

Margaret's Youth

It was raining hard the night that Valerie drove up to the Indianapolis hospital. She had already driven about two hours from her home in southern Indiana when through the rain-soaked windshield of her minivan, she finally saw the blurry signs that would direct her to the parking lot. When she made it inside the quiet, clean, white-tiled building, still looking for a place to set down her umbrella, she was soon stampeded by a small army of children. Her five nieces and nephews were here, as well as a couple of children she did not recognize. Evidently, they were in a frenzy exploring the building, because no sooner than she had gotten a few shrill "Hi!"s, the crowd of children sped off away from Valerie to investigate a piano on the balcony above. Valerie composed herself, took her jacket off, and checked the text message her sister had sent her earlier of the location of the room her grandmother was in.

When she entered the room, it took all of Valerie's energy not to cringe at the sight of her 92-year-old grandmother. Despite her state of being terribly thin and abnormally pale, Margaret, or Granny Marge, as she was known to most of the family, was smiling radiantly as she spoke to her beloved children, Robert and Cynthia, and two of her three grandchildren. After standing silently in the entryway for a few moments, Valerie subtly cleared her throat to announce her arrival to her family. Now Granny Marge, sharp as ever, even in her deathbed, turned her beaming grin to her third and final grandchild. "Valerie! Someone I actually like for a change!", she boomed out in her loud, country twang, as the room chuckled. "I was just listening to your mother telling stories about what a nightmare it was to raise you and your sister! We're going around sharing memories." Valerie walked over, and after hugging each family member in succession, she squeezed into a window seat with her mother, since nearly all the other spaces in

the small room had been occupied by either people or beeping machines. She soon felt a wave of melancholy and relief as she settled in with her family after several weeks of not seeing them.

Granny Marge had been ill for months, and Cynthia, who spent the most time with her and had frequent discussions with nurses and doctors, had recently received a troubling forecast for Margaret's life expectancy and had expertly and efficiently assembled the family in Indianapolis.

The heavy rain and darkness outside persisted as the hours rolled on. Valerie's sister eventually had to drive her worn out children home, and the conversation slowed after the clock struck midnight. The conversation slowly died down, and the room was filled with yawns, but no one wanted to leave yet. Suddenly, a thought occurred to Valerie. All night, the all of the family members had been laughing at old stories, but they had yet to hear any from Granny Marge about herself. In fact, as long as Valerie could remember, her grandmother never spoke about herself, always preferring to listen to others. "Granny, why don't you tell us some of your stories?" she inquired, followed by a chorus of agreement from those around her. Margaret looked at Valerie for a moment, thinking. "Well, what do you want to know? I have indeed had quite the interesting life, as far as I remember." She laughed. Then Robert chimed in, "Tell us about your life, mom, we want to hear!" "Well, my **memory** isn't very great anymore, but I suppose I could think of a few tales if you have the time ..." Margaret touched her chin while she thought, "Now where shall I start? ..."

"Well, once upon a time long ago, I was born. I don't remember much from those first couple years of my life, probably because of what they call **infantile amnesia**. Although I wish I could! My parents were such interesting people, I wish I could have soaked up every last bit of them in my memory, but unfortunately one doesn't remember things from when they were very little, and

when they do start to remember things, they certainly don't appreciate their parents enough! Ha ha ha! We lived on a ranch, and my earliest memory, when I was three or so, was running off through the fields with my dad chasing me because I stole his belt. I thought it was funny that he had to hold his jeans up with his hands as he ran after me. I didn't get very far with it though, because I had such little legs. You might be able to tell, I was a slight bit unhinged as a child, so my parents started sending me to school, hoping a teacher and some peers could straighten me out."

"Granny," Valerie interrupted, confused, "I thought you said your memory was getting bad, but you seem to be recalling things just fine, and with so much detail!" Margaret smiled back at her, "I should have specified, my **short-term memory** is awful these days, I sometimes can't remember what I'm doing when I get up to go to the bathroom. My **long-term memory** is great though! I could tell you all about my childhood. In fact, I remember almost every detail of my first day at that school. How could I forget it! I was 5 years old and my parents sent me off to walk to school with a couple of other children that made the two-mile journey every morning. I had a bucket with my lunch in it and that was about it. The school was one of those old one-room school houses. I noticed that all the other kids seemed to know exactly what they were doing and I felt absolutely lost. We sat on benches and the teacher, Ms. Franklin, greeted us and started writing something I couldn't read on the chalk board until she noticed that she had a new student. She asked me my name, and I told her. Then she asked me if I could spell my name, and I felt like she was challenging me, and even though I hadn't a clue how to do that, I wasn't going down without a fight so I blurted out a series of letters I knew, and maybe a few numbers. All the other kids laughed. They thought I was a bit strange, and maybe I was because all I had ever

known up to this point was my parents and the ranch. I did get made fun of quite often, but a few kids came around eventually, and it was nice to have friends.

“The hardest kid to get along with in that little school was Rosie. Gee, was she a brat! I will never forget the day I showed her what for. You see, Rosie and her friends had been giving me trouble for years about this and that. They made fun of me because I liked to play with ‘boy things’ and wear overalls and jeans instead of dresses. I just didn’t quite catch on to the **gender roles** very easily. I didn’t understand why I had to act a certain way and do certain things to be a normal girl, but that’s our culture I suppose. Anyway, we would go outside when it was warm to eat lunch together under a tree. And when we were done eating, we were allowed to play for a little while before going back inside. I liked to scarf down my lunch as quickly as possible so as not to sacrifice too much of my play time. There was a little creek that ran by the school and I used to love going over to it, hiking up my jeans, and wading into the water to look for crawdads. I had to get far from everyone else though, because I would get in trouble if the teacher found out I was going into the creek, so it was a sneaky operation, you see. Mrs. Franklin really didn’t pay much attention to us during this time, as she usually was relaxing with a book or inside the schoolhouse. It was Rosie and her little friends I had to watch out for. They loved to tell on me and try to humiliate me in front of all the other kids. So, I went as far as I thought was necessary for them not to bother me whenever I wanted to play in the creek. This worked for a little while, but one day, I was splashing around gleefully, when suddenly, I heard people come up behind me, and you can guess who it was. Rosie started rattling off all kinds of threats about telling Mrs. Franklin, telling my parents, and even telling God that I was breaking rules. I had just about had it with her so I reached out and pulled her right into the creek with me. It wasn’t my intention for her to really fall all the way in, but seeing her soaked did make me quite happy, and she didn’t

have a change of clothes for the rest of the day. My parents didn't let me go back to school for a week after that one. I kept going to that school for a long time, with a lot of the same kids. Gosh, I could endure getting made fun of when I was a kid, but once we all started going through **puberty**, things really got rough. We were all as awkward as ever, especially me, I'm afraid. One plus side about that was that it seemed to somehow calm Rosie down a bit.

“When I got a bit older and into my teen years was when I met my future husband. I had stopped going to school for a period of time to help my parents out on the ranch, because droughts were causing them to struggle a bit. In addition to that, my parents were quite old for the time when they had me, so by the time I was seventeen, they were starting to have trouble getting around. The solution was to hire a young man to help out, and it was my job to go around finding boys that might be able to fill this role. There were plenty of perfectly capable guys I met that wanted the job, but when I met Bob, I was absolutely set on having him because I thought he was cute and charming. In fact, he didn't even really want the job at first, he told me he was just fine working at a mechanic shop down the road with his dad. I eventually convinced him to come up on Wednesdays and I think I charmed him into coming to help more and more, until he was there most days, even spending the night sometimes. After a couple of years, Bob and I had quite and **attachment** to each other and my parents liked him enough to want him to marry me. People these days like to talk about having charming small weddings, and I will tell you our wedding was perhaps the smallest and most charming one there ever was.

“One of my proudest accomplishments, besides raising my children of course, was my career in chess. Spending so much time as an only child on a ranch with my parents as a youngster made me have to entertain myself in different ways than kids these days do with their electronics and whatnot. My father loved to play chess, but my mother wouldn't play him

because she said it was a waste of time. I personally think she wouldn't play because she knew she would be no good on account of her **absentmindedness** when it comes to things like that. She could never remember what order the plays happened in, or what each piece did, or maybe she just didn't pay attention. Anyway, my father needed someone to play with so he taught me how to play when I was very young. I will say there were many times when I got bored and frustrated with that silly game, but I will always owe my skill in chess to my father. Shortly after Bob and I married, we moved away to our own home. My parents had recruited a whole host of young healthy people to care for the ranch, and we knew they were in good hands. Bob worked in a new mechanic shop and I started working at a little store that had opened down the street. Bob always took the car to get to the shop so I had to find somewhere to work that was within walking distance, because we needed a little extra money here and there. I absolutely hated that store! I couldn't imagine anything worse than having to work with customers all day long. I was very desperate to find another way to make a little cash, and I was pretty lonely sometimes when Bob was gone. So, I started inviting over one of our lady neighbors and we played games a lot. When she played me in chess, I suppose she was really impressed because she told me her husband was a part of a local chess league and would probably love to have me. So, I agreed and soon I found myself playing chess all the time, and winning a lot of that time, too! I'm not sure how it happened, but suddenly I found myself making a name for myself in the small chess world and a slight bit of cash was coming in from it as well. I was finally able to quit my job at the grocery store once and for all. I think a big part of my success was due to how dad taught me to play. One technique he showed me was **chunking**, where you break the pieces up into groups that are meaningful."

It was now almost two in the morning, and the family was being lulled to sleep by Margaret's stories, as if they were children having a parent read them a bedtime story. Valerie, however, was wide awake, transfixed by the images her Granny's life. Part of her was so happy to know that Marge had lived a wonderful and interesting life, but part of her was deeply saddened by the knowledge that this wonderful life was coming to an end soon. Before Valerie even knew she was crying, Granny Marge whispered "What's wrong, dear?" and reached out to place her wrinkled hand on Valerie's. "Aren't you sad, knowing what your old age has taken from you?" She whispered back. "Oh no, of course not! Do you know what I read about in the paper yesterday? **The socioemotional selectivity theory**. It means that when you are old and dying like me, you learn to change your outlook on life. I focus on positive experiences, spend time with those who matter most to me, and looking back on all of this makes me so incredibly happy. In fact, I'm happier than I have ever been! After all, I can still play chess!"

Glossary

Absentmindedness (7.12)

The inattentive or shallow encoding of events.

I used this term in my artifact by describing how Margaret's mother is not good at playing chess because she doesn't pay enough attention to the game and forgets how to play. This is because the information of the game is getting encoded in a shallow way and is therefore easy to forget.

Attachment (9.5)

A strong, intimate, emotional connection between people that persists across time and across circumstances.

I used this term to describe how Margaret began to become attached to Bob, her husband. Their marriage worked out so well because they had a persistent emotional connection.

Chunking (7.5)

Organizing information into meaningful units to make it easier to remember.

When playing chess, Margaret uses the chunking technique to break up the board and pieces. This helps her understand and remember the pieces.

Gender Role (9.11)

A behavior that is typically associated with being male or female.

In my story, Margaret does not conform to gender roles. Even though she is a girl, she likes to wear boy clothes and play boyish games.

Infantile Amnesia (9.3)

The inability to remember events from early childhood.

Margaret mentions in the story that she doesn't remember anything before she was three because of infantile amnesia. Her first memory is from when she was three, which is about when most people in the US report having their first memory.

Long term memory (7.6)

The relatively permanent storage of information.

Margaret thinks that she has great long-term memory because she can recall events from her childhood and youth very well, even though they were long ago. She is able to do this because these events are stored relatively permanently in her long-term memory.

Memory (7.1)

The nervous system's capacity to retain and retrieve skills and knowledge.

In the beginning, Margaret and her family members are all sharing their memories from their lives together. They are able to do this because of their ability to store and retrieve this knowledge.

Puberty (9.10)

The beginning of adolescence, marked by the onset of sexual maturity and thus the ability to reproduce.

Margaret mentions how awkward the transition during puberty was for her and her classmates. Puberty not only brings physical changes, but also emotional and mental changes.

Short term memory (7.5)

A memory system that briefly holds a limited amount of information in awareness.

Margaret mentions that her short-term memory is declining. This means that she has a hard time remembering things that happened very recently.

Socioemotional selectivity theory (9.15)

As people grow older, they view time as limited and therefore shift their focus to meaningful events, experiences, and goals.

Margaret tells Valerie that she is experiencing a lot of happiness and satisfaction in her old age because of what she focuses on. This would be a good example of the socioemotional selectivity theory.

References

Gazzaniga, M. (2018). *Psychological Science*. W. W. Norton & Company