

In Memory of my Mother Betty Jo Gruell Hofmann

To my Dear Brothers, Children, Grandchildren, Nephews and Great-Nephews

The Bible tells us:

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust in the ground; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living breathing being.

I only have just started, but I am asking you to pardon my poetic license here. You see, I do know according to the biblical account, woman was created from the rib of man. However, I am just quickly trying to get to a simple point; human life, of both men and women, were created from dust. Throughout the years, those that tend to popularize scientific theory have romanticized the idea that we were not just created from any old dust, but we were, according to them, the stuff of the heavens. They said, "We are made of stardust."

However, we can put romantic notions aside, because it is now legitimate scientific theory. Just last year in 2017, through an extensive survey of more than 150 thousand stars across the Milky Way, scientists were able to confirm that our bodies are made up of the same atoms and elements that compose the stars. And, we not only share these characteristics with every human being that has ever existed, we share this with every living thing- the trees that shade us, the blades of grass upon which we stand, and the butterfly flitting by. We are all part of, and related to both heaven and earth in this way. We are human beings formed by a mighty power from stardust.

I imagine you are now thinking, "What does this have to do with Betty? How is this honoring mom, or Grandma? Well, I hope you are willing to bear with me while I try to bring these two seemingly separate themes together. But just for starters, let me say that when thinking about anything, my first inclination is to start at the beginning. So, I did. And, in this story about Grandma Betty, I will keep returning to beginnings.

Our dear mother, grandmother and great-grandmother Betty Jo Gruell began her life on September 22nd 1928, as the second child born to Theodore Gruell and Violet Thelma Helms Gruell. Her birth took place, not in a hospital but in the home of Grandma Betty's grandmother, Nancy Belle Linsey Helms. Betty Jo was the second child and the first and only daughter to be born to the Gruell's. Less than a year after her birth, the Great Depression began. It was a time of severe, worldwide economic depression marked by joblessness and wide spread human suffering. For the Gruell family, this meant times of unemployment, times with simply no money and many times wondering where the next meal would come from. This event and the precarious times it produced (a period that lasted for 10 years) shaped the day to day lives of the Gruell family.

It was a tough life. Grandma Betty's father Ted lost his factory job and took odd jobs when he could get them, to feed his family that within a few years included four children. At times, there simply was no work, so doing the best he could for his family, Grandma Betty's father, our grandfather and your great-grandfather and your great-great grandfather, would trap rabbits to feed his family. Many years later, Grandma Betty would tell me she hated rabbit. There simply did not exist a fancy French restaurant menu that would ever convince her that rabbit was a delicacy.

As if the dire economic times weren't bad enough, Grandma Betty, along with her family experienced tragedy on a personal level. Her older brother Ted, or Junior as his family called him, like Betty Jo had been born at home, and at his birth experienced oxygen deprivation. As the story goes, our great-grandmother (your great-great grandmother or even, great-great-great grandmother) Nancy Belle, assisted the doctor in delivering baby Junior. She spent many minutes after the non-breathing baby's birth, dunking his lifeless body from warm to cold tubs of water, trying to shock the little body to life. Junior finally started to breathe, but he would suffer the effects from that lack of oxygen for his entire life.

Grandma Betty's youngest brother, Billy, was ill all his short life and passed away at the age of three with what the family believed to be leukemia. As we can only imagine, this devastated Grandma Betty, her brothers Junior and Bobbie and her parents Grandma Thelma and Grandpa Ted Gruell. My Great Aunt Edith (Grandma Thelma's sister) told me many years ago, that my Grandpa Ted Gruell never really recovered emotionally from the loss of his three-year-old son Billy. When talking about her memory of this time, Grandma Betty, then just a young girl herself, said she fell asleep one night with little brother Billy playing at the foot of her bed. When she awoke the next morning, Billy was gone.

Of course, there were many good times in this family that was surrounded by love for one another. That love and devotion for the wellbeing of the other carried them through and so did the strong bonds of the extended family. Throughout the years, relatives cared about each other and helped each other survive, at times, banding together and living in a single home until better times came around.

Miss Betty Jo Gruell was a Connersville girl. She grew up during a time when young children could play in the woods and walk on the streets of the town and parents didn't fear for their safety. She played with her brothers Junior and Bobbie and all the throngs of neighborhood children that created daily adventures in the out of doors. A self-described tomboy, Grandma Betty loved to run and play, enjoying the rough and tumble of childhood games. She also loved the Saturday afternoon movie theater matinees. (Remember, there was only radio. There was no television, let alone online computer entertainment.) One of her favorite movie stars of the time was Jeanette McDonald-a beautiful actress with an equally beautiful operatic, soprano voice. Grandma told me she always wanted to sing like Jeanette McDonald, but try as she might, those within earshot, usually her brothers, let Betty Jo know, "She was no Jeanette McDonald."

Years later, this unfortunate inability to carry a tune was confirmed again by 11-month-old granddaughter Kristin. As Grandma Betty settled into the rocking chair with a sleepy Kristin on her lap, she launched into her best rendition of Rock-a-bye Baby. With her little hand, Kristin reached up and covered Grandma Betty's mouth, and very clearly said, "No. Just rock the baby."

Grandma Betty loved school and was always an excellent student. She especially loved to study history and this area of interest lasted her entire life. She also appreciated art and dabbled in it herself. Her dedication to her studies allowed her to graduate in the top 15% of her Connersville High School class and she was awarded a membership in the prestigious National Honor Society.

For as much as she loved school, both for the academics and for her wide circle of high school friends, tragedy once again entered the lives of the Gruell family and marred those years for Betty Jo. Shortly after her fifteenth birthday, Grandma Betty lost her 40-year-old father to a fatal stroke. Now the family that had struggle through the economic deprivation of the Great Depression would be forced to struggle

to survive once again. While Betty Jo's mother, Grandma Thelma Gruell found full-time work in a factory, Betty Jo had to step into a more mother-like role to help take care of both her brothers Junior and Bobbie. The family of six was now a family of four. Heartbroken, they held together with the love and support of Betty Jo's Grandmother Nancy Bell and her uncles and aunts.

Now here's another story about a beginning.

Betty Jo Gruell first met Jack Hofmann in 1945. Grandma Betty was with her girlfriends at the spontaneous celebration that had broken out at the news of Victory Over Japan, an event that marked the end of World War II. The streets of Connersville were filled with cheering crowds and streams of cars honking their horns in celebration for the end of that terrible war. In one of those cars was the young man that would be Grandma Betty's husband, our father and your grandfather, Jack Hofmann. He was riding with a couple of friends that knew one of Grandma Betty's friends. The girls were invited to ride along for the rest of the celebration, and though Betty Jo and Jack hardly spoke that evening, both remembered that first meeting.

It would be months before they dated, but neither forgot about the other. Grandma Betty would ask friends of friends who knew Jack and even received an evaluation from one person stating, "Jack Hofmann was handsome, but he knew it." Grandpa Jack on the other hand, seemed to just show up more and more at the places that Grandma Betty frequented. This "showing up" really did become a pattern with Grandpa Jack. For instance, the couple had only just begun to date, when Grandma Betty, still in high school and president of her high school chapter of the American Red Cross, took a car trip to New York City with the sponsoring teacher and other students to attend the National Red Cross Convention. On their return trip home, but many miles from their destination of Connersville, Grandma Betty along with the other folks in the car, kept noticing the same car with the same young man waiting at a number of various cross roads leading back to Connersville. That young man was Grandpa Jack. Apparently, he had driven many miles from Connersville just to wait for Grandma Betty's car to pass on the road and then he would jump in his car and race down another side road to wait at yet another intersection for her car to pass by again. Evidently, he repeated this, many times.

Now, I have to say this is totally believable. Anyone who ever rode with Jack Hofmann would certainly tell you he was a speed demon and without a doubt could have pulled this off. This was back in the days before Interstate highways and Grandpa Jack remained the speed master of country roads throughout his life.

Now, Grandma Betty did admit this kind of attention was a bit unnerving, at first. But she gradually came to think of it as just his way of showing his interest in her. However, I think today that might meet the definition of stalking. Fortunately for all of us, Grandma Betty did not take out a restraining order on Grandpa Jack and the couple married in May of 1948.

Here's yet another beginning.

This time it is my beginning and Grandma Betty's beginning of life as the mother of me and then fourteen months later, Gary and another five years later, David. Here it gets harder for me to tell the story. What I have told you so far, I learned from family stories from people like my great aunt Edith, the little I remember about spending time with my Grandmother Thelma Gruell, and of course, the stories I heard from my mother, your Grandma Betty- the stories I heard over, and over, and over again. These

are the same stories that at times, I thought would drive me crazy if I heard them one more time. Indeed, it may well have driven me crazy; I'll let you be the judge of that. But I heard these stories many, many more times, because Grandma Betty was known to repeat herself... often. Yet, when putting this together to honor my mother and share her story with you, I finally appreciated that these stories were ingrained in me. Now, I can tell them to you and give you a small glimpse of Grandma Betty and her family... our family. These are some of the very people whose particular stardust has been passed on to all of us, beginning with me as her oldest child all the way down to baby Asher as her youngest great grandchild.

At the risk of sounding very foolish, I am going to state the obvious here because I don't believe we actually think about it very often. At least, I don't. The thing is, we owe our very lives to our parents and all the grandparents that came before us. It is so profound; just think of all the random events and relationships from past generations that had to happen in order for us to be here in the world today. If as they say, everything happens for a reason, then surly, we are the reason. I don't care if you look or act exactly like someone on the other side of your family. You are you in all your wonderful uniqueness and hodgepodge of familial traits because of both sides of your family. You may have never contemplated it, or you may choose to ignore it, but it is the undeniable truth: you are walking around on this earth because of that special mix of stardust that comes from all the parents that came before your beginning.

So that said, let me get back to beginnings.

This story comes from my early memories of my mother, your Grandma Betty. Of course, I remember all the loving things that she did for me. She bandaged my scraped knees and kissed them to make the hurt go away. She taught me to recite the childhood prayer- *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep ...* She read me stories and made me toast and tea when I didn't feel well. She combed and curled my fine straight hair and she always tried at every opportunity to teach me right from wrong. She taught me to play jacks. She was always better than I would ever be. She gave me the opportunity to spend precious time with her mother, my Grandmother Thelma. I was her first grandchild. I was born on her birthday and I can still literally feel her love for me. Yet, I only knew her for a short time because Grandma Thelma had a long and very difficult battle with cancer and died when I was only six. That meant Grandma Betty was only 25 years old when she lost her mother, just a short ten years after her father had passed away.

Later, my mother would rock my new born babies in the middle of the night so that I could get some sleep. I never would have figured out how to use real cloth diapers or how to get that important burp out of the baby's tummy without her. And, oh yes, she taught me to make gravy.

But let me go back to the beginning again. One of my most vivid, early memories of my mother, your grandmother, is how she looked when I was a little girl. Back then I was sure there wasn't a more beautiful mommy anywhere. I loved Saturdays because Saturday was the day of the week my mommy went out. Every Saturday night mommy went out and daddy babysat us. Every Saturday night I would get to watch my mommy curl her shiny dark brown hair and put on makeup, put on a nice dress and high-heel shoes and go out. Every Saturday night my mommy went out..... to the grocery store.

Now I am tempted to tell you tales of how that lead to her abuse of chocolate, but I am not going to go there. Instead, I will say I suspect that memory of my beautiful mother remains so strong for a couple of reasons: 1. She was a beautiful woman and she should be remembered as that; and, 2. It was the

beginning of our mother/daughter relationship. It was the beginning of the unconditional love that is instinctual, easy and not yet complicated by competing agendas of mothering and needing to break away. It was the purist love of our relationship. She was my everything. No wonder my young eyes could only see her great beauty. But I grew up. Don't misunderstand me, we always loved each other. But life is complicated and even as we butted heads and sometimes needed to take timeout, I knew she loved me, and I will always love her.

I think for all of us, over the years just living our lives tended to intervene and disrupt the way we should pay attention to, and be there for those we love. Many miles, busy lives, and enticing attractions pulled all of us away from being there for our mom and grandmother. I can understand why many of us may have felt we didn't really know Grandma Betty very well. I am going to be honest here when I say, Grandma Betty knew you. Through her limited lens and view of the world, she believed she knew you well. Nevermind that her conception of your world did not line up with your lived reality. Nevertheless, she believed she knew you well. However, I am pretty sure she would have loved nothing better than to have been truly close to any and all of us, because we were her everything.

In the last year of her life, something very sad and strange happened. The disease that was ravaging her brain turned her focus away from us and away from the present and the future. Every day, and more and more, we faded from her memory. Memories of us were replaced by memories of her own mother and father. In her mind, she started to relive the sorrow and enact the grief of the young woman who lost both of her parents too soon in life. Here she was, nearly ninety years old, but instead, retreating to her childhood, going back to her beginning.

Our mom and your grandmother passed, but I think we can find hope and comfort in the thought that she was returning to those who had loved and cherished her so long ago, returning to those who passed their stardust on to her as she did to us. Betty Jo, my dear mother, I hope to join you at home some fine day. Until then, God bless you. Godspeed on your final journey home to your new beginning.

