

Veronica Guerin

(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.)

Sarah, a 12 year old girl, is at her grandma's house for dinner. They are both incredibly bored; they have never had a real conversation. They usually resort to small talk: the weather, school, and the like. Today though, Sarah's grandma asks her what she wants to be when she grows up, a question she has never asked before. Sarah is completely taken aback by this, but all of a sudden the entire mood changes and Sarah can't stop smiling while she tells her grandma about the woman who has inspired her to be a journalist.

"So, Sarah, how was school today?" her Grandma asked casually, knowing the answer would be the usual.

"It was okay, you know, the usual. Nothing spectacular happened. We had pizza for lunch. I was happy about that." Sarah knew exactly how the rest of the night was going to go: they would eat, talk about useless information and then her mom would pick her up around nine o'clock.



Well, her grandma expected that answer, but she moved on and asked something she knew Sarah would not expect. "I was thinking about you earlier while I was watching a documentary about teens and their aspirations, and I realized that I have no clue about what you would like to be when you get older."

A little surprised by this statement, Sarah just nodded and sort of mumbled something.

"Well, I'm curious. What would you like to be when you grow up, Sarah?" her grandma questioned very nonchalantly, as if there was nothing unexpected about the question she had just posed to her granddaughter.

Sarah sat bolt upright and words just started falling out of her mouth. "Really, Grandma? You really want to know? I've wanted to be so many things. I mean, I used to want to be an actress, but then I realized that I don't like cameras in my face all the time, and then I wanted to be a pop star, but I don't think I sing that well. For a while I wanted to be a poet, but I stink at writing poetry. FINALLY, I decided that I'm going to be journalist! Just like Veronica Guerin! You know she's Irish, Grandma – just like you!"

"A journalist? Really? That's a wonderful profession, Sarah. I have heard of Veronica Guerin before, but I don't really know that much about her. Why do you want to be just like her?"

"Oh, I just love her, Grandma! You know she was murdered about thirteen years ago? It's so sad. She was an Irish crime reporter. How cool is that? But some mean drug dealers killed her in 1996. I wish she were still living, I would so want to meet her! It would be like the coolest thing ever!"

"She was an Irish crime reporter? That's what you want to be? That sounds interesting. It really is such a shame that she was murdered. But how did you even hear about her?"

"We did a project in English a while ago about women's influences in Ireland. So I searched for Irish journalists and this Veronica Guerin came up. I read a lot about her. She only became a journalist in 1990. She started a public relations firm before that, and she worked as an accountant in her father's company before that. At first she started as a reporter for *Sunday Business Post* and *Sunday Tribune*. She's just amazing, Grandma."

"She certainly sounds it. I can't believe she was only a journalist for six years before she was killed. You said she was Irish, and obviously she was. I can tell because of the newspapers she worked for. But where in Ireland was she from?"

"Yeah, it really is sad that she was a journalist for such a short time. She was only 37 when was killed, too. She was under a month away from her 38th birthday, which is July 5th. She and her four siblings were all born in Dublin. Did you know her nickname was 'Ronnie'? I think that's so cute. She also loved the Manchester United soccer team. You don't like them do you, Grandma?"

"Wow, she was so young. That does sound like a very cute nickname, my dear. And I, myself, support Liverpool. I'm not exactly a fan of Manchester United; your grandfather was, however. Anyway, tell me more about Veronica Guerin's career."

"Liverpool? That's a weird name. Anyway, Veronica started to write about criminals in 1994 for another Irish newspaper called the *Sunday Independent*. She used to use fake names and stuff for the real criminals' names. I guess she didn't want to get into trouble or something. I read something about something called libel laws in Ireland. I don't exactly know what that means."

"Oh, that means she didn't use their real names because she didn't want to publish things about people that weren't true, because then she could get

into big trouble for it! Especially from the criminals; they wouldn't be so nice to her."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense. Well the criminals weren't nice to her at all. When she started talking about drug dealers in the newspapers, she started to get a lot of death threats. In October 1994 she had the first violent thing done to her. Someone shot two bullets into her house after she published an article about some drug kingpin. But she didn't stop there."

"Wait a minute. She had bullets fired into her home and she still continued to write articles about criminals? She really was brave."

"Of course she continued Grandma. She couldn't stop; obviously she loved it! Just like me! So, as I was saying, she didn't stop there. Three months after that, she answered the door to some guy holding a gun to her head! It's crazy! The guy shot her in the leg. Thank God! Some dumb people say that she only did that for attention from the media and stuff, but if you ask me, why would anyone want to get shot in the leg just for attention? I don't think she staged it at all!"

"You're right, Darling. Why would anyone stage that? But you'd find it difficult to believe how many people do stage silly things like that. Of course I'm sure she didn't. Go on, tell me more."

"Exactly! She didn't stage it! Well, whatever, moving on. So obviously that didn't even stop her. She continued to do her investigations. She was given all kinds of security and stuff, but she didn't want any of it. She said it didn't help her work at all."

"I know if I got shot, I would want protection. She sounds like a wonderful woman to admire, Sarah."

"She is Grandma! She is! In 1995 she was attacked again by this guy called John Gilligan – that makes me laugh – Gilligan, it's like Gilligan's Island. Well anyway, this criminal attacked her because she asked how he could live the high life without a job. After that she also got a bunch of calls saying he was going to kidnap and rape her son if she wrote anything more about this Gilligan's Island guy. About two months after that though, she got the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists. That's just like the coolest thing ever. Terrible though, because about seven months after that in June 1996, she was killed. She was driving in her car and she stopped at a red light, and some guys on a motorbike, who had been following her for a while, shot her six times in the head. It was a big deal when she died! Some guy called John Bruton called it an attack against democracy!"

"Wow, that does sound like a big deal. And just to inform you, my love, John Bruton isn't just some guy; he was the Taoiseach of Ireland, which means he was the head of government in Ireland. Guerin's death must have had a large impact for the Taoiseach to say something like that."

"Oh, okay, I didn't know what Taoiseach meant. But that does sound like a pretty huge deal. Well, after her death these new laws were passed, one called the Proceeds of Crime Act and the other called the Criminal Assets Bureau Act. This also led to the Criminal Assets Bureau. Veronica Guerin made Ireland crack down on crime a little. She really was a major part of Ireland's history. I just admire her so much. They even made movies about her. You know you're important if they made a movie about you."

Her grandma laughed at her last statement, and saw the smile that came across her granddaughter's face. She was in pure ecstasy. Her grandma felt her happiness and she too glowed to see her granddaughter so happy.

"You're right, Sarah; she is an important woman to Ireland's history and I hope that you can fulfill all of your dreams and become the best journalist there ever was. Just remember to aim for the moon, because even if you miss, you'll land amongst the stars."

Sarah could do nothing but smile. "Okay, Grandma, I will." Finally, after twelve years, they had a conversation that they could treasure forever.

(Written by Colette Vaughan, a student of Joanne Bergbom of W. Frank Carey High School)

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