Learning About My Grandmother by Living through a Pandemic

Kathryn Suzanne Krase (October 20, 2020)

If you met my grandmother, “Nana Rose”, chances are you can share a story about the experience. Chances are, she talked about you, too. My Nana had a “personality”, for sure. She appreciated personality in those she interacted with and was dismayed by the lack thereof. Of utmost importance to her was whether her partner in a moment could hold a conversation, keep her entertained, or make her laugh. That one was important. A laugh changed her life; I’ll save that story for another time.

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Rose “Cinny” Jordan was born in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, on September 24, 1913, to Filomena Migliore and Anthony Jordan. Filomena was born in Chicago. Anthony (“Papa”) was born in Brooklyn.

Papa was a plumber, who would develop into a political figure with significant influence in the Brooklyn democratic party, largely controlled by Italian-American men, like himself.

Rose was the eldest born child to her parents. She would soon have a brother, Sal, born in 1915, and a sister, Josie, born in 1917. Her mother died pregnant with Rose's 3rd sibling that never was. Filomena didn't perish during childbirth, like so many women of her time (700 women out of every 100,000 who gave birth in 1910 died in childbirth). Filomena succumbed to the Spanish flu in 1919, while pregnant.

Filomena was a young mother of 3 small children, when her unmarried uncle took ill with the flu and needed someone to tend to his symptoms and keep him comfortable. The responsibility fell on Filomena. She got sick, lost her pregnancy, and she died. She wasn't alone. Research suggests that nearly ¼ of pregnant women died during the Spanish Flue Pandemic. The uncle lived, as did all three of Filomena's children.

The loss of her mother was a defining moment in my grandmother's early life. Papa would quickly remarry a woman, Frances, widowed by the pandemic herself, and with two daughters of her own. Anthony and Frances would have 3 children together; two more girls, and a son, Anthony.

Echoing Victorian mourning practice, Nana Rose was required to mark the sorrow of losing her mother by wearing a black ribbon in her hair for a prescribed period of time. (PHOTO) Recalling how this tradition made her feel sad, she would ask: "who would do such a thing to a child?"

If you had the pleasure of talking to Nana Rose on a handful of occasions, you would likely learn about her love of New York sports teams. She was both a Yankees AND a Mets fan, though you could say she "leaned" towards the Bronx. But in reality, she was an abandoned Dodger's fan, just trying to fill a void in her heart by their move to L.A. The Dodgers retreat to the west coast was experienced as a personal affront to Nana Rose. The loss of her home-team was just one of many "tragedies" Nana Rose experienced, starting with the death of her mother. Things seemed to happen to her, specifically, or at least that's how she experienced it.

The Great Depression happened to Nana Rose. She lived the rest of her almost 95 years, all in Brooklyn, clinging to depression-era practices aimed at saving and reusing everything she could. Rubber bands. Tin foil. Parchment paper. Our favorite: the cardboard insert that gave structure to the three-pack of Hostess's Yankee Doodles. This simple piece of cardboard brought three young girls a lot of joy. It was often populated with a handwritten dinner order, for special nights when our grandparents would take me and my two sisters to the McDonald's on Fort Hamilton Parkway, across the street from Greenwood Cemetery.

Other events happened to Nana Rose, too. Like Pearl Harbor and World War II, which saw her baby brother, Anthony, and two of her brother-in-laws sent overseas. All returned safely, though it was a scary few years.

JFK's assassination happened to Nana Rose. She could tell you all about the day he was shot. The desperate minutes between hearing of the shooting and learning of JFK's death. Keeping her radio on, and at the ready, even as she went food shopping in the neighborhood, Nana Rose didn't want to miss anything. If you didn't know, Nana Rose would tell you: JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas. As a result, Nana Rose always rooted against professional sports teams from Texas. When I dated a Cowboys fan, football season was not particularly comfortable.

My mother, sisters, and I would laugh off Nana Rose's insistence that these world changing events happened TO HER. She was unable to conceptualize that these events happened, and she was simply in existence when they happened. We could argue that it wasn't personal, or purposeful, but we found her insistence sort of comical, if not endearing. Until September 11, 2001.

Nana Rose and my grandfather were in their early 90's and living in the top-floor apartment in my parent's house Park Slope brownstone on 9/11. That morning, instead of going to work in lower Manhattan, I watched my newborn nephew, so that my sister, Kristin, could bring her 3 year-old to his first day of preschool. By the time I got to Kristin's house, regular tv programming was

interrupted with scenes of fire in the high floors of the North Tower at the World Trade Center. We watched together live on NY1 as Flight 175 hit the South Tower. We, along with the rest of the world, were terrified into silence as the South Tower, and then the North Tower, fell.

My mother, then an administrator at The Brooklyn Hospital Center in Downtown Brooklyn, would spend that long Tuesday, mobilized and at the ready to receive the overflow of patients from Manhattan that would never come. My father would come join us at Kristin's, so we could be together for whatever happened next. Before he left his house, my father ascended the stairs to my grandparents' apartment to close the windows, so that the debris that we so desperately wanted to think of as pieces of paper that were slowly blowing across the East River wouldn't make it into their space. We asked our father about his decision to leave my grandparents alone. His response was something like: "would you want to spend your last minutes on earth with those two?" We knew what he meant. In her opinion, 9/11 happened to Nana Rose, not to the nearly 3000 people lost that day in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia, and their surviving families.

I felt very close to my grandmother throughout our overlapping 35 years. Not just because we ate dinner with her every Wednesday and Sunday for the first 18 years of my life, and hundreds of other times. Not just because we would call each other after each Mets or Yankees playoff or World Series game, no matter what time it ended. Not just because she sent me three single dollar bills in a greeting card with a note that read "snack time" at least once a semester while I was in college.

I felt very close to my grandmother because I heard all of her stories, more than a few times. I felt close to my grandmother because I lived the most important days of my life with her, and I was there to comfort her after some of the toughest in hers, as she survived the loss of each of her six siblings, and then the loss of my grandfather.

I felt close to my grandmother. But until the COVID19 pandemic, I didn't truly understand her. It didn't take more than pop psychology to connect my grandmother's unique "personality" to the loss of her mother at a young age. I listened to her stories about losing her mother and the sadness that echoed through black hair ribbons, over and over and over again. I knew that her nickname, "Cinny" came from a shortened version of "Rosanella", but could just as easily come from the applicability of "Cinderella" to her life story. But, I never, for a moment, considered that the loss of her mother was so much more than that. She didn't just lose her mother at a young age. She lost her mother during a pandemic.

Nana Rose's loss was much larger than her mother's death. She was a young child, who just lost her mother, as dead bodies lined the streets of NYC. Nana Rose was a young child, who just lost her mother, surrounded by a City full of sadness and uncertainty, beyond her personal loss.

While I appreciated how my grandmother's life was impacted by her loss, I focused on that which I could empathize: her mother's death and her father's remarriage, specifically. I never considered how her life was impacted by loss, more generally, from living through a pandemic. Now, as I'm living in that same city during this pandemic, I have never felt more close to Nana Rose.

First Published in The Park Slope Reader. [2]

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