

# Lady in the Dunes

JENNIFER CHAUSSEE



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: For the profile assignment in my nonfiction class, I chose to profile my grandmother because her life has always been this antiquated mystery that I've wanted to piece together and document, in hopes of reclaiming some of who she was before she became ill. Of course, this required wrestling with a lot of family skeletons while owning up to my own fears of aging and death, fears that have driven me to largely neglect my grandmother. There were several instances when I wanted to abandon the project altogether and do a restaurant review or something of equal emotional detachment, but my professor, David Masiel, encouraged me to visit my grandmother and continue to knock down my internal walls. Her story is the often neglected story of aging in America, the neglect that comes with fear of facing what is finite and inevitable about life. I was relieved to find that facing it head on was a better healing process than running. I hope her story preserves a glimpse of her life as it was, whole.*

—Jennifer Chaussee

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In response to an assignment to do a profile of a person or a place, Jennifer Chaussee chose to profile her grandmother, a decision I initially discouraged. Having led too many writing workshops in which stories of terminal relatives leave readers gasping for breath, I was dubious. But in Jennifer's more-than-capable hands, I needn't have worried. Her portrait of her Grandma Laura is evocative on numerous levels. Over the course of the quarter, she revised the piece several times, choosing words with the attention of a poet and finding a solid structural foundation for a lyrical essay that reads with grace and rings with authenticity. I'm struck now by the carefully chosen details—from the mementos that define a person's life, to a granddaughter's nervous moment wondering if her grandmother will even recognize her. In "Lady in the Dunes," Jennifer Chaussee seamlessly weaves language and story into a poignant, multi-generational portrait of family.*

—David Masiel, University Writing Program

EVERYTHING I KNOW OF MY GRANDMOTHER I have come to know in fragments, pieced together to make some varnished mosaic of imagination, story, a defeated reality; strange and silent shards of moments spent watching her neck strain under the stress of non-responsive vocal chords. I didn't know her before her visiting hours, hours spent trying to understand a mute stranger. Bits of facts and stories given to me by my parents congeal the jagged edges.

I remember the day I caught a glimpse of her yellowed birth certificate: Laura Sousa Dias. Dias, her maiden name, her Portuguese name, looked strange and unfamiliar. I had forgotten she had been known by a name other than my grandfather's. I hadn't even thought of her middle name. When she fell and broke her hip my Dad moved her out to California from Taunton, Massachusetts, so he could see that she was taken care of. We had brown boxes full of the artifacts of her life: a dozen hand-painted eggshell ornaments donning cherub faces, countless intricate crafts and landscape paintings done on homemade canvases, a family of small, hand-sewn mice all dressed in velvet suits and cotton dresses.

There was an old photograph fused onto a wooden frame, a photo of her and my grandfather when they were young and newly married. The antique finish makes them look painted. His broad shoulders tower from behind her sharp, petite shoulders and her face looks calm and soft; immaculate. She appears comfortable, almost complacent, and I wonder if she was ever happy. Stories are hard to come by since she fell five years ago and the Parkinson's really started killing her. When I ask my Dad outright if he thinks she was ever happy he sucks the air through his nostrils and looks out the window, taps the granite countertop and bites his lower lip.

"Yeah," he says, hesitant, like a church boy preaching something he half understands but believes nonetheless. He tilts his head and then says it again, this time with more reassurance,

"Yeah, I think she had her moments, ya know? But I don't know, I mean, she really went through a lot of Hell with Ben."

Ben is the other son. He and my Dad were both adopted. Nobody knows why my grandparents never had their own kids. When I ask Dad he shrugs and says he never asked.

"It wasn't really my business," he says and bites his lip as he stares into the window.

The story with Ben is that one night he came home high on meth and put a bread knife to their mother's throat. She had just been diagnosed with Parkinson's when this happened. Dad blames Ben for the disease because even though there is no definite cause for Parkinson's it is affiliated with high levels of stress.

"He was always doing shit like that." Her tiny body shook behind the blade and after my Dad fought him off, she begged him not to call the cops.

"I'll pray for him!" She cried. And she did.

Grandma Laura is a Catholic through and through: the old-country kind of Catholic, straight from the Azores where they baked their own Eucharist and wove Jesus into their textiles. Her family had moved to Taunton, Massachusetts, just before she was born, but she was raised by The Book because there was no other way to live.

"She was one of the few honest Catholics I have met," my mom tells me. "She really believed and she knew how to live it and she was not afraid and she did not judge." My mom is proud of my Grandma's faith. She calls her the "family saint" and feels inspired by her devotion to The Church. She went to Church every Sunday of her capable life and cooked dinner for the homeless in its cemented basement three nights a week after her shift at the elementary school serving lunch to the kids. When Grandpa Bill bought cable he stayed at home on Sundays to watch wrestling and she drove to Church alone. On bad days when her legs wouldn't stop trembling from the Parkinson's, Alice from up the street would drive Father David to her house after the mass, where my Grandma would put on tea and heat up leftover lasagna, the three of them sitting at the Formica table in the corner of the kitchen as she took the Eucharist. She lives in Roseville, California, now, ten minutes from my dad and around the corner from a car dealership. Grandpa badgers Dad to ask the nurses if they could get a Priest to give Grandma the Eucharist on Sundays.

"They've got some damned Christian minister in there, young fella, too young to know a damn. She needs a real Priest to do it right." He snorts. But he's no real Catholic himself and neither is Dad, so nobody says anything to the nurses, who nod and take no sides.

Mom fingers a dusty string of rosary beads made of crushed rose petals. She keeps them strung around the lamp shade on her nightstand. "Your Grandma Laura gave me these after I married your dad and he was

shipped out to Japan.” My mom is not a Catholic anymore, but she keeps them anyways.

The Parkinson’s comes and goes. “It is like being in a fishbowl,” a good-looking neurologist explained to us once, rubbing the peppered stubble on the side of his wide jaw. “Everyone is looking at you waiting for you to react to them and you are aware of everything but you have no way to react to it because your neurons are shot, the synapses aren’t firing, and your system is exhausted of endorphins. So the outside world sees you as a fish, but you are aware of it.” Alzheimer’s is a better way to go, says Dad. “At least that way you can be delirious of what’s happening to you.”

One night we found her sitting on the edge of her bed in her underwear, scowling at the world through her sliding glass door and refusing to put clothes on. The care home had called us saying she had lost her mind and was making threats. They had called a cop who was standing at the doorway with his hands on his hips, dumbfounded but trying to look authoritative. She had her emaciated back towards us, a strange and heavy anger emanating from the sickly bumps protruding from her sagging skin. She’d been refusing to eat. Dad knelt in front of her and tried to talk to her.

“Don’t touch me!” she snapped, as if completely possessed by some capable demon. Dad took his hand off of her knee and lowered his voice as sweet and patient as he could, as if begging a child.

“Please Ma, let’s get some clothes on so we can get you to the hospital.”

“Don’t touch me!” and her voice broke and she cried, the emaciated bones of her back frail and shaking under heavy heaves. Dad’s face went red and his eyes welled up. He put his hand back on her knee,

“Ma—”

“Don’t touch me, Mark! I want Ben! Where’s Ben? Ben in California.” And her eyes were far off then, tucked under their satin lids, dropping like a valance over two tiny round windows; windows facing a blank wall, windows you cannot see through, but you can see yourself in their reflection.


We all knew she must have meant to ask for “Mark” instead of “Ben,” because Ben doesn’t live in California, and even if he did there is nothing he could do for her anyway. He was back in Massachusetts living in her house, which he bought from her and grandpa but never actually paid for. They were still waiting for him to deposit the other half of the

down payment into their savings account. In the meantime Dad stayed up late filling out extra paperwork for additional Medicaid funding and looked the other way when Grandma got the names confused, saying “Ben” when she meant my dad and “Mark” when she meant my uncle. She would say she had heard Dad fighting with Mom, even though they had been divorced for years and rarely ever spoke.

“Last night, Mark, I heard you two in the kitchen arguing. Is it ok now?” And dad would have to tell her he wasn’t with Mom anymore and she would cry.

We found out through the good-looking neurologist that her fits had been caused by a bladder infection. Parkinson’s patients in advanced stages of the disease are especially susceptible to infection and when they get an infection it affects their cognitive abilities, thrashes their hormonal balance, overwhelms their immune system, and essentially makes them go mad.

WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY SHE WAS A BUYER for the local department store in downtown Taunton called Pober’s. Before my mom even met my dad she had saved money from car-hopping at a clam stand by Horseneck Beach to buy a nice bra at Pober’s, the fancy store. My Grandma was working there then, measuring the well-to-do for bra sizes and clandestinely expanding the bodices of wedding dresses for young brides. My mom remembers her faintly, her black hair cut short and curly to frame her porcelain face. She was nice to my mother, helped her pick through the sale rack for a well-fitted bra that fit smooth underneath her T-shirts.

She drove to New York City in Mr. Pober’s limousine to see the fashion shows and place orders with the up and coming designers of the time. She embroidered her own scarves and handkerchiefs, tiny birds and ocean scenes cornered up against the satin hem. She was petite and exotic and so designers loved her. They sent her home with ribbon-handled hat boxes and crystal-encrusted pocket mirrors. I remember staring at the antique, faded jewelry laid out over white, hand-made doilies on her wooden dresser in the old house in Taunton; clustered jewels of antiquity shining secretly from beneath st.

Nobody knows why she married my Grandfather, who came back an infected and drunken sailor from the War. He was good looking then, though, good and French with his brooding brow bones and full mouth. And nobody really knows how they loved each other; all anyone knows

is that Bill and Laura have been married 63 years and that Bill was lucky to have her. He visits her on most days, squeezes himself into his Buick and drives fifteen miles under the speed limit, on the wrong side of the road, to her care home across town. He is afraid of death so he gets antsy sitting around in a care home where everyone is waiting to die. He wants to take her out to ice cream because she has a sweet tooth. She can only walk on good days and even then it is spare, maybe a few steps towards the doorway of her room with the help of a walker. He eggs her on in his New England grumble, “Come on ol’ girl,” and taps the backs of her knees to get them moving.

He needs her to function. She ran his life for 63 years; he doesn’t know what to do without her. But her knees are locked in place and she won’t be walking anywhere anymore. Her whole body trembles and she starts to lean forward like the tower of Pisa and we have to run and prop her up, scoop her up in a wheelchair and hold her ice cream cone for her. Grandpa is gone most weekends. He has a girlfriend, Gertrude, down the hall from his apartment in the Senior Living Center in Folsom. He takes her to Jackson Rancheria and they gamble away his social security. Dad isn’t happy about it. Grandma, of course, doesn’t know.

I wish I could say that I inherited her lovely hands and olive skin because they are so beautiful. When I visit her for the first time in nearly a year, I am terrified that she won’t recognize me. As I turn the corner I imagine myself having to sulk away shamefully as the neglectful, death-fearing granddaughter unrecognizable to her own grandmother. Equally crushing, though, is the way her tired face lights up when I walk over to her table. But we sit in silence. She runs her hands along the crimson tablecloth in the dining hall. She stares, mesmerized by the laminated weave beneath her fingers. We have already tried to talk and given up. She looks at me as if she is trying to show me something in the tablecloth, and I shrug my shoulders to say I don’t understand but that I don’t really need to anyways, “Oh well.” I put my hand on hers and guide it back to my lap, where I rest our hands on my knees. She picks at the jean of my pants with her fingernails, still long, thin, and strong. Today is a good day.

She seems intent on communicating something to me. She is happy to see me and I am relieved that she recognizes me. Her fingers push into my palms, examining them and then turning them over, touching the soft, dark hairs traveling up my forearms. I laugh, because I know that is

something she understands. We may not be related by blood but we are both Portuguese, and Portuguese women are hairy. Her fingers stop at every freckle, rubbing on the tiny dark spots. She runs her hands along the red scarf around my neck, scratches the gold fringe hem as if she were testing its strength or re-aligning it. She folds it onto itself and gathers up the sides of it in haphazard pleats, arranges it in front of me to sit just right against my neck and chest, pressing it in place once she has it just right.

“This way,” she seems to say, her eyes wide and urgent as she looks up at me, pressing the scarf. She smiles. Her hands are riddled with road maps, tiny spider veins leading the way into deserted fields, thick, blue varicose highways cutting through state lines. Tiny wrinkles gather the skin in narrow hills and shallow valleys.

When I was nineteen I saw a picture of my grandmother at my age. She was standing on a sand dune at the beach, looking as proud as a Kennedy. Her petite body was suited in a retro black bikini, drawn in at her tiny waist, and she had one hand tilting her sunglasses just below her eyes and the other hand on her hip, one knee inverted into the other to accentuate a dainty hourglass figure for the camera. All she needed was a surfboard under her arm. She was sassy, an original pin-up girl like the ones I'd seen in old postcards and modern re-creations tacked up in retro burger joints. I can see the wind in her wild black hair, in a frenzied tuft around her face, two lips pursed into a tiny bow. The pupils of her eyes are barely visible, the faintest of spots, but they are not looking at the camera. She is looking off somewhere, unaware of her own glamour, searching the sand dunes in the distance.

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