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## A BEAT OF GOODBYE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF MY LAST DAYS WITH GRANDMA

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I use field notes, journal entries, and memory recall to write an autoethnographic account of my experiences of the last days of my grandma's life. I use writing as method in the form of an introspective narrative, layering artistic storytelling and academic references. My original research goal was to better understand the experience of loving and caring for a very old family member by showing the inside of how I experienced my grandma's aging and final days, including her move to a retirement home, and her death a short time later. By sharing narratively my lived experiences of my grandma's last days, I also hoped to disrupt some of the socially accepted interpretations surrounding physical bodies and aging, especially for women. Although my initial goal was to understand how these types of experiences transform us, in the process of telling this story I found that what I also gained was a deeper understanding of who my grandma was, and ultimately, who I am.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, writing as method, aging and the female body, reflexive narrative, self and identity

## Introduction: In Death We Part

“Mom, Mom?” said Dad, shaking her shoulder urgently.

“She’s gone, Dad,” I said, rubbing my hand across his back. I felt his warmth on my palm and realized that Grandma’s warmth was fading.

At my words, Dad collapsed, sitting heavy in the chair beside Grandma’s bed. Laying his head on the sheet, he moaned low and long before abandoning himself to desperate sobbing.

“Mom! No, Mom! No!” The sounds of his screams were muffled in Grandma’s side.

I rubbed his back hard, laying my head across his shoulders. I was crying, and I realized that I was crying for him. His pain, so loud and unexpected from my quiet father, felt too heavy to bear.

*You have to bear it, I chastised myself. His mom just died. Grandma is his mom.*

My older sister, Susan, whispered, “Let’s give him a minute.” Together, we went and stood by the door, leaving Dad with Grandma. Susan and I stared at each other while the sound of Dad’s sobs reverberated around us, but we stayed silent. Susan’s eyes were large, likely mirroring mine. As Dad’s painful crying continued, I tried my best to will him my comfort.

At last, he stood and lurched to the door where we waited, pulling first Susan and then me into a tight hug. Wrapped in my dad’s arms, I felt something inside me finally let go, and I realized I was crying again, but this time I was not crying for Dad.

I was crying for Grandma.

## Research Topic, Motivation and Goals

In April of 2017, my grandma passed away in her ninety-seventh year of life. Six weeks earlier, I had helped move her to a retirement home.

Grandma had spent the previous year living with my dad after moving out of a retirement home in Owen Sound. They had lived during the spring and summer of 2016 at Dad’s old 1885 farmhouse that had no well or septic system. In the fall, they moved to a cottage, where they “wintered,” as Dad would say.

Although this was a lot of moving for a ninety-six year old lady, I believe it was her best year in a long time. She always seemed happiest when she was with her only son.

In this article, I use field notes and journal entries in combination with memories of my conversations with family members to write an autoethnographic account of the last days I spent with my grandma before she died, focusing in particular on two days in her final six weeks: the day we moved her to a new retirement home, and the day she died.

In my autoethnographic account, I employ a reflexive narrative approach; the latter includes references to the academic literature, mainly about the aging female body. Hunt and Sampson describe reflexive writing as “doubling the self” to get “both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ourselves simultaneously” (4). By layering narrative with academic references, I am able to both re-experience and reflect on my own emotions and lived experiences while also analyzing them. I chose a narrative form of writing, in part, to honour my grandma; at ninety-three years old, she tried to write the story of her life but only managed to write 799 words. My autoethnographic account is intended to both honour and complement the writing she completed. I also chose the narrative form in order to craft a creative space where readers might examine and question their own assumptions about aging, specifically in relation to the female body. My initial research goal was to better understand the experience of loving and caring for my grandma, her subsequent move to a retirement home, and her death a short time later. I wanted to understand how these types of experiences with elderly family members can transform us. As I continued writing and sharing my perspective about my grandma’s and my experiences, I became more specific in wanting to disrupt some of the socially accepted interpretations surrounding physical bodies and aging, especially for women. Although my original goal was to understand how these types of experiences might transform us, in the process of telling this story I found that what I also gained was a deeper understanding of who my grandma was, and ultimately, who I am.

***“In my autoethnographic account, I employ a reflexive narrative approach; the latter includes references to the academic literature, mainly about the aging female body.”***

## Methodology

My grandmother was a storyteller who selectively reconstructed her past to explain to herself, and to her friends and family, who she was. In this article, I employ a similar means of narrative reconstruction using a combination of my observations and

knowledge of our pasts to describe how her life, and mine, have been transformed by our shared experiences.

As I note earlier, I employ autoethnography in this inquiry. Autoethnography is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 1). In autoethnography, writing is given a central position in the research process (Bochner and Ellis 80). Laurel Richardson describes writing as “a method of inquiry,” saying that writing is “a way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (Richardson 923). Although there are many methods for conducting autoethnographic research, I employ an introspective narrative in the form of a layered account, moving back and forth and in and out of my story, layering my account with academic references that help me begin to understand my grandma’s and my own experiences within a broader socio-cultural context (Ellis 198; Rambo Ronai, *My Mother is Mentally Retarded* 110; Rambo Ronai, *The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher* 103). Rambo Ronai writes: “Introspection is conscious awareness of itself, a social process of self-examination involving conversation with oneself” (*The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher* 103). In the process of writing this paper, I call upon my various selves to tell this story: scholar, granddaughter, daughter, sister, aunt, and mother.

I chose the layered account of autoethnography as my methodology mainly for personal reasons. I have read many examples of autoethnographic texts as well as academic texts that utilize a narrative form. Carolyn Ellis frequently writes personal narrative autoethnography (*Ellis, Maternal Connections; Ellis, There Are Survivors: Telling a Story of Sudden Death*). Carol Rambo Ronai and Arthur Bochner, on the other hand, weave narrative and analysis together in many of the autoethnographic papers they write (Rambo Ronai, *My Mother is Mentally Retarded*; Rambo Ronai, *The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher*; Bochner, *It’s About Time: Narrative and the Divided Self*; Bochner, *Bird on the Wire: Freeing the Father Within Me*). Carol Rambo Ronai coined the term “layered account” (*The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher* 103).

The recursive movement between narrative writing and academic references that is found in a layered account is a format that I personally enjoy. I love how this form weaves together—and also produces—insights. I also appreciate the emotional relief that the academic references in a layered account provide. They give me space to process the powerful emotions generated by the narrative sections. As I have written and rewritten my experiences about my last weeks and days with my grandma, layering and interweaving academic references within the narrative, I have gained clearer insights into how both she and I have been socially shaped in relation to aging and our bodies. The layered form of autoethnography has thus been useful for my own learning

process, and because I also like reading ethnographies such as those I note above, I chose it as the form for this inquiry.

An important consideration in every form of autoethnography is relational ethics. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner write: “Researchers do not exist in isolation. We live connected to social networks that include friends and relatives, partners and children, co-workers and students, and we work in universities and research facilities. Consequently, when we conduct and write research, we implicate others in our work” (*Autoethnography: An Overview* 8). Writing an autoethnographic inquiry involving intimate others has been a bigger challenge than I anticipated, as there are no clear answers concerning how to address all the ethical questions that arise. As Carolyn Ellis writes, “There is no one set of rules to follow” (*Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others* 23). The advice she ultimately gives is “seek the good,” (*Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others* 23) which I take to mean, do no harm. I have done my best to follow this advice as I have written and rewritten this article. I have also spent a considerable amount of time reading the available literature on relational ethics and the ethical requirements of writing autoethnographically in order to ensure I am doing my ethical best for my family.

Autoethnographers are usually closely connected to the participants in their research; thus it is important that the people involved be treated with compassion. Kim Etherington writes that “a major ethical requirement is that we make our attempts and struggles transparent” (142). As I researched and wrote this paper, I kept relational concerns uppermost in my mind. I named as few of my family members as possible, and I was careful to only include details about them that directly related to the lived experiences I was describing.

In my narratives, I have shared more about my dad and my grandma than the rest of my family. As a result, I felt I needed to take additional steps concerning the ethical considerations for each of them. I provided my dad with a copy of this article to read in full, and I have made changes based on his requests and corrections. As I also named my sister, Susan, and her daughter, Monica, I also provided each of them with a copy of this article to read prior to publication. All three of them, my Dad, Susan, and Monica, have provided their consent. Unfortunately, my grandma passed away before this work was completed; however, I did share with her some of the article’s details prior to her passing. The evening before we moved her to the retirement home, I sat with her and discussed the book I was reading, *The Ethnographic I*, by Carolyn Ellis (*The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*). I described to her how Ellis wrote a paper about caring for her own mother (*Maternal Connections*), and other papers in which she took field notes of lives-in-progress. I told Grandma I wanted to take field notes the next day, her moving day, about everything that happened during the day. She agreed verbally that this was okay with her. She thought it would be fun to be involved in one of my essays. The next day, at opportune times, I pulled out my notebook to make notes. She asked once what I was doing, and I explained that I was taking the field notes we had talked about the previous evening, to which she nodded

with understanding. Obviously, I did not have a similar discussion on the day of her death, but had I had one, I believe she would have wholeheartedly agreed. In “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others,” Carolyn Ellis writes that situations similar to that of my grandma are the “easier cases,” stating that “sometimes our stories about people who have died serve as memorials that keep our loved ones alive in our memories” (*Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others* 14). This is true in this case; as I stated earlier, my intention with this article was to honour my grandma. Ultimately, as I could not get my grandma’s explicit consent, I decided that what I would do is keep her best interests always in mind as I proceeded, and only write about what I thought she would have consented to had she had the chance. In this way, I was “seek[ing] the good,” as Ellis suggests.

Finally, I have endeavoured through my writing and rewriting process to focus on my own perspective; each of my narrative accounts is written solely from my own observations and understandings, and although my family members were involved in the experiences I narrate, their understandings and interpretations might be quite different from mine. There is no one and only “true” account of these experiences. Throughout my writing and revision process, I have consistently considered the safety, privacy, and dignity of my family members. I recognize, however, that the issue of relational ethics in autoethnographic writing is complex.

My grandma believed in the importance of sharing stories. She believed in freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the need for political transparency. She believed that more people should share the stories of their lives, especially if those stories might potentially help others. My dad was a journalist for over forty years, and as a result, I heard my grandma express her opinions on these topics on numerous occasions. Thus, I believe my grandma would have been happy to give me permission to publish the final version of this article.

## **Moving Grandma to a Retirement Home**

In my memory, the year that Dad and Grandma lived together was a good year. Grandma spent time on a chair in the back lawn, surrounded by her family in the shade of a tree beside Dad’s rambling flower garden. She and Dad talked about Donald Trump for hours. Periodically, she would tell me she was worried about Dad, and I’d tell her not to worry, he’d be okay, and she’d say, “It’s a mom’s right to worry about her only son.” Grandma fussed at Dad’s constant vacuuming, Dad fussed at Grandma’s inability to make small choices, and they loved it. They both loved to complain, and they loved that what they could complain about was the everyday complaints of sharing a home together.

I also remember it as a bad year. Getting Grandma out of the house to doctors’ appointments was exceedingly difficult. At first she and Dad managed, but after a while, leaving the house began to strain them both. At one point, Grandma, who took sleeping pills, got her leg stuck after trying to get out of bed on the side against the wall. She got

a small cut, which became infected. Eventually, she developed shingles from the stress of the infection. She had to take medicine, which made her confused and unbalanced. She started falling regularly, and Dad told me it took all his strength to lift her from the floor. Research conducted by Gouliquer, Poulin, and Lesmana shows that mobility is particularly important in the lives of older adults; it “is linked to social functioning, independence, and quality of life” (125). In their research findings, Gouliquer, Poulin, and Lesmana note that “As the means and resources related to all levels of mobility decrease for older individuals, so does the opportunities for social interactions and a meaningful existence” (143). Mobility eventually became our family’s biggest concern. Grandma had always been a social person but her decreased mobility made it almost impossible for her to leave the house. To make matters worse, the farmhouse they lived in was very remote, which meant that Grandma had no outside contact with anyone other than my dad and the occasional family visitor. After a while, it became apparent that Grandma was lonely, a situation that seemed to get worse over time. Eventually I began to worry that Grandma’s inability to interact socially with her peers was having a detrimental impact on her mental health. Finally, when winter came, Dad realized the old farmhouse was too cold for Grandma, so he moved them to a small winterized cottage nearby.

At that point, because of concerns for both Grandma’s well-being and Dad’s well-being, Susan and I suggested that Grandma move back to a retirement home. Finally, I pushed the issue, a significant role reversal for me, and Dad agreed. We found a retirement home and set Grandma’s moving day.

On the morning of Grandma’s move, Dad laid Grandma’s clothes out on her bed.

“Oh right, you wanted a brassiere,” he said, looking around blankly. “Your grandma hasn’t been wearing a brassiere lately because of the shingles,” he said to the room in general, where Grandma and I sat, still in our pajamas.

“I might be stretching things a bit, trying to wear a bra,” said Grandma.

“Where did I pack them? I don’t have a clue where they are!” Dad’s usual way of finding something is to muse out loud that he has no idea where to look. Then he remembers.

Spreading out a plastic coat bag, Dad pulled out a bra and holding it up, announced, “This’ll work, right, Mom?”

Grandma laughed under her breath at the absurdity of Dad waving his mom’s bra around the living room, which made me laugh, then Grandma laughed harder, and soon we were all laughing.

“I’m not making an entrance today,” said Grandma eventually, staring at her clothes on the bed.

“Yes you are, Mom. Isn’t that what the hair appointment was about?”

“Your hair looks so good, Grandma!” I told her, and she smiled at me happily and nodded.

“Kathy, help Grandma get dressed, okay?”

“Sure, Dad, I can do that,” I replied, but I must have looked scared because Dad paused like he wanted to say something else, then put on his toque and walked out. He was heading to the farm to start loading Grandma’s belongings.

I had never helped Grandma get dressed before, so I had no idea what would make her uncomfortable and what wouldn’t. What could she do on her own, and what couldn’t she?

I turned towards Grandma, still sitting in her chair, and she had the same knowing look on her face that Dad had.

“Did I ever tell you what my boss said about my last name, Batty, when I married Grandpa?”

I shook my head no.

“He said, ‘seems fitting.’” She grinned at me as she carefully rose to her feet and took hold of her walker.

As she shuffled to the bedroom to dress, I followed slowly behind her.

Grabbing the bra that Dad laid out, she turned and said, “Uh oh, it’s a 34B and I need a 36C.”

I dutifully went to find her another, and Grandma looked happy when I showed her the one I’d found.

“It’s pretty Grandma,” I told her. It was white, lacey, and delicate.

Grandma grinned. “I really like this one. I’ve had it for thirty years!”

“Oh, I guess that means I can’t go buy it then,” I said, laughing. “I was going to ask where you got it.”

Grandma stared at the clothes on the bed. Touching gentle fingers to a red cardinal on her black knit sweater, she said, “I bought this sweater at the mall. It’s my favourite.”

“I know, Grandma,” I said, smiling. “You’ve told me. I’m glad you’re wearing it today.”

“I need a *Depends*,” Grandma announced, shooing me out the door of the bedroom again to collect one of her adult diapers from the bathroom.

When I returned, Grandma was shirtless, and she quickly crossed her arms over her breasts as I entered. I hesitated, not knowing if I should go in, but then I did—she needed my help.

“Put your arms in here, Grandma.”

I was surprised by the skin of her stomach and breasts. It was loose and saggy, but it still seemed youthful. It was pale white and soft like a dove. I don’t know what I thought it would look like, but that wasn’t it. As I helped her on with her bra, I imagined the beautiful young woman she once was. Once, she had a desirable body—that day, I could almost see it.

In our culture, physical beauty and a youthful appearance have become important in determining our value in society, especially for women (Price 33). In her paper, “Managing the Aging Body,” Slevin writes, “there is a double standard of aging whereby old men’s bodies are viewed as distinguished, but old women’s bodies are seen as failing to live up to feminine ideals - indeed, they are reviled and stigmatized” (1006). Clark and Bennett echo this sentiment, stating that research “suggests that ageism is particularly injurious to older women, who are more likely than men to experience discrimination linked to their appearance and sexuality” (133). My experiences with Grandma showed me that she felt this societal stigma strongly. Her physical appearance was one of her biggest concerns, and this definitely had a direct impact on her day-to-day happiness (Price 34).

Grandma cared very deeply about her looks—she refused to go out without doing her hair, putting on makeup, and dressing in her best going out clothes. As Price points out, “women have been socialised to value their bodies in terms of beauty rather than function” (32). Clarke and Bennett write, “The loss of culturally idealized appearances leads to threats to [the elderly’s] sense of identity and social worth” (p. 138). As a young woman, Grandma was often described as “a beauty,” which was a point of pride for her. Growing up, I regularly heard about how beautiful Grandma was when she was young. She would quote me her measurements, proud of her former curves and tiny waist. Grandma resisted aging (Slevin 1017) and as a result, I learned not to comment on the hairs growing from her moles or her double-chin, and instead, to compliment her jewelry and hazel green eyes, the same colour as mine. One of the stories she often told me was when she had entered a Toronto beauty pageant at seventeen years old, where she made it to the last round before dropping out because she was afraid she would win, and her grandmother would find out.

Grandma was proud of her clothes and her jewelry and would frequently show me her jewelry collection. She had many rings. As long as it sparkled, Grandma loved it. One of my earliest memories is of a silver elephant necklace Grandma wore when she visited.

“Do you love it, Kathy?” Grandma asked me, as I delicately stroked the perfect, solid silver elephant in my little hands.

I nodded, speechless. I remember that I wanted it desperately.

Seeing my desire, Grandma laughed. “Don’t worry, birthday granddaughter, I’ll keep it for you.”

Grandma and I were both born in December, so all my life, Grandma described me as her birthday granddaughter, signing many of her cards to me with the words, “All my love, your birthday grandma.” The elephant necklace became part of our special bond and almost every letter and card she sent me contained some reference to it, with lines like, “Elephants NEVER FORGET,” and “I am wearing it now on my chain, till we see you soon.”

Like many women, I, too, have come to value my body for its appearance, and whenever I realize I have lost some of my youth to the passage of time, I feel sad. I find it difficult to look at pictures of myself because all I can see are my perceived faults. Like my grandma, people once called me beautiful, but they don’t anymore, and although I try not to let that bother me, it does. Slevin writes, “The story of aging is intimately connected with the meanings we ascribe to our aging bodies; embodiment is critical to making sense of age and aging” (1004). Unfortunately, the sadness that I feel concerning my own aging body is more than just nostalgia; research shows that there are “perils of being, as well as looking, older, including discrimination, negative stereotyping, loss of opportunities, social invisibility and decreased well-being and self-esteem” (Clarke and Bennett 133). This sentiment is also expressed by Price in “The Older Woman’s Body Image.” Price writes, “Individuals can be stigmatised by their appearance or body function. For example, older people might be judged as less reliable, weaker or less adaptable, based not on a careful assessment of their ability, but on impressions derived from their appearance” (32). In *Facing Age: Women Growing Older in Anti-Aging Culture*, Clarke states that, “the ongoing tendency to ignore older women and older women’s bodies within society more broadly, as well as in sociology and feminist theory specifically, combined with the continued privileging of youthfulness mirrors the intense discomfort with which aged femininity, physicality, and sexuality are regarded” (4). The surprise I felt when I saw my grandma’s belly and breasts demonstrates how much I have internalized the oppressive ideology of the anti-aging movement. I expected to see “loss and decay” (Clarke 7) beneath my grandma’s clothes, but instead what I saw was my grandma’s beautiful body—as lovely as it ever was.

Since that day, I have begun to find a different kind of beauty in my own appearance. I'm wearing form-fitting clothing including dresses again, confidently (albeit with flashes of hesitation—changing ingrained social constructs takes time) showing the bulges and varicose veins that appeared when I was pregnant. Why? Because I have realized that if I my grandma was beautiful at ninety-six even if only in the eyes of someone who loved her, then I can be beautiful at thirty-eight, regardless of, or maybe because of, the marks that living my life have left on me.

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"Come on, girls, get in there," said Grandma, tucking in her breasts. "There! I have a bra on. Isn't that amazing?"

"Me too!" I replied, and we both laughed.

"Grandma, you're beautiful."

She looked up at me sharply but then seeing that I meant it, she smiled, and then her expression clouded. "Oh, you won't think so in a minute."

"Why not?"

"Because.... Well, I'm afraid for you to see my number two!"

"Your number two?" I responded with confusion, before realization dawned. "Oh."

Sighing, she sat on the edge of her commode so I could help her take her diaper off.

"It's only a little bit of poo, Grandma," I told her, as I pulled a clean diaper over her hips.

*It's not at all like changing a baby. She's helpful, for one thing,* I thought. Like Carolyn Ellis describes in "Maternal Connections," taking care of my grandma felt natural (242). My thoughts turned to my young son.

"Your great grandson is in a stubborn phase right now," I told Grandma, as I pulled on her pants. "He absolutely hates getting dressed. It's like dressing an octopus!"

Grandma giggled. "When your dad was two he was like that. I had to sit on him to get his pants on."

I looked up at her quickly. "Grandma! You're not going to make me sit on you, are you?"

Covering her mouth with her hand, she exploded with laughter, and then we were both laughing again. She always laughed at my jokes. Whenever I was with my grandma, I felt hilarious.

“Okay, just socks now, and then we’re done.” I grabbed the yellow socks Dad left for her.

“Are there brown ones? People might see those yellow ones.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma, Dad’s packed everything else now.”

As I changed her socks, I saw her toes, curled in and overlapping on feet that looked like they’d been pressed in a vice. Growing up, she’d told me, her grandmother had made her wear shoes that were always at least one size too small, permanently damaging her feet.

“I think I’ll put a purple highlight in my hair when I get to the retirement home,” she told me, as we made our way back to the living room.

A news report about Donald Trump was blasting on the TV. An intruder at the White House had breached the grounds. Shaking her head, Grandma said, “Should have let the intruder get him.”

The night before her move, I’d heard Grandma talking fearfully in her sleep, and I realized she was having a nightmare. As we watched Trump on TV, I heard the same fear in her voice when she asked, “Where will you put my *Boost* (protein drink)? In my fridge?”

“Yes, Grandma, you have a fridge there.”

I told her about the retirement home again, the indoor village, the hair salon, the neighbourhoods. I tried to reassure her with details, but she only looked more worried.

Glancing at her feet, she saw the bright yellow socks I’d put on her again. “I can’t wear these! Can’t you find me any brown ones, Kathy?”

“Don’t worry, Grandma, your boots will cover them. They won’t see that you have yellow socks on.”

“Oh, who cares what they think anyway!”

“Right, Grandma, who cares! Anyway, they’ll love you. They always do.”

“You know how I make friends?” she asked, and I shook my head no. “I just sit and start talking. Eventually, they talk back.” Grandma looked smug as she stared at Trump ranting on the screen. “I wish that man would stop talking!”

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At the retirement home, I returned from parking the car to find Grandma waiting on a bench.

“Ready to go find your room, Grandma?” asked Susan.

“Oh, hello. I’m just waiting for my granddaughters to come back,” Grandma replied.

“You losing it, Grandma? Earth to Grandma. Do we need to find your glasses?” Susan joked.

Leaning in close to Grandma’s face, Susan said, “Let’s get you into this wheelchair for people with tiny bums, Grandma.”

Grandma looked up at the both of us. “Susan, Kathy, there you are!”

In her room, there was no bed, so we left Grandma squished into the tiny wheelchair and ran to find someone who could get us a bed.

Susan described the bed they eventually brought us as “a bedsore waiting to happen,” but it would do until we could bring Grandma’s bed from the farm.

A large woman in an electronic wheelchair glided through the open door into the room and announced herself as the welcoming committee.

“Let me introduce you to my granddaughters,” Grandma said to the woman. “This is Susan, and, this is...” she looked at me. “What’s your name again?” she asked in a joking voice, but I could tell she really couldn’t remember. Grandma’s mind was amazingly intact at ninety-six, but she got confused when she was stressed and overwhelmed.

The woman handed me a heavy present and then glided from the room. As Grandma opened the present, I thought, *Does she care still about presents? Does death feel like it’s knocking every day?* Then I wondered where the thought came from.

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Dad arrived upstairs with a cartload of boxes and we started setting everything up for Grandma so the space would feel more familiar. Dad knelt and began to unpack her box of knick-knacks, placing the pieces onto a shelf as Grandma watched from the couch.

“Look at him, unpacking it so carefully,” she whispered to me. “See how he’s holding that picture? So tenderly? He really loves me,” she said with wonder.

“Yes he does, Grandma.”

She nodded, gazing at him as he reverently pulled another of her precious things from the box beside him.

Evening arrived, and we decided we should leave Grandma to settle in before bed. Susan left first, but Dad lingered. Finally, I pulled on his arm and motioned to the door.

“Come on, Dad. We really should go now.”

As we left, I looked back at Grandma in the chair I’d borrowed from the office, and she looked sad—lonely, small, and scared, like a child.

“I feel so guilty,” said Dad, in the car on the way to my house.

“I know, Dad,” I said. “Me, too.”

For a few minutes we were silent, and then Dad broke the silence with one of the saddest sentences I’d ever heard him say. “She’ll cry tonight.”

“Oh, Dad! She’ll be okay, Dad; she will, she will!”

But even in the dim light of the car, I saw his face flush red around his beard.

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The next day, I took my son to visit Grandma. As soon as we arrived, all the elderly people with their wheelchairs, walkers, and canes surrounded us. Seeing this crowd of elderly people scared me because at some point during Grandma’s move the day before, I’d realized that I feared death and aging. The elderly people in the retirement home were sweet, but all I could think was, *They’re going to die soon. Then what will be the value of their lives? So many years of living, of feeling and dreaming and hoping and loving and hating, and for what purpose?* Later, I found comfort in the following words by Margaret Young, “We celebrate the life of those we have loved through ritual and passed on memories so that those who went before are not forgotten... [this] speaks to our universal need to keep something of ourselves alive when we are gone” (990). But, at that moment, I was afraid for my grandma’s present and terrified of my future.

Grandma was sitting in the living room area with two other people when I arrived, but I didn’t see her. I glanced at an elderly woman in an easy chair with a passing sense

of familiarity before turning and walking to Grandma's suite. It was empty, and walking back through the living area, I heard my name called in Grandma's high-pitched voice.

"Kathy!"

But I still didn't recognize her until she said my name again. She was wearing jogging pants and a baggy pink t-shirt, and her hair was brushed flat and parted down the middle in a way she never would have chosen for herself.

Hugging her, I felt her familiar firm grip, and that's when I really knew this strange woman was my grandma. During her bath that day, the attendant had brushed her wet hair flat, removing the hairstyle she'd gotten only a few days before, the one she'd been so proud of on the day of her move. Instead of her 'going out' clothes, they'd put her in comfortable clothes, not realizing how upset that would make her. As Price describes, human beings "have come to identify who we are and what we are worth by reviewing how others respond to our appearance, the effect of which is profound" (32). Grandma, fearing she would be judged based on her appearance, as the elderly often are, didn't want anyone to see her like that, so I helped her back to her room, fluffed her hair and gave her a nice shirt to wear.

I tried not to let on to Grandma how angry I was, but the retirement home attendants' treatment of her upset me. Instead of asking her what she wanted to wear, they'd chosen for her, and then they'd embarrassed her by making her sit in the common area dressed in clothes she would never normally wear in public. My grandma's sense of identity was very closely connected to her appearance, and I was afraid this experience might cause Grandma to feel long-term animosity towards the home, significantly impacting her feelings about living there. As a family, we were struggling to make her feel comfortable in this strange new place. These actions on the part of the retirement home attendants didn't help.

A study conducted in the late 1970s by psychologists Langer and Rodin showed that when given the autonomy to manage their own personal care needs, institutionalized elderly individuals experienced improvements in their physical health and sense of well-being (*The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility for the aged* 191). Langer and Rodin, in a follow-up study, found that those who had not been given control over their personal care needs faced a higher likelihood of death (*Long-term effects of a control-relevant intervention with the institutionalized aged* 897).

"They're keeping me prisoner here, Amber," Grandma whispered to me, her words slurred.

"Grandma, you're just a little confused about things right now—they're trying to keep you safe. It's only been one day. I'm sure once you've settled in, and you're feeling like yourself, they'll let you go anywhere you want."

“Okay, Kathy.”

It took me some time to recognize that as well as feeling angry on behalf of my grandma and how she was treated, this incident hit me viscerally, on a personal level. Because of my own recent experiences with the first noticeable physical signs of aging, when Grandma was forced to sit in public dressed in a way that made her uncomfortable, I identified immediately with how she might have felt. Mainstream Western society and culture reinforce the idea that aging is something to be fought against. Our society associates beauty with youth (Chonody and Teaterb 112), making it difficult for aging women to see themselves as beautiful. One study conducted through interviews with 44 women showed that, “To stay visible, credible within society and the workplace, socially valuable, attractive and sexually desirable, the physical signs of aging needed to be reduced through beauty work” (Chonody and Teaterb 114). In another study, “research conducted with a female sample indicates that aging anxiety is also associated with psychological distress ... While aging anxiety about health was a significant predictor, aging anxiety about physical attractiveness was the strongest predictor” (Chonody and Teaterb 115).

I have come to recognize my own aging anxiety through writing this autoethnographic inquiry. I am not concerned about aging from a health perspective—I am not even forty years old yet, and I am in good physical health. But, I can see the signs of physical aging appearing on my body. I have inherited my grandma’s moles, and I’ve started plucking hairs that have recently begun to grow out of them. Jowls run in my family and mine are rearing their ugly... jowls. I have stretch marks, varicose veins, a deep wrinkle between my eyes, and my lips have thinned compared to a decade ago. I acknowledge that I, too, have fallen victim to self-recrimination as a result of cultural expectations surrounding aging. When I found my grandma sitting in that common room surrounded by other residents, wearing a stretched out pink pajama shirt and jogging pants, her hair flat against her head, and no makeup, what I saw in that moment was my future, my loss of control and autonomy, my helplessness; it scared me.

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I visited grandma a few more times in the retirement home, and I was relieved to see the situation improve. She started playing the piano while the other residents gathered around her and sang along. She told me they were all terrible singers, but she said it with pride, and she seemed happier. During one of my last visits, her eyes twinkled as she joked about the handsome activity coordinator who took her to an exercise class. A few days after her arrival, the staff started letting her walk around the retirement home on her own, and the first thing she did was make a standing weekly appointment to get her hair done at the hair salon downstairs. She was scheduled to put a pink streak in her hair at her next appointment. Finally, it seemed like she was settling in.

## Grandma's Last Hours

"Kat speaking," I said, tucking my cell phone by my shoulder so I could keep typing.

"Kathy? It's Susan." My older sister's soft voice held a hint of something desperate.

I swirled away from the screen. "Susan? What's wrong?"

"I'm at the hospital with Grandma."

"Is she okay?"

"Well, she's not great. She's unconscious right now. We got here, and she was joking with the doctor, telling him how cute he is—you know Grandma..."

"Hhmm, yeah." Even at ninety-six, Grandma loved handsome men.

"Then she just... went quiet, and now she's..."

"Do you know why she's unconscious?" I asked, interrupting.

"No," said Susan, her voice hesitant. She said the word slowly like it was unfamiliar.

Susan is a nurse and has worked in the healthcare industry for more than twenty-five years. Now in her forties, she's completing a PhD in Health Sciences. In our family, we depend on her to know everything about health and illness. Her hesitation scared me.

"Should I come?"

"Well, probably soon. I'll call you when I get an update on her condition." Falling back on hospital speak, her voice steadied.

"Okay, just, call as soon as you know anything."

Setting my phone on my desk, I turned towards the computer, but the images on the screen were blurry, my mind no longer taking them in.

"Grandma," I whispered. "Not today, okay?"

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At the hospital, I told the security guard the patient I had come to see, and he nodded, motioning me to follow. He knew right away where to take me, and I did not see this as a good sign. He walked me through the security doors and past the inner waiting room where less urgent patients wait to see the doctor. I remembered sitting in that inner room when I was miscarrying for the second time, and as I glanced over, I saw the same magazine I'd pretended to read clutched in someone else's hands. A sense of dread washed over me.

The security guard pointed, and I saw Susan standing at the edge of a partially closed curtain. She jogged over and pulled me into a tight hug, whispering, "Thank God you're here."

Susan is not normally so expressive.

"She's not okay?" I asked, pulling back to look into Susan's eyes.

"She's still unconscious. They don't know yet, but no, she's... I mean, she's, um..."

"Okay. Can I see her?"

"Yeah, yes, of course," and she lead me past the curtain.

Grandma was lying on the bed in a hospital gown, covered in the thin knit hospital blankets they always have at the hospital. I was reminded again of my miscarriages, but I pushed the thought from my mind.

Grandma looked like she was sleeping. Her breathing was calm, although her hand resting above the blanket moved restlessly at her side. It was a familiar gesture, one she often made. It's a gesture I often make, too. I took her restless hand in mine, and it stilled.

"Grandma?"

She jerked slightly, but didn't respond.

Susan leaned over from the other side. "Grandma, wake up. Grandma, can you please wake up?"

She still didn't respond. Susan and I looked at each other across the bed, each holding one of her hands. But there was nothing we could say.

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Only two people are allowed with a patient in that part of the hospital, but they broke that rule for us. *Because Grandma is dying.* I shook my head to push the thought out.

“She’s still producing urine,” said Susan.

“Is that good?” asked our younger sister, who’d arrived a few minutes earlier and immediately took hold of Grandma’s hand.

“It just means stuff is still working.”

“Come on Grandma, you can beat this,” our sister said, leaning over to stroke Grandma’s hair off her forehead.

Some of Grandma’s great grandchildren were standing with us, and it was tight with all of us in the small space between the bed and the curtain.

“I think we should sing to her,” said one of them.

After some discussion, a few family members began singing in soft voices, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” Leaning close to Grandma’s face, they sang directly into her ears. At “please don’t take my sunshine away,” their voices trailed off.

One person ran from the room, and I looked at Susan, who shook her head. “Let him go.”

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The hospital staff moved Grandma upstairs to a private room where there was more space for all of us. Finally, Dad arrived. As he walked in, I wondered what he’d thought about in those long hours in the car on his way to the hospital.

“How is she?” he asked Susan.

“Still unconscious. I don’t think...”

“Hey,” he interrupted, “She’s strong. Remember how they gave her the last rites when she was a young woman? Surprised them all, didn’t she?”

Susan nodded at Dad’s comment, her eyes sad, and I looked away from Dad’s defiantly hopeful expression to look at Grandma on the bed, silent except for a deep and grinding cough.

“Mom, wake up, Mom,” Dad said, taking Grandma’s hand.

She stirred for the first time in hours, twisting a little in place. Lifting her hands, she pulled at her blanket.

“Feeling cold, Mom?” said Dad as he tucked the blanket around her neck, his voice light, his expression triumphant.

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“One of the kids would like a chance to speak to Grandma alone. Maybe we can take turns?” said Susan.

When it was my turn, I sat beside Grandma and rubbed her arm. It was warm and soft, and her paper-thin skin slipped beneath my fingers. She looked just like she was sleeping, peaceful and relaxed, and for a full minute I was silent, gazing at her face, watching her eyelids flutter. *She’s alive now. Right now.* Taking her hand, I looked at the ring she wore all of my life. When she was about the age that I am now, a friend gave Grandma the ring as a thank you. Its original stone was missing, but the setting was intricate platinum.

“Grandpa had this glass stone made for me, and the jeweler said it was so good, it was hard to tell it was fake.” She’d always smile proudly at the ring at that point.

Seeing that ring sparkling on her finger in the hospital broke my heart.

I leaned towards her and tucked my nose close to her temple, inhaling her Grandma smell.

“I love you, Grandma,” I whispered in her ear. “You’re my birthday Grandma.”

## Concluding Insights

Through the use of writing as method, I have worked to create an evocative, personal, and vulnerable introspective narrative, supported by academic references, mainly about women and aging. I have written the narrative of my grandma’s last days of life from my own perspective. Kenyon and Randall write that “a focus on stories gives us valuable insight into the ‘inside’ of aging” (1). Similarly, Bochner writes about how he favors stories in narrative approaches to qualitative inquiry because they result in texts that show “how [people] cope with exceptional, difficult, and transformative crises... and how they turn calamities into gifts” (434). Further, as Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes state, “because stories are a way of knowing, are a reflexive way of encouraging people to think critically about their habitual worlds, and can engage and move people emotionally and cognitively, in and through their bodies, stories may challenge and change over time negative views of aging” (Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes 3). In telling my version of the story of my grandma’s lived experiences, I have tried to show an inside account of aging. I hope that as I have written this narrative, I have created space for emotions and also for

questions to emerge. I also hope that readers will think more deeply about the elderly as people to be loved, supported, and understood. Finally, I hope that in some small way, I have affected at least one person's perspective on the female body and aging, and what it really means to be beautiful.

Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes write: "narratives can reveal some of the complexities and contradictions that are embedded within the experiences of growing older, along with the construction of different selves and identities over the life course" (3). Ultimately, as I have written about my grandma's life and especially her last few weeks, I have come to a number of realizations and personal insights. I have learned that, like my grandma, I understand my self-worth based largely on my physical appearance, and that this is negatively impacting my sense of self as I age. By analyzing my reactions to my grandma's physical body and also how the broader social perspective has shaped her aging body, I've begun to modify my own beliefs on beauty and aging. Realizing my grandma was still beautiful at ninety-six has helped me to see myself as beautiful at thirty-eight. Throughout this process, I have also realized that my grandma's love has had a positive impact on who I am and also, how I love. Grandma died surrounded by people who loved her; she was beautiful to us right until the end. That's what matters.

My goal was to write an introspective autoethnographic narrative about the experience of caring for my grandma as she lived out the last few weeks of her life with the hope that I might help others who are living through similar experiences. Through this writing process, I learned more about who I am.

So, who am I? I'm a woman who had a grandma who dearly loved her, and a grandma's love is a beautiful gift.

## **Saying Goodbye**

We spent Grandma's last night on hard vinyl cots the hospital staff rolled in for us. As I slept near Grandma's feet, I was comforted by the hum of the machines that surrounded her—the beep of her heartbeat, the soft hiss of the intravenous line.

In the morning, Grandma's condition hadn't changed. We talked about breakfast, but I don't remember eating. At some point, other family members arrived and sat beside me on the vinyl cot looking sad.

Around noon, some people went home for a while.

Eventually, it was just me, Susan, Dad, and one great granddaughter, Monica, in the room. Susan and I talked in animated voices about the business I wanted to open someday. It was an interesting conversation, and for a minute, we forgot where we were, until we realized Grandma's breathing sounded laboured.

Dad's face went grey. Monica whispered to Susan, who motioned me and Dad to the door.

"What's going on?" Dad asked, keeping his eyes on Grandma.

"Monica just wants another minute alone."

Dad looked like he was going to object, but before he could, Monica was done, and we all circled Grandma again. Dad put his hand on Grandma's left shoulder. Monica stood by Grandma's right shoulder. I stood beside Dad, holding Grandma's left hand where it was resting by her leg. Susan was across from me by Grandma's right leg. Monica and Dad leaned close to Grandma's face. For some reason, I was still talking about my business plans, and Susan was nodding like she was listening.

"Mom!" said Monica sharply to Susan, and I stopped talking and looked at Grandma's face.

"Mom, Mom, wake up," said Dad with urgency, and it seemed like she tried. She was breathing hard, arching towards Dad's voice, moaning, and her moan was almost words.

"Mom, oh Mom. I understand. I love you, too. It's okay; you can go, Mom," said Dad, squeezing her hand tight.

Grandma went quiet again, and her breathing calmed, returning to its quiet rhythm like before. Then it stopped.

We all watched her, waiting for another breath. I put my finger on her wrist and felt a thump, an unmistakable heartbeat. It was the last one. A beat of goodbye.

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