

# My Grandmother is Normal

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GIANNA PATRIARCA

*C'est une une jeune Italienne qui explique à sa grand-mère pourquoi elle ne s'est pas encore mariée. La grand-mère elle, a été mariée deux fois, une fois par amour, une autre fois à cause de son veuvage. La jeune fille lui répond qu'à son époque, on s'attendait à ce que la vie pour les femmes était dans le mariage.*

*"Ma, why you no get marry, you such a nice girila, nobody wants marry to you?"*

That's the standard greeting I get from my grandmother every time I appear at her front door, steel gray and decorated with an assortment of sticker-type pictures of angels and saints courtesy of her local church, and a Canadian flag, courtesy of the neighbourhood city councillor. They are all carefully pasted to the solid, impenetrable, intruder-proof door of her modest semi-detached, two-storey house on a one-way street in Toronto, just east of Ossington Avenue, south of Dupont.

My grandmother had always wanted a new crimson door with a bright and shiny gold knob, but my mother insisted that it would make an unflattering statement about those who lived in the house and the neighbours would never stop talking. Red is my grandmother's favourite colour, gold her favourite mineral or metal, Saint Teresa her favourite saint and I am, without a doubt, her most cherished female grandchild.

My mother, her only daughter, is the official Swiss guard on regular duty now that my grandmother has reached her mid-80s, spending most afternoons taking care of her needs, shopping, housecleaning, banking and performing other domestic routines while my grandmother spends more and more time reconnecting to her catholic identity

listening to Radio Maria, reading religious magazines, and baking her amaretto cookies for the rosary group every first Friday of the month. Grandma's internal clock is set for the daily viewing of the Eucharist on Vision tv, which is often broadcast either in French or Latin and she is now comfortably bilingual in the responses, preferring the Latin because it takes her back to the days in Italy when all her prayers were learned in Latin. When the mass is over she switches to RAI international television to reconnect with her original language. This phenomenon of spiritual re-birth has happened in the last ten years or so and I imagine it is a preparation and a type of indemnity for the inevitable realities to come. She has on occasion tried to lead me toward her spiritual inspiration, wanting me to join in her appreciation of the "holy," but as much as she tries I resist it with a sincere politeness that seems to appease her.

Her delight in the utterly mindless programming of RAI International Television is a little more disturbing.

Before I take off my coat or hang up my purse or remove my shoes or even put my arms around her to say "hello," grandmother asks me the same question, which is really less of a question than it is a sad, painful affirmation of my unfortunate state of spinsterhood. My unexploited and unappreciated feminine charms going to waste, as the clock ticks away, are a constant concern for my grandmother and a very real reason to devote a decade of prayers to my needs every time she says the rosary. That is the reason I visit only on absolutely necessary occasions or on the feast day of Saint Teresa and bring her a dozen red roses. Yes, roses are my grandmother's favourite flowers. My grandmother's name is Teresa.

I love my grandmother and would never entertain the thought of a mockingly smart response to any of her questions, of which there are laundry bags full, each with an undercurrent of my unrealized state of womanhood, but there have been moments when visions of grand-matricide have flashed appetizingly in my head.

I don't know why she keeps asking me the same thing over and over when I am almost optimistic she really knows the answer but somehow she needs to play this game that allows a certain pretence into the assumed normality of our

my grandmother he can find that anywhere, the rest is provided by us.

The fact that my brother is 35 and still living with our parents does not trouble her at all. It is true that my mother still waits for him to come home, launders his clothes, and no matter what the hour, she is prepared to cook whatever his heart desires. All this is completely acceptable.

This inevitable contradiction in my grandmother's character and behaviour towards our gender can appear baffling but it is totally natural and I have learned to

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totally peculiar family. Nothing about my grandmother or anyone else in my familial tribe is normal, but then what is normal? Is there a family in history who can ever claim the honour?

I am fortunate that my grandmother has a wicked sense of humour and she does not take offence when I mimic her questionable sanity as I play charades with her advice, her concerns and her God. She laughs easily and with a real need to share the joy that is in her. She also embraces me constantly and I have now learned the hugs are not just a demonstration of affection but a way to get close enough to slip fifty dollar bills into my pockets. Just in case.

My grandmother has buried two husbands. I never met either of them because they exited the planet years before I was born while she was still a relatively young, attractive woman. She has been without a man, a husband, for over thirty years and for the past twenty-five of those she has filled me in on her theory that it is a very real improbability that decent, honest, and exceptional men exist in this world. She has also assured me that their participation in the universe is overestimated and in most instances completely *not* necessary. The fact that my grandmother's God is a man never enters the discussion.

Of course, all of this disdain for the male gender does not apply to her beloved, perfect nephew, my brother, who is her first grandchild, a gemstone, a remarkable young man beyond any imperfection, resembling Michael the good angel and therefore impossible to criticize. He is, for my grandmother, flawless. She has never asked him when he will marry because there is no need for him to marry. Between my grandmother and my mother he has no real need for a wife, except perhaps for sex, and according to

tolerate it without any spite toward her or my brother. They are after all just a little bit insane.

My grandmother's first husband was short, the second was tall, one had a moustache and black wavy hair, the other did not. She has pictures of both husbands on either side of her bedroom wall where they hang quietly in the ordered little world my grandmother has created inside her modest house for the last thirty years. She dusts the pictures daily with a handkerchief she keeps folded by her night table. The handkerchief is only for the photographs of the two men that hang on her wall. The third man hanging on a cross over the headboard of her bed she dusts with a feather brush.

The tall one's photograph is on the right. He was my grandfather and I can see something of me in the serene look of his young face with his receding hairline and large brow. His slightly crooked eyes with the sad droopy eyebrows are unmistakably the same as mine. He was gone five years before I came along but when I look at the photo he does not appear to be a stranger, perhaps because I have spent so many years in this room, we have come to know each other. Sometimes when I am in grandmother's room and we are chatting while I help her with some totally irrelevant chore like folding nightgowns and sheets or ironing pillowcases I become as inquisitive with her as she is with me.

*"Grandma, tell me something, why did you marry these two men?"*

There is always a long dramatic pause before she attempts to find words to give me an answer. She could have been an actress. She prepares her round little body to stand firm and proud, she clears her throat and places her fingers

through her Magnani mane, still thick and well coloured and after a couple of deep sighs she begins telling me how striking she was when she was young and how the suitors of her day would not leave her alone. She had many to choose from as she recalls, “*I was too beautiful not to marry, so many want to make me their wife, so many, but I choose the first one because he love me.*”

Her cheeks darken with a blush as she turns to look at the picture of the man with the moustache. If the first one had not died, she would have been a fine lady in a fine house. If the first one had not died she would have lived a pampered life. The first one was from a family of merchants, well established in commerce and highly respected in their village and she would have inherited much property in due time. But he died before he could give her children and without children there was no claim to position or property.

“In my time the women ... we marry ... we make children ... we become good wife, good mother, that’s what we do.”

There is a look in her eyes that is unconvincing, faintly distant, as if she might be trying to talk herself into believing her own words, or perhaps hoping that I will accept them without any further questions. I know she married the first one for love, so she says, the second she married because the first one died. It was the second who gave her the children but not the indulgent, lavish life.

“A young widow no good in my days. For the womens in that time with no husband you don’t got nothing in the life, so you find the husband and you make the life.”

The second one brought her to Toronto, gave her the children and a house that was less than fine. It’s the same house where the photographs now hang, where my mother was born and where I played as a child among the knick-knacks and photographs. It is the same house where my grandmother waits for my drop-ins, where we sit on her bed and flip through memories in between folding laundry or making pots of espresso which we drink as if we never had need to sleep again.

It is this house she will leave to my brother and me when her time comes, her simple and unpretentious legacy, her gift to us. She will leave us this house so we will remember, on occasion, that she once existed.

But I do not know what house I will live in, or whom I will share it with. I don’t know what I will remember if I live to be her age or if I will ever have children of my own. I cannot tell my grandmother my dreams because I know they would upset her. There are truths and desires in my life that have no words or prayers she will understand. I am as much a casualty of my time as she was of hers.

But now, in this room with her photographs and memories I will remain the granddaughter who could not find

a man to make her a wife, and hope, while we fold sheets and iron pillowcases and talk of her lovers who hang dust free on her pale blue walls that she can feel in her old, settled heart how much I love her and that I need so much more than a man, or even two, to “make the life.”

*Gianna Patriarca is an award-winning author of eight books of poetry and a book for children. Her work, adapted for stage and radio, is featured in numerous documentaries. Her work is taught in universities in Canada, the United States and Italy. She was runner-up to the Milton Acorn People’s Poetry Award, shortlisted for the Bressani Prize, and in 2010, she was the first recipient of the Science and Cultural Award from the Italian Chamber of Commerce. In 2009, an Italian translation of her first book, Italian Women and Other Tragedies, was launched in Italy. She is currently working on a short story collection, All My Fallen Angelas, stories about Italian-Canadian women. She lives in Toronto.*

## JOANNA M. WESTON

### In Another Time

they fire-bombed  
the cities  
rose petals  
fell from your  
bruised hands

when I remember  
stories of gun-smoke  
I breathe  
the scent  
of Christmas roses

my hand in yours  
on the beach  
dune grass blows  
where young women  
grew roses

*Joanna M. Weston is married with two cats, multiple spiders, a herd of deer, and two derelict hen houses. Her middle-reader, Those Blue Shoes, was published by Clarity House Press. Frontenac House of Calgary published her poetry collection, A Summer Father.*