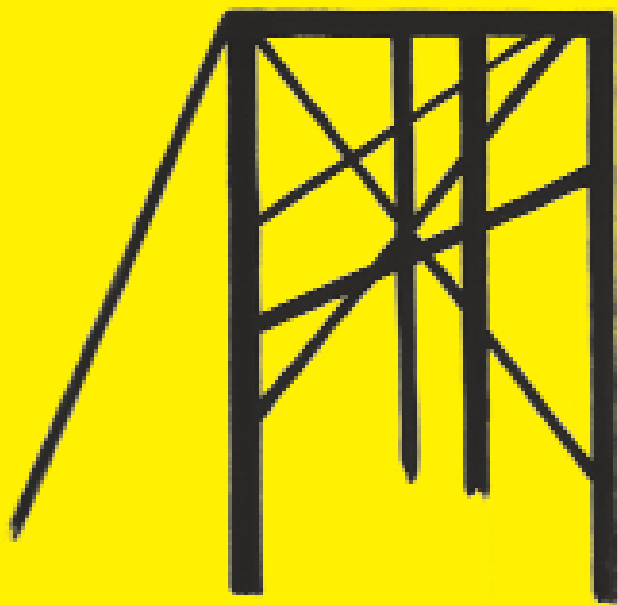


A VOICE FOR MY GRANDMOTHER



by
Ron Singer

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A V O I C E
F O R M Y
G R A N D -
M O T H E R

by

Ron Singer

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-RS

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Dedication

*To my dear old friends, Wayne Somers,
ideal reader, and Carmen Pace, muse of
funniness; and to my most significant others,
Liz, delightful wife, and Zoe, wonderful
daughter.*

--RS

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I. LATER YEARS



Snapshots

She sits at a table by a window, her mouth, with its two teeth, working, her hands playing with knots in a hanky.

The window is in a generic, not a specific, apartment, but it's a kitchen window — her sphere.

The weather, too, is unspecific: it could be rain, sun, snow.

“Zu hot,” she says, but that could be the steam.

Can she read? Why doesn't she talk more?

Probably the language.

She smells of two kinds of powder, face and bubble gum.

She eats corn on the cob by cutting and scraping all the kernels off, then eating them one by one. It takes a long time. But so what?

She looks like an imaginary old Indian chief, referred to by my dad and me, but not by her daughter, my mom, as “Ikamatubee.” Or was there really some notable chieftain of that name?

The Shoes

Whenever she thought about the shoes, which was once every few years, her third, and youngest, daughter would become incensed.

“When Mom needed a new pair of shoes, Pop wouldn’t even take her into the city to buy them. He’d wrap up the old ones in newspaper and ride the train in, himself, then go down to the lower East Side and buy exactly the same shoes — same style, same color, same size.”

Imagine! Grandma being co-opted for some feminist agenda.

I can think of a million things that story leaves out.

Like what? Like what color were the shoes? And what did she wear while he was gone?

We’re probably supposed to picture her traipsing around the farm barefoot.

Maybe she didn’t enjoy going into the city.

Maybe those were the shoes she liked.

Maybe.

Two Wicked Sons-in-Law

My father made mother-in-law jokes about Grandma that I can't remember. He hated religion, but, while my mother was getting out the kosher dishes, preparatory to a visit, he would raise the banner of tolerance, proudly proclaiming a moratorium on anti-religious jokes.

He would also ask my mom how long Grandma was going to stay, then rip into his favorite topic, inequity, in this case the alleged fact that the other relatives didn't shoulder their fair share of Grandma time.

Although she still kept her small apartment, she really couldn't live alone any longer. The money contributed by each of her five then-living children made for a second inequity complaint. Money was a vexed topic, very.

The math of each of these two inequities was inscrutable, always open to profound debate. Dad would also complain about inequity on a global scale — racial, economic, and so on — and he would use the same tone

as when he complained that last year this or that relative had only let Grandma stay at their house half as long as she had stayed at ours. The alleged chief culprit was my uncle, the husband of the daughter who told the shoe story. Social justice may have suffered from being made to share the stage with petty complaint.

Nor was decorum a cherished value. When they thought it was time for Grandma to leave, both my father and uncle would make jocular throat-clearing noises, then drop rude, obvious hints. My uncle even did this in front of me once. Har har! The latitude of these scenes was about two degrees south of a sit-com. The boorish sons-in-law did, however, like Grandma's cooking. Is there no one to forgive these men?

Ranu, M'zooka

“Ranu, M'zooka,” she would say, as she came through the door.

She would rummage through her huge patent-leather pocketbook and bring out a very large packet of bubble gum: Bazooka, a segmented log, pink and speckled with sugar. One by one, I would stuff as many segments as I could into my mouth — four? five? — and, when the bubble broke, it would cover my whole face.

“Ranu!” she would laugh, trying to look strict.

I was eight or nine in this memory. Was that Swahili she was speaking? Was the gift made from love or from a desire for acceptance? Who can possibly say? Grandma, like my own mom, lived in loving fear.

“Pocketbook, money, keys.” According to my mother, that was my first utterance. Improbable.

Grandma never had a word to throw at a dog. She'd sit there smiling and nodding, and, once in a while, reach over and pat my hand.

“There was something, like, very, like, Sixties about Granny. Like, good vibes, man. Like.”

Roll me a j, Gran?

No, Ranu. M'zooka.

Grandma's Bones

Recently, a scandal broke. The funeral company that buried Grandma twenty years ago, a large, respected old concern, was discovered to have overbooked.

Gravestones had disappeared. Split-level burials were unearthed. Mausoleums had been sledge-hammered to make room for multiple newcomers. Bones were found dumped in the adjacent woods.

Is Grandma now in the woods? What happens to corpses matters a lot to Jews — religious ones, that is. My dad and my uncle would first have waxed indignant over the scandal, and then, although the latter was, himself, observant, made numerous self-convulsing jokes.

Ranu. Over here. Under that big bush! M'zooka.

Two Other Grandmas:

The Council-Person

“Are you kidding!” cried the feisty septuagenarian grandma. “You can’t give out a twenty-million dollar contract without any bids. Not even in this town. And, if you try to railroad it through, so help me, I’ll go to the papers! The taxpayers didn’t elect me to let people like you rob them.”

A woman like my Grandma, in many ways: old, similar origins, even looked a bit like her. But the council-person had not been married to someone who was said to have bought her shoes for her. And before that? In their earlier lives? There must have been other cardinal differences. Possibly, though, somewhere inside her, Grandma had the same spirit — somewhere.

The Council-Person's Sister, The Pie-Maker

Ten years after her death, she still holds the record, and it is not likely to be broken. This primacy is periodically re-affirmed at family gatherings: she made the best apple pie any of us has ever eaten. Especially the crust, which was so good that, not only can no single criticism be made of it, but no one has ever even asserted a subjective taste for crust that was a bit more this or a bit less that.

“How did you learn to make such perfect crusts?”

“Well, I threw a lot of them away. I still do.”

She had no career and only one child, but she was an expert weaver who loved all the arts and had a spare, impeccable taste in everything. Her mind was clever, original, acerbic and logical in a way that underscored her sister's conventionality, although the council-person was herself incisive, focused and dominating. But the socially-oriented mind just seemed less brilliant alongside the mind of the pie-maker.

Like my Grandma, she was usually silent. Not always, however.

Toward the end of a holiday dinner, when her silly, but generally harmless, husband and some other men in the family, including me, were sluggishly debating the merits of the nominees in an impending presidential election, she suddenly spoke up. Her sister was not present.

“‘Conservative!’ ‘Liberal!’ The whole thing is disgusting. Isn’t it obvious both of them are completely worthless? How could they be anything but? Just think about the terrible things they’ve had to do to get this far! We’ll never know the half of it.”

And she brought out a litany of shameful facts which were completely new to the rest of us around the table.

“How did she find out all that stuff?”

“She has a lot of time on her hands, so she reads — things most people don’t have the time, patience, or interest to bother with. And she has a good memory.”

Usually, however, she was as silent as my own Grandma.

Sentimental Depictions of the Aged

There are few things I hate more than stories about lonely, impoverished oldsters sitting by their windows feeling bored and bereft. I don't even like these characters when they turn up in English murder novels as the neighborly snoops who peep through the curtains for twenty years until, one fatal day, they see something which solves the whole case. They, and the writers, for that matter, should get a life. Anyway, they, the writers, need better plots.

Grandma Buttresses the Kosher Laws

According to my mother, Grandma used to tell a story about a child in Russia who strayed into the pen of a huge pig and was torn apart and eaten, even as her little sister watched through the fence in helpless terror.

Grandma told this story in order to reinforce her distaste for pig meat. An etiological myth about the kosher laws. She may even have said she was the sister.

In the dream, however, Grandma is the victim, wearing a clean white dress. Sacrificial. Was it my dream or a dream that someone told me?

Well, then. That's the story of a story, or the story of a dream, or the story of the story of a dream, or the story of the story of the story of . . . whatever.

A Turn of Phrase

Her second daughter, my mother, inherited a turn of phrase, which she began to draw upon in middle age:

“How are you, Mom?”

“Oh, about the same.”

Not “Good.” Never, “I’m well.” Not even, “Fine, thanks.”

II. EARLIER YEARS



The Domestic Economy: Eggs

Grandpa, a failed chicken farmer, morphed into something like a gentleman farmer.

Verily, it was chicken shit which broke most of the mighty men of old, from the pale, scrawny scholars to the giants in the earth. Getting rid of the constant, copious droppings before they turned to cement must have been like cleansing the Augean stables. Among the Jewish-American diaspora, failure at chicken farming was practically a tradition.

So Grandpa became an entrepreneur, buying wholesale from those martyrs and supermen who stayed the course, and transporting product to the nearest large town, where he would retail it door to door. Did he travel by horse and wagon, at first? Grandma's help would have been essential: he did the money and eggs, she did the rest — the home fires, and all that.

Some protein-poor people are superstitious about eggs. For instance, the Yoruba of the tse-tse-ridden West-African rain forest have a proverb, "The child who is given eggs to eat will grow up to be a thief."

Unfortunately, we lack statistics.

Leisure Time

When my mother was growing up, baseball was played in a big field on the property. My mother's younger brother, a real athlete, "made the girls play in the outfield, way back in the outfield."

In my time, we would swim and picnic in the park at the top of the dam on the small lake in the middle of town. Grandma and Grandpa were never there. They must have been working, or relaxing at home, whatever form that would have taken:

- a. read the paper and/or religious texts
- b. sewed, knitted, crocheted
- c. listened to the radio
- d. sat on the porch, rocking and praying for a breeze
- e. some, all, or none of the above
- f. and, oh, yes, once all the children were in place,
any bedroom activity becomes a matter of (im)pure speculation.

Or, maybe, they just sat staring into space.
Or dozed. They probably dozed.

And a Mimetic Micro-Economy

I, myself, played Store with the little granddaughter, my age, from across the road. (Was Doctor also played? Quite possibly.) Pebbles, sticks, grapes, flowers, and pine cones and needles were purveyed across a marble counter in our sun-dappled arbor. She bought, I sold.

At least once, Grandma must have walked up the hill to look on in approval, nodding, smiling, and wiping her hands on her apron.

Personal Cows

There was a cow for each of the gentleman farmer's five children, all with predictable names — “Bossy,” “Spotty,” and so forth. Although each child was expected to care for their own cow, the ultimate responsibility for all five of these charismatic mega-fauna must have fallen to Grandma. Not to mention the responsibility for all five children.

Or were there six, or even seven, of each? One or two children may already have died or gone their ways by the time my generation came along. If so, what happened to their personal cows, not to mention the five others? Don't ask.

I Narrowly Avoid Abduction

A man invited me to go for a ride in his car.

“I’ll buy you an ice cream in town.”

I had one foot on the running board and both hands on the door handle when Grandpa hurtled from the house. He may have been waving a gun; he was definitely shouting. While he or my own dad lectured me about strangers, my mom would have chimed in, and Grandma would have pulled a face and nodded vigorously.

“No, Ranu! Feh! No good!”

Fidei Defensor

Others among the Jews in the area made more money. The big thriving farm down the road where my cousins, friends and I pretended to be robbers as we helped ourselves to fallen apples and pears has long since been transformed. Although the dairy still supplies milk to the environs and beyond, the rest of the farm has been carved into a spiffy, but dull, housing subdivision and a big ugly office block, the centerpiece of the whole agglomeration. Each of these enterprises bears the name of the original farm from which we children once gleaned.

It was my own Grandpa, however, a man of only middling wealth, who took the lead in matters spiritual. Rabbis were brought over from Russia. They lived in our house, at least initially, and we hosted services for the synagogue-less little community. When one of these men moved on, whether upward or downward, money had to be found by means of which to extract, lure and ferry over the next one.

Bickering must have been inevitable. The family was large, and Grandpa brought these strangers into the space which Grandma, in a sense, ruled, inviting their

empty stomachs to her table. But since she remained observant years later, long after Grandpa had left the scene, she presumably concurred with his acts of pious charity. Without him, no religious life for the Jewish families in this, their new land. And so, presumably, none without her.

My Mom's Grudges Against Her Parents

Grandpa did not have/would not spend the money for an operation by means of which to uncross my mother's eyes. Grandma must have acquiesced, but my mom's bitterness regarding this unremedied imperfection, which made her an easy target of juvenile cruelty, was forever fixed upon her father.

She also went to school in torn, ill-fitting, often embarrassingly skimpy clothes. Although it was a law of nature that, in all but the richest families, you wore hand-me-downs, for this humiliation she blamed her mother, accusing her of slovenliness and indifference.

For these and whatever other reasons, my mother left school after the fourth or fifth grade.

Grandpa Dies

This time, we stayed longer, on into the Fall, to help see Grandpa through his end game. School, regrettably, was missed. He had inoperable, excruciating cancer somewhere in the nether regions. He screamed and screamed, then screamed some more.

Why didn't they give him morphine or something?

a. They did, but after a while it stopped working.

b. They couldn't give him enough. It was expensive.

This was a horrible time for everyone. My cousins and I were old enough to be almost told he was dying. Whichever daughters were then in residence saw him through the nights in shifts, and their exertions heaped unwonted burdens of parenting and emotional support on their own overtaxed husbands.

But it was Grandma who must have borne the brunt both of Grandpa's care and of the household regimen, which, as always, had to be kept up.

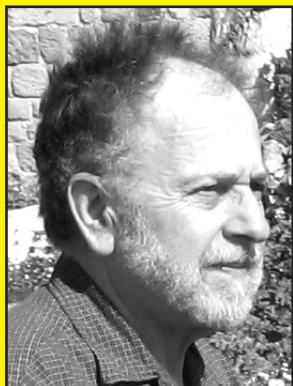
And what happened to all the eggs?

A Final Note in the Interests of Equity

I cannot remember anyone's ever having suggested that our long sojourns at my grandparents' house be credited against the account of Grandma's subsequent visits to us. The bottom line would have been, to use one of my mom's favorite adjectives, interesting.

But never mind. By now, I am the family's principal surviving earthly accountant.

The End



Ron Singer (b.1941) has published fiction in *Ellipsis*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Sage of Consciousness*, *SNR (Starry Night Review)*, and *Willow Review*; and poetry in *Borderlands: The Texas Poetry Review*, *elimae*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream*, and *Windsor Review*.

He has also written librettos for two (performed) operas and the *Introduction to Vanity Fair* (Bantam Books). His satire has appeared in newspapers and in the e-zines, *diagram* (also in their 2006 print anthology), *elimae*, and *Oregon Literary Review*. His essays and reviews on African subjects have appeared in various publications, including *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Poets & Writers* (online), and *The Wall Street Journal*.

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