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THE POWER OF STORYTELLING: USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO UNDERSTAND  
THE ROLE OF LIFE STORY FOR IDENTITY FORMATION

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THE POWER OF STORYTELLING: USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO  
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### Abstract

This study explores the impact a person's life story has on their sense of self, and how meaning is made in the creation of the life story. Using narrative inquiry, the author analyzes his grandmother's handwritten life story journal from her adolescence in 1940-50s Oklahoma along with supplemental primary and secondary sources to determine the purpose and impact it had for her psychologically. This study also explores the importance of narrative and storytelling within family structures as it relates to group and individual identity and family cohesion. The author focuses on researcher reflexivity and the special circumstances surrounding the study of work created by a family member. The last chapter is a creative-nonfiction response to the author's grandmother's life story.

*Keywords:* Narrative analysis, narrative inquiry, life story, autobiography, creative nonfiction, journal analysis, Early 20th century Oklahoma

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### Introduction

“Ah, here it is.” she said, rifling through the top drawer of an antique vanity in her bedroom, just a few feet away from the burgundy armchair decorated with crocheted doilies where I sat. She shuffled back into the living room and handed me an ordinary looking spiral notebook in which she had written out much of her life story. Entries dated back to the 1980’s with sometimes long gaps in between.

I gently opened the book, handling it with the care required of an ancient, precious manuscript, I was only missing the white gloves. Flipping through the yellowed pages written in her neat, cursive writing I asked her, “Why did you decide to write this?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she pondered “I think for me it was a type of therapy. I never went to talk to a doctor -- didn’t have the money and never had much use for ‘em. But I needed to get some things off my chest, so to speak, so I wrote it all in this here notebook.”

“Did it help?”

“I reckon it did.”

I thanked her for lending it to me, and I explained to her what I wanted to do. I thought that maybe I could do a service to her and to our family by telling my grandmother’s story. As we sat there, just the two of us, in two armchairs side by side, surrounded by her magazines and books, and cookie tins turned sewing tins, she recounted the story of her early life. Some of the story I had heard before, but some of the information was new, and some of the stories were not ones that she told lightly. She began with her earliest memory-- laying on her back in a crib outside under the shade of pine canopy blowing in the wind.

I greatly regret the fact that I did not record our conversation that day. She told me about aspects of her life that were not included in her diary -- details from her foster years, a particular foster mother who was also caring for three native sisters who were always sick and never left their bed. She later learned that the woman was poisoning them.

My grandmother was a storyteller. A great one. She stands among many in a line stretching back throughout human history, from the first moment words were spoken around a fire and knowledge was transferred from old to young. She would talk to anyone who would listen, for hours if they would let her. Her memory was crisp and sharp even up into her seventies, as she could recall in vivid detail events that took place when she was just a small child some 60 years prior.

That day she told me stories I had never heard, stories that saddened me, but which also increased my appreciation of where she had been, and the circumstances which in a roundabout way had led to my own life. If I had recorded our conversation, I would have a lasting record of our meeting. I will never forgive myself for not doing so. She passed away roughly a year after that day, a year in which I did not work much on chronicling her story, a year in which I sat this material to the side and assumed we would have more time to talk, plenty of time to go over the details for the project. But a year later I had just gotten home from work when I answered a call from my mother. Fighting through tears, she told me that my grandma had died the night before. When I hung up the phone, grief washed over me in an immense wave. I fell to the bed face down and cried for the first time in five years.

We always think there will be a tomorrow, but none of us know what a new day will bring. It just might bring a shocking reminder of the limitations of time, the brevity of life, and

the realization that the moments we have with loved ones are short and almost always end before we are ready. Much of the time we do not see it coming, even if we should.

A few months later, after the initial shock of her death wore off, I pulled out the notebook she had lent me, and began to transcribe it from her flowing cursive hand into digital type. What she wrote is transcribed verbatim. I thought it best to have an accurate representation of her writing complete with misspellings and grammatical errors because the way it was written originally contains her unique voice. When I read it to myself, it is her voice which speaks the words in my mind.

What she wrote is essentially an autobiography of a common, yet extraordinary person. Her words were intended, I think in part, as a message to her descendants, but in my view they stand as something more. This is also a document of historical importance, not because it elucidates the personal life of some great and notable person, but because through it we can peer into a time long passed and get a sense of a place in history, and of the lives of common people whose stories are not often told or recorded. The stories of ordinary people hold a special significance, just as the stories of more notable or famous people do. Together they form the fabric of human history, but it is the former whose record is most often lost over time.

The majority of this journal covers a period from the early 1940's through 1955 when my grandmother and grandfather married. It is set in rural Oklahoma in various areas where my grandmother lived throughout her childhood. When my grandmother died, the most full and true account of her extraordinary life died with her. But, versions of her stories live on to a great degree in her family, and in her own writing. My family is lucky that she chose to record her life story in her own words. Not many families have that luxury. It ensures that her story is not lost over time as the people who knew her personally and can tell her story pass away. After people

die, the memory of their life fades with time, but as long as this transcript survives, her story survives as well.

After reflecting on this journal, what is on my mind is that there is something striking to me about this thing she created. Our parents, or the people who raise us, play a vital role in the way that we view our lives, in the story of ourselves. We rely on them to tell us how things were before we could form lasting memories or were aware of the world in a meaningful way. They recount the key points, the highs and lows, and we absorb these stories and keep them as our own. I have seen this process occur with my own children. My son will recount a story with all of the detail and feeling of the strongest memories, told as if he is drawing from his own personal recollection of events, replaying the film and relaying the detail. What comes to mind is a time where he fell and scraped his knee outside of Target. He wasn't much over one year old, yet he still remembers because *we* tell the story. It is a part of the oral tradition of our family. I know that we told him the story, he was too young to remember it himself. He tells it with the words and phrases we used, and now they are his. The memory is as real as any other.

My grandmother was an orphan. She was born Katherine Lee Ann Vance (She would later change her name to Jean) in 1938 in Northeastern Oklahoma to Julia Woods Vance, and James Woods Vance. This journal is not only a retelling of her early life for the benefit of her descendants, but it is also an attempt to construct her own narrative, to fill in a hole, to better understand herself. Without her parents to help guide the construction of her life story, my grandmother was forced to do so herself, to draw upon her own recollection alone. Putting her story on paper was a form of catharsis. It was therapeutic.

My grandmother had a fantastic memory, and I wonder how that might have affected the processing of the autobiographical memories she did have. Even without the influence of a guardian to help organize our sense of self in childhood and adolescence, autobiographical memories are clearly important to our sense of self. For my grandmother, those memories might have held a special significance for their value in identity formation in the context of a traumatic childhood.

The events and memories she recounts in her journal are sometimes just images, or sensory details, oddities that seemingly stuck out in her mind. The significance of the details she chose to include is sometimes difficult to parse. I get the sense that she was recording everything she could remember, to create a full picture because she was not sure herself what was significant or not. That begs the question -- what was her ultimate goal in creating this narrative account? One passage that exemplifies this mystery describes a dream that she once had as a child, one that seems significant to my reading, and apparently to her as well since she chose to include it in this narrative. It is however, a passage that I have struggled to make sense of:

“Some times at night I would wake up and there were these bears standing at the foot of my bed. They would just stand there and look at me. The feeling that came over me was sometimes I felt real fat and then I was real skinny. When I felt fat it was like I had been blown up like a balloon. When I felt skinny it was like I was a matchstick. I don’t know when I stopped seeing the bears but the feeling last for years. I would wake up with these feelings.”

Why did she choose to include this description of her dream? What is the significance of the bears and this vague feeling she describes? One gets the sense from reading this passage that there is some sort of symbolism here, if we ascribe to that theory of dreams. I think that she felt that this held some importance, after all it was a recurring dream for her, and was connected with

this feeling of bodily transformation. But her lack of analysis in the narrative leads me to believe that she could not identify the meaning of this dream herself, and if she did she chose not to record it for some reason. As to the ‘meaning’ of these different aspects of her story, my interpretation relies on speculation to a great degree, and that approaches a central theme of this thesis. Do the events of our lives have inherent meaning? Or is meaning something that we must ascribe to them? The ‘life story’ as a narrative form, is the perfect vehicle for exploring these questions and more.

## **Literature Review**

### **Memory**

When I set out to research and write this thesis, I felt the need to analyze my grandmother’s narrative from the perspective of the construction of memories and the meaning that individuals assign to those memories. However, it is important that we first distinguish between types of memories. There are three types -- sensory register, short-term, and long-term. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the function and formation of long-term memories, as the sort of autobiographical construction and recall discussed here-in lies firmly in the realm of long term memory. Among long-term memories, however, there are two subcategories: explicit and implicit. Implicit memories are what people might commonly refer to as “muscle memory,” things we do without thinking about it, like throwing a ball or riding a bike. Explicit memories are things we can recall, which we are consciously aware of. Explicit memories are again divided into two subtypes: semantic and episodic. Semantic memories are factual recollections, trivia, or bits of information we might need (Lally & Valentine-French, 2017). Episodic memories are recollections of events or experiences. Memories are categorized in our brains, “marked” as autobiographical and stored distinctly from other memories (Tulving, 1972).

The phenomena of episodic memory is what I am most interested in and what I believe is most relevant to this analysis. The story which my grandmother wrote out in her journal is an autobiographical account of these types of episodes, which taken together form a narrative of her life story.

### **The Importance of the Life Story and Autobiographical Memory**

Life stories are recognized in the field of developmental psychology as significant to identity formation. Cook-Cottone describes the “life-story work model” which supposes that the life-long construction of one’s personal narrative facilitates the construction of one’s sense of self, and is therefore critical for individuals to ascribe meaning to their lives. This model shows that children depend on parents and family for autobiographical formulation and it is not until adolescence that they take a “subjective” view on their own life. This article specifically focuses on the life-story construction of foster children with a literature review of the currently available research, which the author notes is lacking in quantity, but it is clear that for foster children, whose lives are often unpredictable and unstable, there is a disruption in this autobiographical process (2007).

In *Brains Creating Stories of Selves*, D’Argembeau et al. suggest a neurological basis for autobiographical reasoning and construction. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to map the brain during memory recall and reflection, their study shows that the process of creating autobiographical meaning is more than simply retrieving memories from storage, but is a process of determining meaning and value from past experiences with a biological basis for these actions. When a person engages in *autobiographical reasoning*, or reflection on the “personal significance and implications of their memories,” different parts of their brain are activated in comparison to *autobiographical remembering*, the process of re-

experiencing concrete events. This study therefore, “support[s] the idea that autobiographical reasoning goes beyond mere remembering in that it involves extracting the deeper meaning of one’s past experiences and integrating them with conceptual knowledge about the self and one’s life” (2007, p. 650).

This process of integrating autobiographical memories into the concept of the self is further supported by other studies: Welch-Ros (1995) provides an integrative model explaining the creation of autobiographical memories as they relate to the construction of self-identity. They highlight the importance of metacognition in the formation of long-lasting memories, wherein the child can recognize that an event they remember has special significance if they personally experienced it, those entries are then tagged as “autobiographical” by the person’s brain and therefore hold significance over other memories that are less connected to the concept of the self. It is clear from the research in these related fields that the formation of memories, and autobiographical memories in particular, is a complicated psychiatric and biological process that is ingrained in the very structure of the human brain, which then carries over into higher order processes and brain functions. Detorre discusses the role of parents and other adults in the emotional development of children. Borrowing a term from Mr. Rogers, Detorre describes adults as ‘emotional archaeologists’ whose job it is to collect information from children’s lives and help them to make sense of it (2002).

### ***Why People Tell Their Story***

Knowing the importance of telling one’s story generally, I then wanted to understand why my grandmother decided to write hers down. Her stated reason for writing the journal, at least initially, was as a form of therapy -- to work through some deeply seated trauma from her childhood. The research shows that writing therapy is an effective tool for positive outcomes for

people with histories of trauma (van Emmerik, 2013). In fact, author Virginia Woolf had a history of utilizing this process herself in a series of autobiographical writings about childhood sexual trauma. Victims of trauma are often plagued by unrelenting, yet contradictory inner voices which at times urge the victim to speak out and to expose their abusers, and at other times to hide their trauma (Androutsopoulou, 2019).

These inner critics stand in the way of the creation of accurate narrative accounts, “The presence of strong critical inner voices turns the creation of a complete, meaningful narrative into an almost impossible endeavor” (Androutsopoulou, 2019, p. 3). Constructing the narrative of one’s life either through written or oral storytelling is a powerful tool of self-healing as well as identity construction “...the narrative mode, which places events on a timeline, relays facts that have been worked through and accepted by the self. The process of developing a narrative account regarding difficult life experiences may also play a therapeutic role (e.g. Pals & McAdams, 2004)” (Tokarska, 2019, p. 30). Klein, & Janoff-Bulman (1996) give an analysis of personal narratives in survivors of childhood abuse showing maladaptive coping patterns whereby survivors placed an increased emphasis on others and the past, and de-emphasized the centrality of the self. Participants were given a prescreening questionnaire and then asked to write a personal narrative in the form of a “life-story.” Researchers focused on two aspects of narrative, how often child abuse survivors wrote about themselves vs. other people in their life, and how often they wrote about the past vs. the present. They found that survivors of child abuse wrote significantly more about the past, and wrote more about other people than the control group. In discussing these results, the authors observe:

The child abuse respondents often provided a clearer sense of their abuser(s) than of themselves. It is as if they perceived themselves as relatively less agentic or less significant,

particularly compared with the self-presentations of controls. The life story of abuse victims could apparently best be told through the actions of others; their lives took on dimension through the lives of others. Their victimization continued to pervade their lives, both in terms of its negativity and its minimization of the independent life of the self. (Klein & Janoff-Bulman, 1996).

My grandmother's act of writing out her story, putting her memories into a narrative order may have been a way of establishing ownership of her story, as Shuman writes, "claiming the right to tell one's own experiences is a means of claiming authority; similarly, talking about others is a way of borrowing authority" (Shuman, 2015, p.53).

### **Who Has the Right to Tell a Story?**

An issue central to the concept of a story is in its telling and retelling, which necessarily leads to a discussion of story ownership. "Retellings complicate (and undermine) the unstated rule that the person who suffered or experienced the event has the right to tell it. Each retelling creates a new context, and with these transformations ownership can be refigured, reclaimed, and/or contested." (Shuman, 2015, p. 41). This is an important facet of the stories contained herein. While they belonged to my grandmother inasmuch as she experienced them, their importance to the foundation of my family's narrative created what Goffman (1974) termed *designated performers*, or people who have gained a right to tell the story and are "often, but not only, someone recognized as telling the story well" (Shuman, 2015, p. 41). Who is entitled to a story can be a complicated issue depending on the context of the story and the implications for both the teller and the listener. Narrative is, however, an important aspect of family life. Large and small stories that we tell about each other and ourselves at family gatherings or around the dinner table create sociability (cohesion) within the family, and serve to socialize new members,

especially children, into the family group. Shared stories are part of the fabric of our lives (Gordon, 2015).

### **Meaning Making & Coherence**

Making sense of the past is a central function of narrative, especially when it comes to life stories, “at the core idea of narrative as a mode of understanding is its *retrospective* dimension, that is, the fact that narratives always and necessarily entail looking backward, from some present moment, and seeing in the movement of events episodes that a part of some larger whole.” (Freeman, 2015, p. 27). Meaning is found in the reflection and the reconstruction of episodes into a coherent narrative. Meaning in these stories is therefore difficult to ascertain in the moment because one is not fully aware of the implications, or in other words, the ending. Only when the threads have reached their inevitable conclusions can we see their ends, and therefore may take in the whole story to find its meaning. Even so, as much as retrospection can allow us to piece together the fabric of our lives, it is still an interpretation (Freeman, 2015).

Indeed it may be the case that life stories are without *fixity*, that is to say that the meaning of our lives is ultimately indeterminate (Westlund, 2011). Some, however, argue that “narrative coherence is in some sense required for selfhood, personal identity, and/or temporally extended agency.” (p. 392). This process is termed “self-constitution,” and explains the means by which individuals make sense of their lives through the lens of narrative and autobiography (Westlund, 2011). “To a large extent, we are the stories we tell ourselves. As we narrate experienced events to ourselves, we simultaneously create structure and meaning in our lives.” (Fivush, 2010, p. 88). This meaning imposed upon the bits and pieces of our lives is necessarily “backwards looking,” and reflects upon the significant figures of the past in light of current positions of being in order to make sense of present identity. Issues arise in the fact that since there is still life left to live,

then any narrative arc is incomplete until death, at which point the individual is of course incapable of self-reflection. In my grandmother's case, I think that she was capable of looking over a portion of her life because it was divided. Her childhood and adult life were so different and demarcated, that a retrospective look was not only possible, but perhaps necessary.

Despite this issue, it is without doubt that people conceptualize their own identity in some way or another, even if the self is constantly in flux throughout our lives. Through narrative, through telling the stories of our lives to others or ourselves, we continually define who we are (Fivush, 2010). The motivation for telling our stories depends on the individual. It can come from a desire to understand oneself better, to make sense of the past, or to pass on knowledge to our descendants in what has been called *individual wisdom legacy*. "Individual wisdom legacy develops through self-narrative reflection, analysis, and review across one's lifespan (Staudinger, 2001), especially towards its conclusion" (Tokarska, 2019, p. 30). Tokarska discussed the transfer of this wisdom legacy in the context of letters that grandparents wrote to grandchildren in which they attempted to pass on what they knew to their descendants. I believe that this was one goal of my grandmother when she wrote out her story. Yes, it was largely for her own benefit, but she clearly intended this to be read by her descendants to benefit from the wisdom which it contains (2019).

Braham argues, however, that silence or what is left unsaid, is just as important as what is explicitly stated, like how in a painting negative space is just as important as positive space, and the notes not played in music are as defining as those that are (1995). Fivush takes this a step further with a framework for understanding silence in narrative accounts, and distinguishing between "*being silenced* and *being silent*;" (2010, p. 88).

When it comes to the telling of one's life story, coherence is usually paramount for the storyteller. "For a life story to be coherent, the justification of one's choices or experiences must be recognizable and acceptable" (Wood, 1999, p. 47). This justification is carried out in different ways:

people verbally attempt to establish their emotions, actions, and identities moment by moment during social interaction and that narrative provides a powerful resource for doing so... In narrating, interlocutors attempt to construct themselves from a particular point of view, both as protagonists acting and feeling in the past and as narrators acting and feeling in the present (Wood, 1999, p. 85).

I came to the realization that my grandmother's journal contained major psychological revelations and implications. Viewed as a whole, this work is a personal narrative and more specifically, an autobiography. It is an account of my grandmother's life and the memories which she saw fit to write down. The narrative is structurally episodic, but the episodes are there, for the most part, to serve the overall narrative. I thought it most appropriate to use a narrative analysis or narrative inquiry framework to analyze this journal. For instruction and guidance, I turned in part to a narrative analysis handbook by De Fina and Georgakopoulou, which is primarily focused on sociolinguistics, but is comprehensive enough to apply to related fields.

Androutsopoulou's narrative inquiry into the autobiographical writings of author Virginia Wolfe served as a useful model for my own narrative inquiry.

"There is no more appropriate vehicle for studying human lives than through narrative inquiry" (Freeman, 2015, pp. 21–22). While the study of narrative in terms of literature has a long history, the so-called "narrative turn" only spread across the humanities to a variety of disciplines beginning in the 1960s. Narrative analysis as a study of the story and the act of

storytelling can be traced back to the work of Labov and Waletzky in their seminal work “Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience.” first published in 1967, though the narrative turn in the social sciences did not gather steam until the 1990s (De Fina, 2015, p. 351).

Labov and Waletzky’s work represents a paradigm shift in the study of narrative, away from the study of epics, myths, literary masterpieces, or ancient oral traditions towards the study of narratives as told by ordinary people about their own personal experiences. Through the study of narratives told by people who were not “expert storytellers,” their hypothesis was that the foundational and essential aspects of narrative and storytelling could be more easily recognized (Johnstone, 2016). They identified two functions of narratives: referential, i.e. referring to a sequence of events, and evaluative, i.e. to “establish a point of personal interest” (p. 34) or a point to the story. Labov and Waletzky’s method differed from past study of narratives in its linguistic approach to distinguish the function of smaller units of narrative in the form of clauses or other syntactic pieces as opposed to the kind of thematic analysis more traditionally practiced with literary narratives. I have devoted attention to both of these aspects while analyzing my grandmother’s life story.

### **Bakhtin, Heteroglossia, and the Chronotope**

Bakhtin is a figure important to any discussion of narrative due to his prominence as a thinker and philosopher of the 20th century, but he is someone whom I have only recently been introduced during the research and writing of this thesis. His work is broad and deep, and I feel that I must admit my own ignorance as to the full meaning and implications of his work. The time constraints on this thesis do not permit me to undertake a thorough reading of his complex writing, and much of my understanding comes from secondary sources used to help explain his conclusions. This has been a theme of my writing and research into the study of narrative. While

fascinating and important, this is a field with which I have had little prior experience and the sheer amount of information and variety of sources which I have tried to process and parse has been overwhelming. I feel compelled to write a complete and thorough literature review with all important sources and scholars included, but the more I read, the more important work is revealed, thus widening my scope ad infinitum. I must, therefore, limit the literature included and omit work which could be possibly relevant and only include that which is most appropriate according to my needs (Bakhtin, 1981).

In reading Bakhtin (1981), of particular interest to me are the concepts of *heteroglossia* and *chronotope*. Heteroglossia can be defined as ‘multi-voicedness’ and is used by Bakhtin in his evaluation of the novel and its stylistics -- the internal structure being composed of multiple, heterogenous voices or languages which together comprise the whole and define the genre. One way he describes it in the context of a novel is “the internal stratification of language,” (p. 264) or put another way:

*another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and simultaneously expresses two different intentions: the direct intention of the character speaking and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324).*

He goes on to explain the internal dialogism between the two voices, the discourse at play between the lines, and between individual characters. Though, Bakhtin was specifically writing about the novel as an artistic genre when discussing the concept of *heteroglossia*, I believe that this term is relevant and applicable to other contexts and will come in to play when analyzing the

writing of my grandmother, as the work is, in my opinion, multi-voiced. Beyond that, my participation in this story, in its analysis and the structured retelling which this thesis seeks to accomplish, I am acting as a *designated performer* taking partial ownership of the story and performing a type of *heteroglossia*. My own writing herein is in discourse with the writing of my grandmother. Our two voices are intermingled; I am both researcher and reteller. I have a subjective interest in the text, as I am a direct descendent of the author of the journal being analyzed and responded to. The issue of *reflexivity* is, therefore, central to this thesis and must be thoroughly addressed.

Narrative is a product of the space and time with which it is told and with which it occurred. At issue in the spatio-temporal orientation of narratives is scale. This is a wide encompassing category that needs to be considered when analyzing a narrative. Is the narrative local, regional, national, or global? It is taking place in the present, the future, the past? Over the course of minutes, hours, months, years, decades? (Baynham, p. 132). What is the historical and cultural context of a particular narrative? Even narratives which are deeply personal and local, such as my grandmothers, are linked inextricably to their particular time and place. The sociocultural and historical influences are inescapable, and indeed, foundational to any narrative. In other words, the story would not have occurred as it did were it not for the specific circumstances of space and time. They are, as in physics, inseparable.

The notion of space-time in the context of narrative is best expressed by Bakhtin with the term *chronotope* (time-space). The term was indeed borrowed from Einstein and his Theory of Relativity and used by Bakhtin as a metaphor to discuss the “inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)” (1981, p. 84). In Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, there are two spatio-temporal events--the story and the story-telling event. However, these two

events cannot always be clearly demarcated, as the lines are sometimes blurred. Examples include instances of “coevalness” whereby the storyteller narrates the past as if it were occurring in the present, i.e. the “historical present.” (Perrino, p.141). In this case, there are multiple storytelling events. There are individual journal entries by grandmother in which she laid out her life story, and there is the retelling of the story through this thesis. One way in which this process applies to my grandmother’s journal is in the time between entries. It is a simple detail, but fascinating to me. Her life story is one continuous and coherent narrative, but it is written in a series of entries that sometimes span decades. She would set the story to the side for years, only to pick up her notebook and return to the time and place in which she was writing. Storytelling is time travel.

Bakhtin: “In Literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always colored by emotions and values. Abstract thought can, of course, think time and space as separate entities and conceive them as things apart from from the emotions and values that attach to them. But living artistic perception (which also of course involves thought, but not abstract thought) makes no such divisions and permits no such segmentation. It seizes on the chronotope in all its wholeness and fullness. Art and literature are shot through with chrontopic values of varying degree and scope (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 243).

Certeau wrote that “every story is a travel story” (1988, p. 115). In this, he was specifically writing about the inherent spatiality of stories, how narratives connect the distant whether its a distance of space, time, or both, and how they mediate change. Without that kind of “travel,” there is no story to tell. Narrative is wholly defined by changing circumstances of one kind or another. That’s not to say that all stories are literally about travel, or mobility, but the structure of a narrative interlaces travel in a literary or philosophical sense into every story.

Certeau defines the difference between *place* and *space* as an important distinction in this discussion, defining place as a specific position of stability, and space as a “practiced place” something which “takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.” In other words, a place is the map of the street, “transformed into a space by walkers.” (1988, p. 117).

### **Reflexivity**

There is an issue central to the writing of this thesis, which must be confronted and cannot be extricated from the analysis, or the research. That issue is my role as a participant, as a researcher, and as an interested party in the subject of study. I am not going to portray a facsimile of objectivity in this writing, but instead I wish to clearly articulate my own position and biases in the creation of this text as a means of increasing the objectivity of an inherently subjective work. It would be silly to pretend that there is a large distance between myself and my subject, after all I am writing about my own grandmother. My interest is entirely wrapped up in my identity as her grandson. My ability to write this thesis, as well as the occasion to do so is dependent upon the sociocultural context in which I am writing. This context might be best described as ‘reflexivity,’ or “How we take account of our role in the production is the analytic task, generally subsumed under the term “reflexivity.”” (Kohler Riessman, 2015, p. 220). The definition of reflexivity is dependent on the context and the field in which it is used. Another definition, as offered by Myerhoff and Ruby is “the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself: subject and object fuse” (1982, p.2). This definition is further broken down into three separate parts: *producer*, *process*, and *product*. The producer is the person creating the signs, the storyteller, and in this case my grandmother. But it can also refer to the researcher, in this case myself, as the creator of this

product. Reflexivity is therefore appropriately a part of the definition itself. *Process* refers to “the means, mode, code, and the like, whereby a message is shaped, encoded, and sent,” (1982, p. 5). This encompasses such things as the researchers “epistemological assumptions and methodological thinking,” (Kohler Riessman, 2015, p. 221).

### **Unforeseen Circumstances**

An untimely challenge emerged when researching and writing this thesis. The global coronavirus pandemic reached the United States during the 2020 spring semester during which the vast majority of my research took place. It was especially untimely for me, as the shutdown occurred one week before I had planned to go to the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma to do historical research on the time and place in which this journal is set. This shutdown made my research more difficult, as I was forced to rely solely on what information could be garnered through online tools. Finding good, relevant primary sources in this was arduous and largely fruitless. I have no way of knowing as of now, but I suspect that this led to less information than I might have found had I been able to go in person and utilize the help of the university staff. Regardless of this unique challenge, I have been able to find some historical sources that illuminate certain parts of the journal and give some historical context. The repeated mention of ‘coal oil’ and its various uses perplexed and intrigued me, but an 1869 article in *The British Medical Journal* shed light on what exactly coal oil was, and how it was used medically (Mulvaney).

### **Methods**

#### **Research questions**

What is a memory? Is it a mere recollection of the past, a film played back frame for frame in our heads, drawn up from the subconscious like a reel pulled from the archives? Or are

memories constructed, stored in our brains like blueprints waiting to be rebuilt when we need them? If they are constructed, how does that happen? Why? Are the stories of our lives our own, or are they given to us, to a certain extent constructed for us by our parents and guardians? Are there psychological, or emotional benefits to telling your 'life story?'

What was my grandmother trying to accomplish with her journal? Who was her audience? Why and how did she choose the specific episodes which she included? What did she exclude and why did she exclude it? Who were her parents, what were their backgrounds, and how did that influence their parenting decisions?

What lasting impact did my grandmother's role as a storyteller have on her children and grandchildren? How does that role relate to her written journal? How does it differ from the oral narratives she would weave? How does my grandmother's story fit into the sociocultural fabric of the time? How does that sociocultural fabric influence and shape her life?

These are the questions that are on my mind as I tried to understand the journal, as well as the structure and source of memories. Considering the fact that, in her life, my grandmother had a fantastic memory, and the fact that she was an avid storyteller, I began to wonder if there was a connection between the two--memory and storytelling ability.

### **Creative Non-fiction using a Narrative Analysis Framework**

When I began this process of analyzing her journal, I had never done anything like it in all of my academic career. This fact led me down several different research 'rabbit holes' in order to determine the ideal method for analyzing this source. I decided on a narrative analysis approach as the primary research method with which I would approach the journal. Narrative analysis is, broadly, the study of storytelling in its form and function to the individual and the larger social contexts. It is itself a somewhat new, and sometimes controversial method (Thomas,

2012). I chose a narrative analysis framework because I was primarily interested in the actual narrative that my grandmother created, with all of its nuance and unquantifiable meanings. She chose to organize the events of her life into a narrative structure when she created this life story journal, therefore an approach that prioritized the preeminence of narrative in understanding people's seemed not only appropriate but necessary.

Narrative inquiry is primarily focused on the examination and interpretation of people's lives through the stories they tell (Montero & Washington, 2011). I wanted to understand and examine my grandmother's life. As I conducted initial research into different qualitative research methodologies, I came across narrative inquiry/analysis which was something I had not encountered before. But as I learned what it was, I was immediately struck with curiosity and interest in the method, as well as the seemingly perfect fit for how I had already envisioned approaching the study of this journal. Narrative research allows the researcher to get close to the subject, and to eliminate distance that might otherwise exist within other methodologies. Narrative inquiry/analysis "is not on capturing facts, but rather on the articulation of meaning of experience." (Thomas, 2012, p. 211). The facts are obviously important, and they help to construct the narrative and give context, but the attainment of facts, or hard truth, is not the ultimate goal.

The primary aim of this thesis is to construct a more complete picture of the subject, my grandmother, in order to understand her story in as complete a form as possible by using her journal as a basis and filling in missing details with supplemental materials. I want to fill in the gaps in her life story, to enhance it with historical details, and to also get perspectives from other people in my family in order to come to some conclusions about the meaning of my grandmother's experiences. Another aim of this thesis is to discuss the importance of storytelling

within a family, to understand how the fabric of our lives is constituted by the lives of our parents and grandparents, how events that happened to them shape future generations, but more importantly how their stories become our stories. We take ownership of their stories and retell them with new authority. This is also, in large part, a creative project.

As I wrote in the introduction, this project really began in 2016 when my grandmother lent me her life story journal and spoke with me about her life. In 2017, I started taking my writing more seriously when I found a genre niche in creative nonfiction where I had success and actually liked what I wrote. Specifically, I have written several personal pieces about family that I tried to approach from a unique angle. Following that same track, I wanted to respond to her journal with my own writing, to weave my perspective together with hers. I wanted to write some which was thought provoking, insightful, and entertaining while also maintaining rigorous academic standards.

My original plan was to choose different moments in her life story journal which I would write a response to, but as with other aspects of this thesis, the plan changed. Working in that direction, it just did not feel *right* to me. I came to the conclusion that I wanted her words to stand on their own first without being interrupted by my own writing. Instead I chose to write a response that would follow hers. This response was a creative endeavor, but it was important to me that it also contained parts of my research. My opinion, my speculation, my feelings are all a part of my writing, but there is historical, psychological, statistical, and literary research which supports my writing and hers.

The first thing I wrote was in the style of an epistle, a letter to my grandmother, which is now the ending to this thesis. I was inspired to write this after reading James Baldwin's *Letter to my Nephew*. Both the form and the style informed my own writing and allowed me to step out of

my comfort zone creatively and emotionally. My research into narrative analysis, the different story telling modes and voices gave me the intellectual knowledge and basis to expand the form of my writing and thinking both about the story and the storytelling event. My use of the historical present tense grew from this research.

Narrative analysis was used to understand the story better. I analyzed the way in which it was written, the format, stylistic and content choices. The process of identifying major themes helped me to understand what was important to her and what aspects of her childhood had significant impact on her life and it's major events. Narrative analysis led to a discussion on what was said, as well as what was not said. It gave me the tools to combine my sources to enhance the narrative which she had already written and to fill in blanks which she left whether intentionally or not.

### **Another Word on Reflexivity**

Discussion of my methods during the research and writing first necessitates a continuation of the discussion of reflexivity, of my role in the story as writer, researcher, and subject. While I attempt to be objective as possible, complete objectivity divorced of any emotion or closeness to my subject is impossible. My subject is my grandmother, the entire occasion for me writing this thesis is predicated on that fact. My name is Doyle. That was also my grandfather's name, the man my grandmother was married to for over 40 years. This story is part of my identity, so reflexivity is central.

The concept of researcher reflexivity urges us to examine our biases and assumptions (Mao et. al, 2016). I have a certain understanding of my family, and of my grandmother that has been filtered through my upbringing and experiences. My understanding of my grandmother was already different than that of the kids who she drove on her schoolbus, different from the

viewpoint which my friends had of her, or her neighbors, or even my mother. I am biased to be empathetic to her story, and to cast those who wronged her in a bad light. In the family narrative, my great grandmother, Darla, plays the villain. There is real generational resentment toward her. One of my aims is to try and look past this viewpoint and to critically examine my biases about her.

### **Primary and Secondary Sources**

I began this project by transcribing my grandmother's life story journal verbatim from her hand written account into a digital form. I wanted to maintain authenticity and fidelity of the original by keeping misspellings, grammatical errors, and organizational choices. Digitization was necessary to preserve her journal as an historical document and to allow the digital manipulation of the text so that it would be simpler and easier to quote selections for response, and to include the entire text of the journal in this thesis. I started by taking a photo of every page of her journal, and then working with the photos or with the original, I transcribed her words into a document. This was difficult work at times, and took several weeks of working in my spare time. It was written in cursive, which I personally find difficult to read. Some words were at first illegible and had to be clarified later on in edits. Words which were illegible were marked as such, and much of my effort was devoted to trying to decipher the writing, and checking my work for errors. So that I could reference parts of the journal more easily, I assigned every paragraph a number 1 through 46.

Supplemental materials were garnered from relatives, chiefly my own mother, Jennifer Mosteller, and her sister, Vallory Moore. Both of them have a particular interest in family history and have done a respectable amount of research themselves. Vallory also acts as somewhat of a family archivist. The original life story journal is now in her care along with a collection of

supplemental materials that belonged to my grandmother -- letters, newspaper clippings, etc. I explained to them the goal of my thesis. and they were both enthusiastic collaborators. I cannot thank them enough for their help. I began by asking them the following questions via email:

What is your favorite story your mom used to tell?

What was her [my grandmother's] full name at birth?

Tell me what you know about her childhood and her time spent in foster care?

What do you know about Darla [my grandmother's mother]? Particularly interested in her early life but also her as a mother and what she did after she gave away grandma and her siblings?

These initial questions was intended to elicit responses which related to my grandmother as a storyteller, to see their perspective on the period of my grandmother's life in which I wanted to focus, and try and fill in a rather large part of the narrative of which I had little information -- who was Darla Palmer, my great-great-grandmother. Since she plays such a central role in the narrative, I thought it essential to find more information about her.

The original plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews with different family members, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I have been unable to do so. As I discussed earlier, while working on my thesis, the covid-19 pandemic reached Oklahoma which led to a statewide "safer-at-home" order from the governor and necessitated proper social distancing protocols. The method of email has been useful and effective however, as my collaborators are comfortable with the medium and would periodically send me materials they would find.

Other than the journal containing my grandmother's life story, I also used a journal that she kept in which she wrote more traditional entries: things that happened that day, the weather, and goings on with the family. This other journal has proven useful, but the process of using

these entries was much different than with the other journal. Not all of the entries were relevant to my aims, so my first step was to pick out the entries that were a continuation of the story. Entries concerning my great-grandmother were of particular interest to me as they filled in some details my grandmother had left out of her life-story concerning the time between when she reconnected with her mother and her mother's death. I'll refer to this journal as her "daily journal" going forward in order to avoid confusion.

## **Process for Analysis**

### *Thematic Analysis*

I decided to do a thematic analysis of both journals in order to have a relatively objective picture of the content in both. This process was fairly simple. I started by reading each journal and then identifying the prominent, repeated themes of each.

In her daily journal there were 52 total entries over a nearly 12 year span from "fall break" 2003 to May 10, 2015. Some entries contain multiple themes:

- 17 entries were regarding her mother and their relationship
- 30 entries were concerning visits with other family, or happenings with her family
- 18 entries contained daily activities or occurrences, like the weather or work she was doing on her house.
- 5 entries concerned with her own health

The life-story journal proved to be more difficult to analyze thematically than her daily journal. For one, it is a completely different format. In her daily journal, each entry stands alone as information from that particular day. It might be retrospective to a certain degree, but not to the extent of her life story journal. In her life story journal, she was taking a retrospective look at her entire life, reaching back to her earliest and most prominent memories in an attempt to form a

coherent narrative about her childhood and the events which were the most important to her. In her life story journal there are fewer entries, but each entry contains a lot of information, and it is not always related. There is a distinct lack of organization to the story sometimes. It is at times chronological, beginning with her earliest memories and moving forward from there. In the middle it gets messy. There were moments where I had trouble determining the sequence of events or the identity of people mentioned. For example, she writes about two different grandfathers but refers to them both as “grandpa.” Some parts of her story were written on extra pieces of paper and inserted into the pages as separate vignettes. I did my best to insert them where it seemed appropriate with regard to where they were placed inside the journal, as well as the content and context of each entry.

The narrative arc is often interrupted by these and similar vignettes. It reads as if she would write when a memory struck her and then insert it into the story. This appears to be the only draft, and it is written on paper with little evidence of editing. Some signs of erasing are evident in parts, a few words struck through here and there, but no evidence of any major rewrites. This helps to explain the lack of organization and perhaps why it can sometimes be difficult to follow. It should also be noted that my grandmother only had an 8th grade education (but earned her GED later), and the turbulence of her childhood certainly contributed to both the quality and consistency of the education she did have. Regardless, she was a highly intelligent, if not educated woman. She was an avid reader in life. The writing in her life story journal is captivating, and it is clear that she was a skilled storyteller.

#### ***Major Themes of Life Story Journal***

- family conflicts and instances of violence
- early recollections

- births of siblings and their relationship
- The actions of her parents and grandparents including abuse and/or neglect
- anecdotes about animals
- historical oddities and anecdotes (flower sack clothing, coal oil, Pearl Harbor, etc.)
- other, non-family people she remembers
- discussions and details relating to time and place
- Pivotal moments in her life (i.e. moving, stopping stuttering, the loss of her siblings, etc.)

Identifying these significant details helped me to understand the content of her journal better and therefore what was important to her, or at least what was memorable. After identifying major themes, I made notes about the story and recorded questions I had as I read her story -- things I wanted to know more about, ideas I wanted to explore, details which were unclear, etc. Not all of these questions or notes are included in my response. As it took shape, limiting the scope was necessary to adhere to time requirements as well as to maintain a coherent narrative myself. These notes and questions are context dependent, so may not make as much sense separated from the journal. Examples of these notes include:

- Who were her parents?
- Their situation improved with her dad's new job. He'd bought a one seater coupe.  
Interesting choice for a family man I think.
- What is the significance of this dream and the puppies? Seems strange today that she would just go to live with a neighbor cause she was lonely. Superstitions about toads and toenails. Her father was a brutal man, killed those puppies just for crying.

- Who was the trans person? She called him a morphodite, which I've heard before but I think is a slur. What can I find out about trans people in Oklahoma in the early 20th century? What about the baby not being his? What does that say about Darla?
- I remember the lead in her hand. Write about that experience, asking her about it, seeing the lead buried in her palm, a relic from her childhood. A different time. What was it like for her? What did her father do?
- Lots to unpack here. May need to do some research on transgender people in the early 20th century. Domestic abuse of Darla. So much hinges on her, such a complex character. She is at once deplorable and sympathetic. Who was she?
- Lots of people introduced here. Who were her grandparents? What were their names? Why did Darla leave her husband? Must have been the abuse
- Grandma stops liking Darla, last time she sees her father for decades, evidence of infidelity, A change in Darlas's behavior - Promiscuity, etc. Has a baby and leaves him at the hospital. Metaphor with the dogs and puppies.

Even though I did not ultimately intersperse my written responses with her journal entries, the process was helpful for breaking up her life story into chunks which made it more manageable. The notes also provided an outline from which I could build my own writing in a couple of different ways. The questions I recorded which I wanted to explore provided avenues for further research and probing into supplemental sources. Recording my reactions to her story provided emotional touchstones to underlie my own writing.

### **Limitations**

There are major limitations to this study and the materials contained within. I have written extensively about researcher reflexivity thus far, and the inherent bias that I have towards

the core narrative of my grandmother's life, and my lack of emotional distance to my subject. Narrative analysis provided a framework from which it is acceptable and even sometimes necessary to close the distance between researcher and subject. In fact, that is a strength of this methodology, but it is simultaneously a limitation. The lack of objectivity may allow interpretation that is too biased. Even though the story of people's lives, and their ultimate meaning is interpretive, complete loss of objectivity is not desirable and may lead the researcher to essentially see what they want to see. On the other hand, narrative analysis is limited in the sense that the ultimate goal is not to find hard truth or meaning of the story being told, but to better understand the perspective the storyteller and the meanings which they assign to their own stories. Furthermore, the life-story, or autobiographical form, as well as the narrative analysis methodology, is culturally specific to western society, and may be incongruent or wholly irrelevant in other sociocultural contexts (Montero & Washington, 2011).

As a personal life story, my grandmother's life story is itself and inherently biased creation. It is told entirely from her perspective, the narrative centered on her person, her personal experience, and constructed completely from her own memory. Insofar that we consider the content true and reliable is entirely based on trusting my grandmother as a reliable narrator. However, there is nothing objective to stake that claim on. I knew her to be reliable, there was no discernible reason for her to lie or fabricate her story, but regardless the reader is asked to take it on faith that what she writes is the truth of the matter. And even if she did not intentionally fabricate, exaggerate, or otherwise knowingly produce a false or misleading narrative, it is also true that memory is inherently fallible and imperfect, and the reconstruction of a narrative necessitates certain editorial functions which may cause the narrator to prune certain memories or to alter them in such a way as to better fit the story. I discuss this limitation further in chapters

two and five in regards to silence in a personal narrative and why people might choose to exclude certain details.

Limitations to this study also come in the form of my own inexperience. I am an English teacher, so narrative is important to me professionally and personally, but the concept of narrative analysis was a novel one at the outset of this thesis. So it was essentially up to me to teach myself something new, which was exciting creatively and intellectually, but caused me a significant amount of personal stress and lamentation in my hours of doubt. Why did I not choose something easier, more straightforward? Am I a masochist? These questions arise from a lack of confidence, from inexperience, and from being a novice in a new method. As a novice, I made many mistakes. I should have interviewed my collaborators directly and recorded the conversations. The written format that I chose was not wholly inappropriate since the primary materials I used were written as well, but an oral interview and testimony from my mother and aunt would have allowed me to ask more follow-up questions and to press for more information in certain areas. In my experience, sometimes a conversational interview can lead to new and unexpected turns in which written interviews do not.

### **The Transcript**

What follows is the complete transcription of my grandmother's life story as she wrote it. I did my best to present the transcript with complete fidelity to the original. Preceding it is a scan of the first page of her writing so one can get a sense of the journal itself, and her handwriting. There is a difference of experience between reading the original and a typed transcript: the warmth of the pages, the flowing cursive writing, knowing that it was written by her own hand years ago.

I thought it necessary and appropriate to include the full version of her life story, in her words, in the body of this thesis so that it is placed ahead of my own writing about her life. I feel comfortable in my role as a *designated performer*. She gave me permission to tell her story and to work with these materials while she was alive, and during this process my family has been supportive and encouraging of my efforts. Even still, I want to place her words before my own, because what I write after it is only in response to what she has written can only be understood by first reading her story as she tells it.

Figure 1

Sunday  
7-22-84

I don't rightly know where to begin. Some may say that I can't remember as far back as I say I can. I do remember being placed on a bed and having a newspaper placed over me like a tent because it was raining and the roof was made of brush. (I didn't know why the paper was there until I was told later on in years.) I was just a baby. I also remember being carried down to the cow lot somewhere by someone, in the evening when it was milking time. I can still see in my mind the sun going down. This was before my sister was born. There's two yrs., nine mo.'s & six days between. (I even remember the day she was born.) Somewhere along with the cow lot there was this house with a stairway. I wasn't suppose to get on the stairway but I did. It was a split stairway. There were maybe three or four steps and then a landing before the stairway turned. On this landing there was a window that was low enough for me to look out of or else I was something I crawled upon. I also remember climbing upon an old iron bedstead that was up against a bob-wi

**Figure 2**

7-22-84

1. I don't rightly know where to begin. Some may say that I can't remember as far back as I say I can. I do remember being placed on a bed and having newspaper placed over me like a tent, because it was raining and the roof was made of brush. (I didn't know why the paper was there until I was told later on in years) I was just a baby. I also remember being carried down to the cow lot somewhere, by someone in the evening when it was milking time. I can still see in my mind the sun going down. This was before my sister was born. There's two years, nine months, six days between us. I even remember the day she was born. Somewhere along with the cow lot there was this house with a stairway. I wasn't supposed to get in the stairway but I did. It was a split stairway. There were maybe three or four steps and then a landing, there was a window that was low enough for me to look out of or else there was something I crawled upon. I also remember climbing upon an old iron bedstead that was up against a bob-wire fence. I can see it to this day. The bedstead started falling and I grabbed the bob wire. I still have the scar on my left index finger between the first and second joint. My hand was placed in a wash pan with coal oil (like the kind they used in lamps). It sure turned red fast.

2. Now for the birth of my sister. My daddys father and mother was there at the time. I know Grandma came to help. I had this little broom. Grandpa set his rocking chair up out on the front porch and told me to get my broom and sweep the porch. He dipped snuff. While he rocked and spit, I swept. Every time I wanted to go into the house, he would tell me to sweep the porch some more. I don't know if I stepped on his toe on purpose or if it was an accident. Well anyway she finally arrived. No big deal to me. They let me back in the house.

3. My mama used to plant flowers in the garden. There was a fence around the garden spot. After the flowers bloomed I couldn't go in there either. I remember standing outside at the gate screaming bloody murder, shaking the gate and saying "I'm goin' tell Daddy," Of course I got a spanking. I can remember a lot of things I got a spanking for.

4. Then there was Freddie the baby chicken. He was given to me by the people who had the cow lot and lived in the house with the stairway. Freddie loved flies. When you killed a fly you could call Freddy and he would come. I also had a baby pig for a pet and I think I called her Freddie too. We lived in this house that was fairly high off the ground. A small child could stoop over and go under. For some reason I was mad at mama and I took a board and whammed Freddie the chicken. Of course, that was the end for him. I really got a spanking. Then mama asked me if I was going to kill my little pig, so I picked the board back up and took off after the other Freddie. She was smart. She ran under the house. I went in after her, pumped my head, said a cuss word, and was crying too. Mama told me "you're going to get another spanking when you get out. I couldn't catch the pig so I crawled out from under the house. I got another spanking.

5. My mama sewed. I remember wearing panties she had made out of flour sacks and feed packs. Back then it was pretty material. I remember two pair that was red and white polka dots. I had a pair on one day and I dampened them. Mama spanked me for it and I said I was gonna tell Daddy on her. I got a spanking for saying it and I got another spanking for doing it when Daddy came home. I remember sitting in Daddy's lap when I told him. I don't think I kept Freddie the pig for very long after I tried to do her in. My uncle and aunt came to visit after that and he said he'd give me a dollar for her. I was eleven years old before I got paid and I had to ask him for it. Sometime after my sister was born, Daddy and I went to look at a house

because we were moving. It was two rooms. At one end of the house there was a ditch of sort. This vine was growing and I found a small watermelon on it. No bigger than a lemon maybe. Daddy told me not to pull it and to let it grow. Well we moved into this house, I don't know if daddy ever ate that watermelon.

6. Sometimes Daddy went squirrel hunting. One day he came home with five baby squirrels. He put them in a cage outside. Daddy had to go to Tulsa and he told me I could feed the squirrels but to be careful not to let them out. My aunt lived not too far from us and she had this big black cat. Sometimes he came down to this house. He had been eyeing them. One day when I went to feed them, one jumped on my hand and scratched it. I was scared and jerked my hand back. When I did that, the cage door flew open and they all got out. The cat got them all. When Daddy came home I sure hated it. I didn't know what he was going to do. Daddy got his gun and shot my Aunt's cat. There was a creek not too far away, he took the cat down there and buried it. He didn't want my aunt to know he had killed her cat. Sometime during the night the cat dug its way out of its grave and came back to the house. Daddy got up, got his gun, and shot it again. Daddy didn't like cats. Then there was the time the dog came in the house. We had just eaten supper. The silver ware then was some that you got with Polar Bear brand of coffee. It had red plastic handles. I had finished eating and was on the floor on a pallet with my sister. She was still a baby. It was hot so the door of the house were open. Back then we didn't have screens. Mama and daddy were still sitting at the table, it was dark out. This dog appeared at the kitchen door. Mama or Daddy told me to be real still and to keep the baby still. They just sat there and watched to see what the dog was going to do. He came on in, ran into the other room and under the bed. Daddy got up and got his gun and shot the dog right under the bed. They had

to move the bed to get the body out and mama had to scrub the floor. Daddy had to plug up some holes in the wall.

7. There was this general store we went to. One time when I was with Daddy there was this man who came in and I thought he was a giant. He was so tall. He had on bib overalls. I kept backing up and looking at him.

8. I also remember when we lived there Daddy coming in the kitchen door and telling Mama about Pearl Harbor. I don't know if it was the same day he told mama he had a job in Henryetta with Frisco Railroad. So we moved. I can still see Daddy and Mama loving on one another. I guess they were glad for a change. Daddy had been sharecropping up until then. I was five years old, or else turned five after the move. The house was painted barn red and had three rooms. We were moving up. One more room. Daddy even bought a car while we lived there. A one seater black coupe. My mama also had another baby, a girl. Grandma and grandpa even came again. The front of the house was real high off the ground and me and my sister who was two then had our playhouse in there. Grandpa sat on the porch again and we played. (My sister and I had whooping cough when we lived there While our sister made her way into the world. Back then women had to stay in bed from nine days to two weeks. So grandma and Grandpa stayed awhile. This little house sat on the side of a hill (Henryetta is a town of hills). Like I said, the front of the house sat high off the ground and the back was on the ground. To go to the bathroom you had to use rock steps to get to the out-house. It sat right on the side of the hill. The steps were steep and narrow. One day mama sent me down to the landlord to borrow a cup of sugar. This landlord had her backyard fenced in to keep in her banty chickens. I had to go to there to get to the door. Here come the little hen after me, I started screaming and the lady came out and saved me from that mean chicken. When she asked me what I wanted I couldn't

tell her because I was scared and I stuttered anyway. I tried to tell her but just couldn't get it out. She plainly told me to go back home and not to come back until I could tell her what I wanted without stuttering. I walked back up to the house and sat down on the back porch and kept saying over and over "Mama wants to borrow a cup of sugar, please." I got up and went back down to her house saying this over and over. I got the sugar and never stuttered again. I can't remember ever seeing this woman again until the day my sister cut her hand or foot real bad. We were playing on the rock steps to the outhouse. We had a glass ketchup bottle and it broke. Mama and the landlady took Daddy's little black coupe and rushed her into town to the doctor. Another neighbor kept me and our baby sister. She hadn't been married too long and her husband was in the army. Seems like there was a cartoon strip about him in the local paper. Only came out in the Sunday paper. Anyway, my sister and I didn't play with glass bottles anymore. We also had the whooping cough there. Mama took some sugar and put it in a flat pan, poured enough coal oil over to dampen it and then set it on fire. After it cooled, it made a hard candy. We ate it when we went to coughing. It works.

9. I may have turned six while we lived there. I don't know. Anyway, another neighbor, an elderly woman, her husband went to California and she didn't want to stay by herself at night. So she ask if I could stay with her. I think it was about two weeks. She liked to sit outside in the evenings. One evening I found this hop-toad and kept pestering him. I wound up hurting him so bad he died. She told me that because i did that I would lose my big toe-nail. The next day I stubbed my toe and knocked my big toenail off. I never killed another frog.

10. She always fixed oatmeal for breakfast. She always sweetened it before she put it in our bowls. She only put it in half of the bowl, then poured milk in the other half. Then you took

your spoon and raked off just enough for a bite into the milk. Then you had to fish for it. That's the way we ate our oatmeal every morning.

11. While at this place, someone gave me two little puppies. Daddy put them in a big box and set them out back. They cried all night long. The next day I played with them.. That night it was the same thing over. The next morning I got up to go see them and they were gone. Mama told me a big mean dog had killed them and Daddy had taken them upon the hill and buried them. I believed it then. Now I know better. Daddy didn't care much for dogs either. I really don't know how long we lived in the three roomed house but while living there I started having these dreams and this strange feelings. Some times at night I would wake up and there were these bears standing at the foot of my bed. They would just stand there and look at me. The feeling that came over me was sometimes I felt real fat and then I was real skinny. When I felt fat it was like I had been blown up like a balloon. When I felt skinny it was like I was a matchstick. I don't know when I stopped seeing the bears but the feeling last for years. I would wake up with these feelings.

12. Well anyway we moved to another house. This one had four room and a screened in L shaped porch at the back. Around two sides there was a two or three foot rock wall. There was a slop, a barn and I think a little chicken house. Also had a good size garden spot. By then I was school aged but Daddy wouldn't let me go to school because I had to walk and would have to cross a main highway and about seven lines of Frisco railroad tracks. So I didn't start until I was seven. He wasn't going to let me go then but Mama put her foot down. Daddy was still working at the smelter. We lived there until the month of June until I turned 8 in july. Mama had another baby girl too. Only Daddy said it wasn't his. I guess after we moved there they started having trouble because Mama made friends with this morphodite or whatever. They said

she was a woman but dressed and acted like a man. I know Daddy didn't like it. They were friends with a couple there in town that had three girls. There was also trouble with that relationship too. But in the mean time I didn't know anything about all this. I started to school.

13. My first grade teacher's name was Mrs. Plunkett. During the spring of that year I got the measles. I started running a fever at school and she sent me home. I had to walk. I thought I'd never make it. For some reason Daddy hadn't worked that day and he and mama were putting in a garden. Mama put me to bed and hung quilts over the windows. I remember only one of the other girls coming down with them. (Mama hadn't had the baby yet.) Sometime after that, Mrs. Plunkett gave us a spelling test. Everyone had to have a nice sharp pencil. She gave out several words and then the word "all" I wrote the word and was tracing some lines on my palm. The next thing I know, the pencil was sticking out of my hand. I guess she had come up behind me and thought I was copying, so she slapped my hand. Some of the lead broke off in my palm. By the time school was out, I was sick. When I got home, Mama put me to bed. When Daddy came home, she told him what had happened. Boy was he mad. He left right then and went to see some man he knew that was on the school board. That teacher sure was nice to me the rest of the year.

Daddy was laid off at the railroad and I think he worked a little while in a barber shop before he started driving a cab. But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

14. Daddy worked for the Frisco railroad. I think he worked for them when we first moved to Henryetta. I think he worked with the road crew. One time one of these little cars they rode around on, the kind you had to pump, I called it a "putt-putt," jump the track and hurty some of them. Daddy had a spike go through one of his knees. The railroad sent him to St. Louis Missouri. Seemed like he had to stay there a long time. I think mama got to ride the train and go

see him one time. Can't remember who stayed with us. Think it was one of our aunts. Seems like it took a long time for Daddy to get well before he came home. I believe when he was able to go back to work he got a job at Eagle Pitcher Smelter north east of Heneryetta. (They closed it down. There are still some buildings left standing and a lot of scars on the land.

15. One Time one of my Aunts on Mama's side came to see us, her and her husband. They had two children, a boy and a girl. Anyway there was some drinking and she got so drunk she goes and crawls under the bed and wouldn't come out. All she would do was cry and carry on. I got down and looked under there at her. I thought it was real funny. I don't remember if she came out by herself or if they drug her out.

16. Speaking of beds, there were also bedbugs. When you went to bed, they waited until you went to sleep and then they went to work on you. They looked like ticks only they were soft. I don't know if they quit sucking blood when they got full or quit when it started coming daylight. They lived in the tucks and kinks of your mattresses. I can remember mama taking coal-oil and dabbing in the places where they were. Then sometimes you drug your bedding out to sun and went over your springs with coal-oil. The bed bugs left red spots on you where they had been eating all knight. (Maybe that's why I'm low on blood today.)

17. Back to the cab driving job of Daddy. Mama and daddy were having trouble. Mama use to leave with the Morfydidte to go and check on Daddy. She said he was seeing some nurse on the side. I can remember one fight they had and Daddy hit Mama and knocked her into a ditch that was at the side of the house for or water line. Then there was the time she came home and her face and the back of her hand were skinned up. She said Daddy had pushed her out of the cab and he said she jumped out going around a curve. (But I guess I'll never know the

truth,) The dress Mama had on that night was gray and pink. Sometimes she left there was someone with us and sometime we stayed by ourselves.

18. My baby sister was born in June. This time Mama went to the hospital. One of Mama's sisters came to stay with her. She was suppose to take care of her and the baby but she ran off with a Frenchman and got married. So I did the best I could for a seven year old. I'd be eight in July. I even tried to wash dirty diapers. I can remember being real mad at this Aunt, while washing dirty diapers.

19. As soon as Mama could get up and around she got word to her sister and during the night she came in a truck to move us. I don't know where Daddy was. All Mama left for him was his clothes and a bed. We lived with my Aunt and Uncle for awhile behind Hale Hassell in McAlester. Our furniture and stuff was stacked out in their back yard under a tarp. Grandpa, mother's dad, and his family by his second wife lived on a ranch south of McAlester. When he found out where we were living he moved us in with him. Grandpa moved us to McAlester out on the Circle-C ranch where he lived. This is the first time that I remember seeing him. We lived in this three room rock house with him and Grandma for awhile. They all had a family. Four boys and two girls that made thirteen people living in thee rooms. Bed everywhere. Grandma sure didn't like it. She was Mama's stepmother and she didnt like Mama anyway. She didn't like me either. The only Grandparents I knew were Dad's folks. Once in awhile I got to go an spend some time with them who we lived in Henryetta. They lived in Weleaka. My father's dad didn't like dogs or cats either. He use to keep a pile of rocks on the corner of the porch to throw at them. Back to McAlister, while living there with my grandparents I started the second grade at Frank Switch. We had to walk a long ways to school. Only my uncles went to school. One day the boys ran off and left me to walk to school by myself. I had this cape that

was dark blue on one side and bright red on the other. That morning I wore the red side out. On this ranch there were these cows with big humps on their back. I had to cross a pasture where some were. There was this cow with her calf right in the path where I was walking. She got after me and chased me back. I went back to the house crying. I didn't go to school that day and my uncles got the strap when they got home.

20. There were two little houses across the creek from Grandpa's and one of them became empty. So Mama and us girls moved in. Grandma wouldn't let Mama have all of her stuff because she said Mama owed her something for letting us live there. Daddy came to see us. Grandpa wouldn't let him in in the yard so we went down on the creek and spent the night. Daddy made a bed for us girls out of some willow branches and mama out down quilts on top. Mama and Daddy sat up all night and talked. He asked her to come back to him but she said no.

21. After we moved into one of the little houses baby sister learned to walk. Mama started keeping company with this man that rented a room at the main ranch house. I didn't like him. There was a young couple that rented the other house. She worked, he was an indian and was crippled from serving in World War II.

22. Sometimes in the evenings when Mama and this man would go off, us girls would go and visit this young couple. They were pretty nice to us. This creek that was on the ranch, part of it was right at the back of our house. One time when Mama was gone the sister next to me fell in and would have drowned if Grandpa hadn't been cutting wood close by. He waded in and pulled her out. Another time I stepped on a log at the water's edge to get some foam and fell into a spring. I had gone under for the third time when my uncle grabbed my hair and pulled me out. Drowning is a painless death for a child. The reason Grandpa and the boys were close by was that they were cutting fire wood. I don't know if you would say we were lucky or not.

Sometimes over the years I wondered. Daddy use to come and see us. I would wake up during the night and hear him and Mama talking. He kept asking her to come back for the sake of us girls. The answer was always no. Once when he came he brought me a guitar. The Indian man next door put a finger board on it and painted my name on it (It was a Gibson).

23. In this little house we had a kane heater. Mama had built a fire in it and started fixing breakfast. The sister next to me was sitting in a chair holding the baby by the stove. Someone had put cow feed sack upon the ceiling around the stove. Anyway the house caught fire and it went fast. Only thing we got out was ourselves. Just luckily my guitar was next door. Well there was nothing left to do but move back in with Grandpa. I never saw Grandpa smile. We live with them just a little while. There was another rock house on the ranch that we could move into as soon as some of our other kinfolks moved out. I was nine when we moved there. I have no idea where we got our furniture. I do know that me and my sisters stayed there an awful lot by ourselves. I turned ten while we lived there. Had the mumps. Its a wonder one of us girls didn't get snake bit the way we roamed around and the places we played in. We had this mama dog and we were by ourselves when she decided it was time to have her puppies. We sat and watched. We lived in this rock house the last time I saw my Daddy. He came down and brought this woman from Henryetta with him. Remember the couple that was suppose to have been friends? The ones who had the three girls. Anyway he ask Mama if he could take me with them. The answer was no. They had a big fight. So the left and I never saw or heard from him again. I really didn't like her anyway. Well it wasn't too long before her husband came down and spent the night. You guessed it, he and Mama shared a bed (I guess you could say what's good for the gander is just as good for the goose!). I went home with him and stayed awhile. His young daughter and I were the same age. I think the other two were around fourteen and fifteen.

Atleast while I was there I got to eat. I sure didn't go to bed hungry. After I went back home the two youngest half sisters of Mama's came to stay with us for awhile. By this time Mama had a boyfriend and they got one too. There was drinking and sleeping together. Mama's boyfriend was redheaded. The aunts left after sometime and Mama got another boyfriend. He was younger than her. One morning I got up early and looked in the room where they were sleeping. What I saw a small child shouldn't have seen. After that I didn't like him or my Mama.

24. By this time Grandpa had moved in closer to town and lived close to a saw mill. I went in and stayed awhile with them. There were two uncles that were still small. One was about a year older than me and the other a year younger. The sister next to me was there one day and we all went down toward the saw mill. There were some high weeds we played in. My uncles and I decided it would be fun to swap clothes. The two younger ones would swap and me and the other would swap. My sister wouldn't do it. Me and the uncle that was a year older than me did. I never had on a pair of overalls before. I don't guess he'd ever had on a dress before either. We swaped out right down to the skin, only he didn't have any underwear on. Of course my undies were some that Mama had made, For elastic Mama used a strip of rubber innertube. They were always tight too. That evening I went back home. The next evening Mama had cooked some white beans. While we were eating my sister told on me. I got a good hard whipping. After I got back to the table I told my sister those little pink centers that cook out of white beans were worms. To this day she won't eat white beans.

25. Something else comes to mind. Hobos! While we lived in Henryetta, at the second house there were men who would come to the back door and ask for something to eat. Sometimes they wanted to work and sometimes they didn't. Most of them were railroad hobos.

Word would get around among them where you could get something to eat. I think all we ever had to give them was peanut butter sandwiches. We didn't get too many. (hobo's)

26. Then there was snowball the dog. He was solid white. Don't know what breed, just a small dog. Don't even remember where I got him. It was during garden time and my aunt and Uncle were there. For some reason snowball started acting funny and he took off running toward the house. He ran to the back of the house, went through the screen door, ran around in the house, and went through the front screen door. During this time my Uncle ran to his car and got a gun out and as Snowball came off the front porch my Uncle shot him. Daddy had to buy some screens and patch both doors. This Uncle that shot snowball was the one who promised to pay me a dollar for my pig Freddie. By now she was a real large sow and always had large litters of piglets. I should have gotten a lot more than a dollar. This Aunt and Uncle had several children. They only had one boy same age as me and the rest were girls. Don't remember how many. Anyway the oldest girl wanted to go to the movies one Sunday afternoon. I was at their house visiting. My aunt told her she had to do the dinner dishes before she could go. So she set in and fixed her dishpans of water on the cabinet. This was one that had a roll top door. She put all the pots and pans in the oven and all the dishes in the cabinet and pulled to roll top down to hide them. She wiped everything off., threw out her water and put the pans away. She went to the show. While she was gone my Aunt found out what she did. When she got home my Uncle laid into her with a strap and she had to still do the dishes. This boy they had, he and I played together a lot. He was one of my favorite cousins. The last time I saw him we moved in July when I was eight. I found out in later years he had hit a horse with his car and it cost him his life. He was eighteen.

27. For some reason we moved into town and this boyfriend of Mama's moved in with us. It was a duplex. One large room with a kitchen no bigger than a closet. While we lived there the Welfare took us girls to Ada to stay for awhile. They said Mama had to go and spend some time in the Hospital in Oklahoma City. They said she was sick. (I found out later she had a red headed baby boy.) These people we went to live with lived in the country. The first thing the woman did was she started poking vitamins and cod-liver oil down us. Every morning. I didn't mind the vitamins but cod-liver oil, Ugh! We were there at Christmas time. Every morning this woman would go out on her back porch and shoot at the crows in her corn field. One shot is all. They had two girls. Maby we stayed a couple of months.

28. When we went back to McAlester Mama and her boyfriend had moved into a long three room house. There was a long row of houses and they were all built alike and all painted green. I had my eleventh birthday there. Sometimes on Saturday the three girls and I would walk to town and go to the show. On the way there we would stop at this beer joint where Mama worked and she would give us the money for the show. Sometimes she would send her friend Joe the cab driver for us. A lot of time it would be dark when we walked back home. One time my baby sister had sometime wrong with her eyes and she had to be put in the hospital.

29. Joe came and got me and her and took us and just dropped us off. I stayed with her all the time. She was in there about three days. Joe came and got us. I don't remember who took care of the other two girls. The baby was about three and the sister next to her was six. She had just started to school. One morning Mama said she wasn't going to school because she was running a fever.

30. I went on to school. That afternoon when I got home our two little sisters weren't there. Mama was crying. She said they had gone to live with some other people. I got sick and

that was the day I started hating my mother. Joy my sister said she remembers standing and watching them leave.

31. By this time Mama was expecting again. The Welfare told them they should get married. (This is what I was told.) Mama sent me to live with her Poppy and Mommie. That's what she called them. Mommie was really her step-mother. My other sister went with Mama and her husband to live with his mother and step-father. There sure was a lot of step-parents in our family now.

32. Can you imagine what its like living in a three room house with eight other people? That's how many there was at my grandparents house. Four adults. One of my Aunts and her husband lived there too. There were four uncles. The two older ones had quit school. One of the others was only a year older than me and the youngest a year younger. I started going to school with them. We played hooky a lot.

33. When we played hooky we had two places that we stayed in until school was out. One place was this real big tree with a big circle of honeysuckle around it. We got into the honeysuckle next to the tree and walked all around the tree tromping the honeysuckle down. It was so high that when we sat down you couldn't see over it. Back then you always took your lunch to school with you. What we took was biscuits left from breakfast. Sometimes if there was any left there might be some fried potatoes or some kind of meat. The other place we had was a plum thicket. It was so thick you could almost get lost in it. We were always finding bird nest. Sometimes we would swap the eggs. Well anyway Grandpa found out about us playing hooky and the birds eggs. He used a cane fishing pole on the boys and threatened me.

34. While I was there something happened that made Grandpa mad at Mama and she and Grandpa got into a fight. I saw him slap her and knock her down. Then she told me that my

Mama and Daddy were never married. (I was only 11 years old.) Then this aunt and uncle came and got me and took me home with them. They had a baby girl and needed a baby sitter I guess. I didn't like the Uncle. I think it was his hands. They were square. (To this day I still look at men's hands.) I remember Mama telling my Aunt to never let me go off by myself with this Uncle. I didn't know why at the time. While I was with them we pulled up his peanut plants and turned them upside down to dry. This uncle had a brother whose wife was a gas sniffer. On their farm, they kept a barrel of gas for the tractor. She spent a lot of time with the barrel. He spent a lot of time with her younger sister.

35. Also while I was with them, this uncle that got my pig Freddie, came to see me. He finally paid me for her after I ask him for it. One whole dollar!

36. Then the bad things started happening. The first time was when my uncle made me go with him to hunt for a cow. My aunt didn't want me to go but he told her to shut up. We found the cow and on the way back he tried to do things to me. He never hit me or threaten me but he tried. I cried and hit and kicked at him until finally he gave up. He told me if I told anyone I'd get into trouble. The next time was when he took me into McAlester to see my mama and her new baby boy. On the way home he stopped at a country store and stayed real late. He kept buying me pop and candy. It was almost dark before we started home. On the way he stopped and tried again. This time it was a battle. I was really scared. It got to the point I was about to faint when he stopped. My aunt was mad when we got home and wouldn't speak to me. They lived in two rooms of his mother's farm house. She lived in the other two. I slept on a cot in the kitchen at the front. I went to bed that night with my clothes on. I don't think I slept much that night. It was coming daylight and I got real quite [sic] and picked up what clothes I had in a paper sack and quite like left. They lived about a half mile from the road. I got over at the gate

and his brother and wife came by going into town. I told them I wanted to go home. I {may have} told her what happened because when we got to mama's they made me go outside and stay while they talked. I guess my stepfather must have thought my uncle had made it because everytime he got drunk he tried to get to me. Lucky me he always got caught. The landlord caught him and then the welfare worker caught him. She told mama to get both us girls out of there. Mama sent me to Atoka with his grandmother & aunt. I stayed there for two weeks and had my twelfth birthday. Then I rode the bus back by myself. Only stayed about four days. Then mama took me & my sister to the welfare office, sat us down & walked of our lives. I guess I'll always remember that day.

February 8th, 1997

37. When I started this I guess it was a kind of therapy for me. I don't need this now. Now it's just for background history for my family.

38. The welfare placed me in several foster homes. Some good, some not so good. First in Roff, OK, OKC, [Lequire?], Muskogee, [Heavner?], back to Muskogee, and then to Haskell, OK. At Haskell I turned 15, met and married a farm boy five years older than me. We raised five beautiful healthy children. One son and four daughters. My family knows the rest of the story.

2008 - Need more therapy- 69 years old.

39. When I was 19 yrs. old and expecting my 3rd baby I got a letter from the people who had adopted the sister next to me. They ask if I wanted to see her. You bet. They brought her to Haskell and we had our reunion at the Right Way Cafe that my husband's folks owned. This would have been in about 1957. At this time we lived on the ranch located on Ed Makay Hill NW of Haskell.

40. In 1962, after our 5th baby was born we moved to Rush Springs, OK. My husband was driving a truck for an Oil Co. While we lived there I found my father after 14 years. I had loaded my five children up and headed for Haskell. My husband Doyle was in Elk City on a job. I stopped in Henryetta and through a utility co. I found an aunt and she told me where my dad lived. Only 50 miles from where I had lived for 11 years. Tahlequah, OK. Worked at the college there. I tore our car up getting to Haskell. Doyle's brother and his wife was at the farm. Doyle's brother and sister-in-law took me to Tahlequah the next morning to find my dad. First man they walked upon at the college was my dad.

41. In 1963 we moved to Marlow for 3 months. Then we bought our first home in Duncan, OK. (8-10-63). Shortly after my baby sister turned 18, I could now go about finding my 2 baby sisters. I had my picture taken and sent my story and picture to the Tulsa paper & OKC paper. Never heard a word from the Tulsa paper but OKC paper sent a reporter. Three wks. later my baby sister was at my front door (15 years since I had last seen here.. The other sister was married and living in California. After 18 yrs of being seperated we got together at Stonebluff, OK at my in-laws house. My baby sister was married by then.

42. PV, OK 1977: After 27 yrs. I felt that I was old enough to handle the idea of trying to find my mother. It took two phone calls to locate her. One was made at McAlester and the next one to Pittsburg, Calif. to an Aunt. She told me my mother was living in Greenville(?), SC., gave me her address. I then called my sister in Enid and told her. She got in touch with mother but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. She went to SC to see our mother. While she was out there she called me. Talked to my mother. After my sister came home I went to visit her to find out about our mother. It was in July 1977 before I drove out to SC with my youngest daughter. I had my 39th B-day out there. While out there saw Atlantic Ocean. Over the next 10 yrs I flew to SC

twice to take care of my mother when she had surgery. and my youngest daughter went out once. In May of 87 a daughter and son-in-law rented a U-Haul and moved her back to OK. To P.V.. Here it is in 2008 and over the years I have come to know my mother! My husband told me I was opening up doors to more hurt. He knew what he was talking about. I have tried to make allowances for mother because of the childhood she had and the way she was raised. There comes a time though when that's not enough for me. My mother did not, still does not know how to be a mother. She had 9 children and did not raise one of them. But she wants to be in the limelight for everything that she does for everyone else. She wants the attention of her grandchildren without ever having functioned as a grandmother. Also wants that from her great-grandchildren. She has the title of grandmother but she does not act like one. What my mother wanted was always more important than what was best for her children.

43. My mother is also a problem causing person. She always does everything right and others, expecially [sic] her family, lack the ability to do anything the way it should be done. She only has contact with 2 of her children and then its not at the same time. She can only function with one at a time. She talks against one to the other. She is a very negative person. She is always talking about what she has done for other people and their children. I have a hard time dealing with this. Then she will turn around and talk against these same people. I know I chose to bring her back into my life and I was warned about being hurt all over again but I had to find out who I was. I don't like who my mother is, or the kind of person she is. My worry is how do I honor my parents when they did not raise me. They were both given a second chance and they both failed again.

44. My mother is the kind of person who can make other people think that she is the sweetest kindest most gentle person you could ever meet.

45. Oct. 16, 2013 - Have written things in other book. I missed telling about the place we lived at before my mother had the little boy. It was right on the highway about two miles before the pennitenary going into McAlester. We were left alone there also. The land-lord lived across the highway from us. House did have four rooms.

Dec. 15, 2013

46. Darla Woods (Palmer) passed away in a nursing home at Lindsey, OK without family.

### **Figure 3**

[Selections from a separate journal that she used for day to day entries, hereafter referred to as her daily journal.]

Nov. 30th, 2008 - ...After they left I went up to see mother. She does not look good. She was in bed asleep when I got there so I just read the paper and waited until she woke up. 1 hour. After she got up we visited a bit then I washed up what dishes that was dirty and fixed her some malt-o-meal. She was able to keep that down. I then cleaned "Dukes" litter pan. All in all I was there about 3 ½ hrs. She will more than likely go into the hospital. Suppose to find out tomorrow.

Dec. 1, 2008 - Mother in hospital. Stayed until Thursday. Heart rate too fast and blood pressure up. Started her on new heart med. Came home just as hateful as she was when she went in. I'm one of the people stressing her out.

Dec. 10, 2008 - ...Have not been back to see mother since she got out of hospital. She insinuated that I was one of the people who caused the stress that put her in the hospital. I have called her but cut it real short.

Dec. 18, 2008

Finally got out of the house today. Went to Tio's and had lunch with Jenn, Brandon, and Doyle. After lunch Doyle and I went to Wal-Mart. Doyle helped me with my shopping. He likes canned peaches. Just like his grandpa. I bought him a can of peaches. I came back into town and finished up my errands. Came home and Doyle unload and carry my stuff in. Got a nice surprise about 7:30p. My sister Denise called and talked for almost an hour. Real nice to hear from her.

Dec. 23, 2008

...Went up to see mother and took her gift. Did not stay too long...

March 5th, 2009 - ...Well have only been back to see mother once since Christmas. I call her once in awhile. Plan on going up tomorrow. Its not like it use to be. I just wonder if she realizes what she has done or if she even cares. Oh well, until next time.

April 1, 2009

Had a message dream last night. I dreamed that my sister Joy died and her family had her funeral, cremated and buried her before I could get to Medford. Mother will be gone within 6 months. I have had dreams like this before and it depends on who I dream about as to who will die, We will see. (11-17-11 mother still here)

Started my yard work today. Now its suppose to turn cold again and rain. Oh, well, there will be another nice day again.

(7-9-2013 - Darla still here in nursing home at Lindsey, OK.)

Nov. 17, 2011

...The 30th of Sept. I said good-by to my birth mother by getting out of her life. She told me I always got her in trouble when I went up to see her. I told her I would never cause her any more trouble and walked out of her life. I feel free now. I hope she is happy now.

Jan. 8th, 2012

The 30th of Sept. 2011 was the last time that I saw my mother Darla Palmer. I walked out of her life for good. She had told me earlier in the week that I caused her trouble everytime I came to see her. Before Christmas my sister Joy came down to move her to Medford to a nursing home there. While Joy was here Darla threatened to commit suicide. The retirement complex where she lived called the law and they in turn called APS. She was placed in the nursing home at Lindsey, OK. That's where she is today.

Dec. 28th 2012

Almost the end of the year. Family all OK. Still growing. Six greats and another on the way...

...Darla Palmer still alive and kicking at the nursing home in Lindsey. She will be 94 in April of 2013. Heard she was causing some problems there also. At least I don't have to deal with them any more. My sister Joy has power of attorney over her and she has even reached her limit with her.

It snowed some more today. Small stuff. Didn't stick, melted.

June 2013 - Joy called me one morning and ask if I would do a favor for her. The nursing home had called her and informed her that Darla was going into hospital at P.V. She wanted me to check out the situation. When I finally saw Darla she said she did not know who I was. They were going to keep her overnight. When I went back that evening she knew me. Both times I

visited she only wanted to talk about herself and what others were doing wrong at the nursing home. Almost 2 yrs. since I had seen her. Oh well.

July 2013 - Have been making lap-robos. Plan on taking one to Darla. She may not want it since I made it. Made one for Christine, Gayla's ex-mother-in-law. She is in nursing home at Lindsey, OK.

July 16th, 2013 - Darla back in P.V. Hosp. Joy wanted me to go check on her. When I walked into her room she got this wild look and told me to "get out of there". Gave nurse info she ask for and left.

July 18th - Darla sent back to nursing home. Hospice called in. Guess its just a matter of time.

Jan. 3, 2014

On Dec. 15, 2013 Darla Isabelle (Parker) Palmer passed from this life at Lindsey Manor Nursing home. She was 93 yrs. old. They had given her the pm meds and she just laid back down in her bed, closed her eyes and that was it.

My sister Joy wanted just she and I to be at the cemetary when she was laid to rest. After I made all of the arrangements with the funeral home she calls and informs me she cant make it. All of my children come to be with me. My sister does not like it. Every thing I did she does not like it. Darla did not want a funeral, no flowers and did not want to be buried by James Vance my father. She got everything she did not want!

Jan. 10th, 2014

My sister Joy and I have not spoken since Dec. 19th, 2013. Our conversations was pretty heated. It was all about how wrong I had done her concerning Darla's funeral and what all was wrong with her. I ended the talk. I broke down and called her this morning to see if we were still

sisters. I guess not. She started in again telling me how wrong I was, she didn't like it that I gave two members of the family her address (without her permission) so they could send a sympathy card. I ask her if we still could have a relationship as sisters. She doesn't know! All she could talk about was what all was wrong with her. I told her that I missed talking with her. (No comment.) My sister Joy is a self-centered person. I tried but don't expect to hear from her again. (3 wks. went by)

I called her! We are now talking again. I'm always on guard.

-April 17, 2014 -

My sister Victoria passed this life at Ft. Smith, AR. She drank herself to death. Was cremated and taken to California to be buried with her oldest son. Last time I saw her was in 1995.

--END--

### **My Response and Analysis**

"I don't rightly know where to begin. Some may say that I can't remember as far back as I say I can. I do remember being placed on a bed and having newspaper placed over me like a tent, because it was raining and the roof was made of brush."

The opening lines to her journal set the scene so beautifully. The rustic and antiquated phrasing "I don't rightly know," establishes her authentic voice completely and transitions the reader from the storytelling event right into the story itself with ease and fluidity. She begins in the present with an admission of confusion on how to start her story, an address to supposed critics who doubt her memory. Who was she referring to? Family, perhaps friends, or the reader.

There is an anticipation on her part for whomever is reading this story that they may doubt her authenticity, but the telling is done without apology. This is a memory she has, which she holds onto. Who are we to deny its veracity? She quickly transitions her writing to the past, and so begins with the earliest memory she has, an infant lying on her back in the shade, looking up at tree branches. We are transported into another time and place, one of makeshift roofs and newspaper umbrellas. The narrative is immediately shot through with the chronotope. And what better way to represent this idea than with a newspaper--something completely immersed in time and space. I wonder what the headlines were that day.

What can we learn from this passage? She claims to have memories of being a baby, but is such a thing even possible? It is highly unlikely that someone would retain memories from infancy due to a phenomenon called *infantile amnesia*. A baby's brain is undeveloped and generally cannot form lasting memories (Lally & Valentine-French 2017). But it might not be impossible. What really strikes me is that she doesn't really know her own origin story as most people know it. My grandmother was an orphan. She was given up by her mother at 12 years old and moved into foster care. The only thing she knew about her childhood were these images and episodes from her childhood, unstructured memories without the help of parents to give them structure.

The writing of her life story is a retrospective act. She takes the fraught memories of her childhood, all that she can remember, and giving them structure and coherence (Freeman, 2015). That opening line can be seen as an acknowledgment of the incoherence of her memories and her life up to that point. Where to begin? Where is the beginning if not the first chronological memory. Start there and work your way forward.

She remembers the greatest pains of childhood, and the greatest joys. The birth of her baby sister and a nasty run-in with ‘bob wire.’ She still had the scar. In her description of the home, the first home that she lived in, the one with the cow lot, the one where her sister was born, we have what Certeau refers to as the “enormous corpus” of spatial storytelling, the map or the tour. This description falls into the category of “map” as it describes the layout of a space as opposed to a “tour,” which is more like a walkthrough with directions (1988, p. 118).

Descriptions of spaces and places often fall into one of these two categories, and my grandmother frequently utilizes this technique throughout her journal as she did with her storytelling in person. Reading Certeau brought this aspect to light for me, but I remember her descriptions of spaces as a vivid and integral part of the stories she told in life. She would always paint a picture in the stories she told. Reading her descriptions, the effect for me is clear. I can imagine these places as they once were, places that no longer exist, but which we can see through her eyes because of this description and detail.

One of the most memorable and curious aspects of this journal for me was the repeated use of “coal oil” as a cure-all and all around useful home remedy. It makes an early appearance here and remains a recurring touchstone throughout. From my modern vantage point there is something horrific about using a coal byproduct as medicine, but there was a time when it was quite popular, and thinking about it now it seems petroleum jelly, which is still in use, is surely an antecedent of coal-oil. An 1869 article in *The British Medical Journal* by a surgeon in the Royal Navy praises the healing properties of coal oil (which he clarifies is simply another name for petroleum) via case descriptions for various ailments including burns or scalds, ulcer, phlegmonoid inflammation, chronic duodenitis (which he administered orally by dropping it on sugar cubes), dysentery (administered to himself rectally), Erysipelas, Erysipelatous Laryngitis,

ischio-rectal abscess, sprains, rheumatism, itch, and even as a treatment for “black knot on fruit trees.” Frankly, this is a rather astounding amount of ailments which this surgeon found coal oil to be an effective treatment for, and he was so thoroughly convinced of its abilities that he called its effectiveness as a topical application for inflammation “unsurpassed by any other known remedy.” (Mulvaney, 1869. p. 281). The prominence of coal oil as a medical treatment as featured in this journal might amount to little more than a curiosity, but in my opinion, it is an essential element of the *chronotope*. Details such as these are what situate the story within its particular time and place and demarcate those lines of the story.

My grandmother included a lot of details that do not seem to serve to move the narrative, but instead give us an authentic view into life at that time--Oklahoma, USA in the '40s and '50s. They drink Polar Bear coffee. Her mom makes underwear from flour sacks, and beds from willow branches. Kids eat penny candy and walk to school. Dogs roam rabid, and once into her house because the door is open to keep the breeze. Air conditioning is nothing but a dream. Sharecropping is still a profession, the railroad a titanic industry. Hobos ride their rails and sometimes come to her backdoor to ask for a meal. Her grandparents or parents might have traveled west in a covered wagon, now her dad drives a two seater coupe. She is just three years old during the attack on Pearl Harbor, but still remembers it. She watched black and white westerns at the theater in town. Everything could be cured with coal oil.

Her mother and father were still together early in the story. The birth of her baby sister sticks out in her mind, a memory she held onto. Her siblings were clearly important to her, and she would even act as their primary caregiver at times. The loss of them later was quite obviously a source of great pain for her until the day she died. My mother, her eldest daughter, is named after my grandmother's baby sister. She gave her first girl the name of the baby sister she

lost years prior, who she herself fed and clothed and changed, but who was given away while she was at school one day. She went through great lengths to find her sisters again, and she never gave up until she did. She chronicles this process herself in her life story journal. In paragraphs 39-42 she describes the process of reunification with her family starting with her sisters. In fact, this search for her missing loved ones is already part of the historical record. She recruited the help of newspapers in her search.

The Newspaper Record of Her Search

Figure 4



seeks her sisters. (State Photo)

# For Two Sisters

By the State Staff

DUNCAN — Days have turned into years for Katherine Nance Mosteller. She is searching for two sisters from whom she was separated 15 years ago.

Katherine — now Mrs. Doyle Mosteller of Duncan — was the oldest of four Nance sisters abandoned by their parents in 1948.

The two younger girls were three and six years of age when they were adopted.

"I had no idea that we were going to be separated from each other," Mrs. Mosteller said. "One day Agnes and I came in from school and found Jennifer and Esther gone. We never saw them again."

Mrs. Mosteller said a short time after Jennifer and Esther were adopted, she and Agnes were taken to the welfare office by their mother.

"She told us to stay there and they (the welfare department) would take care of us. We sat there and watched as she walked out of the office and out of our lives. I have never heard from her or seen her since."

The 25-year-old housewife and mother of five youngsters said she last saw two of her sisters in 1948. About six years ago,

she and Agnes were reunited.

"Our baby sister—Jennifer Denice — is 18 years old now and Esther Youvone is 21. I'm sure they were renamed by their adopted parents. Agnes was. They may have no memories of me or our childhood days together, especially Jennifer. She was only three then," Mrs. Mosteller said.

Mrs. Mosteller added, "We were left alone for days at a time when we were young. Since I was the oldest, I tried to take care of the girls. I cooked, washed and ironed their clothes and mothered them the best I could."

Mrs. Mosteller lived in a number of foster homes until her marriage. Her husband has joined her search for her sisters.

"If this is what she wants," Mosteller said, "then we will look for the girls until we find them."

# Reunited With Two Sisters

By the State Staff

DUNCAN — A long and sometimes heartbreaking search of a Duncan woman for two sisters whom she had not seen in 15 years ended Tuesday.

Jean Nance Mosteller, 25-year-old housewife and mother of five children, answered the doorbell and was greeted by a young smiling face. There stood her sister — 18-year-old Susie Godard whom Jean had known 15 years ago as Jennifer Nance — youngest of the four Nance girls abandoned by their parents in McAlester.

Susie had seen a story in The Daily Oklahoman some weeks ago about a Duncan woman's search for two sisters. Her foster parents, Mrs. and Mrs. Clover Godard, who are both school teachers in Spavinaw public schools, brought the 18-year-old girl to Duncan and a reunion with Mrs. Mosteller.

The Godards also adopted Esther Nance at the same time they adopted Susie. She (Esther) is now Mrs. Jean Rogers of Huntington Park, Calif. The reunited sisters telephoned Mrs. Rogers immediately for a joyous long-distance reunion.

Kay Van Meter, a 23-year-old Enid housewife and one of the sisters, was reunited with Mrs. Mosteller about six years ago.

The five Mosteller children were also excited over the reunion of the sisters. One of the youngsters was heard to say, "Now Mommy has a family, too."

The sisters will celebrate Thanksgiving Day together Thursday. It will be the first one together since early childhood.

Duncan Wife

B →  
Not too long after the 1st story was published because mother was still 25 + it referenced

Not too long after the 1st story was published because mother was still 25 & it referenced Cindy reading article 2 weeks ago.

Figure 5

# Tragic time marked joyful family reunion

By Jeff Hall  
The Duncan Banner

At the time, there was no question Jean Mosteller was going to have her baby sister and her adoptive parents come to her Duncan home despite what was going on in the rest of the country.



Jean Mosteller

It was Sunday, Nov. 24, 1963, and while most of the country was paying its last respects to John F. Kennedy in a tearful, televised funeral, Mrs. Mosteller was greeting her sister Susie after being separated for 15 years.

Now, 25 years later, Mrs. Mosteller has moved to Pauls Valley, where she drives a school bus. But in the intervening years, she has located all three of her sisters, her mother and father after being separated by a broken home that sent all four sisters to different adoptive families.

She had made contact with one sister, Kay, who lived in Enid, six years before that Friday in Dallas, and when she found her youngest sister Susie living in Oklahoma City, Mrs. Mosteller said she was determined not let anything, even a national tragedy, stand in the way of their reunion.

The shock of the reunion was so great, however, that Mrs. Mosteller said she fainted and had to be revived by a local doctor. *Not true*

"All I know is, my nerves were pretty shot at the time, even if

■ See Reunion, page 3A

## Reunion

■ Continued from page one

Kennedy hadn't been shot," Mrs. Mosteller said.

"I had five young kids and my husband (Doyle) was a truck driver and gone a lot, so I had to be mom and dad to these kids."

Mrs. Mosteller said it was "great, really great" to meet her youngest sister, and it was even better two years later when all four sisters were able to finally meet together. The fourth sister is also named Jean.

"All of us didn't get together until we met at Stone Bluff, Oklahoma, a couple years later," she said.

Currently, the other Jean lives in California, Kay still lives in Enid and Susie lives in Arkansas, Mrs. Mosteller said. While the sisters keep in touch occasionally, the fact of what happened to the four sisters when their parents separated long ago has kept them from being close, she said.

"We didn't grow up together so we're not that close," Mrs.

Mosteller said.

Since that tragic and happy weekend 25 years ago, Mrs. Mosteller said she has located both her mother and father, and moved both to live in Pauls Valley in separate houses. Her husband, Doyle, recently passed away.

"There's been a lot of heartache in re-locating my family but I'm better equipped to handle that now," Mrs. Mosteller said.

## Ban

■ Continued from page one

because they were unaware of the Nov. 1 meeting.

The council meeting was attended by numerous hunters, apparently concerned over the proposed hunting ban.

Some hunters, and other residents, were present for Monday's planned commission meeting, but many were told beforehand the issue would not be addressed.

The commission Monday also

*This clipping was in her personal journal. Note the underlined section calling out a journalistic fabrication as “not true,” in reference to her fainting at the reunion. The other correction notes that Cindy lived in Jay, OK not Oklahoma City.*

To dig further, there is one question that must first be addressed:

### **Who was Darla Palmer?**

I know the answer in a literal sense. Darla Palmer was the name I knew my great-grandmother by. She was one of those people who was always referred to by their first and last name by my family. Not Darla, certainly not grandma. Darla Palmer.

I grew up in a small town of 7,000 people called Pauls Valley, an hour’s drive south of Oklahoma City along I-35. When I was in high school I had a good friend whose mother taught third grade at the local elementary school. She had a ‘class grandmother’ who would come once a week to read stories to the children, and they all adored her. She was the sweetest person, so kind and patient with the children. Loving and grandmotherly in the greatest sense of the word. My friend’s mom told me this when she learned that this woman was none other than my own great-grandmother, Darla Palmer. She told me with a smile, expecting me to confirm her assessment of Darla’s character and express my own love for her. But I was taken aback and I reacted harshly, with disdain for this person who had caused so much pain in my family. I told her that we had nothing to do with this woman, that she abandoned my grandmother as a child. We knew two different people. My mother had to talk with her and explain the situation in a more level-headed manner than I could muster at 17. My friend’s mom was, I think, disconcerted to learn that the woman in her classroom was perhaps hiding something dark.

How is this reconciled? Was the gentle, loving grandmother who read children’s stories to that third grade class a facade for the rotten person underneath? That is what much of my family might think. They are understandably bitter for what she did to my grandmother, but this theory reads too simply for my taste. Could it be that the sweet old lady reading to children was

an authentic part of herself? Perhaps through this volunteer work she sought to remake herself, to love and be loved without the burden of the past hanging on her shoulders. Perhaps when she walked into that classroom she could shrug off the knowledge that she had long ago destroyed any chance at playing the grandmother to her own family and so relished the opportunity to play that role where no one knew her past or her sins. She could be that gentle loving person to those children in that place in time, reading them stories to soothe and entertain them. I wonder. In some twist of fate she ended up living in Pauls Valley, some 40 or 50 years after she left my grandmother and two of her sisters alone on a bench in the Child Welfare office. She was a bitter woman up until the day she died, 90 some odd years old. Why does it seem that the mean at heart, the most bitter among us live to old age?

Growing up, my family did not hold her in high regard for obvious reasons. She birthed nine children and raised not one into adulthood. She was abusive--verbally, physically, emotionally. Neglectful. Selfish. Mean. These are the adjectives I knew her by. This was the story of my great grandmother. And yet, I cannot help but feel some sympathy for her, and I cannot help but wonder what led her down that path. Was it her natural state, if there is such a thing? Or was she a product of her experiences? My own experience tells me that the answer almost always lies somewhere between. I refuse to believe she was simply a bad person from birth, and I now call into question my own negative judgement of her.

An interesting entry in the life story journal touches on this very subject. A single entry which stands alone undated, but most likely written in 2013 due to surrounding entries, reads: "My mother is the kind of person who can make other people think that she is the sweetest kindest most gentle person you could ever meet." What spurred this entry I wonder? It surely did not come from thin air. Some event must have inspired my grandmother to reach for her

notebook and write this. Her emphasis on “other people” makes me think that some similar event as the one I described brought this particular aspect of Darla’s personality to my grandmother’s attention, and the emphasis on “other” implies that it was not my grandmother who was fooled by what she saw as an act. Most likely it was just a pattern of behavior. The truth is, I did not know her.

I know I met Darla when I was young, but she was as good as a stranger to me. All I know about her I learned from other people, and any feelings, positive or negative, have been derived the same way. Knowing this, I felt compelled to learn more about her, to try and understand her, to empathize with her, as this narrative cannot be told without Darla.

### **Darla According to Others**

#### *According to my Mom and Aunt*

I asked both my mother and my aunt for information about her. I received a reply from my mother first. This is what she wrote:

I think Darla’s father was a sexual predator. He supposedly tried to molest Darla, when he was drunk, and she defended herself with a 2x4. Her mother died when she was very small and he remarried a woman who had a daughter already, or it was his daughter. The young girl supposedly had a child by him. I say supposedly to all this because it’s Darla’s story. Darla was a pretty woman, with green eyes. She had three daughters by James Vance, my grandpa, and one daughter by the next door neighbor. She moved out and took the girls with her, when he was at work one day. He tried to get mom, he said, but Darla said, “If you take one, you take them all.” She “dated” for a while, sometimes staying gone for several days, sometimes bringing the dates home for the night. When she was gone, Mom cared for her sisters, sometimes scrounging for food. Darla took up

with another man, who didn't want to raise someone else's kids, but he did try to molest mom in the back yard one day. The neighbor stopped him. This is when she took Mom and Joy to the Welfare Dept. and left them. She later gave the younger two up, after breaking the 2-year old's leg (my aunt Cindy.) She had 4 children by this man, David, and I think they lived in South Carolina when he left her, taking all the kids back to McAlester, where he was from. She was caught going to the bars as soon as he went to work (he was in the military). He beat her up, broke her arm, and she then lived above a bar for nine months, drunk on Crown (her story to me). Somewhere in there she reportedly had a child that she never brought home from the hospital (gave him up?) I don't know how many times she "married", but her last husband was supposedly a member of the Klan. One of the four children she had by David (2 were boys), fell off of a hay truck over in McAlester and was killed. Mom saw it in a newspaper and located the other three. I don't recall much about them except for one of the girls, Darlene. She came to stay with us for a while, because she was having boyfriend problems. She eventually went back to McAlester with him, but I don't know what happened to her and Mom's relationship. I think she still lives in McAlester, though. Mom and Joy found Darla when Chancy was 6, after 28 years of separation, in Greenville, S. Carolina, working in a fabric mill.

When Mom found her sisters, they had all changed their names. Mom was Kathern Lee Ann, changed to Jean Ann. The Lee was from her paternal grandfather. Margaret (living in Medford), was changed to Joy. Victoria was changed to Jean. She and Cindy had been fostered together, and were adopted together. Victoria (Jean) was living in California. The youngest, Jennifer, had changed to Cindy. She was living in

Arkansas. I have cousins that I met years ago (they all got together a couple of times), but I haven't seen them in many years. One of the cousins hung himself in his garage (Victoria's son). Victoria and Jennifer didn't remember Mom and Joy – they were too young (at least Jennifer didn't.) Victoria died several years ago – she drank herself to death. Joy (Margaret) is screwed up in the head. Cindy is the only one I talk to (texting or on Facebook), though I wouldn't know her if I met her on the street. She got lucky and was adopted by wonderful parents and doesn't remember the bad times. She did tell me that Victoria had psychological problems as a young child.

Vallory knows more than I do, so I'll ask her if she has anything to contribute.

(J. Mosteller, personal communication, March 17, 2020)

My mother is a good family historian and talented writer. Her reply helped me to conceive of my grandmother's story chronologically, and to get a clearer understanding of names and family relations. She gives us a glimpse of Darla's life in between the time she gave away my grandmother and their reunification. That was 27 years in which Darla's life went much the same way as it had before. Bad husbands, children she did not raise, tragedy.

My aunt chose to tell what she knew to my mom and have her write it out, as she trusted my mom's writing skills better than her own. I wondered this resulted from a mistake on my part, perhaps this information is not as objective as I want if it is filtered through another person before it reaches me. But it struck me that this is perhaps completely relevant to my research. I am concerned with the act of storytelling, with the importance of family stories and how those stories are told and retold by different actors, those who have been deemed *designated performer* (Shuman, 2015). My mother was acting as a designated performer for her sister, someone who was trusted to relay the story with fidelity.

My aunt, as told to my Mom concerning Darla (very minor typo edits made by myself):

Darla's mother died in childbirth, when she was two. Her father (William Woods) remarried two years later to a woman who had inherited some money. She bought a house with the money and that's where they lived. Darla said she felt disliked by her step-mother. They had nine children together, in addition to what each brought to the marriage. Darla ran away from home a lot. Mom went to stay with her grandfather and his wife. He used a lot of different items to hit his children. Mom didn't meet her grandfather until she was eight. He was always hitting his wife and his children and they all grew up with emotional problems, according to one of their sons that Val talked to when she lived in Lawton. Willie's (the grandfather) father (a gambler) disappeared and Willie's mother had at least one more child, a girl, who later, along with her sons, robbed a bank in California – a real screwed up family. There's a story, unproven, that Darla was related to Bonnie Parker. Darla didn't talk much about her life as a child. I think Mom told me that her parents (James and Darla) never married.

Mom used to stay with the Woods, sometimes. Getting fruit for Christmas was a big deal. Her grandfather doled out the food at meals, controlling everyone's portions. When she was with her mother, they often went to bed cold and hungry. She even fed her sisters cattle cubes, when there was nothing else to eat. She would beg for eggs from the neighbor woman, and make egg and sugar milk shakes for all of them.

Lee Vance was another grandfather. Her grandmother Phoebe used to sneak extra food for mom, when she stayed with them (in Okema), we think. Her grandfather Lee was very controlling. When Darla left James, moving to McAlester, Mom never saw her

grandparents again. We think that she didn't meet her Woods grandparents until Darla left James and they moved to McAlester.

When Mom was sent to live with one of her aunt's, the uncle tried to sexually molest her and mom left and started walking home. She was picked up by another aunt and uncle and taken on home, back to Darla.

Mom told Val that a Ms. Martin, was a very important person in Mom's life. She was a social worker who treated Mom very special. Ms. Martin was the person who took Mom to Aunt Wilma's, not Aunt Audrey. Aunt Audrey was actually a nurse, who mom met when she was in the hospital, after getting thrown from the horse. Mom slept with Aunt Wilma, at first, because it was winter time and the Wilma's brother, Chet slept in the house. When summer arrived, Chet moved to the barn, and Mom got her own bed. When she rode the bus home, she saw a bunch of guys at the Mosteller place, and they all had motorcycles. She met my grandpa Allie, first, when he came over to Wilma's to talk to her about cutting her hay. Wilma and mom stopped at the Mosteller place one day, and my dad went to the car and talked to Wilma about the hayfield. That's the first time mom met him. He later asked her out when he saw her at church (Pleasant Valley.) Their first date was to see the western, "Shane."

(J. Mosteller & V. Moore, personal communication, March 23, 2020).

Information about Darla is scant, but already from this narrative, we can glimpse into Darla's childhood, and see that she herself was a victim of abuse. Darla's father beat her and his other children with "different items"-- an ominous, if vague, detail. According to my mother, Darla's father tried to molest her, and she had to arm herself with a 2x4 to fend him off. She tried to run away multiple times. This is the same grandfather that my grandma said she never saw

smile, the same man who she watched beat her uncles with a cane fishing pole for “playing hooky,” the same man who my young grandma saw slap Darla so hard that she fell to the ground. Her husband abused her as well. My grandma describes a fight her parents had in paragraph 17 in which her daddy hit her mama so hard that he “knocked her into a ditch.” Another time they came home, the side of Darla’s face and the back of her hand were “skinned up.” Darla said James pushed her out of the car, he said she jumped. I am inclined to believe her. Whatever her sins in life, she was not without her own pain. She endured abuse from her father and her husband she which did not deserve.

*According to Aunt Louise*

A letter from Louise, Darla’s half sister, to my grandmother sheds more light on Darla as a person:

Transcribed verbatim. This letter was written on narrow stationary, and it seems like she used the line breaks as periods so it is difficult to read at times:

**Figure 6**

Dear Kathern 10-25-02

Hello dear one hope this find you in good health & its probably cold there. You ask if I ever think of OK. Yes only I dont feel good about it. The weather was just to cold. Ever since I can remember I wanted to leave there. Yes I am married 3rd time last time :). They say 3rd time is charmed. Guess it must be true. We have been together for 21 years. Frank is a very good husband has very good morals. It took many year to find some one who cared about me. I did not have a very good childhood. I just keep my faith in God to see me through things my pen is trying to quit on me :)

I wish I could tell you something but I dont remember what you were talking about the pigs or hog killing. I ask Cecil he said he remembers it taking place but not the where abouts. I remember once when my sister Lucille & I were at your house with your mother & sisters. That Lucille boyfriend & friend got a hog drunk and tried to put him in the fire place. There wasn't a fire in it then but we had fun I'm sure the hog didn't Kathern. I think your mother is probably ashamed of what she did why she wont talk about it. I could tell you some things about the things she did but I have forgiven her & I dont think saying any thing would do anyone any good. I think about it. But not I realize she was young & had a big burden to carry which by no means excuses a mom for giving up her kids. She was like our dad. He wasn't a very nice dad. Mom was ok. but I never understood why any woman would stay with a man that treated her like a dog & let him mistreat the kids. So anyway I try not to think about its bad stuff.

I had three sons by my first husband married 15 yr. my older son Jerry left here & I don't know where he is never calls or writes. As you know know Larry lives in Chick we keep in touch my younger Billy lives in Paradise CA about 20 miles from Larry they dont keep in touch it really breaks my heart but 2 years that the way life is. Kathern you didnt say if your sisters were still living & if so where are they! You girls were so beautiful. I was staying with you & your mom I had to beg my parents for money to go back home at the time they lived in Cloverdale CA & the boys dad was living with Stan at the time I wasnt there. About 8 months or so my dad decided to leave from there. & go back to Okla. He told me I had to find a place to live I was 18 yr

Alf the boys dad ask me to marry him I had no place to go so that for that to come about. He was 20 years older than me God I hated to get married to him but I so love my sons more than life. I am very happy now & have a good life God has blessed me.

Honey Im sorry about your mother & pray for you to just try & forgive her. I had to forgive my mom for some things & my dad I just didn't care. I hope God can forgive me for that it been really nice hear from you I thought about you girls wondering what ever happen to you. Do you know any thing about where Doris Gardner is? Are you a school teacher? & honey please forgive me for waiting so long in answering your letter. I love to hear from you.

with Love & Prayers

Aunt Louise

Unfortunately, Louise is unwilling to go into much detail here, saying that she has forgiven Darla. I would have liked to see the letter that my grandmother sent to Louise. We can tell from Louise's reply that my grandmother was asking for information about Darla, possibly what Louise could tell her about some childhood memories, but she remains vague. These memories seem to pain Louise as well. She does not seem to look too fondly upon her past, which might explain her reluctance to go into detail. Louise wrote that their father "wasn't a very nice dad." That is quite the understatement given what we already know about him. However, she does make an interesting comparison between them which might give us some insight. She says that Darla was young and carried a "big burden," before comparing Darla and her father, "She was like our dad." So, in Louise's estimation, Darla was repeating patterns from her childhood, something unfortunately common for victims of child abuse (Merrick & Guinn, 2018).

My grandmother's decision to reach out to newspapers for help in locating her sisters is evidence of the emotional and psychological wounds which had been inflicted from her abandonment and the loss of her sisters. She was only a child herself, but it is clear she felt responsibility for them. Her words from *The Oklahoman* (1963) "We were left alone for days at

a time when we were young. Since I was the oldest, I tried to take care of the girls. I cooked, washed and ironed their clothes and mothered them the best I could.”

She ‘mothered them.’ Her words here are revealing to how she felt about them and to their relationship. The role of the mother is sacred across cultures and societies, but that role is not always taken up by the people who biologically gave birth to the child. Too often, the role is taken by older siblings, particularly older sisters who forgo their own childhood and step into the role of adult out of necessity. Being separated from a sibling is traumatic for children, but for a child who has had to adopt the role of caregiver, the loss takes on a new dimension. The trauma of coming home to her baby sisters gone, with not even a chance to say goodbye, was evidently seared into her memory. She writes in paragraphs 29 & 30:

The baby was about three and the sister next to her was six. She had just started to school. One morning Mama said she wasn’t going to school because she was running a fever.

I went on to school. That afternoon when I got home our two little sisters weren’t there. Mama was crying. She said they had gone to live with some other people. I got sick and that was the day I started hating my mother. Joy my sister said she remembers standing and watching them leave.

### **What is Not Written**

The fact that my grandmother acted in the capacity of caregiver to her younger sisters is canon in my family. This is a part of the story told with sadness, but also reverence. Oddly, however, not much of this journal is devoted to the care of her siblings. Some of it is mentioned in passing, she writes “sometimes we stayed by ourselves.” An early instance, perhaps the first of this increased responsibility falls to her at just seven years old after the birth of one of her baby sisters. After her aunt failed to live up to her duty of helping with Darla and her new baby, it was

up to my seven year old grandmother to pick up the slack including washing dirty diapers. That on its own might not be unusual for the time period, but taken as a whole, this is a significant moment. There are other rather vague references she makes to being left alone for long periods of time, or staying for periods with friends, neighbors, or family. An elderly woman across the street. A young couple down the road. But where are the details I know? The parts of the story which became part of the fabric of our family's narrative?

Some of these details can be found in the supplemental sources I have included. From my aunt, as told to my mother, "When she was with her mother, they often went to bed cold and hungry. She even fed her sisters cattle cubes, when there was nothing else to eat. She would beg for eggs from the neighbor woman, and make egg and sugar milk shakes for all of them." These are the details that stand out to me, which have been seared into my memory. I can feel her pain today as if it has been passed down genetically. The day she gave me this journal, my grandmother recounted these details readily. To get to this neighbors house, they had to walk a mile across a field. She carried her baby sister on her hip and walked side by side with the others through the tall grass just for the hope that this woman could spare a single raw egg and cup of milk for them to share. She would claw through the woods, scavenging for edible plants or turn over rocks in the creek looking for crawdads to cook and eat. They ate food meant for *cattle* so that they would not go hungry. It was more than being left alone. It was survival.

So why did she leave these details out of the definitive version of her life story. Why are these events relegated to single lines? Her words: "When I started this I guess it was a kind of therapy for me. I don't need this now. Now it's just for background history for my family." She meant it as therapy. One would think that spilling these details would be a part of that. It's not as if she shied away from writing out painful details in other portions of the journal. I can only

speculate as to why, but there is a reason for silence. The simplest answer is that it simply slipped her mind, she forgot to include it. The research says that survivors of child abuse might avoid writing about themselves when telling their life story, especially when it comes to events which represent a loss of agency (Fivush, 2010). These are not happy memories, and I imagine they would be wrapped in anxiety and a loss of control. She and her little sisters were hungry with nothing to eat in the house, and no adults around to help. Her efforts were sometimes fruitless, her results often meager. She was just a child herself, but she was the oldest and so had to grow up before her time and she did not have a choice in the matter. I have always seen this as proof of her strength, but perhaps she saw things differently. She might have been ashamed. Despite the fact that she was in no way to blame, she may have harbored negative feelings about her inability to care for her siblings properly even though she never should have been in that position in the first place.

There is another piece of the story that she left out, a part that she told me the day she gave me her notebook. She was 14 or 15, living with a new foster mother. They didn't get along. She wanted my grandmother to clean and cook constantly, to be a servant more or less. There were other younger foster children living there--three Native American sisters, all of them sick and bed bound. She described to me the sinister feelings she got whenever she was in the house or around the woman, and the intense psychic pain she felt at this point in her life. Just 15 years old and she had already been through enough misery to last a lifetime. She stayed away from the foster home as much as she could, often sneaking out at night and hanging out with friends, drinking. One night she put on all black clothes and snuck out of the house. She walked across town to a bridge over a river, and there, alone in the night she stood on the side of the bridge and looked over into the darkness. She had come there to jump, to kill herself and end her suffering.

But she had what might be called an epiphany. She called it the voice of God. Something spoke to her then, something deep inside that told her not to jump, and it saved her life. That moment changed the course of her life, it solidified her faith and set the course for all that followed. She was once again moved to a different foster home shortly after that when it was discovered that her foster mother was poisoning the other children to keep them sick.

### **The Consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences**

The psychological term for what happened to my grandmother is called *parentification*. This is when “parental characteristics are projected onto an individual.” (Englehardt, 2012, p. 45). Put another way, the social and emotional burden of the parent is put onto the child in some capacity. This is normal, and even healthy to a degree. It is good for children to gain some extra responsibility as they age, and to be able to see themselves in an adult role. There is a point, however, where this process reaches the point of neglect, becoming pathological and burdensome on the child. It threatens their development by harming their attachment to their primary caregiver. This neglect can have a devastating effect on children throughout their development and into adulthood leading to a wide variety of maladaptive behaviors, poor interpersonal relationships, depression, anxiety, and even physical symptoms like headaches and stomach aches, etc. (Englehardt, 2012). It could be that these memories in particular were among the most painful for her, and so she did not write them out for that reason. There are a myriad of reasons why she would choose to be silent on this issue (Fivush, 2009).

*Parentification* is often used synonymously with ‘role reversal.’ The parent takes on the role of the child, and the child the parent. The child then labors as a parent might, physically, or emotionally. My grandmother felt the need to act as the mother to her siblings, and it could also be the case that Darla took on characteristics of a child herself. This role reversal surely played

out later in their lives. It is clear from the entries which my grandmother wrote in both her life story journal and her daily journal. Decades after Darla abandoned her, as she lived out her life in a retirement home, my grandmother felt the need to take care of her mother. She fed her, shopped for her, attended to her physically and emotionally. She describes the pain and frustration born out of these encounters, of Darla as a bitter old woman who seemed resentful of my grandmother's help while still relying on it. From paragraph 42 of her life story journal:

My mother did not, still does not know how to be a mother. She had 9 children and did not raise one of them. But she wants to be in the limelight for everything that she does for everyone else. She wants the attention of her grandchildren without ever having functioned as a grandmother. Also wants that from her great-grandchildren. She has the title of grandmother but she does not act like one. What my mother wanted was always more important than what was best for her children.

Significant portions of her daily journal are devoted to her interactions with Darla. Through it we can see how their relationship progresses in Darla's final years. The entries begin near the end of 2008. Darla is having health problems. My grandmother is trying to help however she can. She goes to Darla's small apartment to wash dishes and help however she can. Darla is hospitalized for cardiovascular issues, and when she gets out blames my grandmother for stressing her out and putting her in the hospital. Obviously this deeply wounds my grandmother, whatever semblance of a 'good' relationship they may have kindled for a short while is disappearing. "March 5th, 2009 - ...Well have only been back to see mother once since Christmas. I call her once in awhile. Plan on going up tomorrow. Its not like it use to be. I just wonder if she realizes what she has done or if she even cares. Oh well, until next time." Darla had wounded my grandmother once again. She soon had dreams that she interpreted as her

mother's imminent death. Then, in November 2011 there is a pivotal entry which reads: "...The 30th of Sept. I said good-bye to my birth mother by getting out of her life. She told me I always got her in trouble when I went up to see her. I told her I would never cause her any more trouble and walked out of her life. I feel free now. I hope she is happy now." This is the moment she finally gives up on her mother after decades of pain and heartbreak. From the point in her journal, she refers to Darla by her name, not by mother, not by mama. Darla. When she died just two years later in 2013 at 94 years old, the only people at her funeral were my grandmother and her children, there because they wanted to support their mom.

Since I have been interacting more deeply with this narrative, and the materials which I have gathered, as I have tried to understand who Darla was and why she did the things that she did, and how she came to symbolize wretchedness in my family, I cannot help but wonder why my great-grandfather, James Vance, did not receive the same or similar treatment. Why was he not villainized in the same manner? He was the father to my grandma and her sisters, and yet they went into foster care. I have to believe that child welfare would have tried to contact him. He beat Darla, he allegedly threw her from a moving car. He was a womanizer. One might be tempted to give him some credit. In paragraph 23 of her life story journal, she writes about a time when he showed up with another woman and asked Darla if he could take my Grandma with him. According to my mother, Darla told him, "If you take one, you take them all." So, he left and my grandma neither saw nor heard from him until she tracked him down in 1962. He was working and living only 50 miles away from her.

Animals play a prominent role in this story, as the first entry features two pets my grandma had early in her life-- a chicken and a pig both named Freddie. These small memories about her animals are perhaps some of the only things from this journal which might be

considered happy, but they also help to establish the setting, they tell us where she came from. This was a very rural upbringing. Chickens and pigs, cows and horses, dogs and cats, are all an integral part of rural life. In my experience, young children are always fascinated with animals, so it makes good sense that these memories stick out to her from what she had of a childhood

The animals also serve to introduce us to other important themes of her life story. One is anger at her mother, anger which in this case caused her to kill her baby chicken by bludgeoning it with a board, then attempting to kill her pig in the same way. Why would a little girl have so much anger that she kills her pets, or even has the opportunity to do so? Perhaps she was a wild child. But this kind of violence towards animals in children is more than just a source of humor or an interesting anecdote. Children who have perpetrated violence on animals are more likely to have been exposed to domestic violence or animal abuse, to have been abused themselves, and they typically have higher instances of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) all around (Bright et al., 2018). Evidence of ACEs abound in this journal, as this is essentially a story of a tragic childhood. Domestic violence, abuse, and neglect are prominent throughout. She wets her flour sack underwear and is spanked for it by her mother is one example.

Another theme is brutality and violence. I have already discussed the rampant abuse and violence throughout her childhood towards other people, but the level of brutality and violence against animals is, in some ways, just as disturbing. Other than the incident where my grandmother apparently bludgeoned her chicken, there are a few others. My grandmother seemed to have understood this theme as she grouped several of these incidences together in paragraph six. There is a particularly heartbreaking instance where her father comes home from squirrel hunting with five baby squirrels that he puts in a cage outside. My grandmother is then tasked with feeding them while he is gone, but they inevitably get out and are killed by her aunt's cat.

Grandma is immediately distraught, worried and anxious about her dad's reaction. And for good reason it seems:

I didn't know what he was going to do. Daddy got his gun and shot my Aunt's cat. There was a creek not too far away, he took the cat down there and buried it. He didn't want my aunt to know he had killed her cat. Sometime during the night the cat dug its way out of its grave and came back to the house. Daddy got up, got his gun, and shot it again. Daddy didn't like cats.

Imagine the anxiety she must have had about this, the pressure of keeping the squirrels safe when she most likely knew what her Daddy was capable of if she was not successful. He killed the cat *twice*. She must have blamed herself. This was a more dangerous world. She describes a night when a rabid dog comes out of the dark and into their house while she is playing with her baby sister on the floor. The dog runs into the room and under the bed. Her dad shoots and kills it right then and there inside the house. There are holes in the wall from the buckshot, and a bloodstain on the floor they have to scrub clean.

In paragraph 11, she recounts the story of her puppies. Someone had given her two. Her father put them in a box and put them outside all night where they, predictably, cried constantly. Two days later they are gone. In a moment of compassion, trying to protect her daughter's feelings, Darla tells her that they had been killed by a big mean dog, something she would have believed due to her encounter with the rabid one. She realized later that her father killed them. What cruelty it takes to kill two puppies, your daughter's pets, just because they were whining, just you don't like dogs. From there she transitions to this enigmatic dream she started having, the one with the three bears.

This dream is evidently symbolic, meaningful in some way. Otherwise, I don't think she would have included it in this journal. She does not offer any analysis herself, and unfortunately she is not here to offer any explanation. But when you think of three bears and a young girl, what do you think of? The obvious allusion is to Goldilocks -- the girl to whom nothing was ever quite right. Does this not fit with the feelings she describes when the bears were standing over her?

The feeling that came over me was sometimes I felt real fat and then I was real skinny. When I felt fat it was like I had been blown up like a balloon. When I felt skinny it was like I was a matchstick. I don't know when I stopped seeing the bears but the feeling last for years. I would wake up with these feelings.

Are these the feelings of a girl who can't quite find her place? Who perhaps does not feel comfortable in her own skin? As for the bears, maybe they represent danger, danger that she lived with, danger from the people in her life.

Poverty is an insidious force which crosses generational boundaries and follows people for their entire lives. Its destructive power cannot be overstated. My grandmother writes about her father moving from job to job. In the beginning of her story he is a sharecropper before they move to Henryetta so he can work for the railroad, at some point after he drives a cab, and works as a barber. There are evidently new economic opportunities, but there also seems to be a pattern of economic instability through the narrative. My grandmother was born into poverty, the evidence is all over her journal. Going hungry, living in a three bedroom house with eight other people, not knowing when you'll be uprooted again and on to somewhere else. (para. 32).

In this text there are multiple stories weaved together. Each person alive has their own life story, their own autobiography, which is intermixed with the stories of the people around us. We are defined by and against them. They come in and out of our lives, and some of them play

an important role in shaping it. No other person has a larger role in this than our parents. Our lives are also layered. They are set against a backdrop, they are influenced by machinations beyond our control and consciousness. There is the story of our family, our ancestors, the town where we live, the state, the country, the world. None of these stories can be separated from the other--each thread is intertwined. Though there are many people with similar experiences in this world, my grandmother's story could not have happened to anyone else, at any other time, in any other place.

My purpose here is not to cast blame on anyone one person, nor is it my purpose to excuse their misdeeds. Both James and Darla, my great grandparents, are guilty of abuse and neglect. They are both guilty of abandonment of their children. But just like every other man and woman who has ever walked this earth, they are a product of their circumstances. They had their own story, their own regrets, and their own justifications for their actions I am sure. We are all thrust into this life with no choice to the conditions in which we are raised. Cultural forces are at play in our lives before we are born, and for years after before we may even begin to comprehend their existence. Gender identity, race, and wealth (or lack thereof) are the most powerful of these forces. Poverty in particular is associated with innumerable dangers, pitfalls, and burdens which can be measured on an intergenerational scale. Being born into poverty reduces your lifespan, it threatens your health both as a child and later in life, it increases children's risk of abuse and neglect. Poverty is associated with an increased risk to cognitive development, anxiety and depression, drug and alcohol abuse, attempted suicide, and infant mortality (APA, 2009). If you are born into poverty you are likely to die in it, and the fate of your children will likely be the same. The list goes on; the potential harm is staggering. Without

poverty would my grandmother have had to scrounge for food? Would she have been tossed from home to home?

My grandmother suffered from some of the deleterious effects of poverty. That much is clear from her journal. But, to me, her story is ultimately a story of success. She survived. She made her own decisions about her life, and she fought for what she wanted. She lived a good life, one to be proud of. There are three women who were in my grandma's life who played an important role and deserve enormous credit for their kindness. The first, and perhaps the most significant, was a woman she called Ms. Martin. She was my grandmother's social worker, but more importantly, she was one person in my grandmother's life who treated her like she was special. That is a profound gift for a child who rarely if ever had experienced such a thing. The second was a nurse who she always referred to as Aunt Audrey who cared for my grandmother when she was in the hospital after being thrown from a horse, but who remained an important person in her life after. The third was Aunt Wilma, who was the last foster parent my grandmother lived with before she met my grandfather. Aunt Wilma welcomed her into her family and treated her like her own daughter, with love. There is not a single man from my grandmother's early life, save for perhaps the mysterious Joe the Cabdriver, who comes out of this looking good. Other than her father, all of the men she encounters abuse her in some way. Several attempt to sexually assault her before she is even 12 years old. In comparison, there is something powerful to me about these three women who, together, probably saved her life and set it on a positive course.

When my grandmother was staying at Aunt Wilma's, she was introduced to my grandfather and his family, a decidedly normal, functional, and loving group. They married a few short months after their first date, when my grandmother was just 15 years old. Even though

getting married at that age would have been more common at the time, my grandmother was older than her years. She had already lived a hard life, and really did not have much of a childhood to speak of. My grandfather's family took her in and treated her as their own. They showed her love and kinship, and the healing power of family. My grandparents had five children together, all of them educated. Twelve grandchildren. Several of my cousins have a bachelor's, and some have advanced degrees, and here I sit, putting the finishing touches on my Master's Thesis. I know my grandmother would be proud of me. She already was. She changed the trajectory of her life, and mine. She was proud of that fact, and proud of her family, but never shied away from talking about her roots. My mother in law told me that when they first met, my grandmother introduced herself as a "DHS kid." Being a foster child was a part of her identity, but it did not limit her. She made the best of what she had, and worked hard to ensure that her own children had the childhood that she never did. Her life could have been a tragedy, but in the end it was a triumph.

*Dear Grandma,*

I can see you running down that dirt and gravel road, a cloud of dust roaring in your wake, swirling into itself until it blotted out the old farmhouse behind you, and the houses that came before, but which would never come again. I can see you as a child, hurling hopelessly into the future, fighting like hell against momentum far too heavy to stop on your own-- a rock that began to roll before you were born. I can see you coming home from school to learn that your baby sisters had been given away. Seeing your mother cry, but feeling that sadness of their loss turn to hate for your mother. I can see you as I knew you, my grandma, gray hair and wrinkles. Your hands are delicate but strong. I can see the pencil lead still stuck in your palm from your childhood, you were drawing on your hand when the teacher smacked the end of the

pencil to teach you a lesson and the lead broke off in your flesh. It fascinated me as a child. How did it stay there that whole time, like a relic from your past. Sometimes it's difficult for me to imagine the grandma I knew as a little child caught in chaos. There are times when I read these stories and imagine it happened to someone else.

It's night and you are standing on the side of that bridge, dressed all in black because you didn't want to be seen. You are looking down into the darkness below you, opening up before you like a void, calling out to you. Were you 14 then, 15 perhaps? and already you had enough. The bridge was your way out, your goodbye, a ticket to peace you thought, a way to end the chaos. But something drew you back and stopped you from stepping over the edge and letting yourself fall. Maybe it was God. That's what you told me. You were a pious woman for all the time I knew you. You thought he called you back to this world for a reason. It is strange to think that had you jumped then I would not be writing this today, that I would not exist, nor your 5 children, nor the 11 other grandchildren they gave you, and so on. Did you know at that moment that you were altering the course of the world? Did you know what hung in the balance? I would not have blamed you if you had decided differently. If you had decided to jump then and end the misery of your life I would understand. Suicide is a terrible thing. Especially of one so young, but what's even more terrible is the pain and the anguish and the abuse that adults, and even parents inflict upon children. The young, who made no choice to enter this world, who hold no sway and no control over the movements of their lives, who remain at the mercy of those big people that can swat them, or starve them, or abuse them in ways too horrendous to name. I would not blame you for taking what little control you had over your life. But I'm thankful you stepped back.

Last night an old friend of mine threw himself in front of a train. At least that's what I am told happened. Now, I read the news report and it paints a different picture. They say you were standing in the middle of the tracks facing the train when it hit you. I strain to figure which is worse, but somehow this sits better with me. At least it sounds more like you, be it foolish or brave, but you never shied away from anything. I assume they got this information from the conductor, and I shudder to imagine this image from his perspective, and to think that this is likely not the first time he has seen such a thing, nor the last. You had been running after death for as long as I knew you, and I never knew anyone whose life was more filled with chaos. You carried the devil on your back for all of the 35 years you were alive. Who am I to judge?

At your funeral I am sitting next to my brother, one of your best friends. He is distraught that you are gone, and that he could not help you. You are the third friend of his who has taken their own life, and each one of you is a ghost he carries with him now and for the rest of his life. We watch the pictures of you flow by on the projector, the soft, sad music enough to stifle the sobs throughout the room. I see you as a child, your hair blonde, your eyes bright, your whole life ahead of you. And at that moment, the emotional walls I have built around myself crumble and tears stream down my cheeks. I mourn you for what life was lost, and also for the happiness you never found. May you find the peace in the next life which eluded you in this one.

I read over what I had already written about my grandmother and cannot help but compare these two people. My friend was cursed with a childhood which was not so different than my grandmother's. Parents not worth a damn, substance abuse, physical abuse, neglect. It's the children who get the worst of it. I mourn the many children on this earth who are born with such a curse. My grandmother gave me empathy for them.

For the majority of my post-graduate work, up until 2019 I was employed by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services as an administrative technician for Child Welfare Services. I was not a social worker, but I supported those people who worked directly with the children. Child welfare workers have one of the most difficult jobs imaginable. They are exposed to the horrific underbelly of society, one kept relatively secret from the public. We know that children are abused, but most of us don't care to know the details, or the exact extent of it. The truth is simply too disturbing.

According to the Oklahoma Department of Human Resources annual report, in fiscal year 2019 alone there were 35,106 child abuse and neglect investigations in Oklahoma with 63,956 total child victims in those investigations. There are many more investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect than there are substantiated cases, but a full 15,809 of those children had substantiated evidence of abuse or neglect. According to the KIDS COUNT data book released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019), Oklahoma ranked 42nd among all states in overall child well being. That is shameful. The children of this state are being abused and neglected in high numbers. My grandmother and my friend are both part of a statistic. They are just two of the millions of children who have suffered abuse or neglect in this country and the world over.

My grandmother talked with me about her suicidal thoughts as a youth and the time she came closest to following through with them. People who have adverse childhood experiences are 2-5 times more likely to attempt suicide. The odds of a person with no such experiences attempting suicide sit at just 1.1%, while people with 7 or more ACEs attempt suicide at a rate of 31.1% at some point in their lives (Dube et. al., 2001). I won't pretend to know what makes the difference between those that survive these experiences and those that don't. My grandmother

claimed it was God who stopped her. But it is the fire that drives people to the brink, when the pain of living overtakes our natural aversion to death.

Grandma, your stories are such a part of me now that I feel them, and I see them like my own memories. I close my eyes and reconstruct the images, your words are their flesh, your voice their spirit imbuing them with life. I take great comfort in these memories, in your songs which I sing in my head, and keep in my heart in a special place for you, a woman in a long line of extraordinary women throughout our history whose names may be forgotten by all or most, who never knew notoriety, but who formed a part of storytelling tradition. Those women whose stories reached out to children, who soothed them, entertained them, and implanted within them a seed of wonder, and imprinted upon their hearts the mark of the undying love of our mothers and grandmothers. No matter the changes which technology brings, or the shifting reality of humanity: the storytellers are irreplaceable. Oral tradition is the cornerstone of humanity. It is the mark of human experience, of ancient wisdom and knowledge which lives on through those who hear it, which forgets the names and faces and language of those who came before, yet carries a piece of their soul into the future.

Grandma (para. 38): “The welfare placed me in several foster homes. Some good, some not so good. First in Roff, OK, OKC, Lequire, Muskogee, Heavener, back to Muskogee, and then to Haskell, OK. At Haskell I turned 15, met and married a farm boy five years older than me. We raised five beautiful healthy children. One son and four daughters. My family knows the rest of the story.”

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