

NOBODY WALKS IN L.A.

And not too many people kayak, but one man is trying to change that

FROM ZERO TO SUPERHERO

What it takes to become a professional comic book writer

SEEING STARS TONIGHT

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› MAY 15, 2011

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Stars Align

NINE YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE Grandma Sally went to heaven, and whenever I think about her, I can't help but be sad. I'm sad that she never met my wife; she never met her great-grandchildren; she never got to see the world, as we've been so fortunate to do. Mostly, I become sad because Grandma Sally had such a sad life. The lone bright spot for her was her family. With four children and 10 grandchildren, Grandma Sally always had a smile on her face. It didn't matter that she sold purses at the May Company for 30 years without any career advancement; that she watched my grandfather work himself to the bone in the lumberyards of Forrest City before succumbing to leukemia in 1981; that her parents, brothers, aunts, uncles — everyone — had left this world when she was only 19; Grandma Sally always smiled. So when I think back on how sad her life appeared to be, yet how she always derived joy from her family, I become sad — nay, ashamed — that anything in this life can keep me from smiling. She was the strongest person I've ever known — all 4 feet 9 inches of her. She had so much more to teach; we had so much more to learn.

After her passing, and from time to time, I'd drive as far away from the city as I could in the middle of the night, find a back road on which to park and stare at the stars. I'd go to places akin to the dark-sky parks (page 48) and try to find stars that would seemingly speak to me, hoping it was her. I remember a time when I was outside the tiny town of Poetry, Texas, and I could have sworn I saw a constellation appear that formed a series of numbers across the sky: 27307 — a number all too familiar to me.

Grandma Sally was from Plonsk, Poland. Shortly after the German invasion of Poland began on Sept. 1, 1939, she was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto. When the Nazis started liquidating the ghettos in 1941, Grandma Sally, along with her parents, her two brothers and extended family members, was hustled onto the train bound for Auschwitz. She was 19 years old. At the gate, under the sign that read *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("Work Makes You Free"), Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death, sent Grandma Sally to the right line — the work line. The rest of her family was sent to the left — to be stripped, shaved and finally corralled into a warehouse-shower to receive a lethal dose of Zyklon B gas. That was her entire family. Parents, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents. Everyone.

She survived the Holocaust — the slave labor,

a transfer to the "infirmary" at the Birkenau death camp (an order made by camp commandant Rudolf Höss himself), the death march and the firebombing of Dresden, which she escaped in a particularly lucky cattle car. When she came to the United States after the war, she met my grandfather, a Polish Jew who had survived the war by hiding in a righteous gentile's home.

Once, when I was just old enough to ask questions, I was sitting with Grandma Sally, waiting for the bus outside the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. It was summer, and she was wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt. I stared at the tattoo, 27307, inked into her arm.

"What's that on your arm, Grandma?" I asked.

"It's my address," she replied, the hint of a smile on her face.

"But why do you have it written on your arm?"

Grandma Sally closed her eyes and tilted her head back, as if straining to retrieve a faded memory. Then she straightened, opened her eyes, turned her head and regarded me firmly. The smile faded. Her eyes looked sad as she said to me in her heavily accented English: "So I never forget, Adam."

Nine years have passed since Grandma Sally went to heaven. When I think about her, I still look to the stars for guidance, and watch for a sign.


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