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# Family Circles

My 101-year-old Grandma Estelle and I have long played hand games together—a simple, tender way to enjoy each other's presence. My favorite isn't actually a game, but more a looting of my Bubbeleh's jewelry—a way to get her rings off her fingers and onto my own. The seven rings she wears fit loosely, yet the hurdle of knotted knuckles, inevitable casualties of arthritis, slow the removal process.

"Uh-uh! Let me do it," she insists, pulling at a ring, wetting it with her saliva until it slides off. Once all are off, a pile of storied little treasures for me to play with; I curate them across my own fingers.

First is always a sapphire ring accented with diamonds. "My birthstone," she explains (again). "September 11th. You know, that day didn't always mean what it does now."

"Grandpa gave me this one." A simple white gold band that's now mine, which I stack daily on my finger. "One of my wedding bands... the first one. Grandpa proposed many times. I played hard to get.

"I was a goodie-goodie. Always, always did as my mother asked. Not like you. I never did what I wanted. I had wanted to be a nurse you know: I like to comfort people."

Although my Grandma talks of this shy, timid girl she claims to still be, this is not the woman I know.

"Ach, I'm just an actress and the world is my stage!" she balks, responding to my adoring compliments. "No one wants to hear what this old bitty has to say."

Yet ripe with opinion (she's a voracious reader of both *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Jewish Week*), my Bubbeleh never hesitates to dish gems of wisdom, discussing politics and foreign policy with the same fervor she uses to deliver opinions about Bette Midler, Oprah, Judge Judy and her favorite, Dr. Oz.

"This-a one was my mother's...her wedding ring," she continues, twisting at a large asymmetrical ring. It's platinum with three large settings for diamonds, yet only two diamonds remain in place. One disappeared long ago and was never replaced.



“Each ring a treasured tale from my grandmother’s life.” SHIRA LEVINE

I learned to appreciate platinum, black diamonds, rose and white gold from my Bubbeleh. But

accessorizing with sentiment rather than status is what dazzles her. While she inspired my predilection for the fine and rare, what she treasures more than those seven stacked rings—which I'm certain she sleeps and bathes with—are the memories they inspire.

"This-a one I bought myself," she says proudly, admiring the thick gold 1940s ring with a clustered setting of tiny diamond chips. "This one here, it's from your mom and dad. A garnet, I think."

Her other jewelry has evolved with her

age. Her drawers were once filled with glittery gemstones: extraordinary clip-on earrings, the half-dozen other engagement rings. These now sit in a safe deposit box, replaced by little boxes housing various contemporary pieces I've brought her from my travels to Istanbul, Singapore, Cusco and Capetown.

Her idea of what money buys is far from reality. "Please, don't tell me you spent more than \$25 on that!" she says to everything I've ever given her. Even Mikimoto and Cartier gifts elicit a practical truth: "Where will I wear it? To the loo?"

Dropping the last ring, of mysterious origin ("Am I supposed to remember everything?") into my hand, nails newly painted gold (by me), Queen Levine rises from her rocking throne. Sporting a drugstore tiara and bejeweled necklace, she curtsies and announces dramatically that she's "off to the loo..."