Mothering the Patriarchy:
An auto-ethnography of three generations of women

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Abstract

This auto-ethnographic thesis aims to uncover the complex lives of four familial women, cross generationally, to see how patriarchal structures have influenced not only their outlook on life, and femininity, but their practices in raising their own daughters. Through personal interviews, I ask my family members to recall times in which they have experienced sexism in their lives, whether that be in school, the work place, or in daily interactions, to see how those moments may have subsequently affected the ways in which they interacted with their own daughters (or influenced their views of women in general), to be able to fit within the confines of the patriarchal system. I have also included my own personal reflections regarding the interview process, as to not distance myself from those I am analyzing and critiquing. I believe that through my own vulnerability, acknowledging the ways in which I myself have played into and benefitted from the patriarchy, I was able to engage in more raw and open conversations with my family members about their own experiences along the same lines, despite any potentially clouding feelings of shame or regret. I am not using this thesis to critique their actions personally; I am using it to analyze the effects of certain societal structures on the behaviors of women. Overall, this thesis acts as a personalized family study, weaving in feminist and psychoanalytical theory, and anthropological methods to conceptualize the role of the patriarchy in personal and familial relationships.
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**Introduction**

I have always prided myself on being a feminist. A self proclaimed, “hard-core” one at that. It is an integral part of my personality at this point. All of my friends know not to say anything remotely sexist within earshot, even in the context of a joke, unless they want to go twelve rounds in the “debate ring” with me. But what does that even mean in this day and age? To be a “hard-core” feminist. Because I stand by my opinions--what I believe in--so strongly, that it has made me close minded. It even affects my relationships at times; because I feel the urge to write people off after just one mistake. After stepping just one toe out of line. My line. The line that I placed down. This becomes a problem especially if those ‘making the mistakes’ are my own family members. Because with what authority, did I create that line? And did I take any other contexts into consideration?

In her captivating collection of essays appropriately titled, “Bad Feminist,” author Roxane Gay argues that “feminism is flawed,” (Gay, x) because the cultural climate is continually shifting. It would be near impossible to constantly keep up an air of perfection yet we still find ourselves holding “feminism to an unreasonable standard,” (Gay, x). This certainly rings true in my life. Not only do I hold feminism in general to an unforgiving standard, but that standard of perfection also goes for myself specifically, and those around me.

When she openly calls herself a “bad feminist,” (Gay, xi), Gay gives a name to the concept that I have been trying, and struggling, to embrace throughout this entire writing process. I, alongside the rest of the population, am inherently flawed, I am also not an expert in
the history of feminism, and I play into patriarchal culture; it is inevitable at times, given its pervasive roots within society. There is no “right way” to be a feminist, or “do” feminism. It is multifaceted.

Over the past several years, I have endured numerous upsetting encounters with female family members. Encounters that opened my eyes to the idea that women can also be sexist to one another. Interactions that had me questioning not only my relationship with them, but my own self worth as a woman, as well as their granddaughter or daughter. But, following in the footsteps of Roxane Gay, I am taking myself off of the “Feminist Pedestal,” off this moral highground that I have placed myself on because, I too, mess up and I want to do a better job of not jumping to dismissive conclusions on people after a negative interaction. If anthropology has taught me anything, it is that life is nuanced and one needs to acknowledge the various forces and structures within society’s past and present that influence the thoughts, words, and actions of others. And what better way to start, than by revisiting some of these negative interactions that I have had in the past with different female family members, and gaining some context. I want to try and deepen my understanding of feminism because I feel as though women oftentimes find themselves perpetuating various patriarchal ideologies without being conscious of that fact.

I would like to be able to understand how intense, repeated experiences of sexism, has the ability to embed itself into someone enough for it to affect how they look at themselves as well as other women, and how experiencing internalized misogyny at the hands of an older family member impacts the younger generation; in this case, I would be analyzing my responses to experiencing these types of sexist behaviors and comments from my own mother, and grandmothers. Yet rather than critiquing them, I am using this thesis to try and better understand why my beloved family members sometimes act in this way. I am, instead, critiquing the
patriarchy for creating this toxic environment; that maybe it is due to their generational upbringing and their own traumatic history with the patriarchy and sexism that has led to my family’s specific approaches to addressing the younger female generation today.

I feel as though this sort of research will shed light on how pervasive certain aspects of the patriarchy are in our daily lives, and how it can affect personal relationships within family dynamics and internally (with oneself). In being open about an uncomfortable topic such as experiencing sexism from trusted female family members, I hope this thesis provides comfort for some, knowing they are not alone in these experiences and stimulates more open and honest conversations regarding the ways society affects female familial relationships.
**Interview Questions**

I went into these interviews with a goal of gaining a better understanding of the various experiences that the women in my family had during different time periods, to see how certain interactions, experiences and structures, influenced their positionality and opinion of their role within our patriarchal society. I believe this to be crucial as interviews tell us “not just what happened but what people thought happened and how they have internalized and interpreted it;” furthermore, the notion that an understanding of what made the person who they are can open a window into the cultural forces that shape our lives, (Abrams, 7). The study of the self therefore is seen not only as a means of accessing subjectivity but as a way of studying culture and the relationship between the two; the focus on the “life story as an approach to investigating the relationship between personal experience and culture emerged from anthropology” according to Lynn Abrams in her book *Oral History Theory* (Abrams, 33).

Throughout the course of this thesis, I reference the fact that I sent out an outline of my interview questions to my participants days ahead of time to allow them to get their thoughts in order before we met. This is due to the fact that some of the questions require memory retrieval, as I ask them to reflect on specific examples or moments throughout their life; and nothing is worse than being asked to remember something off the cuff under a ticking clock. Below is an exact copy of said outline:

- Describe your relationship with your mother (the good and the bad).
  - What did you learn from your mother about what it means to be a woman in this world?
    - Any advice, warnings, good / bad comments
  - When did you first become aware of your gender?
    - Recount times you saw that your gender could be a disadvantage in the workplace and beyond (in normal everyday interactions).
  - Growing up, did your mother or other family members talk to you about your body, or expectations of appearance and attitude?
    - What did the media portray?
Do you think the patriarchy has affected your life, career wise, or in personal interactions?
  ○ Give some examples

“Scripts” are a blueprint for the living of our lives, which stems from an oppressive society that controls us from the outset via parents, schools, social workers, etc,... essentially creating expectations for how women should behave or appear (Burstow, 56)

- Describe any “scripts” you felt like you had to play out in your life in order to fit in.
  ○ For example, did you ever have to dress a certain way due to your gender, or act a certain way (or what were the expectations for you in certain situations)?
- When did you feel like you were “succeeding” as a woman?
- Describe a time you “failed” at meeting expectations (aka, failed at being the woman society wanted you to be).
- Recount times you experienced sexism in the workplace, how did you respond?
- Have there been times that you used your gender to your advantage, maybe played into sexist expectations in order to get what you wanted?
At least the scenery was beautiful, I mean what else would you expect when sitting in the backyard of a garden company owner? We were only a few weeks into the summer months, so the flowers were in full bloom, encompassing the patio in what I can only describe as a rich suburban jungle. You could get drunk off the smell, it was almost overwhelming. The pink from the azaleas and orange from the begonias blended together through my watery vision to create a soothing sunset if I unfocused my eyes just at the right angle; anything to whisk me away from my seat at the cold, wrought iron table. The splash of water as a sparrow clumsily landed in the birdbath to my right (the bird bath I had been ordered to scrub clean the day before) was the only break in the silence as the tears I so desperately tried to fight back, rolled down my face. The words, “I am disappointed in you,” rang in my ears as I stared blankly back at Kay, her mouth a thin pressed line, “I expected you to have handled this better.”

I thought everything would be ‘righted’ by meeting with Kay. Yes, she was my boss but she was family first; not by blood, but she was in the hospital waiting room when I was born, she watched me grow up and was present at every family event alongside my actual relatives. So surely, she would be ‘on my side.’ Right? And even putting all of that aside, she’s a woman. But I guess I was wrong in assuming that would play to my favor.

This was my second summer working for Kay as a landscaper. No one expected me to return, my father could not comprehend the fact that I actually enjoyed the work. And believe it or not, Kay’s crew was mainly composed of women. I loved telling people I worked for a landscaping company, as you can learn a lot about their character from the way they’d respond to that sort of “shock”. But, when none of the women could efficiently throw the hundred pound tarps of debris onto the dump truck during clean up, that’s when Chris was brought onto the crew. Standing at 6’3, two hundred and thirty pounds, Chris provided what Kay called “the necessary manpower,” to get the job done.

It started off very innocently, or at least I thought it was; asking me about where I go to college, what I am studying, what I do for fun. Everyone talked on the job…it’s how we got through those scorching eight hour days, eager for anything to distract us from the fact that we were on our hands and knees in someone’s back garden weeding in ninety degree heat. I learned about his “crazy ex wife,” his glorious college days (which he was embarrassingly clinging to 20 years later), and his daughter. But then came the online messages, as he found me on Facebook. I would get hit with the “what are you up to’s” and the “I missed you at work today’s.” I knew this was a little odd, but if I did not respond, he would confront me at work the next day for ignoring him, and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. So I would answer. I would keep it short and as formal as I could but it made me feel uncomfortable, even though half the time we were just messaging about the weather. I confided in one of the other women on my crew, asking her for advice because I felt trapped. I could not report him to our supervisor because technically he was not doing anything wrong, and I knew he needed the job (aka the money) more than I did and I did not want him to be fired over something as trivial as messaging me about my day, but I still did not like the attention he was giving me. She wasn’t much help, she just told me to wait until it “escalated” to report him.

A few days later I received a text from my supervisor, Kay’s second in command, that read:

Fiona, I am aware of the inappropriate behavior between you and Chris, if this does not stop immediately, you will be fired.
I started crying before I even finished reading the message. Here I was at nineteen years old, working one of my first semi-serious jobs, receiving a threat of extermination due to being harassed by a man twenty years older than me. And let me clarify that Chris was not sent a similar message. He was not reprimanded at all. Unbelievably embarrassed and upset, I ran to my mother for help; “how could people think this is my fault,” “they are blowing this way out of proportion,” “why would I be the one to get fired,” were all sentences I managed to get out in between sobs. I refused to go to work the next day.

Despite my in depth explanation of my side of the story, my supervisor still dangled potential job loss over my head, so I reached out to Kay. Kay, who I consider to be my third grandmother, who invites me over for lunch and gives me the best cards on my birthday. Surely she will talk some sense into my supervisor, she is the owner of the company after all, thank god I will have her to back me up in this incredible misunderstanding.

This takes us back to the suburban jungle. The wrought iron table. The tears now collecting at my chin, dripping onto my lap; surrounded by flowers I had helped prune just days earlier with the crew. With Chris.

“I don’t understand,” I said, “how is this my fault, I felt like I had no other choice but to answer his messages, I never made it inappropriate, he would get upset when I did not answer, he is literally 42 years old, I was scared.”

“You’re a pretty girl Fiona, you are going to have to get used to this happening to you in the workplace, and you’ve been to Europe, I considered you ‘wordly’ I thought you were more mature, you have handled this very poorly and if I was not friends with your family, you would be fired.

“Not Chris?”

“We need him for man power”

I never drive the speed limit, I enjoy pushing my luck and tack on that extra five or ten mph. But today? Today, I am abiding by the law because every house I pass only brings me that much closer to hers. Excuses have been accumulating in my mind all week; what could I say to get me out of this meeting? My head is spinning as I turn onto Lenola road, sifting through my prepared questions, my goals for the interview, my ‘why.’And why was I doing this? The entire reason why I involved Kay in this thesis was due to the dispute we had a few summers back, as I still could not wrap my head around why not only a fellow woman, but someone who I regarded as family, would ever blame me for being harassed. Let alone be fired over it. But I haven’t yet
decided if I want to bring up the situation, I figure it will be a ‘game-time’ decision. I do not
know if I want the interview to turn into a rehashing of previous trauma; this was to learn…to
understand what could have led to that sort of interaction. To Kay’s hurtful viewpoint. This was
for me.

I walk up the familiar path, flowers of every variety lining the way. Flowers I now know
by name thanks to Kay’s guiding expertise. I always liked her doorbell, it was a sort of key you
have to turn in order for it to ring. I rotate the key three times, step back, and clasp my sweaty
hands behind me.

Despite its beauty, there is a certain coldness to Kay’s house, it does not feel quite lived
in. Everything is perfectly positioned, spotless, and purposeful; it’s reminiscent of being in a
museum. You could say that Kay’s house was a pristine replica of her character. There is a
popular phenomenon which notes that people tend to ‘look’ like their pets, well I would argue
that Kay ‘looks’ like her home; elegant but intimidating. After exchanging polite pleasantries
and catching up on our lives, Kay invited me to sit at her all glass kitchen table to begin the
official interview. I noticed that she had printed out the questions I had sent her ahead of time
and had jotted down some margin notes in jet black, thin cursive. As always, she is prepared.

I opened up the interview like I planned to with all of my participants: “So tell me about
your mother, and how would you describe your relationship with her while you were growing
up?” A question I hoped would help induce insightful conversation, create a strong foundation
for the rest of our talk by getting her to think already about the ways she may have been
influenced by her mother. Everything has the potential to stem back to how one was raised,
psychology 101.
“It was good, it was…definitely um…the time period you know, I mean it was during the fifties, sixties. So she was a stay at home mom, which later in life I figured was a damn shame, even if she didn’t see it. You know…she kept the perfect house, she did all of the things: three meals on the table everyday, well balanced of course…incredible seamstress, good gardener. My mother was a brilliant woman and should have…well she would have been phenomenal in the working world. But I would say I had a good relationship with her. Not like the relationship that *you* have with *your* mother. It was more like being in school; do this, do that. You were told to do something and you did it without question. She definitely influenced how I dressed and looked. You know…‘sit up straight,’ ‘table manners’…those were extremely important. And I mean it paid off in the long run. I can't say I helped her a lot with the housework though, I guess I was too slow at it for my mother’s taste, or too awful at it. Which was fine with me. And I mean that didn't affect me in becoming a woman, I never wanted to go down that road anyway, I never needed to learn to keep a house, I would always have someone do that for me. I couldn’t be bothered.”

Now I am not too surprised by the way Kay describes her mother, she grew up during the time period that women’s rights activist Betty Friedan powerfully spoke out about in her novel “The Feminine Mystique,” a time when women were bound to the home, given no other options; serving as housewives with minimal education outside of that. According to Friedan, the *status quo* assumed that, in a typical household, the man should be the breadwinner, and the woman should adopt the role of homemaker. Now Kay found that she “could not be bothered” by that, you could say she was a part of the generation first influenced by Friedan’s work but is it in the way Friedan intended? Because it is true that Kay never fell into the “typical” role expected of women, as she has always been driven to enter the workforce, support herself, and most
importantly to her... had someone in her home, keeping it tidy but from her interview
statements, I believe it is more so because she views that work as “beneath her,” an opinion that
she shares with my granny. She places competing values on different forms of ‘work,’ which you
can see in her remarks about her mother as well. There is a fine line between wanting women to
break boundaries in what is expected of them, and then invalidating the “work” they do if they
choose to stay in the home.

Kay is what I like to call “classically old school,” which is a double edged sword. There
are some parts that I find extremely amusing about her outdated thinking, most of which I
discovered during this 45 minute interview. For example, at the age of 65, she re-entered the
dating scene after meeting a great man named Chuck;

“Before we were married, I would tell him, you can't stay here overnight...because
‘Fiona comes in the morning to get the bus to school right next door and she will see your car
and know that you spent the night’. I just didn't want to set that example, this neighborhood is a
traditional one.”

All I could do was laugh in response to this comment, as I answered, “oh Kay, that is too
funny, why would you think that I would mind?” Because I can guarantee you that I would not
care if I saw Chuck’s silver pickup truck in her driveway at 7:30 in the morning while I waited at
the bus stop. If anything, it would make me happy; confirming for me that love can thrive at any
point in life. How interesting that a 65 year old woman was concerned about the opinions of a 16
year old. I guess optics are everything. And in following this ‘traditional’ mindset, Kay of course
“can't believe it sometimes,” when it comes to the appearances of the younger generation, “torn
up tee shirts, ripped jeans. And that is not as bad as the nose rings. Oh my word, I had a tough
time adjusting to that, and tattoos and so forth,” she rants to me.
Me and my pierced nose, dyed hair and torn jeans just nod along pleasantly; “I can completely understand that.”

But unfortunately, it can’t always be ‘silly’ old-fashioned opinions, as the sword also tends to cut deep when it comes to this way of thinking, and the more amusing aspects that I mentioned above are not enough to stop the bleeding.

I ask her about her career, knowing that she had a fairly successful one in the business end of the fashion industry, for fifteen years she commuted to New York City from South Jersey to her office at Vogue’s main headquarters. I hoped to gain some sort of insight into her experience with men as a young woman in such an industry.

“Most of the men I worked with were my clients…and I got lunch with them everyday. That is all I really did, take men out to lunch. It’s called being a ‘market services director,’ but I would um, get them to commit a certain amount of money for fashion shows, advertising, or different things. And then I would go back to my bosses and say ‘they are committed for fifty to one hundred thousand dollars,’ or something along those lines.”

Intrigued by this dynamic, of ‘wooing’ clients over lunch, I then asked Kay if she felt as though her job revolved around appealing to men and if that carried negative consequences for her. This question was inspired by my reading of Bonnie Burstow, and her theory on “scripts”; “alienated existential blueprint for the living of our lives,”(), she argues that women often play into stereotypical expectations of women in order to move through interactions with the least amount of resistance.

My direct question back to her went like, “how was it like working in a male dominated setting…did you ever feel that appealing to men was like a part of your job, and do you think
that you ever adjusted parts of yourself in order to best get along with them,” which set off a five minute long monologue, that started off with…

“Well, I spent a lot of time with a lot of men and um… yes they hit on you, but I mean… they do today. You can say yes or no. And that’s what I would say to the girls under me who would come to me and say ‘oh this guy did this to me bla bla bla,’ I would say ‘you have a choice, you can say yes or no.’”

This was a truly defining moment of the interview. One I still find myself reflecting on even though it has been months now. Although I did not want to read too deeply into this comment, it seemed fairly pointed, giving somewhat of an answer as to why I wanted to interview her in the first place. This essentially addressed our fall out all those summers ago, without addressing it… she has viewed sexual harassment like this for decades now. A poor choice, consciously made by the woman.

“I mean God, you can just make up something to get out of a situation. And fluff it for them. When I was presented with an unwelcome comment, I didn't just say ‘ew no I wouldn't go out with you,’” *in a shrill, mocking voice* “I would never cut them off nasty like that.”

Essentially, it is all about appealing to men, no matter what, as they hold all of the power; and then to view women as always having the choice to say no is to label their submission as the problem. Exactly what happened in my case. Due to the glaring mistake of not shutting down Chris from the start, it was perfectly reasonable to then paint me as the perpetrator of my own harassment.

Shifting back to Kay’s life, her reasoning for not “cutting men off nasty” even if they deserved it, actually makes sense to a degree. In her line of work, connections were everything. So even if she was put in an uncomfortable situation, Kay’s success depended on the monetary
commitments of her clients. She needed to keep the peace, even if that meant sacrificing the parts of herself that wanted to talk back.

She continued with, “... But I did establish some very good relationships. I mean, yes, there were parties and drinking and so forth but the behaviors that stemmed from those environments never really bothered me. I don't know how I feel today about it. Um…my job was never in jeopardy I guess I can say, depending on whether or not I put out for somebody. I did not have that experience. I mean I had some characters who knew where I was staying in the city and would call me at 3 am…they thought that because of the way I acted at the business dinner, that I had wanted to get together with them. But you know I had other men who were looking after me when it came to things like that. I think the whole, you know… ‘me too movement’ is just so sad…so awful what some people have been through and then to have lost their jobs over it. I mean I never had that…”

I think it is important to acknowledge Kay’s privilege when it comes to these experiences, or lack thereof, of sexual harrassment and maybe it is due to her inexperience with the darker side of gender power dynamics that has led to her hurtful stance on the matter. Not that I would ever wish it upon anyone to go through an experience similar to or worse than mine, but it is glaringly obvious that Kay’s dearth of understanding fueled her ignorant and distressing response to my particular circumstance.

“But I realized long ago, and still know at my age now, if I met a 95 year old man, he would try to come after me…it's just the nature of the beast. It is better to just expect it, get used to it, and deal with it the best way possible, than try to make it worse for yourself.”

I was at a loss for words after this comment was made. I had no idea how to respond. Essentially, it was like Kay gave up. She was holding out no hope that things would get better.
Her saying that a man’s inappropriate behavior is “just the nature of the beast,” is the equivalent of saying “ah, c’est la vie.” No accountability, no pushback whatsoever. It was as though she had fully succumbed to the patriarchy. It was disheartening. I wanted to argue back, pull from years of my ‘woke’ Haverford education to explain how ignorant it was to push the narrative that these behaviors are inherent in men. To criticize her opinion that nothing will ever change so it is up to us to learn how to “live with it.” But I practiced restraint. I did not come to argue. I came to learn. And I did learn something. There was one silver lining. Kay uttered almost the exact same words in this interview, that she did when she was shaming me for my interactions with Chris. I was sitting in her presence just like this, when she said “You’re a pretty girl fiona, you are going to have to get used to this happening to you in the workplace.” And for some reason, knowing that this was an opinion that she held for years now, across various contexts, made me feel a bit better. That it was not my fault. This was simply how she viewed the world. It is not my responsibility to argue, to try and change that opinion; I was solely here to listen.

After this comment was made, I also thought of Holly Mathews, a cognitive anthropologist who studied women’s accommodation and subsequent acceptance of the harsh realities associated with the patriarchy. Mathews comes forward with a fresh take, writing that the very question of women's accommodation could be critiqued on the grounds that we “are presupposing that women have options for resistance,” (Mathews, 235). In other words, one could conclude that women are accommodating to patriarchal powers because they have no other choice. Or are living under the impression that they do not. This is what I would like to believe when it comes to Kay. That her mergence into the patriarchy is due to the fact that she truly believes men cannot change. So it is best to just adjust accordingly. In a way, it is like her own form of looking out for fellow women. She felt as though she was helping me, protecting me, by
chastising me for not being more well equipped to deal with adverse situations. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

I want to move on from this topic, so I ask about her first husband, Art, who she met when she had just entered the fashion industry. He showed her the ropes. He was also over thirty years her senior. From what I have shared of Kay thus far, I do not know if the shock factor associated with that factoid is as powerful as when I learned of this information a few years back from my grandmother during one of our famous family gossip sessions… “Well you know Kay was married before she met Chuck? Yeah, to a man named Art, she married him when she was 25 and guess how old he was… 57. Yeah... imagine that Fiona. I can't even imagine her father's reaction, I mean for god’s sake, Art was older than him!”

Kay is a very well refined woman. Cashmere sweaters, subtle botox, and a nose that seems as though it is perpetually stuck in an upturned position. So when I discovered this little secret of hers, one she kept from me, I was more impressed than anything else. Who knew she had it in her? I mean don’t get me wrong, I couldn't care less about the age gap, to each their own, I was more intrigued in how this arrangement came to be, and how he impacted her life.

“So tell me about your first husband, I never hear you talk about him…”

“I think at 22…that’s when I met Art Stuckey, he was a lot older than I was and he was an advertising executive. And the thing we had in common… when I first met him casually, was uh…my interests in fashion. And he called on Wanamakers and so forth to get me connected and about a week later, we actually ran into each other in the Wanamakers office building. He asked me to lunch and I have been with him ever since. And he was the one that was so excited about encouraging me, and supporting me. And soon I became a buyer at that firm…”
Kay is always tying things back to work, even though I asked to hear about her first husband, she manages to mention how quickly she became a buyer. This is her story not his; again, Kay has always put herself and her successes first.

“... We got married when I was 25 but we were living together for 4 years prior to that. Which, the prospect of living together before marriage at that time, was... god. I got a separate apartment, well Art got it for me, because the idea that we would be sharing a place was so upsetting for people...you had to hide it.”

I felt the wheels turning in my brain, and heard a ‘click!’ So that explains Kay’s persistent ‘oldschool’ nature. Of course. She experienced actual societal judgment for partaking in premarital relations as a young adult, which influenced her courtship with Chuck 40 years later. I still laugh to myself as I imagine a sixty-five year old Chuck sneaking out of Kay’s house in the middle of the night, all to keep up the image of her perfection. All because sixteen year old Fiona would be outside in the morning. She made him a real ‘backdoor man.’

“So when you were considering marrying Art, and imagining your future together, did you reflect at all on your mother’s life? After seeing her role in your family, did you just decide that kind of life wasn't something you wanted?”

I was proud of myself for coming up with this question on the spot; as we were nearing the end of the interview, I knew I wanted to try to tie it back to her mother again. One last time.

“Oh yeah I definitely knew, not for me. I never wanted to be a housewife. And I really always wanted a man in my life, but marriage was not essential. And I was always content with myself, I always kept a separate checking account. But I allowed them to humor me. I mean here is the thing, I was always married to someone I could fall back on. Both in Art and Chuck. I was
not stressed out. For example, if I didn't like my job or something, I could quit and figure something else out because I had them as a backup system.”

I can only describe this moment as a ‘major plot twist.’ Given her answers up until now, I had written Kay off as someone who had succumbed to the patriarchy. Yes she had her personal successes, but she more often than not played into the role that was expected of her. The role of someone who accepted “the nature of the beast,” but here she was using the beast to her advantage. I was torn on the matter. On one hand, I respected it. Use your situation to the best of your ability and advantage; psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske said it best in “The Psychology of Women Under the Patriarchy.” But on the other hand… I found this to be somewhat hypocritical of her. Here she is, posing as this staunch woman, who owns her own garden company, and takes nothing from nobody, but always had a “safety net” provided by her husbands. A safety net she was fully aware of, and relied upon. In the end, it seems as though we are all still reliant upon men in one way, shape, or form.

I thought that Kay provided some very insightful commentary that I wanted to end on,

“You mentioned that you haven't really experienced many negative things in your job but are there any times that you can recall where you felt disadvantaged in the workplace at all ?”

“I mean yes at Vogue, but it was because of the women! It was unbelievable, I mean have you seen The Devil Wears Prada? *laughs* like that. Some nasty bitches. And I actually had a female boss later on. I went through a series of men, and they basically had kept creating jobs around me in order to give me a space to fit in. where they saw I was good. And the men were fine, they were good but then I was put with this girl who was …she was about 7 years younger than I was. And I was a little bit scared about it but she was terrific, we still correspond. So that…you know, she let me do my thing, that turned out good but some of the ones I had to deal
with oh boy. But yes, that type of stuff was there. Upsetting stuff with the men, but my job was never affected by that situation and I also just learned to deal with it, Like you should.”

“One question I talked to mom about yesterday was about feeling more judged by women than men in certain situations.”

“Oh yes definitely, I think it was mainly jealousy.”

“Why?”

“I just had more confidence, and I think women are trained to see that as a threat in other women and attractive in men.”

Even though Kay expressed having more negative experiences with women in the workforce rather than men (which is what I was expecting), I think she offered a very insightful explanation as to why. Had I wanted an answer that fell very nicely into my idea of “perfect feminism,” where Kay got along with the women in her office, and banded together against the men? Of course I did. But I am learning. I know that is not how the world usually ends up panning out. Instead, I want to focus on her comment on how women are “trained” to view each other in a negative light. It actually makes a lot of sense, women are often pitted against each other. We can't break down the patriarchy if we are caught up in breaking down each other.
I was sitting in my usual spot. In the chair facing the window, looking out onto the back deck lined with flower boxes; the blues, pinks and purples dotting the wooden rails brings splashes of color into a kitchen that seems to be frozen in time. A relic of the 70’s: wooden cabinets that creak no matter how gently you open them, matching yellow and brown tiles for the backsplash and floor, paired with faded green walls. The only updated part of the kitchen were the appliances, the stainless steel provided a humorous juxtaposition against the remnants of past decades. But granny loves to cook, more specifically bake, so, of course, she needed the newest technologies.

Like clockwork, hot chocolate was placed in front of me, whipped cream dripping down the side of the mug that had my name hand painted across it. No matter the weather, granny made me a hot chocolate every day after school, along with whatever food I requested. She insisted I tell her exactly what I wanted, and she would make it happen. Pancakes? Mac and cheese? Chicken? Salmon? Waffles? Coming right up. As children, My sister and I quickly started referring to her kitchen as a restaurant, we even made a mock menu.

It is now my senior year of high school, and I am staring out the window as I mindlessly sip on my daily hot chocolate, granny is flipping pancakes a few feet away after forcing me to finally tell her what I was craving, the biggest smile plastered on her face. I had received my acceptance letter to Haverford a couple weeks earlier; the entire family was ecstatic, especially granny. She always wanted her eldest “grand girl” to go to a worthy school. And before you ask, yes, Granny deems what is worthy. She ‘knows’…apparently. She's been through it before, with her daughter Laura

My entire life, I have been compared to my Aunt Laura, who also went to such a school. She attended Harvard, and then the Wharton School of Business, and enjoyed a successful career on Wall Street. Ever since I started bearing some visual resemblance to her, and it was discovered that I could read at a higher level than the other kids in my grade, I was casted as the “next Laura.” It seemed as though everyone in my family, at least on this side, became fixated on herding me towards schools with the best name, best reputation; anything to have another shot at a “textbook success story” that the family can brag about and I just allowed it to happen. What can I say, I am a people pleaser; And if that means going to a college that I am not 100% sure I even like? Sign me up.

I am in mid lick of the whipped cream topping when my granny says, “Fiona I am so excited that you are going to haverford, but I have to ask…are you going to stay with Mike?”

Michael was my boyfriend at the time. My goofy high school love, a refreshing break from the serious state that I was expected to live my life in, being the “new Laura” and all. He was from the same town as me; we grew up together but only crossed paths during our last couple months of senior year. He just committed to The College of New Jersey, which put an hour-ish drive between us and why I thought she was asking the question, to gauge if I was willing to do the distance.

“I mean we haven't had a serious conversation about it just yet but an hour really isn't bad so I would be willing to try to stay together,” I answer. Michael and I were still in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, we had just said ‘I love you,’ so I was not too worried.
“It’s just that…” my granny starts, then lowers her voice to make sure I am the only one who hears the next part, my grandfather in the room adjacent, “you’ll have so many opportunities to meet men at Haverford who are just like you, who will be successful…”

I do not know why I was surprised by this statement. Maybe because my granny never talked to me about boys or my love life, we were not close on that level, but that wasn’t what this was about. No this, at its core, was about success, like it always is with my grandmother. Her idea was that because Michael was going to a state school, because he is from Cinnaminson, he is not good enough for me. In other words, what opportunities am I being provided if we stay together? Everything is a business deal with her.

I cannot remember how I answered, but I can say that Michael and I stayed together for the first year and a half of college, then had a very amicable breakup and I can confirm that the men I have dated since then, from Haverford, have paled in comparison.

I walk the fifty meters from Kay’s house over to my Granny’s. It’s actually quite astonishing when you think about how after growing up with and befriending my mommom, Kay ends up as my other grandmother’s next door neighbor; it is like she was destined to be a part of our lives.

I’m cursing my overly ambitious past self for scheduling two interviews in one day, as I drag my feet across the cracked sidewalk. The sidewalk I grew up on: where I played hopscotch with my grandfather, where I learned to ride a bike (with training wheels of course), and where I inevitably scraped my knee after taking the training wheels off. This sidewalk marks the homerun boundary for our Fourth of July family wiffle ball games; and it is now supporting me on my walk towards my Granny’s house, to finally learn about the woman who had a huge role in raising me for the first time in twenty one years. I climb the front steps, duck underneath the tattered Irish flag that hangs with pride everyday without fail, and enter into a house that is buzzing with energy.

I am greeted by the chaotic clanking of pots and pans, the ringing of various timers, and muttered curses. A warm glow, accompanied by the strong aroma of freshly baked bread invites
me in towards the commotion, towards the kitchen, the room you can find my grandmother in eighty percent of the time.

If there is one thing you need to know about my granny, it’s that she will cook for you. Morning, afternoon, or night, one of the first things I am greeted with, after “how’s my grandgirl doing,” is “are you hungry?” And with all of the ingredients to my, and my sister’s, favorite meals on deck at all times, it is no wonder why I look forward to the weekly dinners at her house; one of the perks of living less than five minutes away from your grandmother. I’ve known nothing else.

Shepherds pie was the main course of the night, with granny catering to my sister, Sophia’s, preferences this time around. Yet, I could barely enjoy the meal, as I was preoccupied by my thoughts concerning the impending interview, letting the dinner table conversation pass me by without so much as a forced smile to even just feign acknowledgement towards what occuring around me. But I am sure I did not miss much anyway, the conversation always hits the same three points: ‘My success at Haverford,’ ‘Sophia’s forced sharing and immediate devaluation of her recent escapades’ and ‘the latest on Aunt Laura’s seemingly perfect life through my granny’s retelling.’ But tonight, coming in off the bench to sub out ‘Fiona’s recent recaps of Haverford life,’ due to my mental absence, is topic number four: ‘what freudian slip did mom just make that we can all relentlessly bully her for?’ Now that was a hit.

After all the plates had been cleared away, I found myself alone at the table with my grandmother, everyone else had retreated to the living room to watch jeopardy, the dinner-at-granny’s-tradition.

Was the interview about to begin? We hadn’t talked about it all night, I had assumed she’d forgotten and I was not itching to remind her. Pushing it back one more day won’t hurt.
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But I noticed she had pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. Granny, like Kay, had printed out the questions I had sent ahead of time, notes scribbled along the margins in pencil; just the beginning of the numerous parallels I noticed between them. She immediately starts answering the first question, “describe your relationship with your mother”, without a moment’s notice. I lurch for my phone and press record.

“So you wanted to hear about my mother, I’ll give you a story. It was around WW2, and everything was so scarce and rationed and all. Someone she knew gave her the bough of a tree, for her to use for firewood to heat up the house. Remember, we only had three rooms back then, our kitchen, my parents room and my room that I shared with my two brothers, so one fire was enough to heat everything…”

Before I continue, I feel as though I should provide a bit of background information on my granny’s life as it is vastly different from the other women in my family. My granny grew up in a small fishing village along the southern coast of Ireland, called Cheekpoint. It is so rural, that there are no home addresses. All mail is directed to the “general store” and it is up to then, who knows everyone and everything, to pass along your letters when you stop by for groceries. You know how older generations will always find themselves going on a rant that starts with “kids these days…” and usually pertains to younger generations never understanding the value of hard work? They explain how “back in their day” they had to “trek miles to school, and fight three bears along the way” or something exaggerated like that just to prove their generation's superiority? Well my grandmother is quite literally the embodiment of that, except it is not an exaggeration. She actually had to ride her bike five miles to and from school each day, live in a three room cottage, and fetch bathwater from the well a mile down the road. But I’ll let her explain all of that.
“So after midnight mass, a man put the bough of the tree outside of our house, on what we used to call ‘the bank.’ And someone took it. Now there she was alone with three…babies essentially because in the winter my father went to England for work. But she had an idea of who took it. So she went down to their house and demanded it back. Completely confronted the person, in the middle of the night. And they gave it back! She was very tough. I mean she had to do everything. And you know my mother didn't get married until she was 36? So she worked from 14 on…and she worked for a lot of years, ten years, in England. You know, in hotels and such. Um …she worked in a nursing home in Waterford, and helped prepare meals and wait on the patients and stuff. She said she almost didn't bother getting married, but she said that my father would always bother her *laughs*, following her back and forth from England for work. She finally just said yes. But she was…she was the main person, you know? She did the shopping, the cooking, had a garden, grew some vegetables, and shoveled the coal in the winter. She did all of the …manual…physical work, you know? It was just the way it was when we grew up in the fifties in Cheekpoint. Very different from the women in America at the time, so much dirtier. So anytime that I would…later on in life…think ‘oh I can't stand to do this’, or ‘oh woe is me’...I would think of my mother, and I would say to myself “buck up” *laughs* So that was my mother.”

You could say that my grandmother is the “odd one out” when it comes to my research, even stating herself that her upbringing was vastly different than those growing up in America in the fifties; the typical housewife you envision during that time could not be further from the woman who raised my granny. But what I latched onto here was her reference to her “buck up” mentality. Hearing those words triggered a series of flashbacks, of her telling me the same thing
when I was a child. Sad after fighting with my sister? “Buck up.” Fell off my bike and scraped my knee? “Buck up.” Feeling sick and wanting to stay home from school? “Buck up.” My granny was never the one to provide comfort, or offer sweet nothings in your time of need. And hearing these little snippets of her childhood, what she endured, that makes sense. A little jarring for me to experience, given I was raised to sympathize with all forms of suffering, understanding that it is a subjective experience. Yet again, I was not raised in a cottage on a rural farm with no access to running water.

My grandmother glances back down at the paper, ensued by a quick huff and a furrowed brow, “So I see the next question here is ‘when did I become aware of my gender and its attributes?’ Fiona… I was always aware that I was a girl,” she erupts into laughter.

This is what I was nervous about, what I immediately dreaded when I came to the decision to base my thesis on my family members, their lack of open mindedness. Their lack of effort in understanding what I was trying to “get at,” and not taking my research questions seriously. But I chalked this one up to generational differences, or just a dearth of experience discussing topics like gender in this way. I need to do a better job at remembering not everyone is plagued with the urge to constantly analyze every minute detail of their lives situated in various social structures. Better yet, not everyone has then had that urge be nurtured and intensified through a Haverfordian education. So I provide an example from my own experience, to try and further explain what I mean by “becoming aware of your gender,” something I should have done ahead of time, for accessibility and clarification…

“No I know, I mean more in the sense of discovering that your gender is tied to societal differences in a way. Like for me, I would say I became aware of my gender when I was in fourth grade. My friends Tina, Angela and I were not allowed to compete in the school’s 3v3
basketball tournament even though there was no rule stating it was for boys only. The adults running the event gave us a lot of pushback but finally allowed us to play, and we actually ended up in the playoffs, but then the next year, the signup sheet explicitly stated that it was a “boys only 3v3 tournament.” So that was kind of a moment where I was like, oh damn, this is not equal because I am a girl.”

She looks at me horror struck, “you're kidding me! That is insane!”

“I know right, so if you could maybe think of any moments like that, from your childhood where you realized that your gender prompts certain limitations or expectations?”

“Hm, I do not think that I really experienced anything I could not join in on because of my gender. But yeah, I definitely was expected to help wash the dishes and set the table and do things like that around the house while my brothers were not. I also had to trek miles through the fields, down to the well to collect water for us, because my brothers would run off with their friends and they wouldn't do it. But they were not punished for that. It just fell on my shoulders. But *laughs* totally different upbringing than others as you can imagine. Growing up in Cheekpoint.”

A different upbringing indeed. I find myself comparing our childhoods because it is quite unbelievable when you put hers in perspective. Here I am complaining about how I was not allowed to play in a fundraiser basketball tournament, while my granny was lugging buckets of water for miles, the burden falling on her essentially due to the fact that she was the only daughter. Buck up Fiona.

“Now lets see what we have next here,” she says, peering at her paper over her thin rimmed glasses, “uh ‘growing up did family members every talk to you about your body or physical appearance, as well as expectations they had for your specific presentation?’”
I found it amusing as well as a bit unnerving that my granny was essentially interviewing herself. I had wanted this to flow like a conversation, yet she was reading the questions I had sent her off of the sheet out loud to herself. That was not my intention, I had only sent the questions to allow her time to gather her thoughts so as to not freeze on the spot. I felt foolish just sitting there.

“Um, no, no. But all of the magazines, the media were all about makeup and hair. Like what it is now. But as I got older, after coming to the states, in all of the commercials, all of the tv shows, the wife was always there. When you would look at the ideal woman, she was never disheveled. She was always perfect looking, presentable. When you were married…and if you were a stay at home mother, you were told to look nice when your husband came home from work, have a smile on your face, comb your hair and even change your clothes. That shit. Which…you know I never did. But that's what you were told to do…”

My grandfather, who I spotted lingering not so inconspicuously in the kitchen chimes in, “Yeah, were you like that for me? No.”

He laughs at his own little joke and takes a seat at the table. Inviting himself into our conversation. Despite explicitly stating that I wanted this thesis research to be female oriented, I was grateful for my grandfather's added presence. There have been growing concerns within the family regarding my granny’s mental soundness. Her memory has started to decline, and due to the fact that he knows her better than anyone, I had confidence that my grandfather could help fill in the gaps, and add in some extra anecdotes without centering himself in the narrative.

She shoots him her famous look, her hooded eye death stare, and fires back, “you sat on your ass on the couch. Let me tell you, Fiona, we had an apartment in Northeast Philadelphia. And I worked at that time. I guess I was working at the public ledger building. So I wouldn't get
home until six…right? And Poppop would get home at like three thirty or something, because he was teaching at the time. And what would he do? He would sit on the coach Fiona, watching some stupid thing, and wait for me to get home and start dinner. And that was…*sighs* the way it was.”

On paper, my granny presents as a classic feminist. Which after engaging with Gay’s “Bad Feminist,” I do not even know what that means anymore, as I agree that there is not one “correct” way to “do” feminism. But yes, she calls out typical forms of gender inequality like the example she just provided. She has always supported and pushed me in my extensive athletic career, again, envisioning me as her daughter Laura, who played on the women’s ‘under 20’ national soccer team. Even in the seventies, she was the mother who was advocating for equality in sports,

“Well in highschool, both the boys and girls teams would have summer practices around the same times, and one of the fathers there would talk about how hard the boys worked. And I said ‘wait a minute, my daughter’s team runs twelve times around the field before starting practice,’ I was so pissed. It was always ‘ah the boys’ this, and ‘the boys’ that, but I was always known to speak out against those comments. I could never stand for any gender prejudice. It was so upsetting to me…to see so many families that had athletic aspirations for their sons, but never their daughters. But this is also right when Title IX came into play. In college, there were just as many women playing sports than the men but the amount of money given to them was drastically different. The women would get little to no money. Ridiculous.”

But there is always a dark side to the moon, because despite making comments like this, my granny can be “accused” of playing into more hidden, nuanced patriarchal ideals that are
deeply rooted in our society; at least according to her overzealous granddaughter. I had a sneaking suspicion that she fell victim to the siren call of the American Dream.

This came to light when I asked what inspired her voyage to America, “so what was the motivation to come over here?” A question I always harbored, because it seemed like such a drastic decision on her part. She left everyone behind: her mother, father, and two brothers. No one joined in on this immigration. She was only eighteen years old.

“Oh it was definitely more of a romanticized thing. You know, I had been going to see Elvis Presley movies, and Pat Boone movies, oh well you never heard of Pat Boone *laughs* but he was a sweetheart. But yeah I had it built up as this sort of party place. You know Elvis had the hips going, I was really in love with it all. This fantasy.”

The American Dream is an alluring one.

After growing up in a rural village, where a rickety bus from the neighboring city was the only traffic that ever graced the thin dirt road, I can see where my granny got the idea that the only way ‘up’ was to ‘get out’. Leave the country. Start fresh in a world of possibilities, of movie stars and big parties and swinging hips. My granny completely bought what America was selling. And quickly became enthralled with what I like to call, “surface level success.” Basically the idea that wealth equals success; money buys happiness. In other words, I see it as a very linear, textbook notion of success that is deeply entrenched in the harmful capitalistic culture that harms more people than it helps. And it is the way that this “perfect on paper,” fierce, feminist woman discreetly plays into the patriarchy, through the capitalism pipeline; like Gay said, no one can ‘do’ feminism correctly and my granny, pushing her only daughter, Laura, towards her idea of “success” is a perfect example of where she “failed”: high school salutatorian, Harvard undergrad education (an ivy league student-athlete at that), Wharton School of Business for grad
school, successful job on Wall Street, big mansion in the suburbs of New York, a nanny to raise her two kids, spontaneous trips to Europe. The American dream. This is exactly what my granny envisioned at seventeen, in her rundown room that she shared with two rambunctious brothers.

And yes, on the surface, my aunt is very successful. The pride of the family. But how happy is she? She missed the entire childhood of her two sons, raised by another woman while she was working grueling hours, that left her feeling empty and hopeless especially after finding herself out of a job after a career change. Which forced her to reconsider if it was all worth it to begin with. Yet this very classic path to success is still idolized. Yearned after. Especially by my granny. I believe this resonates with Bell Hook’s “Where We Stand: Class Matters.” Hooks writes of yearning to break free from the “tyranny of her mother’s house and her mother’s ways,” who could only get ahead through marriage (Hooks, 5). In a way, I think my granny still viewed herself as that woman, who tried to “get out” but still had to rely on a prosperous marriage to change her status, dependent on my pop pop for stability, because “a girl without proper education, without the right background, could only change her status through marriage,” (Hooks, 5). But she didn't want that same fate for her daughter, she had traveled too far for the struggle to be a generational one still. Hence her obsession with pushing my aunt into anything and everything that could get her into a new realm of independent wealth.

My dad went in a very different direction and has stayed in the same job since he graduated. He is a mailman, and he loves his occupation, which I think is really important to note in regards to my theory of “surface level success.” He gets to be active outside everyday, and fills the hours listening to audiobooks; pleasing both the athlete and history major inside of him. Yet, my granny never talks about him. Of course she is always discussing what Laura is up to in New York, all of her past successes, bragging to our relatives when we go abroad about her
lifestyle (she even brings up me as well) but then does not carry that same energy in talking about my father. Like his life, career and happiness is somehow less valuable than hers.

So yes, the American Dream is an alluring one, but unsurprising to me, as I have studied similar experiences throughout my time in Haverford’s Anthropology department, the rose colored glasses she so enthusiastically viewed this country through, slowly faded to gray after she arrived...

“Well I'll tell you this Fiona, I was very disappointed in coming here, because the boys that I grew up with and would see in Waterford, they were more like, what we would call, ‘Teddy Boys’ at the time. They had the ‘DA’ haircuts, and the leather jackets and we had dances. And I came here and I remember thinking, ‘does anyone do anything other than going out to eat?’ I remember being like ‘is there anything else you do for fun?’ All of the friends I made wanted to go to a pizza place on a Friday night, it wasn't the way the movies portrayed it. And all the boys wore khakis. Oh god *laughs* and crewcuts which I hated...

Granny is very opinionated when it comes to eating habits and appearances, I can just envision her judging scoff now. Like Kay, she has strong opinions on appearance.

“And another thing, going to dances on Friday nights was a big thing in Ireland, a big social event, and I was too young to go really when I lived there so I was so excited to go to ‘dances’ in America. Well, I hated going to La Salle dances when I first got here. In Philadelphia, you know the school? When Pop-Pop was a student there. All of the boys would be on one side, the girls on another and I would show up and be like, ‘what the hell? Oh god, all these guys are so…’ *eye roll*."

My grandfather cuts her off, giving into the urge to defend his image, his masculinity. He needs to tell his side of the story,
“Well, the first time I saw your grandmother was at one of those dances. And I started walking towards her and god fiona, she was just standing there like this *crosses arms, and glowers at me*, arms crossed, snarky look, she was not happy. *laughs*

“Well you're right, I wasn't happy!” She retorts.

“And I was like woah, and walked away…she scared me”

This short interaction reveals just how much of a spit fire my granny was, and still is. She is in fact scary at times. She is unapologetic, and gruff. Someone you would definitely want in your corner, and not facing you head on. And although I loved the extra insight into my grandmother's younger persona, I wanted to get us back on track. This was not about my grandfather.

“And who did you stay with again? When you came over here by yourself?”

“I stayed with my aunt, my fathers sister.”

“And how was she?”

“Ehhh, we didn't really get along, I do not know what she was really expecting from me.. I was 17. It wasn't the best relationship. But I just got it into my head that I wanted to go to the US…”

She trails off here, like she did not want to continue reflecting on her aunt, I do not push her. She switches the topic on her own:

“So I don't know what else you can use other than my mother being a very strong person, and truly taking care of all of us even when we virtually had nothing. She did everything, you know and working until she had children and then taking on so much more labor after that And you know money was the whole thing then…and my mothers whole thing was…like when my father was fishing, because you know he wasn't always away, he would fish locally, but then
fishing you never could depend on a weekly salary, so her whole thing always was. The constant wage *laugh* that you could depend on. You know, because times were tough, and so we had very little money but like I always say, we always ate well and dressed as well as we could. And I mean everyone in that area was the same, on the same level, but my mother was definitely a better provider, she definitely was a better manager of the money and a better cook and everything was spotless in our very small, little cottage *laughs* I mean, you know and I slept in the same bed as my brother Jim until we became too old to do so, because Pat and Jim would fight so terribly they weren't allowed to share together. So Jim and I were in the double bed and Pat was at the foot of the bed in a little twin.”

I laugh along with her, I was lucky enough to have visited Ireland a few times, and have met Pat and Jim. Imagining those three strong personalities cramped in one tiny room terrifies me half to death.

“Because I stand by the belief that society expects women to act in specific ways, ways they deem not only stereotypically feminine but acceptable as well, can you recall anytimes you felt as though you had to play into that? Embody a sort of script or role in order to get by in certain situations?” Learning from my previous blunders, I add in a brief example before my granny can respond with a puzzled yet snide remark, “like for my mom specifically, she said when she was waitressing, she always had to play off rude comments, laugh along with the men, always had to be bubbly and dress up her gender.”

“Well… I remember one thing when I was working in the public ledger building. It was one of the supervisors, this guy named Bob. So this young girl just started, and he is looking at her, and he said to the room “oh, we must be hiring over the phone these days.” And since he
held a higher position in the company, all of the women were expected to laugh at his jokes and go along with it. So it was like we had to play into the misogyny. Oh I felt awful about that. And men would always, you know, look you up and down whenever you walked down the cubical aisles, no woman was ever treated like a professional.”

This really took me by surprise, as I cannot imagine my grandmother ever playing into the script like this; it must have been so hard. I offer a sullen nod of acknowledgement.

My grandfather seemed to nudge my granny under the table, she glances at him as he murmurs, “and what about the time you wanted a promotion dear, what happened then?” He was aware of the stories that had slipped her mind.

“Oh yes right, another thing I remember from work was, I was in the ledger building still, with an insurance company, and we mainly handled automobile accidents, you know? And I was there for a few years, and one day I thought, ‘I want to become an adjuster, I’ve been here long enough, I deserve it.’ So I marched into the manager’s office, got myself all *sits up straight in her chair and fixes her hair as to simulate priming herself for ‘her big moment’ * And I said, ‘I would like to become an adjuster, you know I have been doing the work.. on the phone, looking at estimates, sending out checks and memos, I think I deserve the upgrade,’ And he interrupts me and says ‘are you planning on having children?’” She rolls her eyes, and scoffs, her classic granny scoff, “needless to say, I didn't get the job. But as far as ‘using your gender to get what I wanted’ …no. I'll agree with your mom-mom on that one, like her, never did that, no.”

“Would you notice other friends or coworkers partaking in that?”

“Oh yeah, I had a friend who was a big flirt in the office, but I mean I do not think it was to get ahead in life or work, it was more she just liked the attention. She got married really young
and I think she wasn't happy in that relationship but divorce was very taboo back then. But it was still all innocent, she was never going to cheat but she definitely was friendly with people. She liked the attention from men, I never suffered from that *laughs*

I mean, I liked to go to a dance and be asked to dance, or go on dates but I was not like Mary”

I found the wording of this to be very interesting, how she wields the term “suffering.” She had to clarify that she didn't suffer from the need for male attention or validation, the strong word bringing me back to Roxane Gay. How to do feminism “right” 101, step one: don’t suffer for male attention.

“Oh you know, going back to your previous question, when you asked if my family members ever made comments about my looks, there was one time but it was an extreme case. It was truly the only thing my mother ever said to me about looks. I guess I was fifteen or so, and I was going to the Mercy Convent secondary school which was probably about eight miles from where we lived and I would get there on my bike…”

So it seems that I provided misinformation earlier, it was eight miles on bike to school instead of five, as if five wasn't enough to make you feel bad about all of the times you complained about something menial.

“...Now, I was going down this hill, this one particular morning, and I do not know if it was raining or it was just wet from the night before, but there was a herd of cows at the bottom of the hill, and I couldn't stop my bike. So here I am racing down this hill towards a herd of cows. I went in between two cow heads, their bodies bump into me, and I went flying over the handlebars. Black eye, scraped up face. I don’t think I got any other injuries so I got up and continued to school. And the farmer, behind the cows, oh god he's laughing.
So later that night, we are sitting around our old wooden table having dinner, and my mother goes ‘no man will ever fall in love with that face.’"

She rears her head back in laughter. And I join in. Obviously this is not an entirely relatable story, but I guess I can only speak for myself when I say that I have never even come close to crashing my bike into a herd of cows while on my eight mile bike ride to school. But not everything needs to be relatable, or be tied back to theory or heavily analyzed. Sometimes a funny story is needed and refreshing. And I am grateful to share a laugh with my granny, they are few and far in between, as well as learn about her childhood. It is something out of a movie. She continues on,

“That was the only time my mother said anything like that to me. But you were though, Fiona, and I do not know if Kay said this or your grandmother, but you were expected, you know as a girl, you were expected to act a certain way: not to be loud, um, you had to sit very ladylike--because you were always in a dress--you couldn't get muddy. But my brothers were not expected to sit properly. Ladylike *laughs* yeah that was the term. There were a lot more rules imposed on women than there were on men. But my mother, you know, I always admired. She would be moody, you know and she would be hard to get along with at times but…on the whole, I got along with her. We shared a lot of things. I would sit and watch her roll out pastry, I would go shopping with her, I would go on a walk with her, out to lunch. My brothers never went out to lunch. I went to lunch with my mother *laughs* and I went to dance classes every Saturday. But as far as the ‘men thing’ *clicks tongue, shakes head* and I mean it was kind of different too, the way I grew up because…it wasn't, like in school we were all girls. It was an all girls school. But in primary school, at Faithlegg, it was girls and boys, and from that school, I only know of two girls who went on to college later in life. And, the teacher's son. In highschool,
I don't really remember. One girl became a nun. But I do not remember who went to college at that point, everyone just tried to get a job.

I had a very different upbringing for sure *laughs*”
Mom-mom

I was running late as per usual, but at least this time I had an excuse, I had soccer practice. I always had practice, or a game, or a training session. Growing up, sports were my life. I was always in season. Without any time to change, or even freshen up, I burst into my grandmother’s house in my muddied shorts, sweat stained t-shirt and messy ponytail, my father (the sports chauffeur) trailing behind me. I was thirteen years old.

“Happy birthday Aunt Stephanie!” I said enthusiastically while waving around a sparkly gift bag in my hand, announcing my arrival while also making up for my forty five minute long absence. Family parties were always held at my mom-mom’s, her house was the most central location for her three daughters and their families to get together. Every birthday in the family, no matter what age, called for an entire extended family celebration, even during the months where there was a different birthday every week. I loved it when I was younger, it was an excuse to eat cake and play with my cousins, but as I grew up and got more involved in sports and school, the very frequent gatherings became more of a hassle to work into my schedule.

I was welcomed with an abundance of hugs; another entire family reunion just to celebrate my Aunt’s 43rd birthday. I took my seat at the table, the food already halfway gone from everyone’s plates, and I noticed my grandmother sitting across from me, arms folded. “Nice of you to join us,” was all I got from her; I wrote it off as another one of her empty, sassy remarks so I returned it with a chuckle. She was not joking around with me, but I did not know that just yet. The rest of the day went on fairly normal; there were the usual life updates from everyone, the opening of the presents, the off key singing and the cutting of the cake. My grandmother was short all day in her remarks to me, which was unlike her. It wasn’t until the end of the night that I finally figured out what was happening. My family is the last to leave, being the closest to my grandmother’s house (two streets away) we stayed to help clean up. As I was carrying a pile of plates into the kitchen, I noticed my mother and grandmother in a hushed argument. I slowed down my pace, crept away from the open door frame and pressed my ear against the wall, straining to hear what was being discussed.

“I do not see the point in her missing out on family moments like these just to get all gross and sweaty. Why is that more important,” I hear my grandmother ask. “You know it is more than getting sweaty, and it is not gross, mom come on, it is a huge part of her life,” my mother answered, receiving an affirming headnod from me behind the wall. “She goes out there and gets all dirty, my god it’s like she’s a boy!” “I do not understand what the big deal is.” “It shouldn't be her life, family should be.”
I was a little nervous about this interview. Each day is an unpredictable one with my mom-mom. It is as if these days, her health, mood, and mental energy teeters on a seesaw. Everything started going downhill, about a decade ago, after the loss of my grandfather: her “soulmate” as she always says. And the isolation due to the pandemic only escalated those feelings of utter loneliness; so you never know what version of her you’re going to get. One day she’s talking a mile a minute, laughing carelessly, the sun transforming her eyes into two crystal blue pools. Then the next…the light is gone; she is numb to her surroundings, and it's like you have to physically pull conversation out from her. I walk into her terracotta rancher, and find her in the dark despite it being three in the afternoon; television on, lying horizontally on the couch. Not a great sign for what I had hoped would be a productive conversation. But I cannot lie, I was already feeling a bit disheartened about this meeting due to our text exchange a few weeks prior. As always, I sent her some of the questions in advance to allow her time to get acquainted with the material to which she replied, “I hope you made them easy, you know I don’t understand half of the things you talk to me about.” My mom-mom is not the biggest fan of the ‘frivolousness’ that some Haverford classes embody. But as soon as she laid eyes on me. She erupted into a smile, the light returning instantaneously, “there’s my girl!” This interview may go well after all.

My mom-mom smokes inside of her home. It was why I avoided visiting her when I was younger despite her living a mere five minutes away. My mother could not have paid me to go. The smell soaks into your clothes, your skin, your hair. But I quickly overcame the aversion, realizing that a pleasant afternoon with my grandmother trumps the scent that lingers for hours after. In a way, it’s like she’s still with me, connected at the hip, for the rest of the day.
“Hey mom-mom!” I call back cheerfully, relieved to find her in good spirits given the conversation we were about to engage in. I waft through the haze of cigarette smoke, finally unphased by its presence, and sit down in my favorite spot. My grandfather's chair. I am the only one allowed to sit there. I was his favorite.

“So I normally start out these interviews by asking my participants to describe their relationship with their mother, but I know you have a complex history, having had different mothers / motherly figures throughout your life. Would you mind walking me through your relationship with your birth mother and then the other woman or people who raised you as well?”

“Well I did not have a relationship with my birth mom, she died during childbirth…”

“Oh yes I am sorry I forgot about that.”

“And so, my birth mother…well, her best friend couldn’t have children despite loving them. Her name was Ruth and her husband’s name was Fred. And so they took me in, they raised me, my biological father, Henry, did not want to…”

“Was there a particular reason why he did not want to?”

“Well you know, there I am, a baby, an infant. Not only that, but they didn’t expect me to live because I was only two and a half pounds when I was born I think. So I was in a very delicate position when I was brought home, you know. So…um, anyhow Ruth died when I was eleven, so it was actually…and she was my mother. You know? Of course she didn't birth me, but she took care of me when I was sick. She loved me to death. Spoiled me. So yeah, it was one of the most devastating times of my life. Now you wanted to know how my relationship was with her?

I was spoiled rotten.”
My family doesn't talk about the “hard” stuff, so for my grandmother to even begin to open up about the “most devastating time of [her] life” was a huge step forward, and one I was not expecting to take at all, let alone just five minutes into our conversation. Maybe my family is willing to talk about the more difficult parts of their lives, but the issue is that no one asks. I am upset that it took engaging in research for my senior thesis to begin learning about my grandmother’s life, as if I never cared before now. I laugh and answer, “really? How spoiled?”

“Oh I was a miserable child Fiona. I was a ‘Hughie’…”

This jab at my cousin took me by surprise, and a laugh erupted out of nowhere. I was so glad her humor was beginning to shine through even though this was a joke that wouldn't make sense to anyone outside of our familial circle; a pointed reference to my spoiled younger cousin. Believe me, you do not want to be a “Hughie.”

“...That's how I look at it now, I hope to god I wasn’t that bad. Um… I always knew.. if I couldn’t get it from my mother, I could get it from my father. He would go behind her back and say yes, and I would get whatever I wanted most of the time. And um…as I grew older, I used to fight terribly if I did not get my own way with her. I said some really…well I do not know if I actually did or not, looking back on it, or if it is just my guilt. I don't know. I used to fight so much with her, and yell at her and scream. Temper tantrums I guess you would call them. I wasn’t very nice. And that is the guilt that I held…after she died. Because I…”

This is the closest we got to talking about that “devastating day.” A story that my mother told me when I was younger in order to teach me a lesson, but I never heard it from my mom-mom’s perspective and probably never will. I do not think she ever wants to relive that day.
When my grandmother was eleven, her ‘mother,’ Ruth, was scheduled to have a low risk surgery on her hand. The morning of the surgery, she and Ruth got into an argument which ended in my mom-mom saying “I hate you,” to Ruth as she left for the hospital.

She never came back home.

Something went wrong with the anesthesia she was given and she passed away on the operating table. “I hate you,” was the last thing my mom-mom ever said to her mother; that guilt hangs heavy on her shoulders, something she still bears to this day. This travesty is also a possible explanation as to why my grandmother cares so much about family time, enough to not support my excessive athletic career; every event has the potential to be the last and so my absence from them is painted as a huge betrayal in her eyes.

“...well enough about that,” she said quickly even though she dove into zero detail, “you know I do remember that the grammar school I went to, had a special night where all of the girls and their mothers came and they showed you ‘the film.’ You know…the film about your period and growing up and what your body is going through… all those changes…”

I nod along vigorously, remembering watching a film of a similar vein in my middle school health class.

“Well… all the girls sat together on one side, and the moms sat together on the other. And we giggled the whole time. I didn’t get anything out of it really. And from then on…I remember, um, that she would leave pads around, in the bathroom, wrapped up. Inconspicuous but I knew what it was…”

I cut in with, “Oh so she wouldn’t really talk with you about it?” because I found that to be so peculiar. Maybe it was because my mother was almost too open with me about puberty. I am pretty sure she threw me a party when I finally got my period, granted I was the last person in
my friend group to get it so it was kind of a big deal. But I will admit that a ‘period party’ was a bit much. But maybe this is why my mother was so open with me about bodily changes when I went through puberty, she was trying to break the cycle: her mother did not talk with her about it, because mommom received no guidance either from hers.

“No,” my grandmother answered, “but she wanted to start the conversation I think. Maybe she assumed I would come to her, which didn’t work. I felt...it was...you know...private or whatever. So I just never asked. So through my classmates, you know I had an idea of what was going to happen. Now, she had died... but I had a woman next door who stepped in and I am beyond grateful for that. She was quite a bit older. Let’s say she was in her 60’s. She was like a grandmother to me. I was always over there; morning, noon, and night and I would sit there and talk with her. We would have a cup of tea, you know, just...I loved her. I loved her. That is who I would consider my third “mother.”

“And what was her name?”

“Mimi. So, on my birthday. My 12th birthday. I got my period. And I went into the bathroom, and there was blood in my pants, and I ran next door crying and screaming, ‘Mimi, Mimi I’m bleeding’ *laughs* ‘I’m bleeding down there, somethings wrong!’ So she had to tell me about the facts of life, and you know...um, she had belts. You don't know what they looked like, oh my god *laughs* awful. They were just awful, especially because I was quite heavy. It was just an elastic, just elastic that went around, and it had straps that came down, and you had to basically clip on the pad and the elastic always used to get caught in my crack *laughs* oh it was miserable. But she had one of those sanitary belts, and pads for me. She made sure I was all stocked up. And then she had to tell pop pop, my dad, you know when he came home from work. And he said to me, ‘you just became a woman.’”
My mom-mom is an amazing storyteller; she has the rare ability to weave in lighthearted humor, paired with deep belly laughs in order to break apart the heavier conversations. A gift I am entirely grateful for, although sometimes it steers us a bit off track.

In an attempt to get us back on topic, I turn to my notes, “You mention that when you were younger, you were a little bit heavier. Would anyone, like family members or friends, make comments about that to you? On your physical appearance?”

This question seemed unnecessary to pose, since a person’s individual weight has never been a topic of discussion on my mothers side of the family. Whenever discussions of weight come about when I was young, they are always ignited by my father, or granny (his mother). But I guess I was intrigued to see if it was due to the fact that my grandmother faced disparaging comments that she decided to raise my mother differently, avoiding such discussions, which I guess affected me for the better. My mother never allowed a scale to be present in our house.

“…No actually. I mean, I was ridiculed at school.” She said this like it was a given. “I wanted to be like all the others, be normal. But… I loved my sweets. I loved the bakery, I loved all that. It was the only thing that made me happy. But this is where Joyce Applebee comes in. Now Joyce lived a couple blocks away. She was a grade higher but I was friends with her. So, I was over her house…Joyce, her mother and I were sitting at the kitchen table and we were talking. And I was telling her about how the kids were making fun of me and she sat there for two hours, talking to me about how to eat properly, and telling me about how I can lose weight. She weighed me, and told me what foods to eat and what not to eat. ‘You come back in a week,’ she said ‘and we are going to weigh you again, and we will just keep on doing that,’ and hey, I mean I lost 50 pounds.”
I did not know whether to push any further, it seemed as though her friend was coming from a genuine place rather than a malicious one so I go more broad,

“At that point in your life, were there any cultural expectations regarding appearance? Like in the media? What were the expectations, especially in high school, for women to look like?”

“Well, pants were just starting to come about, you could start wearing slacks as a woman. I would get money from my father to get clothes. But I had no sense of style. I would just go to junk stores. I did not know how to do my hair, no one really was there to guide me with those things. It was always, ‘just get her a perm.’ *laughs* And my hair would be a bunch of frizz. I was a real ugly duckling.”

“In high school, was Mimi still a part of your life? How could she let you go out like that?” I ask in a joking manner. This was my attempt at matching my grandmother’s energy.

She shoots me a glare, in jest, then laughs, “yes she was still in my life, but she was just as clueless about fashion as I was, she was even more so outside of the ‘fads’ at the time.”

I continue, “was there any important advice that you got from her as you were growing up, in regards to navigating life, that really influenced you?”

“I can remember sitting there and talking one night, and she was asking me about a boy I was going out with. I said ‘well he’s very nice’ and then she asked what his parents do, and I said 'oh Mimi, all his mother does at night is, she goes out and cleans office buildings, she doesn’t have a very good job.’ And listen, Mimi would never call me out…on anything. But in that moment she said, ‘I never want to hear you say that ever again. That is good honest work and she is raising a family on it. She is no better or worse than anyone else,’ I think it was the
first and only time she ever got mad at me. I was so embarrassed. But I understood what she was saying, and I never forgot it.”

This little story bears a great impact. Thanks to Mimi, my grandmother learned a valuable lesson, one that has affected generations to come; again, everyone on my mother’s side is supportive of every goal, every dream, every career. All they care about is your happiness. I wish I could say the same for my father’s side. I like to think that I am where I am today due to Mimi’s chastisement. So what happened to her?

“Mimi stayed in my life even after I got married and had kids. I moved away so I wasn’t next door but I was still close enough that I would visit her multiple times a week. I would take her grocery shopping, she didn’t have a car. If she needed anything, I always got it for her and brought it over. Once a week I would wash her hair for her, because she used to go to the hairdresser you know. And I would put it in pin curls the way she liked it. Yeah.. you know I took care of my Mimi, and she took care of me.”

Thinking that this was a beautiful quote to end with, I move on down my list of questions, “Did any of these people present in your life dictate the type of woman you wanted to be? Did anyone teach you what it meant to be a woman?”

“Oh well Ruth always… always had a house dress on, always had her hair, makeup and her nails done. She always made sure she had a new, clean house dress on for when Fred came home. The house was..immaculate. And she would bake. Oh, she was a wonderful baker. Cookies, cakes, pies, everything. And that was kind of like a role model for me. I believed her to be the golden standard. When I got married and all, I felt like I always had to be… well you know…I would even go to bed ‘all made up.’ *laughs*”
It is interesting to note how we often take inspiration from images we grow up with; having seen her mother embody the “perfect housewife” role, she felt as though that was her calling as well. An almost completely opposite reaction than Kay’s, whose own mother also provided a view into a potential future of hers, but instead she responded with: ‘anything but this.’

“I guess this is a good transition into talking about your later years, we do not have to talk about this at all if you do not want to, about your first marriage. Because I know all that my mom has ever alluded to, was that it was really bad. And obviously that led to you being a single mother of three girls, which honestly I am more interested in talking about that experience and how you handled yourself there and your resilience. I do not want to give a lot of time to this man, but do you think there is anything noteworthy that you would like to talk about in regards to that time in your life?”

She pauses for a long time. I hold my breath. Was I too out of line?

“Yeah well, I mean I did it, I made it out, and I am proud of it.”

My grandmother endured an abusive relationship for seventeen years of her life, seventeen years that I hear nothing about. Again, we avoid the hard conversations. But like I said, I wanted to frame this part of our conversation in a way that highlighted my mom-mom's strength, not her husband’s cowardness. This is not his story, it is hers…and it is an inspiring one.

“Steve was.. in the marines. I met him through aunt Joyce…he was her brother. He was home on leave for a couple of weeks, and we dated on and off for a bit.”

“How old were you?”
“Hmm…seventeen. So we dated for two years, and got married when I was nineteen. I heard this once, and I truly believe it, when you get married, you have to marry your best friend. I married my worst enemy. He belittled me… and looking back, I’ve analyzed myself, and I understand why I stayed. My goodness, you see it on television, you know, on Dr. Phil. *laughs* You just don't have any real respect for yourself when you are in those situations. Or like yourself. Because you’re fat, and you’re this and that or whatever. He knew how to manipulate that; ‘nobody loves you,’ ‘you are worthless,’ and he knew about my relatives and my traumatic past, and he used it against me and… I let him. So he was going to be stationed out in Adack, Alaska. And um, he wouldn’t be back for a year. So right before he left, we had sex and I got pregnant. To make a long story short, he was a real son of a bitch. If he had a drinking problem before he left, he really did when he came back. And he came home…nasty. Nasty.”

“Was it just towards you? Or to the girls as well?”

Just as much as I wanted to learn about my grandmother, I wanted to learn about my mother as well. She never talks about this time in her life. She always promises me she will, when I'm “older”. When I am “ready.” But I don’t think there is an age I can reach that will allow her to feel ready to reveal to me all of the dark secrets of our family’s past; which is frustrating to me, because that is just as much a part of us as all of the light.

“No, it was towards me, but I don't doubt that something would have happened with the kids…I don't doubt it. But I think I got out early enough. Just a terrible, terrible time. He would um… well we do not have to get into that. Well… I had to have the police come a couple times.”

The look of shock on my face must have been enough to signal her to keep going.
“Yeah, because I thought he was going to kill Fred, my father who was living with us at the time. Out of the blue, for no reason at all, except that he had been out drinking…we were actually supposed to have company over that day, I had to cancel of course because I didn’t know where he was. He threw Fred down on the kitchen floor, had him bent over. Fred's head was in between his knees, locked. And he was taking this wooden napkin holder.. and he was banging it over his head. *Boom boom boom boom.* Over and over. The girls were downstairs in the rec room area..I could see…myself. All I had to do was turn around. But I could see myself doing something. This is where you get absolutely blind. You know? I could see myself going…and I was going to do it, I saw myself doing it. Get the kitchen knife, and as he was bent over… I was going to plunge it in his back. I really was. I was going to kill him. And then, at that point. I do not know which one daughter it was, maybe it was Stephanie, she came into the kitchen and started screaming as she saw what was going on. And it woke me up out of the trance… I was going to kill him. I wonder, I mean, I could just be coming out of jail right now. I really could have been. If I did that, I do not know. But I was going to kill him. I was in such rage. So yeah, that is when the police came, and that was when his clothes were thrown out the door.”

My mind went blank. I could not come up with anything to say in response to that. I felt bad taking time to process it all instead of offering comforting words. I did not even think to thank her for sharing that deeply vulnerable moment with me. She went on:

“So, everything was fine for a while, we had just moved into a new home, a bi-level. Big mortgage….it was scary. We actually went on welfare for a couple months. At first, Steve was giving me his paycheck and he was living with his parents. But then, his father said ‘stop giving
her any more money, and then she will have to come back to you,’ well… not me honey. You picked the wrong person”

My grandmother’s strength is beyond admirable.

“So when did you start working as a cocktail waitress?”

This was a huge reason as to why I wanted to interview my grandmother. For a majority of her late twenties and early thirties, she worked as a waitress in a cocktail bar; I do not have many stories from her about that time in her life except for the fact that whenever “Don't you Want Me” by The Human League came on the radio, my mother would turn to me and say “this is word for word what happened between my mom and my step-dad.” I could only imagine the whirlwind that must have been that occupation, in the throes of intoxicated men; I was anxious to hear the stories, and see how they may have affected her outlook on life, and the way she raised her children.

“Well the Travel Lodge opened up, and they were looking for cocktail waitresses, this was a couple months after Steve left. I was interviewed in a trailer by the general manager. Well I got in there, and then I found it out, I was told this… all the waitresses have blonde hair and blue eyes. But he told whoever, the assistant manager, ‘I don't remember her name, all I can tell you is that she has blonde hair and blue eyes, so she’s good to go.’ Turns out, everyone had those features. It is what got me the job, I was stunned. But cocktail waitressing, it was fun, in the beginning it was fun.”

My grandmother is stunning at the age of 74, so just imagine how she looked 40 years earlier. The pictures don't do her justice; her honeycomb blonde hair done in a beehive updo, eyes of the clearest blue. That was always something I was teased about by my family. My mom-mom was kind enough to pass those baby blues down to my mother, but unfortunately
that's where the gift exchange ended as I was “blessed” with stormy blue eyes, “gray” if you ask my mom (and you’ll receive that answer with a huff of annoyance, as if I chose to ruin the family line).

“Every night they had a live band from New York, and it was the hottest spot in South Jersey to go to. So you go into work and it was like going to a party every night, with the music and everyone is so happy and dancing and it was just fun. But I know you were interested in my experiences with sexual harassment…”

“Well of course I’d love to hear about any good memories you may have, but yes I am also wondering if you had to endure anything like that when you were waitressing, I feel like that job has the potential to put you in vulnerable positions.”

“So, I told you this story when you were younger. But I had this little costume I was forced to wear when working. God, I looked like a French maid. But it was red, with white ruffles, it was tight and it laced up and down in the front so you look all bosomy. I used to sneak out of the house, with a big coat on, so the kids wouldn’t even see me. I was embarrassed, I didn’t want anyone to see what I had to wear at my job. But oh my god did I make good money there though, *laughs*”

I was expecting this; working at a cocktail longue, where all of the waitresses were hired off of looks, it is not surprising that my grandmother was forced to wear an over-sexualized outfit. But it is still upsetting to hear, especially learning about her shame and embarrassment regarding the uniform. Immediately I think of my conversation with my own mother, who referenced this time in mommom’s life. Noting how she would secretly watch her get ready for work, and the impact that seeing her mother wear heavy makeup, and tight clothing had on her perception of femininity and self worth. But she still framed it as somewhat of a good thing,
making sure to still describe her as beautiful, an inspiration for herself…which is what affected her approaches to advising me on makeup and such. But it is upsetting to compare the two takes on the matter: my mommom, desperately trying to hide the level she has to stoop to in order to support her family single handedly, and my mother, watching as she slinks away but putting her up on a pedestal in her mind.

Mommom continues on,

“There was a client that came in all the time, he was a traveling salesman and spent ‘woohoo’ bucks at the bar. And he was kind of degrading me, you know…saying off color stuff and all. The manager of the place is sitting at the table too, entertaining them, and I was getting madder and madder because the manager wasn’t even saying anything to the guy. So they ordered drinks, and this was another time that I saw myself doing something and I actually did it *laughs*. Because I was thinking the whole time, “oh I am going to dump this damn tray right in his crotch,” and I did. … I was going over with all of these drinks, not just his, but you know a whole tray of iced drinks, and I pretended I had tripped. I did it so well too. Nobody knew, ‘oops I’m sorry’ and it landed on him, oh my god he was soaking wet. *laughs* it landed right in his crotch, all of the ice cubes...” She throws her head all the way back in a roar of laughter, “…and the bartenders were laughing like hell behind the bar, they said ‘I can't believe you did that chris, that is exactly what you should of done, I can't believe you’”

Here is another time that my grandmother had an urge to physically fight back against what I can only describe as ‘toxic masculinity’. I find this metaphor she uses intriguing, the “going blind” aspect of it. Like everything she had been taught growing up: holding your tongue, being ladylike, not causing a stir just disappears, she is blind to it, reacting off pure defensive instinct. It is inspiring. I believe that my grandmother has an alter ego, a person she would love
to be if there were no “rules.” No law. A person who resists, who fights against the patriarchy in these subtle ways, with no remorse. She frames it as these “thoughts” that she gets. Like it is her ‘evil’ twin begging to be unleashed onto the system. The first mention of this “urge” was when she wanted to attack her abusive ex husband, and then again here, but she actually acted upon it; spilling the tray of ice cold drinks onto the man verbally harassing her. I couldn't hide the pride in my eyes even if I wanted to, “serves him right,” I say back, with a beaming smile, “Um, so I guess when you were in that role, there was a lot of stuff that you needed to endure to be able to do the job, and especially get tips? Do you see it that way?”

“Oh yeah there were times you had to swallow your pride. Mmhmm. But I never lead anyone on, thinking anything promiscuous. There were a lot of promiscuous women there, ha ha ha oh man there were some wild women. It was like a den of iniquity.”

“And so, in any interaction then, inside or outside the workforce, were there times where you felt like you kind of ‘played’ up…”

She cuts in, “like my sexuality?”

“Well, not even just your sexuality really, but more like…have you “leaned” into expectations…I don't know…”

I was struggling here, I had no idea how to frame this question. I started feeling like I was pushing her to answer in a way I wanted, even though she had given me so much information already. I do not know why I was not yet satisfied. I guess it was my own fault, going in with certain expectations. I wanted more stories of times in which she used her femininity: that “tiny costume,” her baby blues and sunny blonde hair to her advantage. If there even were any. After all she had been through, I almost felt as though she deserved to take power back in that way. But why was I disappointed to find out that my grandmother kept her head down, served drinks,
and supported her family? Why couldn't that be enough for me, why did I want her to have experienced harassment, to have used her gender to get what she wanted.

“...Like if you dumbed yourself down, or batted your eyes to get what you wanted. That sort of thing, in certain social situations, to kind of use to your femininity to your advantage. I don't know, like the manipulation of certain people, or female stereotypes to get a favorable outcome for yourself?”

I think I was attempting to channel social psychologists, Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. And their research on ambivalent sexism theory; a theory that aims to explain why community members, especially women, often support or play into beliefs that are harmful to them. This is due to their belief that sexism manifests in two complementary ways. Hostile sexism, which embodies a more adversarial view of gender relations in which women are seen as seeking to ‘control’ men; “it leads to overt, prejudice against women who embody nontraditional gender roles,” (Glick, 43). While in contrast, benevolent sexism which characterizes women in “seemingly more positive ways--as pure creatures who ought to be protected and adored…” (Glick 43). It goes without saying that this idealization of women implies simultaneously that they are best suited for conventional gender roles, confined to the pedestal, where they can be ogled. Benevolent sexism, in other words, is just a more subtle form of prejudice, a “legitimizing ideology that helps to justify and maintain inequality,” (Glick, 52). But, on the very intriguing other hand, acceptance of benevolent sexism, by women, can turn subjectively favorable, and serve to one's own advantage. Hostile sexism punishes women who challenge the status quo, but women can work under the guise of benevolence, securing a male protector, to subtly undermine the system that holds them in place, or at least manipulate it in their favor.
“Ohhh I see,” I have finally gotten my point through to her, “yeah, well, I mean you know I always did the classic get-out-of-speeding-tickets thing with the ‘oh I’m sorry officer, I didn’t know I was going that fast,’ all innocent and helpless. Playing into that generalization. That usually worked for me…”

At this point in my conversation with mommom, I figure I have a better chance of getting content related to this theory from my own mother, which she coincidentally validates for me immediately when she ends with, “but I mean my god, you’ve seen your mother at work, she knows how to work it.”

My mother is a connoisseur when it comes to manipulating men with her femininity. It is something that she always told me to “pay attention to” so I can learn to do it myself one day. It came so naturally to her, like it was her birthright. So in knowing that I will return to this topic with my mother, I continue on:

“So when did you meet pop pop (my “step” grandfather), because I know you met him at the Travelodge right?” She smiled, and looked out the window, I can only assume she was reliving the moment in her head. I wish I could have taken a peak. Their story was cinematic. She turns back to me, her eyes glimmering due to a pool of tears now freshly collecting at her brims. Yes she seemed sad, but not how I have seen her before, it wasn't hopeless; this was more of an ache. For what once was.

“Yes I met him there,” she finally answers.

Again, ‘Don't you Want me Baby,’ is ringing in my ears, their story aligns perfectly with the upbeat lyrics, “you were working as a waitress in a cocktail bar, when I met you, I picked you out, and shook you up and turned you into someone new.”

My grandmother interrupts my internal sing-a-long,
“Yes, he would come in, practically every night. And a friend of his told me this; they’d come in, and sit at this one table, and he would go ‘do you see her? Someday I am going to marry her, I am going to ask her out, and I am going to marry her,’ and his friend would go ‘no John, you can’t do that you’re going to get turned down, you can’t do that, she will never go out with you…’ Well he used to come up and sit in the service area, where I would go to pick up the drinks from the tenders to go serve them. That's where he would stand. Sometimes we weren’t that busy, depending on the time of day or whatever. And we would just talk. He was the easiest person to talk with. And I was just.. I was…I was attracted to that. And that beard. Oh god. I can’t believe it when I think about it now.”

I laugh along with her, “oh I’ve seen the pictures, that was a solid beard.”

“They used to call him the bear. He looked like a big bear. So he asked me out…and that was it… we were never apart since then.”

“I always love hearing that story, and I guess I just want to go back a bit before all of that happened, when it was just you, raising the girls on your own, how was that experience for you?”

“Well you know, Fred tried to help, but yeah he went off on his binges too. So, it was definitely challenging.”

“And I am assuming you worked nights at the Lodge, so how did you manage that?”

“Yes, I worked at night, let’s say from four in the afternoon, and then the place would close at 2 in the morning, but you’d have to clean up after closing, so I would get home… between 2 and 3 in the morning. Then get up again in the morning, and make sure the girls got off to school.

I also went through a period where I was going to the community college as well, when they were a lot younger. I would get 4-5 hours of sleep at the most. Because I would get up, get
Kimmy off to school because she was the oldest, and then go to the community college with the other two because they had a daycare there. And then I would go in and take a couple classes, come home, go to work, and then do it all over again.

It was hard… thank god I was young. I do not know how else I would have survived.”

“How would you describe your role / parenting style during those times especially?”

“Well… *pause* The girls always came first. Always. It was… yeah I could have gotten a job working in an office way earlier in my life. Do you think I wanted to be doing half the shit I was doing? No. But the hours at the Travelodge allowed me to be more present in their lives growing up.”

Family first, before all else when it comes to my mommom. Why would I ever choose a soccer game over that? I find myself wondering the same thing now.
Mom

“Fiona, why aren’t you wearing any makeup? Go back upstairs and change, don’t you want the boys to notice you?”

I hate that this sentence is one of the first things that comes to mind when I am asked to reflect upon my mother. I absolutely hate it. Because she is so much more. She is fiery, eccentric, unapologetically herself (almost to a fault) and I love her for that; but she makes these comments that slowly chip away at me. At my confidence. This one in particular even forced me to question my purpose in life. Is that all I was good for? Is that all I need to do? Attract boys?

I was only a sophomore in highschool. Fifteen years old.

It was a Wednesday morning, seven to be exact. I had gotten four hours of sleep, because I stayed up late finishing an assignment that definitely only required half of the effort I put into it. Contemplating the day ahead, which consisted of seven hours of classes and three hours of soccer practice, I already felt defeated. I threw my hair into a messy bun, put on my favorite sweatpants and t-shirt combo, and ran downstairs. As I was walking out the door, my friend Dillon laying on the horn (as I was late for the carpool like always), my mother made the infamous, aforementioned comment.

“That’s weird, I thought the point of going to school was to learn” is what I wished I snapped back with. I would have even been okay with “so you think I need makeup to look good?” as a retort. But I have never been good with comebacks.

Instead, Dillon and I were 5 minutes late to homeroom that day because I ran back upstairs, changed into skinny jeans and put mascara on. The perception of myself forever changed.

Since that day, I have never left the house without makeup on, no matter what I am setting out to do, but what can I say…I learned from the best. My mother would never be caught dead without “her face” on. I cannot begin to recount all of the times I waited, arms crossed, eyes rolling to the back of my head, as my mother put lipstick on before stepping out of the house, the car, or the public restroom. I remember one time she threw her back out because she tried to climb over the seats in the car to make room for incoming passengers instead of getting out and walking around the outside of the car, all because she did not want to be in public for those 5 excruciatingly long seconds and risk being seen without makeup on. The things we do in the sake of vanity

My mother is my best friend. Now I know it seems like everybody at one point or another says that line, whether it be a part of their sentimental social media caption for a Mother’s Day
post, or in a heartfelt birthday speech, but I fully stand by that statement in relation to my own life. And I will also be one the few to admit that being ‘friends’ with your mom isn't always the best type of relationship to have despite the opinions of many; because what some fail to recognize is that, in having your mom as a best friend, you lose a parent in the crossfire. Yet I constantly hear, “oh you’re so lucky that you have that kind of relationship with your mom,” or “I am so jealous of your closeness.” And don’t get me wrong, I like being able to tell my mom all about my latest college exploits--she always gives the best advice no matter if I was in the right, or in the wrong. In highschool she’d help me organize house parties for optimal fun--and every time, half of my guests would end up leaving the basement only to be found in the kitchen completely enthralled by one of her wild tales…my mother always knew how to captivate a crowd. She’s known for taking me to movies I was not yet allowed to see, buying me alcohol I was not yet allowed to drink, and telling me stories about her life that I was not yet allowed to hear. Best friends.

But I wonder if the ‘jealousy’ that people harbor, or the yearning that they experience for this type of relationship would remain once it's revealed that I am the one consoling her through yet another mental breakdown over how “shitty” her life is? That I am the one picking her up from the police station at two in the morning after a wild night that I will hear all about the next morning? Or that I am the one begging her to get a therapist, take a shower, or show up to my younger sister’s soccer games? Boundaries, along with any sense of stability or safety, disappear at that point and you're left lost. Best friends.

The fights are the worst part because no one likes fighting with their best friend; it's entirely different from fighting with a parent. Insults thrown around carelessly. I don’t know how many people can boast being called a “fucking bitch” by their own mother, and immediately
receiving a slammed door to the face, like there were two seventeen year olds involved in the fight and not just one. So yes, there are two sides to every coin, and I was looking forward to flipping that coin to the ‘fun’ best friends side for this interview because God knows, when we get going on a topic, my mom and I can talk together for hours. Best friends.

In envisioning my thesis, I assumed this chapter would be the longest. Because like I said, my mother can talk for what seems like forever. We had already engaged in long conversations in the past about her experiences growing up and dealing with ‘handsy’ customers, dismissive bosses and obnoxious cat-callers. I was nervous that we would have too much to talk about, and I wasn’t necessarily looking forward to the hours of inevitable transcribing. But, I thought wrong, my assumption was off, falling in line with one of the main themes of this thesis almost too perfectly: that assumptions do more harm than good and it is best to go into everything with an open mind and allow yourself to be taught from a different perspective, rather than the one you had already tacked on to the person or situation. Because my mom did not talk for hours, in fact… we didn't even get through the entire interview.

I find my mom in her usual spot, on the couch in the living room, wrapped in a blanket, with a glass of wine in hand. It's rare that you find her anywhere else, which is convenient for me when I am trying to hawp her down for an interview she keeps avoiding.

“Are you ready to start?” I ask as I settle myself on the couch opposite, trying to give off an air of nonchalance, to calm the nerves that were radiating from her.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she answers.

I pull out my phone, hit record, and set it down on the side table. My mother cuts me off before I can even utter the first word from my opening question.

“Oh no you're recording this?”
I am shocked by the question because I had explained the premise of my research numerous times to her, and how it would be based heavily off of interviews. But I run through the basics with her again, and ask the first question,

“How would you describe your relationship with your mother?”

She looks at me, then to my phone, while twisting the end of her hair around her finger, a nervous tick that she has.

“She looks at me, then to my phone, while twisting the end of her hair around her finger, a nervous tick that she has.

“Fiona, this is too much pressure, I don't know if I can do this.”

“I promise you, it is not that big of a deal you can relax.”

“It is a big deal though, this is your thesis.”

“Mom seriously, this is just us having a conversation. Ok? So we can begin by just talking about your relationship with mommom growing up. How was it?"

“Well how would you like me to describe it, what direction do you want me to go in?""

“Mom, that defeats the entire purpose of the interview. I can't dictate what you are going to say, I want this to be authentically you! Like if I were to describe our relationship I would say, ‘oh I tell my mom everything, maybe we are too close sometimes and we talk about really personal things that I do not think a lot of other people talk about with their parents’ you know? Something like that momma.”

I throw the more sentimental nickname for my mother in there at the end as a last ditch effort to calm her nerves, to try and emulate the same carefree conversations we’ve had a million times over in the past.

“It's just very hard to put into words. So I guess as a little girl, growing up, my mom was not the sharing type like how I am with you. That is not the type of mom she was. Mommom was a single, young mom for a few years, I mean we were on welfare! She didn't really have much
time for us, she tried to make a lot of time, don't get me wrong, but she would work at night as a cocktail waitress. And she would sleep in the mornings so it was a lot for her. And she was strict too. Oh god I'm babbling, I am sorry.”

“Don't apologize! This is a great start!”

My mother has a problem with apologizing. She has a knack for it, you could say. I fear that a lot of women do as we are constantly apologizing for being too opinionated, loud or strong. Apologizing for appearances: too dressed up or too dressed down, dressed too modestly or too sexually. Apologizing when needing to ask for something, even when it is necessary. My mothers area of expertise? Apologizing for her intellect… or her presumed lack thereof. And I believe that is why this interview, our initial run through, went so poorly; she was so nervous to be talking about such topics under the pretense of my “Haverford research”. It is as if she views herself and her intelligence as inferior, especially in relation to me. Maybe it is because she barely got through highschool, then went on to community college. But that isnt due to a lack of intelligence, it was due to a lack of familial support. No one cared whether or not she was successful. She had a pretty face and that is all that mattered. No one pushed her to be more than that, or taught her to value anything else. And what is interesting to me, as it is upsetting, is that I see her taking a similar approach with my sister now as well. My mother regularly engages in conversation with me around the topic of Sophia’s future, “oh thank god Sophia is so pretty and funny, she will be able to find somebody who will take care of her, you know?” She always compares my sister to how she was when she was younger and that has definitely affected the way in which my mother has raised and talked to her.

I think my mom has always viewed herself in this light. One that is dimmed, obstructed, shadowed. Which is why she has relied so heavily on her femininity. Her image. Because her
intelligence was never valued in the same way as her beauty was by others…she never learned to value it herself.

“Oh Fiona I won't ever be smart enough to have these conversations with you, please just turn off the recorder.”

I was so frustrated at this point, not necessarily with her, but with the forces that brought her to this debilitating mindset. Because that was not the point at all, to have a “smart conversation” with her. The last thing I wanted was for this thesis to be an “academic one.” I dislike academia for the most part, I find a lot of it to be inaccessible and pompous. I simply wanted my mother's own thoughts in her own words. But she kept apologizing mid sentence, “oh I sound so stupid right now, cut that part out.” She kept saying how she’d rather write it all down than say it out loud so she could have time to gather her thoughts and sound “smarter” for me.

My mother has always claimed to be a better writer than she is a conversationalist. But I kept telling her that I wanted to have a conversation. Because, to me, that's what's real. I did not want her to sit at the computer for hours in order to come up with the perfect phrasing for each answer. But yet again, who am I to take that away from her? This is her story after all. Which brings up the question of ownership. Who gets to tell whose story?

I wanted specific data from my mom, the authentic story. And in some ways, her aversion to that, to being interviewed, was her way of taking control of her own narrative. Something she felt as though she could not do while being recorded. She wanted to sit and take the time to write it out, in her own words, in her own control. That was real to her.

So I gave in to my mothers request and stopped the recording at fifteen minutes and twenty three seconds, only having gotten through two of the questions. And instead, sent her the
list of questions with space after each one for her to type out her answers, leaving enough room for her to “ramble” as much as she wanted. This is what ensued…

“What did you learn from your mother about what it means to be a woman in this world (did she lead by example, or give you advice/warnings about anything).”

“My mom had a tough life. When she left my father in the very early 70's, it was not common. He wouldn't give her any money (she didn't work at the time) in anticipation she would go back to him. She didn't go back, and instead went on welfare until she could find a job. She got a job as a cocktail waitress and I recall that she also attempted to take some college courses. (This became too much, and she only completed two semesters.) She did her best raising three young girls on her own. She would constantly drill into us that ‘you don't need a man to take care of you.’ And that you need to be able to stand on your own. Yet, I remember many men (I'm sure male suitors who wanted to date or be with my mom) stop over to fix the t.v. or change the oil in her car or shovel the snow. Before she would leave for her job, I would sit and watch her get ready; tease, curl and spray her hair, apply her makeup, and put on her tiny little uniform. She looked so beautiful, and I wanted to look as beautiful as her. I guess I just knew that my mom was able to provide for us somehow because she was so beautiful. I don't mean to say she wasn't strong and independent, but I also thought that her femininity provided an advantage. I don't know how that reasoning came to be... Maybe unconsciously I processed all of the visual media at the time (tv, advertisements, etc.) and my mom was as pretty as any model in a magazine who gets things and attention, which I guess influenced my thinking…”

I guess my mother learned from a young age then, just how far looks can get you; despite my mom mom's efforts to conceal her priming routine (that she mentioned in my conversation with her) in order to hide her shame and protect her daughters’ innocence, my mother would
secretly watch the process that she took to get ready for a night of waitressing at the cocktail lounge. I asked my mom in person to expand upon her experiences watching her mother get ready for work, as I was fascinated by its psychological effects:

“Well, I mean she tried to hide it but I saw the uniform that my mother had to wear to work as a cocktail waitress, you know? It was very revealing, extremely tight. And as a younger girl, that kind of influenced my thinking of the world for a while. I mean my mother had to put herself on display physically like that, to make money and be paid attention to and so I think I tied that with value from a young age.”

I also feel as though the line where my mom recalls being told that she did not “need a man to take care of [her]” stands as a stark juxtaposition to Kay’s “backup system” of husbands, to fuel her “independent” lifestyle. Maybe you can have a man take care of you, if he is concealed. Waiting in the wings.

“Can you recount any time when you saw that your gender could be a disadvantage in the workplace and beyond (in normal everyday interactions)?”

“When I worked with my co-worker, Tom, I really could see the advantage of being a man. When we had meetings with parents, especially when fathers were present in the meetings, the parents always referred all their questions back to Tom instead of me or Ginger. There were less disagreements or arguments with parents during meetings. Ginger and I still talk about how the complicated meetings ran so much smoother with Tom (a man) present. Another observation....”

In my mother’s line of work, providing professional advice to schools and families regarding their child’s academic potential, being a man proved to be more beneficial. Their opinions are more respected. Their intelligence is more valued.
“Have there been times that you used your gender to your advantage, maybe played into sexist expectations in order to get what you wanted”

“I believe that I have done this many times. I prefer having a male boss. I know that sounds terrible. But yes.... I have absolutely "batted my eyes" or acted like I needed their help (in a rescuing way) in order to get what I wanted. I walked a fine line of subliminal flirtation, and I rarely got denied.”

One of the more iconic pieces of advice my mother ever gave me was, “you need to learn how to stroke a man’s ego. You give a little, then step back and let them come to you. Once you master the balance of ego stroking and disengagement, you can do anything.”

“Growing up, did your mother or other family members talk to you about your body, or expectations of appearance and attitude? What did the media portray?”

“My mom said one thing to me about my body that stands out to me as it helped me get through my conflicting feelings when I shared my sexual abuse with her. I just turned twelve, and I was so uncomfortable talking to her. I, in a young girl way, was trying to blame myself for the abuse because ‘it didn't feel bad.’ My mom was so supportive and gentle, and explained to me that what he did was wrong and terrible, but my body was responding to the touching and it wasn't my fault. She gave me examples of times you may get aroused when washing your body; your body reacts and you couldn't control it. She tried hard to help me understand that when I get older, I will experience those feelings with a boy and I will not feel ‘dirty.’ She tried hard to help me not be ashamed, to enjoy sexual feelings when I get older and started dating. When it comes to appearances of women, the 70's was a contradiction. You had women ‘libbers’ (Women's Rights groups) but then you had every magazine,commercial and advertizment portraying women as sexual objects. You can burn your bra, but you better have a prettier one in your
dresser to wear the next day. Interestingly enough, I would be so upset about my body growing up. I had no chest, and I would be made fun of by all the boys (and girls). This lasted through high school. But my mother never shared with me that she had breast implants. When I found out years after I got them as an adult, she said she was ashamed she got them and didn’t want me to feel that way....”

This was a lot to read on an online response form, which again is why I wanted to have this interview, this conversation, in person. Face-to-face. Because learning of my mother’s sexual abuse for the first time, through a screen, miles away from home, was devastating. But it is just another testament to her strength, and a great example how she took a horribly traumatizing experience, and turned it into a positive, influencing force in her life; because my mother has always been very open to conversations with me surrounding sex. Which I felt uncomfortable with in my younger years, but now realize was necessary for my mother to do after enduring such an ordeal at elementary school age. She was protecting me. Giving me what she needed at that age.

The final question on the document asked her to reflect on the time she yelled at me to wear more makeup in highschool, a moment that means nothing to her I am sure, but everything to me. It completely altered my state of existence.

“Regarding the makeup question. That is hard to figure out exactly. I watched my mother everyday get ready for work, doing her hair and putting on her make-up, even though we were not allowed to wear makeup or touch my mom’s makeup. My grandmother Johnson would allow me to “Play pretend” with her makeup and I used to love doing that when I would visit. As I got into my middle school years in catholic school, the girls would put on clear nail polish or clear lip gloss and we thought we were getting “away with something.” It is funny looking back on it
now, because my mom would say that a woman should not leave the house without lipstick, but I was not allowed to wear makeup until I fought her on it when I reached high school. I remember shaving my legs without her permission in seventh grade. It was such a huge argument, and I felt ashamed, like I did something horribly wrong. I think honestly, now looking back, that the longer a mother can keep her daughter from “wearing makeup, shaving her legs, etc.” is keeping her innocent and also that her daughter “is good.” By wanting to do things like that, it felt as though you were going to do bad things, like wanting to feel “pretty” was wrong….. However, my mother would give me and my sisters home hair perms to make our hair curly. Three hours in the kitchen with heavy chemicals on our hair, not fun! Then it would turn out awful, and our hair would be damaged and we couldn't complain or get it fixed until it would eventually relax after four months. She would also put our hair in curlers every night before bed. We would have to sleep in them, which was so uncomfortable. I think that I wanted to be able to wear makeup and be “pretty” when I wasn’t allowed to do it, so I didn’t want to put those restrictions on my girls. I remember when you wanted to shave your legs, way earlier than I was allowed, and I was so afraid of being judged by both Mary and my mom. (and other mom’s, honestly…) Your legs were very hairy, and I remember the embarrassment myself as a child, so I didn’t care, but I cared about “what it means to shave your legs..” I still don’t know exactly why there is a rule on when you can do things… I guess, by letting you shave your legs, I allowed my child “to grow up too fast and get into trouble….” When you had no interest in wearing makeup, that confused me. I guess it could be I was so restricted, I actually was thinking, ‘you are allowed to wear makeup! I am letting you! Why won’t you wear it?!?! You are allowed to enhance your looks!! I am giving you permission!’ Now that you have brought this question to me, I think it also is the underlying thought that you need to wear makeup to get noticed… And even though YOU know
that I know you are an amazing girl, I guess I interpret having no interest in enhancing your appearance may mean you don’t want to be noticed? I'm still not sure….”

“Anything else you would like to add?”

“I do just want to say this right off the bat, don't get me wrong, I am very grateful that you have hardly experienced anything terrible with men. I mean I know you had the whole landscaping ordeal recently but back then, the sexism was just so much more in your face for me… so then can you just imagine how it was for mommom? And I mean it is not that I want anything bad to happen to you or your sister, but seriously sometimes I think you are both a little too naive. And yeah disgusting behavior isn't so much in your face anymore but it is still there and I think you are too trusting sometimes because I mean I hate to say it but…men are men. Sometimes I worry you haven't had enough experiences, I am just scared that you won't be able to handle yourself if something truly scary does happen to you like it has to me and mommom. I just worry about that.”

After reading all of the answers that my mother had sent me, I finally understood why she was so animitely against an in-person interview; she is in fact a great writer. Funny enough, she paid me the same compliment the other day, via text at eleven p.m. I'm assuming after she had a few drinks. It went along the lines of, “you know you could be the next Stephen King without the gore. You are such an amazing writer.” Interesting connection but I will take it.

It was through written word that my mother felt she could best express her intelligence. Something she thinks I value above all else because that is how she has divided the family in her mind. ‘The Flynns’ (my fathers side, which includes my granny), v.s. ‘The Maguires’ (my mothers side, which includes my mommom); Intellect, success, and competition v.s. Happiness, wellbeing, and family. And I, with absolutely no say in the matter, have been dubbed a Flynn.
My sister? A Maguire. My mother always divides us in every social situation. And more often than not my sister is like her, and I am like my father.

Being labeled as a Flynn upsets me but I guess I deserve it. I used to make fun of my mom together with my dad and I carry a lot of guilt for that. In reflecting upon my actions during this time, I have realized that I, myself, played into a script that Burstow calls, the “just-like-us script,” involves “any formidable combination of imitating the oppressor, obeying the injunction to ally with the oppressor, or obeying the injunction to cover up differences between oneself and the elite when in the presence of the elite,” and more familiarly goes by the term “honorary male” (Burstow, 57). The honorary male script most commonly evolves within the household; Burstow writes that when operating under a patriarchal guise, the ‘mother’ represents drudgery and powerlessness, and “collusion with ‘father’ is an obvious pull,” from a developing daughter’s perspective; as society is built around men (Burstow, 12). I just went along with it because it seemed like my only way in with my father. But I thought we were all in on the joke, poking fun at her. I thought she was laughing along with us. But, Burstow argues that this is often where internalized misogyny can first develop as “often father and daughter look down on mother (woman) together..they exchange meaningful glances when she misses a point…they agree that she is not bright as they are, cannot reason as they do, yet this collusion does not save the daughter from the mother’s fate” (Burstow, 12). I have definitely played into scripts like this within my own family’s dynamics, clinging on to the idea that I am the “exception” or I am “not like other girls,” yet this only further perpetuates the patriarchal goal of dividing women amongst themselves.

I confess all of this to my mother one day in the kitchen, eyes welled up with tears,
“I am so sorry for ganging up on you all of the time with dad, that was really fucked up and I am ashamed, especially when I consider myself a feminist. You did not deserve that.”

She revealed to me that whenever a rowl broke out at her expense, she would go upstairs and cry afterwards. We were always belittling her. And it may have seemed like small comments in the moment, but these moments happened so often, they definitely built up over time. Up to the point that it affected her sense of self. To the extent that she literally could not talk during our interview, which is never us. We were best friends. She couldn't string a sentence together after seeing me press record on my phone, but ironically, by giving me the least to “work with”, my mother gave me the most to reflect on.
Conclusion

So I have always prided myself on being a feminist, and I will admit, I really thought I knew it all. When I was asked to list my “why” at the beginning of the semester, for choosing this to focus on, I was at a loss for words. My ‘why’ for picking this topic, this format, this journey. For a while, I thought it was because I wanted to “analyze my family,” expose the ways they embodied sexist ideologies, and how that doesn't fly under my radar. But in reflecting over these past few weeks, I think my ‘why’ is a bit more selfish than that. In a good way. I wanted to better understand my family, for my sake. For my own healing. I received some choice words at the hands of the women I love the most, and I was determined to figure out why. To make sure it wasn't my fault. To make sure it wasn't theirs either.

I was told to stop getting lost in the idea of ‘Theory’ (with a capital ‘T’). I was so desperate to try and connect the information I had gathered from my interviews, to the literature I had read beforehand. But that was not really the point of this thesis. This is personal. No scholar in their ivy tower could lecture me on my grandparents, or my mother; or get the same information out of them that I got…the same personalities.

It seems nearly impossible to be able to wrap up everything nicely with a bow, but I will start with what I've learned from each woman I interviewed. In other words, here is my theory with a little ‘t’, because that is just as important. This is for me.

Kay really pushed my boundaries from the get-go, she forced me to acknowledge the different forms that feminism can present itself as. Those forms may not be appealing to all but there is not one “right” way to be feminist. Like Gay said, we are all bad at it and this
conversation taught me to be more open minded around that idea. Yes, Kay does have some problematic beliefs that even I can't put a spin on, but that shouldn't take away from the progress she made for herself. Where she got in life. Also, realizing that what occurred all of those summers ago was not my fault was enlightening, as she had held those beliefs for decades at that point.

I know that she is a kind woman, just very intimidating and stoic; and I almost want to frame her advice regarding “getting used to it” as her way of caring for me. Like she is trying to warn me. So I learned… that dreadful conversation in her backyard was less about her trying to hurt me, or offend other women, or be sexist, and more about her interesting way of viewing the situation that a majority of women find themselves in. She is choosing to accept and survive, finding the best way to stay afloat. It will never change so we might as well prepare, play on the defensive and if you get hurt then that's on you because it's been this way forever. She is an interesting juxtaposition, because she did “break out” of the house, and create a successful career for herself, but she is also broken down.

My Granny, similar to Kay in many ways personality wise, is different when it comes to her role in perpetuating the patriarchy. I think discussing her obsession with “surface level success” is the closest I will get to introducing Theory with a capital ‘T’ in this conclusion. But that is what I learned from my conversation with her, which has everything to do with her childhood: Irish countryside, 2 room cottage, no car. Riding a bike eight miles to and from school. She really latched on to the idea of the American Dream. And this is hard for me to critique in a way; because on one hand, due to the fact that my aunt Laura is a woman, my granny has the ability to conceal her “subtle brags” under the guise of feminism. Like, “look what my daughter was able to accomplish in a male dominated field.” Which yes, is amazing, do
not get me wrong, but I cannot help but feel as though that somewhat plays into patriarchal values. And this is so hard for me to grapple with, because yes she supports women and the widely held belief that women can be just as successful as men but that success is deeply rooted in harmful structures that benefit men in the long run. White men at that. The determiners of success.

When it comes to my mommom, I truly cannot find the words to describe her strength, it is just so unbelievably impressive. I feel ashamed that I went in with a different idea in my head, for how I wanted the interview to go. Why did I want to focus on the negatives? And why did I have these assumptions of my mommom without knowing really anything of her past? I based everything off of information I gleaned from my mother and aunts and went in with this one theory in mind: that my grandmother must have used her femininity to her advantage when she was a waitress. And that wasn't the case at all and even more impressive when you think about it. I am upset that I assumed she would have done so in the first place, clearly I did not know her very well beforehand, and I am honored to know her now.

Finally, I believe that my mother’s interview inspired more self reflection than anything. Witnessing her lack of confidence from the beginning, and realizing I played a role in that destruction was devastating and I really took the time to recognize just how harmful playing into certain scripts can be.

Over the course of a few months, my idea of feminism has completely transformed. First I have recognized, that it is hard to be feminist in a world that in inherently patriarchal. Especially when you find yourself so entrenched in those structures, you catch yourself judging other women for how they practice feminism. We say, “Oh thats not very feminist of you,” or we gatekeep and judge, trying to be the the only one on the pedestal. But we are still operating in
a patriarchal society, there is no “outside” of the patriarchy option. I have learned that it is okay to make mistakes. We are all learning. Just like Roxane Gay, “I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in,” (Gay, xi), except im starting within the microcosm of my family. We all have to start somewhere.
Bibliography


