

Mother Jones

(This essay is one of the two first place winners in our 2009 writing contest. Each entry was written in the form of a conversation between a grandparent and a child about a great woman from Irish history.)

In a small town just outside Memphis, Tennessee lies a large brick house on top of a hill. It is a cool summer night with the wind blowing and no one in sight. The home belongs to the O'Sheas. The O'Sheas are the richest family in the town, their wealth based upon hard work and a wealth shared with others in need. One evening, the O'Sheas went out for dinner and a movie and left Michelle O'Shea to baby-sit for seven year old Sarah O'Shea. The peaceful evening in the O'Shea home was shattered by a loud piercing scream coming from the second floor. Grandma O'Shea raced up the stairs to her granddaughter's room.



"What is wrong, Sarah? Your scream frightened me," said Michelle.

"I wanted you to tell me a story, and I knew if I screamed you would come quickly" said Sarah.

"You had me frightened to death; I thought something happened to you."

"I am sorry grandma, but what was the noise I heard before you ran up here?"

"I was watching my favorite soap opera and enjoying a cup of tea when your piercing scream made me drop my cup and get to you as fast as possible."

"You run really, really fast for an old lady; I want to have you race against all my friends' grandmas."

"While I am here, what story do you want me to read to you? You have a lot of books here. How about *The Magic School Bus*?"

"No grandma those stories are for babies. I am almost seven and a half."

"You're right; you're a big girl and deserve a more grown-up story. What do you have in mind?"

"I want to hear a story about a woman, but not just anybody; I would like a story about a dangerous woman."

"I have just the story for you."

"Please tell it."

"Okay this lady was called "the most dangerous woman in America."

"This sounds great! Who called her that?"

"West Virginia District Attorney Reese Blizzard."

"How many people did she kill?"

"None, but she helped millions of people by doing whatever was needed."

"Than how was she the most dangerous woman in America?"

"You will see; just let me tell you her story."

"I am sorry, Grandma; please continue."

"All right, so her name was Mother Jones and..."

Sarah quickly interrupts her Grandma "Why is her name Mother?"

"I'm going to tell you, just listen."

"So, as you probably know, her real name was not Mother. She was born in Cork, Ireland and given the name Mary Harris by her parents Richard Harris and Ellen Cotter. As a child she watched British soldiers walk down the streets with her fellow Irishmen's heads on the soldiers' bayonets. Mary got her ethics and strong morality from her grandfather, an Irish freedom fighter. When she was five, her grandfather was hanged, forcing the family to emigrate to America. The family grew up in the small town of Monroe, Michigan. She was a school teacher there, then moved to Chicago, Illinois to be a dressmaker, and then moved to Memphis to be a school teacher again."

"Mary Harris lived right by my house?"

"She lived five minutes from here"

"I can not believe that we live five minutes away from the most dangerous woman in America!"

"We don't."

"You just said it was five minutes away."

"I did, we live five minutes away from where Mary Harris used to live."

"She doesn't live there anymore?"

"No, but her stay in Memphis was very significant."

"How?"

"She met her future husband, Greg Jones, in Memphis without him she might have been known as Mother Harris."

"Grandma, you have told me everything about Mother Jones, but what did she do that was so special?"

"Mary Harris was a labor and community organizer."

"What does that mean?"



"It means that she spent her whole life to better the lives of others; she lobbied for workers' rights. Her husband George taught her a lot about rights and labor unions. He taught her everything he knew until 1867."

"What happened in 1867, Grandma?"

"Let's just skip that part; you are not old enough."

"I am a big girl, Grandma; I can handle it."

"All right then I will tell what tragically happened to her in 1867. Within one week her husband and four children all passed away."

"How did they die?"

"They got the yellow fever that killed them all. After this happened, she moved back to Chicago to resume her career as a dressmaker."

"In search for a family, she adopted toilers who called her Mother. This is how her name changed from Mary Jones to Mother Jones. Mother Jones sewed dresses for the wealthy who lived in glamorous houses, and then she would look outside her shop and wonder why there were so many poor people when these people had so much money. During the Industrial Revolution, big businesses came about. The workers of these businesses needed to be represented because they lacked rights. She would help out during strikes and have educational meetings for all workers. After the 1890s she was an advocate for coal miners and worked for the United Mine Workers. Mother Jones was also a member of the Socialist Party. Did you know that if it were not for Mother Jones, you might be working right now?"

"That's funny, Grandma; I am only seven years old."

"I am serious. In the 1900s, children were forced to work in factories, but Mother Jones changed that. She organized a children's march from Pennsylvania to Oyster Bay, New York where President Theodore Roosevelt lived. They marched, screamed and held signs that said, "We want to go to school and not the mines!" Even though Theodore Roosevelt would not meet with the children's rights activists, the problem was brought to the public eye. This march helped bring about laws against child labor."



"What did she do that made her get the title of 'The most dangerous woman in America?' That's all I want to know; did she kill anyone?"

"No, she did not commit murder, but she was held under house arrest and sent to prison in West Virginia with numerous other labor workers for attempted murder. Her arrest had the public going crazy, demanding that she be released right away. She was soon released and the Senate had an investigation of the coal mines."

"Why did she give up her whole life just to help others?"

"Mother Jones was a great woman. She was a pioneer of the labor unions and dedicated her life for the well-being of others."

"Who inspired her to do all these great things?"

"Her grandfather, an Irishman who fought for freedom, instilled in her as a child to fight for others and that people needed to be represented. She learned the basics from her grandfather but learned everything about labor unions and how to achieve success from her husband George Jones. She was also inspired from her days in Chicago when she saw rich people come into her store, buy expensive dresses and go home to their mansions. She wondered how people could have so much when just outside her shop were homeless people begging for food. All of these things combined made her the great person she is remembered as today."

"I do not understand. Why was she the most dangerous woman even though she never hurt or killed anyone?"

"I know you were expecting a story about a pirate who goes around shooting people but that would not be a good role model for you. Mother Jones was the most dangerous woman based on her mind and the actions that she used to get what she wanted. This is the type of person you should dream of becoming. Anybody can go around and be reckless and hurt others, but only true heroes can use their minds to benefit society and create a difference. Mother Jones left the world a better place than the world she entered."

"When I grow up, I want to make a difference."

"That's what I like to hear. Good night."

"See you tomorrow."

Turning off the lights, Michelle O'Shea walked out of the bedroom with pride, knowing that by inspiring the youth, she was making a difference.

(Written by Peter Lynch, a student of Rosemary Steel of W.C. Mephram High School)

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