

Dining With a Cursed Bloodline: Grandma Died at One Hundred

written by Andrea Lambert | February 26, 2018



I wake up to four missed calls from my father. Frantic texts from my out of the country mother. My last living grandmother died. Peacefully in her sleep. At her nursing home. She is with grandpa now.

Grandma lived in that dreadful nursing home after she broke her hip. Left her own home forever. That house that was the cradle of so many happy childhood memories. That house where I lived with her for four months before moving into my own home.

I made us dinner every night during that transitional interval. We ate together over the KOL0 8 evening news. Trader Joe's frozen polenta or gnocchi. A mixed greens salad with oil and balsamic vinaigrette. Microwaved frozen vegetables. Strawberries. For dessert some of the souvenir "Hollywood chocolates" I brought her when I left Los Angeles. Caramel filling melting in our mouths between wafers of milk chocolate.

Virginia Garaventa, née Begninia Herrera, RIP. She immigrated from Mexico as a baby. Changed her first name to Americanize in chalk-white Nevada. Married an Italian soldier. She sought to erase her Latinx by never speaking Spanish to us grandkids.

Yet grandma made lard-soft refried beans we gobbled. Hand-patted out corn tortillas. Taught the grandchildren how. Chicharrones were her favorite snack even deep in her old age. Pink-veined hands dip past cellophane into orange styrofoam cases of deep fried pork skins. I munch her fatty delicious snacks when I stay with her. Pick up more Chicharrones for her at Marketon.

Taking care of the matriarch, I bond with her on a deep level. I see myself in grandma Virginia. She was an artist too. Her creative ambition squashed by

feminine roles in the 1930's. Her alcoholic father wouldn't let her go to art school. Grandma's paintings are much better than mine. Her canvases decorate her house. She gave up art to raise a family. Lived the "American Dream." Now, like the "American Dream," she is dead.

February 4, 2018: The day of the sad news. I take the silver sparkly "100" balloons left over from her hundredth birthday party. Drooping at the corner of my living room. The helium fades like her life. I am blind with grief. Need closure. I slash the "100" balloons with a box cutter. Let the rest of the helium escape like her soul to the afterlife. Bundle the silver mylar husks into the trash.

Grandma's hundredth birthday party is December 9, 2017. The whole family and some of her friends fly out. Blurry, smiling, she doesn't know she is attending her own "Celebration of Life." Not too many people attend their own funerals. Not too many people live to be 100. As that big party happens two months before her death, no funeral is held postmortem. She is cremated as she desires. Ashes put in with grandpa.

Grandma's funeral no one knows yet is her funeral is held in a private room. At the Napa Sonoma Grocery Company in Reno. I show up after being awake for fifty hours. In a long-sleeved mid-calf blue velvet dress. It screams family-appropriate. I clutch the beaded purse that was my bridal "something blue." Wear my wedding ring.

There will never be another love for me after my wife's death. If man-repellant came in a spray I'd douse myself in it like the Yves Saint Laurent Black Opium I wear. The ring works perfectly. None of the solo wife-less men approach me at grandma's party. I am free to stare at my white iPhone 6. Twitter is far more fascinating than Viagra Romeos.

Women couldn't even vote when grandma was born in 1917. My uncle took her to cast her vote for Hillary Clinton. Trump won that 2016 election. Fuck the pussy-grabbing patriarchy where men still see women as property. This diamond ring on my left hand says, "This meat flesh belongs to someone else. Not yours. Stay away." I do belong to someone else. If lesbian relationships even involve ownership. I am married to a dead woman. Anyone who asks where my husband is will get a response they can't handle.

Grandma was married to grandpa till his death parted them also. In her youth she was the beauty of El Cajon. Met grandpa at a WWII USO dance. Married him at 24. The one time I ask her why she married so late for a woman of her era she doesn't want to answer. Years ago at her red formica kitchen table. She just sips her scaldingly hot black coffee. Asks me to heat up another cinnamon roll. Goopy with white frosting.

In my out of it blue velvet I nibble prosciutto off the Meat, Cheese and Fruit Antipasti platter. Pink and tender as the liquid blush I daubed on grandma's cheeks getting done up for this unknowable funeral. Party expert auntie Ruthie planned grandma's birthday celebration spread. Crab stuffed mushrooms. Caprese skewers with Balsamic reduction. Smoked Salmon Pinwheels. Chipotle and BBQ chicken skewers. Meatballs with Blue Cheese and Marinara.

Roasted Pepper Hummus with grilled pita bread. Yum.

Being the sober person at a heavy drinking party is hard. I chat with my cousins. All my cousins. Sip the Red Bull my auntie Sandy gives me when she gets herself wine. The party wears on. The fifty hours I have been awake began to make themselves known. I feel like I'm underwater and hallucinating.

I find myself sitting across from my amicable cousin Matt. My vintage purse on the white tablecloth. My phone dead. Matt volunteers to speed along my father towards our departure. Dad swims scuba-deep drunk in conversation at the bar. By the time I get home I feel a hundred years old too.

Even at her advanced age, grandma's beauty shines. Before her birthday party, my mother and auntie Carol take me to her nursing home to do her makeup. In the loud communal bathroom I take out the kit I assembled the sleepless night before: Smashbox CC Cream. A Benefit "Cheek Parade" Palette for contour. A Too Faced Boudoir Eyes palette. I swathe a web of pastel glamour powders all over her face.

"This is a ritual women have always had between themselves." I say. Tenderly swab and daub beauty products on grandma's wrinkled skin. Aunt Carol hands me the birthday girl's favorite lipstick. I put it on her lips. Set it down in the messy bathroom. No one ever sees that lipstick again. I am lost applying mascara to grandma's thin lashes. Her hearing aids are out. She won't shut her eyes when asked. I mean to give grandma makeup for her hundredth birthday. Instead I lose hers. Sad irony.

June 24, 2017: Cousin Lauren's wedding. When I am first put on grandma makeup duty. After an unfortunate incident with a black eyebrow pencil. Grandma's makeup sense is permanently stuck at WWII. As well it should be. Dandelion powder blush from my own contour palette flatters her for the ceremony. When she's left to her own devices she smears whatever lipstick she is wearing on her cheeks as blush. Bright lipsticks. Clownish. I order Benefit Dandelion Dew Liquid Blush from Sephora for her hundredth birthday gift. I figure a liquid blush more her shade will fix this beauty blunder.

August 12, 2017: I give grandma the Dandelion Dew the morning after her hip surgery. She is still 99. She wears a tie in back gown. Flesh pierced with IVs. I give her her birthday gift in the hospital. A gesture meaning everyone thinks she'll die before reaching one hundred. A long sad quiet moment passes between us. Grandma's gold vial of blush doesn't make it out of that hospital. A nurse probably takes it home to actually use. A ridiculous gift for a dying woman, I suppose. I just want her to feel loved.

Grandma is in a rehab center from for the next few months. She fights to stay alive. Wins. "Signs point to Yes" on my Magic 8 Ball that she'll make it. So I hopefully order her another Dandelion Dew Liquid Blush for her birthday gift. Again. For several months the ornate Benefit box sits on my Queen Anne dresser. When grandma's hundredth birthday comes I ask my mother if I should.

"She can't have makeup in the nursing home. She's too old to know what to do with it. The attendants won't put it on her." My mother says. "Keep it. Wear

it." So I do. Even though it hurts. Every time I daub viscous soft pink from that bottle on my cheeks I think of grandma. I meant the blush as a tribute to her still-living feminine vanity. Her once great beauty. Now it is the macabre relic of a dead woman. Baby pink liquid blush blends with my tears.

December and January pass as grandma gradually decays in the nursing home. The last time I visit her she doesn't know who I am. My mother says it's because she can't see. I am heartbroken to see my last remaining role model brought so low.

Auntie Ruthie invites me to Sunday Dinner February 4, 2018. I text, "I just heard about Grandma. Very sad."

She texts, "Yes. It will be good to be with family today." Offers to pick me up. I am so happy the damning name I gave this essay series didn't alienate me from my extended Reno family. I worried it would.

I am one of the cursed ones. This bloodline's curse skips generations. It skipped grandma's son. Jim is a jazz musician who has all his marbles. Ruthie and Jim's daughter is Bipolar. Grandma Virginia's long-dead sister was Schizophrenic. As well as my paternal grandfather. But not my father. Curse skipped his generation too. The two bloodlines passed the madness genes to me. I never had a chance. That is what is meant by "Dining with a Cursed Bloodline." Not any smear on my family. Living or dead. They knew not what their blood bore when they fell in love. I can't blame them.

When I arrive for Sunday Dinner, I am surprised to find a Super Bowl Party.

"I don't want to get too morbid about this," uncle Jim says. We are expert at not talking about the dead elephant at the table. Grief is private. We need to laugh together today at Justin Timberlake's *Duck Dynasty* camo suit.

Aunt Ruthie in her hospitable way gives sober me a Diet Shasta. Everyone else drinks glass after glass of Merlot. She opens bags of salt and vinegar potato chips. The tart malt bite matches my sorrow while the starch nourishes. She slices salmon and cream cheese rolls. Sets the plate next to me. I perch on a barstool near the food. Nosh. At home I live off granola bars and mixed nuts. This real meal is a rare treat.

Auntie slices an English cucumber. Checks online to see if it is supposed to be that orange color. Finds out that just means it spent too long on the vine. She takes out a Tupperware of chicken salad.

"I like to make chicken salad with lots of apples, cucumbers, pickles, all the crunchy stuff" Ruthie says. She scoops full loaded chicken salad onto many cucumber rounds. Hands us all small plastic plates to load up with hors d'oeuvres. I eat my feelings.

The piece de resistance is my bearded uncle's chicken wings. He takes a roasting dish from the double oven. Pours the greasy goodness into a huge glass bowl. Touchdowns roar from their flatscreen. My cousin, his wife, their toddler, a family friend and me settle in around the kitchen table. I serve myself two wings when the bowl comes around. Add a dollop of ranch. The

succulent fat falls off the tiny bones. When grandma died her bones were tiny too, eaten away by osteoporosis. I dip the wings in ranch. Devour four more. I eat my grief off her tiny bones.

We eat with our hands. Picking the bones clean like we will have to pick clean grandma's house. It's painful to feel like a vulture when you love the dead so much. But we must. Grandma's descendants will have to find homes for all her clutter. One of the most piercing things about the death of a loved one is you inherit beautiful things you can't enjoy at all at the time. If ever. Would trade in a second to have the deceased back.

I think about that when I get home. To the house I live in because my paternal grandparents did. Great aunt and uncle before them. I am the second Schizophrenic and third widow to live here. Grandma's paintings of my mother and father stare down from the mantelpiece. The bloodline passes curses and blessings both.

My grandmother Virginia Garaventa is dead. Blessed be her path to the afterlife. Her art, her memory, the family she sacrificed her art for lives on. I light candles in a pink Himalayan rock salt candleholder to a photo of her and grandpa. Now that I am alone, finally, I weep. May we always remember the fallen.

Cover photograph courtesy of Matthew Brodeur.

Dining with a Cursed Bloodline is a series of autobiographical personal essays investigating sumptuous food, the goings on of a tight-knit Reno family, and queer disabled survival during the Trumpocalypse. A widowed witch with Schizoaffective Disorder, anxiety and PTSD explores her world through food, from Cherry Clafouti's from her backyard tree to traditional Italian Christmas cookies. Appearing the last Monday of every month.