century Village condominium. We found her sitting on her peppermint easy chair, holding her head in her hands, rubbing the back of her neck with the inside of her palm, and emitting soft whimpering sounds, like an infant deep in a bad dream.

“Should we take you to the emergency room?” we ask.

“No,” she says. “I’ll be fine.”

In pain, between whimpers, she reaches down to hand her great-grandson his cardboard books and toys, to smile and coo at him. She moves without complaining.

The next morning, a doctor’s appointment with her internist, Dr. Raymond. Then, a neck x-ray. A CAT scan. Then, a flood in my grandmother’s condo—a gasket bursts in her guest bathroom toilet. Finally, a move to the Hilton.

“Honey,” Grandma calls from the bathroom. “Can you turn the water to cold? You know it’s good to end your shower in cold water,” she says. “Closes up the pores.”

I stand outside her shower and wait until she’s done. Then I wrap a towel around her, help her dry off, and let her hold onto my arm as she lifts her feet over the tub.

“Do you need anything else, Grams?” I ask.

“No, honey, just help me dry my back,” she says. Then. “Would you find my toothbrush for me? It’s somewhere in my cosmetic bag.” Then. “Where did I put my glasses?” Then. “Have

you seen my hearing-aid?" Then. "You know I'm not together like I used to be. I forget."

My naked grandmother fights with her hearing-aids to get them into the right spots in her ears. Each hearing-aid emits a high frequency sound like nails rubbing against a blackboard. Once they are in, she turns down the buttons. She wants to hear less and less of what's going on around her. Alone, I stand outside her bathroom door, crying.