

My Ma Stella Grand-mère

By Lilan Patri

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She is perched on the edge of her mustard-colored bed when I enter the room. "Lilan!" she says, each syllable a clear sweet note—"Oh, Lilan!"—a glow flooding her cheeks, silver light in her eyes. Behind her hangs her favorite painting, orange-indigo phoenix rising through a wall of flame. I smile at her, my Ma Stella Grand-mère, and kiss her cheek and clutch her hand. It is May, and I have flown 3000 miles to see her and maybe—let's hope not, but you never do know—to say good-bye. They are moving her to Sonoma this month. I have no expectations of her on this visit, no needs, and nowhere else to be. A bold sun slants through the glass doors, white light blessing our knees and laps and the breakfast on the tray before her: soggy cornflakes and sliced banana, a mug of milky coffee, a soft-boiled egg swimming in a glass bowl, its ochre yolk the only spot of color on the pale, soft spread. Outside a spray of bougainvillea falls drunkenly against the porch rails.

"Isn't it beautiful—the colors?" she asks, tilting her chin toward the fuchsia blossoms. I nod, my eyes on her. I want to take her all in, breath her, drink her, taste her, be here with her so entirely, as present as possible, a love unquestionable, complete. I have spent too many years running, rushing, a hello here, a kiss there, conversations contrived, humor forced. Now I sit quietly; I want to memorize her every detail, I want to capture her in my mind and never forget. I want to touch her, as if blind, reading Braille, I want to find my way to her, my Ma Stella Grand-mère, the woman she is now, the woman she once was.

I brush a silky white strand of hair off her forehead. She does not mind. She lifts her eyebrows playfully, they are a salt-and-pepper tangle, growing wild as weeds above her eyes. I touch them with my fingertips, her two silver beacons, paying homage to all the wit and vibrancy they have always contained. "Do that thing Ma," I say, "Do that thing with your hair." She moves her eyebrows up and down, and her entire head of hair shifts back and forth as if she is adjusting a wig. I giggle and she laughs her high, tinkling laugh. She looks at me out of the corner of her eyes—once dark and piercing, they are now wet and gauzy with age, the brown ringed in fuzzy blue, her eyelashes no more than tiny nubs, amber pearls sticking and stretching between her lids. I want to clear the filmy yellow away, free her from this indignity of old age. The skin in her cheeks and chin sags and sway, an intricate web of lines, the velvety underside of a leaf. A small patch of scabs grows on the bridge of her nose, red and rough as the tiny strawberries she harvested on Mason Street.

I remember you, Ma, on Mason Street, the cool, solid brown of you, the wide-hipped berth of you, my sanctuary, my only private place. I remember the quiet breath we shared, the space without words, open-petalled sweet peas winding upward, fog-kissed bunches gathered in our palms. I remember you poised in your black vinyl chair, sleek humming cat on your lap, cable cars singing to you as they passed. Crystals spinning in bay windows, rainbows flickering across the floor. Plush sofa, color TV, mountains of rocks in a tall red tin. Rummy tiles slapped flat on half-moon table, smooth cool ivory under our thumbs. Time-worn towels in the bathroom, Yardley soap leaving its jasmine

kiss on my skin. The bindery, all dangling tools and sweet clotted paste and paper snaked through with vines and leaves and marble prints. The deep cat-scented shadows beneath your bed, the Asia in every corner, porcelain lions and crimson silk and hard Japanese snacks.

She eats in slow-motion, lifting her cereal spoon with painstaking care. I do not remember her being so frail, so deliberate. I feel as if we move in different dimensions, the pace of my youth so fast it is startling. "I'm a mushy eater," she explains, the words rolling in her mouth like marbles. Wet cornflakes stray onto her lower lip, clinging to the silver whiskers above her chin. I want to call her attention to it, wipe her clean, a mother and her child. And yet I fight the urge to reach forward; I do not want to strip her of whatever capabilities and competence she still has. "You—" I begin, but Ma knows. She has her own system. With her spoon, she scrapes upward against her lip and corrals the soggy crumbs into her mouth. "I'm just like you," I tell her with a chuckle. "Every morning I sit on my bed and eat my mushy oatmeal with a napkin around my neck to catch the spills." But I can tell she has lost the thread of the conversation. She nods, pretending.

I remember you, Ma, when we moved to Baker Street, falling into despair amidst your leather-bound books, spine buckling, pages frayed. I remember the exhaustion that grayed your cheeks, the grief that sloped your shoulders, as death followed death, your lament over glasses of watered-down white wine, "Why me, Lilan? Why do I have to live and the younger ones die?" Growing old, older, oldest still, your greatest loves slipping out of your grasp, type too small to read, Mystery plots too dense to follow, a garden too steep to tend, your independence smuggled away from you step by agonizing step. I remember the stories you told me, the secrets laid bare, a childhood dark and jarring, too much for me to shoulder. I remember how you wanted to think me angelic, perfection, while inside I was riven by self-doubt, my own life crumbling. I remember the pain that settled in your eyes, the tinge of anger in your voice, words keen and sparkling, when, ill-equipped for such sorrow, such expectations, I stole away from you, forged my identity far from home. And I remember the forgiveness that crept back over the years, unbidden, the love between us weathered, pedestals toppled, failures overlooked.

She is done eating but I remain beside her. "So tell me," she says. "How's things in Germany?" "Um, well, I haven't been there in a while," I stutter, hunting for the logic in her question. "Do you mean Biwi? Or do you mean me in New York? I'm in New York, not Germany." "Well," she says, nodding sagely, "I knew you were closer to Germ—" she interrupts herself "—you're watching me with your eyes thinking: 'What does the old girl think she's saying?'" I laugh out loud, astounded at the clarity that cuts through the murkiness, relieved that she can find humor in what once infuriated her, the fading of her own memory.

I lift her hand in my own; it is a pastiche of liver spots and spindly purple veins, the skin sheer and delicate as cellophane. A clunky silver ring slides around her middle finger, skinny as a wishbone. I touch her fingernails—they are like the broken seashells I pocket at the beach, thick and ribbed, the color of old ivory. I play my fingertips up her wrist and gently rub her dry, scaly arm, tracing the small round flakes of skin, their edges curling upward. It is both beautiful and awful, what becomes of a body in old age; I want to accept it, embrace it, this Ma who sits before, raw as a newborn, distilled to her bare

essence. And yet I want the Ma I knew on Mason Street, the Ma who could walk and read and cook fresh pasta and pluck sweet carrots from her shady city garden. I have been mourning her for years. She pats my hand. "Well, Lilan," she says, "whenever you feel you've had enough of me, say, 'Au revoir, Grand-mère!'"

I remember you, Ma, in Sonoma, wheeled around in your gilded chair, pale and dignified amidst the Christmas ruckus. I remember speaking to you over the din of children and torn-open presents, your wit sharp as ever, your childhood French still fluid, smart proverbs tripping off your tongue. How could I have known that this was the last time I'd see you? How could I believe, when I heard of your coma, that you would not return from that blank, cloudy state? And why should I believe? There was always something—skipping heart, fractured bone, mini stroke—and you always prevailed, your body's will to live unceasing. How could I have known how it would feel to lose you, you who believed in me more than any other, you who saw me for who I was from the very start: writer, woman, fierce-tongued warrior? I miss you, Ma, and, no, I have not had enough, I was not ready for you to go. You are gone, you are ashes, but I insist on carrying you with me, in my heart, in my mind, and I will seize upon life, as you did, Ma, as you wished you'd done so much sooner, I will rise up through my fears, grasp hold of my dreams, and I will be this woman, brave, fiery, generous, untethered, the woman you were, the woman you knew I could be. And I will not, I will never, say, Au revoir, Grand-mère.