

HILL ROAD

M-G
2 PAGES

I had no idea how long I had been asleep, but day had turned to that hazy in between time when the November sky was beginning to close its eyes on the world. It was not quite the midnight blue of deeper winter, but the gray silvery dusk of approaching cold and shorter days.

Her bed was still made up with the toile comforter that had been on it since I was a child coming for sleepovers, then permission, then advice and finally to say goodbye. The pattern was a scene of a woman with a parasol in a hooped dress with roosters at her feet in shades of crimson with a cream background. It was as if the bedspread held its own story. The very same scene accompanied the spread on the other twin bed across the room that she had once shared with her husband and on the heavy curtains that framed the windows that looked out onto Hill Road. A cherry nightstand sat between the two beds and still held items that reminded me of her: a nail file, hand cream that smelled of rose petals, Vicks vapor rub, licorice cough drops and a novel in large print with a magnifying glass laying on top. A bobby pin and a rosary were still there, too.

This solitary bed and a platoon of feathered pillows had become her perch - her very own gilded cage to observe the outside scenes of a life that had left her behind with a single breast, a rattling in her chest and failing eyes. Her wings had been clipped, but the curiosity that had always consumed her in her dancing, singing, social days as a mother and a wife and even a great grandmother had kept her looking and watching out that window for the life that she knew was still out there.

I took Hill Road to high school for four years and would pass by her house twice a day. If the curtains were closed in the early mornings, I knew she had had a sleepless night. On some warm fall or late spring mornings there she would be with a "Hello, dear" through the screen. Some mornings, accompanied by other walking high schoolers, my gaze would not always turn to that window and she knew not to call out, but offered a silent wave instead.

It would be dark on some evenings on my way home after a sport practice and I would slip inside her unlocked front door to find her in her cheery high-ceilinged kitchen with the radio on, a drink in her hand and something warm on the stove. My grandfather had been gone for many years and she often had visitors during this "cocktail hour" that ranged from parish priests to neighbors to sometimes handymen. I think that was the time when that big house felt loneliest to her.

It was in that kitchen that I had my first sip of champagne as I earned money polishing silver that didn't need to be polished, cried when I didn't get into the college I had dreamed of, learned how to make beef stew while listening to Italian lessons on tape before heading to Rome to live for two years, brought my husband for a cold beer and a lecture from her on marriage and nursed my first child.

My Nonny was not one to ever hold her tongue. She stood 5'11" when she was healthy and upright and her height was almost as impressive as what she usually had to say. Well read, well-travelled and full of strong opinions, she could hold court rather royally in the three-story brick Georgian home she had been in for 60 years and vowed never to leave. I was a favorite grandchild who put in the time to be part of her life and share with her the stages of my own. Her wisdom was a welcome piece of who I was and who I was becoming. My youngest sister, though, full of ideologies and how much she thought she knew, left the house on Hill Road in tears once when she came by to proclaim she was getting her PhD and was going to teach philosophy. My grandmother looked her in the eye and told her she was much too selfish to teach and that perhaps she should rethink her career. Nonny had a way of putting things that no one wanted to hear.

I had laid down on her bed to see what her view was like all those years and drifted off into a restless nostalgic sleep. My own children napped in a room next door and I should have been downstairs with the rest of my family preparing our last Thanksgiving in her home without her. She had died in September at 92 years old right in her room that overlooked Hill Road. She told me many times in those last painful years that she was ready and her only regret was not seeing how we would all turn out.

Her view was the perfect pigeon hole of a suburban sidewalk and a street lined with large oak trees and beautiful homes. It faced west - the direction of each day's setting sun. She had watched so many things change on this block over the years including herself grow old. There had always been plenty of life out her window, but I don't think that's what she was looking for in the end.

I peered out for perhaps the last time as I wiped what I knew were stale tears from my face. There were murmurs of my children's voices awakening and the smell of an approaching final family dinner. I took a deep breath and smoothed the indentation I had made on the woman with her roosters. The tiniest hint of a golden ray in the silver sky softly seemed to assure me that she was going to know how I had turned out.