

THE GIFT

By Melanie Ormand

Our family of six stood on the tarmac outside Amarillo's airport like loyal soldiers as the snow-filled winds whipped ice-sharp air across our now-red faces. We danced on our toes and watched the Braniff jet coast into its parking lane, one of many to be filled on this Christmas Eve, 1961.

Large crystal tears sprang unbidden to my eyes. At age four, never had I felt gale-force winds loaded with such extreme cold. I leaned into my mother's heavy black wool coat for warmth, holding her gloved hand tightly with my own mitten-covered ones, seeking more heat than her small body could provide. I hopped on my toes—desperate to warm my legs—then rubbed both kneecaps together, wishing I'd worn the thick, ugly cream-colored tights my mother had suggested only hours earlier.

I wondered what my grandmother—whom we called “Big Mimi” in homage to my father's childhood nickname for his mother—would bring to me on this trip. We children talked often of the gifts that she brought us, as if she were a mink-wrapped Santa. She favored fancy clothes, covered in taffeta, velvet, satin, and lace, some crinkly, some shiny, and all oozing big city living. I wore her gifts proudly, for no one in my hometown had outfits like mine. Thinking of the pale pink taffeta dress with the pearl-encrusted collar hanging in my closet—only worn once—I wondered if this year would bring another outfit like it.

Big Mimi's gifts reflected her success. Texans of a certain age remember my grandmother as Florence Miller, a woman who developed a personal cosmetics and perfume line years before movie stars, pop singers, new divorcees or even a lady named Mary Kay considered such creations. She sold her custom products from a high-priced boutique called Florence Miller Cosmetics, located in the lobby of the ritzy Adolphus Hotel in Dallas. Also, she hosted a weekly television show, *Fashions in Faces*, that aired on the local CBS-TV affiliate.

Her achievements belied her past. In 1924, when she was three months pregnant, she moved with her two-year-old son—my father—to a boarding house miles away from where she'd been living. The boarding house caught fire days later, and Big Mimi miscarried her daughter while trying to escape the flames with my father. For years afterward, my grandmother and father traveled from city to city across Texas, as Big Mimi learned the cosmetics trade. In the 1940s, she traveled alone by train and car to department stores across the U.S. selling clothes and cosmetic for other makeup mavens, like Helena Rubenstein and Hattie Carnegie. My grandmother's break came when she discovered collagen as a key ingredient for anti-wrinkle creams, found a financier to back her entrepreneurial spirit, and opened her Adolphus shop. By 1959, my grandmother was a millionaire.

Her Christmas visits to Pampa, a small Texas Panhandle town, demanded the best from each of us in terms of attitude and attire. For the trip to the airport that day, my sisters and I donned brand-new, wide-wale corduroy jumpers with black Mary Janes spit-polished twice and white socks edged in thin lace, folded carefully over each ankle. My brother and father wore steam-pressed dark wool suits with shirt collars and tails tucked neatly. Mother wore a flared black wool skirt and white cotton blouse, with a wide black patent leather belt cinched tightly at her tiny waist. A bright red holiday sweater with round white buttons and a thin strand of ecru fake pearls topped off her outfit.

Dressing in our Sunday best for this holiday airport trip felt natural. After all, air travel seemed an exotic adventure that only the elite and royalty could experience. My grandmother fit the aura. Well-carried, well-spoken, and well-dressed, Big Mimi was a part of me but above me, living and working in a fancy hotel in a busy city far away. She sold things that made women feel pretty, appeared on television every Wednesday, and traveled annually to New York City and Europe on buying trips. She blatantly treated me, the youngest in the family, as her favorite grandchild, dubbing me “Dumplin’,” the only nickname she doled out among us kids.

The memory reminded me of where I was, still freezing, still waiting for the start of this year's Big Mimi visit. At that moment, the crowd of other families, filled with sons and daughters, spouses and grandchildren, buzzed excitedly.

"Look, honey, there's Big Mimi's plane," my mother said. She squeezed my hand and smiled at me, then pointed at the bird.

The plane sailed steadily toward us then landed with a screech and a roar. In the long moments that followed, the shiny jet coasted to a stop a short distance away from us. Men in dark suits wheeled a giant staircase on wheels to the side of my grandmother's plane. A groan burst forth as the poorly-oiled door of the plane slid outward then sideways to reveal two women, official looking in dark blue, perfectly-pressed uniforms with tiny hats perched on their rock-hard blonde hairdos. Big Mimi wasn't one of them. I strained, looking for my grandmother behind the women in the doorway. Afraid she might not be coming, my heart skipped several beats. Then we saw her.

Making her usual grand appearance, like the TV star she was, Big Mimi stood like royalty, framed in the plane's doorway and peered down at the crowd, earnestly seeking her family. I looked at her face, checking for her reassuring smile, and searched for signs of what I most hoped for. She held an overstuffed shopping bag. Sticking out awkwardly between the handles of the bag was a strange round dark object, topped off with what looked, at a distance, like a pair of thick coat hangers. I wondered what it was and who would get it. I heard my grandmother's inimitable laugh then saw her smile and wave with her empty hand. Had she found us, or was she simply working the crowd?

Beginning her regal descent down the red-carpeted steps, Big Mimi stepped confidently toward us, her free hand clutching the stair rail. She wore a gold scarf, a fragile, netted one filled with large holes, a common head wrap for elderly women. Draping her body like an expensive rug was the "soft dress" I loved so much—her full-length mink coat.

As her right foot hit the bottom step of the stairway, my brother, two sisters, and I tore away from our parents and ran like Olympic runners toward our grandmother. Finally, we reached this woman we'd waited so long to see and swarmed around her, bee-like. Looking for then finding me, my grandmother said, "Dumplin', this is for you!"

She tugged at the dark plastic object and, pulling it out of her bag, placed it gently in my tiny hands. In close view, I recognized instantly what my beloved grandmother had brought to me this holiday season.

"A reindeer!" I shouted. Its nose was red, its ears big and pointed with a brown body twice as large as mine. I grabbed it and did what I always did - I burst into tears, my body shaking with the sobs of a young child delirious with joy. Big Mimi had brought me a gift!

Only recently in a home movie, I saw my favorite childhood toy again. The reindeer was indeed dark brown, spotted with white dots with a large red circle on its nose. It was maybe 18 inches tall - about as little as I was then but so much smaller than my memory now.

Rudolph lasted less than a month in our house—he was inflatable, after all. However, the memory of the only reindeer I ever had still speaks eloquently of a child's love for a grandmother who defined the phrase, "bitter than life."