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Minding Grandma

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Minding Grandma

Julie Rae Sen

I cleaned up the dishes while she sipped her iced buttermilk. She dropped her dentures into another glass and grabbed the remote control. *Wheel of Fortune* was about to come on, and she wouldn't go to bed before she watched Pat and Vanna. She shouted her answers, "Ridge...Rigger...Ribbon!" and "The Mad hatter! The Madame! The Mayflower!" One time she guessed "Blue Suede Shoes" and won.

This had become our nightly routine. Grandma would stagger into the kitchen, banging her walker into the wall as she neared the corner. Her mauve floral robe hung open, exposing the same canary yellow nightgown she'd worn since I was a kid.

The thinning fabric revealed her double-D breasts sagging to her belly button. I'd joke, "Oooh, double-double!" and we'd both laugh. I'd first said "double-double" to her when I was four years old. She had been holding me in her arms, trying to calm me down, when I looked down to see her large bosom jutting out of her blouse. Each breast was double the size of my mom's. Twenty-four years later and those two words still commanded a smile.

Her bedroom was just next to the kitchen, so she didn't have far to go to reach the kitchen table, but I walked next to her with every step. It took about fifteen minutes to cover nine feet. I learned to move every possible obstacle out of the way, turn the stove off, start the microwave and turn on the television before Grandma started her way in to the kitchen. If timed right I could catch the first half of the news before we ever turned the corner. Those fifteen minutes were the longest of my day. When she finally reached her chair at the table, she grabbed onto the edge of the table with one shaky hand and grabbed my arm with the other, then she pivoted and plopped.

For dinner I'd pour A1 Steak Sauce onto her plate in between the bite-sized pieces of pork chop and the mound of mashed potatoes. Grandma would push her potatoes over to the far edge of the plate and drown them in butter. With each bite she took, the outer side of her right hand collected mashed potatoes and butter, while her left pinky finger dabbled in steak sauce.

When I was little she used to wash my hair in her kitchen sink. She'd pour a cup of honey-scented shampoo into her hand and gently massage it over my head. Her sharp fingernails raked

the dirt and oil from my scalp, and her long fingers moved through my hair like autumn leaves in a gentle breeze. Now those same fingers were slathered in mashed potatoes, applesauce and pepper flakes wedged under her fingernails.

I realized early on that yelling at her for being sloppy didn't help matters, so I started placing extra napkins under and around the edges of her plate. When the food made its way up her sleeve, I'd roll up her sleeves before she sat down at the table. Sometimes I put a bib on her to protect her nightgown. When she was done eating I'd wipe her hands with a warm washcloth, as she'd giggle at me. If she weren't looking at me I'd roll my eyes. Sometimes I'd just give her the towel to make her do it herself. Once I even pretended not to see the food mashed under her fingernails and smeared all over her rings. My stomach wretched. I pushed my plate away, left the table and didn't look at her hands the rest of the night.

Before I had moved in I'd been working as a cook at a new restaurant during the day while attending evening classes part-time. I made enough to pay my rent, and survived on spaghetti and macaroni and cheese.

At the same time, Grandma was becoming more and more dependent on Mom for help. Grandma had suffered two knee replacements and couldn't walk without assistance. She couldn't take a shower by herself, couldn't go to the toilet by herself, couldn't dress or undress herself. Mom would stop by after work and help her, but she worked full time and lived on the other side of town. So she suggested I quit my job and move in to take care of Grandma. I wouldn't have to worry about food or rent, and the family agreed to pay me a weekly salary. Mom would stop by when I had to go to class twice a week, and if I wanted to go out for a while, Grandma would be in bed by 8:00 each night so I could leave after then for a few hours.

The arrangement was perfect for a while. I'd wake her up to eat breakfast in the kitchen with me, and she'd invite me to watch her "programs" with her in the afternoon. She'd supervise as I baked her favorite sugar cookies and then help me decorate them. She even taught me the secret recipe of her chocolate walnut fudge. In the afternoons we'd sit on the deck together and drink coffee while watching the squirrels scurry through the trees. She'd convince me to spread some peanut butter on a piece of bread so

she could lure the squirrels to her.

A lot of our time was spent just talking, reminiscing about when I was little. Grandma used to take my cousins and me to Mother Gooseland Park every other weekend during the summers. I would hide in Old Mother Hubbard's giant cupboard when it was time for us to leave. Grandma would hunt me down and threaten to never bring me again, but two weeks later we were back.

She told me stories about my grandpa that I had never heard before. I would sit with my coffee mug cradled in one hand and my chin cupped in the other and listen to her tell stories about when they were young, how they met in high school but she was in love with someone else. She told me how he won her heart and about their first kiss. I prodded her to tell me more each day. After living with her for two months I knew all the juicy details of her wedding night, the pain of her first childbirth, and the hole she had in her heart after the love of her life died.

I'd recalled the card parties they'd held when I was a teenager. Every month she'd pull out three or four card tables from the basement, clean off the spider webs and drape them each with a plastic tablecloth before spreading them out in the living and dining rooms. She'd use the dining room table to display her smorgasbord of appetizers and munchies. Sauerkraut balls, meatballs, little hot dogs wrapped in crescent rolls, finger sandwiches, chips and pretzels, and small squares of Swiss cheese and slices of trail bologna with hot and spicy mustard. Grandpa filled the refrigerator with different kinds of beer and left bottles of gin, vodka, Jack Daniels, coke and cranberry juice. The house filled up with their friends and they played Hearts, Spades, and Euchre until dawn. Grandma always got drunk on Budweiser and ate trail bologna.

Things moved very smoothly in the house for a few months. I'd established a routine schedule to fit in meals, chores, and my private time. Early mornings and late nights were all mine. Sometimes my friends would pop in to join us for a meal, or they'd come later at night to catch me up on the latest gossip. My best friend Cathy and I sat drinking coffee one night in the living room after Grandma went to bed. Grandma started ringing her little bedside bell and I went running like a faithful servant. When I returned to Cathy ten minutes later, she scrunched her nose and eyebrows, "Did you have to wipe her butt?"

My aunts and uncles seemed to come over more often. It

was easier for them to visit since they didn't have to do anything except sit and talk with Grandma, and they probably didn't feel guilty when they left. Whenever they came, my first instinct was to bolt out the door.

One morning Grandma refused to get up for breakfast. "Just bring me a banana and some toast," she pleaded with me to stay in bed, "and some milk with ice." Her sudden defiance surprised me. I sat on the bed with her while she forced down half a piece of wheat toast and a few bites of banana. I checked her mouth after she swallowed her pills. Sometimes she spit them into her milk.

After I gave her a bed bath, I changed her socks and underwear. When I tried to pull on some sweatpants she wrinkled her face and muttered, "Oh just give me my nightgown, I'm not getting up anyway."

"You can stay in bed," I yanked her gown from her, "but you have to put the sweats on. I need to get the stink out of this gown. And you have to get up for dinner, at least."

"Deal. Now give me the remote control so I can watch my shows."

Days turned into weeks. She spent more of her time in bed than out. We spent less and less time talking and more time alone. She withdrew under her blankets and flipped the channels on the TV for hours while I dawdled around the house. It was easier for me with her there. I could whip up breakfast and lunch in no time, do the dishes, the laundry and watch my own television shows whenever I wanted. I wasn't tied to the strict schedule I had previously set up to fit my grandma's needs into my day. She had become part of my long "to do" list, and the quicker I got done with her, the sooner I could move on to something else.

One day I walked in to her room to find her sitting at the edge of her bed crying. She had tried to put her jeans on backwards, and when she stood up she couldn't find the zipper. When I reached to help her she shoved my hands away. I stood frozen in place, staring through her for a few seconds like the owls hanging on her walls stared through me every time I walked by. Her moan snapped me out of my freeze, and then I abruptly turned, grabbed the Kleenex box from her nightstand and tossed it at her side before I walked out. I didn't look at her as I closed the door.

A few minutes later she called me back.

“Oh, now you want my help?” I snapped at her while I knelt down to pull her jeans off her. “Why’d you put your jeans on, Gram?” We both stood up at the same time and she grabbed my shoulders while I yanked her jeans down past her butt. I didn’t look at her face, but I could hear her little sobs. My mind flipped to the list of things I had to do that day: grocery shopping, bring in wood for the fire, clean out the hall closet. I didn’t wait for her to answer me before I grabbed her sweatpants and started to feed her feet through the holes.

She’d wanted to get up for lunch, so I helped her into the kitchen. She cradled herself into the chair and flipped on the television to Channel 8 News at Noon. I folded laundry as she nibbled on her usual grilled cheese sandwich with a bowl of Peter soup. Peter soup was Grandma’s version of Campbell’s Tomato soup with cooked elbow macaroni thrown in. The acidic smell made my nose-hairs curl.

I tossed the socks onto the table to match and fold them. Grandma asked if she could help and I just shrugged my shoulders. She kicked the chair next to her and mumbled, “bullshit” as she poured pepper into her soup.

My head whipped around, and I glared at her. “What’d you say?” The only time Grandma cursed was when she was drunk, and she hadn’t been drunk in years.

“Bull. Shit. Bull. Shit. Bullshit! bullshit! bullshit!” she rambled off like a nursery rhyme.

I tried to stifle my laughter in my shock. “Gram! What is bullshit?” I giggled. I really had no idea what she was talking about.

She just glared at me, grabbed a pair of my socks to fold, and fixed her gaze on the TV screen. She glued herself to that chair for the rest of the evening.

Later that day I put on a pair of socks and felt a mound of sandy material at the bottom of one of them. It reminded me of when I sat at the beach with my toes curled up in the sand. I pulled my sock off and turned it inside out to see the pile of pepper fall to the ground.

When I confronted Grandma about it, she just laughed and said, “You must not have washed them good enough.”

I threw the socks at her, “Yeah, you do it then!” The socks crawled through the air and landed cleverly, one over her shoulder and one on the top of her head.

An hour later, she was still sitting in the chair watching The Home Shopping Network. She asked me for a can of Diet Coke, so I brought one for her and one for myself. I sat down for a few minutes to drink a bit before getting up to switch the loads in the dryer. When I came back a few minutes later she had emptied the peppershaker into my can of Diet Coke. I noticed the specks of pepper on the top of the can before I took a swig; then I spotted the empty peppershaker in front of her. She just laughed. I wanted to spit my coke at her.

When I sat down next to her after dinner, just in time for the last spin of the wheel, she didn't look at me. She wasn't shouting her answers. She wasn't even watching the television. Grandma's gaze fixed on some random spot on the wall just left of the television. She looked like she'd fallen into some hypnotic trance. Her cheeks flushed and her wrinkled hands shook as she coddled the remote control in one, and her buttermilk in the other. I watched as the iced milk spilled out on her shivering hand.

After I poured her into bed, I flipped on her television for her then whisked myself back into the kitchen for some tea. When I thumbed through the new *Better Homes and Gardens* I noticed little black scribblings all over the Girl Scout's "Got Milk?" advertisement. I recognized Grandma's handwriting from the backward slant and large hoops of the /s. The same hand that had written "Love Always" and "Hugs and Kisses" on numerous birthday cards and little notes, now had written in a shaky, fragile penmanship, "Bullshit!" all over the faces of the Girl Scouts.

I shuffled through the magazine and saw "Bullshit" on more pages. On the face of Kathy Lee Gifford and on the birdhouses in an article demonstrating how to make a birdhouse. I put the magazine down and fumbled around the table. She'd written "bullshit" on the napkins that sat neatly folded in their black wire holder. I picked up the bills to be paid and read, "Ohio Edison Energy BullshitBullshit Bull. SHIT!" and "Time Warner bullshit Cable." A personal check made out to me from my mom now read "Pay to Julie Fisher Bullshit" and had little "bullshits" scribbled all over the back of it where I would sign my name. I picked up the placemats and examined each one carefully. "Bullshit, Bull Shit. bulshi... bullshit-ty.. shit shit shit" each one held a variation of her chosen word. I sat there in shock. She even wrote it on the table. I left my tea and

called my mom.

While I waited for my mom to arrive, I heard Grandma slam the receiver of her phone into her bedside table. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* I sat on the couch chewing my fingernails. I flipped on the television. Five minutes later the banging stopped and I heard, "Ah Bullshit!" I turned up the volume. A few minutes later I crept into the kitchen to listen closer. From Grandma's phone the operator announced, "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try your call again." When I went in to hang up the phone, Grandma was snoring.

The next morning, Mom and I peeled Grandma out of bed against her will. She moaned and whined, said she was tired and didn't get enough sleep. Grandma punched and kicked as we got her into her jeans and sweater. When I pulled her arm through the sleeve she grabbed onto my hand and tried to bite me. Luckily she didn't have her dentures in yet so all I felt was her gums. It reminded me of a teething baby. "Mom, can you believe her? She tried to gum me!"

Mom was busy trying to calm her down. "You have a doctor's appointment this morning, Mom" my mother lied. "Don't you remember?" Mom combed her hair as I put her socks on. Mom was great at lying to Grandma in order to get her to do what she wanted. I kept my head down and pushed her shoes onto her feet.

"What're you doing down there?" Grandma's leg swung up and kicked me square in the jaw as the shoe I was pushing her foot into went flying across the room and landed against the dresser mirror. I fell back against the wardrobe and grabbed my jaw. Blood dribbled out of my mouth. Holy crap! I thought. My grandma just kicked me. All the blood rushed to my head, and I wanted to get up and rush her. I wanted to slap her and scream at her and kick her back.

In the emergency room that morning, they took Grandma to one bed and put me in the one next to her. While we waited for the doctors to see us both, Mom opened the curtain between us so we were all together. The doctor came to me first, since I had experienced trauma. He asked me what happened and I tried to explain that my grandma kicked me, but she didn't mean to kick me. I couldn't talk very well because when Grandma kicked me I bit the inside of my mouth so hard my teeth sliced through the

flesh. When I had arrived a nurse gave me ice to hold on the outside of my mouth, but the inside was swelling up and it hurt to talk. I called my mom to help me explain the situation.

While Mom told the doctor everything, I watched Grandma in the bed next to me. Her eyes were huge and popping out like when she watched a scary movie. Little drops of water trickled out of the corners of her mouth onto her flushed cheeks, and clear snot dribbled from her nose onto the top of her lip and down onto her hospital gown. They had put her in restraints to keep her from hitting or kicking. Her trembling hands gripped the edge of the thin white blanket covering her, and she stared at her feet.

My mom was still talking to the doctor about me as I felt the doctor move my head up and down, side to side. He wanted me to get some x-rays to rule out any trauma to the neck or head when I fell. I felt like a dummy doll sitting there as he manipulated my upper extremities. My mouth was bleeding and he was looking at my neck and head. I didn't take my eyes off my grandma, until the doctor opened my mouth and stuck his fingers right into the deep gash. "OW!" I almost bit him trying to pull away. He stuck some gauze in my mouth and left me alone to wait for the nurse to take me to X-ray while Mom went to get some coffee.

I turned back to watch Grandma. The nurse came in to draw some blood from her arm. Grandma yelled when the nurse wrapped that rubber band around her arm to get a vein to pop out, "Ow! What the hell are you doing to me?"

"Hey!" I yelled at the nurse, "You're hurting her!" When I opened my mouth it felt like the gash widened two feet. "Don't do it so tight," I muffled and repositioned the gauze.

The nurse rolled her eyes and continued to smack my grandma's fleshy forearm for a vein to draw blood. I glowered, and leaped up out of bed. My head felt heavy and the room spun a little. I quickly grabbed onto the side rail of Grandma's bed and steadied myself. The nurse was drawing the blood by the time I got my balance. I cupped Grandma's hand in one of mine, while I held onto the side rail with my other. I wanted to punch the nurse.

"You should be in bed," the nurse scolded me. "You could have a concussion, you know." Her eyes never moved from the needle she was pushing into Grandma's arm. She never looked up at me, never looked at Grandma. I sat down on the edge of Grandma's bed, next to her hand wrapped in restraints.

"It's okay, Gram." I found whispering didn't hurt so much. It

only hurt when I talked. This wasn't as bad as getting my wisdom teeth pulled. My cheeks had swollen up like a chipmunk for three days after the dentist had yanked all four teeth. Grandma had taken care of me then. I had to eat a liquid diet, but I couldn't sip anything through a straw or my stitches would tear open. So Grandma blended milkshakes extra thin, and spoon-fed me Jell-O and chicken broth. When the stitches had dissolved, Grandma made me my favorite meatloaf and scalloped potatoes.

Crouched on the edge of her bed, I held her hand and fidgeted with her loose wedding ring. I moved the ring around and around on her finger. The diamond in sight, out of sight, then back in sight again. My mind whirled into a daze as my eyes absorbed the luster of the diamond. All the love and beauty, all the brilliance and strength and meaning of her life had swung around loosely, in and out of my mind, for the past month. But she was still there. And I didn't want to lose her.

Grandma twitched under her blanket. Her abject gaze focused on the white sterile wall in front of her. She didn't blink. She didn't move. "Double-double!" I whispered to her and rested my head on her chest.