

Losing Brooklyn

by Deborah Milstein

New York was for me the fertile crescent of Jewish grandparents. From our house in Boston, we could drive down to Brooklyn in four hours. We went all the time, it felt like, driving fast, late on a Friday night. I'd face out the open window, squinting into the wind, watching traffic and stars. We'd stay the weekend with Grandma and Grampy in Brooklyn, and visit my other grandparents, Bobi and Zedi, in Queens, on the way back home. But after Grampy died and Zedi died and Bobi was sequestered in an old-age home in the Boston suburbs, it was just Mom and me going to New York to visit Grandma — which is what I remember most clearly, the last years of that Brooklyn house.

Mom drove fast in her little red Hyundai and Caleb would whine for us to open the window so he could stick his head out, ears blown back in the wind. We'd stop at McDonald's to pee and drain out the dog in the parking lot, and Mom would get coffee to perk up. Caleb recognized Brooklyn and would squeal when we got close, then burst out of the car and pant at the front door. Mom always carried a key but had to fight with the

tricky lock, and then we lugged ourselves and our bags up the green-carpeted stairs. The carpet was worn down, thin and darker in the center of each step. The light wasn't good but I knew where to step to avoid the umbrella stand. At the top of the stairs was a temperamental light switch, old-fashioned, with buttons rather than switches, that didn't follow instructions well. Caleb pushed past us on the stairs, scrambling to his water bowl that Grandma had already set out in the kitchen by the metal trashcan with the broken lid.

Gram slept with her radio blaring: Dr. Laura doling out advice to the parents of ill-behaved children; thick-accented New Yorkers calling in to holler about Giuliani; all those car commercials; the traffic, the weather, the Yankees, New York. Mom would call "Ma?" and walk into the bedroom to wake her if the dog hadn't already.

"Ay, mammele!" Gram would say — "little mother" in Yiddish — with sleep in her voice. "I'm so glad you're here." Then she'd rustle out to the kitchen in her bathrobe, and, no matter the hour, offer food: a sandwich, apple pie, seltzer, ice cream. "You want something to eat? Not even a little ice cream?" She loved to serve ice cream with whipped cream, the cheap kind in the can. *Pssht*, she called it, for the sound it makes.

They'd stay up awhile talking and I'd go to bed in Mom's girlhood bedroom, which we called "the little room." The sheets on the small old bed always felt gritty, and sometimes in the middle of the night the slats underneath would fall, startling me awake. There were no screens in the windows and, summertime, the mosquitoes were fierce. I collected bites on my arms, feet, eyelids, woke itchy in the night, ate more ice cream. In the winter I'd pile blankets, heavy hand-crocheted granny squares, over me.

The dresser was covered with earrings and nail scissors, pin-cushions and dusty eyeshadows, spare buttons, foreign coins, other small old junks. The closets were full of worn, fancy shoes, and hats in hatboxes, and many years' worth of coats. The bedroom door didn't close all the way, and on the doorknob hung a plastic bag full of plastic bags. Under the window was a small table of African violets. Gram watered them in the afternoon while I was lazing with a book in bed. I always brought books with me to New York, too many to read in the few days I was there. I don't travel without something to read.

Mom and Grandma slept together in Gram's bedroom. It wasn't big but full of big furniture: two four-poster twin beds pushed together to approximate a king-size, and a broad, six-foot tall armoire with deep drawers, everything in dark wood. Gram slept next to her radio, Mom on the other side of the bed, both of them covered with granny-square blankets, of course. Caleb lay on the floor. At home, he slept on my parents' bed, but Grandma wouldn't stand for an uncouth animal on her furniture. I was delighted if he nosed into my room at night and sprang up, depositing fifty pounds of himself always in an inconvenient spot, on my legs or in the center of the bed. Either way I couldn't move.

Over the years, Gram's hearing got worse while the radio got louder. Eventually Mom couldn't take the noise, so she moved to the little room and I took over "the lair," Grampy's bedroom at the front of the house. Before my grandfather died, for years, his mind ghosted away. He had Alzheimer's, his mind mazy and forgetful. Grandma would cry and yell at him, and at night, sitting in the living room, I could hear him sing to himself, warbly and sad.

I don't know when my grandparents started sleeping in separate rooms, but that room was always his and, after he died, it was

always quiet, far from Gram's radio and the toilet singing and Caleb slurping water in the night. Even the heavy black telephone was quiet; the ringer was broken. I loved the lair for its silence and its wide bed, where I'd spread myself out and gaze at the room, which was cozy and curious, full of vintage coats and vintage cigar boxes and crumbly-spined vintage paperbacks: Thomas Hardy, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Sherlock Holmes.

I crept down the hallway from the lair to the kitchen — dimly lit; the lamp at the top of the stairs never did anything — examining pictures I'd examined a thousand times before: my mother the bride, with a sweeping satin train; Grandma and Grampy glamorously young; Aunt Rae on horseback; Grampy, dapper in his Army uniform; Uncle Arthur graduating from high school; my brother the infant; my parents at their prom. Mom had fabulous legs. My favorite item in the bathroom was an antique bottle of nail polish, Prom Pink, with "Joey" painted on the base.

And the bathroom was wonderful, although the toilet didn't flush well. I spent forever in the shower. The water pressure was so heavy I would redden up in a hurry. Gram only had Ivory soap, which made my skin dry and tight. After the shower I'd poke through the medicine cabinet: Maalox in an ancient bottle, dusty-looking containers of baby powder, glass jars of Vaseline, q-tips (a pink plastic stem instead of the regular white cardboard), Grampy's old aftershave and a shaving brush, even after he died.

The bathroom faced the pantry, a cavernous closet with a rickety metal step stool inside that Gram used to reach all the high shelves. There were a lot of outdated Yellow Pages books, and peanut butter she kept on hand for grandchildren, which tasted funny. It had expired, I saw on the label, six years before-

hand. There were glass jars of sugar and rice and oatmeal. I like oatmeal but I wouldn't eat hers because it had tiny worms in it, rolling over themselves and each other.

The kitchen didn't have worms but cockroaches sometimes, scuttling in front of the sink. I didn't tell her. I didn't want to upset her. She couldn't see them anyway, with those eyes. She'd lost most of her vision in her sixties, when she retired and wanted to re-read the classics, and then had a botched cataract surgery in her eighties, leaving one eye dead and the other a cloudy moonstone. But she knew the kitchen well enough she hardly needed to see, even to cook.

Breakfast was half a bagel with butter, greasy and good. I guzzled the orange juice (New Square, not Tropicana) that Grandma bought at the Big Banana. In the fridge there was always a jar of peaches and pears and oranges and grapefruits cut up — not very neatly, with a lot of pits and seeds inside — and it was sweet to scoop them out in the morning. When Grampy was alive he'd leave the pits on the stained blue and white checked plastic tablecloth. Lunch was zucchini, fried and bitter, and some sliced potatoes, and a salad, just some lettuce torn up, and maybe a carrot and a grape tomato or two. For me she made a "hot," a grilled cheese sandwich on half a plain bagel. Dinner was veggies again, and maybe chicken soup, with matzah balls of course, and roast chicken, warm and juicy.

After dinner — we'd have to wait an hour or two to eat dairy if we'd just had meat — there was always ice cream to be had, soft from the freezer that never worked well. If we went to Waldbaum's I'd choose plain chocolate, but if I didn't have input we might end up with the chocolate-vanilla checkerboard kind, or Neapolitan, with the flag of chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. I hated strawberry. Sometimes Gram got butter pecan for

herself, which I rejected entirely. Even *pssht* on top couldn't redeem it. Grandma made milkshakes in her noisy blender. The lid gave off the smell of rubber. It would zoom a while and produce thick, perfect milkshakes, rich and heavy with chocolate syrup. Sometimes she threw in some seltzer, too, to bubble things up.

Between eating there was a lot of napping and reading. I sat by the living room window with a book in Grampy's plushy green armchair, which had an identical twin by the wall, a fake Oriental rug in front of each one, and a table between them with a built-in lamp. When he was alive, I'd sidle through the dining room and creep through the living room on hands and knees, popping out to surprise him in his chair — but he was never surprised, just pretending not to see me till the last moment.

I picture him still reading the newspaper there, the *Times* folded small enough to do the crossword comfortably, smoking his pipe. The whole house smelled tobacco-sweet. Ashes dusted the books on the windowsill: *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, *Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing Perfect Children*, a dictionary, a rhyming dictionary, a thesaurus. Grampy wrote lists: words that rhyme, words that look the same but sound different, words that look different but sound the same. He liked words more than he liked chocolate-covered cherries. He shot at the pigeons outside with rubber bands on a wooden slingshot and wrote letters to the editor of the *New York Times*:

To the Editor:

As a certified fossil (I have reached mandatory retirement age) I am ready to volunteer my services to the city. However, if only as a matter of prin-

ciple, I resent having to pay \$5 per week in transportation for the “privilege.” I think it only fair that either (a) the volunteer be reimbursed for such expenditures or (b) be given a transit pass.

(May 6, 1977)

My uncle tells me that Grampy, exuberantly literate, signed some of his letters “Voltaire,” but the New York Public Library has no record of them being published.

Before he retired and played with words, Grampy had been a lawyer but found there were too many lawyers and not enough business, so he became the proprietor of a knisherie. When I told a friend about the knisherie he proclaimed me Brooklyn royalty.

Brooklyn had royal aspirations, but King’s Highway wasn’t classy. Mom and I both loved afternoon walks to Fleetwood Market, which we called the junk store, right by Jack LaLanne. It boasted cheap makeup and perfume, shirts with rhinestones, useless gadgets, and knock-off brands of shampoo, but the best were the big tables full of cheap jewelry: clip-on earrings, crazy rings, ugly pins, clattery bangles, everything 59 cents a piece. Once we overheard a woman panicking to a cashier: her wedding ring had fallen off while she shuffled through the piles. She dug back through the table frantically, but we left before she found it again — if she ever found it, so much was the junk.

After Grampy died I took over his chair, looking out his window and listening to conversations in Russian, and dogs, and Brooklyn accents, and the ice cream truck, and kids on the street, and car alarms. Girls in long skirts appeared twice a day in front of the Jewish school down the street. I could see into the neighbors’ house, which wasn’t very interesting, just old people in a living room watching television. Once in a while, if

they'd blocked our car in, Mom had to call them. "Danny, could you move your car, please?" He was a small, bent-over guy with a big smile, and he'd move his long black car from the driveway we shared.

Mom would pull out in the street and Danny would move his car back in. We'd pack up and kiss Gram goodbye and she'd go back to her radio. I'd worry, privately, about the cockroaches.

When Gram was ninety-two, my mother decided she shouldn't be alone in that house in Brooklyn. Why should she climb those steep green-carpeted stairs? How could she maintain the moody dishwasher? How could she pay bills, and buy groceries, and walk safely down the treacherous cracked sidewalks? She was old and had only one barely-working eye. The Russian tenants downstairs loved my grandmother and helped her with plumbing and the refrigerator that never behaved, and she helped them with English and gave them extra dishes and furniture — they gobbled it all up — but just how much could the tenants do? How much were they willing to do?

Mom didn't want to worry about an elderly mother, alone, two hundred miles away. Gram refused to move to an elder-care institution — "I'm old, I'm not sick!" — but agreed she needed some sort of help. She was willing to move in with my folks, but our house wouldn't do. It was enormous and drafty and high on a hill, and it specialized in stairs. There were thirty-two steps from the back door to the driveway, sixteen from the first floor to the second, and a hidden servants' staircase wallpapered with pictures of farms. There were forty-eight steps from the street to the front door. Everyone arrived breathless.

Stairs were not what my grandmother needed and, besides, my mother wanted to move. She didn't love our neighborhood and she hated the stairs. I loved our house, stairs and all,

although they were awful to shovel in the wintertime, but by then I'd moved out to a Cambridge apartment and never shoveled anything. So my parents sold our house, where we'd lived and which I'd loved since I was eight, and they sold the Brooklyn house — where my great-great-grandfather studied, where Gram lived for seventy-five years, where my mother grew up — and with the profits they bought a two-family house, the next town over, with many fewer stairs. My parents moved into the upstairs apartment, and my house was gone. Gram would live downstairs, once she was out of the Brooklyn house.

We spent that summer in Brooklyn packing. I say this, easily, because my mother did all the packing with my worried grandmother hovering nearby for weeks, and I showed up for a day or two once in a while, putting things slowly into boxes and claiming other things as my own. I am usually like this: a little lazy and a lot sentimental. The air conditioner was broken and Mom was hot and frantic, boxing things haphazardly, years' worth of trinkets, dresses, shoehorns, thimbles, sheet music, all the detritus of living in a place for seventy-five years. I never saw that house change, the whole time it was mine, until it wasn't mine anymore.

We threw out mounds of things: phonograph records and boots and stationery and a broken sewing machine. There were bookshelves built into the walls under the windows and we gave away the books I didn't want to keep, but some had been there so long they were stuck too fast to yank up. I didn't have any say in the matter but Mom threw out the Prom Pink nail polish before I got there.

There were so many things in that house you have no idea, and it hurt me to let them go so I took them with me, so many, too many things. Books: Chaucer and Shakespeare, although I already had them; Whitman, whom I don't even like; *Fashion is*

Spinach, a mysterious selection from Grampy's room; *College Yiddish*; four leather-bound volumes of Victor Hugo, in French. I don't know French. I took pocketbooks, a dresser, blankets, my great-grandmother's wobbly kitchen table, Wedgwood service for a dozen (used just a few times a year during Passover). I took Grampy's green chair and its twin, and his ashtray that was irrelevant because I don't smoke, and his 1938 Royal typewriter that he used to write letters to the editor and I used to write letters to my brother when he was stationed in Iraq.

When the moving truck arrived in Massachusetts we filled Grandma's apartment with old old things and my Cambridge apartment with new old things, which pleased me, and it didn't hurt so badly until I was about to lose the house for good, just before the closing. It was slow and it hurt, losing those houses. I was twenty-four, grieving lost real estate. My old house was already gone and I missed all its stairs and the funny wallpaper and the azalea bushes in the backyard. I missed it and it was just too much to fathom, that I would miss this house too, even the screen-less windows and the mosquito bites.

I needed to see my Brooklyn house again while I could, and called my mother, distraught, to ask for the keys. She'd given them to my father, who asked what I was going there for, and why was it so pressing? He tried to convince me not to bother but I would not be convinced, so he put my grandmother on the line. "Why do you want to go?" she asked. "It's full of emptiness there."

I cried. My father got back on the phone, concerned and cranky. The next day he was headed to Brooklyn to be the cleanup crew, throwing out the crap left behind and getting everything in order to finalize the sale. Why couldn't I wait a day, he asked, to go with him, and save myself the drive?

No, I needed to go alone. I drove my Oldsmobile fast, late on a Friday night in the rain. I fought with the lock and lugged myself up the stairs. The kitchen was empty and all the pictures were absent from the wall, but Grampy's curtains were up and his bed was still there. "How do I take you with me?" I cried aloud, talking to him one last time. I noticed a paper on the bookshelf built into the wall and picked it up, and it was a photograph, a photograph of him laughing, as if he'd answered me, laughing.

Then I left, loading into my car the picture and the last things I could take: a sickly plant, and Grampy's pillow, and a bottle of 1964 Haut-Sauternes, thickened and un-drinkable, and the bottle of brandy next to it on the kitchen counter, which I forgot about until the dry old cork fell out and my car smelled like brandy for weeks. ■ ■ ■