

A Diva Departs

On the morning of December 27, I went in to check on Mama and tell her about the show. She was groggy from all the painkillers, but she laughed and smiled, especially as I told her about Gary Beach's hilarious performance in the "Springtime for Hitler" number—Adolf Hitler as if it were played by Liza Minnelli. More importantly, she wanted to know if we had a good table at Sardi's. I told her it was the best table in the house. She beamed. Even as she lay dying, the Broadway diva had to know that her name could still command a good table at one of the theater district's finer restaurants.

With great difficulty, she planted her elbows and sat up in bed, facing me.

"I want you to do something for me."

"Sure," I said. "What?"

"Call your brothers and tell them it's time to come and say goodbye."

I stared at her in complete shock. I was totally unprepared for this. All the doctors had said she'd make it until April or May. Don and I were catching the 3:40 flight back to L.A. that afternoon. I thought I'd go back to the Coast, talk to her every day, come back in early February for a week or so, and then be here for an extended goodbye in the spring. But this was it. Still numb, I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and pulled out my plane ticket, almost as if seeing it would make her change her mind. I waved it at her as I spoke, struggling to keep the words from sticking in my throat.

"Mama . . . do you want me to stay? Because if you want me to stay, you know I will."

"No, honey," she said, "I want you to go."

True to form, the actress wanted a clean exit. Don was upstairs packing for L.A. I called to him and he met me on the landing at the bottom of the stairs. He had been so loving and attentive. Don had learned by now that on this trip, when I called for him, there was no time to waste.

As I told him about my conversation with Mama, the impact of it finally hit me. I stood there and sobbed in his arms until his forest-green cable-knit sweater was wet and clammy from my tears.

He looked me in the eyes and he said, "Luke, are you sure you want to go? This is about you now. Will you be okay with not being here as she takes her last breath?"

I pondered this for a moment. "She doesn't want me to. She wants to go with dignity," I said. "Besides, I'm not sure I could take it."