

Cherise Oakley

Non-fiction with a few liberties taken

Crazy Cards by Jane

Christmas gifts at Grandma's house were a crap shoot. Some years there was something good, others not so much. The time came for me and my sister to open our presents. I desperately wanted Underoos, so I could parade around like Wonder Woman in my scibbies. Grandma hushed the crowd and said, "Now Cherise and Betsy, you open your gift together, so I can get a picture."

Betsy and I tore into the colorful wrapping only to discover matching pajamas in slightly different colors from JC Penney. I'm sure the disappointment on our faces made for a powerful tension in the room.

"What do you say girls?" asked my father.

"Thank you, Grandma," we chorused.

"Now give your grandma a kiss," my father instructed. Betsy and I walked over and hugged Grandma, who hesitantly planted a kiss on each of our heads.

Grandma lived next door to us and we could cut across to her house through a roughly mown path. There was an in-ground pool there surrounded by a short chain-link fence. In the summer-time, in an effort to keep the pool warm, a solar cover topped the water and was nearly impossible for a seven-year-old girl to remove on her own. The warning to never swim under the cover was ingrained in me so deeply that, combined with the idea that I could die if I tried such a feat, my covert curiosity was inflamed. So, I would sneak swims under the cover on a regular basis.

Skinny dipping was big news in 1981. I wanted to feel the jets from the filter on my budding breasts. Grandma's car wasn't in the driveway, so I closed the small gate behind me, hid my clothes behind the slide, and slid into the cool water. I was practicing my long-distance swims from one end to the other, completely underwater, only coming up for air at the sides. Then I heard the gravel crunch as Grandma's car pulled in.

I slid to one side, near the ladder, making a pocket under the cover, and praying she'd go in the house. She didn't. I could hear her walk with her groceries to the gate and look around. I heard her place her bags on the patio.

"Cherise, I can see you. Get out of that pool. You know you aren't supposed to be under the cover. You could die," said Grandma.

"I can't get out," I said, feeling my shame and the memory of the glorious jets on my body fade away.

"Get out, Cherise," Grandma demanded again.

"Turn around and I'll get out," I begged.

“Cherise, I am losing patience,” said Grandma.

“Grandma... I can't. My clothes are behind the ladder,” I said.

There was silence for a full minute.

“Well, for heaven's sake, I'm going in the house and you better be down that path lickity split,” said Grandma. She picked up her packages and marched in the house.

Grandma had a special friend, Vinnie St. John. Vinnie would come to her house and hand the grandkids film containers with quarters in them. He would take Grandma on Sunday drives to the duck pond and we kids would have to sit in the back seat. We would squirm and complain, wondering why our parents would set this fate upon us. Sometimes Vinnie's car would be parked at Grandma's house and her door would be locked. We would pound on the door to no avail.

One day, I went with my class on a field trip to the local Penny Saver. We looked at the printing press and the big stacks of newsprint. We took a tour of the office. I saw Vinnie hunkered at his desk.

“Hi Vinnie,” I shouted. “Look everyone! That is my grandma's boyfriend. Vinnie, it's me, Cherise. Do you have any film containers for me?” I begged.

Vinnie sunk low in his chair and avoided eye contact.

“Vinnie, Vinnie, it's me Cherise,” I said.

I felt a firm grip on my elbow as an older, matronly woman led me into an empty office.

“What is your name?” the woman asked, unsmiling.

“Cherise,” I stammered, now obsessed with my red Buster Brown Mary Janes.

“Cherise what?” the woman asked again, still unsmiling.

“Cherise Nesbitt,” I said.

“Well, Cherise Nesbitt. I am Vinnie’s wife, so you tell that harlot Jane Nesbitt that I know what she’s up to and—.” My hated second grade teacher, Mrs. Powley, thankfully, interrupted and assessed the situation.

“Cherise, are you okay?” Mrs. Powley asked.

I started to cry and I wasn’t sure why. Mrs. Powley scuttled me out of the office. We finished our tour rather abruptly and got back on the bus.

Grandma was moving to Arizona. She couldn’t stay and watch my parents’ divorce ravage her loved ones. She needed a “change of scenery.” Aunt Sandi had relocated and just started having babies. Grandma was going to sell everything and join her daughter, partly for her arthritis, partly to get away from the ugliness. I heard my mother say, “only Jane Nesbitt could have a garage sale and make \$20,000.” Down came the World War II posters, the good wool blankets, the antique church pews where we had spent many gatherings eating sweet corn and shrimp salad. Gone was Grandma Jane.

Grandma came to visit and had brought crocheted dolls from Arizona for my sister and me, in two slightly different colors. I was sixteen.

“Thank you, Grandma,” my sister and I chorused. We gave her a hug and she asked to take our pictures with our dolls.

“Say cheese,” she said.

The day after she left I took the doll to the garbage can.

Grandma never forgets a birthday, Christmas or anniversary. She keeps a calendar with all the important dates of all the people who have touched her life. She sends everyone a “Crazy Card by Jane.” The cards are an arts and craft project gone awry with silly, personal sayings and glued in cutouts from the newspaper and magazines she receives. Depending on the level of descendent you are, you get \$30, \$20 or \$10 for your birthday and \$5 for an anniversary. This number has always stayed the same, never varying with inflation. They always make me smile. Grandma is old school.

I was visiting my mother and her new husband in Fairfax, VA. It was my birthday and I had come down to check out the job market for a recent college drop out. My step-father came up behind me, pressing his body against mine and wrapping his arms around my chest.

“Your breasts are so much smaller than your mothers,” he stated.

I froze.

I left the room.

I grabbed my “Crazy Card by Jane,” went into the bedroom, locked the door. I knew Grandma Jane would float me a loan for gas to get back to my dad. I just had to wait for a chance to get to the phone.

My husband, eight-year-old daughter Raine, seven-year-old daughter Anna, and I packed up our stuff, put the dogs in the kennel, and flew out to Phoenix to visit Grandma Jane. We rented a car and went to her house right from the airport. Grandma Jane still cleaned her floors on her hands and knees. She was eighty-two.

Anna was having a good time twirling around on Grandma Jane’s barstools when she lost her balance and fell to the floor. The barstool toppled at her side.

“Are you okay, Anna?” Grandma asked.

Anna was staring at something on the floor.

“Grandma, you have dust on your floor,” Anna said.

I sucked in my breath.

“No, I don’t,” insisted Grandma Jane.

“Look here,” said Anna.

Grandma inspected the spot and quickly wiped it away. We continued with the evening and went back to the hotel, feeling the jet lag with two little girls.

Grandma called the hotel at 7 am the next morning.

“I just wanted to let you know that Anna broke the ball bearings in the stool. That is why there was dust on the floor,” said Grandma.

I was desperately fighting the need to sleep.

“Okay, Grandma. Thanks for letting me know,” I said.

My father and step-mother laid a bomb on the family last spring. While my parents were married, my father and my step-mother, Kim, had an affair. Kim was 19 and my dad was 36. Kim got pregnant. She had a baby girl and didn’t tell anyone. Not her family and not my dad. She kept that secret in the closet for thirty years.

My dad did the DNA test on Ancestry.com and out popped a lovely girl, Julie Altobella, 30 years old. My mysterious sister has an MBA from Cornell and was raised by two PhD parents. She started coming to all of our family dinners.

I called Grandma and asked her what she thought.

Grandma was now ninety years old and didn't want to be bothered with such things.

"But Grandma, I told her you would make her thirty birthday cards," I said.

"For heaven's sake, Cherise! Why would you tell her such a thing?" asked Grandma.

It took a lot of convincing, but Grandma Jane came back to Orleans County. She had recently had cataract surgery on both her eyes and thought she looked old. She wanted to stay put. She finally agreed, but refused special treatment at the airport. No golf carts or wheelchairs for her.

My father planned all kinds of ornate celebrations to bring the family back together. He wanted Grandma to meet my secret sister and visit all her old friends. My father's seven kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, and aunts and uncles all gathered. Grandma kept sneaking away. Too many big personalities to take in. It was a weekend of family overload.

I stopped down the Monday morning before she was supposed to go back home. I asked my dad if I could take Grandma for a spin in his new Corvette convertible. He handed me the keys, and we drove down to her old house and took in all the changes to the neighborhood. We drove past the cemetery where she buried her husband. We put wild flowers on her mother's grave.

We got back in the car to head home. I don't know what possessed me. I glanced at Grandma Jane and felt the purr of the Corvette. The engine was begging to be let loose. I pulled out onto the empty road that led back to my dad's and pressed the accelerator. I had the car tipping 120 mph on Route 98 and the wind was running through our hair. The engine shifted into sixth gear, ripping up the pavement. We took the turn onto Dad's road and I slowly pulled into the driveway, reluctantly turning off the powerful car.

I looked at Grandma Jane.

"How did that feel?" I asked.

"Rejuvenation!" said Grandma.

We both laughed and laughed.