



Photos courtesy of the author.



Christmas with Stashu

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I have already heard the story. He had a massive stroke. Uncle Pete found Grandpa in the morning, face down on the floor by his bed. That's all we know. He's intubated in the ICU. He's responding coherently. He's not responding to anything. He's heavily sedated; he's

not sedated at all. He gave Aunt Jo a thumbs up. He blinked at Kevin. He moves his legs. He only moves one leg. No one has seen him move. There's hope. There's no hope. I got the call on a Wednesday, and Friday I was sitting in the Tom's River Community Medical Center in New Jersey. Thank God this was winter break.

The stroke was enormous. No one comes back from this. Immediately, my dad chimes in: "My daughter is a medical student at UCSF. She understands

what is going on." I slump as far down in my chair as possible. I was not ready for that. But, I think, I know the right thing to do. I have had classes on this. Medical costs, hopeless cases, prolonging pain and suffering. No one wants that. His doctors all agree. He's ninety-three. He was having difficulty at home. He was lonely. He will never walk or talk again. This is Stanley Ciszak. He swam two miles in the ocean every day until he was eighty-seven. We can't keep him like this.

I have to kill my grandfather.

In the meantime, Aunt Jo comes in. She is crying. She is screaming, actually. "Remember when he got hit by the car? They said he would never come back."

When he was eighty-seven, he was in a coma for thirty-eight days after being hit by a van in a parking lot. Apparently (I was not there at the time) he awoke from that episode, looked at my Dad, and promptly said, "What the hell are you doing here?" It is legendary. Everyone in the hospital remembers.

The neurologist walks me to the computer. He shows me the CT scan. There it is. Massive bilateral cortical infarctions. Two-thirds of my grandfather's brain is bright white. Speech, language, executive function, most of his motor cortex: all gone. But—brainstem intact. *Okay, I think, I get it. He may still be able to breathe. But he would never be anywhere close to the person he was, and from the looks of it, he may never move, talk or eat again.* Before we transfer him to hospice, I ask if I can play him the song I learned on the banjo. He may die quickly, the hospice nurse says.

It just so happens that I was planning to be with him on Christmas anyway, which is now in exactly one week. Back in October, the day after I had bought my tickets to visit him in New Jersey, I had (I have to admit, it was an impulse buy) purchased a banjo with the sole intention of playing "Jingle Bells" with my grandfather on Christmas.

I step into his ICU room and play it for him. The sounds of periodic monitor alarms and ventilator cycles mingle with my amateur rendition of "Jingle Bells" to create a clatter that I couldn't even imagine observing from the outside. My dad wanted to listen as well. I am not a musician. I got stage fright. I was crying. It was terrible. When I was done, a final alarm went off. My dad joked to his own father that my performance wasn't all that bad.

We pull out the breathing tube. They let me stay in the room to hold my grandfather's hand while they did it. We hook up a morphine drip. We wheel him over to hospice. Three minutes later, my grandfather's eye opens slightly as he coughs. My dad turns to me. "Lauren, what should we do?" He looks mortified.

I am not a believer in unnecessarily prolonging a person's pain and suffering. Especially when the person is ninety-three years old. But I will say

own. His arms and legs jerk and twitch once in a while. When he coughs, sometimes his eyes open. Sometimes one gets stuck open a bit. He does not look sick and he does not look dead. All his other organs are completely functional. When my aunt looks at me and says that she knows she saw him give her a thumbs up, I reassure her that this is just a muscle twitch, that it is a coincidence, that his eyes opened because he coughed, nothing more, and that, no, he couldn't hear us. And



that in this situation (trained and conditioned though I was) one's brain and one's gut are in distinct opposition. My grandpa still looks like my grandpa. And on top of that, because his stroke was not in the part of his brain that controls his most vital bodily functions like breathing and heart rate, he breathes on his own. He coughs on his

to my Dad: "Dad, we don't do anything. His eyes opened, I know, but it's just from the coughing. It's not happening as a response to anything. We don't do anything." We wait.

But then, I have to step outside and reassure myself. And in fact, I realize that if I am totally honest I have no idea if his eyes are opening for a

reason. Maybe he can hear us. We are playing his favorite Polish Christmas music. If he can't hear, then why? The only thought that comforts me is a profound certitude that my grandfather would never in his life have wanted to be kept alive in this state, whether he could hear us or not.

The whole time we lived at the hospital, I repeated that thought over and over in my head. It was my mantra to counteract the constant intrusion of other, more horrible thoughts

father and I look at each other, skeptical but hoping for a quick and peaceful end. After fifteen minutes, though, my grandfather's blood pressure is stable, he's breathing on his own and his heart rate is seventy-eight and regular.

My grandfather was the 1943 middleweight boxing champion of the U.S. Navy. If that's not impressive enough, he returned to the United States after the war and made it to the New York State Golden Gloves Championship, a sort of high-profile amateur boxing

his last few years. And then, he hated it.

Stanley Ciszak was a people person, his life spent hosting dinners, sharing music, drinking cognac, and smoking cigars with the vibrant Polish-Italian family he had created with my Sicilian grandmother. He took time from his job as a plumber to help found the first community college in New Jersey. He worked tirelessly as an aide to the Mayor of Perth Amboy. He bought my grandmother a house on the Jersey shore, and secretly spent a year fixing it up before presenting it to her for Valentine's Day. He loved his family, adored his wife, and relished his work.

He grew up in Brooklyn. He wasn't too much of a book person and his family needed money, so at fourteen he entered a trade school in Coney Island, where he learned plumbing, electrical, and other construction work. But he fell in love with plumbing. As he got older, one of his favorite stories to tell me was how he was apprenticed to a New York City plumber at the age of sixteen. The youngest among his peers, he quickly became the best and most skilled plumber on the team. After the war, he moved his work to New Jersey and quickly became the most sought-after plumber in the state. Part of this was due to his skill and impeccable work, but another part was due to his trademark. He was the only plumber, who, after finishing his installation, would actually shellac the copper pipes to prevent them from oxidizing over time. "They looked so beautiful!" he would exclaim. And he was the only one around who did it.

My grandmother died when I was twelve. She was a diabetic who ended up with terrible heart disease. She died one night from her third heart attack, just months after my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. My dad, who at the time was living in Kentucky, did not make it to the hospital in time to say goodbye to his mom, and he intended to be there this time, to sort of make it right. So we hunkered down for the night.



that slithered past my logical side and whispered to me that my grandfather had gone over four days without water while I sat there and watched.

Our first nurse, Christine, reminds us that this may be quick. She seems nice, but she had clearly never met my grandfather. She's tall and blonde with a spiked haircut. She's all business. My

tournament still held today. He actually fought in Madison Square Garden. He was, however, knocked out in that fight, and decided professional boxing was not for him.

Early on that day, my dad and I decide to stay the night. There's no way we are leaving Stashu (that's his Polish name) alone. He was never alone until

The first night is terrible. Every sound wakes me up. I keep thinking we missed it. Three times I have to get up to make sure my grandfather is still breathing. When no one is watching I check his pulse, just to make sure. The next morning my uncle arrives, and my dad and I make a quick trip back to the house for the essentials. What we return with includes: my grandfather's banjo, a small fake Christmas tree, twenty family photos from atop the piano, the certificate from his boxing championship, a porcelain figurine of a boxer dog (appropriately his favorite kind, he had three over the course of his life), and his two-by-three foot wedding photograph. Oh, and three CDs of Polish polka music, two of Christmas carols, and one of John Phillip Souza for old times' sake.

My grandfather was a Navy man and he ran a pretty tight ship. So when his two sons were teenagers, and, on the weekends, decided to sleep in past 8:30 in the morning, it was customary in his house to put a John Phillips Souza march (the peppier the better) on the record player at top volume and whip the young men into shape, or at least to startle them out of slumber.

We return to the hospice and set up the room. We take down the generic supposedly soothing paintings of pastel-leaved poplars blowing in the wind and replace them with pictures of my grandmother in her favorite yellow dress, of my dad with his long hippie hair that my grandfather hated. We hang his Navy cap over his morphine drip and string his banjo up on the windowsill.

That banjo, by the way, survived D-day. It traveled with my grandfather from the United States to Iceland, Iceland to Plymouth, England, and from Plymouth straight into the third day of the invasion

of Normandy. You should have heard how his fellow Seabees talked about it. Their battalion was sent to Iceland to build a secret air force base for the invasion. On the way, there were German U-boats everywhere. Only half the ships on that original fleet made it to Iceland to begin with. When they got there, they were working in the daytime, but after sundown they were not allowed to have any lights, not even fires. So my grandfather, banjo always in hand, played for the guys. One of them says it may have saved his life, and at least it kept him sane. Oh yeah, and they had a pet raccoon named Frank but that's a story for another time.

As visitors roll in, the stories roll in with them. The hospice becomes a nice place to be. During that first day, it is easy to forget what is happening. It almost seems like my grandfather

is going to recover; in a few days we'll all be home having Christmas pierogies and kielbasa. But there inevitably comes the time when each visitor looks down at my grandfather, who once in a while moves his right leg in a sort of jerking, frog-like motion, or at times his eyelid opens just a sliver, so it seems as if he is about to wake up and ask for his pipe. And then, attention turns to me. "What was that? We didn't know he could move?" My aunt still swears to me he's squeezing her hand when she asks him to.

"It's just a reflex," I say. But to be honest, I have no idea what it is. As a third-year medical student, the real-world hospital is new to me. I don't yet have confidence in my own clinical abilities, and I shouldn't. But nurse Christine says it's a reflex, so as the medical authority in the room I toe the party line. Maybe it is. I remember



that sometimes with severe brain damage, infantile reflexes can return, one of which is the grasp reflex (this is the reason a baby will automatically grip a finger placed in its hand). So, maybe he grasps a little.

But, they ask, What if he's there, trying to signal to us? What if he wakes up like last time?

I try to answer respectfully by saying that we are pretty sure he can't understand anything and that his quality of life would be horrible if we kept him alive. (What if he hears me saying this? I ask if we can step out of the room.)

So, he's getting no food and no water, they ask?

No.

So you're starving him?

My dad looks at me. I say nothing. What can I say? I stare back. I don't yet know that it is considerably more comfortable for a dying person to be without fluids other than what he wants to take in on his own. The mantra is not helping right now.

That's the worst part, when people come in the room, so hopeful and sure that he's going to wake up. It's like someone shoving an ice pick repeatedly into my gut. Joe Cutrone leans down and says to him, Stash, we know you're in there, just squeeze my hand and let us know. We know you hear us, Stash. And then he breaks down.

Day 4: Things begin to deteriorate. Tensions start to run high. We haven't really slept in four days. We haven't left the hospital. We're getting close to Christmas. I am not sure how much more Polka music any human being can really tolerate. My grandfather's breathing becomes more labored. His temperature rises. Pressure ulcers are beginning to appear on his flank, but when we turn him over his breathing becomes so labored we can't even stand to be in the room. The nursing shifts change every eight hours. Christine has been there for the first shift every day so far. Like I said, she takes charge.

But then there are other nurses. One says, "Well, we can give him

Tylenol to bring down his fever but if I were dying I wouldn't want someone sticking a finger up my bottom. I would rather just use ice packs."

"Do you want us to increase his morphine?" they ask my dad, who inevitably turns to me. How would he know if he wants to increase the morphine drip?

"We can suction him," they say, "but if I were dying I wouldn't want a suction device down my throat."

But the next nurse says, "Well, if I were dying I wouldn't want to have to be breathing so hard, of course we can suction him."

The result of this constant back-and-forth is that depending on the shift, we either feel cruel for using suction, or cruel for not. And either way, once the thought of either option being cruel is placed in our minds, decision-making becomes agonizing. There is never a choice that feels right.

"And by the way, why don't we give him some Tylenol, these ice packs seem uncomfortable, don't you think?" asks the next nurse.

"Yes," I say, "let's increase the morphine drip."

Enter: Nurse Moonbeam.

She says we have to go home. She says we have to take a break. She says that my grandfather does not want to die with our energy in the room. She says he is waiting until we are gone to die. We say, "We understand you are coming from a good place, madam, but Stanley Ciszak is a people person. He wouldn't want to be alone." She, in turn, understands how we might think that, but knows she is right and knows that he can feel our energy there. After this, Dad dubs her Moonbeam. And she was a bit like a moonbeam, she was softer and calmer than Christine, less direct and more diffuse a person who clearly did not mind shining a bit in the darkness.

It's been five days now. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, arguably my grandfather's favorite day of the year.

From before my father was born

until recently the Christmas Eve parties have been enormous. Two families would collide, Italian and Polish, Ciszaks and Cutrones, for an extravaganza of epic proportions. Eighty people would arrive around 4:00 PM, descending onto the house in Cartaret. It was all about the food. Well, the food and the music. My grandmother and grandfather, respectively. The first course would consist of the pre-midnight meatless feast. Linguine and clam sauce, baked ziti, mushroom soup, and pierogies stuffed with potato and cheese were the culinary stars of Act 1.

While everyone was seated, my Grandfather unveiled the Oplatki, a Polish cracker that resembles a larger, squarer communion wafer. As we ate, my grandfather would make the rounds and talk about each and every one of his guests, and all the good things that he or she had done in the past year. He would give us his blessing for good health and happiness in the year to come. With each person, he would give them a piece of the Oplatki and he would take another piece.

Given the size of the crowd, this process could last more than two hours, until long after our soup was consumed, children were either asleep or running laps around the tables, and the rest of us were engaged in a stand-off with the one remaining half-pierogie beckoning to us from our plates. No matter how new and unfamiliar the guest, my grandfather had a kind word and encouraging thing to say, and he welcomed anyone to the table with grace and warmth.

During the Oplatki, a designated someone would slip out, rush upstairs and don our most precious family heirloom: a full-bodied Santa suit complete with wig, beard, hat, and bell. When the Oplatki was finished, the music would start. My grandfather would break out his banjo, or his accordion for that matter. Sometimes he would choose his mandolin first or take a stab at the piano and just add on the harmonica for fun. Either way, "Jingle

Bells” would begin the merriment. “Silent Night,” “Frosty the Snowman,” and “White Christmas” would be interspersed with Polish carols we all knew but could never sing. Later on, my father would accompany on the piano and my uncle on the accordion.

Suddenly, the doorbell would ring and in Santa would walk. Full-bellied with a garbage sack full of presents pilfered from beneath the tree he would explode through the door, bell ringing, and Ho-Ho-Ho-ing. MEEERRYYYY CHRIISTMAS!!! he yelled. Soon, he would be handing out gifts by the hundreds and the music would recommence as each person was called up one-by-one to, sometimes less than willingly, sit on Santa’s lap. At about 11:30 we would all pack into cars to head for midnight Mass.

One year when my father was in college, his turn came to play Santa. At that time, some of the obligation involved being driven around from one family to the next, making an appearance at all the houses before Mass. Well, it was also customary for each house to offer Santa a nice glass of brandy or cognac to keep him warm on his travels all the way back to the North Pole. But the brandy proved too much for St. Nick, and he lost track of time. Rather than risk his mother’s wrath, my dad opted to trade proper dress for punctuality and staggered, on time, into Mass. My grandmother, a pious Catholic, was mortified; but my grandfather couldn’t help cracking up as his youngest son, Santa, stepped up to take communion. My father was saved (in more ways than one) and it was such a sight that the whole thing made the local paper the next day!

We return from Mass to meet our gastronomic Act 2: an early-morning now carnivorous spread complete with ham, kielbasa, spaghetti and meatballs, and braciole. Not to mention all the Italian cookies and pannetone we could eat. This load of calories would inevitably send us all off into a protein-induced slumber that would

end the festivities.

After six days at the hospital, the deterioration continues, but ever so slowly. Now it’s Christmas Eve. Visitors have largely stopped coming, which is something of a relief. Never in a million years did we expect to still be here after this long. More and more sores are appearing all over my grandfather. Each breath sounds like someone trying to sip the last bit of a milkshake through a straw. It is sickening. We stop the polka music. Santa and Mrs. Claus wander the hospital with a miniature golden retriever, distributing candy canes and slobbery kisses. Some nuns come into the hospital giving out knitted shawls with inlaid prayers. The place is starting to feel like home. I don’t even bother to put shoes on to walk the halls any more.

Since we’ve been there, there has been a steady stream of patients who have come and gone. There are only two others here tonight. We decide to do Christmas Eve at the hospice. My uncle arrives and we switch places, my Dad and I go out to prepare for dinner. Driving down a nearby street we happen across a giant red sign reading Polish Deli. We stop in and emerge with kielbasa, pierogies, and prepackaged, dried mushroom soup, instructions for which are written solely in Polish, but we give it a shot anyway. We return home, shower, cook the pierogies and rush back to the hospital. There, my uncle, dad, cousin (only one of my cousins could even bear being there, the other stayed home), and I have a miniature Christmas Eve feast. We put on Christmas carols and drink a little cognac. We hang out in the room with my grandfather. The mushroom soup isn’t bad.

At this point, my dad gets a mischievous look on his face. I cannot possibly fathom what he is thinking. He leans over to me and says, “I think Grandpa deserves one last taste of his favorite cognac.” Hah! Amazing. We close the blinds to the room, and grab the who-knows-how-old bottle of

midrange Remy Martin we found in the liquor cabinet. My dad grabs a paper cup from the bathroom and pours a hefty dose of the golden-brown liquid into it. Then, he grabs one of those green, spongy swabs we have been using to keep my grandfather’s lips from cracking and bleeding with the dehydration. He plunges it into the cognac, waits a few seconds until it is all absorbed and then gently places it in my grandfather’s mouth. My grandfather’s face contorts, one half more expressive than the other by far (that’s the stroke), grimacing with the acrid liquor in a way that is impossible to describe. The reaction is surprising to us all. We laugh, partly out of discomfort, partly because the face really was funny, and partly out of a feeling of triumph at having succeeded in getting this one last earthly pleasure for Stash past the ever-so-watchful eyes of the hospice authorities. We reopen the blinds, smirking.

Moonbeam is on. She is now convinced that my grandfather, who loved this day so much, just wants one last Christmas. Of course, this implies some amount of lucidity, and is an unsettling thought to everyone. But she means well. Plus, she still wants us to leave. She is insisting that maybe he does not want to die in front of his grandchild and son. He might need peace and quiet and space to die in. My dad is insisting that he would not want to die alone. Is what she says even possible? And if so, how on earth would it be possible for us to leave after we have insisted on staying here 24/7 for the past week? It would be giving up. Admitting defeat. Abandoning my grandfather at a time when, as far as we could understand, he needs us most. I start to get angry. Nurse Moonbeam is beginning to feel like the proselytizers that show up on your doorstep insisting you need to be saved from a fate you do not even believe exists. Well-meaning, perhaps, but inconsiderate and quite possibly wrong.

Christmas Day is a quiet one, with



no real change in anything. Grey, cold, and dreary, it begins to feel like my father and I have been transported into some more twisted, morose version of *Waiting for Godot*. Every day: vitals check, morphine increase, ice packs, position change, sponge bath, Tylenol, suction, ice pack, wound check. If Godot doesn't show up today, then definitely, definitely tomorrow.

Over the last few years, after my grandmother died, my grandfather was lonely. The car accident really took a toll on him. He could no longer drive. His hands could not move fast enough anymore to play his music. He had to quit playing in his beloved string bands. He couldn't really dance anymore. He didn't tell anyone, but he secretly sold his banjo. Most of the day, my grandfather sat in his chair. The last time I visited he constantly confused me with my mother. He was taking Tylenol that had expired in 1983. His pants were often soiled. The oven was coated in melted Frito Lay packaging and blackened Ruffles. It took a whole

afternoon to clean out, and the oven rack itself was not salvageable.

The day after Christmas. Still no change. I absolutely have to get to a post office. I am taking my little brother on a trip to Panama in February and if I don't get my passport out for renewal I will not be able to go. My dad and I decide to head out for a minute, and my uncle is on the way anyway. Plus, Moonbeam is on again, so it pays to get out of there. On the way back from the post office, my Dad suggests we stop at a nearby diner. Other than the incredible plate of arroz con pollo that my aunt brought a few days earlier, we have been subsisting on free cereal, turkey sandwiches, and pudding stocked daily in the hospice minifridge.

But just as we are paying our check, we get a phone call. From the look on my dad's face, I know exactly what it is. My uncle says we'd better come quick. I briefly consider just running out the door, but the cashier is fast and we pay. We are literally three minutes from the

hospital, if that. We are running. We leave the car in front of the hospital in the roundabout. We sprint up the stairs, my Dad's two bad knees and all. But by the look on all the nurses' faces, we are too late. We had been gone for less than forty-five minutes. And my grandfather died.

I have never hated anyone so much in my life as I hated Nurse Moonbeam at that very moment. And my father, well, he had missed it again. We stood outside the hospital room door. How was this possible?

Looking back, I regret nothing. I would do it all again in a heartbeat. As the experience settles into my psyche and my heart, my grandfather's story is ever-present as I work with patients. It taught me how trying the hospital can be, how overwhelming it is to be asked to make medical decisions. It reminds me that lying in each hospital bed and sitting on every exam table is a Stanley Ciszak, a person to be given the utmost respect. Because this guy, who for seven days was lying comatose in his bed, twitching and struggling but without the presence and charm that made him Stash, was magnanimous. My grandfather would have made a seat for you at his table in a moment's notice. He would have welcomed you and your entire family into his life with a glass of cognac, a piece of Oplatki and a full string band. And you would have been better for it. So for me this story is a pledge. To, in the spirit of my grandfather, give every person's story the deference it deserves. Whatever it may be: a banjo gone to D-day, a Valentine's Day house, an Icelandic pet raccoon, a perfectly shellacked set of copper pipes. I will remember to look and listen for the story. It will make me a better doctor, and a better human. And, Grandpa, I hope you would be proud.

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