

My Grandma from the Island, My Mother from the Farm

Patricia Roussel

Abstract: “My Grandma from the Island, My Mother from the Farm” is a reflective piece meant to give credit where credit is due in the first-generation university story of Patricia Roussel. From a small town in northern Ontario, Canada, Roussel has had an unconventional degree path at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, beginning her studies during the COVID lockdown and studying abroad at Durham University, England. Drawing from the shared experiences of her grandmother and mother, Roussel pays tribute to the lives of these incredible women and their unfaltering independence, family devotion, and abounding love. For Roussel, her grandmother and mother exemplify what it is to be a strong woman, supporting her university experience.

‘Back home’—a phrase circulated at my grandmother’s dinner table when the dessert rolled out along with the reminiscence of the ‘good old days.’ My grandmother is one of eight children born and raised on an island off the eastern Canadian coast. She left this home at the tender age of 18 to move to Montréal, Québec to start a new life. Going from her small village of 200 people to the hustle and bustle of Montréal in the 1940s, there are many times my grandma would recount how big of a change this was. However, it proved fruitful as she was charmed by a cheeky assembly chief at her waitressing job, who is now remembered in photo albums as my Papa. As my grandma would pick snippets from her life, I remember the wheels turning inside of my head, wondering how all these stories fit together to become the little woman in front of me who always kept red lipstick in her car and whose kitchen was filled by the voices of Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton. My grandma holds an education level to the eighth grade and has lived a life mesmerizing to me. My heart swells when I think of her and all she accomplished that she graciously shared around that table. I’m proud to consider that little island ‘back home’ as it’s the tender beginning of the life I cherish and admire. Now, as my grandma’s mind fades from the one I remember, she’s never forgotten ‘back home,’ nor shall I.

‘The Farm’—another phrase used around my family home to reference the childhood house of my mother in a rural town in northern Ontario, Canada. Having five older brothers and a sister almost twenty years her senior, Mom holds many stories of torment and the hardships of farm life—some of those influencing my now vegetarian lifestyle. Nonetheless, over car rides or lunch, Mom would tell me of her hand-me-down clothes, picking berries after dinner, and the hardworking nature of my grandparents. I would save these stories like pages in an unfinished book and try to piece together how they were part of the strongest woman I know. Each time one of her stories would surface, I found it hard not to look at the life I held and not compare. Instead of waiting for Christmas for one or two toys under the tree, I had everything a child could dream of in my playroom. I never had to compete for attention as I was her only child. And I ate eggs bought from a store instead of ones fought over by children and roasters. My mother saw the farm change over the years as she stayed to care for my aging grandparents, moved out to marry the boy down the street, my grandma’s son, my Dad, and eventually saw a ‘for sale’ sign pitched in the front yard. This house was the center of her family that she nurtured and loved and gave up so much to preserve, staying home after high school. My mother is the most selfless woman I have ever met. Her stories of that farmhouse on the dirt road have influenced how she raised me. I see my mother in that farmhouse we pass every year to go camping and the memories she carries with

her brothers and sister. I see this place as love, tradition, and family—all words that define who she is to me.

For me, the lives of my mother and my grandmother exemplify what it is to be a strong woman. Through years of change, both women accredit much of who they are to where they came from. As I reflect on my first-generation university story, I take their stories with me. Those of taking risks, loyalty to family, and honouring your beginnings. Like my grandmother, moving five hours from my small village to university in the thick of COVID left me with a lot of fear and uncertainty. Feeling like a ‘fish out of water’ and the accompanying components of imposter syndrome filled my first months. Walking around a quiet campus, going to masked dining halls, meeting professors and classmates over a screen, it feels like a blur. The workload was also different. Writing pages of words without knowing the acceptable format, scrolling for hours searching for a helpful email, and racking up a long call history with my mom to seek confirmation on my essays—these were a stark reality. Fitting into the social scene proved challenging as many of my new friends led very different paths getting to university. I wore no blazer to high school, my parents did not carry alumni status, and my wall had no pictures of yearly Europe vacations. University was not an expectation for my life—it was a privilege and an honour. During these moments of misplacement, I found great comfort in calling home and speaking to my family to remember the sacrifices they made for me to be at this place.

I find strength in the lives of my grandmother and mother. Though their stories are different from mine, their adaptation to change and finding the best in situations support me, for if they could make it, so could I. These women do not have a degree to their name, nor have they written thousands of words on a topic, but without their stories of perseverance, mild stubbornness, and championed independence, this could not be my reality. As I prepare for my final year of university, I meditate on these childhood dinner conversations and the women that told them. When I walk across that graduation stage, I carry them with me in hopes that one day, at my dining room table, ‘back home’ and ‘the farm’ continue to be beacons of womanly strength, hope, and family.