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The Shadow of Neglect

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Figure 1: *The Dreamer* by Megan Goodwin

The Shadow of Neglect

Olivia Law

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Lineage

WHEN I look at my grandmother, I see what could have been. She is one of the most complex thinkers I know, not just in literature and history, but in unconventional ways, like being able to formulate intricate maps in her head and remember addresses and phone numbers from decades ago. However, she also tends to not receive social cues and has an extremely hard time standing up for herself. I began to notice these flaws as a teen and became curious about why such a capable woman seemed to have such trou-

ble holding power in her life. Often, she has told me that, in past conversations, how her marriage with my grandfather ended mainly because she could not argue. She buried things she should have expressed, and in turn, arguments over seemingly petty things became explosive. My grandmother was a product of her environment, and like any evolved species, she sometimes has trouble fitting into different settings.

I knew a small portion of this inability to argue had to do with her mother being severely ill throughout her childhood. She was warned that the smallest excitement or shock could kill my great-grandmother, and one day that almost occurred. My grandmother, a young teen at the time, was having to deal with the normal challenges of female adolescence; while also having a mother on her deathbed who was unable to offer comfort or advice. One afternoon, it all became too much, and my grandmother snapped and yelled at my great-grandmother. Within minutes my great-grandmother was being rushed to the hospital, suffering from a severe asthma attack. That event traumatized my grandmother, and she was never able to get her voice back. I later learned this was only a small piece of the complex puzzle that was my grandmother's childhood and adolescence.

My grandmother was born November 6, 1944, in Compton, California, to parents Elizabeth and Samuel Zackheim. Her father was thirty-two when she was born and served as the Vice Principal of Willowbrook Junior High in Compton. The schools he worked in were all segregated, and he used all his time and energy to guarantee the children the best education and future possible. Even when it meant pushing his family to the side, which it often did. As long as his two daughters were perfect, no problem. My great-grandmother was an acting student in Lee Strasberg's Actors Workshop in NYC when she married my great-grandfather at eighteen. When my grandmother was born, my great-grandmother was twenty-four and hated living in a conservative town in Los Angeles. She found an escape by becoming a visual artist. She was very talented at one time, sharing an art studio with the wife of the man who directed one of the Star Wars films. She had a studio in a room attached to their garage, and she would spend hours painting there. She never should have been a mother. She had little, if any, maternal instincts and would have been much happier without children. No one could

understand my great-grandfather's infatuation with her, for she was not the prettiest flower in the garden, and he was extremely handsome, and many women came on to him. It didn't seem to bother my great-grandmother, perhaps because he was so obviously in love with her. I can understand why, my great grandmother may have been sick most of her life, but she was always pushing the limits when it came to the societal standards set for women. For example, when she was only eighteen and a newlywed, living in a tiny mountain village in Nevada, during the war, where my great-grandfather had a teaching position, she meeting secretly with other young wives to teach them about birth control. Most of the residents were Catholic, and the priest became furious and asked that my great-grandfather be transferred. This is how they ended up in Virginia City, Nevada, where he taught at the fourth ward school, and she hired the local madame of the brothel to babysit Michelle, their first child, and my grandmother's only sibling. What was most important to my great-grandmother, even though she was so young, was to stand up for her beliefs, even if they were frowned upon. All the women in my family share this trait, not because it has been passed down like a gene, but because we were taught by watching our mothers the importance of standing up not only for yourself but other people.

My great-grandparents lived in Compton during a time that has been termed the "white flight." Author R.L Brooks explains, stating: "When white residents in Compton left, it created an opportunity for Black residents to move in. . . . The once predominantly white community experienced a drastic demographic shift, in a relatively short period of time, shaking the foundation of this city, putting an end to the suburban dream that Compton promised. When the white residents moved away, they took their resources, businesses, tax-base" (Brooks 61). My great-grandparents could have crossed the color line and moved into the nicer "white neighborhood," with less violence and more acceptance, but my great-grandfather refused. He was sensitive to how it would appear, being a white educator working in a minority community and commuting from an all-white area. This decision cost my grandmother her childhood. Instead of a childhood filled with playing and toys, it was filled with ricocheted bullets and terror.

They already had a daughter Michelle, born five years before my grandmother and equally as unhappy as her mother. Michelle had

already had to deal with many of the hardships my grandmother would have to face due to my grandfather's commanding job and his refusal to leave Compton. She also had to endure the immense despair and anxiety of living as a European Jew during the Holocaust. My aunt shares stories of watching my great-grandparents huddled over the radio murmuring prayers and mourning in Yiddish. By the end of World War II, my family had lost thirty-six people, plus the additional members who would never make a full recovery. My grandmother was born in the midst of all this unhappiness, and the resentment stained her like a birthmark.

My grandmother was an easy target for bullies. Michelle made it one of her priorities to make my grandma feel she was undesired. At one point, she told my grandmother she was adopted, and their parents were taking her back to the orphanage. My grandmother, being a child, believed her. She was never able to shake the feeling of her being a burden to her family, and the bullying she would soon experience served as validation for her fears. Their parents were ardent democrats in conservative Compton and highly involved in the civil rights movement. She often tells me how the black kids were much nicer to her than the white kids, and they became her main friends. She shares pictures of her as a young girl being embraced by a black woman, who I later learned was my great-grandmother's best friend and a second mother to my grandmother. To make matters worse, her family was one of the only openly Jewish families in town and often faced attacks from anti-Semitic neighbors and students, which were at times violent. She was told to stay away from the windows because, at times, drive-bys would occur targeting her family, and bullets would fly through the glass and across the room.

Although my grandmother did not live in the nicest of neighborhoods, it was the early 1950s and my grandmother's parents allowed her to play in the front yard with their Cocker Spaniel, Shadow. He was a cuddly, playful, rambunctious dog with big paws, and had that wonderful puppy smell that filled her nose whenever she nuzzled her head into his black silky fur. Their yard was unfenced, but Shadow was well trained and never left their property unless called, so my grandmother and him would spend the afternoons running around the front lawn and in and out of the house through the doggy-door. They would roll around in the grass and play fetch until the street-

lights came on and the mosquitos began to bite. However, sometimes they went in sooner. Across the street lived a boy, so despicable I will not even give him the acknowledgment of mentioning his name. He was the older brother of one of my grandmother's friends and made it his duty to torment her. He would throw rocks at her, pinch her, call her names, anything he could do to make her cry. As soon as my grandmother would catch sight of him, she would run into her house and lock the door, not wanting to face the consequences of letting him within five feet of her.

One afternoon, she did not go in soon enough. As Shadow and my grandmother were romping around the front yard, the boy saw them and hatched a plan. When a car was coming down the street, the boy called Shadow's name, and Shadow being an obedient, trusting dog, went without hesitation. Before my grandmother could react, the sound of a thud and a yelp sliced through the air. When relaying this story to me, she looked me dead in the eyes and asked, "Did you know dogs actually scream in pain?" Over seventy years have gone by, and the shock still hasn't left her body. By the time my grandmother turned around, Shadow was writhing on the asphalt, letting out shrieks of fright and pain that rang in my grandmother's ears like a point-blank gunshot. When her father ran out and saw the damage, he immediately rushed back inside to grab a blanket for the dog, who was now quietly whimpering, his body shutting down from the trauma. My grandmother was sobbing, her father was sobbing, and the boy from across the street was standing, watching them mourn their beloved Shadow, all while looking maliciously satisfied.

With my grandmother's unmatched intelligence, it would be assumed that school was a safe place for her to thrive. A graduate student from Chapman University explains, "Education should promote social solidarity through providing equal opportunity, through freeing people from narrow class prejudice and snobbery, through special programs for the disadvantaged child, and through teaching the kind of quality that democracy requires" (Cormier 2). Unfortunately, that was not the case. School only made the bullying worse, for her teachers not only allowed for it to occur but facilitated it. When my grandma was in fourth grade, her teacher, Ms. Massey, showed up at her door one evening around dinner time. My grandmother had experienced troubles in the past with her. A few times,

Ms. Massey had aggressively grabbed onto my grandma's arm when lecturing her, leaving bruises that would take weeks to fade and a scared state of confusion that would last decades. She demanded she speak to my great-grandma immediately, leading my grandmother to believe she had done something that was going to get her seriously reprimanded. My great-grandmother approached the door, and the teacher began a long, vicious tirade saying that if they didn't convert to Christianity, they were all going to burn in hell. The Jews killed Jesus Christ. The Jews drank the blood of Christian babies. She went on and on. My grandmother saw the fury in her mother's eyes and feared she was going to drive a knife through the teacher's heart. My great-grandmother politely used every euphemism she could think of for the phrase, "go fuck yourself," and shut the door in the woman's face. Unfortunately, that was the last of my great-grandmother's interference in the situation. My grandmother was forced to endure the remaining of the year with Ms. Massey and her hateful biases.

While helping my grandmother move, I came across a photo of her, she was alone in the photo, which was rare, so I asked about the occasion. I soon regretted my inquisitiveness. I learned the picture was taken on her tenth birthday, where she had been forced to attend a pancake breakfast fundraiser at her father's new school directly from her own, after spending the day being humiliated in class by the same teacher who came to her house. She divulged to me the isolating effect the teacher's behavior had, for kids took the teacher's bullying as instruction and began tormenting my grandmother themselves, calling her things they themselves did not understand, from "Christ Killer," all the way to "N-Loving Jew." My grandma tried so hard to be accepted by her peers and family, but she was continuously alienated and mistreated due to circumstances outside of her control.

My grandmother's hardships followed her into high school. Her mother's illness progressed, and on a multitude of occasions, they were told she had days to live. She went through all the struggles a normal high schooler does without a mother figure to nurture her or give advice. Her sister, Michelle, had matured a bit at this point, and although her older sibling antics persisted, she did her best to fill in for her mother when she was able. For my grandmother's school dance, her mother had begun sewing her a dress but was unable to

finish it due to her being in the ICU. It was Michelle who finished the job allowing my grandmother to attend the dance. Although Michelle did her best to help, she had already finished high school when my grandmother was just beginning and had moved out and began making a name for herself as an artist. My grandfather was still enthralled with his work and commitment to social justice, leaving my grandmother to basically fend for herself. School continued to serve her no good, for she was just as lonely as she was at home.

Her parents never took the time to teach her the basic rules and expectations of socializing, and due to her teacher's bullying, she lost the opportunity to learn it at school, leaving her clueless about making any meaningful connection with people. This affected my grandmother throughout her whole life, for she was never able to pick up a variety of social cues, and many still go right over her head. She will often talk for very long periods of time, even when the people she is talking to are completely uninterested in what she is saying. For people who do not know her and her history, this can come off as very narcissistic, but in truth, she just wants to share her passions and interests with you.

The trauma from her childhood has gone past affecting just her friendships and caused problems with her intimate relationships. She was so afraid of losing her partners that over time that she became unable to speak up for herself and still becomes extremely overwhelmed whenever any argument occurs. She married my grandfather when she was nineteen. They divorced when she was in her thirties, and she has remained unmarried since. In those almost thirty years, she has only had two serious boyfriends, and both ended quite sadly. As author Sherry Boschert states, "Only in recent years have mental health providers recognized the importance of less dramatic forms of childhood maltreatment, such as emotional abuse and neglect, and begun to study those issues" (Boschert 1). For many decades, my grandmother was dealing with the effects of a trauma that was not yet recognized. As a result, she was never able to be educated on the skills needed to overcome her childhood and move on with her life. It is so saddening and frustrating to see such a fascinating, hard-working woman, full of so much love, so frequently turned away, especially because it is the effect of her childhood neglect. I make sure I tell her I love her as much as I can because I do, and in some ways, I feel like I am trying to make up for the "I

love you” s she never got as a child.

All the negativity she faced on a daily basis caused her to become severely depressed, and at age sixteen, she attempted to commit suicide one day while driving home. Her plan was to crash her car into a wall, but suddenly a car appeared from a side street, and she swerved to avoid it, saving her life. It was one thing to kill herself, but harming someone else in the process was a whole other. She proceeded to drive home and took the time to reflect on her life, making the decision to soldier on, grasping onto the hope that one day she would leave her racist community and go to a prestigious University. Although I did not know the full extent of her depression, I knew my grandmother had an incredibly traumatic high school experience. When I myself was bullied, it was very comforting to have someone I idolized also be a victim of bullying, as well as depression and anxiety. It gave me validation that the abuse I suffered was not because I was a worthless human; it was because people, especially teenagers, can be malicious. However, the most important lesson I gained from her experiences was that just because you want the best for other people does not mean it is reciprocated. When my sister was bullying me both at home and at school, it was my grandmother who always knew what to say to make me feel better. She had the unique factor of having gone through a very similar experience herself. When I tell people my sister bullied me, they picture the usual petty sister fighting. My grandmother understood the extent to which it could go and how much pain I was in. She also had the understanding to recognize that my sister did not hate me; she actually loved me deeply and was just also in pain. Although I was not able to fully understand the reasoning behind my sister taking her anger out on me, my grandmother is the reason I was able to accept it and start taking actions to break the cycle. My grandmother has been one of the only stable things in my tumultuous life and has supported me in every aspect.

When my sister and I are going through a hard time, we often say to each other, “Hey, at least we have Mima.” We usually laugh after we say it, but we both know how serious each other is. For a long time, my grandmother’s loft was the only place either of us felt safe, and by our own choice, we spent nearly every weekend there from the time we were toddlers to well into our middle school years.

People love to lie that you can go to them for anything, but with her, I really can. The list of things this woman has done for me would end up resembling a Torah scroll in its enormity. She has never once let me down and is always sure to tell me how happy she is to do whatever inconvenient thing I have caused her to do. I have yet to feel the same level of warmth and security my grandmother brings to me, and I do not think I ever will.

Author Bio

Olivia Law is a student at CSUMB. This essay was written as part of a first-year composition course.

Artist Statement

The Dreamer by Megan Goodwin

Much of my work uses vivid colors to depict a dream-like realism. This piece in particular delves into the subconscious mind and depicts dreams and nightmares in the material plane. Additionally, like *The Dreamer*, I choose to look towards my dreams and goals rather than succumb to my fears and nightmares.

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