

Few could tell bedtime stories as titillating as my grandmother could.

They were unfiltered, even when telling them to children. She wouldn't stifle any of the outrageous bizzarrities that lived in her brain, of which there was no limit.

A blown-up air mattress was camped at the foot of her bed for my sister and I, where we would curl up together. As she tucked us in, we'd gaze at her longingly, our eyes begging for a story.

Each story was unlike the last, never read out of a book. As a story begun, it was near impossible to calculate where it would end.

I can't remember any of them today. The beauty of them is that they were not made to be remembered. They existed for one night, one moment, somewhere else entirely as they enveloped me in them. The next visit would be a new one, a new world she created for us.

Usually, these stories lulled me to sleep apart from when I'd think of the porcelain leopard that sat under her window. This leopard terrified my young self.

Not to worry, she'd assure me. Once she turned off the light, I wouldn't be able to see it.

The end, story over, I'd find myself in the dark, on the air mattress, vulnerable to attack from the leopard. It watched me with its glassy eyes, waiting for me to fall asleep so it could pounce. I made her move it outside the bedroom, or she made my grandpa move it. Only then could I fall asleep without fear.

Last night, like most nights, my roommate and I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. In the dark and without my glasses, I looked at her without seeing much. I asked if she could tell me a story.

She began her story about an oddly sized shoe that spent his life looking for someone to wear him. Between sentences, her tongue clicked, she swallowed while catching her breath when the words came out too fast.

This reminded me of my grandma, of her soft voice and pauses as she thought of what to say next.

Nowadays she can't quite hold a conversation. The pauses are extensive.

She rarely does think of what to say next.

When I speak to her, her eyes gloss over. She looks at me as if I said nothing at all.

Her eyes have become that of the porcelain leopard.

Now, this leopard is the vulnerable one. Now, I do not fear the leopard. I let her into my bedroom.

I tell her stories. I speak to her softly and never let her feel afraid, just as she did for me.