

Never Too Late

— AN ESSAY BY —

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For sixty-one years my grandmother was Mrs. Harry C. Hank. She ate what her husband ate, voted how her husband voted, and ultimately learned to want out of life what my grandfather wanted. In that respect, Nanny was very much a woman of her generation.

My grandfather wasn't always an easy guy to get along with. A Lutheran minister and a pillar of the community, his guidance and leadership were often called upon by friends and strangers. To the public eye, he was gregarious and reliable. But privately, Pop was unyielding in his convictions, ironclad in his routines, stubborn in his negotiations, and generous and dependable on his own terms. He was, as the saying goes, a good provider. So good that my grandmother was afforded little opportunity to exercise her own agency, pursue her own interests, or provide for her own needs. Like so many women of her generation, Nanny spent her life in service to her family.

When Pop Hank died in 1994, I think we all assumed that without his needs to absorb Nanny's energies, and his demands to fill her time, she would be lost, bereft of occupation and purpose. What would she do with her days? How would she fill them? Who would she talk to?

My mom and my grandma had a complex relationship, probably because they were so much alike. It was often as if they were out of patience with each other before they'd ever begun. It didn't seem to matter how firmly they resolved themselves to diplomacy or civil obligation—after the briefest of exchanges, they often devolved into a prickly state of nervous exhaustion.

Following Pop's funeral, my mom stayed in Palm Springs to help get her mother's affairs in order. Mostly, I imagined, to rumble through her house like a tornado, emptying drawers, gutting closets, and encouraging my grandmother to dispose of truckloads of junk that had been accumulating since the Truman administration. Patent leather wallets from Turkey, dusty

encyclopedia sets from 1953, marmalade jelly packets filched from Knott's Berry Farm in 1967, along with a lifetime of photographs, keepsakes, and letters.

Knowing that my mom could be a little bullish and unsentimental in her approach to cleaning house, especially on the heels of a tragedy (something my family is accustomed to), I, at that time a thrice-unpublished novelist, drove down from Los Angeles to make sure my mom and my grandma weren't at each other's throats. I expected that after two weeks holed up together, they would welcome me as a sort of arbiter, a mediating party to help settle what was sure to be a series of disputes and a litany of disagreements. I figured when I wasn't ironing out discord, diverting squabbles, and generally saving the day with my male presence, I could score a few free meals and maybe a Turkish wallet. Heck, maybe even a little cash to put in it.

What I found in Palm Springs was two women I hardly recognized, two women who seemed to have reinvented their entire context with regard to one another. Something, I can't say what, had been healed. I honestly don't know what those two weeks holed up together looked or sounded like to my mom and my grandma. I don't know what they discussed, what they reconciled, or how they managed their armistice so quickly and effectively. All I know is they had improved themselves and their situation decisively, an accomplishment that in large part informed my new novel's seventy-eight-year-old protagonist, Harriet Chance, who finds herself navigating the choppy waters of a tempestuous relationship with her daughter, Caroline.

In the months that followed my visit to Palm Springs, Nanny blossomed. She became more active in her community, acquainted herself with neighbors long unfamiliar, and started attending a more liberal and progressive church. Her political ideologies became increasingly informed, humane, and, most important, her own. Out from under the shadow of her husband at last, Nanny filled her days just fine, thank you very much. She was bereft of neither occupation nor purpose. It was as if she was finally being who she'd wanted to be all along.

As for my mom, she's now Harriet's age, and though she loves her routines, to be sure, she continually embraces new ideas, new attitudes, new experiences, and to some extent even new technologies (though she's not

quite sold on e-mail yet). At eighty, my mom is still expanding, still pushing herself, still learning.

Me, I'm trying, too. If my first novel, *All About Lulu*, was a coming-of-age, I guess you could say *This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!* is a coming-of-old-age story. Like the bildungsroman, the novel is chiefly concerned with character transformation, though in the case of Harriet Chance, that transformation transcends youth and young adulthood, and even middle age, to encompass the final chapter of a long life. Because as Harriet learns, it's never too late for forgiveness, never too late for acceptance, never too late for growth or reconciliation.

Formally, structurally, and tonally, my novels tend to be quite different from one another on the surface. Yet, I always return to one theme: reinvention. The idea that my characters can improve themselves and their situations is nothing less than an imperative for me as an author and a person. Most of my protagonists have been marginalized by the larger culture in some way. A wimp. A town gone bust. A failed breadwinner and stay-at-home dad. In this regard, Harriet is no exception. Approaching her eightieth birthday, nobody besides the health care industry is marketing toward her, programming toward her, legislating toward her, or even paying attention to where she's spending her money. Harriet, an everywoman of a certain generation, is now largely ignored by the world. I wanted to change that, at least in some small part.

I was raised by women. While men moved in and out of my life, buying me stuff, flexing their muscles, and announcing themselves loudly before departing, women were always there for me. I originally conceived of this book as a kind of combined portrait of those women, the ones who settled for less, who never quite got their fair share, who soldiered on in the face of inequity, frustration, and even despair. I hope this novel will serve as a thank-you to those women, particularly those like my mom and my grandma who had the courage and wherewithal to continue their personal evolutions late in life, the ones who, like Harriet Chance, confronted their pasts and rewrote the endings that others had already written for their stories.

In the case of Harriet, no sooner does she set sail on an ill-fated cruise of Alaska's Inside Passage than she finds herself disoriented and adrift, forced

to navigate the suddenly unfamiliar environs of her own identity. Through a series of revelations, both Harriet and Caroline abruptly discover that much of what they've endured, and much of what they know about themselves and each other, is only a small part of their story. Alone and together, Harriet and Caroline must absorb this new information and begin to heal themselves and their relationship. But don't get the idea it's all misty eyes and aching hearts. Before the journey is over, Harriet's dead husband will make numerous appearances, the ship's steward will be assaulted with a crab leg, and Harriet will be rolling around on the carpet of the Vista Lounge.

In the end, it is my hope that *This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!* will stand as an affirmation of the determination, endurance, and power we all have to transform ourselves. It is true that things happen to us that we can never undo. But we can accept them. We can forgive ourselves and others. And ultimately, it's never too late to rewrite our endings.