SPONTANEOUS GENERATIONS LEFT, THE AUTHOR AT HOME IN LOS ANGELES. RIGHT, HER GRANDMOTHER JEAN IN 1960.

granny takes a trip

Janelle Brown had always been the family rebel: punky, moody, and a dabbler in youthful vices. Then one day her dying grandmother made an unusual request. With every age, they both realized, comes wisdom.

My grandmother Jean told a dirty joke exactly once: at a formal family dinner, not long before she died. "I know one," she piped up, interrupting a noisy conversation that I had been having with my cousins about bad jokes. A table of ten heads swiveled to stare at my tiny grandmother, prim in her St. John knits, her gray hair fluffed to cotton perfection from her weekly visit to her hairdresser. "Three nuns died and went to Heaven," she began, her eyes wrinkling naughtily. The joke deteriorated from there—she botched the punch line, something about a nun's last wish to get laid—but it was effective nonetheless: The fact that our family's formidable matriarch even knew a filthy yarn was enough to leave our jaws on the floor.

My grandmother did not titillate. That was more of my domain: the granddaughter who'd marred the annual Christmas photos with a retina-bruising array of hairstyles (burgundy, orange, striped, pixie) and who accessorized her cheerful all-black ensembles with bizarre footwear retrieved from the Goodwill. The "creative" granddaughter who liked to shock, and whose behavior—high school–dropout boyfriends! Entire weekends lost to raves! Annual trips to Burning Man to hang out with naked, drugged-up freaks!—had long been cause for family concern.

All families have their How Things Are, an unwritten but nonetheless intransigent set of expectations—of one another, of the group dynamic, of what is acceptable behavior and what simply isn't. In our family, my grandmother had always set the rules, and they weren't exactly liberal. Intoxication? Uncouth. Brazen sexuality? How tacky. Swearing? Answered by pinched lips, as if she'd just bit into a lemon. Jeans at family gatherings? Don't even think of it.

Even in my rebellion I wasn't quite brave enough to snub convention at those sacrosanct gatherings. I learned my lesson just once, at a Christmas in my early 20s, when, with the latest unsuitable boyfriend glued to my side, I decided *up front >100*

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to flaunt my new appreciation for scotch on the rocks. Three snifters in, as my boyfriend and I gossiped unsociably in the corner, I caught my grandmother watching me. All it took was one quiet, concerned look from her and the rest of my drink melted into a watery pool, untouched. The boyfriend was history soon after.

But things were changing. My grandmother was in the latter, deteriorating stages of osteoarthritis, a degenerative disease that breaks down the protective cartilage in the body, leaving bone rubbing against excruciating bone. Over the last decade, she had shrunk nearly nine inches. Her body was literally caving in on itself. And as it was, so were the walls that had always divided me from my grandmother: three decades of entrenched family roles, what had once seemed an insurmountable generational divide. Something had visibly loosened between us: Crisis, I was learning, lends itself to unexpected intimacies.

Not even that unexpected joke, though, could prepare me for the phone call that came on a cold November evening, months later. I was at home in my apartment in San Francisco when the telephone rang. When I answered it, I was surprised to hear my grandfather's voice on the other end: Phone calls were usually my grandmother's domain, along with writing thank-you notes, buying gifts, arranging holiday dinners, organizing vacations, and just about everything else social or family.

My grandfather was unusually hesitant. "Your mother said you could come over and help us make some"—he paused and cleared his throat—"pot brownies?"

It seemed to take a whole minute before I could respond, my lungs having apparently seized up in shock. Still, the invitation was not a total surprise. In fact, giving pot—or, more accurately, medical marijuana—to my grandmother was my own idea. I had just never imagined my grandparents would actually take me up on my insane suggestion.

For years, my grandmother had been working her way through almost every pain medication on the pharmacy shelf, from OxyContin to Vicodin, and none had done her much good. Simply walking was agonizing: She moved quietly but stiffly, and stopped after every step as if she were pausing to consider her surroundings. The entire family knew that this was because the pain was too much to bear.

Lately it had grown worse. And it was difficult to accept that this slow, wincing woman was the grandmother I had known for almost 30 years. My grandmother may never have worked—in her day, ladies simply didn't—but she had always been in motion. From her annual travels to Asia and beyond with my grandfather, she filled her home with elegant antiquities and her refrigerator with lychee nuts, an exotic treat that she adored (but that I, as a child, considered a terrible disappointment). Days were for housekeeping and coordinating family affairs, for volunteering for the San Francisco Symphony and a clutch of other nonprofits; nights for cocktails, dinner parties, and the Wednesday canasta gatherings that she hosted for 60 years.

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Of course, she had always been meticulously turned out. In a classic photo of her, circa 1960, her trim figure was neatly folded into a woolen dress suit, her razor-angled face more interesting than beautiful. She had accessorized with coordinated purse and pearls and gloves; her black bob was curled and coiffed, her lips glazed in ladylike red. (And yet, a child of the Depression, she considered fancy labels a frivolous waste of money: Her beer was generic-brand, she shopped primarily at sales, and the only reason she owned a fur coat was that my grandfather insisted on buying it for her.)

Beyond simple physical activity, though, what illness erodes slowly, incrementally, like the sea stealing away the shore, is cheer. Though my grandmother could be a sharp woman—and I sometimes sensed that I loved her from a distance, as a figurehead, rather than as an intimate—her spirit was infectious. I can still remember a day when I was a child: I was sitting on a settee in my grandmother's bedroom, watching her dress to go out. The room smelled like vintage perfume and aging silk. And from the closet, I could hear my grandmother as she opened shoe boxes and unsheathed dresses from their plastic tombs: She was whistling, tunelessly, through her teeth. This was what she did when she was happy: Her whistling was a sign that all was well in the world.

But that era was now history. My grandparents had sold the antiques-filled house for an apartment in a retirement community, so my grandmother could live in proximity to a hospital. The travels had ended; so had the cocktail parties, the dress suits replaced by orthopedic shoes. Her body was failing, the whistling was rare, and I, in turn, ached in sympathy for the vibrant woman who was fading away from pain.

Which is why, at my grandfather's ninetieth-birthday dinner, as I watched my grandmother inch her way from car to restaurant door—her face gray from the effort—I finally turned to my mother and said, in a low voice, "Has anyone considered medical marijuana?"

Medical marijuana was legalized in California in 1996, when Proposition 215—better known as the Compassionate Use Act—was voted into law. Initially promoted by the gay community in San Francisco, which had been quietly using marijuana to curb the agony of AIDS for many years, Prop 215 allowed seriously ill Californians to use marijuana legally as long as they obtained a written doctor's recommendation first. Since then, ten states—including Washington, Oregon, Vermont, and Colorado—had followed suit, despite the continued federal ban. The result had been a federal–versus–state law showdown in the court system that seemed to have no end, despite the fact that countless medical organizations, including the American Academy of Family Physicians and the Institute of Medicine, had endorsed marijuana's value for the relief of pain and nausea and for appetite stimulation.

It was clear to me that my grandmother was in desperate need of this kind of relief. In fact, her doctor had already tried prescribing Marinol, an FDA-approved but inferior synthetic marijuana substitute that is primarily *up front >102*

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known for making its users, including my grandmother, feel groggy. And so, as we walked toward the dinner table at my grandfather's birthday, I found myself uttering words to my mother that I could never have imagined emerging from my lips: "... because, you know, if you want me to, I could probably get Grandma some pot."

The phone call came just a few days later.

I arrived at my grandparents' condominium with a sheaf of pot-brownie recipes I'd culled from sites like Cannabis Heaven and PureTHC.com, but no actual marijuana. "Don't worry about that," my grandfather had said on the phone. "We have some."

My grandmother had dressed for the occasion in a coordinated pantsuit; I felt vaguely embarrassed about my own jeans. But she shuffled to meet me at the door with a gleam in her eye and took my hand in her own. The bones in her hand felt as delicate as a baby bird's; her skin was crepey and soft.

There was a surreal quality to my visit. Drugs, like other unseemly topics, were something my family never openly discussed. The subject of my own experimentations with intoxicants had been broached only once, when I was a senior English major at UC Berkeley in the early throes of rebellion. "Do you do marijuana?" my father asked over dessert one evening, his eyebrows puckered with suspicion. There seemed to be only one plausible response: "I tried it, but I didn't like it."

This wasn't precisely the truth. Judging by my parents' concerned expressions, it wasn't the right answer, either. And I could just envision my grandmother's pinched face of disappointment at hearing this news, though she never spoke of it with me. Years later, although my youthful indiscretions were fading into the past—as were the raves, the punk boyfriends, and the thrift-store costumery—they still seemed to define my role in the family: the black sheep. How bizarre to think that those experimentations could now be of service to my family.

Regardless, I couldn't quite breach the decades of entrenched family propriety to openly discuss what we were about to do, despite the fact that it was, in my grandmother's case, perfectly legal, even doctor-prescribed. The subtext of my presence in this apartment—that I was the family expert when it came to illicit drugs—was too horrifying to consider mentioning to my genteel grandmother. I was almost afraid to smile: Perhaps this should be a sober activity, with appropriately penitent gravitas.

But my grandmother had no such intention. "I'm looking forward to seeing your baking skills," she said. And then, to my utter astonishment, she giggled, the pealing laugh of a schoolgirl.

We moved to the kitchen, and I assessed the stove, which, to that point, had been primarily used as extra storage for my grandmother's Ensure nutritional drinks. I put the recipes down by the kitchen sink, along with a box of brownie mix.

"So, where are the . . . medicinal herbs?" I asked, tiptoeing around the word *marijuana.*

My grandfather escorted me into his den, where, from a decorative wooden box, he retrieved a plastic bag. He proffered it gingerly, like a hot dish that might scald. Nestled in the bottom was a desiccated brown nubbin of pot that I had to squint to see. It was the size of my pinkie nail.

Most medical marijuana in California comes from the state's numerous sanctioned pot clubs, which require a doctor's prescription and a membership card before purchase. I'd peered into one near my apartment in the Mission, and it was a dim, scary place, with bars on the windows and a buzzer at the front door, reggae music on the stereo, and a counter lined with marijuana-filled candy jars labeled with names like Trainwreck and White Widow. It was not the kind of establishment I could imagine my grandmother frequenting.

Apparently she couldn't either, since this useless little nugget of marijuana was clearly not a pot-club purchase. "I know a nurse," my grandfather said vaguely when I asked him where he got it. Astonished, I envisioned a retirement-home black market, furtive drug deals taking place under the bridge table.

"Well, I don't know if this is going to do the trick," I explained, looking at the recipe I planned to use. It called for a half-ounce of the drug—at least 20 times what I had in hand. "But I'll try."

I broke the nubbin up into pieces and submerged them in a saucepan of butter: When heated up, the essential THC from the marijuana would leach into the fat. The concoction bubbled along at a slow simmer, little shreds of marijuana floating on top, the aroma heady and acrid. My grandparents peered anxiously over my shoulder as I stirred, as if they expected the mess to turn into a viscous green witches' brew.

"How do you know if it's working?" my grandmother asked me.

"I don't," I said, and I wasn't sure whether it was the fumes or simply the curious scenario itself that caused all three of us to break into giggles at my response.

The doctored butter went into the brownie mix; the Ensure was removed from the oven, to make room for the pan. We played a round of dominoes while the aroma of baking chocolate began to fill the room. Watching my grandmother shaking the antique ivory tiles from their velvet bag, I realized that I felt closer to her at this moment than I ever had: Something about the transgressiveness of our strange afternoon had broken down all the years of formality. My grandmother, I realized, had always terrified me slightly: She was the apotheosis of all of our family values, whether I agreed with all of them or not, and so I had always feared disappointing her more than anyone. Instead, in what could be a moment of ignominy, I felt embraced, as if we had shared, this afternoon, our first real secret. There was another side of her—a more open-minded side than I had given her credit for. In crisis, we had moved beyond judgment.

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My grandmother killed us both at dominoes, as she always did. And she whistled, tunelessly, winkingly, as she did it.

The buzzer went off, and on cue we all rushed to the kitchen. Out came the pan. I realized we probably looked ridiculous, examining a pan of cooling brownies as intently as a Guggenheim display. They appeared innocuous, delicious, so much so that it frightened me: Despite the tiny amount of *up front >104*

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drugs in the batter, I was still nervous about accidentally getting my grandmother stoned. I cut the brownies into postage-stamp cubes. "Eat just a tiny, tiny bite at first," I said before I left. "Really. Better safe than sorry."

But my fears were unjustified: The brownies turned out to be about as intoxicating as a Valrhona bar. I waited a week before calling my grandmother to ask what had happened. "Did they, well, work?" I asked euphemistically.

"I didn't feel a thing," she said, and despite the cheerfulness in her voice, I could hear the flat underlying disappointment that yet another door had closed behind her.

But I wasn't willing to give up on our experiment yet. I went back to my recipes: This time, I decided, I would procure the marijuana myself. As November crept into December, I made a few phone calls. A friend of a friend's brother lived in Humboldt—the unofficial marijuana-growing capital of California—and was coming down for a visit soon. I extracted a promise for a half-ounce of "Humboldt's finest." When the day came to pick it up from my friend, I had to remind myself to go to the bank for cash: A credit card wasn't going to cut it.

In exchange for three 20s, I was handed a plastic baggie generously packed with green buds so pungent that I could smell them across the room. I put the bag inside an envelope, the envelope inside a tin box, the tin box inside a chest of drawers, and still felt vaguely unsettled about the size of my stash every time I entered my living room, as if DEA helicopters might be hovering just outside the window. It had been, I realized, some time since I was so anxious about illicit substances. Perhaps I had grown more like my grandmother than I had expected.

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And perhaps the rest of the family was moving in my direction, too. Already, Grandma's brownies had become the stuff of family legend: Something had broken open, and the entire family was flirting with newfound drug innuendo. "I think I had better keep you out of the kitchen," my mother joked when I offered to help her with the holiday meal. Another relative E-mailed me, " . . . I hear you have a specialty in baking desserts!"

Christmas in our house is an elegant affair: an opportunity to bring out the silver and crystal and china, the hand-calligraphed place cards and the holiday sweaters and the rarely worn hosiery. When I arrived at my mother's house that year, I whisked my gifts under the tree: On one of them, a tissue-wrapped bundle that smelled suspiciously of chocolate, I'd written my grandmother's name.

When my grandmother arrived, amid a bustle of cousins, she had deteriorated even further: She limped up the walk on my grandfather's arm, dwarfed by the rest of us. Settled into the most comfortable armchair in the living room, she watched the ensuing chaos of wrapping paper and tinsel and ribbons with a weary smile.

Finally I fetched my own gift for her and placed it in her lap. She pulled at the bow—my grandfather had to help, since her fingers were too weak to untie the knots—and unearthed the plate inside, heaped high with pot brownies.

"This batch will really work," I announced, and, emboldened, added, "I already tested them."

The room burst into shocked laughter. My grandmother turned pink, laughing so uncontrollably that tears streamed down her cheeks. It is one of the vibrant memories that we have of her: the brownies in her lap erupting in tissue and cellophane, her hands thrown up in surprised joy, the family doubled over in mirth. It was the happiest Christmas we ever shared.

Watching her, I realized that the best panacea for her pain had less to do with the THC in the brownies than with the scandalized delight on her family's faces as they considered the idea of Grandmother doing drugs. Grandma! Getting stoned! In our near-hysterical chorus I glimpsed a new and more open family dynamic, born from hardship: sin recontextualized as love, a suspension of rules grown inconsequential when juxtaposed with the enormity of life and death. It clearly titillated my grandmother to be the center of such a blatant breach of her own taboos, and this was what filled her face with life.

Because the brownies, in the end, turned out to be of little use. My grandmother hedged around the topic when I brought it up a month later, and my mother later told me that they were "not to Grandma's taste." At this point, the osteoarthritis was too far along for any drug, government-condoned or not, to make a real difference. My grandmother was really dying now, a slow and unbearable death; and as she did, that cracked-open door seemed to close. A silence once again descended on our family after that Christmas; and I realized that the fact that no one was joking about my brownies any longer meant her life was finally arriving at its end. The most heartbreaking point in terminal illness, I soon learned, is not the death itself, but the moment that you finally give up on hope.

Still, it took a year and a half for my grandmother to die. The last six months of her life were spent in and out of the hospital, in such agony that even to lie motionless rendered her speechless. To the end, she remained the matriarch: In her last weeks, she stopped eating in order to make it clear that she had decided it was time to go, and there would be no arguments about it, no more blood transfusions, no more drugs, no more experimental treatments. I flew north from Los Angeles, where I had moved with my future husband, to say goodbye.

My grandmother lay in the hospital bed, her body as brittle and desiccated as a corn husk. I was afraid to take her hand, thinking it would hurt her too much, but she took mine anyway. "I'm happy," I told her, feeling the need to reassure her that her rebellious granddaughter was going to lead a productive life, a life as full of love and grace as her own, even if she was not there to guide it. My voice was thick and cracked. "I'm going to be OK, Grandma," I said.

She nodded, with her eyes closed, and smiled as best she could. She whispered, "I know." □