

For Martha

my mother's mother,
my grandmother,
my friend.

My grandmother loved birds. They filled thick guidebooks she stored below wooden end tables. They adorned illustrated greeting cards she regularly mailed to friends and family. They were sewn onto the colorful and oversized sweaters she wore year-round. One was embellished onto a brooch I remember her displaying on a jacket lapel.

Perhaps my grandmother's greatest overture to the birds: Seasonally, she made a point to hang the same bright red feeder, filled with sweet sugar water, from her storage shed—in hopes of inviting some small creature into her otherwise still and secluded backyard.

If you asked her why she loved the birds, my grandmother would likely say something simple. Like, “Oh, I don't know; I just do.” And although her backyard visitors apparently brought her as much irritation and they did bemusement—as she was known to ridicule the greedy ones, the ones that took too much water, and the aggressive ones, the ones that caused the feeder to shake and swing—she did, without fail, enjoy them. Passing year after passing year.

On warm summer mornings, she would watch the birds from her back porch. A cup of decaffeinated coffee at her side. A slight grin at her lips. A front-row seat.

She watched screechy blue jays and brown-spotted wrens. She watched sing-songy cardinals and American robins. But most of all, when I think of my grandmother, I am reminded of the hummingbird. The ruby-throated variety, common in Ohio in the summertime, was perhaps her most frequent visitor.

Maybe she was telling the truth. There was no good reason why my grandmother liked the birds. Maybe it passed the time. Maybe it was an excuse to get some fresh air. But my suspicion, having known her for 27 years, is that there was something more to her rituals. My suspicion is that, consciously or unconsciously, she saw something in these small, fluttering creatures that she also saw inside herself. A steadfastness. A sure, dependable, reliable, constant, unwavering quality. The same magic that made her the extraordinary woman, the mother and grandmother that she was.

Hummingbirds are busybodies. They literally never stop moving. Ruby-throaters can produce up to 80 wing-beats per second, and their heart rate can reach over 1,200 beats per minute. They are mostly solitary birds, other than when it comes to caring for their young. Above all, the hummingbird is incredibly resilient. When met with turbulent airflow, hummingbirds can bob and weave their heads, alter the plane angle of their wing strokes, and even enlarge the surface area of their tail feathers into the shape of a fan—all to ensure maximum stability. During migratory patterns, they can complete nonstop 500-mile flights over open water.

Webster's definition of "resilient" is: "capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture," or, "tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change."

When I think of my grandmother, I think of hummingbirds, but I also think of this nine-letter word. She embodied it. She set the mold. Every day of her life.

My grandmother grew up on a farm and was driving pickup trucks and tending to cattle before most of her peers had completed puberty. Respite eventually came in the form of the Southern boy she affectionately called "Al." They eloped in Georgia on Independence Day, two months before her 21st birthday. But only 12 years later, Al passed away. And my grandmother became a widow with five children—the last of whom she delivered alone, just months after Al's premature death.

When I am running in the mountains and the tendons in my legs are burning; when I am climbing up rock faces and my tired grip is weakening; when I feel stressed at work and cannot imagine how I will stomach one more minute in front of the computer screen; when I wake up with that burnt-out feeling, seemingly defeated, utterly convinced I cannot answer the alarm clock's call, I think of my grandmother. I think of every single morning from the day Al died to her last—she had a decision to make. This wasn't a one-and-done kind of decision. It was a fundamental decision, a

character-defining decision, that she had to make day after day after day. My grandmother had every excuse to falter, to throw in the towel, to take the downhill path, the path of least resistance. Because those five mouths were not going to feed themselves. Those five bodies were not going to clothe themselves. And the house payment and electric bill and so many others certainly were not going to pay themselves.

But every morning, head still on the pillow, eyes flickering open, my grandmother made the decision to get up, get dressed, get moving, and do the best with what she had—no matter how many cards were stacked against her. It was not always pretty, and it was never easy. Sometimes, she butted heads with her kids. Often, she worked long hours. Almost always, she was completely exhausted in such a way that you or I are incapable of fully comprehending.

“The going” did not, in fact, get easier for my grandmother. In her later life, she buried two of her sons, both who died prematurely just like their father. Again—every excuse was at her doorstep. But she did not budge. The woman faced unthinkable adversity time after time after time, and it never broke her spirit. This is her story.

The week before her death, her hospitalization, her sudden sickness, she was still waking at 5 A.M.—some mornings even earlier, if you can believe it. To make breakfast. To do laundry. To organize the cupboards. Like the hummingbird, she never stopped. Because despite having no college education, no deep spiritual or philosophical bindings, this farm girl from Salem, Ohio, understood the great secret to life: You can never afford to stop moving forward.

Reciprocating my grandmother’s love was an impossible task. She coddled me as a baby. Took me to the Ames department store off State Street to buy me cartloads of action figures as a kid. Took me to the Walmart at the corner of Cunningham to buy me CDs as a teenager. She always called me “her buddy,” long into my teenage years and my twenties. I never corrected her, because I didn’t need to. It was true. We were buddies. And I never asked her not to call me that because I liked when she said it. No matter how old I was.

As a kid, I remember actively and purposefully choosing to spend the night at my grandmother’s house instead of my friend’s. It was more fun. She was cooler. We would play solitaire and Pokemon cards. We would eat ice cream sundaes and watch Wheel of Fortune and laugh at the overzealous contestants who pushed their luck too far and ended up “bankrupt.” Next was Jeopardy. Neither of us could guess many of the

right answers, so we mostly just ridiculed the pompousness of Alex Trebek. She would often fade before me, head dozing in her rocker, while I played my Gameboy on the adjacent couch. The next morning, I knew gooey scrambled eggs would be waiting for me. She made them perfectly, just the way I liked, with a little extra milk.

I remember one night when out of the fridge she mistakenly pulled a can of Miller Lite—likely there for my uncles Jeff or Terry—instead of a Dr. Pepper. Without looking, she popped the tab, dropped a straw, and took a huge swig.

“What the hell?” she said, nearly spitting it across the shaggy living room rug. She looked over to me, seeking some kind of reprieve. I laughed, and then she laughed, too.

We would retell this story over and over, years later. I’d be over for a visit, and she’d get up to offer me a drink.

“I’ll just be getting a beer for myself,” she’d say, totally deadpan.

In college, I began the tradition of our weekly phone calls. Admittedly, I would miss a week here or there. Sometimes the calls were hourlong. Sometimes they were 10 minutes. But talking to my grandmother, hearing her voice when I couldn’t physically see her, became part of how I operated. If too many days passed without one of our calls, I felt off. Whenever we did speak, I always felt better, more balanced.

No matter what kind of mood I was in, no matter what was going on in my life, her voice, the sound of her saying my name with that signature, upswinging inflection, always brought me back to earth. Made me even.

The first voicemail from my grandmother that I saved was on my 21st birthday. It was a cheerful and long-winded message I remember listening to on the lawn on my then-apartment building. To this day, my voicemail box is always filled to capacity, prohibiting callers from leaving new messages, because it’s disproportionately backlogged with saved messages from my grandmother, dating from January 18, 2012, to March 2, 2018.

On April 15, 2018, I recounted my 18 currently stored messages in my voicemail box. Eight of them are from her. So I concluded that I need to free up the other 10, because there will always be eight fewer available slots in my voicemail box. Because there will be days when I will need to hear her say my name, when I will need to hear that upswinging inflection I know so well. To say that I am profoundly sad that I can no

longer call my grandmother is the greatest of understatements. But at the press of a button, I will always be able to hear her voice.

After I moved to Columbus, and especially after I moved to Colorado, I treasured our in-person visits. We talked often enough that there was never any “catching up” to do. She knew what was going on in my world, and I knew what was going on in hers. So sitting in her living room became our thing. She’d sit in her rocker, and I’d sit in the cushy recliner against the adjacent wall. The conversation would ebb and flow. When it would ebb, we’d just sit there and look at each other. Smiling.

Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis once said, “It’s not the notes you play; it’s the notes you don’t play.” He was not only referring to the power of silence and negative space in jazz compositions, but also in life. I often thought of this sentiment while sitting in my grandmother’s living room during an “ebb.”

Despite every storm she had weathered, every unfathomable blow she was dealt in life, there she was—sitting across the room, smiling back at me.

It was a privilege to share a room with my grandmother. It was a privilege because those moments were invaluable. And because they were invaluable, they could not be infinite. That is why it was a privilege—because I will never do it again. I am struggling to accept that. But it’s gotten easier since I began telling myself that she and I are just in the middle of an “ebb.” We’ll flow again.

Our love was a unique one. It was unlike the love between my father and I, my mother and I, my girlfriend and I, my dearest friends and I. That is not to say it was greater or less than. It was simply different. She knew it, and I knew it. We didn’t just know it; we felt it. I still feel it. I always will.

She was so good. She was so pure. She lived selflessly and in complete service to her friends and especially her family. I am unsure if she knew just how powerful she was and is—how far and deep her influence reaches—but I know she was proud. I hope she was proud not only of those around her, but for herself and what she accomplished, against all odds. I suspect, despite her silence on the matter, she was.

When you’re 87 years old, there doesn’t need to be a good reason to leave this earth. When you’ve lived the life that my grandmother did, there doesn’t even need to be a question. She was tired. Her body had reached its limit, and her mind was ready for

long-awaited rest. The manner in which it happened—her letting go—tells me that she knew her job was done.

My grandmother is responsible for my life because she is responsible for my mother's. That is an obvious fact, of course it is, but I ask you to reconsider it. She gave birth to the woman who gave birth to me. For that, I am grateful. Moreover, I have hope. Because this obvious fact means that a little bit of the magic that was in my grandmother's bones and muscles and blood—a little bit of that resiliency—is inside of me, too. As goes for everyone in the Manis family tree. And that is no empty platitude, no figuratively or religiously driven sentiment. It is objective and it is true that she has given all of us her strength.

But like my grandmother did, we have to wake up every day and make that decision. To move forward. And in moving forward, we can live in tribute to her and her inspiring life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anthony Dominic', with a stylized, flowing script.

Anthony Dominic

Arvada, Colorado
April 16, 2018