

My Mother's Death Left Me Grieving for My Grandmother All Over Again

At Hanukkah, a new talisman reminds me of her most enduring lesson

By [Deborah L. Jacobs](#)

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In our family, what ought to have been a mother-daughter bond skipped a generation. My maternal grandmother and I had a strained relationship with my mother, but were close to each other. Grandma Bess, who died in 2002, was a source of wisdom and perspective well into my adult life. Events surrounding my mother's recent death left me grieving for her all over again.



Grandma Bess didn't covet precious objects, but for nearly 92 years she relished the small moments. And her ability to laugh melodically at life's absurdities equipped her for whatever came her way. That included her seven-decade marriage to my curmudgeonly Grandpa Oscar, her high school sweetheart.

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My first memory of Grandma Bess is visual. When I was 16 months old and stayed with her while my mother gave birth to one of my brothers, she sat beside me on her green carpeted staircase, and demonstrated how to descend safely — on my butt.

She was 47 at the time and a gym teacher, having chosen this profession because gender bias prevented her from studying medicine. Later, she got a Masters in psychology, and became a high school guidance counselor. When

it was my turn for a career change, she was the only family member who encouraged me to go to journalism school, after six years of practicing law.

The Hanukkah when she presented me with an [Add-A-Pearl necklace](#), I was too young to appreciate this legacy gift. But I now

see it as a symbol of the advice she gave me, bit by bit, as I matured. At times when I felt stymied, she would assure me that "things have a way of working out." She'd look me straight in the eyes, and brush her forefinger against the tip of my nose — a playful gesture that was my signal to lighten up.

Supportive Reminders

Among her belongings when she died were all the [letters](#) that I wrote her, many venting about one thing or another. Her replies, which I saved, were supportive but never coddling.

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Looking for solace, I reread those letters after my mother died in 2023. Late in life, she had accused me of something I didn't do, and then [disinherited me](#) from the most valuable part of her estate. Shattered, I yearned for my grandmother's unwavering love and support.

**"Disappointments
occur all the time.
The smart person**

A couple of the letters, that she sent to me in college, offered clues of how she would have reacted. In one, written as I struggled with my senior thesis,

learns to handle them."

she wrote, "As you know, I am of the firm conviction that writing, particularly when you are emotionally involved, is your

greatest strength."

Another responded to my complaint about a summer job where I felt marginalized. "Disappointments occur all the time. The smart person learns to handle them," my grandmother advised.

Those last words seemed terribly blunt — at the time, and again, as I struggled to cope with a devastating blow: My mother had rearranged millions of dollars' worth of individual retirement accounts so that I would not get a dime of it.

"Your mother has always been impossible," I imagine my grandmother telling me, with familiar disdain. We might have been standing in her kitchen, where we tended to have our heart-to-hearts. My mother used to say, with a pinch of envy, that I was the only person my grandmother allowed in there while she was cooking. At [Hanukkah](#), I loved to watch her make latkes.

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Surely, as she vigorously grated the potatoes, Grandma Bess would have disapproved of my mother's [punishing me from the grave](#). Then pausing, she would have turned to me and in her most didactic voice, said "De-BOR-ah (she sometimes pronounced my name the old Hebrew way for emphasis), there is NO point agonizing over things we can't control!" This Hanukkah, I have a new talisman to remind me of that truism.

A Therapeutic Adventure

It emerged from what turned out to be a therapeutic adventure, inspired by a pair of Grandma Bess's earrings. These flimsy gold discs, engraved with the letter 'B,' for Bess, turned up in my mother's apartment, and my brother Paul gave them to me as he cleaned it out. I would never wear them, but didn't want to melt them down or have them sit in a drawer. So instead, I took them to Varda Singer, the owner of [ICD Jewelry](#) in Chappaqua, New York, who specializes in giving new life to inherited jewelry.

The author with her grandmother during 1980s Cape Cod visit | Credit: Courtesy of Deborah L. Jacobs

She suggested soldering the earrings together, with the 'B' on the inside — preserving the connection to my grandmother. This would create a circular pendant less than an inch in diameter, which could be set with tiny sapphires, in an assortment of colors and shapes. Singer showed me pictures of what she had in mind.

Certainly, the stones could be bought in New York, but knowing that I planned to visit Southeast Asia, Singer recommended that I shop for them in Bangkok, which is a major gemstone market. It wasn't about saving money, necessarily, but about having fun. Perhaps Singer intuited that this was just what I needed.

I had sources in Bangkok, and asked one of them to recommend someone trustworthy. He told me that [Venus Jewelry](#) is where a lot of embassy people go.

The author with her grandparents Bess and Oscar | Credit: Courtesy of Deborah L. Jacobs

Upon entering the shop, I felt like prey. The saleswoman scoffed when I described my project, perhaps surmising (correctly) that I wasn't a big spender. Reluctantly, she produced dozens of round plastic containers, each containing one or two gems smaller than a lemon pit.

When I had chosen 10, I inquired about the total tab. It was five times what Singer had told me to spend. I prepared to leave empty-handed.

The saleslady motioned for me to stay, summoned a younger employee and spoke to her in a language that I didn't understand. This worker retreated to a back room, and after another 45 minutes, returned with 10 additional stones. I was thrilled with the colors and shapes, and the price, \$200, would fit my budget.

When I got back to New York, Singer showed the stones to a gem

expert, who confirmed her suspicion: Three were not sapphires. There was a citrine, a peridot and a tanzanite, all of which cost less than sapphires. The total value there was about the same as what I had paid in Bangkok, but I didn't get what I asked for. I sent Venus, the Bangkok jeweler, an email recounting these events, and attaching both the receipt and a photo.

"You are right, I can clearly see that the light green stone is peridot and the other two possibly are tanzanite and garnet," wrote Pala Palalikit, one of three siblings in the [second generation](#) now operating this family-owned business. He said the saleswoman had made a mistake and offered to send me three sapphires. They arrived a week later by FedEx.

'All Is Good'

I took them to Maykel Rieth, owner of R Gems, a cutter and wholesaler in New York's jewelry district, who confirmed that they were authentic. Even at a reputable place, "mistakes can happen, and they're willing to replace it by sending you other ones," Rieth said. "You're getting the right thing in the end, and that's what counts." Eerily, his conclusion reminded me of Grandma Bess.

The finished necklace | Credit: Courtesy of Deborah L. Jacobs

Not expecting Venus to send me

more stones, I had given Singer the OK to complete the medallion with those I brought back from Bangkok. "Is it too late to substitute them for the fakes that we used?" I asked once I'd had the additional stones checked out.

"Way too late," she texted, but then added: "We did not use fakes. We just used gems that are not sapphires. All is good." This, too, was something Grandma Bess might have said.

I think of my unique new necklace as a Hanukkah gift from my grandmother. The story behind it reminds me of her most enduring lesson: We can make plans, but we can't plan for life. The twists and turns are much too unpredictable.

Grandma Bess would have laughed heartily as I told her about my mission in Bangkok. Then she would have urged me to write about it.

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