

Commentary

Surviving Grandma's Bucket List - A Male Nursing Student's Developing Relationship with his Eccentric Grandmother

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Incensed, Rick stormed into the hail even angrier than when he slipped through Nieman's massive front door heading for the escalator as the sleet started to pound. She knew I had to study today. She knew finals were coming up fast. And now she should ask me *this*? How does she think I am going to graduate with a distraction like this? More than a 'distraction', a mainliner delay! Rick mulled over their conversation.

Lunch at the Zodiac Room was always good. At first I was glad Gram invited me. I could sure use some food that wasn't pasty pasta and full of beans like they served at school.

"Ricky, so glad you could come!" Gram said flashing her enigmatic smile. I know that smile. She was up to something.

"Sure Gram-good to see you" I lied. "Where's the menu?"

"Ah, Ricky, always leading with your stomach."

"I'll have the escargot in Cabernet Truffle sauce" to the waitress. Then, "What did you want to see me about Gram".

"Oh, nothing in particular."

"Gosh, for 'nothing in particular' we could have met at a fast food joint and saved you some money."

"Life is not always about saving money, Ricky."

"Well it's not about spending it as fast as you can either. Grandpa hasn't been gone that long. You'll need that money to live on."

"If you can't use your money to make yourself and others happy, what good is it?"

"Gram!" I said, suddenly serious. "You've made plenty of people happy. Look at the patrol car you bought for the police."

"That was for the canine police officer, Zoey. When the car she rode in broke down, and she couldn't ride in a regular patrol car, ASPC, you know, she would have lost all her dog-policing skills. "They *needed* another car Ricky! Besides, it made me happy. You know you love animals as much as I do. And, she continued, "Zoey and her fellow officers needed the bullet-proof vests too."

"You could spend some of that happiness my way Gram," An errant escargot slithered like a gummy worm out of the corner of my mouth. The waitress came offering asparagus. PASS-knowing it would make my piss stink—just in case I got lucky later, as unlikely as that seemed. Amanda was still in Colorado and she would miss finals since her mother's condition was getting worse.

"I already have!"

"Yes, yes...and I *do* appreciate your paying my tuition Gram. But...right now it's such a tough drag. I hate *all* the classes. This week we'll be studying male genitalia! In a class full of women, how do think *that* will make me feel?" But I knew that my whole family was counting on me to finish college as I would be the first one in the family to do so-but I wasn't lying; I really didn't like nursing.

"How do you think it will make *them* feel? She chuckled. "Hum-m-m...maybe you do need a break, Ricky. One semester off might do you a lot of good." smiling that sly smile again, "Come with me to Australia!"

"What?!" "Australia!" She swooned. "Beautiful, beautiful Australia. My friend, Monica, invited me. You remember her," she prompted, "she and her husband lived on the next block. They came over on a management exchange program. Soon it will be springtime in Australia, you know. No more snow, no more sleet; beautiful exotic flowers blooming everywhere. It would be such..." she coughed that broken crackle cough that smokers have. Gram never smoked... "...an adventure for us."

"Gram," I said patiently. "Haven't you had enough adventures, rather, I should more accurately call them... close calls, in your life?"

"What are you talking about?—Close calls indeed!" She spat indignantly.

"What do you call 'playing chicken' during your student pilot days?"

"That was just part of the lesson." Gram said complacently, spearing the tip of a thin stalk of asparagus.

"It was NOT! You mean to tell me taking the plane up to 6,000 ft., killing the motor, and then plummeting till you pulled out of the spin before crashing, was part of the *lesson*? If *that* was part of the lesson, the flight instructor should be shot!"

"It was deliciously illicit."

"You probably flew through the Arch too, didn't you?"

"It wasn't illegal back then."

In her defense, it's not really Gram's fault that she has an unusual attitude. Her eccentric streak may have fit in well with the other flight lessons she had with that crazy instructor. Her 'unusual attitude' may have developed along with her piloting skills. Gram told me once how, at one point in one of the lessons, she had to don a black plastic visor-helmet. Then, looking like a temporarily blinded Star Wars platypus, the instructor would wrench the controls, yanking the plane around in death defying

contortions. When finally he said “GO!” Gram had to shuck the helmet, analyze the situation, and...somehow...get the plane to level flight. ‘Unusual attitude’ lesson they documented in her student flight log. Gram had many unusual attitudes. Once, as they approached landing, her instructor got very nervous with their steep downward aim and started yelling “FLARE OUT... FLARE OUT!” (aviation parlance for flaps to slow down, back on the yoke to lift the wings, then gently set down tail wheel first on the runway). This, while befuddled Gram wondered which button dropped the flares?

Grandma says that flying is not that much different from nursing. In nursing you also had to figure out fast what was wrong with the patient. As I see it, there is a BIG difference. If you didn’t figure out fast what was wrong with the patient, the patient could die; but if you didn’t figure out fast what was wrong with the plane YOU could die. Seems like a pretty big difference to me.

“A girl’s gotta have some fun, Ricky! Another glass of... this...” twirling her finger over her glass motioning to the waitress.

“What about the time you kidnapped a priest?” I went on, more excited now that memories were fast flooding in.

“*That* was necessary”, explained Gram. “My friend was about to get heart surgery and she needed confession.” (Gram thought her friend in desperate need of this redemption service,—just in case)...and...who would do it if not her friend?

“Besides, I bought him a nice breakfast in the hospital cafeteria afterwards and he agreed not to press charges.” She boasted.

“That’s probably because you also offered to paint the church.”

“Well, *that* was needed too. Just think Ricky...” Gram said, deftly changing the subject. We could be sipping Cappucino among the Emperor penguins on the south shores of Tasmania!”

“You can’t have Cappucino, Gram, it’s too sweet.”

“Ah Ricky, the nurse in you always sneaks out. Yes, I can I will just substitute something else.” As if in defiance, Gram flashed two fingers at a passing waitress, “Two Cappucino’s please.”

“Gram, there’s bound to be problems. You don’t know your way around Australia. Look what happened when you tried to find Daytona Beach in Dayton, Ohio!”

“*That* was an isolated instance. *Anybody* could have made that mistake, besides we got to see a lot of the city looking for that beach. I always get Iowa and Ohio mixed up”.

“Gram! Daytona Beach isn’t in Iowa either!”

“There’s no “T” in ‘bird’ either.” She offered by way of explanation.

“*What* does that have to do with *anything*?”

“No matter”, she shrugged. “My friend will drive us around, so don’t worry.”

“NO way!” I said emphatically. Thanks for lunch.” I threw

my napkin onto the garlic- butter soaked plate. The angry cumulous clouds were still grumbling business as I headed for my car. A pang of guilt hit me knowing Amanda was caring for her mother right now and I just refused to care for my Grandmother. I felt rotten. I am rotten. What would Amanda think?

As I bounded the creaking dorm stairs to my room, the TV in the great room blared a Blues/Washington Capitols’ game. Not as good as Blues killing Blackhawks, but *something* anyway, to smother my guilt and...*anything* to keep me from studying. Besides, I already knew about male genitalia. Small consolation. Maybe I should call Amanda?

And so... it came to pass, that here we are gazing down upon the grand Opera Theater in Sydney’s fabulous harbor. The fasten seat belt sign lit up as the Captain announced landing within minutes.

“Oh Ricky, isn’t it beautiful?” swooned Grandma dutifully re-buckling into place.

It was indeed beautiful. Almost made me glad I succumbed to Gram’s wishes instead of finishing my last semester. Amanda and I could graduate together later—no worries, Mate!

“You know Ricky; there are just some things in life you *have to do*.” She had said emphatically.

Gram’s friend, Monica, met the plane. We piled our luggage into her car (with 300,000 miles under its belt) and prayed it wouldn’t break down as we headed for her suburban Sydney home. The round trip must have added 100 miles to her car’s aging tires. Kangaroos raced beside us on the desolate roads.

“Sometimes a car will hit one—but you can reach into a female’s pouch and take out the ‘Joey’ and keep it if you fill out some government forms. They’re very smart and make good pets. My neighbor trained her Joey to come in and have a cup of tea with her at the kitchen table.” Monica explained.

“Can we visit your neighbor?”

“Well, we can, but the Joey died. They’d been spraying their front porch with strong insecticide—cause of all the spiders, you know. Joey had a convulsion and died. We think he absorbed the insecticide through his feet.”

Monica and her husband, Lew, had a one level house with a pool out back. A row of kangaroos on the adjoining hillside inspected the scene inquisitively as we pulled up. “Sometimes in the morning”, Monica said, she hears them spring over the fence and cannonball into the pool. Splashing around in the pool, their fur clogs up the filter. As if she read my mind, she cautioned, “It’s not a good idea to swim with kangaroos.” Lew had a penchant for gardening and beautiful foliage surrounded their home: Bird of Paradise, stately columns of Ginger comb, huge multicolor spider Chrysanthemums, Singapore orchids, and even some wild pomegranates were left still clinging to the trees. A patch of gangly sunflowers surrounded the entrance portico. Lew put a pair of sunglasses on one that leered obscenely at us as we entered.

Australia’s drought now in its second year, was burning up valuable grazing land. Cattle could not survive without a diet of grass, so beef was a rarity in Australia. No hamburgers for Gram

and me (no escargot either). There was, however, plenty of lamb and poached pumpkin that was surprisingly good. When in Rome, you know. I reminded Gram about checking her blood sugar since the pumpkin was deliciously encrusted with butter and brown sugar.

Monica guided us to each of our bedrooms and whispered a warning to me, "earlier in the day we saw a big black spider crawl across your pillow. We smashed it...but you know...when there's one, there's usually two."

Probably a black widow I thought? Since female black widows usually eat their mate, there probably wouldn't be another. I comforted myself with that thought as I cautiously peered under the top sheet.

"By the way", she continued from the doorway, "I guess you know that ALL spiders and snakes in Australia are poisonous?" That night I slept with one eye open.

Touring Sydney's downtown the next day, I couldn't help noticing skin cancer shops on every corner-- much like multiple Walgreens here at home.

"It's the government's 'Slip, Slap, Slop' health policy" Monica explained. It's a popular slogan to remind people to 'slip on a shirt; slap on a hat; and slop on plenty of sunscreen'. The government is in charge of the people's health, you know, so the policy and slogan are intended to cover more skin against the sun's damaging rays". For some reason the sun is hotter and more apt to burn in Australia, with Queensland considered the skin cancer capitol of the world.

Somehow Gram and Monica found their way to a diamond wholesaler and Gram bought two diamonds, a champagne and a chocolate, each a half carat. Monica said Gram looked wistfully for a long time at a sizable pink diamond before deciding on her selection. Apparently even Gram's budget was not that big. Australia is one of the few places in the world that mine rare colored diamonds. I thought about Amanda.

A raised train track looped around the city made it possible to tour Sydney by night. Beautiful lights from the bustling city below mesmerized us. At one stop two men entered our small train car. One looked unkempt and swarthy. The other was a skinhead holding a book with a big cross on it. Suddenly Gram bolted out the tram door. I could barely do the same before the door slammed shut. Shaken but safe by what we felt sure was intended as a robbery, we decided on continuing with a more conventional form of transportation to get to the Casino. Later, disembarking the bus after Frank Sinatra Jr.'s show, Gram lost her footing...though I caught her in time. "Oops...I shlipped Icky," she slurred.

Leaving the security of Monica and Lew's guidance we boarded a plane to Cannes, the closest spot in Australia to the Great Barrier Reef. We trained for this trip while waiting for our passports so, as Grandma put it, 'we could see the Great Barrier Reef from the inside'.

As the ship headed out toward the Reef the tour guide had pre-arranged a number of personal and professional experiences for us based on Grandma's credentials and interests. Scuba diving the Great Barrier Reef was foremost among them. Once

out a considerable way into the ocean, the Captain announced that we were positioned over the most Northern portion of the Reef. The ship's passengers were invited to choose among four activities: scuba diving, snorkeling, helicopter view of the Reef and viewing through the glass bottom of the boat. Our Dive Master tried to prepare the little group who had elected to dive. He had a thick German accent that was neigh-on impossible to understand. Add to that, the unusual names and functions of each piece of scuba gear were so confusing and foreign-sounding to the scuba amateurs that it soon became an orientation from hell. People who chose the scuba option chattered witlessly through the whole orientation. I couldn't help but wonder if they thought, 'Hey, if this old lady can do it, so can I.' But what they didn't know was that the 'old lady' and I had taken scuba lessons to prepare for this eventuality. In fact, the diving lessons that Gram and I took were very taxing on both of us. Gram's cough and slight shortness of breath seemed to have gotten worse after this. I wondered how the others would know what to do in some of the emergency situations we had to extricate ourselves from in our training? I was soon to find out.

Outfitted with black rubber dive suits, pipes and hoses sticking out from our bodies in odd places we looked like seals, as one-by-one we lowered ourselves into the water. At 10 feet down a huge lion fish swam by. At twenty feet I tried to pet a curious porpoise but he was having none of it. At thirty feet down the videographer Gram hired was busily squirting a can of pressurized cheese hoping to lure some hungry fish in for a photo. They swam by disinterestedly, apparently not realizing that ribbons of cheese found by chance in the ocean were edible.

Luminescent coral lit up like neon in the mid-day's sun -so beautiful. I glanced at my oxygen gauge-OK, plenty left. Suddenly I wondered, "Where's Gram?" A quick 360° revealed nothing. She was nowhere to be seen. I tapped the arm of the dive master and he hand-signaled "what's wrong?" I could only shrug my shoulders and point 'up' in response. First, the stall as he tried to divert my attention by pointing out some particularly colorful Anemones. Their brightly colored tentacles defying death for clown fish but making good on the lethal promise to other fish who dared to swim near. Reluctantly, on my continued insistence, he let me rise.

Once topside, sure enough, my intuition that something was wrong was right. I spotted Gram back aboard the ship surrounded by curious passengers as Gram attempted to revive one of the other divers seen previously blithering through the orientation. Later, we found out that, as the diver ascended with sunlight appearing brighter and nearer, she pulled the regulator out of her mouth. Apparently she thought that soon her head would be above the water's surface and she could breathe on her own. Sadly, on hearing this, Gram and I knew her head would never have reached the water's surface since she had neither unlatched the 20 lb. break-away lead belt around her waist, nor had she diverted air from the tank to her Buoyancy Control Device (BCD) vest allowing her to float on top of the water. I guess she didn't hear about that during orientation. Lucky for her another passenger saw her floundering and dived in to save her.

The ship's cook saved us a sumptuous feast of fresh seafood and local vegetables but neither of us felt like eating. I reminded

Gram that with all the stress she had been through, she *needed* to eat. Sure enough she was starting to shake as she dutifully checked her blood sugar-and took a few bites. Later we stopped by to see our patient. Another passenger was combing her wet hair. “Ah, getting beautiful again, I see.” I said.

“No, just getting an estimate,” she responded.

A few days of relative peace and quiet followed that hair-raising experience before beginning the next adventure planned for Gram and me. We were scheduled to fly a patient pick-up with the Royal Flying Doctors service. Gram had long since let her pilot’s license lapse, but she brought it along anyway and flashed it in front of the Chief Pilot with a special request. Buffaloed, they let her fly co-pilot as we headed out to pick up the patient. I sat in the back of the infirmary plane marveling at Gram’s *hutzpah* as we flew over mile upon mile of thick green forest below. A downed plane would never be found in this dense undergrowth, I mused.

After we picked up the patient Gram and I joined the Royal Flying Doctor’s flight nurse in back caring for the patient. It was against company policy, the pilot explained, to let any but company pilots fly with a patient on board. Good thing. Gram

joined me on the flight back as the company nurse, and we tended the patient. Everything was going well.

Then suddenly it happened! The flight nurse had gone up front to chat with the pilots when the patient started to vomit. I bolted- quickly turning her onto her side and suctioned out her throat. She gave me a feeble smile as she settled back in her cot. Hearing all the noise the flight nurse came running back. “Ricky”, she said. “You saved this patient’s life. If you hadn’t done what you did so fast she would have aspirated vomit and died.” Gram was beaming. Maybe I wasn’t so rotten, after all? I had never thought about flying air evac patients before but this experience was pretty cool. I actually saved a life. Halfway around the world, I actually saved a life! Talk about ‘making a difference’! Is this a new career opportunity for me, I wondered?

As we flew over the Statue of Liberty toward JFK, Gram kissed me on the cheek. “Ricky, I could never have done this without you. You took good care of me. You will make...a... wonderful...nurse...” as she dozed off.

“Natural causes of old age.” the pronouncing doctor said emphatically. “The sedentary inactivity of retirement is bound to catch up with them sooner or later”.

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