

Missing Vivian

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In 1954 my grandmother, Vivian, visited her doctor for a penicillin shot. In those days, penicillin was being passed around like candy at a kid's birthday party. Apparently she had developed an undetected allergic reaction to the drug. "Anaphylactic shock" they called it. She was dead by the time she hit the floor at the doctor's feet. She was fifty-seven years old; I was twelve at the time.

This was my first death experience, and I did not handle it well. When my dad blew through the door that night, he was totally unprepared for the hysteria that awaited him. I remember hearing him utter under his breath the queen mother of dirty words. I was wringing my hands, Mother was hysterical, and Dad flapped his arms around like a bird in flight. He decided we should go to the movies.

Even at that time, I thought this was an odd way to handle the death of a loved one. I was filled with questions and grief. As I sat in the darkened theater, I juggled those feelings, not knowing what to do with them. As a family, we attended church and Sunday school, so I had the background; but I was also a twelve-year-old kid who was attached at the hip to a grandmother I adored. Vivian, while loving and caring, had issues with boundaries, and our lives had become intertwined in a fashion that delighted me, but concerned my parents.

Having no prior experience with death, I had never seen a dead body. The thought of the funeral terrified me. And the thought of my grandmother lying in front of the church in a box was unsettling, to say the least. After the service, a well-meaning neighbor steered me toward the casket, thinking I needed to view the body. I remember her whispering to me as she gripped my hand tightly and moved me toward the front of the church. This was not how I wanted to remember my grandmother.

Vivian was a pioneer of sorts. In 1917 in Tacoma, when she was just nineteen, she found herself unmarried and pregnant with my father. She never

did marry. She worked as a waitress all her life hauling food, and coffee so hot it could steam the wrinkles right out of your face. She jammed all her tips into her pockets and later unrolled the bills to put in her wallet. Her money always bore the folds of those wadded up bills. She was a large, severe-looking woman with a handshake that could cripple and an astounding ability to survive. No one ever called her "Viv," and I don't think she ever had much fun. She spent almost all her free time with our family, and she took me everywhere with her. Since she never owned a car, we took the bus or an occasional cab.

The Puyallup Fair was always an outing we looked forward to. One year she handed me one of those crumpled up five-dollar bills and sent me off to buy a treat, waiting for me on a bench nearby. When I returned she asked me, "Did you count your change?" I hadn't. She counted it for me, and upon finding it short, grabbed me with one of her meaty hands and hauled me back to the booth where I had so proudly made my purchase. Vivian reached across the counter, grabbed the little man by the neck of his shirt, and lifted him off the ground. His eyes were huge. "Give me the proper change," she demanded. And after he did so, we retreated to the bench, where we sat for over an hour while I learned the proper way to count change.

For Vivian, becoming a grandmother at the age of forty-five was an unexpected surprise in her life, and she split her time from then on between our family and her job. From the day of my birth, my grandmother and my mother were engaged in an unspoken tug of war for my affection. One Christmas Eve when I was about ten, my parents tucked my baby brother into bed, and left me in charge while they dashed across the street for a quick drink or two. As soon as they cleared the front porch, I called my grandmother and announced I had been left alone on Christmas Eve. She promptly jumped into a cab and came to our house, where I hugged and held on to her as if I had been starving, and she was the first solid food I'd had in weeks. By then Mother and Dad had returned home, their lips loosened by a couple of Manhattans, surprised, and none too happy, with the sudden, unexpected appearance of Vivian.

So I suppose it was no surprise that when she died so abruptly, I retreated to my room and hugged her photograph. I was inconsolable. Since then, over the years I've lost many loved ones to death—my mother, my dad, and my husband in a sudden accident. My husband and I had many discussions about death. I made

him promise me if he died before I did, that he would come back and tell me what it was like. I'm still waiting on that one.

Death remains a mystery. And even though I am now in my sixties, I still wonder where they went, and what they are doing; can my loved ones see me? Does my dad know that I can talk on a phone in my car? Did my husband see how I painted and reorganized the pantry? And more importantly, do they even care?

On the day of Vivian's death my dad found a hastily scribbled note by her front door. It read, "Buy a gift for Joanie." She was thinking of me up to her last minute. Part of me is still that twelve-year-old, confused girl, hugging a photograph of her dead grandmother to her chest and crying. Even today, I just want her back.