

Ars Longa, Vita Brevis

I detested that refrigerator. It sat in Gram's garage, clunking and humming its confident pledge. We move through time, distinguishably, with changes and forward progress. The newness that keeps life interesting. But not this fridge. It was old, and the way it stood, so proud of itself, working and keeping the glass bottled milk cold after all its years.

It was cerulean. She painted it that specific shade and decorated it with her imperfect, asymmetrical white stars, pirouetting as if wearing high-heeled doll shoes, the way she often did. Glissading back and forth, individual brush strokes kicked their five-pointed legs.

Whenever I pulled down the vertical handle, my thirteen-year-old hands blocked my body. I braced myself for attack. An entity surely would spill from cold depths, finally free. A misty wind dropping chill bumps over my skin.

It is still alive. It breathes crisp air. Even now, with its same thumping anthem pulsing its rhythm, that icebox remains. Not at her house, but in mine.

The call came as I stared into fire. Orange and blue flames lapped over lava rock, warming my fingers. In the woods around me, trees bowed. My sister said two words, and we sat in silence, accepting the new absence. Ninety-two years lifted and released.

She had called me earlier that day, too. "Hurry," Rachel had said. Grabbing my keys and then my shoes, driving to the facility, circling around Gram, lifting tissues to my eyes, reading her memories in poem form, watching her labored and shaky inhales, hoping she could hear, I hurried. I didn't take anything of hers. I left. Empty handed.

When I drove to her house, for the last time, I knew I would make the find. Rachel and Mom had been searching. They had looked in her jewelry boxes, her drawers, even under the kitchen sink, which is where I would

have checked. Gram always set that unusual ring on a wooden hand-shaped stand beside the white ceramic sink.

Long silver prongs enclosed a round brilliant aquamarine. In my plethora of recollections, Gram was wearing it on her right hand. It was there as she set down homemade birthday cakes before the wishmaker. There, every December thirteenth when she wore a crown of flaming candles and walked into my morning bedroom, the light on her head more vibrant than the rising sun. There, when she pulled from the oven our clay-baked baby figurines, wrapped in striped blankets. There, under gloved hands, as she packed pieces of winter, building a snow rabbit. She garlanded him with a purple, checkered tie.

“It’s gone for good,” my mom said when I walked inside. A desk drawer open beside her, a dusty photo album on her lap, she didn’t look up. Cardboard boxes filled the disheveled rooms. It was the first time I had thought about all that is left behind, all that remains, afterwards.

Because I felt a pulling, as if a child were nagging at my sleeve, I entered her bedroom first. Mom had the jewelry displayed on the bed as if to prove she had tried.

“It’ll forever be a mystery. I bet it vanished years ago,” she said as I eyed the pixelated mosaic of beads and costume baubles.

“No.” A petite voice whispered, tickling my ear. By the way her focused stare did not break, I knew Mom hadn’t heard. The breath tugged my elbow, and I tripped, catching myself on the sock drawer.

“I’ve already looked through there,” Mom said, but I slid the door open anyway. Betty Boop socks greeted me, so I picked them up, smiling. There, in the vacated space sat a red and gold silk pouch. Mom only noticed my movements when I gasped, dropping the socks to the floor.

“I found it,” I said.

Ars longa, vita brevis. Caligraphed in her curvy, cursive handwriting, she signed every piece of her art with the phrase and her initials: FGR. Each one Latin-inscribed: Five granddaughters she painted on the wall, the headboard she crafted with angel bunnies ribboning pink blossom trees—an aurulent banner between their paws, all drawings of her penned Gamma Alpha Rho newsletter collection.

As I turn pages of the printed edition, the fifty-nine remaining bulletins, I realize she's only partially correct because she's alive in the black-and-white sketch of Mom pouring tea by the heart chair while Gram sat on the floor, holding a pencil, working the crossword. Because she's present in Newsletter Number 30, watching her two eldest granddaughters hang Easter eggs on a thin, bare sapling. Because she breathes in her self portrait, gazing into a treasure box and holding a bird house, while her parents smile down from a colored-pencil heaven bubble.

Within her ink, her intricate lines, her stripes of paint, she whispers, "*Ars longa, vita brevis.*" I hear her harmonious voice when I open the fridge, her blue ring on my finger. The most important remains: I take her words with me.