

Irma Maidenberg's Last Months

A memoir begun on Mother's Day, May 10, 2009



July, 2008. The ever-pleasant back porch.

Summer, 2008. Mother says she has decided not to go to Fort Lauderdale the following winter. Despite entreaties from Mike to come and stay in Coral Gables, she is adamant that she is not up to it.

"Michael, you don't understand," she says. "I've changed."

August, 2008. She suffers a "TIA" or transient ischemic attack, a mini-stroke. Toby arranges for 24x7 helpers, a crew put together by Chris Ailes, who helps with Frank Maidenberg.

As soon as Mother recovers some strength, she disposes of the helpers. She doesn't like their presence in the house, and she hates the expense.

Thanksgiving, 2008. Mother is uneasy about the big gathering, but plays her role with her usual verve. She doesn't do as much cooking, and she tires easily. She

comments that she just can't do it anymore. We agree 2008 is the last Marion Thanksgiving.

December, 2008. Toby, Mike and Kitty travel together in India. When they call her from half a world away she is chipper if not exactly chatty. She is pleased to hear from them.

Sunday, Jan. 11, 2009. Mike calls Mother. She is in bad shape. It is noon. She says she has not gotten out of bed, and is having trouble remembering what day it is.

Mike tells Mother either to call Joyce, or he will. She phones Joyce, who comes over immediately and takes her to Marion General Hospital, where she stays for three nights.

Monday, Jan. 12. Mike speaks to Dr. Kavita Raj. Mother has a bladder infection, she says. She is dehydrated. Dr. Raj notes Mother's history of poor kidney function. She will need help when she returns home.

Mike speaks with Mother in the hospital later that day. "I don't want dialysis," she says. "I'll just float out."

Toby springs into action. She arranges for around -the-clock care using Chris Ailes' group. She books a visit for the end of the month. Johna, David and Sigalit will accompany her.

Wednesday, Jan. 14. Mother comes home. Her voice sounds stronger, but she feels weak. The helpers are in place.

Thursday, January 16. Toby e-mails a discussion with Chris.

Mother complains about being weak, but Chris thinks she is doing better. She said her vital signs are much better. She said that she talks about death and Chris said she had told her that she doesn't think she is dying 'right now' and that she will get better if she gets up and moves around.

Mother gets up to watch television, and to use the computer.

Friday, January 17. Chris talks to Mike. She says Mother is doing a little better every day. But she is weak. She is not able to go to the bathroom by herself. She is using a walker. Unlike last August, Chris says, "She is not fighting me."

Thursday, January 22. Mother e-mails Toby:

**It is a peculiar feeling to be facing one's death. that is how I feel daily, I am not any stronger so I am existing right now.
que sera
mother**

Toby replies:

I guess it is always good to face the fact that you might die, though you need to live in the present. And that goes for any age you are.

I don't know if it is any comfort, though I hope it is, to know that you have three children who have great love for you. You have been a good mother to us, and I expect you to continue for a while longer. I'm not ready to say good-bye.

Friday, January 23. After discussion with her children, Mother signs a "Do not resuscitate" form. Toby recaps:

Mother said...how strange it is to be facing one's own death and how she feels she is just existing right now. I told her that I thought it was always good to face the prospect of one's death at any time in your life, but to live in the present. She still has a life and a whole big family who love her.

Mike speaks with Dr. Raj, who notes that Mother's heart disease has been progressing. The symptoms are horrible, a sensation of smothering or drowning. To counter this, Dr. Raj says she is prescribing a medication that will remove fluids. The downside is that it will worsen the kidney condition. Dr. Raj says that when kidneys shut down, it is not painful. It is "a better way to go."

Monday, January 26. Mother tells Chris she does not want the helpers in the house when Toby, Johna, David and Sig visit the next weekend. Chris tells her this is just not realistic, given her level of care. Mother relents.

Friday, January 30. Toby and Johna arrive. David and Sigalit come the next day, Saturday. Toby e-mails:

She wears this oxygen thing and every time she goes to the bathroom the women follow along to make sure she doesn't get all tangled up in the cord, to make sure the walker doesn't run into obstacles. This happens 4-5 times a day. She needs help getting up and help getting dressed and help with meals. She cannot navigate in the kitchen with the walker and the food prep.

She has the combination of heart failure and kidney failure; but she has had both of these conditions for a while now, and she could continue to live an OK if restricted sort of life. She is totally there mentally and her appetite is pretty good.

The heart failure causes her trouble at night. Nighttime is when she is stressed, because the heart has more trouble pumping away the fluids. I think it is scary but she had a slightly better night last night. Being propped up helps.

Toby and David present Mother with the stunning pashmina Toby and Mike bought her in India. They send a photo of Mother smiling with the pashmina draped in front of her.



At Dr. Raj's suggestion, Toby arranges for hospice to come in. The organization is New Hope Hospice. Julie Brown, an RN, is the prime contact.

Julie says Dr. Raj thinks Mother's life expectancy is six months, but cautions that no one can tell.

Saturday, February 7. Around 8 p.m., Mother e-mails Toby:

THIS AFTERNOON betty FLECK AND dEBBIE DROVE IN FOR A VISIT WHICH WAS NICE.. CHAN NGE OF SCENERY, AT LEAST. aLL IS WELL NOT MUCH SEEMSTO CHANGE SO i GUESS THAT IS A GOODTHING. luv, mOTHER

Saturday, February 14. Toby and Mother banter about Mother being a "hard-hearted mama" because she didn't want her children to visit her (and, they surmised, see her in a weakened state, oxygen tubes in her nose, unable to care for herself, to get about the house).

Mother e-mails Toby:

think you understdnd how I feel. Don't know who could put on a happy face under theae circumstances. I would be an idiot to sit here with a big smile'. There are certain circumstances when it is actually not worth living-- I wonder how long I can go on like this?? They are doing their best to keep me alive, but what is the point? I feel that I had a perfectly good life and now it is time togo, wherever that may be. I know ththat I will live on in my children just as I have from my parents. I expect nothing else. Love, Mother

Friday, February 20. Mother taps out an unhappy e-mail with the subject line, "mney, money, money."

**dear mike,
last month i put out 12,615.45 for nurses alone.not so bad if all hadn't gone bust.
today, i sold 100shares coned and 20,000\$ franklin templeton. wont last long but no choice.
i dont feel worth this miserable existence.it is not any pleasure to me and it is time to go.they are taking such good care of me that i will outlast the money,i fear**

if i had a sense of humor it has left with the money.
just wanted you to know.
mother

Thursday, March 12. Mother e-mails Reed:

After our most recent conversation today I felt thyat I must reassure you
THAT UNDER THECIRCUMSTANCES i AM BEING WELL CARED FOR AND
YOU CANNOT FIGHT THE INEVITABLE .i HAVE LIVED A LONG LIFE AND A
HAPPY ONE. i LOVE MY CHILDREN AND i KNOW THEY LOVE ME, WHAT
ELSE IS THERE IN THIS LIFE BUT FAMILY? so, dEAR rEED, DO NOT BE
SAD , YOU KNOW THAT DEATH Dear Reed,
IS A PARTOF LIFE AND NO ONE. CAN ESCAPE THAT. YOU HAVE YOUR
WONDERFUL DAUGHTER AND THAT IS WHAT IS IMPORTANT. I LOVE
YOU A LOT rEED, AND i WILL LIVE ON IN YOUR MEMORIES,THAT IS THE
WAY IT IS .
mOTHER

Reed replies:

Mother, thank you for your email.

It is bittersweet to say the least. We have been blessed to have had you
with us for so long, but it has made us greedy and not willing to easily let
go. Add to that you have your faculties pretty well intact, your mind mostly
clear and sharp, even as your body winds down.

We will continue to love and cherish you, and want you among us,
available to us over the phone at the least, and anchoring all our collective
memories at 1100 Euclid Avenue.

It is clear that your health has declined dramatically, and also that you have
proven to have the capacity to bounce back before, and might again, but
also that there is only so much bounce we are given in life.

All the words you write carry a strong concentrated impact, given the effort
it must take to express those thoughts. Just know that you live strong and
bright and ever-young in our hearts despite the toll time has taken. We are
blessed.

As you say, and as we all know...we are living on the borrowed time plan,
and tomorrow is only a promise, not a guarantee.

Love, Reed

Mother responds:

**DEAR REED,
i APPRECIATE YOUR UNDERSTANDING. IT MEANS A LOT ME
LOVE,
MOTHER**

When Mike visits the following week, he understands the unusual typography of Mother's e-mails. She does not have enough strength to depress the keys. She uses a large screw she found somewhere to tap out her messages letter by letter.

Monday, March 16. Mike flies to Marion for a two-day visit. He sees her weakness. She has trouble making it from the bedroom to the den. Yet she still wants to be the welcoming presence of old. She has carefully instructed one of the helpers how to make brisket. The dish is edible, but hardly up to standard. Mother is scornful of the cooking ability of the helper crew, snorting that some of them "don't know how to boil an egg."

Mother herself eats sparingly. She does not leave her chair in the den, eating from a wicker tray.

Dr. Raj stops by the house. She explains calmly and clearly that two major organs are failing, the heart and the kidneys. She tells mother that kidney failure is a painless death.

In a conversation, Mother recalls the lyric, "I'm tired of living but scared of dying."

Mike spends much of the time working out how to pay the helpers. CPA Bob Logan explains the options. We decide the best method is for Mother to become their employer. This will facilitate paying FICA taxes, as well as meeting federal and state unemployment obligations.

When I tell this to Mother, she is grateful. The handling of the payments has been overwhelming to her, particularly now that she can barely muster strength to sign her name.

"When I was growing up, I depended on my father. Then I depended on Milt. And now I depend on you, Michael," she says.

Monday, March 30. Mike returns to Marion to help put the new payroll system into place. The helpers now will turn in their hours to Maidenberg Associates, which will act as Mother's agent.

Mike sees that Mother is noticeably more feeble than just two weeks ago. Now she can no longer use her walker. When she is in her chair, her head slumps forward. She spends more time in bed. The blare of CNN is gone. She does not use the computer.

Mother eats very little. She depends on the helpers for all of her needs.

She tells Mike that she is little more than a "rag doll".

Thursday, April 9. Ted calls Mother to tell her about the birth of Maisy Jane that day. He texts, "Just spoke to her. Sounded weak but really perked up when I told her the news."

Saturday, April 11. Chris calls Mike. Mother is nervous, she says. Last night, she wanted to sleep in the den. She seems afraid of going to bed. She declined the morphine that she had been getting after previous episodes of agitation and sleeplessness.

Chris says she helped calm her down. She is weaker. This morning she couldn't stand. She is talking more and more about dying.

Sunday, April 12. Toby flies to Marion. She is intent on making matzo ball soup for Mother, who has not been eating well despite the well-meaning attempts of the helpers.

Once when lack of culinary skills was mentioned to Chris, she smiled and said, "I don't hire them for their ability to cook."

Reed and David are coming on Tuesday. David will drive the Toyota back to Boston.

Tuesday, April 14. Mike talks to Julie Brown of New Hope Hospice. Mother seems depressed, she says. Perhaps an anti-depressant medication should be considered.

Mother is more withdrawn. Often she doesn't open her eyes.

We recall what Dr. Raj has said about kidney disease. The person sleeps more and more, and eventually doesn't wake up.

Wednesday, April 15. As Toby leaves, Mother makes a supreme effort to appear normal. She has a bite to eat, talks a bit, shares a joke.

Toby tells Mother that Dan and Amy had a little girl, Aviva, born April 12. Mother is lying in bed, Toby is lounging with her. One of the helpers brings the phone to her and says, it is your grandson Dan. Dan tells her about the baby. Mother listens. She says to Dan, "One spirit leaves...another spirit arrives."

Thursday, April 16. Toby e-mails:

I felt Mother was asking us to let her go..let me go she said, on one occasion.

Reed:

This morning, mother sitting in her chair with some breakfast watching tv. Reed: "how you feeling today Mother?" Mother: "How should I feel? I'm dying." (accompanied by wry smirk.)

Last night she asked me to read Gunga Din to her. I did. Mike had printed it out. I asked her if there were any other poems she would like to hear. She mentioned "Life is just a bowl of cherries" with lyrics on the office bulletin board. I brought it back and tried to sing it, but I didn't know the melody (only what I heard from Toby over the phone.) Then she said she had a Fosse tape with it on it, and that she would like me to play it. No vhs in bedroom, so I got the one from the porch, found two Fosse tapes in the closet (had to put in new bulb), brought them back, set it up, and started searching through the tape. Enchanting, passionate dancing and singing. I was often tempted to stop and watch. I thought of mother sitting on the porch watching, absorbing this fabulous artistry, being inspired by it. All those wonderful tapes she has of dance, music, culture, lovingly labeled and organized. it's hard to think of her with that energy now. Well, I finally found Ben Vereen singing the song, and I roused mother to get her attention, which had flagged seriously by then. She said it wasn't how she remembered it. Next command: "Eject!" Well, I tried.

Reed finds a copy of a short, typed document entitled "My Will", which Mother authored in 1969.

She emphasizes a closed casket. "I want you to remember me as I lived, and if that's not enough I'm sorry."

She ends: "It's not easy to write a will when one is in good health as I am now in my 54th year...The fact of death seems very far away right now...So, don't stop the world because I am getting off. It was a good ride on the merry-go-round."

Mother had copied the lyrics to "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries" and pinned them on the bulletin board in the office where she used the computer and did her checkbook. No doubt she read them often.

**Life is just a bowl of cherries
Don't take it serious,
Life's too mysterious
You work,
You save,
You worry so
But you can't take your dough
When you go, go, go**

**So keep repeating "It's the berries."
The strongest oak must fall
The sweet things in life
To you were just loaned
So how can you lose
What you've never owned**

**Life is just a bowl of cherries
So live and laugh, aha!
Laugh and love
Live and laugh,
Laugh and love,
Live and laugh at it all!**

Friday, April 17. Reed e-mails:

I was looking at her face, and it really looked serene, with very few wrinkles as she lay a little on her left side. I held her hand for a long time. I said we love her, and understand if she has to go she has to go. We love her and will always love her and know that she has reached the end of the line. "There's a bridge game waiting for you over there." I think she smiled a little.

I sat on the bed for a long time and didn't move. When I finally got up, she immediately said "Good night, Reed." And "why don't you go see that movie?" (I don't know what movie). I said I'm staying here, and that I would be here tomorrow, too. She said "okay."

Reed reads Mother an e-mail from Jill. "She heard it," he says:

Dear Auntie,

You have stated to me more than once that we tend to die near our birthdays. I know Milt did, my mom did, Ruthie did. And here we are coming up on May. If it happens that I don't see you again on this earth I have a few things I'd like to say to you.

I know you're ready to go. I hope and pray the end comes easily. I cannot imagine the world without you.

I am just so glad to have been your niece. You have inspired me in so many ways and for so long that I think of you as I breathe: without even being aware it. You are in every room of my house!

I am so glad you have had a good and full life. I have so many fond memories of you, of you and Milt, of our family gatherings, from my whole life. So many good and happy times! I also remember that at my mother's unveiling I was so grief-stricken that I could barely stand. You held me up. I never said thank you.

In my mind's eye it's a beautiful afternoon and you and I are sitting on the back porch. I'm sipping a Coke and people are dropping in. Books, newspapers, photographs are everywhere, always something new, always new life. We're discussing and laughing and catching up, and your eyes are very sparkly, and you're beautiful, and there is color everywhere. How I love you! How I will cherish these memories.

Good final journey to you, my beloved aunt. If it happens that you run into Milt, Grandma Rose and my mom, give them all a squeeze for me.

I love you so! Jill

Saturday, April 18. Reed:

Mother very weak, not opening her eyes at all.

I was holding her hand for a long time. Finally she said, "Leave me alone."

Hospice nurse Kathy came. Took vital signs. Blood pressure is slightly down. Mother is taking very little in, outputting very little...She does wake up occasionally and looks to see if someone is there, told Becci, "What will I do if you leave?" Becci reassured her she won't be alone.

What happened of note is Mother used the toilet and went limp, and Becci

couldn't manage her back onto the bed by herself. I had to help. Slight as she is, when she is dead weight she's a lot to manage. So Becci is going to try and get a Depend on her just in case. When Mother is out of bed she complains of cold.

Becci put on Tony Bennett on the cassette player in the bedroom. "I thought about you" is playing.

Now..."Night and Day."

Toby:

Dear brothers,

We were lucky to have two caring parents. To the end, both of them are/were more concerned about us, than about leaving this world. I feel like Mother has carried the torch for a long time, and done it beautifully. I'm really going to miss her.

Reed:

As she says in her "will" she will live on in our memories and in her children; and, might I add, in the wonderful artwork she created, that is her immortality. As we embody her spirit and ideals and remember her, she will live on. I think that's all she expects and wants.

Just before midnight, Toby writes to the family:

We are sitting vigil here, with Reed our oracle, bringing us news, carrying messages to us from the very edge of the beyond...Thanks Reed.

Sunday, April 19. Just after midnight, Reed sends a photo he calls "The Jazz Mamas at their peak."



Mid-morning text: "Mother is up sitting in her chair. I played Dan and Amy's video and Emma's message and she spoke with Johna too."

Two hours later, in an e-mail titled "Words don't serve":

I was talking with her, she says "This is a hell of a way to go." I said I was happy we all had time to see her and say goodbye, that I thought that was better than something sudden and unexpected.

I asked her if she could send a postcard from the other side, and she smiled a little.

She said "why are you still here?" I said I am going to see the Boncheks tomorrow, and she said "good." I said I would stay by her side if she wanted, she said "no."

I said the care givers are wonderful women, she said "Jackie knows what she's doing." (Jackie was here at the time). Becci was absolutely wonderful with her today, so kind and patient, even having to clean her up after she wet the bed. We are so lucky to have these women.

Chris also came this evening and they decided to overlap shifts by 1/2 hour to facilitate any moving of Mother if she becomes even more unable to move herself. I was surprised that she got up on her elbows tonight to let me adjust her pillow. She wouldn't have wanted me to see her so a month ago, but she has let go of vanity at this stage. That's saying something for such a private and well put together woman.

Just before noon:

I am leaving Marion now. What a time it has been. I wish I could say it was as fun as my other visits here, but you know better.

I think Mother got up this morning knowing I was leaving and wanted to be in her chair to see me off. It was a blessing that she could view Dan's video, hear Emma's message, and Joseph and the kids prattling on about pancakes, etc. Everyday life, the prosaic, must seem quite exotic to her.

She didn't want to watch the morning news shows. She sat silently, wiping her nose now and then with a tissue. She said very forcefully, "Goodbye," as if, go already. But typical to my style, I'm still here. What is that about the British and the Yiddish? You know the story.

Anyway, I'm about to go say goodbye to her in her bedroom, where she retired to 10 minutes ago. Then...to Bloomington, and, the plan is, to Calif. tomorrow, unless there's a reason not to.

"Final goodbye" is the subject line:

I said my final goodbye to Mother...I can't talk to you about this, I just have to write it. She was in bed. Nancy left to give me some private time.

"Mother, I'm leaving."

"All right, honey."

"I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Okay."

Every response clear and strong from her. I said I know this is hard on her as it is on me, and I don't want to prolong it; that she was the best mother anyone could ask for, that I'm so proud of her that she's been strong and brave up to the end; that I'll carry my love for her all my life and that I'm so happy to have been her son.

At the end, "Okay honey...goodbye."

I'm a wreck...

Reed sends out a not-yet-complete poem:

**our lady of jewels lies in bed
not awaiting her call to duty;
not awaiting her next party to host
or order to fulfill;
grandchild to pamper with cash gift
or fun costume jewelry;**

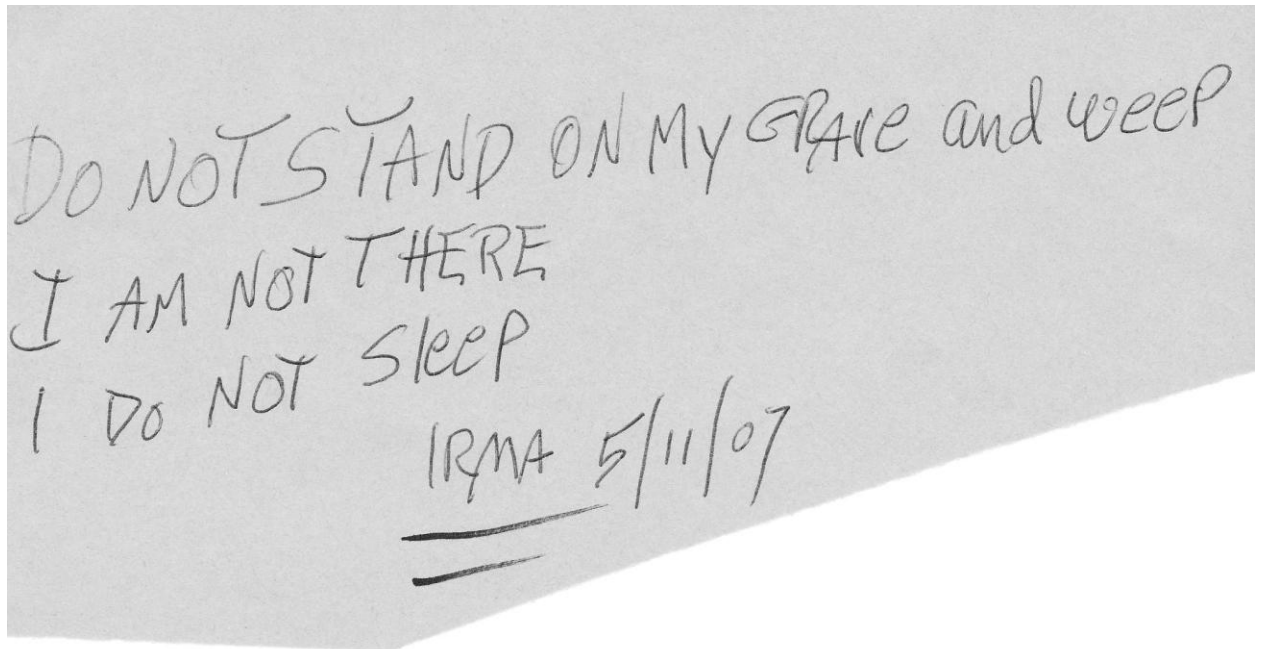
not depended upon to bake a sweet kugel
or matzah ball soup; or whip up a quick wonderful meal:
ratatouille, twice-baked potatoes, lemon meringue pie;
or even salty popcorn and a tumbler of cool refreshment
on the screen porch on a summer afternoon with the cardinals whooping,
the mourning doves cooing, lawn mowers rumbling with the
sweet smell of cut grass in the air mixed with exhaust.

Irma, delight of our delight, who had us all
laughing, sparkling in reflected brilliance,
wit sharp at the ready, not dulled to ease the penetration
nor any best seller of quality passed by;
New Yorker chewed and digested weekly; Bill Maher, Jon Stewart;
a closet full of VHS tapes: Fosse, Sondheim, Bernstein, Waller,
Ellington, Jobim, Porter, Carmichael, you get the idea;
Curb your Enthusiasm, a great favorite: humor had to have bite, too,
like life. not cloying sweetness, but bitter taste included.
Honest.
Dance, theater, jazz, the arts she so gravitated to;
beauty and grace of form she was inspired by:
these were her delights, the water she drank
to slake the thirst for transcendence.

Alas, transcendence comes, but at the price of the body.
No promise of a better world soothes her spirit
nor serves as balm for us who love her.
She quoted once: "Do not stand on my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep."
She is facing this cold end honestly, truthfully, bravely,
but with care and compassion even now for those who love her.

"They are calling from the other side,
but this side won't let me go."

As she might say, "Enough already. Go."
But...



DO NOT STAND ON MY GRAVE and weep
I AM NOT THERE
I DO NOT SLEEP
IRMA 5/11/07

Jackie Ganz e-mails about Anne's last talk with Irma:

I know from this end (Arizona) as emotional and brief as it was on Friday it was important for them to hear each other's voice and express their love for each other. We spent quite a while reminiscing after they hung up. Reed had left when she called this morning and Irma wasn't able to talk.

Monday, April 20. Reed heads from Bloomington to Indianapolis, where he is scheduled to catch his return flight to California. As he nears the terminal, he receives a call from Toby: "Something happened. They think she might be going. She went cold and her blood pressure dropped. She said 'I think I'm going.'" It is clear to him that he must return to Marion. He does.

When he is back at 1100 Euclid and sizes up the situation, he tells Mike and Toby they need to be there as well. Both book flights, Mike to arrive Thursday and Toby Friday. They agree that it will be just the three of them together.

We learn later that on this day, Mother tells Julie from hospice she is ready to go.

"What's the hold-up?" she asks.

At 8:29 p.m. Jenny Maidenberger e-mails "The White Blouse" story:

Just returned from 1100...Irma is surrounded by love, Reed, Frank

Sinatra music, a hospice nurse, and caregivers. It is very serene.

I need to share...Irma, many years ago, told me to ALWAYS own a good white blouse, starched correctly, collar up, nothing can ever look better. It was her signature style and I have to say I have adopted for myself. I own many white blouses...have become somewhat of a snob about them to boot.

I always feel delicious and refined because I know it looks right. After all, the master of chic and good taste said so. And...I always think of Irma and will continue to think of her every time I slip one on.

Tony just poured me a chilled Lillet...another Irma tip. Tomorrow...a white blouse.

Tuesday, April 21. Reed:

Irma is alert within her cocoon. When I went and said Hello, she said "hi." Frank expressed a wish to see her. She said "no."

When Becci left this morning, Irma asked "where are you going?" LaVonna and I had a nice talk last night, spurred by my gentle admonition that she not read to Irma from her bible, nor attempt any kind of religious approach with her. She said she would never do that, that she is trying to find answers for herself, not anyone else, and told me about many conversations she had had with Mother about God and what was happening to her. It was fascinating.

That's all. She's resting comfortably, morphine at the ready. I think in some part of her brain she is wondering, How did this happen to me, with all my vitality and love of life? Perhaps she needs to let that go before she can move on. But who knows?

Chloe Goldsmith just called offering consolation, condolences and matzah ball soup. I told her Irma probably wouldn't drink it but I would.

I'm playing music for Mother. Jobim, Sondheim, Short sings Porter, Sinatra, Clooney, Hartman/Coltrane, plus many others. I burnt two CDs for the bedroom.

In Mother's tape that I heard last night, she said she wanted Cabaret played at her funeral, with Liza Minelli. That was recorded 2 years ago.

Frank did come over. He used his wheelchair to get to the bedroom. He spent a few minutes at Mother's side, with Joyce, speaking to Irma in a quiet voice, then

speaking to Becci, recalling vacations they had taken together with Irma and Milt to Israel, and other wonderful memories.

Mother never needed morphine during the final week.

Wednesday, April 22. Reed:

Please keep Irma in your thoughts and prayers. I have encouraged everyone to speak to her, out loud at a private moment. I believe a part of her consciousness is not bound by time and space now, at this sacred crossing point. She is awake in there, responds when you speak directly to her. So I think she's floating around in space still attached to the body, but getting ready to depart. In that space I believe that a prayer, a thought, a feeling of love directed to her, and spoken aloud, may be received.

Reed reads Mother a letter from Rhiana:

Dear Irma,

I wanted to let you know how much I have appreciated being a part of your life and your family. I have treasured the time I spent with you in Marion, talking about movies, Bush and Obama, and sharing Elana's 1st few years with you. Both Maisy and Elana will grow up knowing what an amazing, beautiful and magical woman you were.

You made me feel welcome from my first Thanksgiving in Marion. I remember feeling very timid and worried about not being Jewish, but you never seemed to care about that. Thank you for being so generous and loving.

I hope to live my life as boldly as you. My life is so much greater having had you in it.

Love, Rhiana

Thursday, April 23. Mike arrives late afternoon. He goes to see Mother. She is in the hospital bed. Her eyes are closed. She does not speak.

He puts his hand on her forehead. "It's Mike, Mother. I'm here."

Her eyebrows work. Beneath the closed eyelids, her eyes seem to be moving.

Reed sits on one side of the bed, Mike on the other. We talk to Mother and we talk to each other.

Mike holds Mother's hand. As he talks, he feels pressure, a soft squeeze. He is certain that she knows he is here. Reed too, and the helpers, say Mother is conscious that she is surrounded by love.

Friday, April 24. Mike e-mails his sons:

Uneventful night. Mother resting comfortably now. Just taking a little moisture, no food, no drink, no meds. She doesn't open her eyes, doesn't talk, but her eyebrows move, her lips. She seems to be comprehending on some level. She moves little. Blood pressure low but heart still at work. She is at peace. Toby coming at 2.

When Toby arrives, the three siblings gather around the bed. They talk to Mother, hold her hand, sense that she senses them.

Her eyebrows flutter rapidly. Her brow furrows. Her eyes move. Occasionally her lips move as if to form words that she has not the strength to utter.

The siblings talk amongst ourselves as to what is going on in her mind.

Mike says something to the effect that she is seeing her life pass before her, that people she knew and loved are appearing before her.

The thought makes them smile.

Mike feels a soft pressing of Mother's hand, as if to say, that's right, that's what's happening.

When Mike looks at Mother's face in these last hours, he notices that she has begun to look like her mother, Grandma Val.

Saturday, April 25. Mother's condition is now far different than the day before. There is no movement of eyebrows or lips. There is no pressure from her hands. She is still. She breathes softly, but has gone to another stage of life.

Toby, Mike and Reed didn't know it, but the fluttering and furrowing of yesterday were her final good-byes to them.

In the afternoon, Jeannie Wilkinson, an old Marion acquaintance, stops by, along with Tony and Jennie. Reed plays the tribute video he made in her honor, which

was shown at Mother's 80th birthday party. It was a moving retelling of her life, so poignant at this moment.

Mike and Toby chat with the guests. Reed, however, senses that he should go to see Mother.

At 3:27 p.m. he sends a text:

"Come."

Toby and Mike join him at Mother's bedside. Her breathing is shallower and slower. It slows, slows, slows. It stops. Reed holds her pulse. The heartbeat continues for a few seconds. Then it too stops.

Toby, Mike and Reed join hands. They bow their heads across their mother's body, knowing that she had told them many times, "I am not there." They say their good-byes silently. They are thankful they were together in these her final moments.



Irma Valinet Maidenberg
May 17, 1915 - April 25, 2009