

# My Grandmother's Love



## *Dedication and Acknowledgements*



This is dedicated to [REDACTED], not only my grandmother but also a friend and mentor. Without her, this book would not be here. A big thank you for her love and kindness.

I would like to acknowledge my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, [REDACTED] who helped me make my first book ever, and who I promised to acknowledge if I ever had a book in print. To my parents, who are always there for me in whatever I do, and to my friends, who always give me a boost when I need in. Lastly, I would like to thank all my past English teachers, without them I would never have been interested in writing, and especially to [REDACTED] who gave us this assignment.



**I**t's been three years since grandma moved from Hawaii, and finally I will be able to see her again. Even though she wrote and called frequently, it was not the same—she couldn't scratch my back or bake me cookies two thousand miles away. After living in Maui, Hawaii for seven years, my parents decided it was time to move back to the mainland. My uncle William, who lives in Fayetteville, owns an auto body repair shop, which my dad would work for. My mother, who is a nurse, would be working at the local hospital. Of course I was apprehensive about moving to a state I had barely heard of, and leaving my friends and the only home I ever knew behind was also difficult. Yet the idea of seeing my grandmother again spurred me on.

After traveling in my uncle's R.V. for almost two weeks and having to survive without air conditioning in the broiling summer weather (the air conditioning broke down in Arizona, where the temperature was more than 110 degrees Fahrenheit), I was glad that we were only fifteen minutes away from my uncle's house. I worried, however, that my relationship with my grandmother might have changed, that I might disappoint her. Over the past few years my hair has grown long, I've acquired glasses, and also added several inches to my height.

I didn't have time to ponder these feelings though, because we arrived at my uncle's home, and there on the lawn stood my cousins. I hugged them, and then raced up the steep driveway to find my grandmother, who was waiting just inside the door for me. I do not remember what like my first meeting with my grandmother was like (since I was only two at the time) but I do remember this reunion with her, and I would have to say it was most likely better than my toddler reaction. After a big hug, my grandma of course exclaimed "You're gotten so tall!" in typical fashion, and I laughed and said, "It feels great to be home."



Me and Grandma in matching outfits. Taken on our front porch in Hawaii, 1988

**M**y grandmother, Viola Wertens, was and still is my mentor, guide, and healer. She was virtually my second mother from age two, and was there for me when my hardworking parents were not. As her youngest grandchild, I was doted upon, and when she moved in with us, became her favorite. Her values and old fashioned charm helped mold my values and outlook on life. In recent years her memory has slowly started to deteriorate and her body, wizened with age, has slowly begun to fail. As my time with her slips by, I continually plunge myself in memories of what was, so I am not frightened about what is to come eventually. My grandmother taught me to love, and love can overcome all things, including in the end, death.



Grandma and me together again. Taken Christmas 2001 in my living room.

**A**fter living with my family in Hawaii, my grandmother moved to Colorado in 1993 to live with her daughter, my Aunt Mary, and then moved in 1995 to live with my Uncle William and his family here in Fayetteville. After my uncle moved to Oklahoma, she decided to live on her own. She currently resides in a roomy house with her small dog, Simon. Living alone was her decision, even though she admits it can be lonely. Whenever I would visit, my grandma would pat Simon on the head and say, "[H]e's more faithful than anyone I know." Simon, a shihzu, doesn't make much of a guard dog, but serves well as a companion for grandma. As she ages, so does Simon, and grandma is fond of telling me the fact that Simon is actually older than her, or at least in dog years.

Simon is as much a part of the décor of my grandmother's home-he is almost always sitting at her feet- as her butterfly collection. Ever since I've known her, my grandmother has adored butterflies. Every holiday I give her one, and her collection includes crocheted butterflies, pictures of butterflies, ceramic butterfly magnets, and displays of real butterflies under glass. It was always those butterflies under glass that disturbed me, their fragile wings preserved behind the glaring glass. They seemed to press against the shining surface yearning to be free. I mentioned this once to my grandmother, and she agreed with me that they were very beautiful, yet also quite sad.



The butterflies of her home not only hang on the walls but also intermingle with greeting cards from birthdays and holidays and snapshots of family and friends. An oil painting depicting the California coastline-which resembles a painting hanging above my family's

mantelpiece- never ceases to make me long for the sea. Cluttered and kitschy, none of the furniture in my grandmother's living room matches, yet when she's settled in her plush overstuffed chair gesturing and telling a story, none of that seems to matter.

**A**lthough my grandmother says of her appearance, "I never was a raving beauty," I think otherwise. Old photographs reveal glossy thick curls, smooth creamy skin, and sparkling hazel eyes. Now her hair has gone a shining white shot through with silver strands, her skin wrinkled, and her eyes hidden behind thick spectacles, but she retains her sparkle and warmth and the real beauty, which is her kindness and generosity.



My grandmother and grandfather on their first date. She was beautiful then and still is

Her hands, lined and a bit gnarled, speak of their history. My grandmother worked hard in her lifetime; her hands washed dishes, held a damp cloth to a sick child's brow, and sewed neat stitches for doll clothes or dress-up clothes for me. They may not be beautiful by most standards, but my grandmother's hands show her love, the labor that they went through to help those in need.

**B**orn into a family of seven, my grandmother always loved family and children.

Her father, John Blyth, a manager at Eastman Kodak, always had time for her and her siblings. He himself had immigrated to the United States with his parents as a young child from Scotland, and was living the American dream. My grandmother's mother, Mary, was the daughter of German immigrants and was a soft spoken woman. Mary died from ovarian cancer when my grandmother was in her early 20s, and John remarried twice. He eventually outlived all three of his wives.



My grandmother, age four with her favorite cousin, Josie. Taken 1921 in Chiron

"We didn't have much, but we were happy," my grandmother says about her childhood. "My brothers and sisters generally got along, except my younger sister Margaret always liked to pass off chores on me, and since I was older, I had to do them. Our house didn't have enough bedrooms, and I when I was really young I used to sleep with two of my sisters in one bed, and the boys of course slept in another room. Unlike today, everyone on the block knew each other. I would wander over to a neighbor's house and we would all

gather together to play hopscotch or kick-the-can or build snow forts in the winter."

After dropping out of high school on doctor's orders, my grandmother went to work in the mailroom of Stuart Warner, where her sister was head of the department. There is where she met my grandfather, William, who was the boss's son. "When I saw him, I just knew that was the man I was going to marry," my grandmother says when I asked about the day she met him. Unlike the other girls, she said that she didn't like to flirt, and in as an attempt to pique William's interest baked him a cherry pie. "The best way to a man's heart is through his stomach," my grandmother cites as an explanation. The pie plot seemed to have worked, since William asked my grandmother on a date, and they soon became steady for two years. "When he kissed me, he claimed that I bit him, and then he didn't call me for a week. I was a bit worried, but that's men for you."



My grandmother's co-workers at a house warming party. Taken in Chicago 1940.

My grandparents were married in 1940, and my father, Douglas, arrived a year later, and was soon followed by Mary, Bill, and after my grandfather served in WWII for a year, their youngest child, Ron. Like almost all women of the age, my grandmother quit her job after she was married, and became a housewife. She, however, babysat for neighbor children as well as helped my grandfather with business matters. My grandparents, both born and

raised in Chicago, moved to California after the war, and my grandmother lived there over 20 years before retiring to Arkansas with my grandfather.

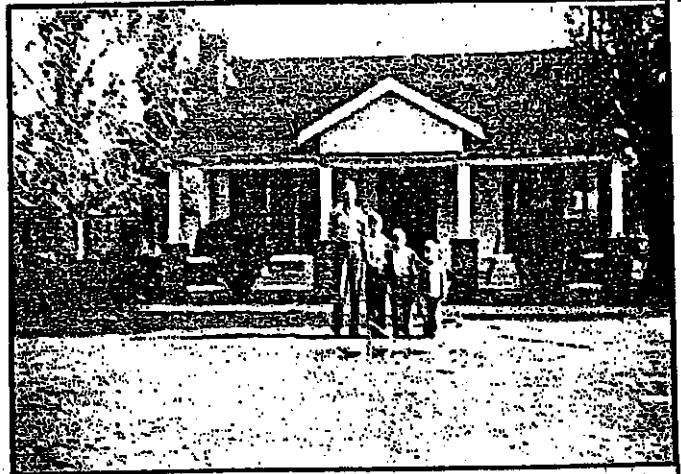
**G**randma saw both life and death in her lifetime, sorrow and pain as well as love and joy. Her children married, and had children of their own, which she babysat and doted upon. She and my grandfather lived with their beagle, Sherlock, in Fayetteville in their retirement years. My grandfather, who had smoked as a younger man, succumbed to a heart attack in late 1986. "When he died I couldn't picture his face, and when I woke up in the morning, I couldn't find myself," my grandmother says of her feelings about his death. "I had a good marriage, nothing to complain about," she says, "I could never marry anyone else, even if someone was crazy enough to want me!"



The Wertens family in 1950, from left, clockwise: William, my grandmother holding Ron; Bill, Mary, and Doug (my dad). Taken in Pasadena, California.

Even though she has seen the death of friends, her parents, and all of her siblings, my grandmother remains optimistic for the future. A very religious person, she believes that she will go when God wants her to. She describes death as "another level of life, just like graduating from high school or

college, but you're on a higher plane." When asked if she misses my grandfather, "I know he's still here with me in spirit, you're never really dead, it's only the body that's gone."



"The Boys" in front of my grandma's house in California. From left: my grandpa, Doug, Bill, and Ron. Taken in 1952

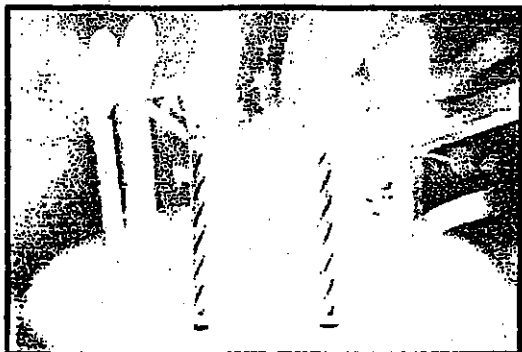


My grandmother relaxing in front of her home in California with her two parrots. She used to tell me stories about those parrots, and how one would sometimes talk in the night and scare her, and the other would like to nibble the corners of her books, especially her Bible. Taken in 1956.

**I**t is the spring of 1997, a warm, but breezy evening. Today is April 15<sup>th</sup>, unofficially the most dreaded day for Americans, tax day, but officially my grandmother's birthday, who was born in 1917. My grandmother's friends and our family are gathered at my Uncle William's home, including my second cousin, Kay, who drove in from Chicago just for the event. After a backyard barbecue and gift opening we all crowded into the small dining room for the lighting of the cake.

The faint glow emanating from the candles illuminates the message on the sugar laden cake, "Happy 80<sup>th</sup> birthday Viola!" My young cousin's hand darts out and sneaks a bit of the icing, and is swiftly reprimanded by one of my aunts. Before anyone else can make a move, my mother insists upon setting up her brand new camera on its tripod and taking a dozen shots of the cake, while the rest of us duck to avoid being in the picture. After the cake has been preserved in photographic glory, all of us gather around to sing "Happy Birthday"; young and old attempt to match pitches, fail helplessly, then go onward anyways. "I never realized how tone deaf my family was," my grandmother exclaims while shaking her head.

Finally she blows out the candles, and we all cheer and clap. "Good thing they make these new candles in the shape of numbers, or I would either be here all day or burn the house down with my cake," grandma says laughingly.



There is a mad dash to see who would get to lick the frosting off the candles, and both I and my cousin snag one. The adults hand out cups, plates, and forks, and we dig into the cake, which is a moist chocolate cake with creamy frosting. With my mouth full of cake I plop on to the sofa next to grandma, where is enjoying her own piece. "I never thought I would be the last living one in my family," she tells me, "I was always sick as a girl."

An anemic, she had to drop out of high school in eleventh grade, but unlike the rest of her family, cancer did not find its way into her body. "You're going to live to one hundred grandma, and then you can see my children," I tell her with certainty.



Grandma helping herself to some birthday ice cream. Taken at my uncle's house in 1997.

**I**ask her what her perfect day would be like-- would she visit some exotic tropical island, see a Broadway show, or whack through the wilds of Africa? No, like Morrie, she desires something simple, everyday, her idea of perfection is modest yet poignant. "My perfect day, well, I haven't really thought about it but I would want to see your grandfather



again. It wouldn't matter if we were young or old, but I would like to be with him and you and all of my family, whether they be dead or living now. Where would I go? Back to Chicago, so I could see my old house, though I'm sure it's changed so much I wouldn't recognize it. I would want someone to cook us a dinner with all my favorite foods, and I would bake apple brown betty for dessert. My sight and hearing would be better so I think I would like to go to a show, and see the latest picture. Then after riding a streetcar one more time I would head back home and read a book while your grandpa watched a game— like we always used to do."

"That's it?" I ask. "I suppose so," she says, "I've had a good life, and though I haven't traveled far, I've had no desire to; no I like being close to home, where my family is."

**T**he greatest lesson that my grandmother taught me is to love others, regardless of what they look like or what their history is. Whether it is because she came from a large family or she is deeply rooted in her faith, she has always had a kind heart. When I was young she taught me the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." My grandmother put this rule into practice, I cannot recall a time when she ever raised her voice or was angry with me. Even when I did something wrong, she would talk quietly with me and worked to solve the problem rather than agitate it. My grandmother understands people, and the fact "that a little kindness goes a long way." Indeed it does, whether that kindness is a smile, compliment, or a fresh baked cookie. Whenever I struggle with my emotions or get frustrated I remember my grandmother and think positive thoughts rather than belittle others or myself.

Being honest and working hard were two other things she taught me, and instilled in me a set of old fashioned

values modified to fit today's changing times. Having lived through the depression my grandmother was always thrifty, and also has an appreciation for the smaller things that I take for granted, since I come from an increasingly materialistic "throwaway" generation. She made doll cradles out of Quaker Oak Cartons, and converted her old dresses into play clothes for me. She saved everything, but was also generous and gave whatever she had to give to everyone.



Me and Raggedy Anne dressed in playclothes made by my grandma. Taken in Hawaii, 1989.

**A**fter the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, while most Americans were sorting out their morals and sorting out their priorities, my grandmother remained calm and reflective. She had always placed her family first, and was a rock for others to lean on. In her usual way, in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, my grandmother, instead of condemning anyone she said, "We have a lot to be



grateful for." Even though thousands died in the terrorist attack, she did not lay the blame on Al Qaeda or Afghanistan. Instead, she said that we should support each other, and be thankful for what we did have. Her belief in goodness in all people, no matter what their actions, is enviable. She has been confronted with evil, numerous times, but refuses to see the dark side of humanity, the glass will forever remain "half full" for her.



The twin towers, just after the attack, neither tower had yet fallen. Thousands died in the collapse.

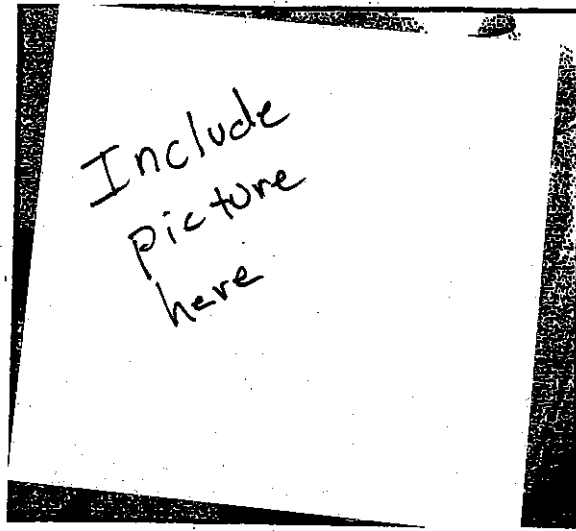


Even after the death and destruction of September 11, my grandma remains optimistic and patriotic.

This quote by Mark Twain describes my grandmother perfectly, "Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been." Though old and slowing down, she still has her love of life. She treats aging not as something to be ashamed of, but to be proud of. Oftentimes she jokes and says that "I may be old, but I'm not stupid," and calls herself a "little old lady." We used to play a game where I would reverse the number of my real age, so I could be older- if I was 12, then I would be 21, and if she were 76, she would be 67. Grandma told me that since we had played that game so often she would oftentimes forget how old she truly was, and tell her friends or people she met that she was actually 67. "You're as old as you feel," she would tell me, and how true that is. I just only wish that I could be nine again, curled up on my grandmother's lap, while she reads the *Bernstein Bears* to me.



Ah, to be young again, so I could spend my days with my grandma and not worry about "real life."



**[REDACTED] is a journalist and artist. This is her first novel. Her hobbies include reading, photography, and webdesign. She currently resides in Fayetteville, Arkansas with her parents and two loveable cats. She hopes to attend New York University to major in journalism and visual arts. Her relationship with her grandmother remains strong and she visits her every Sunday after church.**