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What They Wanted

My grandparents died as they lived: on their own terms and holding hands.



Credit...Matt

Huynh

By Ariel Kanter

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There was nothing traditional about my grandparents, other than, perhaps, my grandmother's rabid interest in my love life.

"I just want to be around long enough to dance at your wedding," Mopsy, as we called my paternal grandmother, told me over and over again for a decade.

When, four years ago, I did finally meet the man I would eventually marry, she asked time and again why we were waiting so long for the ceremony. I thought a pandemic was a pretty good reason; she reminded me that people still got married when polio was around.

Mopsy never waited. She was married to my grandfather, Richard Kanter, just months after meeting him. Richard, a University of Pennsylvania student, asked young and wily Claire — who was known for calling a cab mid-date if she wasn't having fun — to go skiing with him.

Claire may have played the part of accomplished skier well, until she got off the chairlift. She was so frozen, as they told it, that the ski patrol had to take her down the mountain in a toboggan. Richard must have found her confidence charming: Their engagement wasn't long after that.

Throughout their lives, they always played by their own rules. They were pioneers in so many ways.



Claire and Richard Kanter, also known as Mopsy and Papa, in a photo believed to be taken around 2017. Credit...via Ariel Kanter

As parents, when everyone was settling down in the suburbs, they moved to an apartment in downtown Boston. While their peers were home living their American dream, Mopsy and Papa went traveling abroad.

In 1979, they founded a student exchange program at a school in Newton, Mass., with a school in Beijing, and it still exists today. That same year, Mopsy, who was a special-education teacher, was the United States representative in a

TV pilot on the “education of the developmentally disabled throughout the world.”

My grandfather, or Papa, as he was known, was a successful accountant and entrepreneur. He was as forward-thinking as they come, starting an electric car conversion business in 2004.

But their most impressive feat was when they were in their 60s. While some of their peers were hunkering down, my grandfather bought a book about circumnavigation. Soon after, they sold their apartment in Boston, designed a 47-foot sailboat, christened her Runaway, and spent the next 12 years sailing around the world largely by themselves. They docked in unfamiliar lands, visited witch doctors and, according to their stories, survived actual pirates.

I remember my time on Runaway vividly, visiting them in Greece, Spain and Australia. I would clean the decks and fall asleep in a tiny bunk bed as the waves rocked me back and forth. Nights were spent at a small table in the boat’s belly, cushioned by a micro-suede banquette, eating Mopsy’s famous spaghetti Bolognese and playing hearts.

They always held hands. While I never saw my parents (now divorced) show affection when I was young, I would often watch Mopsy and Papa walk down the street hand in hand. Even while snorkeling in the wavy waters of Bonaire, I’d catch them grasping for each other to swim side by side.

They were unabashed in their love for each other, once telling a young couple at a table next to them that the secret to a good marriage is “pornographic sex.”

Getting sick of each other was never in the cards. Being cramped together on a boat, rolling over the seas was something they could handle. It was something they relished. Even something they planned. Being alone was not.

Image



The Kanters designed a 47-foot sailboat, which they christened Runaway, and it sailed around the world. Credit...via Ariel Kanter

On Oct. 7, 2021, Mopsy called like she often did. She asked for more details about my wedding, scheduled to take place seven months later. She joked that she wasn't going to be able to make it — like always, she was in a hurry for my married life to begin.

She also asked about my plans for the house my fiancé and I had purchased. Is there space for children? Just one? She told me she bought a pot roast the other day, cooked it, then returned it because it was too tough. She laughed and told me I was her girl. The conversation was as ordinary as could be. It was the last time we ever spoke.

The day after our phone call, she and Papa walked into their favorite park hand in hand, laid down a blanket and, at the ages of 89 and 91, took their lives. Someone found them the next morning side by side. The police called my family.

Because they died in a public park, there is surveillance video of everything that happened, including their entrance to the park. I'll never watch it.

A note from Mopsy was found in Papa's pocket. In her distinct, curly handwriting, the handwriting I have been deciphering all my life in birthday and Hanukkah cards, she wrote that they were healthy and happy, but had decided it was time to go. They wanted to go while things were good. No hospitals, no nursing homes. Complete control.

The rest of the page was filled with details one might give a lawyer: The rent was paid through the month; most everything in their apartment had been donated; and they gave their dog, Kru, to a friend. It read like an itinerary for their death.

I scoured the page for something for me, something special, some kind of further explanation of why they left when they still had time to live. There was a tiny note next to my name. She said she was sorry she couldn't come to the wedding. And that was that.

A few days later we found out that Mopsy had written letters to a few of her friends to say goodbye. Part of me longed for my own letter. But there was nothing.

It might sound romantic: After 68 years together, choosing your time and leaving this world together. But what they left in their wake was not: three

children, six grandchildren, six great-grandchildren, another great-grandchild on the way and me, Mopsy's girl, replaying our final conversation over and over.

Through the course of planning my wedding, I would go to my phone to text her, but then my heart would crack like the day I learned they were gone. After so many years of her scrutiny, her love, her judgment, her dreams for my future, I felt completely and utterly left behind.

Now that I am married, it's hard not to compare my relationship to Mopsy and Papa's. But what they had wasn't just marriage. It was a chemical bond that simply wouldn't work without them both.

A small part of me understands, with heartbreak, why they did what they did. From their perspective, it was their only option. I can only imagine the anguish my grandmother would experience without Papa, and vice versa.

Now that I am married, I'm not sure that's the kind of bond I'm after. I hope my marriage has an iota of the fortitude, passion and commitment of theirs. But it's because I love my husband that I would want him to find joy, love and purpose without me.

That feels like the right kind of love for me, for today. The kind that won't leave friends and family with questions and pain. The kind that can withstand anything, even loss.

Perhaps we will never be able to stand living in a 47-foot sailboat for a decade together, but we'll find an adventure that works for us. After all, when it comes to adventure, I learned from the best.

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If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at [800-273-8255](tel:800-273-8255) (TALK) or go to [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for a list of additional resources.

Funny the questions we ask as we try to get our mind around this.

And telling that we so routinely now cover any moral liability by notifying readers or listeners of an online helpline. I cannot imagine myself ever calling one to speak to a stranger following a script thousands of miles away. Would I be calling just in hope of fooling myself that this person would have something relevant and helpful to contribute (that no one here could)? And I'm an old counsellor! Which shows perhaps why I am no longer one.

TJB