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# Reflections on Being a Grandmother

*This essay is both about the close bond between a grandmother with disabilities and her grandchild and also about the women who walked before me, my mother as a grandmother and my own grandmother, both of whom served as extraordinary role models.*

## **Witches and Birthing**

When my six-year-old granddaughter comes to visit us from her home in London twice a year, my study floor becomes a vast housing complex with my daughter's old doll-house furniture and miniature families scattered around the room. We spend mornings with the door shut for privacy and the scenes are more intense and vivid than *Shrek 1* and *2*. I am the witch, kidnapping the children as I crouch in my high-pitched voice. There are often mass kidnappings and rescues that Ariel directs. I build a jail for witches out of an old box.

Ariel has recently become interested in the birthing process because my daughter-in-law, Mary Rosser, is an obstetrician and also because Ariel has moved beyond the stage of bathroom humor into the world of "boobies" as she refers to breasts. I am Dr. Rosser, hurrying to deliver the triplets my granddaughter's doll is expecting. (I have had to show her that babies usually come out head-first.) She calls me, "Dr. Rosser, come quickly, my babies are coming." And as Dr. Rosser breezes in all concern, Ariel is already moaning and pushing, "Uh, Uh, Uh." Then of course, there is much nursing as the dollies take off their tops and the babies go "shulp, shulp, shulp."

Sometimes the dollhouse families need to take refuge from the marauding witch and then we hide in the forest. I take leaves off my hibiscus plant and create a sanctuary. Or they take a slow ride down the river Seine in Paris in my slipper.

If her mother or grandfather opens the door, Ariel will say, “Mommy (or grandpa) I love you, but will you please go away.”

I bring in little scraps of my quilting material and we use them to create swimming pools and fields. I bring in empty boxes for ambulances and fast cars. The hours slip by and then invariably I have to make lunch or dinner. “Oh why do we have to eat,” Ariel protests. “I don’t want to stop.”

Our play is uncensored and directed by my little granddaughter’s musings and discoveries. “Let’s pretend the children are really naughty and slip out of school,” she chimes. “This little boy asks the teacher if he can go and get a drink, but he really goes outside to meet one of his friends.”

When we drive Ariel and her mother to the airport for their trip back to London, Ariel and I sit in the back seat and continue our saga. I rather wish my daughter and husband wouldn’t hear my high-pitched voice preparing for a wedding, a ball or a birth, but we draw out our special time together.

I write to her every week and tell her what the dollies are doing, what disastrous events have happened in the attic where they are wintering and how they cannot become pregnant until she returns to Boston.

### **Behind a Glass Wall**

Our flights of imagination are what I can give Ariel, for I do not have the physical ease to spend the entire day with her or take her to exciting places. Now that Ariel can read and write, she is fascinated by science as well as art. I can’t accompany her to the Children’s Museum she enjoys so much or to the park like my husband does for walking slowly for 30 minutes is a good day for me, and 10 or 15 minutes is more the norm. Ariel radiates energy and enthusiasm; she runs, skips and leaps on the way to the park and rushes from one exhibit to another in the museums around Boston. While she and her grandfather are at the museum, I am taking long naps. “Why do you always nap?” she asks me. “Because I’m tired,” I answer.

I tend to have a slight tremor when fatigued and I have noticed her imitating me. However she is still too young for me to explain my limitations other than the fact that I need long rests and can’t go out with her and her grandfather.

When I think of her delight and excitement at the Science Museum or the Children’s Museum as she stands enraptured before the exhibits, and my husband takes videos of her, I often feel bereft. But always when Ariel returns from these adventures she bursts in the door with her usual excitement and calls out, “Nonna will you play with me now.” We have our own private world. She and I know that what matters are these times and not the things I cannot do.

Ariel has only a vague sense of my disabilities that are neurogenic and musculoskeletal; fibromyalgia and Intersititial Cystitis, affecting my immune system, my stamina and my ability to stand or walk. They leave me with very little energy. If it’s difficult for adults to understand my situation because I don’t have any visible signs of a physical condition such as crutches, it is even more

perplexing for children. The constant physical pain of fibromyalgia is invisible as is my perpetual exhaustion. I often feel as if I am looking at the world through a glass wall that separates me from all of the people who move about with such ease without having to think about how to negotiate the most mundane acts.

When Ariel is with us, my whole energy is directed towards our secret adventures in my study. She keeps my spirits soaring even when fatigue grips me and I am longing for a rest.

But if I am unable to take her places, I nevertheless have a feverish imagination that has remained undiminished and which feeds my precious times with her. Best of all, I can give her a different kind of attention than her overburdened single mother. When we are together, she is the center of the world, directing our games with all the self-assurance of someone who is deeply cherished.

Once a year she visits us in France where we have a small apartment in the Alps. While I rest afternoons, she churns the pool water in the local hotel because she is very athletic like all the women in our family. Afterwards, she and I settle down to our private world. I give her an old tea carton and some playing cards and we construct a movie theater. She prefers these games to playing with toys. I make people out of matches I split in four. I remember how my mother once made me an exquisite doll's house out of cardboard she covered with fabric that had cellophane windows and real curtains. I may not have my mother's buoyant walk or seemingly limitless vigor, but I have her hands and her imagination. Playing with Ariel and finding ways to adjust to my physical condition, I feel surrounded by my own grandmother and by my mother who left me such riches.

### **The Women Who Walked Before Me**

I grew up in an all female household with my grandmother, my mother, my sister and I. My grandmother, Anna Guzman, came from Trieste, Italy to live with us in Wilmette, Illinois when I was nine years old. She carried herself like royalty and claimed space for herself at a time when women were supposed to stay at home. She entered a new landscape and what must have seemed like strange customs as if she had lived there all her life. Coming from a multilingual society she spoke German, Italian, Slovene and French so that she seemed to pick up English and acquired friends in what she considered "the right circles" very quickly.

My grandmother lived through two world wars, losing her husband in World War I and during World War II, experiencing the German and then Yugoslav Occupation of Trieste where I was born. She never spoke of the hunger and deprivation of those times and which I witnessed when I visited my great aunt in Trieste as a teenager, observing how she still would hoard food as if it were gold. Rather she spoke of her triumphs. She mimed the German officer trying to requisition her apartment on Via Cavana, as she stood before me barking his questions in a threatening voice and then replying with great

dignity in her perfect German that the officer was at the wrong address.

People tended to retreat before my grandmother because of her regal air and her sense of entitlement. She was beautiful, statuesque and could either charm with her gracious smile when necessary or reduce people to apologetic murmurs when she was offended.

When I was in grammar school I was frequently in trouble for I was rather wild. After one of my visits to the principal's office, my grandmother would get dressed up and "invade" my school. She entered as if she owned the place, smiling graciously and speaking with my teachers. When she left, they were invariably beaming and treated me with utter kindness. I never knew what transpired during those conversations.

When I was hospitalized with a burst appendix in the next town, she would walk to visit me daily, the equivalent of several train stops. I always see her taking her favorite long walks, for she was an active and buoyant person even into her eighties.

By the time my mother Valerie became a grandmother, she was the vice president of marketing for a catalogue company specializing in a line of dresses that she also designed. She too had adapted to a new environment when we first moved to the United States and my father promptly left us. She managed to find work and progress in her chosen field in a male dominated society. She continued her heavy schedule but always managed to fly in from New York City to Wellesley, Massachusetts weekends to be with my children. She would arrive Friday night; Saturday morning at 5:00 a.m. they would wake her with shrieks of joy and spend the day playing with her.

As they grew up, they would fly into New York City to take in the circus, the theater, and roam around the city with her. My mother even took my niece to Woodstock during the sixties (stuffing her ears with cotton).

### **A Different Model**

Both my mother and grandmother were blessed with vitality, a spirit of adventure, and defiance gathering their grandchildren in their wake like magnets. Although they have left me such an important legacy, I cannot help but compare myself with these two women when I think of my limitations. But if I do not have their physical ease, they left me with models of strength and adaptability that serve me well in coping with my illnesses.

I am continually adjusting to my condition, revising my life so that I can pursue my passion of writing nonfiction and poetry. I may work in the middle of the night, or for a half-hour a day at an odd time depending on how I am feeling that particular period. The need for reinventing myself and creating a satisfying life has given me a new compassion and understanding. I hope in the years to come, I will become a model for Ariel as my grandmother was for me.

When my daughter was hospitalized for some months last year I wished so much that we could have stayed in her London home for that period. My fatigue and my need for frequent doctor visits meant we could only visit her on

a few occasions and even these represented a big physical effort for me. But we made the most of those times. What I could give Ariel then, was a secure space in which she could cry without anyone denying her feelings. While people around her tried to console her or cheer her up, I often sat with her quietly until her tears dried as she sobbed that she missed her mother. I also respected Ariel's wish not to have me brush her tangled hair because "only mommy can comb it."

We took her out to dinner often as a treat and I would always let her give vent to her views of dressing up.

Once she put on the most outlandish outfit; a princess Jasmine costume, pink plastic heels and a jean jacket I did persuade her to wear because her midriff was bare. "But I'll look ridiculous with that jacket," she moaned. "Just until we reach the restaurant and then you can take it off," I told her. She made quite a splash walking down Gloucester street, so much like my grandmother, her head held high, secure in her own good looks, and so much like my glamorous mother arriving in our suburb dressed to the nines.

"Tell me a funny story," Ariel would frequently ask me. Just as my grandmother would regale me with stories about our family in Trieste, Ariel loves to hear stories about our family. Since she is only six, she wants to know about naughty things her mother and uncle did when they were little. She has favorites that I repeat to her delight: "When Pierre was a little boy he liked to collect acorns. Once, he kept some in his closet for a long time and when we opened the door to vacuum, we found worms coming out of them!" "Ugh" she laughs with delight. "When your mommy and uncle were little they would spray Pledge furniture polish on the rug then skate on it with their slippers!" She chortles with glee and asks for more as if they were songs she could listen to again and again. I have to keep them fairly simple because of her age. She tends to get confused between "Merica" and France she once referred to as "America with Cows."

Since my husband was born in France and I was born in Trieste, I hope to pass on our heritage as Ariel gets older, and hopefully French and Italian as my grandmother did to me. I want to give her a sense of belonging to a world much wider than her own in London, and in a culture that does not take kindly to "foreigners" including my American daughter who looks both Italian and French. Ariel loves to look at the quilt I made her mother with photos of the harbor of Trieste, my mother and I, my grandmother, my daughter and I in many different settings. In time I will make her one of her own with photos of the important people in her life.

Like my mother, my daughter and myself, Ariel has a very strong artistic streak. She loves to make collages and once took some silvery bits of paper to make her abstract version of the snow-covered mountains that shimmer through our apartment window. Her favorite occupation is to busy herself with her paints and pencils, retreating into her own private world. My mother was a visual artist in the rare times she had to herself as a single mother and my daughter is an actress who also has a career in voice. Once I was with Ariel when

she was busily drawing. Suddenly she burst into a tearful rage,” It’s not right. It’s awful. I hate it.” As a poet and writer, I could respect her upset. “Darling,” I said, “I have many artist friends and they are often disappointed by what they are trying to do. It’s very hard to draw what you see in your imagination, but I can assure you it’s normal to get upset and that your drawing is beautiful.” She calmed down a bit. Later she told me, “I like it.”

I always have art supplies waiting for her when she visits and we set up a table and chair where she can draw, cut paste, staple and create.

When we go out for drives she shares my love and wonder at the landscape, especially the colors. “It’s pitch green out,” she once remarked as we drove home through a mountain pass one evening. Or she will say, “Look at the orange,” while gazing at a fading sunset. I too am in love with color and it is a central part of the quilts I am always working on for I am a quilt artist.

I know that in the years to come she and I will have discussions about the creative life, conversations I couldn’t have with my daughter just because I was her mother. As a grandmother, I will be able to talk with Ariel about the difficult process of writing and painting and she won’t feel that I am either judging her or intruding on her space. Oh, this is one of the joys of being a grandmother. I have a long life behind me filled with rich experience that I can share with her, and along with my husband I can be a source of security in her world as a child of separated parents.

My daughter doesn’t really enjoy art exhibits and this is something I look forward to doing with Ariel even though I will have to sit on the benches the museum provides most of the time. As Ariel grows older I look forward to sharing my extensive collection of art books with her and taking her to art museums. Even at the tender age of 6 she has gotten to know the names of some impressionist painters like Seurat, and I have given her art kits based upon the work of this group of artists.

But running through my life with her is the leitmotif of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy as well as of loss. I am unable to travel to London as my husband does almost every other month for I do not have the stamina. I see her only two or three times a year for a few days at a time, a week at the most. I am generally at peace with the physical limitations my illness imposes on me, but I cannot help but feel a terrible sadness that I can’t see Ariel more often.

The last time she left Wellesley after a visit she wrapped her arms around me and held me as if she didn’t wish to let me go. I felt the same. The old adages about quality time sound very good intellectually, but my arms long to hug her more often, and I want to be a larger part of her life before she becomes a teenager, busy with her friends and a new life.

### **Continuities**

Among the blessings of coming from a lineage of extraordinary women are the continuities I see in the lives and personalities of my daughter and granddaughter and my own mother and grandmother. Ariel has my grand-

mother's sense of entitlement. I remember visiting my grandmother in Trieste when she had moved back to the apartment she shared with her sister. She marched ahead of me when I boarded the train for France looked in a compartment and cleared out all the people. "My granddaughter needs this space," she said from her heights and with that smile; surprisingly, a man and two women left without a word of protest. When my husband went to pick up Ariel at school during one of his visits she queried, "Where's the car?" "There is no car," her grandfather answered, for Ariel and her mommy live in the midst of London and use public transportation. "Carry me" she replied with aplomb and of course her grandfather was only too pleased to hoist her on his shoulders as if it was his role in life to wait on her, shades of Anna Guzman.

My daughter doesn't remember my grandmother because she died when Laurie was only four and she lived far away from us. However she and my mother were extremely close and my daughter wears the ring I bought my mother when she became divorced. Our three names are inscribed inside; Valerie, Guita, Laurie. I see my daughter growing into my mother's face and mirroring her gestures. I see in her my mother's innate practicality, her bent for engineering as well as her artistic streak. I see Ariel already becoming a writer as well as an artist, for she keeps a nightly journal, and I see how closely she observes people she meets and the world around her.

One of the great strengths of the female lineage is that there is always someone that has gone ahead showing us the way. Once when I was going through a bad patch with my illness, I dreamed of my mother walking ahead of me in a mountainous terrain and I knew that even though she had died so many years ago, she was accompanying me.

In coping with the limits on my ability to have a so called normal life, I always see my grandmother walking before me, remembering how she was widowed at the age of 30 and lived through wars that took many family members as well as destroying her way of life.

Even with my many physical problems, I hope I will be an example of overcoming difficulties, continuing to be a productive writer and a now low key social activist, other trodden paths for Ariel.

Once, when Ariel was visiting us, I showed her rosary beads that had been in my family since the seventeenth century and that I had mounted on some old lace and framed. "Those will be for your mother," I told her. She looked at me beaming and said, "then I will have them, and then I can give them to my children." She understands generations for she is close to her father's mother and even has a great-gran in London. My mother is frequently woven into our conversations because her handwork is reflected in my daughter's old doll-house toys and throughout our home. Through our conversations and our play, Ariel has gained a sense of belonging and comfort.

Ariel may be puzzled by my disabilities, but as she grows older I will explain them to her for what they are, severe physical impediments that do not impinge upon my spirit or my ability to love and accept her unquestioningly.