

Stories at the Grocery Store with Grama

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Prologue

As the oldest grandchild living in Vancouver, I have had the opportunity to cultivate a unique and close relationship with my grandmother. Our relationship has been built on many moments together, but a place we often find ourselves is the grocery store. She cannot drive, or see well, so we take our trips and I help her shop. I am her transportation and her eyes.

But what does this mean for us?

What stories do these encounters create?

What are we weaving together as she and I venture into the grocery store?

Through a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation,
 this living inquiry sets out with the intention of discovering,
 ‘How are stories lived at the grocery store with Grama?’





Chapter 1. What's a Story? – A Reflection to Start our Tale

As I considered how stories lived at the grocery store, I found myself wondering on the etymology of the word story. What does it mean? To story something, there needs to be more than one. A teller, and a listener. To story is to create, to express, to recount, to render into the present moment. Why do we tell stories? What gets left behind in their telling? What does a story between a grandmother and granddaughter look like? A story is a history. A story is an account. A story is one million different ways to experience the grocery store. Stories are moving and fluid. They are not static, and they pick up pieces of the teller through each telling. As we shopped, I considered if the stories we tell make us more alive, living on through others and the stories they tell of us. As I adventure with Grama in the grocery store, I realize that these are the lines of her story I will remember the most, pushing a buggy, running for asparagus, judging carrots, her hand grasping my arm.





Chapter 2. The Adventure Begins

Sitting in the car, free from grandfather’s gaze and paranoid, Parkinson’s riddled ears, my Grama releases. Stories of his escapades have built up within her and a volcano of frustration spews out over the dash. Many of our trips begin this way, and I have pre-emptively braced myself for the spray. No longer startled, and instead more settled in, ready to ride the waves of her overflowing emotions. My uncle accompanies us. We drive and commiserate alongside her, small “mmhmm’s” and nods in recognition of my



grandfathers’ follies. Tales of bank tellers and traffic weave in and out of the conversation, as one thought melts into the next. This is her time to be heard. “You know what buddy!” is a common under the breath utterance in her retelling; recounting moments of forgetfulness or stubbornness on my grandfather’s part. I try to be open. A safe space for her to recount her days and let go. By the time we arrive at the grocery store and get into the elevator, the lava flow of repressed emotions has slowed, and her temperament begins to cool.



Chapter 3. My Favourite Story, Hands Down



My Grama reaches out and grasps at a bag of bread, using her hands to sense what type of loaf it is. Fingers gently squeeze and squish in a circular, delicate motion, not wanting to disrupt the structure of the loaf. The folds of her hand folding and rolling along with it. Each wrinkle, each crease like the page of a novel. A sentence etched into her skin, a record of every motion her hand has made. Every loaf of bread analyzed, every grocery shop, every meal made, all of the ways love has been shown, written into those lines. I look at my own hands, still smooth and uncreased. A sure sign of my youthfully short life. Her hands remind me of my mothers, whose hands look like mine. I wonder which lines represent our time together, and which ones belong to

others. How many sentences in this story were born out of holding me as a child? And how many were written hanging onto my arm as she steadies herself.





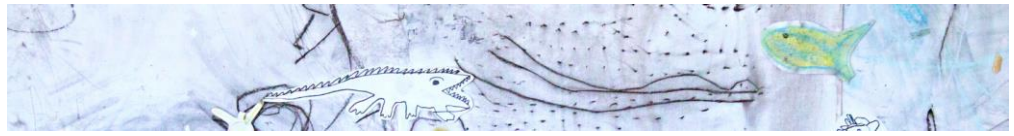
Chapter 4. How to Shop During a Pandemic: for Dummies.

Grama, body bent over the buggy, speaks instructions through her mask into my general direction. I stop and turn towards her and must bring my ear low and close. “Can you say that again?” I ask. She mumbles and I can’t tell if the words are muffled because of her speech, or her mask. I make out the word ‘turnips’ and nod my head in understanding. This is what communication looks like in a global pandemic history. We speak looking like we are going to rob the grocery store. She mumbles something again and I must forgo the six feet apart rule in order to fulfill her order of six potatoes. I stare at the giant pile of spuds and search



with my eyes for the plumpest, most potato-y looking potatoes, conscious not to touch them until I am sure of which ones Grama will like. Gracefully, after months of this routine, my hands move about the pile, selecting the pieces already eyed. I chose the home comers and turn towards the buggy. About to place them down, I stop, remembering I need a plastic bag to put them in. All of the hurrah two years ago about earth conscious practices seems to have gone to seed. In this new pandemic plagued world, plastic keeps you safe. With the potatoes safely inside, the bag becomes knotted and cut off from the rest of the vegetables in the cart, each one in their own separate homes inside the buggy. A small smile crosses my face as I realize this is what it has meant to be human the last 18 months. The history of the world contained inside this shopping cart.





Chapter 5. A Run for my Money.

As the heavy car door whooshes closed, I let out a similarly energetic sigh. Everything I have emptied out in that breath. All of the vibrating stress that comes with the high stakes poker game that is shopping with Grama releases like the air from a popped balloon. It is only at this solitary moment in the car after dropping her off do I notice how much my body is holding. I kept my cards close to my chest the entire trip, and now I am folding. My body relaxes a little more with each exhale and the tightness I didn't realize was in my chest unfolds and un-creases. My hands run gently over the steering wheel, as if I was trying to transfer some of the frenetic energy from my body into the car to get me home faster. This trip took something from me. I must be so present with her that my flight or fight mode kicks in, and adrenaline silently consumes me. It is only here at the end of the adventure that I focus back on what is left of myself. All my cards are on the table and what I see is exhaustion. My energy has faded; I am all out of chips.



Chapter 6. In Conversation.

Toni: “OK, now turn to the left.”

Grama: “Hmm? Ok.”

Buggy: “Squeak, squeak, squeak.”

Toni: “Now a little to the right.”

Buggy: “Reeeeeeepp.”

Grama: “I want two oranges.”

Toni: “Two oranges, you got it.

Watch out for the corner!”

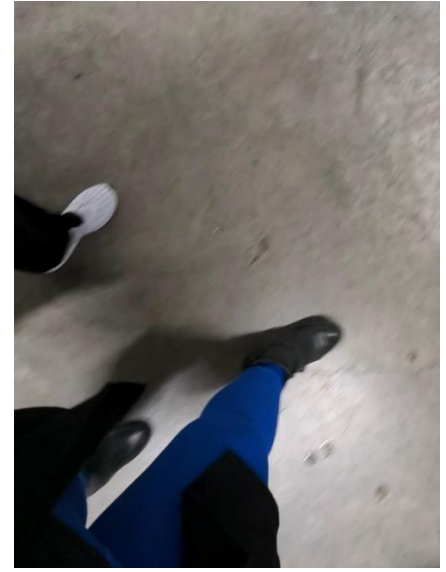
Buggy: “Squeeeaaakk, thump.”

Grama: “Oh.”

Toni: “Here, this way. Slow down lady!”

Buggy: “Squeak, squeak, squeak.”

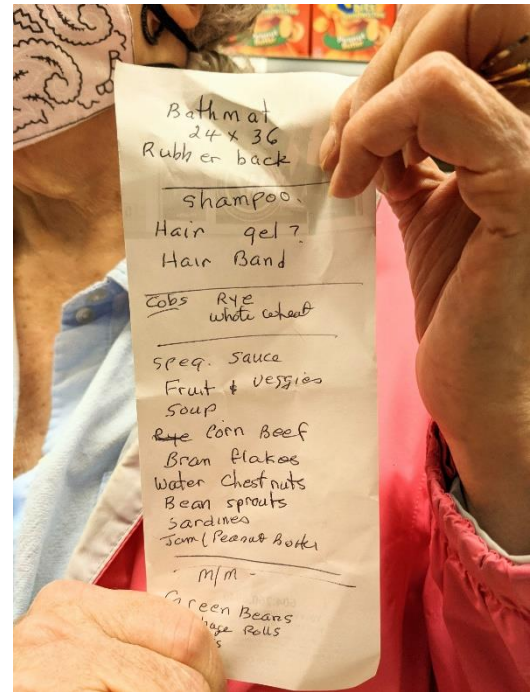
As we walk, I glance periodically at the ground. Watching our feet against the floor is a form of protection. Grama cannot see, so I must be her eyes and narrate which direction we must go. Left, right, straight, watch out for the man there, left again. I watch Grama’s feet and mine move in rhythm, my stride slightly longer than hers. We often wear matching shoes. As I gaze down, I notice the wheels of the buggy, rolling and squeaking. I wonder who the protagonist is in this story, between Grama, buggy and I? Who is leading who around the shop? Perhaps here in this moment, it is the buggy. The buggy can only reside in the story of ‘going to the grocery store’. It does not come home with us but lives forever between the aisles of cereal and cold meat. Or does Grama leaning on the buggy for support make it a supporting character? Our trips have made me very familiar with the feel and charm of the buggy. The way it swerves and turns, its speed and agility, the weight of it. However, even though they all look the same, each one is slightly different, like our trips to the grocery store.





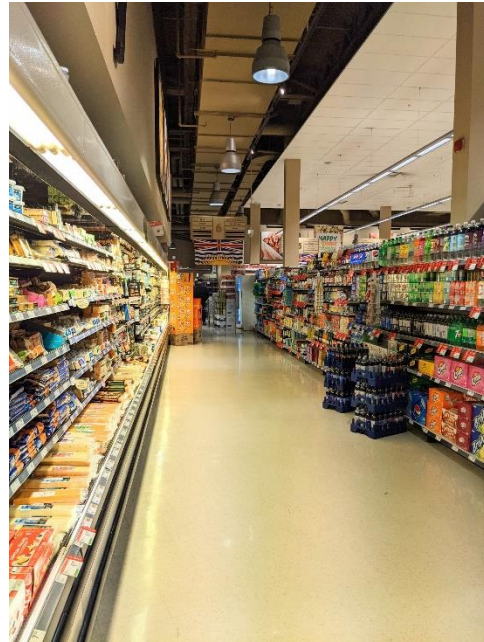
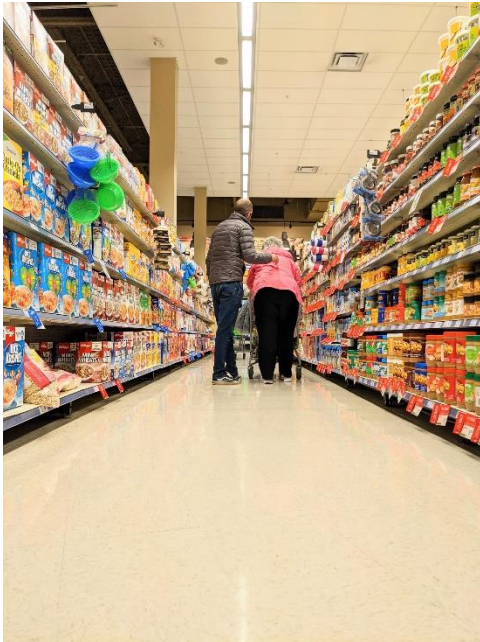
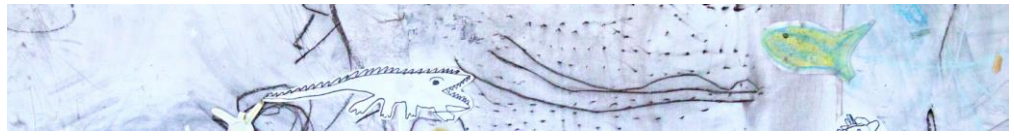
Chapter 7. How to Shop During a Pandemic: For Dummies 2

Wandering down the aisles, I relax. There is no one here, just Grama, Uncle and me. Is this due to the pandemic? Or the early Saturday morning routine? We guide my grama leisurely down the aisles, only a few months ago covered in arrows, indicating the direction we should travel; a treasure map for butter and cheese. We slowly roll along like a lazy river. Three generations of family history and memories traveling in between crackers and spaghetti sauce. The story of Grama's legacy, child and grandchild, looking for oatmeal. Uncle stops suddenly exclaiming, "Ah, you wanted tuna, right? It's not on the list." He gingerly picks up a few cans and stacks them one on top of the other in his hands, offering her options even though she can't really see them. Turning them this way and that, together we take turns reading the labels in our best announcer voices. These



voices have been refined over many trips, loud and clear and quick. A character created to enhance repetitive tasks. Joy and silliness cut the quietness of this pandemic grocery trip. Grama's wrinkles crease as she squints and giggles at us.

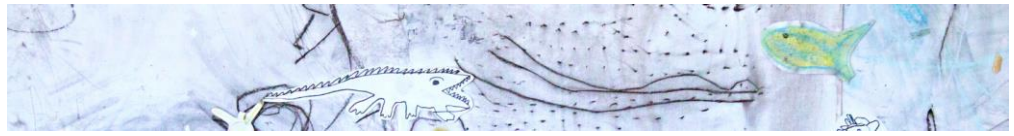
Later, she will recount this chronical to a friend over the phone, gossiping about how cute her family is. And then she will call me to tell me the story of telling the story.



Epilogue

How are stories lived at the grocery store with Grama? As I look back over our time together, this question lingers in my mind. Our adventures bring us closer together, cementing the relationship we have created on my heart. It is through these trips, down aisles and memory lane, that we share the stories of our lives. Our history is filled with gossip and anecdotes, recounted between blueberries and baking powder, rolling off our tongues with a language of love.





Author's Bio

Toni DiCatri is a student in the Early Child Care and Education Degree program. Toni spent her childhood in the Salmon Arm, BC, Canada. She moved to Vancouver thirteen years ago and worked in the health and wellness sector for over a decade. Wanting a career change, she began pursuing her degree in 2018. Toni is very enthusiastic about her work and cares deeply for children. She has a passion for the arts and creating rich, meaningful curriculum centered in place-based pedagogy. When Toni is not working on her degree, you can find her painting abstracts in the studio, or aqua-scaping one of her many aquariums.