

*Eleanor Jean Defazio Hodgkins*

1934-2009





Eleanor Jean Defazio Hodgkins' life reminded everyone who knew her that there is goodness at the heart of things. When she spoke she spoke well, but her actions spoke so much better even than her words. She was our mother, but she was more than a mother: she was a daughter of great loyalty, courage, and kindness; she was a sister to trust, enjoy, and rely on; she was a wife of rare quality; and her grandchildren brought out in her a special tenderness and attention that went beyond – if possible – even that shown to her own children.

And of course Mom was also "Aunt Eleanor." A story is told that once one of our older cousins brought a friend to a Defazio family picnic at East Portal Park in Sacramento. As they arrived, Mom walked up, embraced our cousin, turned to greet her friend, and said, "Hello! I'm Aunt Eleanor!" Our cousin's friend was puzzled – a few moments later she turned to our cousin and asked "Why'd she say that? She's not *my* aunt!" Our cousin pointed to the huge crowd of people – well over one hundred strong – and said that most of them were Mom's nieces and nephews and their kids. "I see now!" the friend said, "Being an aunt is this family is like being the Pope!"



### **A Classy Lady**

Whatever her title or role, Mom wore it lightly. Since her death, a number of people who knew her well have used the same word to praise her: "She was a class act." "Wow, she had class." "A classy lady." And Mom was indeed a classy lady. She was gracious in both senses – in the cultural sense, she was beautiful, stylish, and refined; while in her personal character, she was kind, friendly, patient, and compassionate. These are qualities that always should go together, and sometimes actually do – in people like Mom. So how do we account for Mom's apparently effortless sense of grace and refinement? We'll tell you a secret: she worked at it.

Mom used to talk about her time in "charm school," learning perfect posture by walking with a book on her head, and practicing her conversational skills and her penmanship. We'd kid her about it, but the experience was for real. Here's what she says in her memoir:

I met someone at Cal-Western [insurance agency in the summer of 1953] who was taking a course at the local charm school. It was an intriguing idea. I was growing interested in developing a wardrobe and was beginning to buy attractive clothes. After the course was completed I participated in two fashion shows and two or three other events in Sacramento. It was fun for a brief time but I soon put it behind me. I did learn about using make-up, assembling a wardrobe, and walking with a book on my head. I realized, though, that I would rather read the book!



Eleanor Defazio, intellectual runway model! Mom graduated from charm school with a perky Audrey Hepburn bob; but she walked through life with the calm grace of someone who had learned to balance a book – and to read one too. It's a testament to how well she learned her lessons in style that she walked steadily through the fashion earthquakes of the Sixties and Seventies, and then on into the Eighties, Nineties, and "Aughts," and managed somehow to look great in every



changing era. Of course God gave her the perfect skin and the bright smile, but Mom knew how to improve on these gifts by finding what was best and most attractive in any place and time, and to make it her own.

However, when people call Mom a classy lady they mean more than good looks, fashion sense, and party manners; they mean the love and kindness that lay behind them. "The point of good manners," Mom used to say, "is to make people feel comfortable." Even in thinking of her own appearance and behavior, Mom was thinking of others, of their good, of setting them at ease. Everybody, it seemed, loved to be around her: from our friends, to her nephews and nieces, to the neighbor ladies, to the poor soul in the produce aisle who poured out her troubles, to the jailhouse inmate who asked for her prayers. She listened as if she cared, because she did; she thought that you were important because you were – because you are. You must be important, if such an important person as God made you. A woman with Mom's "people skills" and charm could have used her powers to manipulate, to undermine, to dominate; instead she used them to soothe, to console, to reconcile.

### **Scads of Fun**

Not that she was solemn about it. Hers was an easy grace, unobtrusive, unostentatious, as silent as light. With Mom, you didn't hear the gears grind, nor did you feel operated on. She was, in addition to smart and pretty and refined and classy, "scads of fun," to use one of her old expressions. She was quick to laugh, sing, and dance a few steps – she'd spontaneously belt out



some lines from "Fight Dragons Fight" (the Sac High school song) or "A Spoonful of Sugar," cheer up a sad son with "Side by Side" or "You are my Sunshine." She knew the words to the goofy old Al Jolson/Bing Crosby duet "The Spaniard Who Blighted My Life"; she could say "Vitameatavegamin" without the aid of alcohol; and (this became her especially well) she'd perform a Johnny Mercer tune called "Personality," as in "When Madam Pompadour was on the ballroom floor, / Said all the gentlemen 'Obviously, / The madam has the cutest personality!'" Her voice quavered a bit, but so did Dorothy Lamour's. Mom knew all the show tunes, especially the ones that Craig, Catherine, and Chris were performing in the latest Napa High School musical. She cheered herself hoarse at Craig's and Charles' basketball games, because even a classy lady shouts on appropriate occasions.

Family and friends who visited our home marveled at how smoothly she made it run. As with her social graces, so at home she was a warm and creative mother who worked so hard that she made it look easy; motherhood was her calling and her passion and her joy. She studied hard; she read Dr. Spock (*Baby and Child Care*) and Dr. Ginott (*Between Parent and Child*), and improved on them both. When we were little, she knew how to nurture and encourage each of her children according to our particular personalities, gifts and quirks, and how to make us all feel uniquely loved. Between the carrot and the stick, it was almost always carrot, and even that she made into carrot cake. As to the stick, usually a word or a look from her was enough. She spanked us only when nothing else would do, and often with tears in her eyes.

## **Broad Shoulders**

It takes courage and self-control to discipline your children well; and Mom was courageous and willing to act on behalf of those who needed her help, especially family. "I've got broooad shoulders" she'd jokingly say; she did, too, for a woman of her size; she didn't come from the *paisani* of Castagna for nothing. It says a lot that at about the same time that she was going to charm school, she was seeing for the first time one of her lifelong favorite films, *On the Waterfront*. In her memoir she speaks of how this movie stirred her compassion and her sense of justice, as the Marlon Brando character, washed-up "palooka"

Terry Malloy, took on the corrupt union bosses and fought for his fellow longshoremen's right to work. For all of her very real kindness, tact, and charm, and though she stood only 5'4", Mom had a spine of steel, a Terry Malloy side that would not suffer liars and bullies gladly, especially when her loved ones were at risk. In another favorite film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, Uncle Billy tells the nasty Mr. Potter, "not all the heels were in Germany and Japan" – and when Mom got to moving, the heels learned the hard way.



### **Family History: Mom's Memoir**

Mom was a deep rememberer; she loved the whole cockeyed caravan of the human race, and relished telling the stories of her ancestors, her parents and family, her neighbors and friends, children and grandchildren – from the corner of 59th Street and Second Avenue, through Tahoe Elementary, Kit Carson Jr. High, and Sac High – and eventually to Sloughhouse and Utica, Montebello, Whittier, Citrus Heights, Truckee, Tahoe City, Chico, San Pablo/Pinole, and Napa, and then to Stockton and Malibu and Irvine and Westminster, Chicago and Grand Rapids, Greensboro and London and Paris and San Francisco.

We wish that we could recall all the stories that she told us; but then, we don't have to, because Mom left behind a memoir of over 200

pages, written between 1997 and 2002. It's part immigrant epic, beginning in Calabria in the 1890s and tracing the Talericos and Picollis and Defazios, the Arcuris and the Panes, as they moved by fits and starts to New York City and Hudson and Utica and then across the continent to Sacramento. It's part American dream, as the focus narrows to the remarkable Luigi Defazio, who starts from the Brickyard on the Hudson, makes his way as a boilermaker and union organizer to the Southern Pacific Shops in Sacramento, and by his 30s is bucking the Great Depression as proprietor of Louie's Market and President of the United Grocers of California. He and his wife Christina build a home bursting with their multigenerational family; a neighborhood grows up around them and their nine children, in many ways centered on them; his sons play ball in the glory days of the Pacific Coast League; his oldest boy graduates Sac High in February 1944 and that December fights the Battle of the Bulge; and by the late 1940s the dynamic patriarch is on his way with his growing chain of four Louie's Markets.

And the memoir is part American tragedy. Louie's favorite niece Eleanor dies of typhoid early in 1934, and he gives her name to his second-youngest girl, born soon after; sweet-natured Louis Jr. dies young of meningitis in the summer of 1941; and Louie himself, born with the 20th Century, collapses from heart failure in 1949, decades before his time. The stream of family history is rerouted by this seismic death – Louie's aged father is taken by Louie's brother to languish in an old hospital basement; his teen daughters are left without their adored icon of a father; his grown sons are suddenly free of the "old man" but still heirs to his wealth and his vision – and under his shadow. Eisenhower-era American dream becomes nightmare as the sons' ambitious restaurant venture collapses, taking the family fortune with it – like an eerie anticipation of the film *Big Night*. After the daughters and sons and their growing families recover and again prosper in the 1960s, fissures appear in the 1970s over the care of their aging mother Christina, and in the midst of a quietly intense struggle, Christina loses a second beloved son before his time.

Yet there are plenty of good times along the way, with vivid characters and some happy endings. There's a truly astonishing bigamist; a heroic rescue from drowning; there are easy-going bantering big brothers –

Bill, Jim, Richard, and Anthony – and their buddies; there are spunky sisters – Marge, Marie, and Bernadine; there are quirky and even wacky neighbors. We read lively descriptions of bygone foods and furnishings and gadgets, radio shows and movie palaces, of the rats at Sloughhouse and of Ota Giuseppe's goat. Governor Earl Warren makes an appearance, as do supermarket pioneer Tom Raley and comedian Will Rogers – the latter in a portrait over Grandpa Louie's desk, the others in the flesh. All in all, and fittingly for the work of a grocer's daughter, Mom's memoir is a moveable feast.



The memoir is a fascinating document in its own right, based not only on Mom's recollections but on her interviews and conversations with many older relatives who had lived through the immigrant era. But it is especially precious to those who loved her, because it preserves her authentic voice and thoughts during the years 1997-2002, just before 2003-2004 when Lewy Body Dementia began to rob her of her memories and indeed of her own mind. It was God's grace that gave Mom to us at all; and it is Mom's grace that has given us her life in her own lasting words.

### **Mom's Model: Her Mother**

Since describing a life like Mom's could take a lifetime, we might as well end here. We'll conclude with a few more words of her own. If there's a personal theme that emerges from Mom's memoir, it's her struggle to live out her mother Christina's own traditional model in the contemporary world. And this struggle came to a head in the late 1970s at a time when her aged mother most needed her help. She writes:

It was my mother who had been my primary example. My question was whether I would be the same way in my later

years? I was beginning to see my world from a broader perspective because my world had become so enlarged. It was a perspective, by birth, that I had been destined to assume just because of my birth. The traditional Italian family had different expectations for sons and daughters. My mother knew of only giving and the giving up of herself. I was struggling with my role as the daughter of this person. I could not feel resentment because I saw the situation as a responsibility. It was a moment of truth for me.

What if I had been born into a family of a totally different background? Different parenting? What if I had been an only child, or even one of two, instead of the eighth of nine?



I loved my mother dearly, and honored her and her courage to always be faithful to God and to her family, no matter what happened to her personally. I was emotionally committed to my extended family, the most important being my mother, whose needs I must help meet. I could only conjecture what other responsibilities would await me in the future. I knew I must persevere to carry on, be of service, and put my faith in God as I had seen my mother do time after time.

Here we see Mom's resolution of her dilemma: to take the initiative as a contemporary woman rather than remaining passive like the traditional Italian mother. Yet Mom's reasons for taking this non-traditional action are entirely traditional: to show the love and duty that we all owe to our parents and to God. Here we see her fulfillment

of her own mother's complicated model; here we see peasant Christian virtues and simple faith shining, full of grace, in a modern woman of the world.

Her price is far above rubies . . .  
She girds herself with strength,  
And makes her arms strong . . .  
She opens her hand to the poor,  
And reaches out her hand to the needy . . .  
She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue . . .  
Her children rise up and bless her . . .  
"Many women have done excellently,  
But you surpass them all."

(Proverbs 31)





# Grace In Great Measure

by Craig Hodgkins

Life with Mom was a multi-sensory experience. Through the years, and in so many ways, she brought continued delight to the eye, the ear, the mouth, and the nose.

And although she is gone now, her spirit, and the essence of that delight, lives on in sense memory.

Her smile was gracious and kindhearted, the kind that would put a stranger at ease, and knowing Mom, they wouldn't remain strangers for long. Of course, if you were among the fortunate multitudes that knew her, you could rest assured a sincere question about you and your family would immediately follow.



If the smile is truly the crowning glory of the face, Mom was royalty.

She usually moved unhurriedly, with a measured grace, but was quick on her feet when the situation demanded it. One evening, my four-year-old sister accidentally swallowed a butterscotch candy, and it became lodged in her throat. In an instant, Mom was across the living room, and, in one swift, unified movement, she grabbed my sister by the legs, turned her upside down, and slapped her between the shoulder blades repeatedly until the sticky candy bounced harmlessly to the carpet as Chris and I stared dumbfounded from the couch.

To this day, certain smells instantly transport me to her side, and they don't all deal with food: Noxzema, which she used every night to care for her marvelous skin; Ivory Soap (so pure, it floats!), which was always in the tub and shower; and Coppertone, which she generously slathered on us kids when we vacationed at Lake Tahoe.

Of course, there was always the food, rich in both smell and taste. From the intoxicating sauce simmering on the stove and the chopped garlic and aromatic herbs in a bowl on the kitchen counter to the legendary tollhouse cookies melting in the oven, our house was a blind man's Disneyland.

Her laugh was full-bodied and from the heart, and we laughed a lot at our house. It's something I honestly could never hear enough, and it remains one of my favorite sounds.

In 1964, Mom and Dad attended a Peter, Paul & Mary concert in Sacramento. The event (as well as shows in four other cities on the tour) was recorded by Warner Brothers, and a few of the songs the trio performed that evening would later be released on their *In Concert* double-LP.

To this day, I swear that I can hear her laughing at one of Paul Stookey's jokes on a track that made the album's final cut.

She also had a fun way of elongating certain vowels when she spoke to us... "Oh, Craaaaaaig," she'd say, "you're just tooooooooooo much." And there were the oft-repeated stories about the Sloughhouse worker who wanted "three polk chops (always told while holding up two fingers)," her imitation of my elementary school (and "L"-deficient) recitation of "baa baa bwack sheep, have you any woooooooooo?," or her insistence that she couldn't wear her swimsuit because it had a hole in the knee.

If repetition can bring children a sense of security, than Mom was better than Fort Knox.

But beyond her laugh, and her occasional silliness, her voice was also one of reason, comfort, and – perhaps a bit too frequently in my case – correction.

Make no mistake about it...Mom was the boss of our house. I experienced none of that "wait 'til your father gets home" passivity while Dad was at work. In many ways, she was like a US President we both admired: Teddy Roosevelt. In his spirit, she "walked softly and carried a big stick," which in her case was a long wooden spoon stored in a kitchen drawer close to the dining room table. It wasn't always the same one – she had splintered a few on my, um, back pockets through the years – but I knew it was there, lurking.

She believed in "instantaneous feedback," so there was never any confusion about "why" I was about to be swatted. She let the punishment fit the crime, was never excessive, and each swift blow was accompanied by a little practical motherly advice on how to improve my behavior going forward.



But the vast majority of her advice came in kinder and gentler ways. I cherish the many long talks we had, when I would go on and on about some injustice I was facing, or how I couldn't make much sense of my own teenage (and beyond!) feelings.

She had a way of drawing me out; of helping me look deep inside myself. Sometimes it was asking the right question at the right time; at others, it was giving me the space I needed to sort things out.

In 1980, I had a choice of what to do for my college summer break, and Mom had researched some good local job opportunities for me. Instead, I made plans to head off to Aspen, Colorado, where I had

rented a room with a college friend for the summer. Our plan was simple: we would work construction jobs during the day, and enjoy the many wonders of Aspen's nightlife in the evenings. But a week before we were to depart, my buddy got a job working at NBC Studios, and apologetically dropped out. I decided to head out on my own.

When I arrived in town, I learned that the job I had waiting had literally washed away. I had been hired to work as a carpenter on a huge deck remodel at a local restaurant, but a flash storm had washed away the only bridge to the place. No road, no customers, no job. So I hit the (albeit lovely) streets of Aspen, filling out job applications at every gas station, hotel and restaurant that would allow me to fill one out.

The thing that kept me going were my nightly phone calls to Napa, all in that bygone era of reversed charges. Because of my faith, I knew I could always talk to God. But I also knew there would always be a wise and winsome voice waiting for me at (707) 255-6093.

Never once did she say, "I told you so." Instead, she listened (mostly), laughed (a lot), and shared some recipes with me so I could wow my host family with some authentic Italian dishes. I still have my handwritten notes on her sausage and meat sauce and her manicotti ("leave the shells more *al dente* than usual, they'll continue to cook out of the water"), both transcribed over the phone that summer.

Just in case you're wondering, my host family was suitably wowed.

After I no longer called Napa home, our talks continued, every week or two by phone, until the spring of 2007. And even though her motherly side probably desired a more linear career path for me (she was notorious for providing state job applications to me on multiple occasions, because a job with the State of California provided security!), she supported my decisions, knowing that life itself is often the best teacher, even for the slowest of students.

When I finally landed a salaried gig with Disney – first at Disneyland Park and later at the corporate headquarters in Burbank – she was

delighted. We were Disney fans of longstanding, and it brought me great joy to finally give my parents a tour of Walt's Fun Factory after I began work there. Living in Southern California, and working in and around the entertainment industry, it was hard not to rub shoulders with some of her favorites, and she would listen attentively as I regaled her with stories of places I had visited, things I had done, and people I had met.

I am particularly thankful that I was able to introduce her to one of my favorite Disney actresses, Mary Costa, who not only voiced Princess Aurora in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, but who is Italian to boot!

Mom wasn't perfect; instead, she was marvelously human. She had an intensely private side to her personality, and she protected and defended her children, sometimes to a fault. She also held a few strong opinions on things large and small. She was mostly apolitical, but always stood up for the little guy, and for people less fortunate. She was no prude, but abhorred foul and vulgar language. And, while she was loath to speak ill of anyone, she was quite particular about the friends we made, and the people with whom we associated. In high school, if I was doing something with friends she considered to be "on the fence," she often reminded me as I walked out the door, "people are judged by the company they keep."

Of course, my stock answer to that was, "I bet their mothers tell them the same thing!"

I'm not quite sure why, but Mom wasn't big on men with ponytails, earrings or tattoos. I don't know how serious she was, because she always said it with a smile, but I heard more than once, "If you come home from college with an earring or a tattoo, don't come home." Of course, this only made me want to play a joke on her.

I didn't have a car during my two years at Pepperdine, but could occasionally borrow one to make the 400-mile drive north (I had some *very* accommodating friends). Remembering Mom's admonition, I borrowed a small, hoop earring from a girlfriend and crimped it down onto my left ear so that it stayed on. It didn't hurt; so I left it on as I began my drive.

Somewhere along Interstate 5, I forgot all about it.

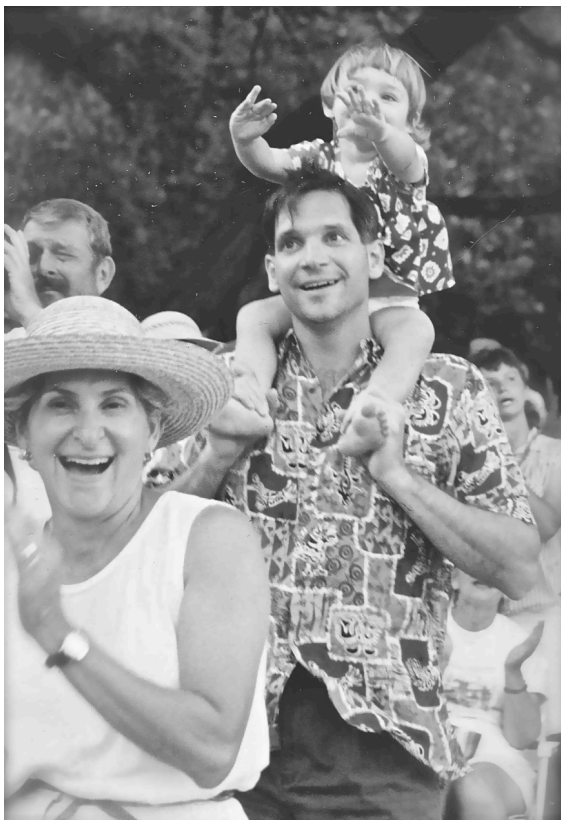
Pulling into the driveway in Napa was always a pleasure, no matter what time of day or night. I knew that I'd have a big hug at the door, followed by a catch-up conversation, great food out of the fridge, and a warm bed, even if it was on the couch. So on this particular late evening, I parked and knocked with great expectations. Mom

came to the door, in her bathrobe as always, and gave me that huge hug. I set down my bag in the doorway, and walked past her to the dining room table as she turned on the light. Food, glorious food!

Suddenly, her eyes went wide. "What is *that*?" she exclaimed, pointing vaguely in my direction. I had no clue what she was talking about. "What?" I asked?

She grabbed my upper arm and spun me around to face the mirror that used to hang on the wall behind the front door in the entryway. "That!" she exclaimed, pointing to the reflection of a bewildered guy in the mirror...the one with a little hoop of gold crimped down on his earlobe.

My brain finally caught up to the situation, and I grabbed the offending piece of jewelry off my ear. "It's fake. It's a joke. Honest."



We stared at each other for a moment, and then we both burst out laughing. She may have known it was a joke all along, but I never tried that one again.

With Mom, it was always family first, and that included everyone in our house, as well as all of the family in Sacramento. Even though we lived in Sacramento County twice, we spent most of our time there as visitors from our various hometowns. It was always fun to see Mom at one of a myriad of Defazio functions. In the early years, the events were mostly, picnics, potlucks, and wiffle ball games at Joe Schultz Stadium. Later, it was weddings, baptisms, and first communions. Occasionally, it was for a funeral. But at every event, person after person would greet Mom as she hugged and chatted with my aunts, uncles, and cousins, and kissed babies I had never seen before.

When her own grandchildren arrived, I saw her baby-handling skills in action again. She was a doting grandmother, and when she and Dad visited us in Southern California, she would always play games with my girls for as long as they wanted. We visited them in Palm Springs three or four times, and that was always fun. By the time Eric arrived on the scene in 2003, she was slowing down a bit, but they would still visit us two or three times a year, and we would return the favor each summer.

Our original house was pretty tiny, so Mom and Dad usually stayed at a Best Western right around the corner, or an Extended Stay a mile down the road. I remember how excited I was when we bought a larger house about a block away from the old one, which had a nice guest room. No more hotel rooms for my parents.

Growing up, I never really noticed going without anything, even though we didn't have much money in the bank. Fun was the monetary system in our house, something that has been a strong value for Diane and I as we raise our three children. Mom had a lot to do with that. She had a gift for life, and did it all with grace and her own special brand of humor.

I remember one other time I arrived home from college, only to see Charles playing with some new electronic toy. "He sure has a lot more



stuff that I had when I was his age," I whined.

Without missing a beat, she diffused my sarcasm with a sparkle in her eye, "Yes," she responded, "but he has an old mother!"

That was Mom.



# Eleanor Moments

by Charles Hodgkins

I was born near the end of 1971, around the holidays. I've been told my mom brought me home in a Christmas stocking.

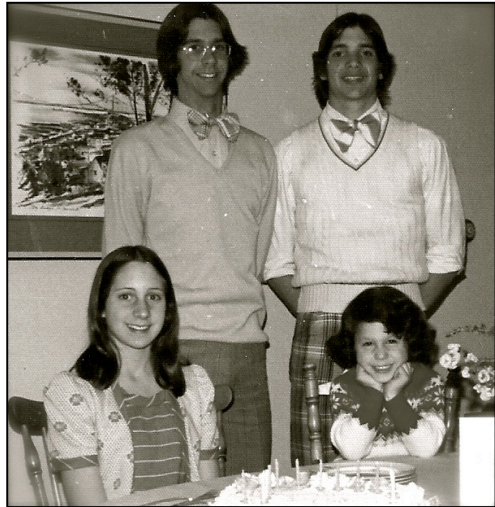
I can't say I remember that, but there's a slew of other Eleanor moments I'll always carry around with me.

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**It's 1976 and my Mom is saving me from explosions in the sky.**

It's a huge 4th of July crowd in Old Sacramento, especially to my kid self. It's the national bicentennial. This is a big deal.

Soon after nightfall, the big booms begin. I don't know what to make of the continuous blasts that seem to have something to do with all the sparkling colors over the Sacramento River, again and again. I do not grasp the concept of fireworks at the mere age of four. I completely lose it.



I turn away from the river and see Aunt Anna Rose right behind me, smiling and enjoying the show. She catches on right away that I've had the daylights scared right out of me; she helps me find my mom right away.

The next thing I know, I'm wrapped around my mom's leg. For all I know she may have only been five feet away among all the tall trees of grown-ups, but it felt like five miles.

The fireworks continue, and soon enough, I get it. Or maybe she explains that the world is indeed *not* ending tonight after all. In any event, everything is better now.

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### **It's 1982 and my mom's toll house cookies are in major demand.**

The problem is, I've only got a few of them in my lunch.

At this point in my youth, I'm frequently chided by friends at Browns Valley School for having a "deli chef" for a mom. One of my usual lunches might consist of a turkey sandwich – invariably with fresh lettuce, mustard, and a glorious slice of American cheese-food, all wedged inside some kind of roll – along with several slices of apple or perhaps a few pretzels. And of course, a handful of my mom's world-class toll house (aka chocolate chip) or oatmeal raisin cookies.

*You and your fancy deli sandwiches, Charles*, they say, usually while nibbling through some sort of faceless concoction made with sliced bread. I don't know how to respond. I'm thinking, *Are sandwich rolls that sophisticated?* I'm not looking at my lunch as a status symbol. *These rolls are more presentation than anything, right?* I just figure my mom likes going the extra mile on the lunch-making relay.

*Sorry your sandwich is lame, Ronnie*, I reply.

My mom's cookies, however, are the daily *coup de grace*. Mario Moreno wants one. Matt Jessell always wants one. And now, Ronnie Felthoven wants one. They pull assorted items from their lunch bags as potential trade bait – unopened juice-box drinks, corn chips, those silly little 'Cheez-n-Crackerz' disasters – but I'm savvy enough to recognize the astronomical value of my dessert stock here. Anyway, I'm not much of a wheeler-dealer.

So whichever kid is lucky enough to end up with that golden giveaway cookie, I'm their best friend for a couple days.

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### **It's 1986 and my mom and I like a few of the same songs.**

My dad drives for a living and often works peculiar hours, and it's a few years yet before I'm old enough to get my drivers license. As a result, my mom often acts as my local taxi service around Napa – to and from basketball practices, school dances, friends' houses in other parts of town.



Our relatively new Honda Accord is conveniently equipped with a cassette player, and as much as I'd like to say that my growing collection of tapes offers an opportunity to bridge the generation gap separating my mom and I, the truth is I just want to listen to Men At Work and Bryan Adams on the way home from hanging out at Mike Hanna's house.

But thanks to her admirable patience with my nascent music obsession, she usually gives me run of the stereo when we're in the car together, and the gap is unintentionally bridged, at least occasionally. For a 51-year-old Peter, Paul & Mary fan and 13-year-old Police fan, this is a real hands-across-the-water moment. Still, her authority lies in the occasional invocation of the so-called Too Frantic! Rule: She reserves the right to turn the volume down – or even off, a veto power she invokes a couple times I foolishly take things a step too far and play Night Ranger's "You Can Still Rock In America" or Van Halen's "Girl Gone Bad."

At one point, she says she likes the Cars' "I'm Not The One"; another time, Bruce Springsteen's "My Hometown." And if Billy Joel's "Scenes From An Italian Restaurant" comes on, she even sings along: "A bottle of red / A bottle of white..."

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### **It's 1991 and my mom is in the stands.**

During my early college years, I join four friends I work with at Christian Brothers Greystone Winery in St. Helena on a Napa City League basketball team. We call ourselves Air Greystone, and it's an only half tongue-in-cheek name, at most. After the regimented style of high school ball, which never really suited me, this is just what the doctor ordered: five young guys, no subs, no coach. It's 100% fun – run-and-gun basketball straight off the suburban playground. And the icing on the cake is that we rarely lose. We even play at one of my former haunts: Redwood Middle School's musty, hideously lit gymnasium, which lends the whole experience a kind of retro-new feel.

Of course, this being a city league venture, crowds at these contests are less than capacity. Friends, girlfriends, and co-workers from Christian Brothers turn up to watch here and there. And on occasion, my mom, hooting out a *Yay, two-five!* amid scattered clapping after I sink a free throw or outside shot.

You never outgrow hearing your mom cheer for you.

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### **It's 1997 and my mom is aghast at my hair.**

After a few years in Berkeley, I'm back where I grew up and not too excited about it, courtesy of a sharp case of post-collegiate cluelessness. I used to live at home; now it seems I'm just staying at the house. I'm managing a small record store in Napa, not making much money. My longtime girlfriend and I are in the midst of a slow fade. Even my 19-year-old cat is on the way out.

Times aren't so rosy for my mom, either, so we bond ever more tightly. We take evening walks up and down Partrick Road; we make trips to the local Baskin-Robbins for lemon chiffon ice cream; I help her learn her way around our Macintosh computer so she can begin writing her long-percolating family narrative.

By late summer, my boredom and angst reach critical mass; I react by getting my hair dyed really blond at the salon downstairs from my record shop.

Guessing correctly that my mom won't greet my radical cosmetic change with great enthusiasm, I walk into the house gingerly that evening. She's on the phone at the dining room table. Even before she spots me, there's a look of grave concern on her face.

Her dear brother Bill has died suddenly today. Another Defazio man taken by a heart attack. She'd just seen him in Sacramento a few days before.

Still on the phone, she looks over and sees me. She drops her forehead onto the palm of her right hand. I don't think I've ever seen my typically bright, cheery mother ever more disgusted. My timing could not be worse.

She doesn't even have to ask. By the time the day of the funeral arrives, my hair is back to a slightly lighter approximation of its natural color.

\* \* \*

**It's 2004 and my mom is the hit of the party.**

As is her lasagna.

Sonja and I have a relatively small wedding at Stern Grove in San Francisco. My immediate family, including all the next-generation Hodgkins, comprises nearly one-third of the entire guest list.

A couple months later, we throw an informal, take-all-comers party at our house. It serves as kind of a second wedding reception, only without all my *Soul Train*-ready dance moves.

My parents arrive in late afternoon armed with a couple of huge casserole dishes, along with another container or two of surprises. Local friends of mine – many of whom have never met my mom, let alone enjoyed her legendary cooking – gather like moths to lamplight as this cute



little gray-haired lady places the enormous soft tin containers on cooling racks on our dining room table. The guests dig in.

Candace: *Charles, is that your mom? She's adorable.*

Howard (chewing): *Dude. This lasagna rules the school.*

Brolin: *I'm getting seconds.*

Peter: *Hey, are those chocolate chip cookies that your mom brought fair game?*

\* \* \*

### **It's 2007 and my mom is reluctant to leave my house.**

My dad's gone off to England with Christopher, so my mom's been staying with us since Wednesday. We've had a nice few days: a stroll in the Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park; making pasta fagioli together at home; an afternoon in North Beach and Russian Hill; even burritos at La Parrilla.



But her health has clearly deteriorated the last couple years. Her fast walking, always an Eleanor staple, has turned to an increasingly fragile shuffle.

I give her a hand up and down our stairs. I wipe her runny nose from time to time, always remembering to crack a joke about it so she won't feel self-

conscious. I worry about her getting in and out of the bathtub and shower.



She still picks up on my silliness, but not like before. She calls me Craig every now and then, then gets frustrated when she realizes she's got the wrong son.

And she cries so easily now, whether at the sight of a photo of the two of us from just a few years before, or one night seemingly out of nowhere when I help her get into bed. She feels guilty for these soft outbursts, explaining them away by remarking, *I guess I'm just an old softie.*

Now it's Sunday afternoon, and it's been an eventful morning. Catherine and her husband Chris are here to take Mom with them – Catherine says they're going to look after her for the next week or so. But Mom's got cold feet about it. I sense it; so does Sonja.

I collect Mom's things from our guestroom and put them in Catherine's truck. We say our goodbyes in my driveway. I'm told we'll all get together again next weekend.

## **It's 2010 and the place isn't the same anymore.**

Most everyone in my mom's generation had a favorite *I Love Lucy* episode, and hers was the candy factory one. The sight of Lucy and Ethel stuffing their faces with bunches of chocolates flying by on a conveyor belt sent her into hysterics every time. If you've ever seen me laugh so hard that my eyes start to tear up...this tendency has a source line that leads directly back to my mom.

Since we lived sort of in the country on the outskirts of Napa, I learned how to entertain myself at an early age: lots of one-on-none football games on our long driveway, lots of armchair road trips while looking at maps, frequent trawling around in the sunken creek below our backyard, reading Choose Your Own Adventure books. But there were some things I couldn't do on my own, and one was batting practice. When I was 12, I was in the midst of a heavy Wiffle Ball phase. Given the lack of playmates in my un-neighborhood, I persuaded my southpaw mom to pitch to me a time or two. Probably only once, because she was a much better fan than pitcher. She didn't enjoy it much...but to her credit, she gave it a shot.

When I was about eight, I got a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. Soon the day came when the vaunted swimsuit issue arrived in our mailbox, with none other than the impossibly beautiful Christie Brinkley gracing the cover. But my mom stole my prepubescent thunder by taping together the most crucial pages so I couldn't get a look at what all the hubbub was about. I think I eventually went over to Chris Lamson's house to look at his copy of the issue.

My mom liked Johnny Cash. You wouldn't think so, but she did. The Man in Black, the guy giving the camera the bird on his way to the stage at San Quentin, singing in that inimitably subterranean baritone about the poor, the downtrodden, the murderous, the incarcerated – themes alien to our lives on mild-mannered Partrick Road. But I guess she appreciated the threadbare honesty in all those songs.

In 2006, my website and I were the subject of a Q&A feature in *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine*, distributed with the Sunday paper each week. The day before the piece officially published, I was visiting my

parents in Napa. My mom and I were out and about in town that Saturday afternoon, and I stopped by a store to pick up a few early editions of the Sunday paper. I hadn't said a word about the feature to anyone (not even Sonja), so I gave my mom the magazine when we were at a cafe and suggested she look at page four. She opened it, saw my picture and the article, smiled, and said very understatedly, *Oh look, now my son is a celebrity*. Then, still smiling, she looked up and said, *Hello celebrity*.

My mom would regularly drive Catherine to San Francisco for ballet classes during my early grade school years, and I often went along. While my sister was at ballet, my mom and I would find things to do around the big city, like see *The Rescuers* at the Alhambra or get ice cream at Clown Alley on Columbus Avenue. One particularly memorable day, she and I rode the glass elevators at the Hyatt Regency. Up and down, up and down. Then we went to the St. Francis Hotel and did the same thing. I think we may have also hit up the Fairmont as well. For years afterward, this became an epic, Oscar-winning film in my mind called *The Day We Rode All the Glass Hotel Elevators in San Francisco*.

You couldn't get my mom on a roller coaster for, in her own words, all the peanuts in Georgia. She and I took an overnight trip to Santa Cruz when I was 11, and while visiting the Beach Boardwalk, I could not persuade her to ride the Giant Dipper with me, no matter how hard I tried. In fact, much later, she wrote in her memoir about an ill-fated ride on this same coaster in the mid 1940s. (I passed on riding it alone, so I guess I wasn't so brave at that point, either.) I *was* able to get her to go on the sky tram, which crosses over the amusement park at an ear-popping altitude of perhaps 40 feet. But this was no enclosed carriage; rather, the ride was a ski lift-style contraption, all dangling legs and open air right under us. We got on and instantly white-knuckled up, both of us. A very slow five minutes later, we disembarked onto terra firma, got our bearings, looked up at the relatively wimpy ride that had terrified us so much, and shuddered like a couple of sissies. I later went on to a successful roller coaster-riding career; my mom stuck to the merry-go-rounds.

Did you know my mom once had a non-speaking cameo on nighttime soap *Falcon Crest*? You can look it up: prime time, CBS, 1983. She answered a casting call in the *Napa Register*, went to the shoot at the old County Court House in downtown Napa one Saturday, and ended up walking right behind Jane Wyman in one of the season's climactic scenes.

The day I graduated from college, my mom hosted a party at our house. A good crowd of family and friends turned up that warm spring evening; so did a lot of mosquitos. In our backyard, her brother Bill kidded around



by calling her his “movie-star sister,” more for her perennially radiant glow than her brief onscreen career 13 years earlier. It was nothing more than a tossed-off comment – my Uncle Bill always seemed to know how to say the right thing – but as she smiled and was rendered speechless, I realized I’d never seen her look quite like that before.

My mom was never one to hide her true nature, but right there she was at her best, in the crosshairs of her oldest brother’s kindness. That is probably my favorite Eleanor moment of all.

# The Taste of Memory: Reflections on Mom's Life

by Chris Hodgkins

Mom had a way of adopting people – like my flame-haired UOP college room-mate Andrew Fink, whom she always called “my red-headed son.” (To imagine Andrew, think young Ronnie Howard as Richie Cunningham, only – as Mom always said of loved ones when comparing them to the stars – “better looking.”) Mom connected with people powerfully even over long distances, even if it was just on the phone. While I was living at the University of Chicago’s International House dormitory in 1982, Mom called and my new British roommate John Hand answered. Instead of asking for me right off, she introduced herself to John and chatted with him for ten minutes, beginning a friendship that lasted for 25 years. “My, your mother is charming!” said John when he eventually handed me the phone.

My, she was charming.

## The Food of Love

If the way to a man’s – or a boy’s – heart is through his stomach, then Mom had me at hello. There are few better ways of expressing or receiving love than through food. We didn’t speak much Italian in our home, but the words we learned



had mainly to do with eating – *mangia bene, macaroni* (I never heard anyone call it pasta until the 1970s), *favae, grispella* – or were words of affection – *bella, bellissimo, caro mio, mio figlio, comare, padrone, poveretta* (or occasionally were words of anger: *na ciavatta, stopito, basta, infamia*.)

Mom nurtured and nourished with our favorite foods: besides those tollhouse cookies (i.e. chocolate chip), there were golden honey cookies at Christmas, plump enough to make Perry Como burst into song; carrot cakes and zucchini breads; anisette toast; air-light lacy pizelles; melt-in-your-mouth-soft biscotti; and in the hot summers “molded salad” – lime jello and pineapple and Cool Whip mixed and chilled in that copper grape-cluster mold which made this confection look like abundance itself.

And there was a lot to eat before dessert! Consider her vegetable salads: green pepper and red onion salad (with plenty of basil and oregano), purple kidney bean salad, Italian potato salad, cucumber-in-vinegar salad, Caesar salad. But her crowning glory was in the main dishes, especially the Italian ones – spaghetti and handmade meatballs (plenty of parmesan, *per favore*), manicotti, stuffed shells, ravioli (“ravs”), and (ahh) lasagna, those perfect layers of melting mozzarella, rich ricotta, and ground sweet sausage. Over the past two decades Mom never left our house in North Carolina without leaving one or two of her lasagnas waiting in our freezer to love us after she had gone.

And now she is gone. Yet food is a powerful trigger to memory, sometimes overwhelmingly and unexpectedly. One day I discovered this at the movies. At the climactic moment of the Pixar film *Ratatouille*, a jaded and arrogant restaurant critic takes a first bite of that humble vegetable dish and suddenly is transported back to childhood in his mother’s kitchen, where she feeds and caresses her lonely little boy. The memory softens his hard heart – and that moment in the film stunned me into tears in a Greensboro theater as I instantly recalled the countless dishes of edible love that Mom set before me in my life. My brother Craig tells me that he also wept at that same moment in that same movie, and for the same reason.

## Feeding Young Minds

Good meals came first, but mental food was always on Mom's menu. Interestingly, Mom fed my mind first by listening. She was a first-class listener, and since I was naturally a talker we got along famously. She had the unique ability to give undivided attention, to make you feel truly important because she cared about your ideas and the little details of your life. At the age of seven I was her little professor and she was my original class. And yet Mom's attention had an interesting side effect – it made me care about what she thought, and even (shock) listen to her advice. Mom taught us a rhyme on the wisdom of listening:

The wise old owl sat in an oak;  
The more he heard, the less he spoke;  
The less he spoke, the more he heard –  
Why can't we be like that wise old bird?

I'm delighted but not surprised that my daughters Mary and Alice remember the same total attention from "Grammy."

Mom's natural curiosity and attentiveness also meant that she made sure we knew the importance of books, both in the house and at the library. Craig and I



were "Volunteer Pages" at that old Goodman Library in Napa, and helped to dedicate the bigger library that still serves the city on Coombs Street. It's no accident that three of her children have grown up to be professional writers, because we were all readers first; and we



were readers because we saw her reading, and because she read to us. She was big on books – on our bookshelves were not only modern literature like Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Jessamyn West's *The Friendly Persuasion* (the author lived in Napa!), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but also *The Essays of Francis Bacon* (published 1625 – the first Renaissance literature beside Shakespeare that I ever read), and *The Puritan Dilemma* by Perry Miller of Harvard University. Mom had real intellectual hunger, and took classes at American River Junior College in Sacramento, and later at Napa Community College, to satisfy it.

### **Some Glimpses: Her Favorite Things**

Mom had many facets, none of which entirely defined her, so I won't try to define her either, except to show you some glimpses of her favorite things.

She had her favorite stars and celebrities:

Probably her all-time favorite actor was Jimmy Stewart ("OUR Jimmy Stewart" she called him); Mom especially enjoyed his movies directed by Frank Capra and Alfred Hitchcock, and loved showing off the photos that Catherine had taken with him after the Christmas service at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in the early 1990s. (Personally, I've always been grateful to Mr. Stewart because he made tall, awkward skinny guys like me look so good.) Though Mom admired many actresses, I think that her favorites were comediennees like Carol Burnett and Lucille Ball; they were "a panic," as Mom would say, with their routines, parodies, and wacky situations. Once Mom was an extra on the popular 1980s TV series *Falcon Crest*, shot in Napa Valley and starring Jane Wyman; so she especially loved Burnett's 1986 *Falcon Crest* parody, *Fresno*, in which Burnett played the domineering "raisin queen" who wore huge padded shoulders and was chauffeured around to her vineyards in the back of an old pick-up truck. This put Mom on the floor; she laughed until she cried.

And Mom had a Lucille Ball moment, not with Lucy, but with another favorite actor. She told us about the time that she bumped into someone in the Sacramento airport in the mid-1950s: "I was

walking too fast and ran into a man and looked up and I said, 'Clark Gable! You're Clark Gable!!'" And he raised his eyebrow in his best roguish smirk, and he said, "Frankly, my dear, I knew that, but I don't mind bumping into a lovely like *you*." Well, actually, he looked mildly annoyed, said "Excuse me," and moved on, leaving young Eleanor awestruck.

Mom also enjoyed booming male singers with voices the size of Montana: Howard Keel, Harve Presnell, and Gordon McRae, who sang of deep rivers and big skies and tornadoes and lost loves and surries with the fringe on top. She liked velvet-voiced serenaders such as the now-forgotten Art Lund, and the ultra-famous Bennett and Sinatra; later in life she even confessed a weakness for Dean Martin, though she didn't much like his drunk act. And we all learned to sing "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*. Mom tapped her foot with Peter, Paul and Mary, and loved it when Craig, Catherine, and I performed their songs. She also wept for the dead Kennedys (the real ones, not the band), and like many young wives and mothers of the 1960s followed Jackie's fortunes from Jack through widowhood and into the "Jackie O" era as if the former first lady were a glamorous older sister. She loved baseball and her ball-playing big



brothers, and revered the great DiMaggio. One of the thrills of her life was getting Joltin' Joe to autograph Craig's copy of his book on baseball, and to watch Charles serve him dinner at a Justin-Siena High School banquet in Napa. When Joe died, Mom insisted on seeing him off at the packed-out memorial Mass at Sts. Peter and Paul in San Francisco – even though that meant standing outside in the street.

Speaking of Italian celebrities, Mom warmed very slowly to Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* films; severed horse heads and piano-wire whack jobs weren't to her taste, and she initially thought that they perpetuated negative images of Italians, the kinds of stereotypes her honest father had worked so hard to live down, and had moved from New York to escape. But over time these movies grew on her – the beautiful Mediterranean settings, the warm family dinners, the exuberant celebrations all took her back to positive parts of our heritage. And when she met Franny Coppola while they did jury duty together at the Napa County Courthouse, she found him charmingly down-to-earth – an impression that deepened when Charles worked for a time at his Niebaum-Coppola Winery upvalley.

Mom had her favorite phrases:

- “Wake up, Sleepyhead!” (followed by French toast or poached eggs with OJ);
- “I'd better go get the groooooceries!” (and she did, by the carload, filling a fridge and full-sized freezer);
- “I've got broooooad shoulders!” (because many shared their burdens with her);
- “That's not like you!” (when we kids misbehaved);
- “I'm getting the wooden spoon!” (when we kept misbehaving);
- “I'm going to run away from home!” (when we really kept misbehaving).

That last threat was the nuclear option, and the few times she used it, she stopped me cold; not because I really believed Mom would jump ship, but because, even as a child, I knew how much my life and our family's depended on her, and that if she “ran away from home,” home would go with her. Her face in the room meant that everything was going to be okay.

And the wrong face could have the opposite effect. I remember the time when I was six or seven that we stayed in a motel and in playing up and down the halls I ran into a room and put my arms around Mom's leg only to realize that the woman in Mom's dress with Mom's hairstyle had another woman's face on. She was probably a perfectly nice lady with a perfectly fine face, but she might as well have been Norman Bates' mummified mother from *Psycho* – I sprinted from the wrong room screaming like a banshee.

### **Child Management, Eleanor-Style**

Mom seldom had to threaten or raise her voice because the way she cared for her kids made us, more often than not, want to please her – and wanting to please is, on the whole, a better motive



than just avoiding punishment (though punishment will do in a pinch). I can remember when I was six or seven deciding that I was going to clean up my room without being asked simply because I knew it would make my Mom smile. And it did, too! I can still remember her warm words and that hug. I wish I could say that I did this sort of thing often as a kid, but I can't forget the joy Mom got out of seeing us do things to make her happy.

As I grew older, Mom showed that she was a shrewd judge of my character in steering me away from bad choices. Rather than rant and lecture at length, she would clearly and gently make her views known, and then leave me with the choice and the consequences. I recall that

early in my senior year at Napa High School some friends and teachers began recruiting me for the Transcendental Meditation movement. I told Mom that I'd like to join TM so that I could get a mantra and experience the enlightenment that they promised. Mom asked me why prayer to Jesus Christ wasn't good enough. I told Mom that this wasn't about prayer or God, that it was a simple exercise, like spiritual push-ups, but that I needed \$75 from her for the initiation fee that would get me my secret mantra. Then all I had to do was bow to the picture of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, say a few secret words, and I'd be in.

"Well, Christopher" (generally she used my full name only when she was being very serious or very affectionate) "we don't believe in doing such things, but if you want to do it, you'll have to pay for it yourself."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. Well, I don't want to join *that* much." And I never seriously thought about TM again. Mom knew her thrifty son.

And then there was my first drink, a few years earlier when I was about 15. One day, I found at the back of our kitchen cabinet the few bottles of liquor in the house. My parents seldom drank anything other than a little wine, so these dusty bottles had been untouched for a long time. Mom found me holding a vodka bottle and instead of scolding me, she said, "You're welcome to have some, as long as you drink it in front of me." So I said, "Sure," and Mom got out a small tumbler, poured in a splash, and slid it across the counter. I'd seen enough movies to know that real men "tossed them back," so I did; and once the flammable liquor hit my throat, my throat tossed it right up again, spraying across the room.

"Ppffew! This stuff tastes like...like...what they rub on your arm before they give you a shot!" I gasped.

"That's about right," said Mom. "Want some more?" I didn't. So ended my brief adolescent interest in booze. But Mom, no teetotaler, taught me to appreciate a good glass of wine, preferably with a big plate of pasta.

## **Hello; Goodbye; Good Morning**

Mom's parenting skills – sometimes Solomonic, often sacrificial – owed a lot to her parents. She told me how her father inoculated her against smoking by letting her puff his cigar when she was about seven, turning her a predictable shade of green and giving her permanently queasy memories.

And, much more seriously, in later years I learned about the role that my grandmother played in my coming into the world. In Mom's memoir, she tells the rather harrowing story of my birth:

I delivered our first son at 11:56 in the morning in Montebello, just east of Los Angeles. I had hoped to be awake for the delivery, but there was a problem with the umbilical cord. As a result, I was anesthetized so the doctor could work on the baby. Later that day the doctor came to my room where I was in recovery and told me that the baby did not breathe for several minutes; because of this, it was necessary to place him in an incubator. He would remain there for at least five days.

I was overcome with grief. The pregnancy had been a glorious time for us but my joy was overshadowed by my worry that my baby would possibly suffer brain damage. I lay in bed and prayed for hours until I fell asleep. My prayers were my only comfort at this time. The next morning when Royce came to visit me, we walked to the nursery to see our baby for the first time. He was beautiful and looked as healthy and strong as any baby I had seen. I was not allowed to touch him because it was vital that he remain in the ideal conditions the incubator provided him.

To make matters worse, I was born during a crisis in the larger Defazio family. The family's Villa D'Italia Restaurant, founded in 1957, was failing and about to close its doors, taking family fortunes with it. Yet even as bankruptcy loomed, Grandma Defazio came to the rescue. As Mom writes:

I cannot believe what my mother did. Knowing of my problem, my mother rode a Greyhound bus [from Sacramento] to East Los Angeles to be with me. It was incredible. Her mothering spirit was so resilient. She stayed only a few days, but went to the hospital with Royce to bring my baby home. The sense of complete joy when I held him overwhelmed me. I took Christopher from his grandmother's arms and into mine for the first time. I could only cry and hug my infant close as she stood beside me and cried with me. This was a moment of elation for her amid the anguish she had been living with for the past several months.

I love the thought that Mom not only brought me into the world but prayed me into life; and that the first person to cuddle and carry me, to say "Hello" and welcome me, was my grandmother, Christina. By this time Grandma had a couple dozen other grandchildren to love, and yet she dropped everything else to come and hold me.



With women like this in my life, it's not surprising that from a young age I saw how much depended on their love and care. My greatest fear, then, was not Mom's "running away," but her passing away, her death. I can remember that when I was about five a pet died, which brought home to me how the unimaginable is also the inevitable: that everyone I love and who loves me is mortal; above all that Mom, too, would die.

I sometimes lay awake at night in those early years and shuddered at the prospect – but not wanting to look silly or morbid, I never mentioned it to anyone, though I'm sure this dreadful feeling must be common enough in children, and perhaps even in adults.

And now, after all, it has come – the inevitable Goodbye; and given the circumstances of Mom's last illness, that Goodbye was much harder than I had imagined or feared; because nearly everyone she knew and loved was denied the chance to tell her Goodbye, to bid her farewell, to tell of their love. Tragically, this woman who meant so much to so many died virtually alone.

Yet, beyond those fears and that loss, life goes on, and so does love. In some sense Mom lives on in the people – children and grandchildren, nephews and nieces, siblings and cousins and friends – that she has loved, served, fed, and taught; and she lives much more radiantly in the presence of God. There she lives freed from the illness, separation, and grief of her last years, and lives freed to shine like the sun – and to laugh like a girl again.

Jesus tells us that for those who have loved Him, Heaven is going to be like a wedding party – not a quiet restrained affair with punch and white cake, but a real rip-roarer, with plenty of great food and better wine and the happiest, biggest family reunion you ever saw.

And when I've gone on too, and come to that great Reunion, I hope to see Mom as I remember her best – young, lively, full of smiles and laughter, surrounded by friends and family, with words of kindness for everyone. And perhaps on that Resurrection morning the first voice I hear will be Mom's, saying "Wake up, Sleepyhead!"



# Letter to Grammy

by Alice Hodgkins

Dear Grammy,

It's funny how when I sit down and try to think of memories of you how quickly, yet how faintly they come. I remember that your favorite color was yellow and that's why you loved gold jewelry. I remember that you were always kind and brave. Even now, I can't quite explain how I know that, but I do. You loved well, especially your grandkids. I relished being in the same room as you, because I was sure to have your undivided attention. If I had something to tell, or show, you were not only willing to listen and watch; you were delighted to. It was your highest priority. If I sat down to play my cello, I would look up after one song, and you would be there listening. I would come home from school, and there you and Granddad would be, on the couch, with no other objective in mind than to talk about my day. I remember the lyric quality of your voice, and the way you laughed. Even when I knew you, you still laughed like a girl. You would throw your head back, and clasp your hand over your heart, as if trying to contain your joy. But you never succeeded, it would overflow anyway. When I was very small



and heard you laugh it always mystified me. I couldn't quite grasp your quirky humor, but the magnetic quality of that laugh made me want to get in on the joke. There are other small memories floating around. They are hard to piece together, because while they were happening they were just life. For the most part they were not marked as important or valuable, so I let them slip away, and now I miss them. My picture of you has holes. I remember you speaking strongly to a teenager in the street for cursing in front of your grandchildren. I remember the drawer of warm clothes you kept in your guest room especially for us, and the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt from it, which hangs on my door. It is still my favorite. I remember the homemade lasagnas you left in our freezer after each springtime visit. And I remember that when you did leave you would cry. Cry getting into planes, trains, and cars. You were sad to leave us. There is one thing about you, which, even when I am old, I will still remember. I will remember your hands, long and graceful, with beautiful fingernails. They were always soft from all of your hand cream, smoother than any I have ever seen. I will remember your hands gentle in small acts of love and kindness. Your hands chopping vegetables in the kitchen, your hands tying a sweater around my shoulders, in case of chill, and when I was small your hands bathing my back with sweet smelling soaps, and your hand in mine as we walked. I will remember your hands.

Last time you saw me I was thirteen, and awkward. You never got to read a story I wrote, or hear me play my Bach, or see me dolled up before a spring dance. Grammy, I've grown up. In March, I have a twenty-page senior thesis due. In April I will turn eighteen, and in May, on your seventy-sixth birthday, I will graduate from high school. I wish you could be there. I have so many things to tell you, but I suppose they will wait. I miss you.

Love,  
Alice

# Fragments

based on a work of Sappho

by Mary Eleanor Hodgkins

“ . . . and honestly I just don’t know that she is dead.”  
I had not misheard him.  
The appropriate place inside of me  
Wept, not understanding; I remembered how she had wept at each of  
our leavings.  
If she had had her way,  
“Please stay forever!”

We did not stay, replying:  
“Time for home!”

She did not stay either,  
But I didn’t know that when . . .  
I didn’t know even when he said it.  
When we said farewell for the last time  
I did not know  
That it was the last time.

But if I had known,  
If I could have seen the blank future,  
Before our leavings . . . to you:  
“The days of pinecones in baskets and  
Fall sunshine . . .  
. . . a bag of bay leaves, dry and aromatic.  
The many times after seeing you,  
Smelling of garlic and basil,  
Hoping to be washed in your gentle lotion.”

Later I knew,  
While all around me the laughter and joy  
Was spreading like waves,

Washing over the quiet rock of me,  
Leaving tears dripping off.  
What could I say to him?

Then the music started,  
But you can't cry and sing at once.  
. . . I can't.  
I wept then, and did not sing,  
And my weeping was not appropriate,  
Until . . .

"Every holiday brings a remembrance from you,  
Even the little ones.  
Your fingernails . . . always perfectly round.  
Sweet delicacies, thin and crisp,  
Handmade with thoughts of home . . .  
And knowing that 'Your children are the world'  
And the world will miss you."

Then in spite of my weeping  
I was singing.







(Faccia bella!)

For more on Eleanor's life, including additional photographs and tributes, as well as extended excerpts from her memoir, visit [Eleanorhodgkins.com](http://Eleanorhodgkins.com).

Program designed by  
Sonja Shin Hodgkins

