

Inspired Life

There was a void in my life. Then I became friends with my ex-boyfriend's grandmother-in- law.

By **Lauren DePino** March 20

“Is she your grandmother?” the wheelchair attendant at New York’s JFK Airport asked.

Gloria, my 91-year-old traveling companion, and I had just flown in from San Diego. The man in charge of transporting her to baggage claim looked at me.

“She’s my ex-boyfriend’s grandmother-in-law.”

After I said it out loud, I realized how strange it sounded.

I imagine it sounds even stranger when I explain how it all started.

My first long-term boyfriend, Ross, and I broke up 12 years ago on such good terms that I helped him find his wife, Allison, on the dating site OkCupid. When I wrote an [article](#) in 2016 about the unusualness of it all, Allison’s grandmother, Gloria, read it and wanted to meet me.

It didn’t happen then, but we did meet about a year-and-a-half later. In September last year, I had settled into living in Los Angeles, where I had moved from Philadelphia to be with my fiancé, Alan. On our way to a weekend getaway south, as our train coasted alongside the ocean, I remembered we were heading toward San Diego, where Gloria lives. I called Allison and it was quickly settled.

The next day, Alan and I took Gloria to IHOP for breakfast. Even though we hadn’t met

before, talking with her felt familiar. I was missing my own grandmother, who had died years before, and she was missing her granddaughter, who lived in Philadelphia, where I was from. Our connection might have appeared odd to others, but for us, it was perfectly fitting.

Soon after, Allison asked whether I would mind accompanying Gloria to New York for Thanksgiving week — where Allison’s father and mother lived — since I’d be heading east to see my family anyway. I told her I’d be honored.

When Gloria heard, she immediately wanted to take care of me, just like my grandmother used to. Since we had an early-morning flight, I would stay overnight at her apartment.

In an email, she wrote: “I certainly will appreciate you giving me your needs, dinner night before, breakfast, whatever I can take on the plane for our snacks and anything else you can think of.” In my reply, I asked her what I could bring to make her feel comfortable. She wrote: “Honey, there is nothing I need. Thank you for being you.”

When I arrived, multiple courses of dinner were on the table. I couldn’t help but notice, for a 91-year-old woman, Gloria’s smile resembled that of the 19-year-old version of her in the photo on the fridge. The man grinning next to her in the picture was Frank, Allison’s grandfather — the love of Gloria’s life. He had passed away three decades ago.

“I’m still so mad at him for dying,” she said.

“I would feel that way too,” I said. “I always tell Alan he’s not allowed to die before me.”

“I don’t blame you. He should know he’d better not die,” she said.

Before we ate, she handed me five pages stapled together. It was an essay she had written about her father, Israel Abraham Lerner, a furrier from Ukraine, whom she described as a “true mensch.”

“Lauren, dear, your marvelous essay about Ross inspired me to take a course on writing so I could share my stories with my family,” she said. “I told Allison you’re a celebrity.”

“I’m definitely not,” I said. But I enjoyed her praise. The only other person I’ve felt like a celebrity around was my own grandmother.

Grammy, as I started calling her, heated up our plates in the microwave. As my own grandmother and I would often do — over dinner and tea — we told each other everything. I confessed my senseless worrying.

“Hello, honey! I can’t stop biting my nails even at this age. Give yourself a break,” Gloria said.

She told me about her biggest fear.

“Becoming dependent on people. I told my son I don’t want anyone to worry about me. When it’s my time, I want to have a big party and say to everyone, ‘This has been a wonderful life and I love you all.’ ”

I hugged Gloria good night. I promised to wake her at 5 a.m.

The next morning, after I put on my clothes and zipped up my bags, I walked to her room.

“Morning, Grammy,” I said. I thought I’d find her still asleep. Instead, she instantly sat up. She was on top of the covers, wearing a plush jumpsuit. Her bed was made, her hair and makeup done. My mouth was agape.

“Darling, since I woke early, I thought I’d get ready and rest my eyes until it was time to go,” she said.

Between the movies and the free cookies and our conversation, the flight went by in a flash. By the time the wheelchair attendant delivered us to the baggage claim to Gloria’s family, I felt valued in that way that only a grandmother who loves you can make you feel.

When the week was over and it was time to meet Gloria for our flight back to San Diego, she insisted that we leave enough time for her to treat me to dinner at the airport. She wanted to repay me for taking care of her. She was adamant about it. But from my perspective, she had been the one who’d taken care of me. Maybe I carried her bags and let her lean on my arm when she needed it. But she gave me something that extended far beyond the surface of corporeal support.

She was overjoyed with me, just being me. When my grandmother died, it was easy to forget how she made me feel. But Gloria reminded me that there are people right here on

earth who can show us we're worthy of unconditional, heart-filling love.

When the waitress at the restaurant came to take our order, Gloria asked for the veggie burger and a glass of wine — the same thing I was planning to order. I warned her that one glass of wine might affect me. She told me that one glass might make her feel “bombed.”

Gloria told me it was a dream to communicate with her young great-grandchildren in person. “If only Frank could have seen it,” she said.

“I think he did.”

Before we headed to the gate, she squeezed my hand and said, “Lauren, I would be lucky to have you as a granddaughter.”

The wheelchair attendant returned. It was time to board. As she pushed Gloria down the long hall that led to the door to the plane, she asked:

“Is she your grandmother?”

Like last time, I stalled.

Unlike last time, I said yes.

[Lauren DePino](#)'s first memoir is about heartbreak. She's working on a second memoir about the hope and hazards of falling in love. You can find her on [Twitter](#).

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