

The Knights of Parma

I get in my car and pull out of my parent's driveway. It is December and I'm home for the holidays and it is 70 degrees out and the sky is blue. Southern California has its perks. I'd feel good going as far as to say it is *the* perk. I'm making the half-mile trip to see Tutu down in the assisted living place where she has been for the past few years, though it sometimes seems its the place where she's always been. It is called Parma, which as my sister once commented seems a strange, even cheesy name, but I'm told it was once the name of a type of Roman shield, so the founder had good intentions anyway. To shield elderly people from discomfort; to shield families from the harsh reality of the degeneration of their loved ones. Parma!

The short drive takes me through the suburb of my youth. The streets are wide and the front yards grassy. There are many speed bumps now, even more than the ones they added when I was thirteen and grateful for the increase in the number of jumps I had for my skates as I cruised around the neighborhood with friends and sticks of wax, looking for nice ledges and curbs to coat with the stuff to make our grinding go smoother. We were the terrors of the night, the vampires of suburbia, stealing our mothers' Christmas candles and defacing the concrete with red.

Women are out walking with dogs or strollers or 3 lb. hand weights, trees devoid of leaves blow slightly in the wind and many garage doors are open, men washing cars or watering the lawn. Yards are filled with plastic reindeer and sleighs, and shiny stuff abounds. Tutu used to always drive up from her condo in Oceanside in her little Ford around this time, entering the house with her big glasses and large smile, handing me a note with a joke and a drawing on it or a silly toy, or both. I'd help her carry in her things but I couldn't look in the trunk. With her she brought the smell of her house, one of the two main smells of my childhood, one of those smells that lingers in the back of your brain for years until you smell something similar and then there you are, five years old again playing on a white staircase in the summertime and the sunny world outside is immense and unknown.

I get to Parma and park in the parking lot across the way, the unoccupied backside of a strip mall

complex. I walk up and think how nice the place is, the landscaping and Spanish look of the front entrance combine with the high chandelier and nice sofas of the main lobby to create a truly classy vibe. I say hi to the young girl at the desk who my sister says is dating a forty-five year old, and then sign in as a visitor. My mother never does anymore because she's there so often but I always do. A few years ago I would write in "226" under Room Number but now I just write Italy. Italy is the Alzheimer's ward.

I walk down the hallway to the right (the left one eventually takes you to France, which makes Italy look like a crowd of NASA scientists), and stop at the counter in the pseudo-kitchen to fill up a little cup of coffee. Then I continue on, passing the dining room and kitchen before entering the door to this top secret area, one which you need to punch in a five-digit code to get out of.

The first thing you pass in the hallway now that you're on the other side of that time portal they call a door is a little room that says "Life's Haven" on the outside. It has a comfortable armchair, old-timey photographs and wallpaper and little butterflies and stuff hanging from the ceiling. There is some sort of cotton-candy music playing as well. I've been coming here for years and have yet to see anybody taking repose in Life's Haven. I think its because even though you might lose your memory you'll never lose the sense that a place like that reeks of bogus. I make a left and continue on down the hall.

The hallway is probably about one hundred feet long and lined with doors to the rooms of Italy's residents. Each has a name, sometimes accompanied by a photo collage made by the family, posted at the door. In one open doorway I see the feet of a sleeping man. At the far end of the hallway sits Tutu, in her usual post-up in the armchair at the T-intersection of hallway and living/dining room area. She is singing to herself.

"Dah dah dah, blue skies for meeee!" she sings, waving her hands back and forth to a beat. I approach with a smile, she looks at me and gives a start of exaggerated surprise. "Well, look at that!"

"Hey Tutu!" I say, bending down in front of her. "I came to see you!"

"Well, we can all see that!" she says, extending her hand to me with a smile and gleaming eyes. "It's good to see you."

“Yeah, it's been a while since you've seen your favorite grandson, ey?” I set the coffee on the corner table next to her. “Here, I got you some coffee, I'm putting it here.”

“Grandson! Well isn't that something,” she says, reaching for the coffee. “Oh, boy I love coffee.” She is good at pretending she recognizes people. She does recognize me, in a sense, but has no idea why.

“I know you do, Tootz! I inherited that addiction from you, I think.” I kiss her on the cheek.

“Oh, thank you,” she says, as always when you show her affection. There is another resident sitting in the armchair next to her, one who doesn't ever really talk. Tutu gestures with the mug, “Well, you two have met, haven't you?” Always the good host.

“Yeah, I know Dorothy, how you doing?” Dorothy gives me a regal nod then looks back into the space she's been staring into. Perhaps she sees childhood memories, perhaps spinning, mathematical equations, perhaps little blue men dancing on a distant planet. We'll never know. “So tell me the news, Tootz! You been making trouble?”

“Oh, you know, not too much. But I'll tell you, they come over here and they bring their you know, their trells, and start to talk about all sorts of...”

“You mean trolls? Or trellises?”

“Yeah!” she waves her hand. “Their trolls, that's right. They bring them here and expect everyone to go along with it, and well, I do. But sometimes it's difficult.”

“Oh yeah, I know about those trolls. Sometimes they can really be a pain in the butt.”

“You're telling me. Well look now, here he comes.” Approaching is Kathy, another resident who ceaselessly paces the hallways, tracing the exact parameters of her confinement. From afar, Tutu sometimes mistakes her for a man. Every once in a while she makes a passing comment about the “topic” of conversation, usually nasty, without even breaking stride. This is where it begins to enter the realm of the absurd, because Tutu will be talking about something like trolls or dynamite and Kathy will come by and say something biting like, “You'll never find that dynamite.” Then Tutu will say “Oh, that woman!” but Kathy will already be fifteen feet down the hall. A cleverly edited documentary on the drama between the two has great potential.

I give Kathy a nod and she alters her path to pass close by and says, "You sure are handsome!" She also boosts my ego every time I go there. She's usually just nasty towards women. She continues on down the hall.

"There he goes," says Tutu.

I smile and we sit there in silence for a while, holding hands. My head is filled with thoughts of the external world. I look at Tutu, wonder what she's thinking. There are times, if she hasn't slept well, when she can't seem to get her eyes open but can carry on a full conversation with you, and I'm always trying to ask her about what she's seeing behind her eyelids. I never get too much detail; I know she's holding out on me.

"It's good to see you Tutu, the last time we saw each other was six months ago!"

She looks at me with surprise. "Oh really? Well, where have you been?"

"Lots of places! For most of the time I was living out of a tent all over the west, it was pretty amazing. It's so much easier than I thought it would be!"

"That's nice," she says as she takes a sip of her coffee. "But why would you want to do that?"

"Oh, I don't know, I was doing lots of rock climbing and reading books and stuff. I was tired of living in a city and trying to do that whole work in an office thing."

"Well yeah, but you need to have a job, don't you?"

"I mean yeah, that's the way the world works around here, but for a while I didn't want one."

"Well I guess its okay by me, but who am I to say?"

"You're my Grandma!"

"I am!?" She laughs, pretending its a joke. "Oh look, I'm out of coffee."

I laugh too, and take the mug from her. "Ok Tootz, I'll get you some more. I'm an enabler, you know." As I stand up, one of the blue-polo clad caretakers comes out of the dining room and smiles at me.

"We're going to bring them in here for an activity, should I bring Tutu too?"

"Yeah sure, I'm just going to go get her some more coffee."

I walk down the hallway, thinking about the people that work here. I like that they all call her Tutu. It is our family name for her, originating when she found out it means “grandma” in Hawaiian about when my oldest cousin was born, and decided she would go with it from there on out. Now it is what all the people who take care of her every day call her. In a way I suppose it is ironic, since she seems to often revert to a state of pre-grandchildren, thinking she is twenty or forty years old again.

As I turn the corner another caretaker passes by and we smile and say hello. I've noticed that they are almost always really good people, friendly and relaxed. This seems kind of a miracle, because they are paid about minimum wage and don't have to have any special training. Moreover, they often have to put up with abuse and spend their day taking care of people who can't get dressed or eat on their own or clean themselves in the bathroom. Regardless of this, and whatever their situation is on the outside, they are happy on the job. Perhaps being around all these elderly beings who are once again drawing closer to that other world, the same one which small children are close to as well, has a soothing effect on the soul. Even further, maybe something about the fact that Tutu and her ilk are also not really aware of the present brings them even closer to that world beyond the veil. But this is my train of thought beginning to head once again down that path its been taking lately. Everything is connecting.

I am at the door and looking at a keypad. I don't know the code to get out. I stand there for a minute feeling helpless, then decide that Tutu will be alright without another cup of coffee, and won't remember that I went to get her some in the first place, so I turn around and head down the hall again.

Walking back, I remember when we had all finally accepted that Tutu's memory loss was progressing to beyond a point of no return and they were interviewing her to see if she needed to be taken from the main area to the more assisted-living style of Italy. The lady asked her, “Do you know what season we're in?” Tutu looked at the rain outside the window. “It's winter,” she said.

When I get to the dining room they have all the residents that they're going to manage to get involved sitting in a circle at the big, oval table. Some are off sleeping, and Kathy can't sit still long

enough except to eat half a meal. This leaves Tutu, the wise and silent Dorothy, Patti (Tutu's sometime partner in crime), Gil, Norman and Fran. They are the Knights of the Oval Table. I pull up a chair and take a spot next to Tutu. The caretaker comes over with a small balloon in her hand. "Oh boy," I say, knowing what is coming. "We're in for it Tootz, another epic showdown, a free-for-all battle of hit-the-balloon!"

"The rules are simple," says the caretaker, face mock serious. "Hit the balloon around to each other!" She throws it onto the center of the table and it bounces towards Patti. She winds up, and as it arrives, gives it a massive flick with the back of her hand. Starting off strong. It goes soaring towards Gil, the most agile of the group, the only one who can get up and walk away unassisted. He extends his hand to the right and the balloon ricochets off it back onto the table. Disaster prevented. It bounces past Norman, who is slumped in a wheelchair and can't raise a spoon to his mouth, let alone hit a balloon, and then is coming towards Tutu.

"Heee ya!" Tutu yells, batting it downwards onto the table. It bounces up and, in intense slow motion, arcs over Dorothy's slowly extending hand, off the top of her head and to the nothingness beyond. The balloon has left the table. Like Italy and the password protected door, anything beyond the table doesn't exist. But they have a hero here to save them all.

"I'll get it Tootz!" I am the Flash. I walk around and pick it up off the floor. The caretaker has already walked off to get Kathy out of somebody's room. I send it back to Tutu and she knocks it towards Gil. The game continues on. Then I'm back in my seat between Tutu and Fran and making truly spectacular moves to save it from going out all the time, since Gil is opposite and is over-aggressive and Fran can't really move because of her Parkinson's.

Time flows like lava. Tutu and I have lapsed into silence; nobody really talks. Everyone's energy is focused on this floating object bouncing around between us, even the ones who can't physically participate like Fran and Norman. Well, I'm not sure about Norman, but maybe even him. I am overwhelmed by a feeling of peace, sitting here in this lava flow of time, in this circle which makes all else seem insubstantial. Again, my thoughts jump to that place, and something compels me to try

discussing it with Tutu.

“Tutu,” I say, using my old volleyball skills to send the balloon curving around Fran's head towards Dorothy, “I had a really crazy experience recently.”

“Oh, well isn't that nice.” The balloon bounces off Dorothy and stops near Fran, who slowly reaches with trembling hands and picks it up. “Well go on,” Tutu encourages her. “Whack it!” Fran sits there for a minute and the tension in the air due to the stopped motion of the balloon is palpable. She slowly turns her head towards me.

“Here, I'll help you Fran,” I say, gently taking it from her. She tries to say something but no words really come out. I throw it towards Patti, who hits it upwards.

“Nice one,” says Tutu, watching it arc towards us.

“Yeah Tootz, I was with two of my friends and we were at this outdoor concert.” Tutu reaches up and bats it toward Gil.

“Oh, I love music.” She starts to sing, “Dah dah dee, dee dee... dah dah dah doo doo.”

I smile, saying, “I know you love music, Tootz, I do too!” It is fascinating how Tutu's memory no longer contains much in terms of events, but hum a few bars and she remembers lyrics to entire songs. A different part of the brain, they say. “Anyway, I was saying that this night, this night there was something in the air and something important happened to me.” Gil smacks the balloon and it soars over Dorothy's head.

“Oh, we better go get that,” Tutu says. I retrieve the balloon and hand it to Tutu.

“What I was saying Tootz, what happened that night was so crazy it has changed the way I'm seeing life... seeing everything!”

“Oh my, that sounds wonderful. You know how those crazy things are.” She hits it towards Patti, who sends it arcing up and over Tutu's head.

“Yeah, you know when it happened?” I reach over her head and save the day. “The night of a full moon.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, I was in this crowd of people and I realized that I could actually *see* everybody's energy, Tutu!”

“With your *eyes*?” She backhands the balloon toward Gil.

“Yeah!”

“Seeing is believing, they say,” she says, as Gil's return sends it through that sweet spot between the koala-like Dorothy and the immovable Fran.

I get up to rescue the balloon. “Yeah, I'd been thinking and reading and talking about this with people, that we are this force which extends beyond just the limit of our bodies, I mean many people believe this, but before that night I'd never really *experienced* it, you know what I mean?”

Gil gives me a funny look - I suspect he's the most together mentally of any here - and Dorothy sends the balloon I handed her towards him. Tutu says, “Well, I'm not one to ask about crazy! Now look at him over there, he hits it this way and then, oh, I got that one. Crazy. Turning. You know about the *turnovers*, don't you?”

I smile, “Thanks for putting it into context, Tootz. I know it sounds really out there. But since then, the things here that I was shying away from seem even more difficult to deal with.”

“Well, you know if you're shy you just have to go out force yourself to meet people.” The balloon bounces off Dorothy and slowly rolls toward Tutu.

“Yeah,” I say. “But I think that here we have this sense of individualism which forces us to be separate from people. We can know hundreds of people but in the end we are only responsible for ourselves and maybe our immediate family.” Tutu sends the balloon flying over Patti's head with a serious backhand before responding.

“Well you know what they say, if you can't find what you want here, you better go somewhere else!”

We're sitting in silence again and the group has been getting smaller. Gil's gotten up and wandered off, perhaps showing off his ability to do so, and Dorothy has been taken to the bathroom. The only

capable participants left are Tutu, Patti and I, though Norman and Fran are still here. Tutu's words resonate within me, bouncing around on the inside just like the balloon. I think about community, and how we've really banished the notion of it here. The individual, responsible for him or herself, reigns supreme. I also think about how Tutu and company here are a sort of community. One from a parallel dimension where nobody remembers each others names, but one nonetheless. Though they don't know names or histories, they know that they know each other, and are at ease. The feeling of peace I get while sitting with a group of them like just now is a product of that, I'm sure. I feel the turmoil is reaching a breaking point.

"I mean what is the most important thing, Tutu?" She's now holding onto the balloon, squeezing it off and on with her fingers. Patti doesn't seem to mind that the game has stopped. Tutu looks at me.

"In life, or what?"

"Yeah," I say. "In life."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, it starts with an F."

"Tutu! I hope you mean friendship or family or something!"

"Of cooourse!" She smiles slyly. "Like her and I," she says, gesturing at Patti, "We've been friends all our lives, haven't we?"

"Why yes, that's right," says Patti.

Tutu smiles her big, infectious smile. "We used to do all sorts of things together, we got into all sorts of trouble didn't we?"

"Oh, yes we did," Patti says, smiling as well.

"Yeah, our father's know each other and everything," Tutu says to me.

Of course, I know that Tutu and Patti have known each other for about four years, and might even have said something of the sort a few years ago. But now, who am I to tell? Maybe their fathers do know each other, somewhere.

"Yes," Tutu says. "As a matter of fact my mother and father should be here any minute."

Patti soon gets up with the help of the caretaker and heads off, pushing her walker. Tutu's head is nodding. She often mentions her mother and father when she's tired. Theories start bouncing around in my head. Theories about old people and children and napping, about the realm of sleep and dreams being closer to that bigger reality beyond this limited physical one we are restrained to. Theories about ancestors, about communities, about the limiting notion of individualism we grow up with, and the balloon bouncing around my head becomes a bowling ball. It crashes around, and somewhere within my being a string snaps. I feel a rush of something filling my body, a golden light, filling me beyond bursting. It is the feeling that a decision has been made from beyond the realm of logic. My eyes close and images of deserts and trees and oceans fill my head, images of people of all sorts, people and smiles. I open them again, and Tutu is alert, looking at me. I take her hand.

“Tutu, I think I'm going away again.”

I sit in a circle of people on the top of the hill and the sun is setting over the ocean. It is December once again and the sunset is red and magnificent, the last rays illuminating the waterfall to my left and the green of the bamboo and palms all around. In the circle there are twenty people, all clasping hands with their neighbor, and I hold everyone's attention. I'm telling the end of a story.

“Then my mother said to her, 'Tutu, I made your special pumpkin pie recipe! Do you remember your secret ingredient?’

“Tutu looked at her for a minute, my whole family holding their breath in anticipation.

“Well yeah,' she said. 'Pumpkin!’