

TO HEAR THE MOVEMENTS

It was after 9PM on a Monday night. I pulled around the corner at 1stst and West Fort Street, and parked illegally, putting Gerty's emergency flashers on. I was too tired and upset to keep driving. I had just hung up with my mom, and now all I could think about was the conversation I'd had with my grandfather over the phone a few weeks earlier. Besides, my new friend, Nicole, was going to call any minute with directions on where to park in relation to her apartment complex. We had never met before, only exchanged a handful of emails after she'd gotten wind of my expedition. She offered me a place to stay once I'd reached Detroit.

The phone startled me when it buzzed in my hand, the van still idling. "Hi, Kristin! It's Nicole. We're on our way from the gym. Where did you end up parking?"

Before I could bring myself to utter a single word I began to cry. This was my first phone conversation with Nicole, and I was so embarrassed that I first tried to hold in the sobs, until that seemed to cause them to double in size and volume.

"Hi," I said shakily.

"Is everything okay?" Nicole asked.

"I'm so sorry," I said, now through heaving breaths and heavy tears. "I just hung up with my mom, and I need to book a flight back to New York. It's my grandfather. He doesn't have much longer."

We hadn't yet hung up when Nicole and her partner, Chris, reached the van. It started raining through the humid night sky. She had no sooner parked and flung her car door open, leaving it unclosed behind her, as she trotted up alongside the van.

It had been a few days since I'd last showered, it was hot, the air conditioner in the van had stopped working, and I was doubly sweaty from anxiety and sadness. I didn't want to hug her hello like I'd done with everyone else I'd met so far, because I didn't want her to see me crying or to catch my stink. But as I slid out of the van, nervous to even make soggy eye contact, she leaned in. We stood in the middle of the street and embraced warmly as our silhouettes cast out behind us, drawn forward by the headlights of her car, still running.

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"Kris," said Mom. "Kris, are you there? I've got Pop on the phone for you."

She was calling from St. Mary's Hospital. I was surprised to hear they were at a hospital, since Pop had been living at the Eddy Heritage House Nursing & Rehab Center, and that's usually where she'd call from if I ever chatted with Pop over the phone. The Eddy—as Mom referred to it—was just a few miles from the house he'd built for my grandmother and their three kids, decades earlier, in Troy, New York.

He chose to move in a couple years after his wife, my Gram, started living there. Before he moved into the nursing home with Gram, he would take a senior citizens shuttle to and from their house to the nursing home, where he would spend all day by her side, seven days a week.

Gram had had a stroke nearly a decade earlier that, not long after, bound her to a wheelchair. Pop took care of her for a few years from their home with the assistance of a caregiver, who would stop in once a day to check on things. But, as his body slowed down, it became more difficult for him to lift her to and from bed, carry her to the bath, and prepare meals.

Stories of Gram's outgoing and adventuresome childhood, and strength and kindness as a mother, were never in short supply during family gatherings. Like the one about how as a teen she broke her leg after attempting to jump a barrel while ice-skating across a homemade pond. Or when, in her early sixties, she was diagnosed with colon cancer and, after the surgery that removed much of her large intestine, she was told she'd have to wear a colostomy bag outside of her body the rest of her life. Within a few months she fully recovered and overcame her diagnosis, remaining cancer- and colostomy bag-free for her remaining years.

Age, and perhaps a diet of too much chocolate—although it is hard to believe she liked chocolate more than I do—eventually caught up with her. The last few years of her life had taken away much of her memory, and her words. She rarely spoke at all, to anyone. I often wondered if she even recognized Mom after a while. My mother visited Gram every single day she spent in the home.

When Mom had called, I was sitting in the passenger seat of the van, parked in the u-shaped driveway of Good 'n' Raw in Lakewood, Ohio. It was comfortably warm out that day, and I was about to dive into a small container of sunflower-based vegan tuna salad and a plate of raw nachos topped with hearty, walnut-based taco meat and a creamy cashew-based cheese sauce.

I could immediately tell by her tone and cracked words that things weren't good. Pop had been on a gradual decline for a few weeks now, but I suppose it's a thing that's, in many ways, impossible to prepare for.

"Hey, Mom. Yep, I'm here," I said. "Oh, okay. Put him on."

Pop was notoriously hard of hearing. His large-lobed Italian ears (decorated with grey and white bristly strands of hair, of varying sizes, jutting out from the inside and dancing along the top outer part of his ears too) would make you think they were designed for catching sound waves, no matter what. But over time, conversations turned into slowed-down shouting, so that he could make out what anyone was saying.

"HEY, POP. HOW ARE YOU?" I spoke, as loudly as I could without full-on yelling, into the tiny mic on my phone. I was glad to be inside the van, self-conscious of speaking so loudly.

"Kris? Kris, is that you?" he said, in a slow, muffled way.

"YES. IT'S KRIS. HI, POP!" I said.

"Oh, it's so good to hear your voice, Kris. Kris, how are you doing? Still traveling?"

"I'M WELL, POP. YES, STILL DRIVING AROUND THE COUNTRY."

"Oh, that's just wonderful, Kris. I'm so glad. Hey listen..." he said, and then he started to cry a little. "I, I just wanted to tell ya that I love ya. And that I'm proud of ya. I still love the way you were with Spirit. Gram and I loved going to your horse shows and watching you do those side steps and trail courses with that little pony of yours. You two were such a great team."

"I MISS THE HORSES, TOO, POP." I said, now trying to hold back my own tears.

"And..." he paused for a moment "...I wanted to say goodbye, Kris."

"OH. POP." And then I started to cry.

"I know my time is coming, and I just want you to know I love you and am so proud of you. You're wonderful. And Gram and I are so proud of ya."

"THANK YOU, POP. I LOVE YOU, TOO," I said.

He began to snuffle a bit more, and then Mom came back on the phone. She was crying. "He's been calling everyone today, to say goodbye," she said.

Through his final days, my grandfather's mind was relatively sharp, but his body had been on the decline for several years. After Gram passed, about one year earlier, he started to go much quicker.

They were such a handsome couple, my grandparents. I always loved this one black-and-white photo of them, now browned and worn around the edges. Pop looked sharp, beaming with confidence in his army uniform, one leg propped up on the front bumper of a black car. Gram was standing next to the car, by one of the front tires. She was leaning against it, facing the camera; Pop was just behind and alongside her. Gram's hair was done up in 1950s-style waves, she had a big floppy hat on, and wore a beautiful but simple dress (pinched at the waist by a skinny belt), and saddle shoes. They looked happy.

This photo lived frameless atop their fireplace mantle along with dozens of other photos—some framed, others not—of Mom and her older brother and sister, and of me and my brother, and our cousins. My mom and aunt in their childhood baton twirling uniforms, my uncle in boy scout getups. Their own children's aging family photos, baby pictures, and dozens of their grandkids' school portraits.

In addition to the black-and-white one of them, there were two other photos—placed somewhat centered on the mantle—that always caught my eye whenever I'd scan the lineup.

The first was that of my mom in her late teens, sitting atop a large chestnut brown horse named Lady. Lady was mid-swishing her tail, her neck lowered to the side, scratching one of her forelegs. Mom looked ethereal—I'd rarely seen her as confident and happy as she appeared to be in that picture. She radiated contentedness and joy with her straight, waist-long brown hair pulled back into a loose, low ponytail. Her porcelain skin shone from her face like a beam of light, her sharp cheekbones glowed pink, and her deep green-blue eyes sparkled like Emerald City.

The other photo was of me with my pony, Spirit. We had won some blue and red ribbons at a local horse show that day. They were strung along the nearest rein, for the picture. I must have been 10 or so years old. My spindly, beige jodhpur-clad legs barely made it halfway down Spirit's hay-bellied sides, and my dome-shaped, black velvet helmet made me resemble a bobble-head, equestrian in nature.

Sometimes I'd look at that photo and feel as though time and space collapsed, that Scotty would beam me from present day to sometime circa 1992. My grandparents' living room would fade away, and streaks of light would zoom past me until I was no longer viewing the picture, but experiencing it as my pre-teen self—there on Spirit, holding the pose, waiting for Gram to snap the shot.

She'd say, "Kris. Kris, get her ears up. Jan [that's my mom], Jan will you get Spirit's ears up for the photo? Kris, smile. Show your teeth, smile!" she'd say, all while snapping away on her toy-looking camera, the thick strap of it slung around her neck.

Gram always had on a flowery blouse with either a pair of cotton, straight-legged blue pants, or a brown ankle-length skirt. She slept with curlers in almost every night, so her grey hair was perfectly curled into medium-sized swirls, every day.

"No, hold on, Kris. One more. Wait, let me get one more. Oh shoot, FRANK! HOW DO I PUT THE FLASH ON?" she'd shout to my grandfather. Photo taking was always a bit of a process with Pop and Gram; I loved every minute of it. And minutes it took, every time.

They never missed a single horse show, gymnastics showcase, school play, or dance recital. Not a single one. Their other grandkids lived in Virginia and Long Island; my brother and I were the closest to them, living in a small town just outside of Troy. They made it a point to show up, and be positive and supportive, no matter what my brother and I were into at the moment. I suspect that if my cousins had lived closer, they would have found a way to see all of us, as much as possible.

I never did grow out of my love for horses. It would become a largely defining element of my childhood, and Pop and Gram were fixtures at every event. Even once wheelchair-bound, my grandmother would insist on getting up early so that she and my grandfather could make it to the shows by 8AM, just in time for the first class. Friends and acquaintances, and regular show-goers, came to know my grandparents well. They had visitors at each show; no matter where along the ring they parked themselves, familiar faces would stop to chat, sometimes for hours at a time. Pop was the forever kind-hearted jokester, and Gram quietly carried a smile and a giggle that would warm your heart for days.

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Nicole pulled back, and held me by the shoulders. Her cropped auburn hair cupped her head neatly. It stopped just below her ears—enough that she could just barely tuck it behind them. She was a bit taller than I am, slender, and athletic-bodied. She had large, dark chocolate-brown eyes, deeper and more knowing than all the world's oceans.

"I'm so sorry. We just met, and I feel terrible that I'm a mess. And I smell..." I trailed off as she stood looking upon me like a gentle, concerned mother, and then picked up after me.

"Oh my gosh, no worries at all. It's okay. Everything will be okay."

She pulled me in for another hug before we determined that Gerty would remain in the private parking lot of her apartment complex, a large Double Tree Hotel that was half hotel, half Fort Shelby Tower Apartments.

I'd never met anyone like Nicole. Though I was beginning to open to the idea of what spirituality meant—intention setting, meditation, and energy healing—Nicole lived it. She manifested dream jobs and relationships and living situations. She found meaningful lessons in every life event, and I saw—for one of the first times in my life—what inner beauty looked like, on a complete stranger.

Here she was—she and her kind, dashing-tall, dark, wavy-haired, handsome boyfriend—taking in a smelly, crying, mess of a stranger who she met on the internet only a few months earlier. And yet she felt like a dear friend, like someone I'd known my whole life. We clicked. Though I went to bed early that first night—after taking a long, much needed shower—for my remaining days in Detroit we'd stay up talking about food, family, travel, and romance. We watched ridiculous YouTube videos into the wee hours of the night. She introduced me to her friends, we dined in and out together, and I truly felt cared for—without a hint of judgment or question.

One of my favorite meals was enjoyed at Nicole's living room table. We ordered nearly one of everything from Detroit Vegan Soul. Co-founders and owners Erika and Kirsten personally delivered our goodies, and Nicole's friend Kim joined us for the feast. The table overflowed with what—to this day—is the best soul food I've ever had the pleasure of enjoying. In tapas-style fashion, we passed compostable to-go containers around and across the table, scooping out hefty spoonfuls of the most tender collard greens and creamy mac 'n' cheese. We sliced in half the two large slabs of seitan steak with mashed taters doused in a thick, dark brown, home-style mushroom gravy sauce. There were crispy, fried spring rolls with sweet and sour dipping sauce, salty string beans, and mini corn muffins that crumbled delicately into our hands. We even cut an avocado-topped veggie burger—with the fluffiest of buns—into thirds. We finished the meal off with Detroit Vegan Soul's warm apple pie, oatmeal muffins, and chocolate chip cookies that were so good, a single bite was enough to paralyze me for more than a few seconds.

Afterwards, the three of us reclined in a food coma—guts aching with delight—and gabbed the rest of the day away, talking travel, relationships, marriage, and the universe. I could relive that meal, and Nicole and Kim's company, every day without tiring of it.

The day of my flight, Nicole handed me a paper bag that she'd packed full of snacks, then drove me to the airport so I could go home for Pop's funeral. She also picked me up when I returned to Detroit a week later. I learned that, while I was away, her dad had taken the van for a tune up and oil change, and replaced one of the non-working headlights.

It's no wonder this sweet young woman was so kind and generous—her family appeared to be equally so.

On the morning of my last day in Detroit, having returned from the funeral now and finishing up vegan food spotting, I sat tired and uncomfortable on a bar stool at Cacao Tree Café, eating a huge salad of baby spinach with cucumber, avocado, red cabbage, onions, carrots, sprouts, and house-dehydrated teriyaki almonds topped with ginger-lime dressing.

I schlepped back to the van, and discovered a parking ticket on Gerty's windshield. Apparently the meter was five minutes overdue. I left the parking ticket on the windshield, crawled into the van, rolled up into the blankets on the bed, and took a brief, deep nap. Afterwards, I plucked the parking ticket out from under the wiper, hopped into the driver's seat, filled out the ticket form, and put cash inside the envelope, before driving to the town police station to drop it off.

As I settled back into the driver's seat and buckled my seatbelt, I opened the Mail app on my phone for a quick scan, before heading out and on to Wisconsin. There was an email with the subject line: "Dear beautiful woman." It read:

You are stunning in the most epic way possible.

I am so grateful for you!

Tap Dancing to Hear the Movements,

Nicole