

GRANDMA BEFORE THE GRAND

Just the other day I was taken aback by the simple fact that my grandma used to wear miniskirts in college. My grandma who, today, would say you're dressing like a harlot wore miniskirts? Absurd!

"Well yes, it was the clothing of the time."

Thinking about my grandma as someone other than the woman I've known my whole life is mind-blowing. My grandma today hates most people and sits and reads all day. She spies on her neighbors through her binoculars and whenever she calls me she informs me of their doings. It's weird to imagine her as anyone but my grandma. It's honestly hard to think of her as my dad's mom even though there are enough anecdotes of my dad's childhood shenanigans to write a book about—herself present in every one of them.

Who was Grandma before she became Grandma or even before she became Mom to my dad and uncles? Who is Phyllis?

Well, first off don't call her that she hates it. Ugliest name in the whole world if you ask her.

"Who'd name their kid ____? Well at least it's better than Phyllis," she says often.

Phil, as she is rather called, grew up in the boonies of Southern Missouri outside the tiny village of Des Arc in a house built by hand with no running water and the only heat came from the wood stove. Their bathroom was outside in an outhouse, and the well water was so bad my grandma lost all of her teeth and got dentures by age sixteen in 1965.

Her grandma lived with them up until her death. She was an old, bitter Native woman who hated my grandma's mom for trapping her son in marriage with the birth of my grandma's older brother. Phil was probably a watchful, hardworking, and disciplined child, but I know she

was a happy one. Her dad drove the wood truck and would be gone from dawn til dusk delivering wood to neighboring communities. (He would also stop at bars and flirt with young ladies if you asked the townspeople.) But when he came home he made sure to bring his three kids something sweet and would often take them to the circus or other events to let them make the happy childhood memories that he didn't get to have.

Her mother on the other hand was trapped at home with the grandma who hated her guts. She never learned how to drive. She had to put up with her husband's infidelity. She stuck to her kitchen and ruled it with an iron fist. Phil was not allowed in said kitchen. The only time a foot of hers could enter was when she loaded another piece of wood into the stove.

Luckily for Phil, she was smart, really smart. She claims she didn't take hard classes and that's why she got valedictorian of her tiny Missouri high school, but I think she's lying. My grandma is a walking dictionary in present day. Anyway, Phil at age sixteen graduated at the top of her class and her dad decided she was smart enough that maybe she should be the first Ursery to go to college despite being a girl and him being a misogynist.

Because of this my grandma became the first woman in her family's history to learn how to drive. Only so her dad would no longer have to pick her up on the holidays while she was away. During college, my grandma was in a sorority, which is mind-boggling—my prude grandma in a sorority house. She shared her room with another girl who was weird and disappeared mid-semester. The janitor spied on the girls who walked around with only their bras. Not Grandma though, she would never. Phil looked out her window to spy on Vinny, the tennis player she had a crush on—who we tracked down on Facebook two years ago. She wore miniskirts, took a swimming class, and wrote in her diary everyday.

During the summers, she didn't really go home except on the occasional weekend. Instead she worked at a family owned truck stop for twelve hours straight and lived in the upstairs room every weekday. The family would give Phil 15 cents an hour and she saved every penny. Eventually she graduated, got her own car, and a job teaching second grade.

She was the first Ursery ever to graduate from college, work a non-blue collar job, and the first Ursery woman to have a car of *her* own down in the Missouri basin. She taught two years of second grade and worked in the nursery during the summers with her best friend Hazel.

Hazel is mighty important because was dating a man named Hop, who was stationed at the nearby Fort Leonard Wood. Hop had a friend who he brought as a blind date for my grandma for their movie night double date. The young man was tanned with blocky black framed glasses and a plastered on genuine smile. He introduced himself as Dave Miller from the small town of Monroe, Iowa. He had been drafted alongside his two older brothers for the Vietnam War, and he was her date. Dave was super nice and polite and just as nervous as she was.

But Phil in true Grandma-fashion sat as far away from Dave as she possibly could in the car, but she did kind of like him. After their date he went back up to base and began writing her letters every day that she'd pick up on the weekends. Today, she claims they were full of complaining and silly, but obviously then they were effective because after three months of letters back and forth and a handful of in-person dates, Dave asked Phil to marry him—three times.

She finally said yes.

They were married at her parent's house with no audience except for the witnesses of Hop and Hazel and the priest. Dave would be discharged and take Phil up to Iowa to join him on the farm. Dave and Phil would have three sons Scott, the genius; Shannon, the accident and my

father; and Shawn, the baby. Phil would become Mom then Grandma and thus favorite person to ever exist.