

*Sample Chapter from:*

Who Are *You* Calling  
*Grandma?*  
*True Confessions of a Baby Boomer's Passage*



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# Introduction



It seems that neither my grandchild nor I have been born yet.

Of course, Baby has the perfect excuse: there are still eight weeks to hang out in Hotel Uteriné before nature declares check-out time. My own excuse is neither as mystical nor as legit. It's simply this: I never thought of myself as a grandma. I suppose such astounding lack of foresight has something to do with wanting to maintain my youth—or at least the latest version of it. But I really don't think that's the heart of the matter. For me it's more fundamental than that (and here I must resort to a confessional tone): *I'm just not sure I'm grandma material.* In fact, I have this nagging suspicion that I could be missing the Grangene altogether. At least this is my excuse for having a daughter-in-law who's seven months pregnant while I have yet to fully conceive of myself as a grandmother.

So at two months and counting, here's the implausible state of things: At this very moment, the Anticipated One is two time zones away, enrolled in the pre-school of humanity, sucking thumb while mother snorkels, and kicking up bony little heels while she attempts to relax on the Kohala Coast. Meanwhile, I am happily land-locked, house and doggie sitting for the expectant pair while they perform the last rites of a (nearly) child free vacation—without of course, fully comprehending the nature of their indulgence.

I'm in and out of their house all day—tending to the dogs, meandering the funky aisles of the independent grocery, briskly walking the hilly surround, deep-watering the flower beds—and yet, when I'm behind closed doors, I'm drawn again and again to the little lamb and gingham paradise that sits at the end of the hall. Some part of me seems convinced that if I linger here long enough, I'll come to accept the startling and incomprehensible fact that very soon, I'm going to be someone's ... someone's ... that my son and his wife are having a baby.

I assure you, the situation isn't so bad that my children insisted I come sit in the nursery until I could act like a decent grandmother. Actually I *volunteered* to come dog sit, which given my disposition toward canines, stops just this side of noble. Okay, so I'm fond of these *particular* dogs, got complimentary plane fare, and an eight-day-seven-night breather from my chronically cranky to-do lists (you can never please them), but I still count my choice as progress. It seems radically similar to something a bona fide grandmother-in-waiting might do. But maybe the truth is that I simply came to sit—not only with the backyard beasts (as my son affectionately calls them), or in front of the curiously comforting wiles of HGTV, but here in this house, in this little corner room bursting with unused promise. Perhaps I came, after all, to sit in the nursery chair my mother and I bought, and rock myself into a new existence.



Like every crucial passage since the age of twenty-seven, this one too has brought me to my journal, which is the writer's equivalent of being brought to her knees. You have to tell the truth on your knees. Otherwise, why bother? A journal is just like that. It's a little spiral-bound altar where the words get soft and sticky when you start to lie to yourself. Then the pen starts hovering over the page, and inevitably, the doodling begins. Only honesty can save you from the ill repute of doodling. People in my grandfather's church hailed him as the Prayer Warrior because he had cracks in his shoes from kneeling so much. I do sometimes get stiff fingers from bending over my little blue-lined altar, which doesn't play quite as well as splitting shoes. But as long as I can avoid the margins, I figure I'm on the right path.

So that's what I'm attempting to do as the unyearned-for mantle of the *third generation* falls to me: trying to keep from marginalizing this moment. Trying to stay instead with my real-me experience of it—even if it is about as flattering as last decade's swim suit.

Of course, I gather my imagined comrades around me. I tell myself that I can't be the only fifty-something woman who never tried that hard to envision herself as a grandmother—and who got so easily distracted when she did. "Surely my misgivings aren't just mine," I mutter as I prepare to wedge myself into these strange new shoes, like some aging stepsister of Cinderella. Speaking of shoes, I wonder if *Grandmother-hood* might be one of the last stomping grounds of having it Our Way. One of the last re-inventions in the Boomer Do-It-Yourself Kit. I suspect that as with everything else, we'll turn the stomping into a dance, recreating what we don't relate to, remaking it in our own image. And in the process, believing we've made it better.

So this is my two-step, my bit in the greater dance: the journal of a woman in the throes of becoming a grandmother. Missing gene or not.

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# *The First Trimester*



## Freud Cringes From Beyond the Grave

### *November 29*

My daughter, Nikki, was birthed to me in a wedding gown and a dazzling smile at the age of twenty: a gift from my firstborn son. Five years later, as she drives me to the airport after My-Turn-to-Share-the-Turkey visit, she's waxing eloquent about the projected three year plan: building careers, getting debts paid off, possibly buying a bigger house. My son is almost thirty and ready for a child, but she's diligently making her mark in the world and both she and the world are impressed. I sympathize with my son, but I'm glad she's giving herself time to flourish, to make friends with her competence. And neither do I mind the fact that she's giving me an extended warranty on my middle age. I smile smugly as we speed along in the night. Her bio-clock is no doubt ticking away somewhere inside, but evidently no one has set the alarm yet.

In just three days that starlit ride and its moonstruck prattle will seem incredibly naïve. And the two of us will seem like a pair of little chatty ostriches that can't imagine how we got so much sand in our eyes. For one thing, during most of my visit, she'd been complaining of pain in her breasts, especially when she exercised. Okay, that could have multiple causes. But for another, she'd confided in me that she was over a week late. Well, that's happened before. But here's the clincher: after mapping out the gestalt of the next three years, she'd seamlessly transitioned into projecting family stats. "Just think, if I got pregnant tonight, I'd be thirty-six when the child was ten. And Justin would be almost forty. And if got pregnant again a couple of years from now, we'd be married eighteen years by the time that child was ten."

Ahhh yes, the unconscious having the last word.

And that's exactly what should have alerted me: that sudden, illogical shift that in the blink of an eye, shot down her three-year plan. I was a psychotherapist for fifteen years for God's sake. Freud would hang his one-track head.

### *December 1*

Nikki calls to talk about sticks. The kind inside pregnancy kits. Now, of course, I've never used a pregnancy kit. I've only seen the commercials, and therefore I don't trust them. (Ever since I stopped up sewer lines with tampons years ago and had a plumber tell me "not to believe Madison Avenue," I've been appropriately wary.) Besides, a lined stick vs. an un-lined stick has never enthralled me as a way to enter life's most mysterious relationship. So Nikki and I giggle together, home phone to cell



phone, about those things “being wrong all the time,” although I realize afterward that I’d been doing most of the giggling. And some time later, I remembered that all the other times she’d taken those tests of which I’m so suspicious, they’d been absolutely accurate. In fact, they’d been right *every* time so far. Still, isn’t there something about false positives being more common than false negatives—or is it the other way around?

### *December 3*

Two kits (of different brands) later and now the stick is giggling. In fact, all three of them are laughing behind their little blue lines. Nikki’s convinced it’s definitive. Of course she’s not from the generation that believes it’s only official if you’ve been *pronounced* pregnant by a lab technician who’s had an up close and personal moment with your urine, and in turn, by an M.D. in a white coat, lab results in hand. Actually, I no longer ascribe to such formalities. In my heart, I believe a woman can know she’s pregnant with nothing but the x-ray vision of instinct. But today I regress. I’m not ready to look the rather bawdy truth in the eye.

## Expectant Grandmother Braves Ocean in Dinghy

### *December 5*

Even with the doctor’s appointment a couple of days away, it seems clear that we are about to be launched onto the great wide ocean of HavingABaby. Justin and Nikki appear to have already made themselves seaworthy. He is exuberant, a man who doesn’t waste enthusiasm on every little thing and therefore has plenty to lavish on things that matter. She seems a bit more dazed, but has hopped aboard and is waving back at me as they put out to sea. I’m in my own little dinghy—not quite prepared, not quite believing, and not doing much paddling. At the moment I am mostly happy for them, putt-putting along on the fumes of their joy.

Tonight I lay in bed and wondered about the efficacy of being so happy for people who have no idea what they’re in for. No one in a state of prenatal euphoria has any idea of the river they’ve just stepped into. And no way to know. Regardless of whether the venture goes all the way to the North Star or as south as south can go, they simply have no idea what it means to have a piece of yourself living and breathing in someone else’s body. Still, I can’t and won’t relinquish my joy for them. Partly because there’s wisdom in innocence and partly because right now, it’s the only thing I feel.

### *December 7*

It’s officially, medically, absolutely so. Nikki and Justin are expecting their first child. My firstborn is the expectant father of his firstborn. Life cycles ’round. I wish I felt deliriously happy, the way my mother felt when Justin was conceived. It’s not that I’m *unhappy*, but neither am I tossing back champagne or calling my ten best friends (of which, in truth there are only three). Nikki seemed to sense my lack of zest when they called tonight. “It’s just so unexpected!” I told her gaily, but I knew she could hear through it. She always can.



### December 10

I entered the great cathedral of Barnes and Noble today. Truly, for a place of such unmitigated commerce, it somehow evokes that hushed, holy feeling in me. I swear that some part of me genuflects every time I pass through the electronic portals. Maybe it's those weighty, impressive double doors that invoke a sense of reverence. Or perhaps it's the intoxicating incense from the adjoining temple of Starbucks. I only know that once inside, cup in hand, I'm ready to worship.

Today, however, is different. I head directly for the information desk to make my baby-specific query. I was led to, not pointed-in-the-direction-of, the precise and desired shelf. My obliging assistant even took the time to pull out a popular selection for me. I thanked her, flipped through it, and promptly returned it to its slot. I'm looking for the book that I wish I'd had as a neo-natalphyte. A book that describes the day-by-day developments of fetal progress. Day 26: aorta begins to form! Day 72: migrating intestines! Day 131: heartbeat audible through a stethoscope! The book the employee offered me was too graphic, too journalistically honest in its portrayal of Day 270 or thereabouts. I leave that level of revelation to the hearty medical types (God bless them) who run birthing classes and whose sensibilities aren't shattered by living color. For the moment, I want to stay within the blurred lines of the developing mystery, within that almost unfathomable realm of ear buds and translucent eyelids. A few more tries and the perfect book finds its way into my grasp: *The Pregnancy Journal* by Christine Harris. Its day-by-day format provides minimal, inviting space for the newly pregnant to record her thoughts and feelings. And most importantly, that space is surrounded by ordered and delicate descriptions of the deepest mystery known to man and womankind.

### December 14

Nikki and Justin had their first doctor appointment and without warning, an image of the six-week-old fetus popped onto the screen, compliments of a vaginal ultrasound. (There's a part of me that thinks even less of a vaginal ultrasound than it does of lines on a stick. And the other part of me is as jealous as a jade-eyed cat. But my reaction is exceedingly beside the point here.) That sudden, unexpected image plugged Nikki into the living matrix of motherhood. She's no longer just a woman who simply knows she's pregnant. That knowledge has now slipped from head to gut and landed in the soft bed of instinct. "All of a sudden it was real!" she told me, sounding like a love-struck school-girl. "I can't begin to tell you how I feel. How different it all is!" She didn't have to. Her joy tap-danced across the phone lines and clicked its heels in rhythm with my heart.

When the phone was passed to Justin, I once again heard the elation in his voice, heightened by impact of the ultrasound. A copy of the life-altering image is already posted on their fridge. I tried to picture it: a snapshot of their barely-conceived child hanging there in the midst of magnets and mug shots, just to the left of their whiteboard scribbled with the minutiae of daily living. They can see their baby now. S/he's already settled into the cheery bedlam of their refrigerator life. But I can't see this babe at all yet. I can't even imagine what such an image would look like. Or what I'll feel when I see it.



“So I just need to find my own excitement,” I tell my companion Sandi that night. “Without the aid of technology.”

“Or hormones,” she added dryly. Tonight I stood in front of the mirror and gazed at my vibrant, smiling, still-capable-of-being-sexy-self and said, “Hey kid, I know you’re not going to believe this, but you’re going to be ... one of *them*.”

*This is one of the unique problems of my generation*, I thought as I tucked myself into bed. Many of us don’t see Grandmotherhood as natural. Well, that’s not quite true. We see it as natural for our grandmothers. Yes, sure, we wanted grandmothers. And we see it as natural for our mothers. Yes, sure, we wanted our children to have grandmothers. But somehow, the logic of the next step failed to occur to some of us. Grandmothers were *them* and we weren’t waiting around for our turn, knitting and dreaming and dropping hints. So while in some abstract way we would wish our theoretical grandchildren to have theoretical grandmothers, we didn’t necessarily want to *be* them. At least not yet.

It seems that Yet has not only arrived on my humble doorstep, but is ready to elbow its way over my threshold. I’m not ready tonight, but soon, I’ll be stepping aside.

### *December 15*

Newly-expectant parents have a strange case of boredom. More like boredomitis. They’re officially pregnant and these days, they have baby’s first photo op to prove it. But the next doctor’s appointment is a month off and it’s too early to do any worthwhile shopping. Their lives have been radically, inextricably altered and yet, unless you count morning sickness, nothing has visibly changed.

Which is where the search for the perfect name comes in. Every time I ring Portland a new name has wheedled its way to the top of the list. Sometimes even in the same phone call, a prospective daughter can go from Lauren to Hannah depending on which expectant parent has me on the line. Alexis was the short-lived favorite of both of them until Nikki dropped back to Lauren and set up camp. Justin also speaks of male names: Patrick, Logan, Quincy. Nikki treats boys’ names like write-in candidates. Since she’s from a family of girls, she blithely reasons, *what else would she have?* Such reasoning bespeaks her preference. “But I’ll love this baby just as much if it’s a boy, Mom. You know that.” And I do know it. Nikki is a young woman of strong preferences and opinions. But she’s even stronger on loving what belongs to her.

## Ex-therapist Verges on Neurotic Breakdown

### *December 18*

I’m definitely deranged. Right alongside a reluctance to claim my reproductive birthright is this full-blown neurotic inquiry: “*Who gets the baby next Christmas?!*” I know this is irrational. It’s beyond irrational. There’s probably some official diagnosis for such a serious split of psyche, but the problem is, whatever its classification, I’m stuck with it. No, I’m crazy with it.



I'm aware that up until this time I've drafted my tale as if Nikki had no family to speak of. In the reader's mind, perhaps, she was early-orphaned or the product of a family that had gone round the dysfunctional bend. Or at the very least one that lived across the country in some novel-worthy state of estrangement. None of these, however, is a representative sample of the truth. It's just that I just thought I'd give myself a running start, give the reader a glimpse of how exceptionally close I am to my daughter-by-marriage before I diluted the story with reality—which is that she's much closer to her own mother.

Nikki's family is more traditional than ours. Her parents, Ginny and Sam, are still married and own their own business. Her sister and husband live within shouting distance of the homestead and also prime the pump of the family trade. They are hard-working, loving, prosperous people whose preference would be to have Nikki and Justin live close by too. And while they seem to have made peace with the four-hour trek that separates them, as you might expect, these are folks that cherish Christmas with their family.

I've never personally spoken with my laws-in-law (coining as I go here) about our holiday arrangements, though it's become apparent that they would prefer to have each and every Christmas with their family intact. In the early years of Nikki and Justin's marriage, things seemed to be migrating in that direction, but have since evolved into an equitable arrangement: the families in question alternate Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations from year-to-year. But now I have this funny feeling. I'm wondering if a first grandchild will break the spell of our unspoken agreement and automatically qualify them for the Intact Family All Rights Reserved Award.

So here I am—God help me—not wanting to admit that I'm a grandmother-in-the-making and *at the same time*, going nuts over the thought that my first Christmas with this baby might be revoked! Because next year will be, after all, Our Turn. ("Our" referring to my former husband and his wife, who live just a mile from me.) I realize that this is the kind of thing that drives people into therapy. In fact, it's the kind of thing that once-upon-a-time drove people into therapy with me as their therapist. I repeat, God help me. And since I spent so many years assuring clients that my real job was to help them become their own therapists, it seems I'm stuck with myself. Although I do frequently contract out. Sandi, who works as an analyst for the state, is one of the best therapists I've ever met. She just didn't bother getting that pesky degree. My friend Margaret is another consistent source of solid reflection. And despite her generous claims, she didn't learn it all from me. Lastly, my younger son Gavin rounds out Team Therapy. As fortune would have it, I'm scheduled to meet him downtown in a few days to deliver Christmas gifts to our Adopt-A-Family. In my condition, I'm reluctant to use the word *needy* in their behalf.

### *December 20*

I've had my first sip of non-vicarious prenatal joy. I've just sent Christmas presents to Nikki and Justin that compensate for my weak response to the heir unapparent. My inspiration was a little cloth bag someone made when Justin was born, one of the few things I've saved. It's orange with green piping and



bears an appliqué clown with all of the pertinent birth data cross-stitched upon his multi-colored balloons. It's still in excellent condition so I gently hand washed it and placed a few things inside: first, my own pink-striped pregnancy record book with an expectant bear on the cover and all my doctor visits, weight gains, and gift lists meticulously noted inside. Next, a paperback entitled *50 Ways to Tell If Your Baby is A Boy or A Girl*. It's full of simple tests from various cultures and though it emanates mostly from the Old Wives circuit, I thought it might be a distraction from The Perfect Name fixation. (Update: Nikki's not budging from Lauren, which Justin doesn't care for. He keeps coming back to Quincy for a boy which she will agree to under no circumstances. Her favorite male name, when she momentarily concedes it could be a boy: Ryan.) And lastly, I put a book in the bag that I read some years ago and desperately wished I'd read as a pregnant mother. Though in all honesty, I can't guarantee it would have interested me then. It's entitled, "The Secret Life of the Unborn Child," and when I visit Portland in January, I will reread it from my new and improved vantage point of thirty years.

One final offering from my small cache of memorabilia: a necklace. I felt a genuine trill of inspiration as I pulled it from my vintage-only jewelry box. You know the kind of box I mean. Mine is gold leatherette and houses, among other ludicrous treasures, my tarnished high school charm bracelet. (Three things are true about this bracelet: I'll never wear it again. It is of no value to anyone else. And I'll never part with it.) Hold on! Revelation! Maybe it's something a granddaughter would love! Or is that just so last century, playing dress-up with your grandmother's charm bracelet? Anyway, the opal necklace, our baby's birthstone, was the present my husband, Brad, gave me on the day Justin was born. Though I haven't worn it for years, I did of course commit it to the rest home for beloved old jewelry. So in the spirit of the times, I decided to pass it on. After purchasing a new chain for it, I had it made into an anklet for Nikki. I don't know if she'll love it, or even if she'll wear it. But passing on this piece of myself, this memento of my history as a mother, brings a quiet spark of connection to the next generation.

Only one thing remains now in my dresser drawer of keepsakes: a little yellow two-piece suit with a white, ribbed yoke circled by Scottie dogs. It was Justin's birth present from his Daddy. It's been double plastic-bagged all these years and appears to be in remarkably good condition. Chromosomes are even now deciding its fate. This morning I put everything in the mail and for the rest of the day, my heartburn ruminations about next Christmas nodded off like a colicky baby who unexpectedly graces you with sleep.

## Woman Gives Birth to Own Therapist

*December 23*

After delivering baskets and boxes to our adopted families, Gavin and I settle into one of our favorite downtown haunts, The Tower Café. The food here is distinctly Californian and the atmosphere so full of bustle and clang that it creates its own version of privacy. I usually prefer something more environmentally subtle when dining out—but not when I'm downtown. After assessing our first-year experience with the Adopt-A-Family program, we turn to *my* current lack. Of peace.



Gavin listens thoughtfully as I pour out my angst. “And to top it all off,” I say, eyeing a strolling Santa and hoping he won’t interrupt my tabletop counseling session, “having the family together for Christmas isn’t that easy for me anyway. For starters, I know Nikki would rather be with her family, which is always hard. And that’s compounded by the growing disparity among us about gift-giving. Not to mention the fact that my stomach keeps track of everyone’s mood. So when we’re together, I end up feeling like the motherboard through which all circuits run.”

“But the last thing you want is for it to be taken away,” he says without a hint of mockery.

“Exactly!”

“I don’t think losing Christmas together is really your biggest concern, Mom. I think you’re more afraid of not feeling equal.”

The proverbial nail just got hammered into the motherboard. Sparks fly, circuits fuse. Tears sting my eyes. (I hate crying in public, but perhaps my tears will at least ward off Santa.) I’d known all along there was something bigger beneath the surface. There always is when I’m secretly starring in a drama of my worst fears.

“I don’t *feel* equal though. Nikki’s parents live closer, they have more money, they’re still together ...”

He merely nods, knowing it’s not the time for a swing vote toward optimism.

“I feel ridiculous! I’m so ambivalent about becoming a grandmother, and at the same time, afraid I’m going to miss a chance to be one.”

“You’ll get the chance. Maybe not in certain prescribed ways, but the big chance—the one all of us have, you know? The chance to know this child and have this child know you.”

This is why I no longer have to pay for therapy.

As our food is served, something inside me relaxes with the truth. Still, I’m not so naïve as to imagine that the truth now chiming in my heart like Christmas bells, will effect a complete cure. I know that fears still lurk of being the lesser grandma. The California one. The Thanksgiving one. The one without a grandpa. It’s just that for the moment, I remember that those fears are just fears, not spells cast by the Reality Witch. I’m also aware, however, that this shiny new perspective implies a certain emotional security on my part. And like my aging blood pressure, such security, I’ve found, all depends on the day you’re checking levels.

When I take Gavin home, I get out of the car and we hug with celebratory gusto in the middle of the street. Tomorrow is officially Christmas. But in my heart, it’s all taking place this moment on 27th Avenue in downtown Sacramento, where life and cold and the gift of intimacy-opened, pulse in the air around us. On the way back to the suburbs, I continue the conversation. Just me talking to me now about what I do want instead of what I don’t. Me talking to me about the relationship I can have with this child regardless of distance, means, or my own misgivings. One of my old loves taught me that *quality* of relationship transcends all other amenities of life, and I silently thank him for leaving that gift in my care.

On the ride from the restaurant, Gavin and I had spoken of creating a whole new version of Christmas, a new tradition shaped by everyone’s thoughts and desires. Now I realize that we already



have our focal point. Never mind that we know neither name nor gender. Anything we create will be centered around this child—his needs, his naptime, his year-to-year changes. Or hers. And eventually, I'm sure, *theirs*.

Then, suddenly, a flashback induces an irrepressible grin: Justin at fourteen months, twirling in the paper and ribbon refuse of Christmas, absolutely high on color and crinkle.

A focal point indeed.

## About Maridel



Maridel Bowes, M.A. is a professional writer and speaker. According to her mother, she talked before she walked. According to her English teacher, her essays were too long but she couldn't find anything to cut. Yet Maridel has one passion greater than her pursuing her gifts: using them to evoke women's soulfulness, sassiness and spirit.

Out of her experience as a therapist, astrologer and workshop leader, she shakes up a literary cocktail of what's deep, funny and real in women's lives—in the hopes of supporting them to trust their own true light.

Visit Maridel at [EvolvingJourney.com](http://EvolvingJourney.com) and sign up for her newsletters, *Crossing Paths* and *But That's Not All!*

