

All in the Family
Linda Gebroe

There is a teenage girl in this photo, standing on a tree stump, right hand on her stomach, laughing a hearty and literal belly laugh. Her smile is broad, unglamorous and genuine. Her left hand holds that of a fella, partly to keep her balance, partly to flirt. She towers above him from the tree stump, and his head, which comes only as high as her hip, is tilted back, looking up at her, smiling. Smitten.

She is my grandmother and he is my grandfather. Pearl and Charlie Lightstone. She is big-boned, and he is slight. Pearl stands solid in knickers and knee socks, sporting a jaunty, athletic look. By the time I was born, those chunky calves were known in my family as the “Lightstone legs.” All of us gals have them, substantial, muscular legs, ankles almost as broad as the calves they support.

My grandfather is dressed impeccably, naturally, in a dark blazer, light gray vest and crisp white shirt, topped with a smart bow tie. The ensemble suggests he was born dressed. Little wonder he chose haberdashery for his career.

This was the beginning of my grandparents’ sixty-three years together; and who they were in this photo is who they were throughout. Pearl, the larger, lustier, stronger of the two. Charlie, the sweeter, more loyal, more doting.

When she was in her thirties, my grandmother took up with another man, a better-looking, better-educated one than my grandfather. Some days, while Charlie worked at the store (Lightstone’s Menswear), this other man (a doctor) would come calling at their apartment and take Pearl out for the afternoon. By this time Pearl and Charlie were

parents to my mother and uncle. Pearl would dress up nice, put on make-up and perfume, and then leave my mother to baby-sit.

I imagine the family dinners in those days: Pearl, Charlie, and their two children sitting around a small table in Brooklyn, Pearl full of life and lust, Charlie tired after ten hours working on his feet, my adolescent mother seething from complicity she did not choose, my uncle an unwitting distraction.

I didn't find out about the affair until my grandmother was near ninety. She was blind (from refusing to go to a doctor for her cataracts), withered and, I believed, sexless. My grandfather was dead and I suppose my mother felt it was safe now to tell the tale as we made our way home from Pearl's retirement community one evening. If anything, the story made me like my grandmother more.

Thank god she was in my life. It was she who braved the Ferris wheel with me at Coney Island when no one else would. And she who took me to the United Nations, and to Radio City, where I saw my first movie. She pulled no punches, that one, calling me a Jersey hick when, as a child, I was intimidated by the New York City subway trains.

Every year my parents would go away on vacation, and my grandparents would come and stay with my brother, sister and me. It was like a parental upgrade for us kids. While my mother was lukewarm to my friends, my grandmother welcomed them. As I grew older, she'd let me have parties downstairs in the family den, allegedly to dance, but really to make out. She and my grandfather would watch TV upstairs, and leave us alone. I may have had my grandfather fooled; he spent a lifetime projecting sweet innocence onto all women. But Pearl, she knew better.

There is another photo, this of my grandmother and me. In it, I am the young and athletic one. I am in my twenties, squatting, as if in the front row of a team photo, leaning back against the legs of my grandmother, who is seated. Pearl's hands rest comfortably on my shoulders. She is well into her seventies here, but her eyes are young and twinkly, her smile as broad as when she was a teenager. She and I are family and friends, sisters and compadres.

Recently my mother asked if I miss my grandparents. I was surprised by the question, as they've been dead a long time now. I do miss them. I look at the photo of them together, where they are not yet my grandparents, not even parents, just Pearl and Charlie, sharing a laugh, and I think of how they were young and how they were old and who they were and how they lived.

Like every woman, my grandmother was born with all the eggs she would ever need or use in her entire life. In young and athletic Pearl dwelt the egg that would eventually become my mother and, in her, the egg that would become me. So in this old photo of Pearl and Charlie, I am already there. Now I am middle-aged and while my eggs may not be technically viable, they can still do the rumba. After all, I've got a little bit of Pearl in me.

###