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Four Generations: A Collection of Essays

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Ruby
Tori Bertram

My first memory of my great-grandmother is her second husband's funeral. My mother put me in a black velvet dress with white tights and tiny white shoes. I was five years old. It rained. My mother carried my brother, who was three. I don't remember what my great-grandmother wore. She took her wedding band off that day and never put it back on.

Ruby May Lyles, *Nanny*, as I call her, stands rigidly tall for a woman just shy of 5 feet. She carries the weight of many years living in Paducah, Kentucky--a town that developed as she did. A town nudged up against the Ohio, smelling of river water and transportation and the textile industry. A town that grew beyond its water line, that exhaled the factory smoke of industrialization and inhaled the arts: bluegrass, jazz, theater, painting, poetry, quilting – all of it continues to keep the town more than just technologically advancing. Born in the 1920s, raised on big bands and bobby socks in a rundown neighborhood, Ruby has been made a little feisty--maybe a little spiteful—by Paducah.

I've seen the house where my great-grandmother grew up. Small and brick. White trim frames the windows and door. I've seen the house where her sister had lived before she died, it's identical. Both small. Both an orangish shade of brick where the white mortar between the bricks brings out the white trim. They don't seem to have roofs, not when I try to picture them. They are just rectangular boxes. These one story houses match not only each other, but every other house in the neighborhood. Well, at least they used to. Now Ruby's home is in the shadows of the two or three story houses recently remodeled around her, their beautiful white siding and dark, brand new roofs and attached two-car garages representing the upsized American dream.

One of the few differences between Ruby's house and her sisters was the red tulips in the back, under the kitchen window where her sister would throw out her used tea bags. Ruby instead fed the squirrels. I used to get their houses mixed up as a child, being only two or so streets over. The only noticeable difference for me was the location of the screened-in porch. Ruby's sister's screened-in porch was attached to the front of her house, where she could watch the road and wave to neighbors as she sat. Ruby's porch was around back, hidden from the neighbors adjacent to her yard by several large trees.

The inside of Ruby's house smells like cucumber lotion and dust. Ruby's personal mementos are contained in only one place: a bookcase in the living room. Made of dark cherry wood, it stands about eight feet tall and four and a half feet wide. On its five shelves are photographs of my uncle in his service uniform from Vietnam, my graduation from high school, and my mother's wedding. Sitting among the black, and dark wood frames are a few glass squirrel figurines. But you would never see the inside of her house if you walked by; thick, cream drapes cover the wide front windows. They let no light into the room and she only parts them a few inches, enough to see from the driveway a cream lamp she keeps on her table, when she is waiting on company.

Not far from her childhood home lies the Ohio river, and along the river runs a tall, thick, concrete flood wall painted with a series of murals. They document the history of the city: the original land, the natives Paducah was named for, early Independence festivals, and men at work on steam engine blades. I always stop at the one of eight women. Six are seated facing a large control board, all eight wearing headsets maneuvering the Paducah phone lines. Wearing pastel

dresses and high heeled shoes, and their hair precisely curled, they reach with their manicured hands to connect and disconnect calls. I like to think of Ruby at work, sitting at the long desk among many other working women, probably the first working woman in the family. Like the women on the wall, punching in and out on her time card. But unlike most of these pastel women, she didn't have a choice. She was alone, and her daughter had to eat.

Every holiday I help fix her plate so she doesn't fight with her daughter. At Christmas, she insists on buying the steaks. She sits beside me. I pass her the salt, butter her roll, help her in and out of her chair. Some days she is glad for the help, other days she loathes me for it. Sometimes she grabs the spoon from me and frustratedly, often pathetically, tries to find the dish in front of her to scoop out her own helping of casserole.

Her vision went first. Cataracts. She has to put her finger in her cup to gauge how much she pours in it. The duller her vision becomes, the more brittle her spirit. As much as she needs us, she pushes us farther away. The more we care, the less she cares for us. For several Christmases and birthdays, we purchased items for her to help make her life easier: a magnifying lens to read bills and newspapers, and a phone with giant colorful buttons. I was really excited about giving her an audio reader for Christmas. The device read books and played music albums, and the buttons on it spoke, so she would always know what she was doing, even if she couldn't see. I was excited about the device bringing a little motion to the stuffy air in her house. It was so quiet there, as if the cream blinds and beige carpet absorbed all the sound. I've never been anywhere quieter. You don't hear cars on the street outside. You don't hear the wind. I hoped the sound waves would awaken the house, shake it – and maybe her – into life. I picked out several

big band and jazz tapes I thought she would like: Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Benny Goodman. I visited her once when she had it playing. I could hear it as I walked up her steps and she opened the door for me, the music wasn't loud enough to rattle windows, but it seemed to create an atmosphere that hadn't existed before; the room seemed brighter, and the blinds seemed to be opened further. Once I stepped inside she immediately went to turn it off. I never heard it play again.

My grandmother, mother, and I have adopted a phrase we use when it's just the three of us and we're sharing our latest Ruby anecdote: "*Okay, Nanny...*," we say. My grandmother mocks Nanny's pointing and frustrated hand gestures. She scrunches up her face and makes her voice a little lower and more raspy. Because my grandmother looks so much like Nanny, it's like she is prophesying her own future.

Ruby's only words when my mother told her she was getting married were "Oh, shit." Ruby is only proud of my grandfather and my uncle. I wonder if it an issue of power for her, or a status symbol, as if standing with the men as they smoke outside and discuss the latest developments at their jobs keeps her safe and asserts her status as a strong and independent woman. I don't think she feels the need to compete with them. She doesn't feel threatened, believing as she does that they won't gossip about her behind her back. To my grandmother, mother and me, it seems the women of our family are beneath Ruby. They're not worth her time. She's ashamed I can't cook. I'm distanced from her disapproval with so many years between us, but it kills my mother that Ruby will never like her as much as she likes my uncle, whose best friend has been the bottle since his wife left him. My mother is a teacher at an underprivileged

public school, and my grandmother volunteers at a human resources center, trying to help provide people with food and clothing. My grandmother devotes an enormous amount of energy to Ruby, worrying over her comfort and stability, attending to her finances, and taking her to the grocery store and her medical appointments. In my book, they're both heroines, but Ruby neither likes nor trusts either of them. So all of us women wonder, is Ruby capable of being proud of any of us? Could she, would she, dare to tell us if she was?

Always calculated, never prone to impulsive decisions, Ruby surprised everyone when, while out grocery shopping, she bought a car. A white, fresh off the line, 2000 Toyota Camry. We were all even more surprised when she gave it to me for my 17th birthday. She hosted a party at her house—a rare occurrence since she tends to be rude and bossy to everyone around her when she is in her own domain. We all sat around Ruby's kitchen table. My grandmother and mother had brought all the food: vanilla cupcakes with pale pink flowers iced on top, fresh pineapple and strawberries, and punch. Ruby had been asked only to get up and get dressed to avoid any stress or cause for strife. Short, round vases of white peonies with pale pink rimmed edges were scattered around the kitchen. The walls were cream, but lit up the room as the afternoon sun shone through the window and back door. She slipped me a small cream-colored box tied with a pale pink ribbon and a note that read, "Find where this goes," and she seemed more at peace than I had ever seen her. Her piercing gaze and always anxious hands relaxed a bit, and she seemed to be taking in the scene, making no snide comments. She seemed free of the weariness of being too proud for a moment.

Ruby would surprise us again a few years later at Christmas, when she declared that she wanted to play a game. She ordered my grandmother around, making her the unofficial referee. Everyone chose a gift box: some larger, as if containing a sweater; others smaller, down to the size of a bracelet box. Once we'd selected a box, she gave us the option to steal another person's box, then told us to pass our boxes --once to the right, twice to the left. Everyone was unsure at first, but soon enough the scene turned rollicking, with my brother slipping my uncle's box underneath the seat cushion so my uncle couldn't find it. While my brother was hiding my uncle's, my mother stole his and replaced it with her own. My great-grandmother sat there and waited. My grandmother was oblivious to Ruby because my father and my grandfather had her entertained trying to guess what was in all of these boxes. They weren't heavy, but none of us had a clue what was in them. At least nine people sat in our circle, including my great-grandmother, and even she got a package. It was noisy at first as we all began to open our boxes, but quickly things got still. Inside of each box was one hundred dollars. My great-grandmother picked up her one hundred dollar bill and hugged it to her chest. "Merry Christmas to me," she said. And we all began to laugh. My grandmother didn't stop laughing for several hours. Every few minutes she would get tickled remembering the moment and would laugh all over again.

Recently, my grandmother's begun tracing our family's genealogy. When researching Ruby's line, my grandmother was shocked to learn that in the 1940s, Ruby was one of the only divorced women in the whole city of Paducah. When my grandmother tells me this, I wonder if that's why Ruby holds her spine so erect, her head so awkwardly high. Sometimes I wonder if she had to carry herself so rigidly for protection, against glances at grocery stores, whispers at

work, or simply because when it came down to it, she had to do whatever was needed so she and her daughter would survive.

My mother and I only visit Ruby if we have a game plan: bringing her casserole or cake or news about the latest event, and always right before my brother and I headed back to college. One time my cat had kittens, and while they were small and snuggly, we packed them in a laundry basket and took them to her. We put the sleepest one in her palms. He was small, his orange fur bright in her shaky, wrinkly hands graphed with large blue veins just beneath the surface of her pale skin so fragile and sheer. She sat in her chair, hardly listening to a word we said as she gently, almost fearfully, stroked the kitten's head. She sat completely still, entranced by the life in her hands, sometimes speaking softly to it. I was surprised by her attachment, and I can't explain the sense of urgency I felt when we got ready to leave Ruby's house. It wasn't quite fear, but it did feel like something close to panic. I wanted to leave one of the kittens with her. I felt like we needed to. Leaving her house was always awkward; as much as she hated the intrusion of our visits, she seemed to acknowledge their ending reluctantly. She would hug us twice, or recall some past event she saw on television just to keep us sitting on the couch a little longer. Sometimes she even kisses me on the cheek, or pats my face before I step out the door. But that day, our leaving was harder for all of us. When we started gathering up the tiny visitors and their toys, the kitten in Ruby's lap was asleep and completely happy snuggled up against her. Ruby's sweater was old, a yellowed cream color from too many washes, and had a few small holes around the waistband and sleeves, but the kitten seemed to find it all the more endearing, even more comfortable than the basket we had brought him in. My mom finally asked Ruby if she could have the kitten back, because it was time for us to head home. "But he is sleeping," she

said. With a sigh, she gently cupped her hands around him, lifted him from her lap and placed him in the hands of my mother, who then placed the kitten in the basket. Ruby's pale, icy blue eyes aren't very clear anymore; cataracts and age have fogged them over like a kitchen window on an early, cold morning. And yet, in that moment she perceived so much. Once we, and the basket, had left, she would be alone again. I could see her trying to be brave. She patted her permed grey hair and stood up even taller. She walked over to the door and opened it for us. This was what she had worked so hard for; this is what she had wanted. She had always worked to be tough, untouchable, and reliant on no one. But in that moment, it seemed she had a moment of regret.

I thought that by leaving the tiny orange kitten, she might feel some relief. That maybe, just maybe, her house would not be so quiet. It would not be so still. I imaged the kitten in a tiny blue collar with a loud bell, playing in the thick carpet and chasing the fringe on the end of Ruby's table cloths. I imaged the kitten growing up and slowing down a bit, just the way Ruby would like it, and sitting on the couch with Ruby, rubbing his head up against her arm, or purring contentedly in her lap.

But my mother had said no. "She wouldn't take a kitten," she said when we were back in the car. "She wants to be alone." I was heartbroken as I pictured my great-grandmother sitting back down in her chair. Her visitors were gone, so the thick, cream-colored blinds were closed, preventing me or anyone else from seeing her there. And truthfully, I didn't want to. As we pulled out of the driveway, her brick house seemed less orange and more gray to me, like the color of the underside of thunderclouds. The house seemed to shrink, becoming even smaller in my mind, and the distance between her home and her neighbors' seemed to grow. I had to remind myself, as my mother and grandmother also had to remind themselves--that this was how

Ruby wanted things to be, closed off from the world and from everyone else. She wasn't going to change. Like the Ohio River moving through the surrounding landscapes, Ruby would keep moving through my life – slowly, powerfully, a mystery I could never quite see clearly through.