

Jane Caro

*Pass It On*

‘Can I give you a kiss goodbye?’

I always ask my three-year-old grandson for permission before I give him a hug or a kiss. We are very big on consent in our family and believe in teaching respect for another’s bodily autonomy early, but sometimes (often) it has its downside.

‘No, you can’t.’

I respect his choice—I have to, that’s the point of asking—but I don’t give up entirely.

‘Can I shake your hand instead, then?’

He looks up at me sweetly and replies with exactly the right note of kindly condescension and regret.

‘No, sorry, you can’t. I am just too busy.’

Once again, I must content myself with a wave and blowing a kiss. His little sister, not yet verbal, loves to give big,

open-mouthed, sloppy kisses and, despite her snotty nose, I'm happy with that.

I love being a grandmother. I love it in a way that surprises me. When my daughter first announced she was pregnant—with my perennially time-poor grandson, as it turned out—I was pleased, of course, but I also felt an unexpected clutch of anxiety. Ever since my daughters moved out of home, I have revelled in my child-free existence. I love the freedom to work, loll about, watch what I want, eat what I want, when I want (with only minor objections from my husband). I love that when I tidy up, it stays tidy and I love the peace and quiet. I love the freedom to travel, to come and go as I please. I loved it so much that when our two cats died within months of one another, I had zero desire to replace them. That's why I worried—guiltily—what the return of little children into my life would do to my blissful and professionally satisfying existence.

And, of course, my two grandchildren have blown up my life. Not as much as they have blown up my daughter's, but enough to have taken most of my down time. What is surprising is that I don't mind. I look forward to seeing Alfie and Esther with the anticipation of a teenage girl with a crush, and I like who I am with them.

I am much more patient with my grandchildren than I was with my own daughters. I have just enough detachment—and more than enough energy, unlike their sleep-deprived mother—to observe their temper tantrums (they are real, human children, after all) without feeling either responsible

or disturbed. My daughter tells me I am the master of distraction—I suppose it's the decades of experience as a mother kicking in. It is always nice to discover old skills that have lain rusty for years and find you can still use them with skill and tact. I rarely lose my temper with my grandchildren. I do not mind mess, sticky fingers, the aforementioned snotty noses, spills or marks on furniture. I am not good at playing games or rumberling (I never was)—that is my husband's terrain—but I am great for reading stories, telling stories, drawing pictures, singing songs, going for walks, splashing in puddles, rambling round the garden, watering plants (I don't even make too much fuss when I get hosed) and taking their conversation and observations seriously. I pay my grandson and my granddaughter serious attention. I hope I always will.

When I was in the grip of the small flare-up of anxiety that greeted my daughter's announcement of impending birth, I made a silent promise to myself: I would be as supportive of my daughter and her mothering as I possibly could be. I would not criticise—and I don't. (This is not hard because I generally agree with her parenting style.) I would help her out whenever she asked—if I possibly could. I would never let her see that I was putting time in reluctantly, even if I was. I remember with pain how bad I felt every time I asked my own mother for help—help I desperately needed. My mother had four children and by the time her grandchildren came around I think she had well and truly had enough. She loved her children's children, but she was protective of her hard-won freedom. When my sisters and I were young mothers, it was

my mother's feminism that made her so reluctant to give up the space she had finally created for herself. It is my feminism that makes me so determined to help my own daughter as much as possible and never, ever make her feel guilty for asking. I remember how annihilating it was to drown beneath the demands of a toddler who wouldn't sleep during the day, a baby who wouldn't sleep at night and a husband whose job took him away twenty-six weeks a year. I do not want her to feel that way.

Perhaps it was those bad memories—my younger daughter's first year of life was one of the worst years of mine, mostly due to chronic sleep-deprivation—that triggered the frisson of anxiety when I first heard I was to be a grandmother. I was afraid that I might have to go down that dark rabbit hole a second time, but it has not turned out that way.

I underestimated just how much I would love these small but vigorous and insistent voyagers into the future—a future that I will never see, a future I now worry about even more. What will climate change do to their prospects? But that is an issue for a different essay. Just as I felt about my own children, I recognise that these grandchildren are my only chance for immortality or, at least, life after death—they will remember us. Their arrival has made me think about my own grandmothers, both of whom have been dead for decades. I only really knew my maternal grandmother and I loved her very much. She and my maternal grandfather followed their daughters (my mother and my aunt) when they migrated to Australia in the early 1960s. My paternal grandparents

remained in London. I was five almost six when we migrated to Australia. I was ten nearly eleven when we travelled back to the UK in 1968. The day after we arrived was the last time I ever saw my London-based grandmother.

‘My head! My head!’

My grandmother was in the front passenger seat of her car. My father was driving. They had decided that he should start getting used to driving on British roads again as we were intending to stay in the UK for months. It turned out to be a very wise decision.

My grandmother was screaming in terrible distress. It was an unearthly noise. I had never heard an adult make such a sound. We’d left my mother and three-year-old sister at the local laundrette with a promise to pick them up in an hour or so. We had a lot of laundry. My family, including four children aged from three (the previously mentioned baby sister) to ten (me) had been travelling for weeks. My other sister, brother and I were all in the back seat. I could see my father was very upset. None of us made a sound.

We got home and my grandmother was still moaning and screaming. She was writhing in pain and clutching her head. My father told us to go into the lounge room.

‘You’re in charge, Jane. Don’t come out, no matter what you hear!’

He closed the door firmly behind him. I felt scared but also proud to have such a responsibility. I heard my father dial the ambulance. I heard the siren as it arrived—it sounded different from Aussie ones. I heard my grandmother

screaming...and screaming...and screaming. But we did not come out, not one of us, or open the door, or ask any of the questions we were desperate to ask.

My sixty-three-year-old grandmother (she chose to be called Gran, not Granny because it made her sound too old) had suffered an aneurism. She died a few weeks later, leaving my parents and grandfather grief-stricken. It remains the one and only time I saw my father cry. But apart from that one dramatic and horrible moment, I have no memory of my paternal grandmother. When I think of her now that I am aged sixty-two, only one year younger than she was when she died, it is with sadness for her and fear for me. I don't want to die before my grandchildren can fix some memories of me. I want to stay alive for at least another twenty years—for all sorts of reasons, of course, but not least because I want my grandchildren to remember me, the way I remember my maternal grandmother.

In the more formal era of my youth, we all referred to my mother's mother as Granny Booth. To her face, we called her Granny. It was in her honour that I knew, as soon as my daughter announced her pregnancy, that I wanted to be called Granny. Like my long-dead other grandmother, many of my friends felt that Granny sounded too old; they preferred the more common Australian honorific of Nan or Nanna. But there has never been a Nan or a Nanna in my archetypical northern-English family and I felt Granny was right—both to honour my heritage and my own half-Scottish, half-Welsh Granny Booth. As it stands, the discussion has proven moot.

My grandson calls me Gonky, which is as close as he can come to Granny. I love it and answer happily to it when it screamed out across a crowd of bemused shoppers in the local mall. My husband is Gra Ga and he likes that fine too. Indeed, my grandson has recently taken a liking to calling everyone a bin-truck, as in Gonky bin-truck, and I am quite delighted by that too—a grandmother's love is blind.

I loved my Granny Booth. Of all my relatives in my extended family, she is the only one who never judged me. I was a bumptious and outspoken child, hungry for the limelight. I was not what a nice little girl was meant to be, especially in the 1960s, and my overeagerness resulted in some people taking pleasure in squelching me. No doubt I often deserved it, but Granny never squelched me, nor did she ever make me feel that she disapproved of me. I just felt loved by her even though she would no more have demonstrated overt affection or said the words 'I love you' than flown to the moon. People from working-class Manchester don't hold with being mushy. She showed her affection in small ways. I was a picky eater and she was a bounteous and talented baker. When I watch *The Great British Bake-Off* now (and I cannot get enough of it) I often think how my quiet, self-effacing Granny could easily have won the competition if only such things had been around in her day. I still make her melt-in-your-mouth short pastry every Christmas...but I digress.

Granny Booth took the trouble to notice the baked goods I did like—scones, Shrewsbury biscuits, lemon curd, shortbread, cheese-and-onion pie—and made sure she always had plenty

on hand. Like my own mother, she never forced me to eat anything I did not like. She knew what each of her grandchildren (she had six, my mother's four and my aunt's two) liked best and had them freshly baked and plated up ready to be devoured when we came to see her. She was brilliant at handicrafts—I still have some lace she made by means of the long-forgotten art of tatting—and made us beautiful stuffed toys and an exquisite collection of elegant clothes for my Barbie doll—a collection I am ashamed to say I turned my nose up at because they were not store-bought. How I wish I still had them now. My elder daughter inherited that talent, and as I watch her knit and crochet blankets, toys and clothing, I always think how proud her great-granny would have been.

My sister who was closest to me in age was one of those kids who caught constant bouts of tonsillitis. I was never sick. When relatives came to see Ann in her sickbed, they would bring her a present. I'll never forget the time Granny brought me a small present as well and said, 'It's not your fault you are not sick.' She thought of things like that.

She was also great fun and up for a laugh, despite her natural reserve. We played charades every Christmas—the kind where you are on a team, choose a word and then act out each syllable while the other teams try to guess what full word you have chosen. At one family celebration, I vividly remember her playing a naughty schoolgirl in my cousin's ill-fitting school uniform. It may even have been at her husband's and her golden wedding anniversary party. She was



utterly convincing and filled with glee. It made me wonder what kind of a schoolgirl she once was.

I was with her just before she died. I went home to my children only a few hours before she took her last breath. My aunt and my cousin were with her at the end, and she died—as so few of us are fortunate enough to do—in her own bed. She died quickly, taking to her bed only a day or two before the end. I knew—as we all did—that she was fatally ill, but she was ninety-two, and at that age cancer proceeds slowly, so when I decided to take my two-year-old daughter to visit her, I had done so to alleviate the sense of aimlessness that often assailed me when I had dropped my elder daughter at school and the hours until I picked her up yawned in front of me. As the mother of small children, I could not escape the feeling that no one knew or cared what I did with my day, and I did not like it. To fill the time, I drove down to the retirement village where my grandmother—a widow by this time—lived. I had no idea that she was within a day or two of dying.

As soon as I saw her, however, I knew. My aunt was with her and had obviously stayed the night, but that was not what gave the game away. My ladylike Granny was sitting on the couch with her skirt rucked up above her thighs, oblivious to her *déshabillé*. But that wasn't the main clue either. It was her eyes. I know this sounds absurd, but they had the same huge pupils and unfocused, faraway look my cat had a few days before it passed away at a grand old age. As soon as I saw her eyes, I knew.

She wasn't unhappy, however, and she was conscious enough of her surroundings to be pleased to see us, particularly

her great-granddaughter Charlotte (who bore Granny's mother's first name). Charlotte was as bubbly and unselfconscious as toddlers always are with people they know and love, and my gentle grandmother had my daughter's confidence just as much as she had mine. Charlotte clambered up beside her to play a favourite game—one I had also loved as a small child. Granny and Charlotte used an ancient set of dominoes (I suspect the white squares were made from real ivory) to build houses and towers, which of course two-year-old Charlotte delighted in knocking down. When the charms of that game palled, Charlotte went out into Granny's garden. Her bungalow in the retirement village had a spectacular flower garden, established by my long-dead grandfather and lovingly maintained by his wife. It was a beautiful day and Charlotte happily picked flowers. That was another great virtue of my granny—it pleased her to see children pick and enjoy the flowers she grew.

Charlotte came inside and climbed up again beside Granny on her makeshift bed on the couch. Entirely spontaneously, and prattling away cheerfully, my little blonde daughter began to weave the flowers she had picked into my grandmother's grey hair. My grandmother could not have been more delighted. It is the last picture I have in my mind's eye of my much-loved grandmother, a little old lady who looked rather like a wizened five-year-old—she had lost so much weight to the cancer—resplendent with bright flowers woven into her hair.

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I hope my last conscious day is exactly like hers. But that is not why I tell you this story. I tell you because the fact that my grandmother remains so vividly in my memory is something that has taken on more importance to me now. Grandchildren give you a foothold into the future, for sure, but they also ladder you back to the past. In a strange way, becoming a grandmother, like becoming a mother, leads you to recognise connections, characteristics and legacies of those figures from your own childhood. Your memory of the grandmothers who preceded you sharpens. And the importance of them intensifies; your memory of them keeps them alive, just as their memory of their own grandparents did and still does. Granny Booth often told me stories of her own mother (Granny Jones) and grandmother (Granny Grey), and of her parents-in-law (she didn't like them much).

I have a great deal of information about the women of my family thanks to that chain of grandmothers. It saddens me, and is also revealing, that I know so little about the men. They kept themselves to themselves in a way that women do not.

Until very recently, the memories from my grandmother were all the information I had about my antecedents. I found out a little about the Caro side via some census information, and I knew Gran Caro was a professional dancer who once performed in a show with Fred Astaire's equally famous sister Adele. All the Caros are nifty movers—it's because we are hyper-mobile, which, especially as you age, turns out not to be a good thing.

It is due to modern technology, however, that I discovered the lost secret of the unbroken chain of my maternal grandmothers. I had my DNA tested a couple of years ago. It came about as part of the SBS promotion of their program *DNA Nation*. They wanted a Fairfax columnist to have their DNA tested to promote the show and I was the lucky writer who got the gig. My father and I swabbed our cheeks—fathers and daughters have to be tested separately to isolate the mitochondrial DNA because mothers pass it on to their daughters, not to their sons. We know maternal grandmothers are particularly important for the health and survival of their grandchildren, much more so than grandmothers on the father's side. We also know that it is their DNA that is handed down through the maternal line, from mother to daughter from generation to generation. The chain of grandmothers is not just emotional or practical, it is biological too.

As everyone knows, all modern humans have the same great-great-great-etc-grandmother—an African woman who lived 200,000 years ago. Along the way, however, her mitochondrial DNA has mutated many times, creating all the various differences we can see in human beings and their racial and ethnic identities today. These mutations are called haplotypes and are what identify your ancestry when you have your DNA tested. People who look like me—white Europeans—are usually haplotype H, a mutation that occurred about 30,000 years ago.

When the results came back, the boffin who had done the testing for SBS told me he wanted to meet me personally to

give me the results because my mitochondrial DNA (passed to me from Granny Booth) was the most unusual he had ever seen! I was filled with curiosity and not a little trepidation—what could ‘unusual’ mean, exactly? It turned out my mitochondrial DNA is ancient—100,000 years old. It is called haplotype L1 and is black African. For the ‘dilution’, as he called it, to have occurred—in other words, for me to look as I do—the introduction of European genes must have happened between 300 and 500 years ago.

In 1500 (or 1700), my African great-great-great-etc-grandmother had a daughter to a white man, who had a daughter to a white man, who had a daughter to a white man, and so on. Of course, I thought of slavery. But who knows? I don’t and I never will, but at least I know something about all those grandmothers, one of whom must have been the last to know that particular family secret. I was delighted when both my grandchildren were born and I love them both equally, but I confess to a small secret thrill when my granddaughter was born. My grandson has his mother’s mitochondrial DNA, but he cannot pass it on. My granddaughter can bestow that ancient lineage on her children.

To be a grandmother is a privilege and a pleasure. It gives you a chance to be of use to the next generation. It gives you a chance to repay the debt you owe all the grandmothers who came before you and who helped their daughters to be parents long enough for them also to become grandmothers. And I cannot help but feel pleased that, after centuries, that long-lost African grandmother has not had her existence entirely

erased. She lives on, in us.

We grandmothers make history, repeat history, carry history and pass on history. We pass on stories, nursery rhymes, family sayings and the unspoken, unacknowledged ripples of long-forgotten events, traumas, twists and turns in our complex lives. Our face, our touch, the sound of our voice, the smell of our skin may be forgotten, but we are there, inside our grandchildren. Pass it on.