

Saying I Love You

I don't want to call my grandmother, but I do it anyway. She's dying about fifteen miles due north from me, in her nursing home in Yonkers, just outside city limits. I'm in her apartment, her half-emptied apartment on the Lower East Side, quarantined with what remains of her art, her furniture, her lifetime accumulation of unused cooking implements. Before moving here, she sunk half a million dollars into renovations, imagining that an apartment truly her own would redeem her final years. Or maybe, as my mother claims, she was swindled by a pair of real-estate agents who befriended a sad, lonely old woman. In any case, it is a cold, sterile place.

The phone rings—once, twice. I hope no one picks up. What am I to say? She's dying, either of COVID or something else, there's no point in testing, she's not going to any hospital. Normally I tell her lies, but it feels wrong, or perhaps merely ludicrous, to do so on her deathbed. *Just hold on, you'll feel better soon.* She's 96, can't form sentences, isn't responding to treatment. For the past year has ended every visit begging me to stay, threatening to throw herself out a window. Do I hope she gets better? No, I suppose not. They say she's not in pain.

Perhaps—I think hopefully—I'll get in her the mood my mother did yesterday. The only sentence she could muster: asking for chocolate ice cream. There are worse last words.

A business-like aide picks up the phone.

"Yes?"

"Hi, it's Andrew, Elaine's grandson."

"Hi," she says, and waits.

I can't just say, *I love you*. It doesn't mean anything like that, sputtered out to an insensate body. It requires accoutrement. But then, she never asked for much of that. Though the units by which she measured affection were calls and visits, she never wanted to talk for more than thirty seconds. (I suddenly realize I'm already thinking of her in the past tense.)

"Can I talk to her?"

"Well," says the aide skeptically. "She can't talk."

I pause, stymied.

"Ok. Can I talk... at her?"

"Sure."

On the other end of the line I hear the aide's prompting. *Elaine, Elaine. It's your grandson, Andrew. Andrew, Elaine, your grandson.* She returns to the phone.

"OK, I'm going to hold it next to her."

A Darth Vader sort of breathing fills the line.

"Grandma...? Can you hear me?" I feel ridiculous, like I'm talking to holding music.

“Yes, she can hear you,” puts in the aide from the background.

How does she know? I wonder. Even prior to this, my grandmother’s final descent into herself, it was unclear if she ever listened to us. Really listened, I mean, in a way where our words could inflect the progress of her inner life. This made dishonesty easy. It cost us little to advise her to make friends, to take classes, precisely because we knew she wouldn’t do it. Our words were inert, cheap. I said them partly because it was a script to follow and partly because it made my mother feel better.

“Grandma, I love you and I hope...”

I feel the aide waiting patiently in the background, her silence like an eyeroll. *I love you* meant something to my grandmother, I know. But did it mean the right thing? As long as I can remember, every visit ended with a series of desperately tight hugs, innumerable *I love yous*. My mother says that she’s always been like that—demanding proofs of love in place of the thing itself. I have the sudden urge to give her an *I love you* better than the one requested.

There are, I think as I hesitate, two kinds of *I love you*. The first is capacious, world-filling. The *I love you* of young lovers, of parent to child. And then there is the other kind, bare and desperate. This *I love you* is given to someone when you have no other way of helping them. You lob it blindly over the high castle walls, hoping they can do something with it.

“I love you, and we’re all thinking about you – Libby, Cara, John, Anton.” I say the names of our family, hoping one sparks something. “And that’s all I wanted to say, Grandma.”

“OK. Bye,” says the aide, and promptly hangs up.

I think suddenly of my first girlfriend. I told her I loved her, and at least thought that I meant it. She replied that she didn’t know what love meant. As we lay in silence, a hollow, loathing expression spread—if only for an instant—across her face.

And now, quarantined in this half-emptied apartment, I wait for the final call to come.