

## The Red Rose

Two years ago, while we sat in Harvard Yard watching students walk by, my grandmother said to me, “Elizabeth, I am so excited for your graduation. I have been thinking about it for years; what to wear, when to scream your name, how many pictures to take. But if, by some small chance, I don’t make it, please put a red rose on my seat.” I was shocked; I couldn’t imagine it. But this May, I will leave a single red rose on the seat beside my father.

I once promised my grandmother that I would sit her down and videotape her explaining her amazing life. I regret that I never did it. But I treasure my memories of what she told me. When I thought about what to share with you tonight, I decided to tell her story.

My Nana was the most resilient person I have known. Her childhood memories were of leaving her family in Milan during World War II to live hidden in the Italian countryside. The same day that she left home, as she sat safely in the train watching fields go by, a bomb hit her hometown, killing her grandparents. It took her long time for her to overcome the loss, but she reunited with her parents and brother and survived.

When she was the same age I am now, Nana met an Irish American sailor at a dance; they were married soon after. She left behind her entire family when my grandfather brought her to America. She told me of her bewilderment at the number of cars on the streets of New York, her craze for American donuts, and her

constant homesickness. After spending a few years learning English, Nana was accepted to Columbia University, where she studied medicine until she had the first of her four children.

But then my grandfather left her, and Nana had to work two jobs to raise her children on her own. She was determined to push forward no matter the difficulties. She left medicine and got a job at a department store. Over 20 years, she worked her way up to create and be the head of the International department of May Company, known today as Macy's. She flew all over the world, nurturing her love for travel, discovery, and adventure.

No matter its difficulties, Nana loved life; her enthusiasm was infectious. She would pull you around an art museum by the hand, pointing out intimate details of paintings that I bet even the painters didn't know they had made. She would pore over piles of books just to learn about something you once mentioned. She would advise you about the latest fashions, and that you should probably wear more purple and lace. She would sit with you in the movie theatre, throw popcorn at the people in front, and giggle. She would hold my hand as I crossed the street to the playground, curl my hair for prom, sit here in Lowell dining hall eating dinner with me. Her greatest love was spending time with family.

I don't talk about my grandmother, because it still hurts so much. I lost my best friend. Her death was the greatest sadness I have known.

But tonight I am keeping my promise to tell her story. I know she is still

here, with me. I can feel her in the shift of the air, in my craving for pasta, and how she taught me to love life with all of my heart.

What is my last memory of her? Last March when she lay in the hospital, thin and frail as I cried over her? No, I won't choose that one.

I choose my lasting memory of her as the summer of 2014, when she came to visit me in Italy while I studied abroad learning her first language. After an adventurous weekend together, we sat waiting for her train. It was hot, but there was a breeze coming in from seaport. "I've had so much fun, Nana," I told her. The train rolled onto the platform and people bustled past. We hugged tightly as the train tooted its warning whistle. She climbed on with her suitcase and a smile, ready for her next journey. I watched her train slowly disappear into the horizon, and I thought of the last words she said to me: "I wish I could stay," she had replied, "but in the end we must always keep going."