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Off of the Island

Reflections Through Memory

Joshua Lycka

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Introduction

My great-grandmother once wrote a book titled *Six on an Island: Childhood Memories of Lake Huron*. It is the only published paperback book that exists in my biological family. Through the book, she speaks frankly and intimately with the reader about her feelings, experiences, and inner emotions during her childhood on Marquette Island, just across a short channel from Cedarville, MI.

Eight years have passed since her death. Shaky home videos, collections of her poetry, and pictures are the only windows left into her life from an outside perspective. The spirit that she instilled in my family and I carries on and manifests itself through our actions, ways of thinking, and attitudes toward life. Still, I appreciate the ease of opening a book and entering into her life any time I desire.

I became intimately connected with her account after an extensive translation project I began last year as a student at Grand Valley State University. My goal was to translate the entire English version into French. This task required me to pore over every sentence and revisit its meaning in both languages to truly understand the sense that she had intended. I felt like I had opened up a new conversation with her through the words that she had written; the likeness of spirit that I recognized between her and myself helped me believe that a part of her remained inside of me even beyond the grave.

I didn’t intend the following work to be a full biography of my great-grandmother. I hoped that instead, I could describe the context of her life through the people that influenced her as well as those that she brought into life and love. In parts, she is the main focus; in others, she exists on the fringes of the story as her family members interact with and without her.

Additionally, I intended this work to accompany Dodo’s book as a companion reader. The references from her story litter the pages, but in an effort to avoid redundancy, I don’t explain their context or provide a summary of what she has already eloquently described. The small cast of characters that play into her story may be initially confusing, as many of them are more commonly referred to by their nickname within the family. The following diagram explains the names and relations of those that appear in the book:

**Generation 1**
- Edward Rudd (Sr.) = Grandpa Rudd = Grandfather
- Bertha Rudd = Grandma Rudd = Nana

**Generation 2**
- Uldene (Rudd) Leroy = Dodo
- E.J. Rudd = Edward Rudd (Jr.) = Uldene’s younger brother
- Audrey (Rudd) Delbridge = Uldene’s younger sister
- Colleen (Rudd) Berry = Uldene’s youngest sister = Aunt Connie
- Wyman LeRoy = Uldene’s husband

**Generation 3**
- Marise (LeRoy) Lycka-Murphy = Uldene’s oldest daughter = Mimi
- Patricia (LeRoy) Wilkens = Uldene’s second daughter = Aunt Pat
- Mack Delbridge = Audrey’s son
- Robert Lycka = Mimi’s widowed husband = Bob
- John Murphy = Mimi’s second and current husband

I, Josh Lycka, fit into generation 5; Mimi is my paternal grandmother
1. Time marches on, and with it one’s point of view

It’s early summer, and the tree-lined road leading to Cedarville is lush with greenery, dotted with the bright reds of ripe raspberries. The trip is much shorter than how I remembered it as a child. I’m unsure if my grandmother realizes how emotional I am today, how every story she tells me fulfills a thirst that I only recently became conscious of. Angie-O’s. The cemetery. A brief trip to the cottage, but discreetly, as if we were children sneaking to see a forbidden playmate. I always check to see if it’s unlocked, the opportunity to walk around and see the miniscule cabin from the perspective of a man, remembered as a child. In effect, I become a child when I’m here. But the memories fleet away, the pictures are tucked away in boxes far from where I live away from home, and the door is locked. Three times, if I remember correctly.

Nostalgia can affect a person of any age, though I used to consider it a sentiment reserved for older people. It can trick us, as the passage of time blurs our perceptions and delivers both convenient deceptions and, as my great-grandmother writes, a loss of the important memories. When one reminisces deeply and openly – and this seems to happen most often in the company of family – the mind restores the clarity of its thoughts and, like muscle memory on a once familiar instrument, leads to an unexpected experience. Connections that were once forgotten and overlooked spring back to life as the mind wanders through the landscape of stored dreams, emotions, and memories.

To be honest, my great-grandmother Dodo, or more properly, Uldene, didn’t play an active role in my life for years after her death. Only when someone retold or a story about her or I happened upon her book on our bookshelf did I start to reconnect with the memories of her, which were quickly forgotten when the business of the present took precedence over the past. It must have been her, who left such a legacy of wit, not to mention a written memoir of her childhood that thrust me back into the present and instilled in me a desire to learn about where my family came from, to derive their stories, to seek out a connection with the historical roots that ground me today.

Though I had heard all the stories before at family gatherings, I didn’t treat them as reality and didn’t assign much importance to them. Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention. Maybe when stories were flying left and right between the matriarchs and patriarchs of my family I had tuned out, lost in thought about something assuredly more trivial than the physics of a horse-chestnut exploding in a wood-stove, or a liquefied opossum spraying through the valve of a pressure cooker and raining down over the kitchen. Honestly the only reason I know today that FFA stands for Future Farmers of America is because at one point my grandmother, recently moved in to a new school in Chesaning, teased her rural classmates that it stood for Fuzzy Fanny Association. One might have to glean through the detailed descriptions and/or exaggerations to retain anything worthy of the history books but in any case, the most attentive of us could learn a lot from these stories.

Recently I’ve noticed the tell-tale beep of a voice recorder each time one of our older relatives starts off on a string of stories. At first I was slightly irked at the clash of technology and the past, as if it degraded the quality of the stories just knowing that they existed somewhere more permanent than our memories. The feeling persists somewhat until I sit here in reflection and panic when I can’t piece together the sound of my grandpa’s voice, which I will only hear from home videos from now on. And perhaps it is more meaningful to hold on to the vague fragments of the past rather than resort to a hard copy, but at this point I’d rather clutch on to
what I can get. It’s for this reason that I owe so much to the written account that my great-grandmother left to the family and, for that matter, the world.

I’d wager that I’m not the only one guilty of this non-intentional apathy toward the past. It isn’t even so much apathy as it is an under-appreciation of the rich past from which we came. There aren’t any more immediate consequences to forgetting a family story than there are to forgetting the plot of a book one read years back, or the ending to a film. Thus, the oral history meets the same fate as the recorded media that one can always turn back to, to verify. If the current generations left on this planet continue to lose interest in anecdotal history like it seems we are, regardless of its perceived merit, the future consequences, which are the loss of compassion, the degradation of our identity, and the destruction of a social system founded on benevolence and graciousness for the elders who constructed our current world from the past, will take a while to catch up with us.

This preface should serve as a warning to those generations that come after me: I’m going to talk their ears off as an old man! I’ll notice that they aren’t paying attention but won’t let on to it. I’ll continue recounting the oral history that I will have lived through my life, and if they don’t appreciate it then, I’ll make sure to jot it down so it won’t be lost in the future. And I’ll make sure to take some poetic license just to add flair to the stories.

A combination of factors led me to re-evaluate and re-appreciate Dodo’s memoir. I’ll be the first to admit that I’d forgotten about the book since I read it in middle school years ago. I knew she had written it, but I’d forgotten how great it was, lost in a long reading list that I was required to work through for college classes. Thankfully, this reading list motivated me to devour any literature I could get my hands on. I had just finished To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf and found myself wandering through the university hallways in a reminiscent daze, wondering if I would have a newfound appreciation for Dodo’s book now that I had braved everything that 19th century writers could throw at me.

It was about this time that I began to feel disconnected from my ancestors. I didn’t know where my roots sprang from and I felt deficient of a cultural identity. Had I just ignored everything that I had been taught about my past? Was I in the dark because I had never asked? I didn’t know the ramifications of this lack of identity because it hadn’t played a major role in my life thus far. Instead, I latched on to the French language, the only strong cultural influence that was personal to me. I needed to find the thread that ran through my family’s past and account for the lost years and people that came before my great-grandparents.

The realization hit me that I would never again have the opportunity to hear stories from the primary sources that lived them and felt them. A whole world of family stories was waiting for me to grasp. I seized any opportunity to pay close attention to the more adventurous tales; those involving watermelon thefts and shotgun wielding farmers, cross-continental trips away from any parents, bear attacks – basically, experiences that I likely won’t have a chance to live out in my mid-twenties in the year 2012.

My reflections brought me beyond what I could learn from a close reading of Six on an Island. I look into my grandmother’s eyes and see the same fire of life burning in them that I remember from Dodo. The mention of her name at family gatherings evokes smiles and reflections. She might have passed away, but her energy still circulates among those who knew her. Even now, beyond the gap that death has created between us my great grandmother and I are still building our relationship.

Our main channel of communication is our family. Hidden deep down inside many of us, her influences touch and sculpt. Some show it more overtly than others. Anecdotes that never
made it to print live out through stories retold by her children and grandchildren. Curiosity and research then serves as the second channel. I flip through an old tin box of postcards sent between my great-great grandmother and her relatives and vicariously enter into conversation with them. I chance at a random poem I turn to in a small plastic-bound anthology of poetry that Dodo left behind and feel her reading it to me. I suppose the only way to communicate back is to send my love through writing.

A more complete account of her life, beyond what she wrote in *Six on an Island*, stems from anecdotes, photos, and childhood memories that really have, it seems, lost all of the important details. When I want to hear her own rendition of her life, I can turn to her book, where she describes her childhood, her life as an emerging woman, and her reflections upon it.

Most of what I know about her comes from the family members that connect me to her through blood and especially through our personalities. Hardly a biography, the tale that follows is a spontaneous reflection of a time past and of a relationship that was rekindled beyond the grave through the written word and through the life of her children; it is at the same time a call to action for anyone that is still fortunate enough to have living relatives to listen to, to debate with, and to be taught by.

She was a small woman with an expressive face that could elicit any emotion from her audience. Her curly hair perched like a cap upon her head and I never saw her wear it in any other style, even in pictures. She dressed well, usually professionally, and once showed me how one could actually polish a penny and slip it into the front of penny-loafers, which I thought was extremely technical and keen. As a child I would look up at her from where I stood just above knee-level and feel the warmth of her regard that I accepted but didn’t understand, for she was neither a parent nor a grandparent, the two relations that were closest to me. Apparently it took me a while to make the connection that she was my grandmother’s mother, after which I felt worlds more comfortable with her affection.

Probably the most important aspect that I can describe about her is her name. In our family she goes by Dodo. The name Dodo describes her well, contrasting with her given name: Uldene Rudd, and then later, Uldene Rudd LeRoy. Uldene evokes a serious, antiquated, grandmotherly image, whereas Dodo describes her quick wit and playfulness. In her heart she is a goofball, in the deepest essence of her being she is a trickster, in her memory lies more than a few practical jokes. Since she lets the reader so intimately into her personal life I’ll take the liberty of referring to her, as I knew her: Dodo.

I ask to go to the main dock where Dodo rowed so many times across the channel to her home. For the most part it is in the same condition as it was back in the day, Mimi tells me. My father picks up the phone to tell one of my relatives that we are over at the dock and that we will meet up with the rest of the group at Angie-o’s in just a bit. My mother wanders around behind me with her phone at the ready, prepared to document the trip in photos. I mention that I wish I would have brought a film camera to capture the physical light of the moment and hold on to it later.

From the shady, gravel parking lot uphill, a small dirt path leads down to the dock. The few ash trees I see on the way down give me hope that the ash-borer might not wipe out every last one in the U.P., and despite my great desire to be here, my mind wanders. Mimi might be the most focused of all of us here. Down on the dock she looks out over at the island and takes a few mental calculations. The water tower is just over the hill…yes, there it is just peeking out over the trees. And there, she gestures, there is where the house used to be. It must be the same
house, perhaps with new caretakers, or perhaps used for some other purpose now. Her husband John analyzes the dock construction, noting that the water level has dropped several times. The watermarks on the heavily weathered wood make this fact very clear.

“Some of this wood is just rotting out, needs to be replaced,” John announces. My parents chat with each other several feet behind me and I feign a sort of smiley half-attentiveness.

The channel is much smaller than I had imagined in my mind, frankly. While I studied her book I had perhaps overestimated the size of many a description, or maybe Dodo just exaggerated a bit. This makes me smile. At this point I’m sure that Mimi can sense my curiosity, and without cue she takes me several steps aside and begins to point out where some of the events occurred across the channel, on the island. An overwhelming feeling of mutual wonderment and understanding settles down upon us at the mention of some anecdotes from the book and others that we remember firsthand.

“You know, I can’t believe we live just an hour and a half away from here,” I say, “we really should come up here more often.” I’m speaking just to fill in my part of the background noise; I’m not really committed to what’s coming out of my mouth. Part of it is a slight guilt I feel for only just now realizing how close we are to Dodo’s old stomping grounds, to the place where we built so many family memories over the years. And then again, whom would we come visit up here? The cottage is empty and all the relatives are gone. It would be a purely spiritual experience in the sense that we would come to dwell around the spirits of those who have passed away. They are embodied, if only symbolically, in the trees, in the water, in Rudd road cut out of the forest.

Mixing the evasive, ethereal notions and memories of the past with the tangible aspects of a dock, a water tower, a channel- this is why everything seems to hold so much meaning to me. The energy that twists my stomach with a soothing sensation is the past introducing itself to me through unfamiliar and uncommon vectors.

“I can’t help but think about Dodo like Bilbo Baggins, Mimi. I mean, when I think about Six on an Island I always feel like I’m reading her personal version of ‘There and Back Again’. Then when I get a thought like that I think about her wit and her poise- she could pull a fast one on you if you weren’t paying attention!”

Her laugh releases some of the built-up energy that is inherent in this moment. She goes on to mention how once, while Dodo was in for a check-up, the doctor asked her if she knew who the president was to test her memory. “Well, if you don’t know, I’m certainly not going to tell you!” she responded keenly, risking a quick wink at my grandmother.

We stroll back up to the car and leave behind the dock, the channel, the view of the water tower, and the cottage. My grandmother and her husband have made this trip before, so often, in fact, that there is a sort of ritual to it. The next stop is the cemetery.

It’s not a long drive to the cemetery from the dock. Pulling out onto the main road, I’m still caught up in nostalgia when I realize that we’ve arrived there. Edgewood Cemetery. As a child I went there to visit Dodo’s husband Wyman’s grave with her, and now after her death I’ve been back a handful of times to visit hers as well.

A small wooden fence pushed back about ten feet from the road separates the sandy shoulder of 4-Mile Road from the recently mowed cemetery green. Something about Edgewood seems out of place to me every time that I visit it. There are maybe three-dozen trees in the two-
acre area and the gravestones are spread far apart. Surrounded by a thick forest, the sparse layout sticks out obtrusively when viewed from the road. It seems like a reflection of the population of the Upper Peninsula as a whole: existences carved out of the forest, spaced few and far between.

Down the dirt driveway, just to the right, Dodo and her husband rest in peace less than a mile from where she grew up. The headstone to the left bears the name Wyman LeRoy, who passed away in 1982. Dodo’s headstone, which bears the name Uldene Rudd LeRoy, had to be redone when she passed away because she outlived the estimate that had been carved deeply into the stone. The numbers 19—had been inscribed when it was placed there next to her husband’s in the 80’s as if she wasn’t expected to make it into the new millennium. It must be strangely metaphoric to see your death date carved into stone. It follows her personality that she would surpass all the bets made against her by some artisan who unwittingly carved the wrong date prefix into her headstone decades earlier. Mimi’s husband sticks the tip of his jack-knife into the carving and verifies that they must have pulled out the entire faceplate to redo the inscription. Everybody has a fine chuckle, and in that moment the warmth of Dodo’s spirit surrounds us.

Next to the headstones stand several silk flowers buried into the ground. Each of us takes a turn to brush some leaves and grass clippings from around the sacred area. John and I bend over and begin weeding around the real flowers that are planted about. Nobody speaks very much, but there isn’t any need to in a time like this. Climbing into the car to leave, I cast a last glance back at the plot. Mimi and I share a hug and a smile. We’re off to Angie-O’s Family Restaurant to have a meal with Dodo’s only remaining sibling, Colleen, and some other family members.

I generally saw Colleen up in Cedarville when we visited the cottage years back. To me, she is Aunt Connie. My memories of the extended family meeting up at the cottages for the summer are vague but warm, always full of young cousins running around and older family members lounging on the covered porch in the shade of the trees. Colleen and her husband Robert Berry’s cottage sits right next to Dodo’s, slightly more upland and subtly farther away from the water. If Dodo’s cottage is designed for two or three week long vacations, the Berry’s is built to pass the entire summer in. Its architecture is larger, the construction is sturdier, and the accommodations are fitting for a big family.

Colleen struck me as close copy of either Dodo or Mimi, some combination of the two perhaps, with her own nuances of course. She is small statured and in fine shape. Curly locks dress her crown and don’t fall onto or obscure her face, which is framed particularly by a smoothly rounded, squarish jaw. Her eyes light up with what one might interpret as a keen intuition, a tendency towards close observation, or a long tale that she is ready to recount.

Her husband was one of the few members of my extended family that didn’t come from a Midwest state. The foreign allure of his subtle southern drawl made him seem less closely related to me through my childish eyes. Unfortunately at the age that I was during these large family gatherings, I had difficulty making connections about which family members I was blood related to. Many a story I heard, but rarely did I have a conversation with Uncle Bob.

Four years ago Robert was in the hospital in Petoskey to be treated for a head injury he sustained. As most events turn out, the negative aspect of him being there at least gave us a chance to see him and Aunt Connie, who stayed at our house. As I spoke with her and looked at her, I felt half-convinced that I was conversing with Dodo herself. Their voices and mannerisms match closely enough to those that I have guarded in my mind; their resemblance isn’t uncanny, but it’s passable.
Several years had passed since she came to visit us in Petoskey and her living situation had changed much in the same way that Dodo’s had. She was becoming physically weaker and needed more help getting around and taking care of herself. She lived now with one of her children, Libby, who was also waiting for us at the restaurant with her husband and kids.

In the small town U.P. family diner category, Angie-O’s rates high. I can’t remember anyone in our family eating out elsewhere throughout all the years we’d been coming up to Cedarville. Like most restaurants and businesses up north, it sits right off of the main street, which is also the main highway.

We arrive and pull into the first parking spot we see. Nothing compares to three generations of family spilling out of a car that they’ve been crammed into for the last three hours, off and on. At 22 years old I can’t imagine the stiff legs that Mimi and John get when they hop out of the car. All of us crack and pop like an unenthused bowl of Rice Krispies when we get out. We stretch and hobble the first few feet out of the car and walk into the restaurant.

Everybody is already seated at a large table in the middle of the big dining room when we stroll past the host’s stand. To see so many people I haven’t seen for a long time gives me a strange impression of refocusing my eyes from a blurry to a clear image, like when I put on my glasses in the morning and readjust to the clarity of the world in front of me. My foggy memory gives way to the present and I re-focus my eyes to shake off how I imagine everyone in my mind and grasp how everyone looks and sounds since I’ve seen them last. Colleen is seated at the table on the left, about three quarters of the way down with her walker right beside, loaded with a jacket and a purse. My Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Rick are there with their two boys, Eddy and Bobby. Connie Rudd, one of Dodo’s nieces, is seated with her daughter Kelly and her children at the far end. We exchange hugs and some playful banter about what exactly our relation – second cousin once removed perhaps? – is called.

The bright sunlight has trouble flickering into the room. The mood lighting consists of fluorescent lights with the occasional lick of sunlight that creeps through the window.

“I’m so lucky to have such handsome grandchildren!” Colleen exclaims. “Look at all these handsome men in our family, you can see we’ve got good genes.” She doesn’t get up but scoots out her chair a bit so I can give her a makeshift hug from where I’m about to sit down. Greetings and laughter quickly liven up the mood. Everyone has a smile on their face and I overhear the obligatory small talk of people that haven’t seen each other for years.

“Now what grade are you in this year?”
“And then so-and-so’s nephew went off to school,”
“Yep, still at the post office, the mail hasn’t stopped yet!”
“In Bethelehelm,”
“At camp,”
“In France,”
“What’s so-and-so been up to?”
“15 gallons of cherry tar, yep,”

After a while it isn’t hard to focus in on just one conversation and I get carried away talking with my cousin Eddy. Colleen listens in and smiles as he talks about how his summer has been and what he’s up to in the fall. I want her to know that I’m interested in what she’s been up to as well and slowly slip out of the flow of conversation to address her directly.

“So where are you living these days?” I ask.
“I’ve moved in with Elizabeth and her family in Bethelehelm,” she informs me.
“It must be wild to have so much family all together in one place, what with the boys and all around the house.”

“Oh yes, it is nice to have them all there. I don’t stay too busy these days,” she comments objectively.

“I bet it’s relaxing though!”

Hearing her voice brings me back to more memories of Dodo. I see her in the hallway of the Masonic home in Alma as my dad, Mimi, and I walk alongside her wheelchair through the Hall of Memories, decorated with décor and old-fashioned trends of yesteryear. There’ll be time for reflection later, I tell myself. I should pay more attention to what’s going on right now.

Alas, I don’t pay enough attention even after the thought crosses my mind to remember exactly which stories are shared. We discuss her sister, the island, and what I’ve been up to recently. Her eyes light up each time that the conversation shifts to the subject of the island.

“Do you remember when we were on the island back in, what was it then, when we lived together on the island?”

“Mother, I never lived on the island while you did, you know that,” Elizabeth kindly replies.

“Oh, hmm.” Colleen doesn’t show any embarrassment about her mistake, simply a bit of confusion about the misplaced memory. Mimi jumps in and begins talking about the times that they spent together, since even though Colleen was her aunt, they were only separated by several years and enjoyed each other’s company more like cousins.

“I’ve been reading Six on an Island lately, and keep thinking about how much fun it must have been to have been up there on the island together as a family,” I comment.

“Oh yes, my sister always was a great writer. I’m glad she wrote down some of those stories, a lot of funny things happened over the years.”

I can never tell if it is tiring to be interviewed about stories that one has told a thousand times in their lives. Nevertheless, the conversation turns to more recent events and discussions about family happenings and changes. I can’t help but catch glimpses of Dodo out of the corner of my eye, since her sister really is a spitting image of her in her old age.

One of my cousins mentions that he’s studying web design and IT in college, and we begin talking about the changing face of technology in the world. Though I’m conscious of it, it’s hard for me to imagine what it must be like for someone born in the early 1900’s to participate in such a conversation. It’s as foreign as if an old-timer were to explain the use of a horse-drawn cultipacker to a high school student with their face glued to a smart phone.

One similarity that Colleen and Dodo share is their excellent vocabulary and articulation. It’s refreshing to be plunged into a world rich with descriptive imagery rather than a barrage of filler words, and at the same time a bit intimidating. When a person with such powerful verbal weaponry becomes frustrated, the combination of her speech and dry wit can be surprisingly cutting!

With each mannerism and trait that I notice about everyone sitting at the table, I realize more and more that we are a perfect mix of our parents and relatives. On our own, many of the characteristics are subtle and simply a part of our own personalities. There’s a particular way that everyone pronounces the word “Grandfather”; the embellished facial expressions that accompany most comments clash against one another and add a live spirit to the room. Even if I didn’t get the chance to meet some of my relatives before they passed away, I don’t ignore the fact that I can learn a great deal about them from just looking around the table.
It’s about time to leave now. The food has been eaten, everyone has exhausted their quota of coffee, and the idea of sitting in the screened in porch is as sweet as a siren’s call. Colleen stands up with minimal help from my cousin, but with a little assistance nonetheless.

“Here Mom, let me get your walker,” Libby offers.

“Oh, I’ve got it, it’s no worry,” Colleen replies.

A big black purse is draped over the side of the walker. In the basket lies a half-folded up jacket for the windy spells that constantly drop the warm summer temperature to a brisk chill.

“Have you got everything?”

Colleen replies by grasping the handles of her walker with a look of determination and slight annoyance and begins shuffling out of the restaurant. We grab our stuff and pack into the cars outside to drive down to Rudd Road and the cottage.

Dodo’s father purposefully minimized Rudd Road’s visibility from the main highway so tourists wouldn’t get curious and drive down the drive and disturb the family. If one could see the lake from the highway, everyone would think that they had just found their own private beach, and he wasn’t about to let that happen. We take a left turn off of Highway 134 where the pavement concedes to hard-packed dirt and the vegetation thickens on either side of the vehicle. The road snakes to the left and right through the spruce, pine, and birch forest, lush with verdure yet sparse enough to allow dusty light to break through the canopy openings.

It’s not uncommon to see a small family of deer leap across the road, or spot a fawn sniffing around a tree. Bear have been known to frequent the woods from time to time as well. My second cousin Mac described to me how once, while he was hunting out near the road, a sudden crashing noise broke the silence, coming closer and closer behind him. All he had was a meager .22 in his hand, which was no match for the charging bear that he imagined lumbering toward him. Luckily the imagined bear turned out to be a wayward moose making a beeline through the woods. He ran behind the clumsy animal and followed it to the lakeshore just outside of Dodo’s cottage where it jumped in the water and started to wade across the channel toward the island. Curious and amused, Mac hopped in a rowboat and paddled behind it all the way to Marquette Island. When it arrived at the island it trudged up onto the shore and took off toward the club, sprinting up the hill that overlooks the mainland.

After we park, we walk around the perimeter of Dodo’s cottage and examine the architecture, the small details that have never changed, and the steps and doors and windows that house the pleasant ghosts of the past. The swell of emotions is simply too strong, and although I’m not sad, not particularly overjoyed, not stressed, they wash over me like sea-foam, lightening my stomach and making my heart palpitate. Mimi must feel an even larger rush in times like these.

The cottage came to rest in its current lot after a wealthy family on the island sold it off to Dodo’s father. It was originally a worker’s living quarters. The family had hired a Chinese man as their personal cook but the rest of the service staff refused to bunk down in the same building as him because of his ethnicity. As his fellow colleagues shunned him his employers were obliged, and kind enough, to house him in his own personal one-story cottage next to their home.

Years passed by, the family moved away, and the small shack remained vacant next to the property. At the same time Dodo’s parents, Edward and Bertha, were in the process of constructing their new modern home on the mainland. Edward purchased the house around 1952 and used a scow to haul it across the channel to the mainland where it would rest on one of three lots that had been reserved in advance for each of the sisters. The lots lay on a stretch of beach just across from their childhood home on Marquette Island. Mac was a teenager during the
move. His grandfather assigned him the task of loading up the furniture onto the scow and tugging it across the channel. The reeds were so thick near the shore that as the boat passed, with grandfather at the helm, Mac reached out in front with a scythe and mowed down the reeds.

Everyone makes their way across Dodo’s lot and up the hill toward the Berry’s cottage. Seated in a circle, on fold up chairs and benches on the covered porch, the conversations ebbs and flows across generations. My dad and I catch each other’s regard and raise our eyebrows.

“Shall we ask?” We had been planning on a canoe trip around the island before we even left the house. My Aunt Libby perks up at the mention of it.

“We’ve got some kayaks and canoes over at our cottage,” Kelly adds. “We can drive over there and suit up, and go from there.”

“Sounds like a plan!” my father replies, visibly excited.

We share a canoe that looks as if it belongs at a summer camp for teenagers. The fiberglass design looks sturdy enough on shore, but once in the water it shifts and flexes elastically with the water that splashes around it.

“You think she’ll hold?” I ask.

“Aw sure, she’ll be fine!”

Our collective 400 pounds puts the question to the test, but it seems to hold up fairly well on the smooth water. We start off toward a smaller channel that runs to the south-west of the club. Part of the island is designated as a nature preserve, since the club makes up only a small portion of the island. The shallow channels make excellent habitat for reeds and lily pads, bullfrogs and perch. Some turtles poke their heads out of the water as we pass and gaze at us with an objective eye.

After about 30 minutes of rowing we turn around and head to the area where Dodo and her family crossed the channel every day. From the water, one can make out the details of the club buildings much more clearly. Most of the houses have been significantly renovated and resemble modern homes. There are a handful of older, less cared for homes that are still enormous and beautiful in their own right. The water tower rises up from atop the hill and peeks out from behind trees and houses. Dodo’s childhood home sits patiently on the water’s edge, waiting for more people and stories to fill it with memories. I consider it for quite some time. The wake from a passing boat makes slow, rolling waves that rock the canoe and we ride over them gently while we observe everything. I’m drawn to thoughts about the channel in wintertime, the crossing laid out with boughs, the threat of tumbling through the ice always in the back of one’s mind. I picture a young girl, my great-grandmother, with a broomstick in her hand to slide out to her father who has just fallen through. It’s nice to think of the history that was left on this piece of land by my ancestors, and even nicer to imagine what it’s like today.

I feel a strong sense of peace continue to run up my spine. I wonder if Dodo ever sat staring at the mainland from the beach outside of her home and imagine that her great-grandchild would be in the same spot reflecting about her. If we were to spend an entire day out on the water I wouldn’t be disappointed, but I remember that we left the rest of the family on the mainland at Colleen’s cottage.

We’ve been gone for just about 2 hours and the conversation has tapered off slightly on the porch.

“How was the trip?” My Uncle Rick asks.

“Just amazing.”

Colleen is in the middle of a story about Dale, or John, or some name that escapes me at the moment.
“I saw him just the other day and was asking about how things are going on the island,” she recounts. “It seems that everything is just fine with his family. It was nice to talk to him and catch up on things.”

“No, that couldn’t have been, he’s been dead for quite some time now. You must be thinking of someone else,” my aunt remarks.

“Oh, that’s queer,” Colleen replies. “I could have sworn…”

Some glances are thrown around and the conversation continues on another tangent. I chance an opportunity to whisper to Mimi.

“How is Aunt Connie’s memory holding up? I seriously thought when we were talking at the restaurant that she’s held up pretty well with the aging, she seems ‘with it’. Honestly if she thinks that she talked to him maybe she did, maybe she’s lucky enough to be able to catch up with people she used to know who aren’t here anymore. I think it’s beautiful,” I whisper.

“Yeah Josh, she has been a little foggy on some memories but I agree, she does still have her wits about her. Especially when we talk, she remembers exactly all the times we spent together, and she seems sharp still.”

Colleen is seated just to right of the entryway into the cottage and she looks out at the water when she isn’t paying attention to who’s talking. Her soft voice is no match for the booming register of the younger family members seated around her. I get annoyed on several occasions when she starts to jump into the conversation and her voice is mowed over by another’s. As a result, I scoot closer to her so I can hear. There’s a map of the island framed on the wall just above her.

“Where is the Indian village on the map?” I ask her.

“Well let’s see, ah yes, there it is,” she points to a spot on the map not far from the club. “They were a friendly bunch, those Indians. I remember in particular a few characters that had very queer manners.” She proceeds to tell me about her mother signing checks for the workers, and a Native American man that couldn’t sign his name on the check receipt.

“He would just mark an ‘X’ just like that,” she motions with her hand. The rest of the family becomes interested in the map and somebody asks what ‘Les Chenaux’ means.

“The Snows,” my grandmother offers. Being a student of French, I know that she’s incorrect but I don’t say anything.

“Actually it means ‘the channels’, for all the little channels that it creates against the mainland,” Colleen corrects.

For the next hour the conversation shifts between anecdotes and memories, descriptions of past relatives and nostalgic dreams. Finally the time comes when naps and return trips home start to sound tempting. My aunt and uncle invite anyone to come visit them in Pennsylvania sometime, and we exchange hugs and parting salutations before we make our way back to the vehicle.

“Enjoy the rest of your summer in Petoskey, you’re lucky to live in such a beautiful region,” Colleen tells me as she wishes me off.

“I love you Aunt Connie, it was amazing to see you and I really enjoyed our conversation,” I tell her. I’m certain that she knows that I mean it. She remembered that our family lives in Petoskey, I tell myself. And she knows who we all are. There’s no way she’s losing it. It’s a subject that Mimi and I discuss in the car on our way back to Petoskey. For her, Colleen isn’t just an aunt but a close friend. Mimi proudly stands up for her and agrees with me that no matter what anyone says, she seems to be the same Colleen that she’s known since the island.
2. Life after the Island

Dodo(194,163),(841,990) left the island during her high school years to attend Sault Ste. Marie High, about an hour north of Cedarville. She stayed with one of her friends at her Aunt Edith’s house, where she didn’t always have the liberties and compassionate treatment that she was used to at home. She was only an hour away from everything familiar to her, but separated nonetheless. She was undeniably homesick.

Her father would drive up to visit her regularly and bring her home to spend a weekend or school vacation back on the island. She used to recount that she was always ‘dying to get back home’ and be once again in her element.

One winter day her father made the trek up to the Sault to fetch Dodo and bring her back home for a weekend. He came at a particular moment when Aunt Edith’s company had driven Dodo up the wall and left her patience thin. She sat by the window and anxiously awaited his arrival. Just as luck would have it, snow began to fall, to torrent, and then to drift up and blow across the roads.

Most people in Northern Michigan can immediately recognize the severity of a storm, if one has lived there long enough. Either by matter of intuition or by force of experience the sensations of pressure, wind, moisture and sound combine to give a good idea of what’s to come. Whether she sat at the window and watched the flakes become denser or took a step outside and felt the moist conglomerations of snow cement together on her hair it’s hard to say. She knew the storm was brewing. Her father had left the house just as the weather turned and she worried for his safe arrival and chance to get away from her aunt.

By the time he arrived it was clear that a return trip was out of the question for the night. That meant another night at Edith’s for both of them. What joy she felt to see her father, but what despair, exaggerated by strong adolescent emotions, to be stuck in this blasted border town for another interminable night. Her father must have felt the same way. He reserved a hotel room, a brief shelter from the storm for two weary travelers who had already closed the gap between home without even moving an inch closer to the island.

Luckily, her high school experience didn’t last the normally prescribed four years. According to Mimi, Dodo had the highest grades in the county and was able to work through extra classes to graduate at 16 years old.

After high school Dodo took a larger step away from her childhood home on Marquette Island. She crossed the Straits of Mackinaw and went to live and work with one of her cousins, Alice, in New Lothrop. She worked in the New Lothrop Post Office with her sister Audrey, who had also moved in at Alice’s. The three girls joined the Nazarene church in New Lothrop where they sang in the church choir.

She attended beauty school and then business school with her sister in Owosso, not far from New Lothrop. Both Dodo and Audrey aspired to go to college but money was too tight to allow it. Disappointment flattened Audrey’s dreams of teaching physical education and Dodo’s hope to attain a business degree. They made the best of it at the small yearlong schools and at the very least got to enjoy each other’s company. Dodo began work at a salon after she had finished beauty school and cut hair for quite some time.

Dodo was involved in a long distance relationship with a man named Paul Conklin while she lived at Alice’s. They had verbally agreed on marriage, which meant that there was no ring
yet, just eventual plans to tie the knot. At the beginning of the summer he had planned to come and deliver a proper ring to her, but then accepted an offer to go to college rather than settle down and start a family. I can imagine Dodo’s quick temper rising at his announcement. I’m not sure if she broke up with him on the spot, but when the next week came around she was again a single woman.

Enter Wyman Leroy, a local boy from New Lothrup who grew up without the material and close family comforts that the Rudds had enjoyed up north on the island. He was not exceedingly tall and had a strong and robust build with a personality that was larger than life. During his childhood in the Great Depression, his father worked as a preacher in a congregation that could only pay him with items like chickens and vegetables. It was enough for the family to survive but hardly enough to thrive on, especially since he was required as pastor to donate 10% of all he earned back into the church. The pressure of the economic atmosphere paired with increasingly difficult crop years on their small family farm led Wyman’s father into an emotional collapse. When they lost their farm to foreclosure, he renounced his faith and lost his will to work, allowing himself to slip deeper and deeper into depression. Wyman took over the role of breadwinner during these years at the age of 15. He worked for area farmers and took care of household necessities while his father struggled to find the will to continue on. Wyman quit school during his 10th grade year, around the time that the emotional and financial tension in the family had bottomed out at an all-time low. He needed to work to support the family, and there wasn’t enough space left in his life for school.

Since money was tight, each member of the family had to make ends meet however they could. For Wyman, it meant that his broken, torn-up shoes had to be repaired rather than replaced. One day, as he strolled through the high school hallways, one of his shoes became loose. It wasn’t a matter of laces; the soles were wired to the top of the shoe and the whole thing was wired around his foot. With the next step, the shoe detached and flew up into the air, hitting the ceiling. As Wyman recounted, “I never turned around, just kept on walking and never came back.” He continued to work for farmers around the area and moonlighted at a factory to raise money for a house, which he eventually purchased for his parents.

He entered Dodo’s life subtly one early spring day. She was coming back from choir practice at the Nazarene Church with Audrey and Alice when he pulled up beside the girls in his car. Alice and Wyman had known each other from the small town school and exchanged some small talk before he drove away. A bit dumbfounded by the two new girls in town, he tried to figure out from his friends what Dodo’s name was.

He arrived home one night and told his dad that he had just met the girl he was going to marry.

“A Rudd girl?” His father replied with a smirk, “You gotta start goin’ to church if you wanna meet that girl!” And so he did. At that night’s evening service, Dodo noticed a bright red face sticking out from among the normal congregation. They introduced themselves after the service and were married six months later.

The abbreviated courtship was unusual for two people that were not normally impulsive. Their hard working and keen temperaments complemented each other well, except for the times when tensions ran high. Dodo’s wit enabled her to be snappy and incendiary when she needed to pull her claws out; Wyman had a quick temper that often caused him to explode into fits of verbal magma. He wasn’t a violent person, but his words could cut deeply if he lost his cool.

Mimi and Pat experienced some of their parents’ fights over the years and realized that there was a predictable formula they followed every time. First Wyman’s temper would flare
and he his frustration would crescendo higher and higher as Dodo spurred him on with sardonic comments. The fight would reach its peak when both parties had become fully incensed, then the tension would break and Dodo would begin to cry. Her tears seemed to end the fight every time and leave only a few residual traces of it with them afterwards.

One day after a verbal spar, Wyman lay down to nap on the sofa in the living room. Dodo tiptoed out of the room and out to the driveway with the keys to his beloved car in hand. Though she had been traumatized with driving and normally never got behind the wheel, she fired it up and drove it out behind the house, in the middle of a field, far away behind a rock pile. Later, her husband woke up and looked around confusedly for the car.

“How is it?” he worried, asking Dodo frantically.

“I dunno,” she replied with a firm poker face.

The fights were sparse and surely didn’t characterize Dodo and Wyman’s relationship. If anything did, it was the collective sense of Irish humor that they shared from their upbringings. My aunt Pat holds back laughter at the very thought of her father and tells me that “he could be funnier than anybody when he wanted to be”. He often couldn’t make it through his own jokes before he would crack up with laughter and lose track of his story; moments like this were often funnier than the story he told in the first place!

Before the girls were born he worked at various factories as a tool and die maker. He was a member of the Michigan State Troops Home Guard and conducted aerial photography missions before WWII began. In 1943 he was called over to Detroit during the first set of race riots. During the war, Wyman was exempted from overseas active duty in order to help build planes at Nash Kalvinator in Lansing. The family lived in Lansing throughout the war years before Mimi was old enough to go to school.

The LeRoys lived on 706 Mason Street in Owosso for about nine years after moving back from Lansing. The girls remember the fond home life they shared with their parents, who were deeply in love and openly affectionate toward each other. “It was them against the world,” Pat tells me. The family spent time together at meals and sat around the record player afterwards to chat and enjoy the music. On Sunday nights their father would gather together bologna, peanuts, pickles, and mayonnaise, and feed all the ingredients through their meat grinder to make ground bologna sandwiches. It was quite a treat.

Even though times were economically difficult, the family enjoyed many pleasant surprises that kept their spirits up. Nana and Grandfather Rudd sent regular care packages down to Owosso, filled with candies and clothing that Nana had stitched together on the island. “In those times it wasn’t possible to just go down to Meijer and get some candy,” Pat reminds me. “It was really something special when it did arrive.” On regular trips to the grocery store Wyman would bring back the girls’ favorite treats, pickles for Mimi and bananas for Pat.

Wyman instilled a strong spirit of courage in his daughters and taught them how to stand up for themselves and fight, if necessary. He made them feel safe and protected. Mack likes to talk about one instance during Mimi’s time in middle school in Owosso. He had taken his car into town to get a bite to eat, and was waiting for her to walk home. When she came into view, two older boys were following her and appeared to be making snide comments; she didn’t turn around at their prodding, just kept walking ahead. Then they started to get pushy. She whipped around and “really tore into them” as Mack describes it, and had them running down the street like scared children by the time she was done with them.

When the girls were 9 and 14 years old, Wyman and Dodo decided to move and reconnect with their agricultural roots. In reality, the home that they raised the girls at found
itself in an increasingly dangerous section of town; incidences involving gangs, burglaries, and sex offenders had pushed Dodo and Wyman to pick a new spot to live. He had spent his youth as a farmer and figured that the country would be a more positive atmosphere to raise two girls in. They purchased a 30-acre farm about 10 miles outside of Chesaning on a country road, where there wasn’t even telephone service. Over the years Wyman prodded the phone provider to install lines reaching the farm but it never happened. The family began to farm corn and wheat, along with a cast of animals: cattle, pigs, chickens, some dogs, and a host of cats. When they first moved in, Dodo busied herself painting and wallpapering the upstairs of the house with magazine covers that she’d amassed over the years.

Though she had spent her childhood separated from town on the island, Dodo had developed into a city girl in Owosso. She didn’t drive, didn’t have a telephone, and had no friends in the new town they had just moved into. When the girls were at school and Wyman at work at General Motors she tried to busy herself at home with books, magazines, craft projects, and preparation of elaborate meals and sweets. She canned vegetables and turned the meager supply of available food into startling masterpieces.

During her years alone at home during the day, Dodo began and completed her book, *Six on an Island*. She actively published articles in newspapers and magazines, composed poetry, and penned letters to her mother, who kept up daily correspondence. Her fingers danced over the typewriter keys that she mastered to perfection, without spelling errors or stray key strokes. When the girls arrived home from school she would be seated on the sofa or on the swing set on the porch, an apple and a Redbook magazine in her hand, with a soap opera playing in the background on the black and white television set.

Wyman worked at General Motors during the years on the farm, but tended to the grains and the animals when he returned in the evening. Mimi, who was in high school at the time, helped him with farm chores when she returned from school. The farming lifestyle came as a sudden change for the girls that had been raised in the city and were unfamiliar with the country life. The tractor that came with the farm served practically no purpose. The cantankerous machine sat in the periphery of a field and surely wasn’t capable of pulling heavy loads. Wyman decided that he would instead use his car to remove some fence posts that separated two fields to expand them into one. He tied a rope to the chassis of the car and attached it to one of the posts.

“When I say go, push the accelerator and we’ll pull it out,” he instructed Dodo from outside the car.

“Oh!” she signaled in understanding. At his cue, she floored the gas pedal and ripped the post out much more quickly than foreseen. She didn’t let up on it even after fishtailing into a ditch, up the other side, into the road, and across into another field. An exasperated Wyman ran up to car to see what had happened.

“Well you told me to go,” she responded innocently.

Dodo only worried a bit about her isolation at the farm. Without a telephone or neighbors, she was even more isolated from the world than during her childhood. Her daily companions were Velvet, her beloved cocker spaniel, and her multiple cats that lined up on the porch to greet her when she would emerge from the house. When their oil-burning stove, an outdated relic even in the 1950’s, started a small fire downstairs, she had to stop the blaze by herself as it rushed up the wall and threatened to set the entire house up in flames. She managed to wet it and smother it long before it burned out of control.
“I had quite a day,” she reported to Wyman when he arrived home. She had a tendency to understate things. She recounted her amateur fire-fighting experience as his face turned to a slight frown.

“You should have let it burn,” he murmured.

In the late 1950’s grain prices began to rebound from an all-time high and dropped off to a meager low. The animals began to get sick and die, and there wasn’t enough productivity to make the farming dream a reality. The family moved back to Owosso just over four years after they had initially moved to the farm.

Mimi was 19 years old when the family moved onto Washington Street in Owosso. She had courted her fiancé Bob and was about to get married and move out to Lansing, where she had taken a job at Bell Telephone as a switchboard operator. Only Dodo, Wyman, and Pat moved in together at the new house. Dodo attended the First Church of Christ just down the road and volunteered in their library several times a week. She continued to write and was hired for several speaking arrangements after the release of her book in 1956. Her reading and writing career filled her days with excitement and fulfillment.

When Pat left the house after high school, Dodo busied herself with friends, church, and her writing. She knew that the girls were safe on their own and was excited that they were able to live out their own adventures away from the nest. Wyman, however, worried immensely about his daughters while they were in Lansing at school and work.

The births of Mimi and Pat’s first children marked a sudden change in Dodo’s usual comportment. She lit up with excitement and acted silly with her grandchildren, agreeing to watch them for long periods of time and pamper them with attention. She had been a loving mother but was a much more “hands-on” grandmother. She could now socialize with her daughters as grown women and treat them as her friends rather than children.

Wyman passed away in 1985 and left Dodo alone in Owosso. She moved to where I would later spend my days with her on East King Street. Their love had been abundant and passionate; his passing took a heavy toll on Dodo that she soothed through the church. She founded a widow’s support group at her church called “Pathfinder’s” to help her and other women cope with their loss and find their way.

When the girls visited her in the 80’s they noticed signs of her anxiety, like a baseball bat leaned up next to the door. She feared living alone but didn’t cower from fright. Rather, she liked to look at it right in the eye. One night some teenage boys rapped on her door and started to hassle her through the door. She whipped it open with a fire in her eyes and screamed at them to go away, or she would “turn their necks red with her bare hands”. She managed to scare them off – and scare the life out of her daughters when she recounted the story.

“But why’d you even open the door Mom?” Mimi asked, puzzled.

Dodo lived alone for five years before her first great-grandchild, me, was born in 1990. She was 77 years old when the next chapter of her life opened as a great-grandmother.
3. Grandparents and Grandchildren

Another long school year has just ended. My grandmother Mimi, known more properly as Marise, and her mother board the bus toward Mackinaw City. The drive from Corunna to Mackinaw transports one through a tunnel of trees and forests. The road subtly climbs to higher elevations through the central part of the state before mounting the thrust-out chest of Otsego County, just north of the 45th parallel. After about five hours, the bus arrives in the sparsely populated northland.

The year is 1952 and the towering Mackinaw Bridge has not yet been constructed. Instead, all travelers still rely on car ferries to bring them across the five-mile stretch of water where Lake Michigan and Lake Huron connect to form the straits of Mackinaw. A fleet of boats greets the crowds at this upper limit of Michigan’s terra firma. Beyond lie the North Country, Marquette Island, a warm home, and family.

“Come and get your hot smoked whitefish!” a fish vendor hollers out at the crowd, looking for takers. He’s got a captive audience with the line of cars backed up for hundreds of yards at the ferry docks. Even the multiple ferry companies can’t keep up with the high demand, and some days passengers wait for an hour for the next opening.

The passage across the straits changes dramatically from summer to winter. In the cool June air it is possible to stand up on the top of the passenger deck and watch the white caps puff their foamy smoke into the azure. Passengers can sit inside the ferry and look out the window or ride up on the top deck in the open air. Each time the ferry breaks through a wave a mist of cool water rises up to those who decide to ride on top, sometimes accompanied by a large splash of water. Visions of humongous waves breaking over the side of the ship and washing the passengers overboard dance through Marise’s mind and send chills up her spine. When the ferry has almost completed the crossing the captain makes an announcement for the passengers to get back in their cars and prepare for unloading.

In the winter, a heated waiting room welcomes the passengers with hot coffee and snacks. For the braver folks, the top deck is available during the morning and early afternoon. The water is often more turbulent and sometimes covered with a sheet of ice, which requires some extra planning on the crew’s behalf. A secondary boat leads the ferry across and breaks the ice if necessary. This time when the passengers file back into their cars there is much hand warming and expectations for the rest of the warm trip up north.

Bertha and Edward Rudd are waiting by their car when the bus pulls up to the stop in Hessel. Mimi’s grandparents load the luggage into the trunk of their car and share greetings and hugs.

“Don’t you think Mimi’s hair is pretty?” her grandmother coos. Moments like this will remain with her intimately. She never expected such a compliment after what she saw as a permanent disfigurement, following a dog bite on her face at the age of 3. Though she recovered from the attack, it left embarrassing scars behind that made her self-conscious. She always wore bangs to hide her forehead.

As a young girl Mimi never expected compliments or much ado about her appearance or accomplishments from her mother. But what Dodo didn’t express verbally, her grandmother Bertha made up for. Mimi always looked forward to visits to Nana and Grandfather’s house for this reason. Feeling the closeness of family and the warm embrace of grandmotherly love restored her self-confidence and helped form her into the loving person she would come to be.
“She didn’t even have to tell me that she loved me, I just knew.” She tells me later over the telephone. As she describes her, she was always accepting and never tried to change anyone, regardless of their personality or connection with the family. Her grandmother touched her life so much that Mimi once led a Christian woman’s conference centered on her qualities and personality.

Bertha occupied most of the remembered family time by cooking bountiful meals and conversing at the table or in the kitchen. She stood at the counter, at the ready for an assistant to come help her or talk to her. The large kitchen was her proud domain and she ensured that it was always immaculately clean. She dressed in a bibbed apron, her hair wrapped up tight in a bun on the top of her head to stay out of the way of her work. Her rosy cheeks radiated her inner warmth.

She took on the tedious task of bleaching, laundering, and ironing the bedding and laundry in the house to the extent that her daughter Colleen would send her dirty laundry back from East Lansing, where she went to school 6 hours away, to be washed! Bertha was pleased, and no doubt honored, to undertake such a long-distance trip to the cleaners. She spent so much time occupied with laundry that her husband Edward eventually bought her a Mangle ironer. The unit automatically pressed anything one could throw at it between two yard-long rollers. She could even crank out arduous ironing tasks such as sheets while sitting down in front of the unit. No matter how well intentioned his gift was, the statement that it made about her personality embarrassed her immensely. There was no denying her hardworking attitude, but she thought the professional machine was a bit tacky and unnecessary.

Edward had a way of unintentionally embarrassing his wife in general through the gifts he purchased for her. When the time came to replace the little motorboat that was later used to travel between the island and the mainland, he hired a local boat builder to make the finest specimen of a motorboat for the island commute. His wife was hardly flattered when she saw, upon the vessel, the name “Bertha” printed in large letters across the back. Although she loved taking care of those who were dear to her, she didn’t care for so much overt attention directed at her.

When Edward would take his grandson Mack out into town, my grandmother Mimi often wanted to tag along. The announcement, “We’re off to go see the Eli Lily company”, or, “Will you help me out delivering the Detroit Free Press?” didn’t apply to her, either due to the fact that she was three years younger than Mack or because she was a girl. In these times Bertha took her under her wing and taught her practical knowledge that she delivered with a smile; she helped her blossom into womanhood and stood as a strong ally and friend.

Bertha had lived her whole life in the Upper Peninsula, north of Cedarville in the town of Pickford. Her parents had come over from England and settled down on a homestead farm shortly before her birth. Before they left England, Bertha’s mother held a job as lady in waiting for Queen Victoria, which entailed many more responsibilities than a common servant’s. Her life changed from mornings of laying out the Queen’s clothes for the day, seeing that her needs were met, and being surrounded by excess, to cold mornings in the U.P. with her husband Bill and their young daughters. Bertha never got the chance to know her very well; she became ill at a young age and passed away when Bertha was still a young girl.

Her father married a younger woman after the passing of his first wife. She mistreated Bertha and Violet and lashed out at them in fits of mania, leaving their father in an awkward position between protecting his daughters and standing up for his new wife. She was eventually
institutionalized for psychiatric problems, while Bertha, Violet, and their father were left together on the farm.

Edward and Bertha’s first grandchildren added an extra injection of life into the family. Uldene gave birth to Marise, my grandmother, in 1939. Uldene was a small-statured woman and her frail size made people wonder how she could possibly have room for a baby inside of her. Due to complications with her birth, Mimi was delivered by Cesarean section. Her father would always introduce her, saying, “This is my oldest daughter, Mimi. She was born Cesarean.”

Uldene’s sister Audrey gave birth to her first son, Mack, in 1936. Uldene and Audrey grew up only one and a half years apart and even as adults were inseparable. Marise and Mack were thus companions from a young age, for better or worse. Being the oldest grandchildren, they were constantly surrounded by adults during family dinners, gatherings, and holidays. After dinner they would gather with their grandfather to listen to the Lone Ranger broadcast on the radio, huddled together in suspense and joy at the story. Edward adored his grandchildren and made a specific effort to spend as much time as possible with them.

“We all played games every single night after supper,” Mack tells me on the phone. “Monopoly, Sorry, and all those types of games. The fun part was he’d always cheat on purpose!” In the midst of a game, Grandfather Rudd would slyly scoot his piece ahead on the board or embezzle a stray $500 bill from the bank till.

“Hey! I saw that!” one of the children would holler, to his delight. After the games had ended and the impending hour of bedtime approached, Mimi and Mac would lead their grandfather to their room for bedtime stories. He crafted outrageous tales of wild animals and capers, of his lone trip back from Ireland as a young boy, and his journeys across the state of Michigan with a band of lumberjacks.

When they were away from their parents, the island opened up unlimited possibilities for play and troublemaking. Yet the mischief began even before they reached the island every year. When the families would travel north together, the kids would benefit from the distraction of their parents’ conversation and laughter on the ferry between Mackinaw and St. Ignace. Mimi and her cousin would take advantage of such moments to slip away unnoticed. A nudge of elbows and a quick smirk were all it took to propose an adventure to the other.

Down the steps that led from the passenger deck, down even below the main deck, the two small figures would slip past the benches and chairs into the lower regions of the vessel. Giggling with pleasure, they would run through the narrow hallways towards the smells and noises that wafted from the crew kitchen. Here, the “hardened sailors” of the freshwater seas doled out doughnuts and sweets to the electrified children. Up on the deck, Dodo and Wyman would still be caught up in conversation with Audrey and her husband Burl when the kids returned.

On the island, the children were on cloud nine. They had the entire world to explore and all the pampering comforts of their grandparents who, at this point, were no longer newcomers but seasoned mainstays of the Les Chenaux Club culture. It was a paradise that had to be shared between the children’s two strong personalities.

As Mack recounts, Mimi was always a feisty one, and pretty stubborn too. It’s a fact that she wouldn’t deny herself. Mack is equally witty; the combination of quick turns of phrase and a sense of cousin rivalry led to many skirmishes and confrontations over the years. One of the kids would run a crayon up and down the walls of the house and tattle on the other, feigning complete innocence. It was always a personal challenge to get the other cousin in trouble.
An old playhouse that used to belong to Colleen sat in the backyard of the house for the cousins to enjoy. At first, as young playmates, they were able to play in it and share it equally. As they grew slightly older they began to claim it for themselves though and become territorial over the little shack, leading them so far as to section off the inside of the playhouse with pieces of wood so that each one had their own side. The confrontations may have been irritating to the children when they were young, but at the end of the day, seated around the table in good company of family, all quarrels were forgiven. Their grandparents’ main goal was to provide an atmosphere in which everyone was safe and loved, filled with food and giggles, and taught to stand up for themselves and loved ones.

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The two cousins have aged slightly throughout the years and are entering adolescence. That doesn’t mean that anyone is ever too old to run around and play rough and tumble in the yard, though.

“Hey Mimi,” Mack calls out, a grin smeared on his face, “you’re gettin’ to have a chest!” Mimi, mortified, stops what she’s doing and tries to ignore the embarrassment welling up inside of her. It’s a feature that even her mother didn’t seem to notice, which would have been better than her older cousin at least, and Mimi hasn’t had any advice on how to treat her new endowment. What’s more, she never bargained for this to happen and would have preferred a figure more apt to running around the woods and less likely to draw the curious glances of boys.

Inside the house she innocently approaches the women in the kitchen. “Could I get a t-shirt to wear underneath my blouse?” she asks. Her mother and aunt laugh, becoming conscious of her predicament. Her grandmother tells her to follow, and leads her upstairs where she begins to take down some old boxes and sort through them. “Here, this is what you want.”

Bertha extends one of Colleen’s old bras out to Mimi and rummages through the rest of the box to pull out some more. “Try them on, show them to me, and I’ll sew them until they fit,” she says, smiling. This moment of tenderness shared between the two women affects Mimi strongly. Her grandmother understands her modesty and embarrassment and empathizes with her granddaughter, for she had even less help learning how to adapt to the challenges of her life after her mother passed away.

Through the years her grandmother took time out of the way to teach her random skills that she would have otherwise missed out on, like how to sew on a button, or how to thicken soup, or how to prepare a whole chicken. Dodo’s parenting style didn’t include lessons like these, so Mimi thought it was the greatest thing in the world to have the extra attention given to her to better herself. Bertha always made Mimi feel special and important; she listened to her and treated her as an equal, and showered her with love and knowledge.

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Uldene gave birth to her second daughter Patricia in 1945, five years after Mimi. In many of Mimi’s early memories of the island her sister is still a baby, left with the adults while she and Mack found ways to amuse themselves. To keep them out of trouble and give them something fun to do, Grandfather would take Mimi and Mac with him to run errands and do odd jobs for the club.

Mimi remembers feeling jealous of the fact that Mack could deliver the Detroit Free Press to the members and she couldn’t. He would come back with a handful of tips from the club members while she waited inside with her grandmother and cooked, talked about life, and
shared secrets. She likely ended up with a more valuable experience than Mack, who only made a few bucks anyway, for bonding with and learning from her grandmother.

Their grandfather would take both the children through the vacant houses in the winter as he inspected them for any damage or potential burglary. Mack tells me about one in particular with 17 fireplaces, one in every bedroom, and Clue-style passages between the bedroom and front of the house. A panel slid away to reveal a corridor where the slightly paranoid residents could sneak off to if they needed to disappear. The children got the chance to see the homes of prominent individuals that seemed to have run out of places to spend their money, even installing an expansive ballroom within the mansion, even though the club building had another one just around the corner.

The empty mansions and homes in the winter gave way to the vibrant migration of club members in the summer. Just as Dodo and her siblings interacted with the members during their own childhood, Mack and Mimi got to experience the influx of exotic faces and namesakes every year at their grandparents’. Gigantic sailboats and motorboats clogged the boat docks; unsupervised children wandered about looking for some trouble to get into. Mack would often meet up with the child of a Coca-Cola executive and sail around the island, spending the days carefree and ignorant of their different social classes.

When Mack was about 15 years old he would pick up club members at the public airport near the Sault, about an hour away. His grandfather would receive a call from Bill Derby in particular, an attorney from downtown Chicago that had an affinity for Mack. He’d phone to say that he just arrived and needed to be picked up in his new Mercedes that was waiting in the garage at the golf course. He describes it as an exciting time, as he readied for the next hour of joyride that lay in front of him. Many of the club members left their summertime play toys in storage at the island for the rest of the year, and much of the springtime was spent readying the boats so they could enjoy them with no hassles when they arrived at the club.

Since Mack was the oldest by 3 years, he had extra opportunities that the other grandchildren didn’t experience. He was able to ferry people across the channel in the powerboat, or cruise along by himself to enjoy the summer days. At night he enjoyed passing by the orchard on the mainland, where moose and deer gathered to graze on apples. The flashlight beam immobilized everyone and made for a humorous midnight scene as he caught the animals in the act.

Around 1952 Edward and Bertha began the process of building a home on the mainland. Mac was 15 years old, Mimi 12, and Pat 7. The grandchildren got turns accompanying Edward to the building site and future home of Rudd Road. During the construction process the Rudds lived in the small shack that would eventually become Dodo’s cottage while they carved out their new homestead nearby.

A young Marise Leroy stands next to her Grandfather Rudd, a short and stocky man that nevertheless possesses great physical strength from years of outdoor labor. He’s dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and jeans, his usual outfit. He holds a piece of chalk in his hand and looks out at the deep, lush forest that lies before them. The pair is set to mark out the trees that will be cut down to carve Rudd Road from the resilient forest. Beyond the veil of trees one can see the glare of the lake, “But,” notes Grandpa Rudd, “We’ve got to make sure you can’t see the lake from the highway.” That way visitors passing by on M-134 won’t be tempted to disrupt the serenity of the Rudd property on a side trip down to the beach.
Later on, after all the trees are marked, Mack and Grandfather come back out, armed with a crosscut saw and a chainsaw. With one man on each side of the crosscut, they remove the marked trees and toss them to the side as well as they can. When the passage is clear enough they chain a large tree to the back of the car and drive through, pulling all the downed wood closer to the lake. Some is cut for firewood; other trees are cut and filled with rocks to be used for the dock.

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If Edward Rudd had a knack for forestry, it may have been related to his experiences in lumber camps as a young child. The tale begins north of Cedarville, in the middle of the Upper Peninsula between Pickford and Sault Ste. Marie where his parents- my great-great-great grandparents- were homesteading. His parents had come from Ireland and had carved out a comfortable existence for themselves in the north of Michigan. But at age 35, his father began to have problems with his appendix.

The family made the choice to return to Ireland for the operation. They trusted the doctors in their native land and had their life savings in an Irish bank. Besides, their placement in the middle of the woods was already far from any modern medical facilities. So Edward, his two brothers, his sister, and their parents made the long voyage back to Ireland on boat.

During the operation Edward’s father was given too many anesthetics and overdosed. He died at age 35 on the operating table with his entire family far from their home in Michigan. His wife was unable to withdraw money from the bank account because it was in his name, and she only had enough money for three return tickets to the States. She took her oldest son and her daughter back first and left Edward and his little brother, ages 9 and 7 respectively, in Ireland with some relatives.

Once their mother arrived back in the Upper Peninsula she sold off some land to raise money for the boys’ return trip. Almost a year later, an envelope arrived with the bare minimum for boat fare. From Dublin to Liverpool, then from Liverpool to New York, the boys traveled on ship with no extra money and no plan to get back to their mother once they landed. The boys couldn’t afford a room on the boat and wandered around the decks for the first part of their voyage. Some crew members noticed the young boys with no place to sleep and no food to eat, and inquired about their predicament. As a result, some crew members took the boys under their wing and provided them with a place to bunk and warm meals.

They had arrived safely in New York without any further plan of action. Again, the crew gathered together and purchased train tickets for the boys to ride to Detroit. They were 90% of the way back home. However, the last 10% still meant a cross country journey through primitive woodland, a crossing of the straits of Mackinaw, and eventual voyage back to the northern-most eastern tip of the U.P. They managed to find a logging team based in Detroit that would eventually make their way up through the state and arrive near their home. The luck of the Irish seemed to follow them and guide them through the obstacle-ridden journey they had embarked on earlier that month.

For the next three months, the boys travelled with the lumberjacks through lumber camps all across the state. They had no contact with their mother until they finally arrived one day, packed with stories that most 9 year-olds don’t have the chance to experience.

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Christmastime on the island brought the warmest memories of the year. Another long trip across the straits of Mackinaw, up snow-covered roads and through icy blizzards, and finally to the dock at the mainland delivered the family almost all the way home to Nana and
Grandfather’s. One of the parents would honk the horn at the dock and see a figure slide down onto the surface of the ice with a large sleigh in his hand, following the evergreen boughs that he had laid out along the channel to mark the safest crossing. The grandchildren squeezed into a makeshift shelter that Edward had installed on the sleigh and watched the wind whip around them as they crossed.

“It felt sorta like going to the North Pole!” my Aunt Pat describes. In those days, the Upper Peninsula was pummeled with snow nearly every winter. The snow banks would tower over even the adults’ heads and cover the entire landscape in its thick blanket. The dramatic multi-stage voyage through this landscape made the entry into their home on the island even warmer and more exciting.

The entire family would gather all at once and feast on what Dodo describes as 30-pound turkeys, stuffed *par excellence* by her father and served with all the trappings of a traditional Christmas dinner. It was the right season for the grandparents to spoil their children and grandchildren; even in times of hardship and economic turmoil, the family had presents under the tree, oranges, and candies to delight in for a couple weeks every year.

Edward loved to entertain his grandchildren and make the holiday season as authentic as possible. He hired a neighbor from the mainland to dress up as Santa Claus every year and sneak in the house to deliver presents under the tree. Old and young alike gathered around to listen to his stories and watch his face warm up with his laughter.

Christmas 1942 at Nana and Grandfather’s had undertones of tension and worry, which the family made an effort to cover up with teasing, joking, and stories. Mack was a toddler and Mimi only a young baby. Their Uncle Ed, Dodo’s brother, was away from home and awaited a call for deployment for the war. He worked as a medic in the army and trained nurses that were about to be deployed overseas. The news had arrived that his unit was about to be sent out any minute, and he promised that he would try to call before he left.

When the phone rang, Bertha dashed to the receiver and picked it up without a word. She dropped the phone and crouched down in tears at the news she had just received. There it was. Uncle Ed was going to stay in the U.S. to continue training medics. They couldn’t spare him yet. The joyful news washed over the room and marked a flame of joy in the darkness of the times.

In summer or winter, the send-off from the island was filled with mixed emotions of anticipation and sadness. Nobody really wanted to leave the insulated piece of heaven on the lake that lay so far away from their homes downstate in the glove of the Lower Peninsula. The boat ride across the channel symbolized the long journey that separated Nana and Grandfather Rudd from the rest of the world. The grandchildren couldn’t wait to open the lunch-sacks that their grandmother packed them for the return trip. Of course, the main component they longed for was the assorted candy she would slip in. For an entire hour, Mimi and Pat restrained themselves in the back of the car until they reached the Straits of Mackinaw, where they were finally able to open the sacks and dig in.

Even though the return trip separated the family physically, Bertha made an effort to keep up frequent correspondence that would be impressive even today in the age of computers and cell phones. Pat maintains that her grandmother sent letters nearly every day to all of her children. Edward usually scribbled a note on the bottom of the letter before sending it out. The cross-generational bond that united the grandchildren and their grandparents was mutually supported by love and energy from the children and the adults. The family’s culture made everyone proud and warm. It gives me hope to reflect on the loving community that spawned from a young Irish boy and English girl in the northland of Michigan, who now have passed
down their personalities and pieces of their hearts to all of us who come from their company beyond the generations.
4. My Life with Dodo

The Dodo that I remember most vividly from my childhood lived on East King Street, not far from Emerson elementary school. She was my partner in crime, which, at the age of 6 years old consisted mostly of walking to the Kings Corner market to purchase orange ice-cream push-ups, cow-tails, and exploding noise makers. We would litter her driveway with the tissue-wrapped bundles of sand and gunpowder and jump back at the tiny explosions that blended together with our laughter. My father would remind me not to throw them at her white garage door, since they left small black rings on the paint. I paid special attention to wipe them clean with a tissue extracted from her purse to hide the evidence before I got picked up. Afterwards, we would be obliged to walk around and pick up the spent pieces of tissue paper with a vigilant eye, pointing out those that the other one had missed. She was around 80 years old during this time. Yet facts like how old she was, how old I was, which games we played, etc. don’t stand out to me when I start reflecting about her. The dates and numbers only help position the past in a clever timeline that I become conscious of when I search out the specifics and add them ex post facto. In my mind she was a child like me, just older and more responsible.

I know that scents are said to be the strongest cue of the past, but for me the emotions that I remember feeling hold the greatest importance. Through the emotional memories I’m able to reconstruct the images, and from the images I can recall the specifics. I’ve tried to hold on to the glimpses of my very first memory of this world and to re-master its clarity so I can regard it as a beacon in the landscape of time. In the blurry glimpse of my first memory I’m carried down into the calm darkness of a pleasant room, in the arms of either my father or mother. I focus on the red light that burns softly on the table next to the sofa. I’ll later find out that this light was the indicator on the camera battery charger, which my parents always had on the ready for my ‘firsts’. It continues quite logically that my first lucid vision of the world came about at my first steps.

The ambiance in the room was joyful; loving bodies were gathered about and sat on couches and chairs around me, towering over my little self. I cannot recall the struggles of attempting to walk, only the feeling of accomplishment when I stumbled out the first several steps toward my grandmother. Next, I remember an older, wiser, more curly-headed face bend down toward me and address me in an unknown language. The memory ends there, with the joyful spirit of Dodo lingering in my mind like a sweet aftertaste.

She babysat me until she was well into her eighties, as long as she was able to. The contrast between her childhood on the island and mine in Owosso reminds me of the rapid momentum of change between generations. It didn’t take long before I was just as apt as she to hook up the looming Atari console into the RF receiver and slip in a dusty game cartridge, while she sat watching on the couch. Sometimes she would watch cartoons and children’s shows with me; other times she would slip into the kitchen to prepare a dish while I was zoned into the television set.

Both my grandmother Mimi and great-aunt Pat have mentioned to me that Dodo, although very loving and caring for the girls, wasn’t much of a hands-on mother. She often busied herself with her own work and projects and left expressions of her continuing love for the girls to a minimum as they were growing up. “Even if she didn’t say it a lot, you always knew that she loved you and when you came home, everything was gonna be ok.” Mimi adds the caveat that she was, on the other hand, an extremely hands-on grandmother and great
grandmother. The hours of play that she shared with both my father and I are testimony to this. If she did leave me alone for any period of time, her attentiveness didn’t lack in the slightest.

Pat reminded me that one day at Dodo’s house I had been sitting in the living room sipping away at some juice out of a sippy cup on the couch. With Dodo in the other room, I managed to unscrew the lid and pull out the tiny straw that was connected to the mouthpiece. She ran into the room, guided by either my choking sounds or by intuition, and realized that I had slipped the straw down the back of my throat while I was chewing on it. She reached her hand right down and pulled it out!

On several rainy days I remember situating cozily under an afghan to listen to old radio shows on cassette tape that she played from a vintage speaker system. The foley effects scared me, but it gave me a silent comfort to look up and see her lost in the story. The stories she used to recount to me could have been fictional ones or true memories. It didn’t matter much to me anyway, lost in imagination and carried off into the world of her descriptions.

She was a talented writer and storyteller that left behind many of her poems and musings. In younger years she published stories in the Weekly Wave, a local newspaper based in St. Ignace. Much of her literary concentration was devoted to the church, where she taught Sunday School and led Women’s bible studies, as well as a widow’s support group called Pathfi nders. Her strong influence in the church shaped her immensely and served as a backdrop for her life and all she did. She was a woman of strong faith and got joy from sharing it with others, using her life as an example of the ‘Christian Walk’. When it was time for prayer she would take her hand in mine and squeeze with a moderate force that, even in her last days, grounded me and reminded me of her solidarity to God.

Her Christian influence defined her and she proudly used every chance she got to promote a relationship with Christ. With that in mind, her devotion to writing mattered greaty to her as well. She had work published in the magazine True Confessions, a slightly racy publication that she didn’t want to advertise her connection to. She hid the magazine from Mimi, who was 9 years old at the time and only reluctantly admitted that she had even submitted the article.

The juxtapositions of her character traits and actions, of her gentle comportment and sometimes striking sarcasm, resulted in an eclectic personality that could throw off people who had only just met her. Her stubbornness was virtuous and unyielding, which, in certain situations, could pose some problems.

One specific trip to Old Kent bank in downtown Owosso stands out in my mind, though I was only five years old at the time. We walked in through the impressive old-style doors, framed with stained wood and cross-barred with polished brass handles. The ambiance of the bank amazed me; brass, hardwood, and heavy felt covered ropes to separate the teller lines made me feel as though I was in an old mansion. The soft lighting reflected off the brass accoutrements and the ornate light fixtures that dangled from the ceiling. Dodo and I walked hand in hand into our spot in line and observed the others waiting around us. Her hand held mine much more weakly than in prayer. In general, it felt bony and only thinly covered her protruding veins, a sensation that may have sparked some realization about how much older she was than me.

“Hello Ma’am, what can I do for you today?” The teller squeezed out between her smiles. The nature of our visit was unclear to me, but I remember Dodo’s frustration digging around through her purse to take out her checkbook, her snappy “What?” when she didn’t hear the teller clearly, and her commentary of “Well I never…” as we walked back out into the street.
after the transaction was over. It made me giggle to see her act short with people and get frustrated for the split second that she couldn’t find something of hers, because she would continue to make a witty remark about it just afterwards. One might have perceived her as a crotchety old lady in times like those, but I always knew the truth about her true age and personality of a mischievous young girl.

As I got older and more cognizant of the people in my life and their own personalities, passions, and joys, Dodo seemed to age rapidly in my mind. She quickly progressed from the child-like soul I used to play with to become my great-grandmother, the oldest age distinction that I could imagine at that time. To think of her taking care of my grandmother as she took care of me made her impossibly aged in my elementary school mind. The fact that she still acted silly and playful was overshadowed by the category I assigned her to. That’s not to say that we still didn’t goof around and laugh; I relished in the moments that we could tease each other and laugh at our common sense of humor.

She had been planning on babysitting me one day shortly after I had started kindergarten, but called my Aunt Pat to relay a message on to my mother that she had come down with the flu and didn’t want to get me sick.

“Well I’m gonna come over if you’re sick.” Pat replied, wanting to make sure that her now elderly mother was holding up all right.

“No, you might get it, I think I’ve got a case of the flu.” Dodo protested.

“No, I’m coming over.”

When she arrived at the house it appeared that her mother was indeed suffering from a bad case of the flu. She was nauseated and her skin was clammy, so Pat decided that she’d stay with her and sleep on the couch to make sure everything was alright. In the early hours of the morning she heard a peculiar noise from Dodo’s bedroom and jumped up to investigate. Upon entering she saw her mother laid out on the bed, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, apparently dead.

“Mom!” She ran over to the bed and started shaking her in an attempt to pull her out of the state she was in. The thought of calling 911 quickly advanced forward from the back of her mind, but before she could, Dodo came to again. Not long afterwards it happened again. The second spell occurred more violently, as Dodo’s eyes glazed over and she groped aimlessly at the air. Pat describes it as if she were in the process of dying. She called 911 and Mimi, and followed the ambulance up to Memorial Hospital where they initially wrote her condition off as the flu. She collapsed again and fell into another fit before leaving the hospital; the nurses rushed her to ICU and began to diagnose her heart condition. That night Dodo had her first pacemaker installed.

The strength of her spirit translated into an incredible physical tolerance for pain. During the pacemaker surgery, a surgeon accidentally incised a small section of her lung that went unnoticed even after she had been released. For the next several days she went about her business as usual without any complaint of the injured lung that slowly collapsed inside her. Not until four days later did she notice anything amiss! It seems as though anyone else with a collapsed lung would struggle to even make it out of the hospital rather than make cookies, get groceries, and tidy the house but she must have just assumed it was related to the pacemaker operation. Technically she wouldn’t have been wrong. But another trip to the hospital resolved her problem and she was as good as new with her fresh pacemaker and newly re-inflated lung.

The first marked change in my perception came when my grandparents Mimi and Bob moved out of their house on Ardelene Drive in Owosso to a lakeside home near Stanwood. They were pleased to have retired to a quaint home on the lake where they were close to Pat and Jim,
my aunt Trina and her family, and only an hour and a half drive from my parents and my Aunt Mitzie. Dodo was nearing an age where she could no longer live by herself. When I was in 3rd or 4th grade she was already beginning to suffer from some form of Alzheimer’s or dementia that caused her to slowly lose grip on her memory. Her inability to remember small things gave way to forgetfulness about pills, deadlines, and important dates. Though she still had her wits about her she needed a hand to take care of herself from time to time. I recall only a few occasions when she became forgetful while she was still living alone. It seemed confusing to me to see someone who had just recently been my partner in crime and caretaker in a state of confusion about who her family members were. Each recurring sign of the illness that she displayed made a deeper and deeper impact on Mimi and Pat. One wants to believe that memories cannot fade, that the special moments shared within a family will endure forever without weakening, but forgetfulness slowly erodes them away in a heart-aching process.

Her two daughters made the collective decision that the time had come for her to leave her home and move in with one of them. My Aunt Pat and Uncle Jim invited her to come stay at their house while she was in the process of selling her own and transitioning to a state of more assisted living. In Stanwood she could at least be near her two daughters and in a natural surrounding where she could stroll and enjoy the outdoors.

I suspect that Dodo began feeling mischievous from her frustration with memory loss, and took advantage of Pat’s catering nature. She suffered from bouts of sudden pain in her legs and the rest of her body that the doctors could never pinpoint. On some days she would complain for hours about the intense pain and ask to be taken to the hospital. Yet once there, she acted as if nothing was amiss.

“Why did you bring me here?” She would ask Pat, genuinely curious.

“Well Mom, you asked me to! It was the pain you were talking about all morning!”

“Why, I don’t feel any pain at all!” She’d reply before proceeding to stroll down the hallway with the gait of a perfectly healthy individual. Or on a separate occasion, Pat noticed that Dodo had a strange mark on her face that she didn’t remember getting. It was as if she had fallen and knocked her face against an object, or scraped against something without noticing. They were at the doctor’s office when Pat noticed.

“Mom, how did you get that mark?” She asked.

“You should know, you hit me!” Dodo snapped. Pat stood in awe at the words that had just come out of her mother’s mouth in front of all the people in the waiting room. She hadn’t ever laid hands on her mother, and she was deeply hurt and embarrassed that she would say such a thing. Dodo knew when she had the upper hand, and didn’t refrain from taking advantage of it when she felt snappy.

The year she spent at Pat and Jim’s passed well in general, though we saw her much less since she was now more than just a short drive away. The sisters agreed that they would split up their time with their mother and have her stay at Mimi’s for the next year. The computer room in their house was converted into Dodo’s room, no larger than an ordinary college dormitory room. Her condition worsened at a slight but noticeable rate as memories came to her with increasing difficulty every day. Mimi took over the role of parental guardian that her own mother had once held for her years ago. The two women would make dozens – perhaps grosses- of cookies to share with family during the summer and holidays when the kids and grandchildren filled the house. Dodo had always cooked up a storm ever since she was a child on the island, trained by one of the best cooks, her mother. Now, as she would stand in the kitchen with Mimi, she had
completely lost her instinct for baking and would have to carefully follow instructions from her daughter to properly make the treats.

“It was like watching a woman who had made thousands of cookies in her life making a batch of them for the first time. It almost felt like she was my daughter,” Mimi recounts. “It was kind of nice, even though it was sad.”

One day, the toilet mysteriously stopped working. On any other day, Bob would have jumped to the task and made his way through the repair, losing his wrench several times and knocking his head on the toilet bowl as he jumped up to reach for another tool. But the cancer that slowly eroded away at his health had rendered him unmotivated and unconcerned with the task. They called a plumber to come by and settle the issue, which ended up being a fairly complicated affair. Nobody knew exactly what had happened, until Dodo proffered a potential cause: “You don’t suppose someone dropped a small bottle of perfume down there, do you?”

Mimi smiled broadly as Dodo innocently feigned ignorance, her poker face unwavering.

Daily routines were no longer instinctual for her and had to be encouraged, if not enforced. Dodo had taken high blood pressure medicine every day for decades, but had forgotten and became suspicious of the pill that Mimi handed her in the morning.

“I’m not taking that!” Dodo would exclaim.

“But Mom, you have a prescription for it! It says that you need to take it every day as prescribed.”

“I’ve never seen nor taken that in all my life!” She would protest as she crossed her arms and stood steadfast with her back to my grandmother. Mimi retells the story with a bright smile and many laughs, though I suspect that at the time she regarded it as less humorous.

“Mom, really, you need to take it. Please.”

“No!” This time, her protest would be accompanied by a stamping of feet. Her stubbornness surely didn’t fade with time. My grandfather Bob, who had started to become ill from complications with pancreatic cancer, was a much more effective voice in the argument. She listened hesitantly to his firm suggestion and always ended up taking the pill with a gulp of her pride, while the harbored resentment showed clearly through her eyes the whole time. Her trivial arguments resembled those of an angst ridden teenager.

Over the first year that she spent at Mimi’s, Bob’s cancer worsened significantly. He became increasingly weaker as the days passed, which made it more difficult to take care of Dodo and meet her special needs. After an argument about the high blood pressure medication, Bob slowly turned around in his chair and looked at Dodo with pleading eyes and a voice tired out from his vicious fight with the disease. It was a moment that would break Mimi’s heart: to see the two people she loved the most both in pain.

Just as Pat had come in to find her mother in a state of arrest years before, Mimi happened upon her collapsed and apparently dead in her room in Stanwood one day in the spring. Her pulse had in fact stopped by the time that Mimi came to her side; the pacemaker had shut off and failed to regulate the beating of her heart for a period of perhaps ten seconds. She came to, out of breath and a bit confused, disoriented as to what had just occurred. The women sped through the country roads to reach the hospital, where my grandmother’s account was met with skepticism.

“I came in to find my mother on the ground, with no pulse,” She explained.

“Well you know honey, sometimes when people pass out they look like they’re dead,” assured the nurse. “She probably just had a fit and fainted.”
“I know the difference between dead and passed out,” Mimi retorted, “I felt for a pulse and there was nothing for quite a while!” Dodo laid on the examination table with a heart monitor attached as the women exchanged words about precisely what had happened to her.

“She appears to be doing fine,” The nurse confirmed. “It was probably nothing.” As if on cue, the heart activity monitor flat lined and Dodo’s heart proved the point to the unconvinced nurse. Nurses and doctors rushed around to start defibrillation and Mimi shook her head, exasperated by the fact that it took this to happen again to corroborate her story.

It turns out that Dodo had worn out her pacemaker battery and needed it replaced. Who knew how many times it had stuttered since these clustered occurrences on this day? The lack of oxygen severely affected the brain’s function and likely contributed to the severity of her Alzheimer’s/dementia. She was, nevertheless, “one tough cookie”.

Shortly after this scare, Mimi and Pat decided to move Dodo into an assisted living facility not far from their homes in Stanwood. The new facility had only just opened but featured beautiful carpentry and a wide-open design. When Dodo first visited the home, she was the sole resident of the building. Luckily, other seniors in the area joined her and soon there was a small but eclectic cast of characters.

“Do you see that man over there?” Dodo once inquired to Mimi, gesturing behind her shoulder where she sat in the main lobby of the building.

“Sure, why?”
“Everyday he asks me to marry him!”
“Well are you going to?” Mimi asked half-seriously, amused by her mother’s sense of shock at the ridiculous proposition.

“Why no, you know what that entails!” She responded.

I visited the assisted living center about once month, especially in the summertime when I would stay at Mimi and Bob’s for a length of time. I had gotten a bit older and used to the process of change that Dodo was dealing with. Sometimes she would remember my face but not place the name; other times I had to introduce myself to her anew at the beginning of our visit. I would sit in the main upstairs lobby just down the hall from her apartment and play the band music that I had been learning on my saxophone to provide some entertainment for the visit. It always made me self-conscious to blast away on the large woodwind in the echoing corridor, accentuating each squeak and missed note. She would scoot up to the piano bench and deftly manipulate beautiful songs out of the keys. Music brought joy into her life and the musical conversations we exchanged, that could not be conveyed with words, united our souls in the same way as our actions did when we played together during babysitting.

Dodo lived in the assisted living center in Stanwood for just under 2 years before she began wandering about the facility in confusion, which could pose a potential safety hazard for her. The staff at this home was not equipped to provide the close attention necessary to keep tabs on her at all times, so she moved to another, more nursing intensive home in Greenville. The Greenville living center was smaller and more intimate, with potted trees scattered along the main hallway next to the rooms. With her freedom limited, she didn’t seem to fill right in her own skin. After another year she was ready to move once again to the Masonic Pathways home in Alma, where they specialized in memory care services and even more intensive medical care. Her father had been a freemason, and her husband had attempted to join the order, but was black-balled and never got in. Calling on her legacy to the order, she joined the nursing home community. The wide, bright hallways of the home were a pleasant change from the one-story apartment complex in Greenville. A “Hall of Memories” on the lower level allowed residents to
walk among nostalgic paraphernalia such as antique signs, vintage car replicas, and old products from times now past.

I walked down the Hall of Memories with my father, Mimi, and Dodo in the winter of 2003. I had experienced Dodo as my second memory in the world, through my young childhood, my elementary school days, and finally as a middle school student. She had marked imprint on my heart that was tender and instructive, especially useful for accepting change and learning how to love unconditionally. On the day that we walked down the hallway and joked around, Dodo appeared content but less lucid than I had ever seen her before. We wheeled her down the hallway in the wheelchair and stooped down to address her and ask her about various things we passed. She didn’t recognize any of us, but knew that we were family that cared about her. In the deepest part of her heart she guarded the important memories and ideas: love for God, love for family, and unconditional caring for everyone. All that, spiced with a smirk and a clever quip.

My parents and I visited the home twice before Dodo passed away in February of 2004. Her passing had been prefaced by Bob’s death in 2002, which delivered a painful blow to the family. It was the first death to ever touch me. He had been an extreme influence in my life and had shaped my perceptions of family and the gift of generational knowledge. The interim between Bob and Dodo’s deaths was harshest on Mimi, whose coping process now involved the realization that her mother’s memory and health were degrading at a more rapid pace.

Mimi and Pat were both with their mother when she passed away on February 27th at the Masonic Home. It brought closure to the long mental erosion process that everyone had experienced over the past years, as well as a new hope that Dodo could finally fly away from her aged body and join her parents, husband, brother and sister in the afterlife. It was a beautiful image to imagine her at the prime of her life, full of all the memories and cleverness that had given this petite woman such a robust character.

Laughter and tears mixed at the funeral; it lacked the airs of tragedy that were more prevalent at Bob’s. Fittingly enough, intricate masonry inlaid into the floor just before the doors gave way to the wide, deep chapel. The cedar vaulted ceiling added to the impression of open space. Flowers ornamented the casket and entire front of the chapel. Family members and folks from her church in Owosso composed the entire audience, which made the ceremony intimate and celebratory. She had lived a full life, brought families together, fulfilled her Lord’s work, affected change in hardened hearts, and left an extensive account of it all behind her. The catharsis of her passing eased the turmoil of the turbulent past years and left the family with the task of remembering and enjoying rather than worrying and tending.

To look back on her passing today, having since experienced grievous loss as well as blessings of unexpected recovery and health, I feel content. She was the first family member that I knew who died of what one would call “old age”, meaning to me that her heart and spirit exceeded the capabilities of her weathered body. Though I don’t regret how I communicated with her in the last years of her life, I would have liked to find out more about the sensations that she felt as she experienced everything: her high school years away from the island and her family, her move to Owosso, her love with Wyman, the first and then second baby girl that she brought into this world, in short, the moments that can’t be fully described by writing or conversation, but only through the light and energy that releases when one reminisces about them. That, perhaps, is what I miss the most about her: the twinkle in her eyes.