

Room 727

by Dorg

Every summer she came to Vancouver to visit and stayed for exactly three weeks. She usually arrived on the same weekend at the end of July. She stayed in the same hotel, the Sylvia Hotel. And she always, always stayed in the same room. Room 727.

She was our grandmother from New York and I suppose to each of us in our small family the visit meant something completely different. To my sister and me it meant that our totally carefree days of summer were over. Life would get more structured in two increasingly restrictive phases. Phase one with partial structure came with Granny's arrival. Phase two with total structure came when we went back to school in September. I was a five years old and Miriam was ten. Perfect days meant just hanging out and doing nothing all day. Our little runt friends Phil, Tom, Rob and Ian and I were all wired for summer fun. We'd build tree forts on the huge wooded hill of the Nunnery across the street from our house, go skateboarding down the steep slope between 11th and 12th on Crown Street, dig tiny holes in Mrs. Wa's front lawn and bury small treasures (coins, model car parts, and baby teeth we had lost) in those holes. On rainy days, summer was non-stop all day sessions of Monopoly, buying up every property you could get your hands on. Risk, Twister, Clue and Password were other great ways to fill a wet day. And when you got sick and tired of all the board games you could always build something cool out of Lego. On sunny days we'd take the hose out of the garage for a water fight. Summer meant outdoor sleep-overs on our front porch; walking Thor, our pet German Shepard, going swimming down at Jericho Beach, or just horsing around doing nothing but play fighting all day - summer was the greatest time of the year. It was hot and you could wear shorts everyday. Granny's arrival marked the end of those perfect carefree and totally unstructured days. Summer abruptly interrupted. That's where Miriam and I were coming from.

To understand Granny's point of view on her annual visits and where she was coming from you have to understand where she came from. And I mean literally. Where she came from and where her father came from. Her Origin; her roots. Granny's father was a celebrated Hungarian physician born in Budapest in 1861. He was the chief surgeon at St. Itsvan Hospital in Budapest where he developed some new, cutting edge surgical procedures. The author of several medical books, and a worldwide leader at the time in the field of treatment of diseases of the Kidney, his achievements were recognized by the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Joseph the first. In 1902 the Emperor elevated our Great-Grandfather to Hungarian Nobility. This meant that his daughter, would go onto become a Baroness. Our Grandmothers formal name was the Baroness Hedwig Von Herczel.

To our Granny, the Baroness, her visit meant the chance to spend some time with the only family she had. She loved my sister and I very much and only got the chance to see us once a year. We were her only relatives. Shortly after I was born my father died. My father was her only child. So of course we were her only grandchildren. Grannies husband, our grandfather, also died before I was born, so Granny was pretty much on her own. And even though she was old fashioned we loved her and were glad to see her every year. But her visit was like two worlds colliding. The old world opulence and charm of Budapest at the turn of the century was Granny's world. Her world was one of lavish balls, baroness debutants, big houses and country estates, butlers and bridge tournaments. Her world was a far more formal world. Our world was the world of a single immigrant Mother, struggling to raise two kids with a lack of financial resources.

Granny left Europe, as our mother and father did ,for a better life. In 1954 when the political and economic situation deteriorated in Budapest she and her husband immigrated to the United States. Just like in the Monopoly game that we played as kids Granny landed on one of the properties that everyone wanted. Park Avenue. She lived in a posh rented apartment in the middle of downtown Manhattan on Park Avenue. As a kid I couldn't comprehend having a Granny that lived on a Monopoly square. Park Place was the 2nd most expensive property on the entire board, and with a hotel on it, had the ability to drain other players of their cash flow. Years later as a teenager I got to visit her at her prestigious nest at number10 Park Place. In 1974, I won a scholarship to visit New York and study with the United Nations Security Council in session for one summer. During that trip when I visited Granny's Park Place home, the apartments entrance alone

was everything I expected it to be and more, including a big brass entrance door, uniformed concierge, fresh cut flowers in a big lobby, and thick plush carpets.

Granny only went on one trip each year. It was her annual pilgrimage from Park Avenue to Beach Avenue. In the early sixties, the Sylvia was considered a pretty fancy hotel by Vancouver standards so it is no surprise that she made it her home away from home. Room 727 was just below the top floor of the 8 story hotel on Beach Avenue and Gilford. Her room faced west and had a sweeping unobstructed ocean view. Granny would talk about days gone by when the Sylvia was one of the tallest buildings in Vancouver. There used to be a big neon sign on the roof of the hotel in the 1950's with bright eight foot block letters advertising "Dine In The Sky". Granny told us that the restaurant on the top floor that was all the rage because of its lofty high altitude location. The Sylvia was named after Sylvia (Goldstein) Albowitz whose father built the hotel in 1912 when Vancouver's West End was relatively unpopulated. Covered in Virginia Creeper Ivy it has a unique old fashioned look. Resting staidly on the shores of English Bay the Sylvia hotel has always been a Vancouver landmark.

As perennial as the ivy itself the hotel had an old fashioned Doorman named Mannie. He was friendly, short and Japanese and wore a dark red doorman's uniform with grey pants and a purple lapel. To us he almost seemed to live in the front lobby because he was permanently there. He would always welcome us to the Sylvia and greet Granny by her name. "Good afternoon Mrs. Dorothy, how was your day today".

Our Grandmother was a very generous women who helped support our family after our father died. But her visit always came along with a degree of tension. We sensed it as children - and only now as adults can we fully understand it. I think our mother would have viewed the annual five week visit as an intrusion at best and an inspection at worst. You can understand her reticence. Since Granny helped pay the household bills she had the right to come out to make sure the house was in order. That meant our mother, who was very practical, felt an obligation and a certain degree of pressure to present us and the house in the best possible light. Granny had to be picked-up, or "fetched" as she would say, from the Sylvia Hotel at precisely 4:00 every day. We had to wear our cleanest newest clothes and have our hair combed. It was all a bit pretentious and unnatural. Our daily Granny dates always involved pursuits that I wasn't used to. She loved to take us to beautiful

touristy outdoor places to have our pictures taken in front of nice objects. We have albums full of Miriam and me standing next to old hollow trees in Stanley Park, next to bushes in Queen Elizabeth Park, next to boats in Coal Harbor and next to logs on Jericho Beach. Posing, unnaturally with stiffly pasted-on smiles, Granny snapped off rolls and rolls of Kodachrome film with her new instamatic camera. I have noticed 40 years later Miriam has picked up the same habit. On family holidays my sister has this strange affliction of not being able to pass an object of interest without snapping a quick picture of it with one of her children in front of it. I call it the Granny Photo Fixation.

After our pictures taking sessions we would usually go to one of three fancy restaurants for dinner. One was the Stanley Park Pavilion at Prospect Point. It was great because you got to sit outside and they served chicken paprika roasted on the spit, with these little white paper socks and pink ribbons tied on the ends of the drumsticks. We'd also go to the Bavarian Room on West Broadway and the Hungarian Goulash House on West 4th. Sometimes we would have a salmon dinner at our place. The home cooked salmon meal would be served on the front porch which was a special place that we only ate at when Granny was there. Suppers on the front porch were always interrupted by an attack of wasps from a nearby nest which provided an entertaining and welcome distraction for a 5 year old like me,.

Dinner reservations, and dinners at home were at 5:30 sharp and we would pick Granny up at the Sylvia Hotel, like clockwork at 4:00 pm. Our Mum would pull up to the front of the Ivy covered hotel in our turquoise 1960 Vauxhall, and Miriam and I, who were nothing more than a couple of little puny rug-rats at the time, would quickly scurry out of the car and make a mad dash to the hotel elevator. We frantically flew up the front entrance stairs, past Mannie the doorman, past the front marble check-in counter, down the hallway covered in purple paisley motif carpet, and then left to the elevator. Out of breath, running as fast as we could - who would be the first one to press the elevator button? With reckless abandon we could run full blast, and be as noisy as we liked because our mother was busy parking the car. It was harmless unsupervised childhood fun. Totally caught up in the moment, in an ecstatic state of mind we'd dodge through hotel guests' knees, around ashtrays and baggage trolleys as we raced to the lift. Catching our breath we stood there in fits of uncontrollable juvenile laughter waiting for the elevator doors to open. The open doors signaled part two of our hotel shenanigans. We'd scurry into the elevator for the contest to see who could be the first to reach

way up and place their tiny little finger on the seventh floor button. Ooh what fun? At this stage the Otis Elevator Olympics took a brief intermission as the rickety contraption slowly ascended to the seventh floor of the Sylvia. As soon as the gates (doors) flew open it was another mad dash to see who was the fastest one to run all the way down the hallway, and be the first to knock on the door of room 727.

The Sylvia hotels elevator was nothing short of pure bliss. Waterslides hadn't been invented yet but they would have paled in comparison. You have to remember that this is 1963, these were simpler times, before video games and computers. An elevator was a pretty high-tech invention, and we didn't get to go into them too often. Everything seemed so much simpler back then.

Granny would open the door and give us each a big kiss on the cheek. She always wore way too much perfume and had lots of make up and jewelry on. She'd have a treat waiting for us. She'd tell us that she had brought us a little something special from New York and then reach deep into the back of her big pepper grey tweed suit case and pull out six bright red packs of delicious Dentyne gum. Three packs for each of us. "Like I mean , WOW" She must have bought it in bulk before each trip because her Dentyne supply lasted for the duration for her entire six week stay. And not just for us; she brought Dentyne for Phil, Tom Ian and Rob too. The endless supply of chewing gum made a lasting impression on my friends too because 42 years later whenever I mention Granny to any of the old gang they bring up her abundant never ending supply of Dentyne.

We'd chat in her room for a few minutes waiting for our mother to arrive from parking the Vauxhall. I can't remember the particulars of our conversations from 40 years ago about but I am sure she would ask us the standard questions that grandmothers have been asking grand kids for generations. Once Mum arrived at room 727 Granny would excuse herself to the washroom for quite a long period of time to freshen up before we left for dinner. That's when the fun really began. Granny always had a big fresh bowl of fruit in her room. We didn't know where it came from, but we sure knew where it was going. Straight out the window. She must have really liked grapes because the fruit bowl overflowed with three or four large bunches of fresh green grapes. Grapes were perfect projectiles to toss out of the window. At first it was just fun to lob them out of the window and watch them bounce on the sidewalk or explode into a squishy mess seven floor down. Then as we became more sophisticated we started to drop them on the unsuspecting

pedestrians walking down Beach Avenue in front of the Sylvania.

It's not that easy to drop a grape and land it perfectly on top of someone's head from seven stories up. You need to anticipate two important variable factors. First off the weight of the grape and the amount of time it will take for the grape to travel to the ground; which was about two seconds. And then you need to factor in the speed of which a person is walking. Older people walk slower than younger people. If a slow walking older person was walking down Beach Avenue on a sunny August afternoon at say around 4:40 you could easily miscalculate the grape-drop and have it land right in front of them, splatting unmeaningfully onto the sidewalk. It takes a lot of practice to have the grape and the person's head meet at exactly the right time. And when you are five years old practicing grape target shooting is a total riot.

Looking back on it now I believe dropping grapes was pretty harmless. I can't imagine a grape actually seriously hurting anyone. According to Galileo's theory of velocity an object will accelerate at a rate of 32 feet and increase at that rate of speed until it reaches terminal velocity. So although the grapes could reach a dangerous speed, let's say 100 or 200 feet per second, I still don't think they could have really hurt anyone. They are too small and soft. But it still must have been a bit annoying to have been hit by one of our flying grapes. The people walking far far down below on Beach Avenue looked like tiny ants and we didn't really consider them to be real people at all. We'd toss the grapes from the ledge and then crouch down behind the window as if to hide. We'd laugh our heads off, and from the tiny bathroom near the window Granny would ask what was going on? Our Mum turned a blind eye and kind of played along with our shenanigans realizing we were young and bored.

This grape tossing became a tradition that happened pretty much on a daily basis during Granny's five week stay. Every afternoon we looked forward to the elevator race followed by the grape tossing. Over the course of the summer hundreds of grapes were tossed out of room 727.

There must have been a pedestrian that took particular umbrage over the flying fruit. One summer morning the phone rang at our house and it was Granny. From listening to Mum's reaction on our end of the phone we could tell that something was wrong. Mum was responding with plenty of "hmmms" and words like "really" and "I can't believe it". Her end of the conversation was full of compassionate concern and disbelief. By the way our mother

looked at as while she spoke to Granny we could also tell that we were going to be in big trouble once she got off the phone.

Apparently one of the unlucky pedestrian ants that had been hit by our grapes (collateral damage) must have been looking up. Out of the corner of his eye he saw which room the Thompsen seedless had been launched from. He counted the number of floors up and the number of rooms over and filed a complaint with the hotel management. To make matters worse the hotel management had received numerous complaints from other pedestrians over the course of that summer complaining of falling fruit. The hotel manager had no choice but to call Granny and tell her that if she continued flinging grapes out of room 727 she would be asked to leave the hotel. Can you imagine her reaction? She was the Baroness

Hedwig Von Herczel and they were going to kick her out! She pleaded not guilty to the managers accusations but they didn't believe her. They must have thought she was some waco little old bitty from New York who came to Vancouver every year to toss fruit on unsuspecting Canadians. On the phone when our mother finally caved on us, Granny couldn't believe that her two angelic grandkids were responsible for her possible eviction.

Recently my sister told me that we also tossed peaches out the window. I don't remember being involved with anything that large, nor will I ever admit to tossing peaches of room 727 (I am not sure how long the statute of limitations applies to crimes involving fruit). However since my sister was five years older than me at the time I have to assume there might be some truth to her recollections. She must have tossed the peaches. Not me. The story somehow loses a bit of its childhood innocence when the fruits being tossed are heavy and dangerous.

Back to our daily routine at the Sylvia now. After Granny was ready to go and after we had reduced the contents of her fruit bowl by at least 50 percent, all four of us would stroll down the hallway together toward the 7th floor elevator. Either Miriam or I would yell out "Race you to the bottom" and we'd suddenly take off running all the way down the staircase to the ground floor. Naturally, along the way we would stop on every floor just long enough to press the elevator button. Just when you thought more fun wasn't possible at the Sylvia, when you thought how can we possibly top the race to Granny's room and the grape toss, you got to press a bunch of elevator buttons. It was too much fun. When the elevator finally arrived on the ground floor after making five unnecessary stops our mum and Granny immediately reprimanded

us. Mum would have had a bit of a smile on her face and Granny would just have a puzzled look on hers.

Year in year out we repeated our Sylvia Hotel ritual. I don't ever remember getting older and growing out of it although I imagine we did. Granny got older though. One year she became ill and stopped coming to Vancouver. That was around the time I was just becoming a teenager. By the time I reached my late teens Granny had died in her apartment in New York.

Now as an adult whenever I walk or jog by the Sylvia I can't help being swept away by a flood of happy memories. Memories of innocent discoveries and childhood foolishness. Memories of our loving Grandmother and Mother letting us do what comes naturally to kids. Just being kids. And when I pass the old Sylvia Hotel and indulge myself in those wonderful thoughts I always look up to room 727 to make sure some little brat isn't about to toss a grape at me.

PART ONE OF THE STORY IS OVER AND NOW IT IS TIME FOR PART TWO -WHICH WILL BEGIN ON APRIL 23rd 2005.

So it has been about 35 years since Miriam and I have dropped grapes out of room 727 of the Sylvia Hotel. Recently I wondered what it would feel like to do it again. To toss grapes out of the window now, as an adult. Miriam's 53 Birthday is coming up so I went down to the old Sylvia Hotel and rented room 727 for the occasion. Miriam and her husband Len will stay there for overnight, I'll arrange for a nice dinner and a show for them too. And ofcourse I'll make sure there is a big basket full of fruit waiting for them. I'll join her to toss a few grapes out of the window for old times sake. Then as the grapes fall freely through the sky we'll both pause to think of Granny and Mum and those carefree summers that we thought would never come to an end.

And if you see a peach being flung out of the window , it wasn't me tossing it. It was Miriam. other