

Grandmothers*Nonfiction*

“Nana, when I’m an adult and Mommy is your age, will you be dead?” asked my five-year-old granddaughter, Raquel Amelia.

She sat in the back seat with her harness securely fastened. I looked into her dark brown eyes through the rearview mirror. Raquel was adamant that I give her my undivided attention. Eye contact assured her that I was listening. I had just picked her up from kindergarten. We were on our way to pick up her three-year-old brother from preschool and then go to gymnastics. During this time every afternoon, she told me how her day had gone and she filled me in on her latest ideas. She had declared earlier in the summer that she wanted to be an engineer. She had laid out a schematic of a “bachine” that she was going to build, using crayons on the living room floor. My daughter took a picture of it with her iPhone and filed it in her “Raquelisms” file. This afternoon, Raquel had been telling me about the latest addition to her detective club when she abruptly switched gears. She did that a lot.

I was surprised and impressed by her question. She was a bright and inquisitive child. Much brighter, I was sure, than I had been at her age. She knew that her great-grandmother was deceased. My granddaughter had seen her namesake’s picture sitting on our piano — a black and white photograph with my mom as a teenager and my grandmother as a middle-aged woman. I hadn’t really told Raquel much about my mother other than that she was named after her and that she had died. I didn’t realize that my granddaughter had been paying attention.

Malinalli, Raquel’s mom, was the only one of my three daughters who met my mother. My mom saw her on two occasions. The first time was when she was born, and then again when Malinalli was six months old. Each time my mother lavished my daughter with love and attention. She spent every waking moment of their time together holding my daughter in her arms.

When I was growing up, I never really spent much of my childhood with either set of grandparents. My father’s parents lived in a remote village in Mexico.

In October 1961, when I was in the first grade, my father decided to move our family *back* to Mexico despite the fact that *he* was the only one *from* Mexico. His father, Papa Reyes, had a small cattle ranch and my father was going to help him work the land. He pulled me out of school and took our family to live with his parents in the same adobe house in which he had grown up.



We arrived at Mama Chu's door late at night.

"Pásale," *Come in*, she said to my father as she stepped back from the doorway.

He herded my four-year-old brother and three-year-old sister in ahead of him — his hands cupped behind each of their heads. I followed with my ten-month-old sleeping sister in my arms. My mom hobbled in on crutches, hands gripped tightly around the handles. The metal cuffs tapped against her wrists with each step. The rubber tips thudded softly on the compacted dirt floor. My mother had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis two years earlier.

"Allá se van a quedar." *You're going to stay over there*. His mother motioned toward our left then headed to our right and went back to bed.

We entered a room lit by a single kerosene lamp. The window — a mere hole in the adobe wall — was covered by a curtain that sat perfectly still in the breezeless night. The moonlight forced its way through the thin cloth. A small bed rested against one wall and two cots were made up on the other side of the tiny room. My baby sister slept with me. My two other siblings shared the remaining cot.

The next morning, Mama Chu spoke to my mom for the first time since our arrival.

"Ay está la cocina si les quieres hacer de comer." *There's the kitchen if you want to make them something to eat*. My father and Papa Reyes had apparently eaten earlier because they were both gone.

My mother balanced herself on one crutch, opened the door to the cast iron stove, took a couple of pieces of wood from the pile beside it, and added them to the dying embers. The iron plate was still hot but wouldn't remain so once she started cooking. She shuttled the eggs, two at a time from the basket in which they sat, to the table. Mama Chu stood against the wall a few feet away watching. Her fleshy arms crossed beneath her generous bosom, her face set in a disapproving glare. I sat with my siblings at the kitchen table and watched helplessly as the scene played out.

"Ve siéntate. Inútil." *Go sit down. Useless*. It quickly became her favorite nickname for my mom.

Mama Chu grabbed the eggs from the table, cracked and scrambled them. She ladled beans from a clay pot into a frying pan in which she had already melted a lump of lard. I could hear the sizzle and see the grease droplets dance as she added the first few spoonfuls. She mashed the beans and set them aside. She took handfuls of dough from a cloth-covered bowl and made paper-thin tortillas the size of large pizzas. The entire time she was making breakfast, she muttered under her breath.

"Ven, llévate esto, no soy mesera." *Here take this, I'm not a waitress*. She called me to the stove to take the plates she had fixed for us.



“Gracias,” I said as I took the food from her. She said nothing, turned back to the stove, and put lids on the pans. I didn’t dare tell her that I liked my eggs over-medium.

After breakfast, I looked for, but couldn’t find, the bathroom. I asked Mama Chu where it was. She pursed her lips and sighed. She gave me a look that said “what a stupid little girl you are” and pointed to the field behind the house. I saw nothing but dirt and weeds. I headed toward the back not knowing what to expect. Then I saw the tiny wooden structure that covered the hole in the ground that would be our toilet for the rest of our stay.

I went to school in my father’s hometown, San Pedro de la Cueva, Sonora. Every morning, I got dressed in my school uniform — blue jumper and white blouse — and walked along the dirt path to school. I saluted the flag and pledged my allegiance. I learned first grade lessons in Spanish. My school mates called me “*pochita*,” a derogatory term for U.S.-born Mexicans who don’t speak Spanish properly.

While we were living in Mexico, my mother’s arthritis worsened. She struggled more to get to her feet and took longer to get around. She had to rely on my father to get her out of bed. The first few times that he had to lift her out, he was somewhat careful. I suppose he assumed it was a temporary duty. That changed quickly. He took to yanking her out of bed and dropping her into a chair. He ignored her cries of pain. He wasn’t happy about the additional responsibility. Neither was his mother. My mom had helped in the kitchen as much as she could but Mama Chu would complain about my mother’s slow pace and continued to call her *Inútil*. As my mom’s condition deteriorated, she was worse than useless — she was a burden. I tried to fill in for my mother.

“¿Mama Chu, le puedo ayudar?” *Mama Chu, can I help you?*

“No me estorbes,” *Don’t get in my way*, she responded without looking at me.

After eight months in Mexico, we returned to the US.

My maternal grandmother played a significant role throughout my childhood. My parents weren’t married when I was born, so my mom and I lived with her parents until she and my father wed. When my mother moved out, Gramma wouldn’t let her take me. My grandmother didn’t like my father. She believed that he would not be a good husband to my mom or a good father to me.

I had heard this story many times. It was the one my mother always told when I asked her to tell about when I was a baby. The movie that played in my head went something like this:

Returning from their courthouse wedding, my mom gets out of my father’s car and walks into her parents’ home. My father waits in the car. She is met at the door by my grandparents.



“I can’t stop you from leaving, but you’re not taking Anna out of this house,” my grandmother says. She is holding me in her arms, resting me on one hip.

“She’s *my* daughter.”

“You’re *not* taking her.”

“Dad?” My mom turns to my grandfather for support.

“You heard your mother.” He stands beside my grandmother and drapes his arm over her shoulder.

My father honks the horn.

My mom leaves.

Fade to black.

When I was two, my grandmother had a heart attack. At that time, she still had two teenaged children. The additional responsibility of a toddler was too much, so she gave me back to my mother. I am convinced that if she’d had somewhere to send the teenagers, she would have kept me.

When I was six, after we returned from Mexico, my parents separated and my father dropped us off at my maternal grandparents’ home in Kerman, California, a small three-bedroom house with a big yard. My grandparents must have heard the car pulling up in front of their house because they came out to greet us. My grandfather helped my mom out of the front seat and up the two steps into their home. My grandmother hugged and kissed my sister, my brother, and me, then carried my sleeping baby sister to one of the bedrooms and gently placed her on the bed. My father put our belongings on the porch and drove off headed for Hollister, California.

Gramma made dinner for us while we washed up and got situated. I had slept in the car on the drive from San Pedro, but I was still tired. We went to bed shortly after supper. My mother slept in one bedroom, my two sisters and I in another, and my brother got the living room couch.

My grandmother raised chickens in her yard. Some mornings I helped her collect the eggs and feed the hens. She gave me my own bowl of corn kernels, which I would throw on the ground for them to eat. She showed me how to flick my wrist so that the kernels wouldn’t land in a clump. Sometimes my grandfather would bring home a rabbit he had shot; other times Gramma would grab a chicken, swing it around to snap its neck, then cut the head off and clean it. I would help with the plucking. My little fingers were able to get the really small feathers.

I followed my grandmother around while she watered her plants and cleaned out the chicken coops. She stopped and smiled at her little shadow, kissed me on the top of the head, and told me to go play.



“Anna, go inside, it’s too hot for you to be out here,” she said. With the back of her hand, she wiped the perspiration that was threatening to run into her eyes. Her gray hair was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Unlike my hair, hers lay perfectly flat. Sweat made the few short hairs that framed my face curl into an unruly mess.

“But I want to help you,” I protested.

If it was extremely hot, she would stand her ground and make me go inside. Other times, she would hand me the garden hose and let me water the plants. I always managed to get more water on me than on the plants. Somehow Gramma managed to keep her skirt and blouse dry.

Sometimes I helped her cook the family meals. She taught me how to make flour tortillas. She made the dough but would let me roll out my own tortillas. She used the big rolling pin and gave me the small one — the one she used for making corn tortillas. She showed me how to pinch off a piece of dough, roll it into a ball between my palms, and then flatten it out on the floured wooden board. I mimicked her moves, but my tortillas always came out lopsided, while hers were perfectly round. My grandmother noticed my disappointment at my inability to master tortilla-making.

“It’s OK, Mija,” she said, “they aren’t going to roll into your stomach.”

I celebrated my seventh birthday shortly after we arrived in Kerman. There was no money for presents, but Gramma made me a cake from scratch. My cousins came over and sang “Happy Birthday” as I blew out the candles. We played tag. We drew a hopscotch court in the dirt with a stick and used rocks for markers. We played and laughed until it was time for them to go home.

Three months later, in early September 1962, my parents reconciled. I had no idea that was coming. One day, my father appeared at my grandparents’ home. I wasn’t happy to see him. I had grown very close to my grandparents and was not looking forward to returning to live with my father. During my time with my grandparents, I had been spared my father’s abuses. He was fond of making me kneel on gravel in the middle of the living room floor for the smallest of transgressions. I cried as we drove away. After we returned to Hollister, my father kept us isolated from my mom’s family.

I didn’t see my grandmother again until my parents divorced when I was thirteen. We lived with my grandparents for about three weeks until my mother was able to rent a house for us. My father would visit us every couple of months or so.

“But Mom, I don’t want to go,” I had said to her earlier in the day when she had told me that he was coming to pick us up. We were spending the day with Gramma who was teaching me to crochet. As I had gotten older, my father had taken to whipping my bare



buttocks and legs with a belt or a switch any time I did anything that displeased him.

“Anna Maria, he’s your father,” she’d responded. Despite the fact that they were divorced, she hadn’t yet found the strength to stand up to him, much less defy him.

My mother’s sister, a beautician, had cut my jet black hair. It had gone from hanging below my waist to barely covering my ears. As a result, my father had taken to calling me *zopilote remojado* (soaked buzzard).

It was late afternoon when he arrived at my grandmother’s house. He sat in his car and honked his horn. My brother and sisters ran out the door and across the porch to greet him — the screen door banged in their wake. I refused to budge from my seat at the kitchen table.

“Mom, I don’t want to go. Please don’t make me go,” I pleaded one last time.

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Gramma said before my mother could give me her usual response.

I ran to my grandmother — who was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes — hugged her and buried my face in her chest.

Gramma didn’t normally interfere in her children’s marriages or their child-rearing. On this occasion, she apparently saw my distress and stepped in to protect me. At that moment, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and love for my grandmother. I was grateful that someone had finally listened to me. That at last my feelings and wishes mattered. I hung onto her and she returned my embrace, her wet soapy hands rested on my back.

Once Gramma took a position, no one defied her — not my grandfather and certainly not my mother. After that, I was never forced to see my father. And I never *chose* to see him.

I had my grandmother in my life for two more years until a final heart attack took her from me for good, at the age of sixty-three. I was fifteen. It had never occurred to me to ask her if she was going to die.

My mom passed away when she was forty-three. Malinalli never got to ask her if she was going to die. She was only seven months old when my mother passed.

My husband and I had both retired early so that we could be full-time grandparents. We chauffeured the grandkids to and from school and to their activities. Once Raquel was in kindergarten, I volunteered at her school two days a week. I was in charge of the reading program for her class. I took her to Jiu Jitsu classes twice a week and marveled as she learned to free herself from a hold, or arm bar her sparring partner. I recorded her on my iPhone when she sparred and texted it to the family.

When Raquel was two, an art teacher noticed her doodling and said



that she had talent but told us to wait until she was five to get her into lessons. When she started kindergarten, I drove her to her private art class every other week.

My son-in-law traveled three to five days a week for business, and my daughter taught high school chemistry and coached cross-country and track. We didn't want strangers babysitting our grandchildren, so whenever their dad was out of town, the kids stayed with me. Every day after work, Malinalli would come to our house and have dinner with the kids, bathe them, read to them, then go home to sleep. By then, I had helped Raquel with her homework and had her practice her sight-words and numbers.

Whenever our grandkids slept at our house, my husband was banished to Raquel's room. Although the kids each had their own bedroom, which they got to pick out and decorate, they slept with me in the master bed, me in the middle with a child in each arm.

On one such occasion, Raquel had her head on my chest. "I can hear your heart, Nana."

About a minute later, she rested her head on my head. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to hear your brain," she said. That went into my "Raquelisms" file.

I started to think about my own mortality when I turned forty-three, the age at which my mother passed. Since my mom had died as a result of medical malpractice, intellectually I knew that her death at a young age did not signal my early demise. But it gave me pause. Turning sixty-three was another milestone. Fortunately, I didn't suffer from heart disease, so I figured I should be OK. My husband and I ran marathons and half-marathons, though not as often as we had in our younger days. I tried to take care of myself. I wanted to be around to see my grandkids graduate from college, though I doubted I would make it to see great-grandchildren.

As I watched my granddaughter in the rearview mirror, I thought about Gramma and wondered how she would have answered the question if I'd had the wherewithal to ask it when I was Raquel's age. And I thought about my mother. In the thirty-eight years since her death, she was never far from my thoughts. I wondered how she might have handled the question from one of my daughters.

"I am going to try not to die," I said.

Seemingly satisfied with my answer, Raquel reached into her lunchbox for a baggie of green grapes, her favorite after-school snack.



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