

## Saturday Donuts

Saturdays were the best days. Grandma Flo brought donuts and 5-Alive Juice Cocktail without fail. I enjoyed the donuts, of course, but mostly, I enjoyed the consistency. She always came. She wore her White Diamonds perfume and a pinky-mauve nail polish on her long, manicured nails. We weren't allowed to use nail polish or perfume in our house because of mom's "allergy" to everything pretty.

I often sat on Grandma Flo's lap, and she'd scratch my back with her long nails. Occasionally, she'd bust out a horsey ride and sing "A-rig-a-ma-jig-and-away-we-go!" She was tone deaf. But I loved every minute of it. Singing next to her in church proved more of a challenge, but I always wanted to sit by her. We all did. We often fought over who got to be with her. She knew. She knew how hard it was to live in that house with our mom. She had raised her, after all. It is because of this that I don't believe in the old saying "*the apple doesn't fall far from the tree*". She was nothing like my grandma and had fallen as far away from the tree as humanly possible. She had the heart of a shriveled apple that had fallen off the tree too soon and rolled under a bush to wither away. In fact, I think she pushed herself under that bush because she liked the darkness. And now darkness was all she had to give.

As I grew older, Grandma Flo told me things about her childhood and her marriage to my grandfather, Alfred, that could have broken a person. Yet, here she was, one of the most giving, fun, selfless people I knew. She was the one who taught me that the cycle of abuse can be broken. She taught me that loving people was important, but that you had to also know how to be independent. She hadn't always lived by those rules, but she learned to after Alfred died. She finally had her independence after 68 years. She was free.

I watched her grieve deeply after my grandfather passed. I didn't understand it at first, because I had never known him to be a nice man. I was afraid to even be near him for fear of being yelled at for nothing. He also loved to scare us and trick us with pranks he ordered through the mail. I can remember only a few of those pranks, but they scarred me for life. The most terrifying item he kept near his chair was called "Shnicklefritz", a tiny, make-believe man who lived in a small canvas sack my grandfather kept within reach. In reality, I never actually saw the tiny man since he wasn't *allowed* out of his sack. Instead, I heard his mischievous laugh which came from the voice box hidden in the bag. This, along with shocking sticks of gum, a book that sent pain up your arms upon opening it, and plastic ice cubes filled with fake bugs are the memories I keep of Alfred.

Later, I realized that Grandma Flo wasn't grieving Alfred, but was instead, grieving the years she had lost to him. After a while, she let her new-found freedom guide her to take trips and experience life differently than she had before he died. I was happy for this new freedom she felt. It did seem, however, that no matter how much freedom she had, she was easily sucked back into situations in which she was left taking care of people from her old life. First, she looked after Alfred's mother, then a friend or two, and then a lady who had put an ad in the newspaper for a caretaker, and finally a man named Charlie, an old family friend who she began to see in a more romantic way. I know about Charlie because of her mention of him from time to time, but mostly from the love letters I found between

them following Grandma Flo's death in 2016. I know she had kept their relationship a secret from my mother to spare herself from mom's wrath. I felt sad when I found the letters, because I knew that although she had tried to teach me the importance of independence, Grandma Flo had never been completely on her own. Until the day she died, my mother ran Grandma's life from afar. She had a grip on her in every way she could. So, when grandma passed in 2016, I vowed secretly to myself that I would never allow my mother to control my life again, even if it meant that I would have to completely walk away from her, from my siblings, and from my dad, Tom.

I grieved for my grandmother like I had never grieved before. I felt, and still feel a huge emptiness that she once filled. And although I wish I could say that I did exactly what I promised I would do, it was, and continues to be extremely difficult to separate my life from my mother. Her claws are attached to every aspect of my psyche. She has engrained herself into the core of my very being, and I can't get rid of her as easily as I thought I could. She implanted a seed of guilt in me when I was a child. That guilt surfaces every time I try to rid my life of her. *How dare I disrespect her?* This is still a key component in why I can't leave her behind. When I try, I hear her in the corners of my mind.

"How dare you disrespect your mother? You owe me your life."