

MY BACK-STORY: FROM CHILDLESS MOM TO INVISIBLE GRANDPARENT

Overview – Two Sides to Every Story and then the Truth

I am an Invisible Grandparent, twice over. Over the past decade I only got to imagine Anne or Carter excited to see me, running to my open arms spouting versions of “Gam-ma” that become more and more articulate as they get older. There is an empty spot on my counter every year for the Christmas cards I’ll never get, or thank-you notes signed in their developing handwriting for birthday presents I don’t get to send.

I must admit that over a decade ago I went kicking and screaming into accepting my own aging and the fact I could achieve grandparent status. Close to 50, I was plenty old enough. Born in 1945, a hair too old to be an official baby boomer, I wasn’t ready for the stereotypical ubiquitous silver-haired old lady designation.

Today I can see how important it is that kids get to know adult role models other than, and older than, their own parents. Moms and dads are often too strung out from the 24/7 exhaustion and stress of parenting and working to do it well all by themselves. They need help with bedtime stories, picking kids up from school, helping with homework, not to mention ventures to museums, excursions to other neighborhoods, exposure to different cultures ... all the things most grandparents are willing and able to do.

So what keeps me from doing these things? What forces contrive to keep me from doing the intergenerational educating I want to be doing? The truth. My particular truths are difficult to admit, but I had to speak them aloud to help me heal my feelings around the circumstances that created my invisibility.

My first particular truth is that in 1999, in spite of my being a lifelong sex educator, my slippery, risk-taking, 17-year-old firstborn son got his 16-year-old first-ever real girlfriend pregnant. He then became too afraid of himself to stick around, and ran in any way he could. First with alcohol, then pot, and finally with many broken promises. Just before his son was born, he ran from New York to California.

The second unalterable truth is that my firstborn did it again two years later! This time with a bright, lovely, perky girl he’d met after I’d kicked him out of my own home when he was 20.

Thank the goddess, the true story that follows, is that the two wonderful young women to whom my son was drawn (Lily, mother of Carter, now 12; and Suzie mother of Anne, now 10, had the emotional intelligence to leave my then bad boy behind, and become the loving mothers they are. With the help of other more stable young men who love and married them, they have each begotten a second and third child. My son's journey, while he took us down roads no parent ever wants to traverse, has a 'happy ending' too; stay tuned.

Both of these new families have a full set of grandparents. What is hard for me in both cases, one more painful than the other because it is a granddaughter, who looks just like I did at that age, is that I get to be invisible. I don't count. In my case, the difficulty of telling children at a young age (or any age, for that matter) the honest story about their lineage has wiped out any feelings of empathy or obligation on the part of one of my grandchildren's biological mothers. That is the proverbial long story made short. I may never know the truth.

Besides being hurt and perplexed when first confronted with the fact that I was being cut out of the life of the darling bright blonde brown-eyed four year old girl who I'd held at birth and had last played dress-up with in my own stairwell; I was pissed. I could somewhat understand that her mom might want to erase every memory of my son's bad behavior in those few years from her daughter's memory bank; but why me also? What had I done but visit monthly when she'd allowed it?

Yet, as this backstory will reveal, the other of these two beautiful young mothers suggested a way to heal the separation that absolutely opened my heart at this pivotal stage in my own life. Writing letters for over four years as an invisible grandparent to the children I don't get to see as often as I'd like, has enabled me to get over my own resentment and guilt. Saving them has helped me leave a legacy of love whether I can be there or not. Releasing others that I wrote never to be sent helped me get beyond the anger, rage and pain that come as a result of this separation. It is my fervent hope that others will do the same.

The back-story that follows will illuminate my version to date of the truth. But remember as my minister says, "there are at least two sides to every story, and then there's the truth." What you read here is merely my perception of the events that happened in the last 12 years.

Part One - Kicking and Screaming into Accidental Grandparenting

For years, near the end of my forties, I'd wince and come close to gagging whenever someone said to me, "I can't wait to be a grandparent!" When both men and women donned a beatific smile and went "go goo-goo ga-ga" in the presence of a tiny baby, losing any semblance of an articulate mind, I'd bite my tongue and paint a poker face rather than show my personal sense of disapproval that bordered on disgust. As people dragged out baby pictures in business meetings, I'd suddenly have to leave the room to go to the bathroom or get coffee. Today I am getting closer to understanding what was behind this for me.

"Just wait and see," a few close friends said. "You love your own children involuntarily. Yes. But it becomes a whole different ball game when they're your grandchildren. It's even deeper."

"Thank you. I prefer to wait," I would say shrugging. At the time it wasn't quite clear to me where the shiver of my reluctance to openly admit that I was both old enough and wise enough to be a grandmother came from. Perhaps it was a premonition of the way it would slap me in the face a few years later.

I have always been labeled a maverick, first in 1964 when I balked at teaching only cooking and sewing with my degree in Home Economics. I brought boys into my high school classroom, and taught family life and sex education before the John Birch Society called it a communist plot. I even had a child development lab built, so these teenagers could peek at what many of them would be doing in too few years after graduation.

Divorced and remarried by the time I was 34 wasn't too out of the ordinary; nor was being labeled an "elderly prime-ep" (first-time mother) in the hospital when, at 36 and 38, I had the two blonde brown-eyed boys I always knew I would. Splitting from their dad when they were two and four, because all the therapy we'd pursued pointed to how we didn't actually *like* one another, much less could survive parenting under the same roof wasn't too uncommon either. By 1986 many women were seeing the writing on the wall and getting out of bad marriages far earlier than their foremothers had.

After a year of shuffling kids between two houses a mile apart, I was offered a dream job 3,000 miles away. With my ex's blessing, I took it and we agreed on a bi-coastal custody arrangement. That was radical. I paid child support nine months a year. Our kids spent summers

and school vacations in California, living the stable school year in New York with their dad and his new wife.

Some details have been deliberately omitted to spare you the reader more information than you need to know. At the time of the divorce my ex and I had declared we wanted to provide a model of a loving relationship for our boys that wasn't possible between us. Within months of our separation, with difficulty, considerable help from my friends and multiple therapies, I had to accept just that. Women mourn and men replace, I told myself. Julie, the "cookie baker," became my ex's second wife and fell into the role of my kids' stepmom, scout leader, and Pop Warner football coach with an ease I never could have. Over the years I got used to the idea. One Christmas day I even wrote a letter to Newsweek's MY TURN, ostensibly thanking her for her up-close parenting, declaring, "Stepmom is Not a Dirty Word."

Co-parenting in this manner turned out well all around, generally. However, on the eve of my firstborn's high school graduation, I found myself in a therapist's office with him, not quite ready for another hump in the roller coaster ride my headstrong adolescent firstborn had already given us that spring.

My 17-year-old, blonde, brown-eyed, 6-foot-1, movie-star-gorgeous son had muscular six-pack abs, got 1400 on his SATs (that he probably took stoned), and looked like something from a Ralph Lauren ad in the Sunday New York Times. He was seeing a shrink his live-in father and I, his long-distance mom, had arranged. He'd gotten a 'DUIC' (driving under the influence of controlled substances: pot) on the eve of his coming to California that May. That weekend he was supposed to both register for community college and take a local girl he'd befriended to her senior prom. He stood us both up on "My Mother's Day from Hell" in 1999. He'd had the habit of making bad choices, but this time he shot himself and his future more than in the foot.

I was trying so much to live up to the therapist's prompt to Brad that I seemed to be much more "totally accepting" than his father, that I almost didn't hear him say to my son that this might be a good time for him to tell me something.

"Tell me what?" I'd asked naively.

Then Brad spoke these words: "I guess I'm going to be a dad."

I was speechless, a rare occasion.

"Lily thinks she's pregnant."

“You guess?” I managed to say, bewildered. “Lily thinks? Are you sure?” I mumbled shaken. I thought he’d broken up with her.

These circumstances were far from than the joyous occasion my more grandma-friendly friends had predicted news like this would be. I’d already had six weeks to deal with self-inflicted maternal guilt over his getting a DUI, but this? It took me totally by surprise. I had never wanted to hear those words! No sir-eee. I’d been a college health educator for 20-plus years. In spite of the fact his father and I had been divorced since he was four, he’d had all the requisite sit-downs.

“She’s sure. She went to the doctor yesterday, after the drugstore pregnancy test said positive.”

“Well yippee,” I screamed inside my head. “How the fuck could you have done this to me? This is sooooo embarrassing. Me. The sex educator. You, the firstborn son who I gave The Good Vibration’s A Kids First Book About Sex in the fifth grade, and access anytime to all the free condoms you desired since you were in the sixth. Shit. This goes beyond guilt to shame. How could I have raised a son who could make such a miss-take? GodDAMMIT!”

But after a deep breath and some quick prayer, out of my mouth came something like, “Well, this is going to take a lot of consideration. Have you two thought of talking to a counselor at Planned Parenthood?”

Abortion as a sound option was the first thing to pop into my 54-year-old feminist women’s health professor mind. I couldn’t imagine a smiling baby right then; I couldn’t even come close to it. This was an accident. A slip-up that needed to be corrected immediately. Lily was a junior in high school, for Christ’s sake. Her size-two body that looked so great in tight jeans didn’t look like it could lift ten pounds, much less birth a baby. Jesus Christo.

“Neither Lily or I could do that,” Brad said, tilting his head with a twisted smile that let me know he was nervous, or knew nothing: NO THING AT ALL about the demands of pregnancy and birthing, much less the onerous responsibility to provide that little being with what it needs to grow up and thrive in a less-than-perfect world. For eighteen fucking years ... no for-EVER!

After a long carefully considered pause I said, “Might we be talking about paternity issues here?”

“You did tell me she saw someone else back then,” Mr. MFCC piped up from his leather chair. As he spoke I tried not to notice that he was wearing a toupee, while my son and I simultaneously folded our arms and slouched deeper into opposite ends of a pillowed sofa.

Mea Culpa. What had they gotten us into? Just then I didn't even want to begin to imagine what kind of role either my son or I was going to play in that yet unborn child's life. A grandmother now? Me? Impossible!

To make a long sordid story short, I angrily left my son at his father's to figure out his own future. When I returned to California, I immediately went into therapy over my own shame about this. I had planned to tell no one except my current husband and my counselor about the impending birth.

Then, one day in an e-mail to a dear friend and colleague who was a fellow member on a national health list-serve, in a slip of the wrist that could either be called fate or my distracted state at that moment, half the readers of that list-serve got my Wailing Wall story. To my amazement, I received several condolence messages, only one of which was filled with horror and judgment. One of the leaders in my field wrote me with empathy. He told me his son had fathered a child five years ago. He had a grandchild he'd never seen and probably wouldn't, ever. The message was implicit: get over it, Pat. And the second message was 'you're not alone.'

To my surprise my therapist suggested I *had* to play some role in that grandchild's life, at least from a distance. She gently pushed me to become the reluctant grandparent I'd so strongly protested before.

My handsome headstrong teenager continued his path of flight, denial, and numbing reality with substances. He ended his “therapy” abruptly, telling the court-appointed shrink, his father and me, that he didn't need to talk to anyone, that this was “useless bullshit.” He also told both sets of his parents that he was going to “take a year off” before going to college, and got a job landscaping at a local golf course.

Lily's large extended family embraced her as many millions in similar places have over the ages. So, at 17, she entered her senior year in high school pregnant, long before it was in movies like “Juno.” By taking no lunch breaks she was able to graduate with honors in January one month before she was due. I wrote her several letters and received two in return on lined paper in beautifully rounded cursive. One, dated November 8, 1999, she thanked me for Anne Lamott's Operating Instructions, my standard baby gift for my friends who had postponed

making families until their early 40's, and Penelope Leach's Your Baby from One to Five, the bible for post-Spock era feminist moms at the time. In it she said,

"Today I am 26 weeks, the baby loves to move a lot. I have signed up for a Childbirth Preparation Program. There are two classes every week from December 6th to January 10th. I would really like Brad to be my coach. I have only mentioned it to him and have yet to talk to him about it. I will explain to him that I want to look up and see him during labor and delivery. My father told me that at first he didn't really want to go to the birthing classes but now he's glad he did. He said being there watching my sister and I be born was such an incredible experience. I'm so excited!"

I'm glad she couldn't see the look on my face or feel the fear in my heart when I read that. "*How naïve can she be?*" I thought. Writing this now, I just burst into tears as I opened a handmade Christmas card postmarked 15 DEC 1999. A black-and-white photograph of an angel is pasted onto card stock. Written in silver in Lily's script is "Wishing you all the peace and beauty of the Holiday season." Inside are her Class of 2000 high school photo and another letter. In this one, the maturity she gained in the months following her decision to become a mother, with or without my son, amazed me.

"Thank you for encouraging Brad to come to the classes with me because I very much want him to be a part of this. My mother went with me because Brad says he forgot about the first one. Now he has a new job which he tells me gets him home 8 or 8:30, the time the classes end. I don't want him to be shocked or too surprised by

what will happen while I'm in labor. My mother has been very helpful and seems to enjoy herself at the classes.

I can relate to you when you say you 'lost sleep' over Brad. I also care about him very much and only want to see him happy. I just wish he'd realize how much I need him. All he seems to care about sometimes is himself and going out and having a good time. I understand he is a teenage guy, but he needs to become a little bit more responsible and face reality. I have had to change so much in the last seven months. I don't want to sound like I'm complaining because it was my choice to keep this baby and I can't imagine anything ever happening to him or her now, but Brad has made little effort to change his lifestyle."

She was starting to see the writing on the wall. I still have the invitation to Lily's baby shower; its return address from "Nana Laura" dated January 10, 2000. I remember picking out a beautiful white satin nightgown and robe at Macy's for the hospital and sending it to her.

To continue, my firstborn, with my implicit permission (since empty promises can inflict more hurt than the truth), abandoned Lily without making any of her Lamaze classes, and left New York for California. He's seen that beautiful son only once, on the day of his younger brother's high school graduation in 2001. And in ten years, I can count on my hands the times I've seen that grandson.

Carter is now 12. Thankfully, his beautiful mom woke up and put her past in the past. That story has a happy ending. Within three years, she married and now has two other beautiful children: a boy now seven and baby girl, three.

In the summer of 2000, when Carter was five months old, with my therapist and partner me persistently nudging to make contact, I visited him during a visit to my mother on the East

coast. It took three days for me to plow through my resistance and be ready drive four hours to see my grandson. I met Lily and her striking 46-year-old mother at their home in the rolling farmland where the family-run greenhouse was in full bloom.

Pictures don't lie. There were tears in my eyes in the photo that was snapped when Lily handed me her baby, my grandson. His resemblance to my firstborn made me wince at the accusation of paternity I'd wielded months ago. At first I was afraid I would do something wrong or drop him, feelings I had when I held my own baby for the first time. Then something in his five-month-old smile, his soft skin or the baby smells broke through my reluctance and made me admit I truly was a grandmother. More tears. When the heart opens they flow. Somehow this could be turned into a blessing.

Carter was eighteen months old when my "significant equal" and I decided to get married in Big Sur at what we called our "Seven-Year Hitch." It was the anniversary of the day we'd met and driven there after a spiritual conference at Asilomar on California's central coast. We flew Lily, Carter and her now-husband John out to the wedding in May 2001.

During the outdoor ceremony on a wide lawn overlooking California's most famed view, we gave each of the elders a rose for paving the way for our union, and one to Carter, the youngest in attendance, to pass on the love. This 18-month-old and his beautiful mother stole the show. He sat up quietly through a ceremony that was close to an hour long. Many of the guests complimented Lily on her kind, gentle mothering and her gorgeous child, my grandson. Somewhat, but not completely, I had put aside my reluctance, fear and ego-induced shame. I sent a sigh of gratitude up to the universe, finally realizing how well the spirits had taken care of what I first thought was a terrible mistake.

Distance, time and propriety have kept me in an only partially visible role with this grandson. I kept contact with Lily by e-mail and an occasional phone call. Thanks to the Internet and i-Photo, I've followed the growth of her family. I send special books to Carter every Christmas and birthday. They usually have some positive spiritual twist to them, and are just the kind I'd like to be there to read in person. I'd love to hear him say, "Oh, Grandma, read it a-gain, puh-lease!" But that cannot be. What to sign them continues to be a problem:

Your mystery godmother?

Your surrogate Grandma?

Pat?

Aunt Pat?

Or not sign them at all?

Until recently, I was one among many elders in Carter's lovely extended family, so I usually just settle for Pat. Or "California Pat."

Over the years, I have become an annual visitor. I show up on a holiday or summer vacation with a gift or two. Carter avoids addressing me with a family name and just calls me Pat. He's taken me for a walk down the lovely winding rural road he lives on showing me tadpoles in a stream and naming the vegetation. And this summer I got to watch a budding personality play games and interact with all sorts of children at the lake near his home. The very same lake in which his biological father learned to swim.

As he aged, Carter seemed to resemble Lily's side of the family more than his father's and mine. He has the smooth skin and high cheekbones that Brad did, but darker eyes and hair. At his brother's 5th birthday party that I attended, Lily's sisters and friends from high school remarked to me how much of Brad they saw in Carter, who was being raised in a way totally kinder and slower than I had ever been able to do. He'd not spent even one hour with his biological father to explain this imprinting.

That summer I observed Carter make certain movements and heard an expression in his voice that sounded uncannily like his father, my son, at that early age. One day we were playing ping-pong. Carter's younger brother and I were a team and he played solo on the other side. He was spot-on good. His shots were carefully placed, his spin hard and direct. (As an adult, his father Brad had won regional dart tournaments in many a bar). But suddenly, when Carter missed a pivotal shot, he spouted out in anger and threw his paddle at the floor in a way I'd witnessed my impulsive 10-year-old son do decades ago.

And then, even uncannier, I flashed on an ancient memory. When I was nine years old, Jack Wilkin, my father and Carter's biological great granddad, made it to the final round of the 1954 New Jersey Amateur Golf Championships. I was in the gallery. When he missed the put that lost him the tournament, he took his favorite putter "Goldie," and broke it across his knee! My mother still has the article that ran in the local paper. Weird. I shivered and wondered if an invisible thread could somehow pass on traits like these. Nah. Not so. It was just a coincidence. Right.

Part Deux: Deeper into Invisibility

I am an invisible grandparent two times over. My second story is even more difficult to pull out of my memory banks, but I must. It is about a granddaughter who I haven't seen the last six of her ten years of life. It is sad. It makes me mad. And yet it comes complete with a positive twist that Carter's natural earth mother Lily herself thought of. Both stories have the somewhat happy ending that became the basis for this book and www.invisiblegrandparent.com. Here is how the spirits took care of yet another unintentional (or was it?) pregnancy on my son's part.

Brad continued on what a friend helped me to accept by calling it his hopefully "low road to enlightenment." Some kids wake up from addictions and learn to make better choices before hitting bottom. Others maintain a life lubricated with whatever makes it feel okay for a long, long time.

Kahil Gibran's words that were read at my firstborn's christening in 1981 provided some comfort along the way: "Your children come through you, they are not of you." Admittedly they are the arrows that we spring from the bow. We do our best to point it towards center but, as with the wind, much of the outcome is out of our control.

On his 21st birthday, just before I visited Brad and his new girlfriend in Las Vegas where they'd moved and both had jobs in Caesar's Palace, Brad said those words again on the phone: "Just so you know, I'm going to be a dad."

I don't remember what my "Yikes!" sounded like this time, but the truth of his "Suzie's six months' pregnant," settled in quickly. His East coast father helped me see it with the hope that he'd "do it right this time."

Flying to Sin City to hold that precious newborn felt a lot different than the first time I held Carter. She was precious. Brad looked happy. They kissed each other good-bye when he went to the store to pick up groceries, even parroting mutual, "I love you's" as he left. Suzie looked excited and appeared to be thrilled with motherhood in a way I'd never been. The next Valentine's Day my son told me he'd gotten on one knee and proposed with a real (small) diamond he'd gotten in a pawn shop.

They decided Vegas was too tough a town in which to raise a child (or keep a job). They left their waiter/server jobs and moved back to California. Happily, I made monthly 350-mile daylong round trips to visit as Anne as she progressed from toddler to little girl. We made the

requisite cookies from scratch, went to the zoo and shopped together for the pink Ariel plastic umbrella she wanted for her 3rd birthday.

Yet sometimes kids can keep a lot hidden from the eyes of in-laws. Suzie didn't complain much, but I detected things were amiss. I watched my son lose jobs, one after another, and his belly grew larger and larger. He went from waiter to bus boy to barbeque smokehouse chef and, finally, took a night shift at a 7-11 convenience store. There always was some reason that he'd been fired or had quit, other than his own inability to tolerate authority, control his anger or limit his consumption of beer.

Then, on one visit, I witnessed a screaming match that in a nano-second would spur any grandmother to grasp her grandchild and run far away with her. Thankfully, I've repressed the details. Suffice it to say that the next day, before Brad came home from wherever he was, Suzie had called her brothers who helped her move out the apartment.

The depression my son experienced the year following that loss got to him in ways I certainly can understand, but was not very empathic to back then. Good news: he got a job in construction and was making good money. He also found a new girlfriend: ten years his senior at 36 and a surveyor, at that. He looked like he was drinking less and had lost some weight. Suzie let him see Anne every other weekend, and asked of me that I make that the only time I see her. Reluctantly, I agreed. I had no choice in the matter.

On most of those visits, the refrigerator in Brad's apartment, which he was sharing with his stepbrother who'd joined him to work in construction, was pretty clean and filled with decent "kid food" like bananas, applesauce and mac and cheese. Brad had become a pretty attentive dad. It showed that he loved his child. I was happy to take them to lunch, the playground, and movies, whatever.

But then things got edgy. Brad broke up with the surveyor. At a Christmas I wasn't able to witness, he showed up with another woman. His brother, my second-born then completing high level military training, called and told me that even he didn't understand this girl, that "something smelled bad." Not literally, of course. She and he were always kind to Anne in front of my ex on their visit from the East; but his brother described for me the frail frame, bad teeth, slippery eyes, and pock-marked face of a meth addict. It took me till late January to get the information out of his stepbrother, that indeed Brad was doing methamphetamine; that it was prevalent in the construction industry in that town.

Needless to say, I flipped out. Crawling on my knees to my therapist this time, she said I had to do something to protect that child on those weekends my son had been granted “unsupervised” visitation, not without considerable legal struggle. With Suzie’s cooperation, I consulted every rehab and drug addiction specialist from here to New York. I called my ex and told him, but it took three weeks to break through denial that indeed Brad was using meth. Unable to pull off an intervention, I wrote the most difficult letter a mother ever should have to, letting Child Protective Services know that my son needed to be tested before he had any visitation with my granddaughter.

In spite of great protest and accusations that I his “psycho mom would eat my words,” Brad failed the drug test twice. He blew up at me, as did his father who had to have someone to blame shouted, “How come you never supported your son?” After that, private investigator included, neither his father nor I heard from him for a harrowing 18 months. Once he did reach out to his military brother, who drove 400 miles to visit him at a favorite fishing spot in the hills.

“Brad looked good,” he told us. He’d denied he was using, but did sign a contract his brother made him write, that he would never borrow money from his father again and he’d stay in contact. Neither happened. Much to the entire family’s chagrin, he didn’t even make it to his brother’s graduation from one of the most prestigious military training programs in the United States. I took it as a sign of hope that ten minutes to midnight on Mother’s Day during that period, he called. “Mom, it’s me Brad,” he went on as I almost fainted my heart was beating so loudly.

“Don’t ask me any questions, or I’ll hang up,” he said, “I just wanted to say Happy Mother’s Day.” I told him how glad I was to hear his voice, that I always loved him and always would. End of conversation.

The following Christmas I heard from his brother that Brad had found a new girlfriend who encouraged him to reach out to his family. He started with a cousin, and then she encouraged him to call his father. Somehow my son had escaped early enough from the downward spiral that accompanies meth addiction. My ex and his wife Julie visited him and said he looked fine. He never contacted me directly. But on Thanksgiving Day of 2010, I got the surprise of my life. When I opened the door of my in-laws’ house, there with my soldier son, who we’d expected, stood Brad! It had been almost two years since I’d seen him.

“I’d have called you mom, but I wanted to surprise you and see if you’d have a heart attack!”

Before I could give him the proverbial slap-across-the-side-of-his-head comment that he deserved, he gave his mom a big bear hug. My tears made a visible imprint on his pressed white shirt.

He doesn’t call me often. But he did on the Mother’s Days since, always late in the day near midnight. I only have a P.O. Box for him, not an address. As far as I know, he’s living in the Sierras working two jobs, one as a ski patrol and the other cutting trees. This year he didn’t call on my birthday. But hey, I’ve stopped obsessing about his life. It’s his journey that I couldn’t have predicted and certainly can’t control. It’s his road to walk, and whether that is to enlightenment or mediocrity is not up to me.

Here’s where the Invisible Grandparent, Part Deux, comes in. For five months, back when their separation started, Suzie had allowed me to drive over monthly and have daylong visits with Anne. Happily ensconced in a new relationship, she’d actually had a newborn little sister for Anne and was planning her own wedding. Then, one day, she stopped answering my calls. For weeks that became months she would not return messages. Sometimes I curse caller ID.

Later on I asked my ex and Julie for her address, as I’d heard they got to visit when they were across country. But they told me she specifically had asked them not to give it to her. Julie even snuck in a Christmas present from me to their collection of mailed packages; but I didn’t dare fully identify myself. It was a stuffed penguin, and a copy of a new DVD on penguins that I was hoping might remind her it was I who’d given her *Happy Feet* and watched it with her over and over. That would have to do.

I slid deeper into invisibility and depression. I couldn’t understand why I was specifically being asked not to be a presence at all in the life of a young girl that looks and acts exactly like I did at that age and had seen almost monthly until she was four. I figured that her mom was, and still is, choosing to erase every memory that she can of her real father out of her daughter’s mind. Unfortunately, that included me, who she must consider to be an aging hippie grandma.

But is that possible, at four? What I understood even less is that she asked my ex and his wife, who play grandpa and grandma on annual visits to California, not to give me her number or address, as I was “too intense.” Angry at first, it appeared to me they colluded with Suzie’s

request to keep me out of the picture. Then I understood that of course, they would! They wouldn't want to jeopardize their ability to see her the one time a year they make it from the East to the West Coast.

With more than a little exasperation, I ran to several more therapy sessions to swallow yet another test of my invisibility. I pondered what I had done to deserve such treatment? The old "Why me?" and even the "Why not them?" reared its ugly head. Anne's mom said I was too intense. Go figure. Like Julie isn't? And they get to remain visible. Huh? Let me spare you my thoughts at the time on that one.

My therapist, who I still needed for sure, told me personally she knew of three cases similar to mine. She suggested that at some point in the future my granddaughter might look me up. That didn't help. All I hoped then was, that by that time, I'd be of sound enough body and mind to communicate all the love that I've been bottling up all this time.

I knew there were others out there like me. Surely other invisible grandparents had fantasies that someday a grown woman or man will knock on their door, or seek them out for a reunion on a television talk show? But at that time I didn't know where to turn for solace and comfort.

Part Three: 'Invisible but not Silent: Writing Letters Helps Heal Hurt

I used to exclaim, "Out of the mouths of babes," but now I say, "out of the mouths of babes who have become mothers!" Writing letters to the grandchildren to whom I am invisible has helped me reconcile and heal the circumstances surrounding my situation. And it was all Lily's idea. I may be invisible, but I can still have a voice.

During the period Brad was missing, I had confided in Lily, who by then had married and had given Carter a brother. I told her that Brad had a drug problem and was nowhere to be found. She'd heard about Suzie and Anne years before.

Lily lovely mother of two at all of 23 had a great idea! She called me with the news that Carter was developing a yet-to-be-defined writing/reading disability. He was being encouraged in school to write letters. She asked me for the address of his half-sister. I told her sadly, that I didn't have it, and hadn't been able to make contact with Anne for 18 months.

I told her I had not heard from Brad in that time, despite the fact that my ex-husband and his wife, the other set of biological grandparents, had her address and have even seen her. Back

then, after hearing my story with understandable empathy, beautiful Lily said, “Why don’t you write Anne letters and save them?”

Boink! *#\$!! Lightbulbs went off in my head!

What ... a ... great ... idea!

She suggested I write letters to her, bundle them and save them for that day my therapist said might happen. How my heart was touched! As I wrote the first letter, an incredible weight seemed to lift off my shoulders. Some unintentional healing was beginning. I found the process incredibly therapeutic. I kept writing letters. Slowly but surely I realized that process was helping me get over past hurts. You witnessed my first letter about her first day of school in the prologue.

Since then I’ve written dozens of letters and discovered that there are lots of others out there like me. By speaking out about my ‘identity’ at a national conference of ‘crones’ (older women), I discovered I was one of an undeterminable number of adults whose grown children, for some reason, have kept their identity as well as their participation out of the lives of their children. Invisibility hurts, especially around the holidays. But writing letters and saving some, while purposely releasing others in order to move towards forgiveness, helps.

There are all kinds of adult-child intergenerational invisibility. Recently a friend’s first-expected grandchild very unexpectedly ended up stillborn at full term. The grief I saw on her face while she sat at a choir concert as if nothing had happened was palpable. I have another friend who gave a child up for adoption forty years ago during the Vietnam War. To this day she wonders if the teenagers she runs into in her hometown are the by-product of her never-forgotten act. Another quite privileged friend confided in me that she was an invisible Auntie. For seven years a clash with her sister has kept her being blocked from seeing a nephew and niece she’d been close to, and had even written into her will.

As I continued to be public with my story, I realized how much residual secrecy and shame was out there. On the anniversary of my first storytelling I thought other grandparents, especially ones involved enough to attend *Crones Counsel*, would like a workshop on “How Letters Can Heal Past Hurts: Invisible Grandparenting.”

Unfortunately, it was scheduled on the last afternoon, a Saturday, back-to-back with things like “Laughing Yoga.” I showed up with an open heart and material for a fully packed hour and a half. Much to my surprise however, no one came. Nada! Not one of those individuals who’d said my idea was great had walked into the room to participate. Disappointed but

undaunted, I took this as a message about the need for a vehicle to heal such secrecy and guilt. I continued my own letter writing and started work on a website where others could see my letters, comment, and possibly choose to write and post their own.

With the grace of God/Goddess/higher power, whatever you call it, I have come to surrender and not fight this situation. I'm working on forgiveness. Forgiveness of my own son, forgiveness for the mother who has banished me from the mind of a child who looks exactly as I did at her age. And, last but not least, forgiveness of myself. I had raised my two sons in a nontraditional long distance joint custody arrangement, and sometimes felt that way I'd parented was coming back to haunt me.

My first letters were about places I'd been that were special to my sons. Some contained fond memories. Others were wistful values-laden letters about the high costs of war and the presidential election. Many contained advice on things like "thank you notes are important" and "long deep baths are good for the soul" and "my broken listener." Some were about aging, others about death and letting go, like when a hospice client of mine had died. One day I found myself addressing topics and talking in a voice more appropriate for a young adult or teenage listener. I decided to rate those letters "G," "PG 13" and "R." You'll find a collection of my letters in the chapters that follow.

Sometimes as I folded a letter and put it in the special chest I'd found for it, something special happened that made me more at peace with the situation. I found myself intending the best for Anne and actually visualizing it, in the form of affirmative prayer.

However, other days I couldn't suppress the resentment, the anger that this was happening to me. I was angry that I couldn't transmit my values and model aging gracefully, directly. Invisiblity hurt. My first reaction was to get angry and self-righteous and scream about all the good things my grandchildren will miss out on, me at the top of the list. So I decided to intentionally write a few that I told myself I would never save. I did not want my grandchild, or anyone for that matter, to feel the negative energy in them. I found ways to mentally release them. I even burned copies of a few, dancing in the moonlight to Janis Joplin's "Take a Little Piece of My Heart!"

I developed two categories of letters: those to be "Said and Saved" (SS) and those to be "Said but NEVER Sent" (SNS). As a writer, I couldn't help but save a copy of a few of my angry letters. Here is my first SNS letter:

December 18th 08

Dear Anne:

I was just bending over the kitchen sink, crying. Sobbing. I don't want to turn on the radio and listen to cheery Christmas music, or go into stores and watch everybody spending money on the gifts and the special foods they make every year. This year, the thought of opening the beautiful decorations I store in a box for eleven months and looking forward to hearing you say how much you like the bubble lights, gives me a stomach-ache. I want to watch you see everyone exclaiming, "Oooh! The surfer girl! Grandpa gave me that one when I was in college," or hear you say, "The crystal icicles are my favorite," or me say, "I remember when Grandma gave me this one of the graduate in cap and gown when I got my Ph.D!"

All of this makes me very very sad. And mad.

I was sad, really sad this morning, reading the newspaper today. I wanted to buy tickets for you for the dance performance of "The Velveteen Rabbit," instead of "The Nutcracker" this year.

"Thank you, Grandma," I can hear you say. "I loved the sugar plum fairy and all the ballerinas last year, but that show was soooo long!"

I want to be buying a tiny tree you could string popcorn for, and to have you help me cook the turkey dinner. It's your voice I want to hear asking me to make a favorite recipe of mine, like the pink molded cranberry salad Uncle Ted loved and always helped whip the cream for.

But, most of all, I was crying because your mother (I want to curse her soul at the moment, but even in this "to be said and not sent" letter, I find myself unable to be too "mean." But your f---ing

mother (there, that felt good! At least I got out a nasty word) had the audacity (meaning the balls! the not-good sense), to send me her “Smith Family Sending You Holiday Hugs Card” with no return address on it! All that was inside the envelope was a picture of the five of you. Five, wow! I see you have a new baby brother or sister. Maybe that’s all your mom wanted to tell me, to show me, but Jesus! What a way to do it!

*Suzie doesn’t have a clue what it feels like (!*x#?!*) to be blocked from having the kind of family that actually makes contact with one another, especially at holidays!*

Forgive me, God, but that woman in all her hormonal breastfeeding miasma must have a really twisted and distorted sense of herself and me to do this! They say what goes around comes around, but I write this in hopes that you, my little Anne, have the good sense never to do this to the mother of your children’s children. I don’t want you to even imagine what it would feel like if, someday, someone took your own grandchildren, Suzie’s great grandchildren, away. Far far away, leaving no address or way to contact them. Asking the other grandparents who do get to see you once a year when they’re in from the East coast, not to give me your address! And then to send a picture at Christmas time! A picture is supposed to equal a thousand words. Hmm, I wonder what sentences would come out after all this silence and distance! I doubt they would be pretty. But part of me hopes they would be.

I truly don’t understand why this is happening to me. Your mother told Julie that I was “too intense.” What kind of excuse is that? Is this a slap in the face or what? I have some ideas of why she is now keeping you from seeing me, even after, in truth, it was I who was protecting you by turning your biological father into Child

Protective Services for using drugs that could endanger your safety on unsupervised visits; but I'll save that for another letter.

I'd sure like to tell Julie and Sam, your biological father's parents, my version of the truth about your mom. They are the grandparents you do see sometimes, who I'm sure have already sent you a bunch of cool presents to be opened under the tree. But I am going to spare you the negative energy by writing these words, but then burning them. Really. I will be putting them in a bowl outside and lighting the paper on fire, watching the words disintegrate and turn into ash and blow away. To be forgotten, I wish!

Merry Christmas. Take a look at this picture of the way Larry and I put the lights on our houseplants. With no children around we've stopped decorating a tree.



F---! S---! P--s! This hurts!

Please, Anne, may you grow up with the good sense to communicate the truth clearly to everyone you deal with, and not get caught up in a bunch of distorted lies.

Christmases hurt for me. May yours be memorably merry!

I love you!

Your invisible grandma.

PAT

P.S. Bah. Humbug! Enough of this. Being grateful for where I am right now and what I do have helps me to forget what I don't. I'm going to drive to the gym in the 65-degree sunshine this 18th of

*December, and work out to some rock-n-roll. Then swim outdoors
in the heated pool.*

I will not wallow in this.

I will not wallow in this.

Over the past four years I continued writing these phantom letters at least once a month, and will keep it up until ... until ... until? I believe that if other parents and grandparents burdened with invisibility wrote their own letters, a movement of positive intention for future generations could emerge. We grandparents, kept in the shadows, can have a voice at least, even if we can't be "seen." By writing, we too can have an opportunity to express our own feelings about our virtual entrapment.

By forgiving others and ourselves, we set ourselves free. If more of us engaged in rituals for expressing negative feelings honestly, followed by a safe way to collectively let go of negative vibrations, while "holding the high watch for that child," who knows what good may follow? Setting an intention of forgiveness, yes to the people, places and things that resulted in our situation, but more importantly forgiving ourselves for any residual guilt or shame, may actually free us to pass on to younger generations the memories and values we feel important.

Today, instead of pouting and listing what was missing from my life that I have no control over; I'm putting a different vibration out there. It encourages and articulates our love for those little ones. It promotes forgiveness. Please join me in my journey and let me know about yours! Many of us are facing similar non-traditional family hurdles. Perhaps we can help each other, and still make a difference in the lives of the yet-to-be. Leave a legacy of love whether you can be there or not.

Update Twelve Years Later

Heart-full-ness – September 12, 2012

My heart is full. Yesterday I sat in a beach chair in sunny Santa Barbara California, and one of my boys (now 29) asked me to rub sunscreen on his military muscular triangular back. His older brother (now 31) was already out beyond the breakers standing on a paddleboard. What a reunion! Where had the twenty+ years gone since the annual summer trips we took to

'Aunt Joni's' house blocks from the beach? Then I had applied the same sunscreen to six and eight year old backs. Boogie boards was their favorite way to ride the waves. Later skateboards became the chosen way to ride the streets to the wharf for ice cream, and buy star-shaped wands to dip in huge vats of bubbles.

My heart is bursting because there were years at a time, not long ago, that I hadn't heard from my oldest child and didn't even know where he was. There were also many months when heart in my throat, I couldn't hear from his younger brother, because he was in Iraq or Afghanistan or Bahrain. My heart is still in my throat as I finally write this, because it's been a full four years since I wrote my 'First Day of School' letter from an invisible grandparent, to a then four-year-old granddaughter who I haven't been able to see for six years. She'll be ten in October and my only contact with her has been in my dreams.

My heart is wide open, because a year ago I traveled 3000 miles and saw my now 12-year old grandson, who now has specifically been told by his wonderful mother and step-dad, that 'Pat from California' who rolls by once a year, is his biological grandmother. I hadn't realized they'd told Carter long ago that he was adopted, that his dad "just wasn't ready to settle down" long ago. This year wonderfully wise Lily, asked Carter to imagine a 17-year-old neighbor as a dad. His response was "No way!"

Here again is some of her thinking, this time not in cursive but via computer:

"It's a little embarrassing reading these letters I wrote. It's hard for me to remember that girl I was. We have never withheld the facts about John adopting Tristan when he was two. I have always told him that you are his biological grandmother. It wasn't like we sat down with him one day and surprised him with this news. I thought and still think the best way to handle it is have it all be out in the open. I will and have always answered any of Tristan's questions honestly. He just hasn't asked many.

When we did have a discussion about Brad (probably about a year ago now) I asked Carter if he could imagine our 17-year-old neighbor who he knows well as a father. He said "no way!" and I think he somewhat understood why Brad moved to California. I couldn't understand then, but know now that him moving to California was the best thing he could have done for me. I

honestly couldn't be happier with my life now Pat. John has given me everything I have ever dreamed of.”

Lily – October 11, 2012

It's also been almost four years since I had the inclination to write a book about Invisible Grandparenting that would address my own pain, and my still not fully finished path to rising above circumstances out of my control and healing separation from two grandchildren. In these years I've learned that I want and we all can still be able to leave a legacy of something, anything, especially of love, to our own grandkids or any children for that matter.

It's been two years since I developed and started blogging at my website www.invisiblegrandparenting.com attracting comments from others who identify with my situation. It's been a full three months, home in a foggy Monterey summer (winter) that I've had the time, nothing on my teaching or speaking schedule, to write. At first I fell into what I called a depression, avoiding telling this story of my own long-distance parenting. Waves of thinking this situation I'd found myself in was 'my fault.' I'd internalized the blame and shame others like me must feel; and for awhile I couldn't rise above it, even with the very healing exercises I had used in workshops I'd run with other invisible grannies and aunties you will see in the next chapters.

But now, witness these pages, I've finally found the energy to pull the volumes of material I've written on Invisible Grandparenting into form and fruition. While the names and locations of everyone but myself have been changed, I am now geared up to not only bare my own soul, but to encourage others to do so in a way that can help us rise above our 'stories,' attempt to let go of bitterness, and leave a legacy of something, anything for the children who will outlive and outlast us.

Pat Hanson, Marina, California

October 23, 2012