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Bones and Heart: A First-Generation Scholar's Inheritance

Abstract

Situating Samantha Osbiston's short story collection, "Adrift" in ancestral legacy, "Bones and Heart" is a narrative essay examining intergenerational resilience in the context of first-generation scholarship. Through memories of her grandparents' lives shaped by poverty, exclusion, and endurance, Osbiston explores how intellectual curiosity and emotional strength are transmitted outside formal education. The essay challenges narrow definitions of "first-generation," framing success not as self-made but as the continuation of a collective inheritance of persistence and love.

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SAMANTHA OSBISTON

Bones and Heart: A First-Generation Scholar's Inheritance



It's tragic, isn't it, that some of the people who helped me get to university never saw me make it there.

Amid all that exclusion at school, it was my grandma who showed me another way. I called her "Grandma Blobby" after an incident with the television during 'Noel's House Party' when I was learning to speak. Where school dismissed me as a problem, she treated my curiosity as a gift. She gave me the joy I would eventually find in my subject: Computer Science.

It all began when she enrolled in an "Introduction to Computing" course at her local college. I was sixteen, spending another summer away from my home in the North East of England, staying in Bury St Edmunds, where my grandparents lived. That summer, I watched her build her first PC. The first thing we did after setting it up was play games.

School hadn't been kind to me. I was never a troublemaker. I hated being told off, but I was different, and difference wasn't tolerated. Bullied by staff and students alike, I had my two front teeth broken at seven, my cheekbone fractured at eleven after being ganged up on by fifteen-year-olds. I was labelled "a problem" before I had even finished primary school, and with that label came closed doors. I wasn't allowed to play an instrument because of my poor hearing. I wasn't allowed to pursue science GCSEs because I would "bring down the school's academic standards."

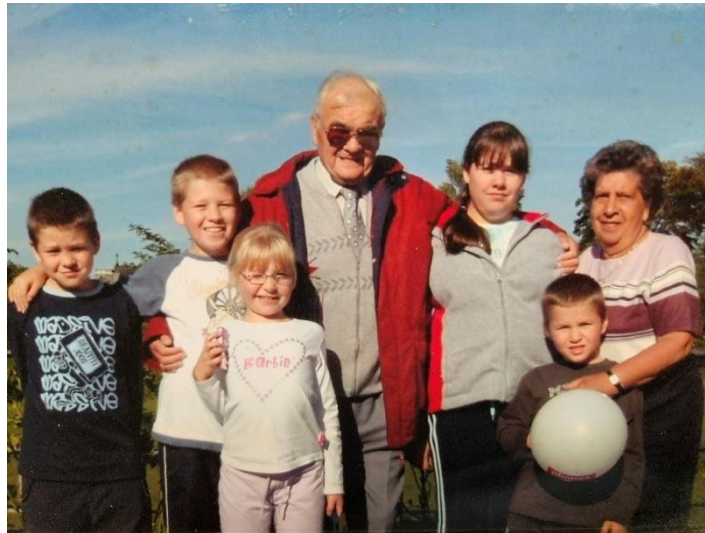
Still, I found ways to endure. Tenacity. Determination. What the institution withheld, I looked for elsewhere, and that's where my grandmother stepped in. Where school starved me of opportunity, she nourished my curiosity. She became the counterweight, reminding me that learning could be joy.

Computer Science wasn't taught at school when I was growing up. We had ICT, five years of PowerPoint, Word, and Excel. It was soul-sapping. I was bored stiff. I wanted to

understand how things *worked*. I was drawn to circuits and code. Ironically, school did more to deter me from learning than to ignite it.

But my grandma saw something else. She encouraged my curiosity. She showed me 'Ruby', taught me how to bake, how to knit, how to fix things. She fed my hunger for knowledge when institutions tried to starve it. She's not here anymore but she lit the first spark.

She never saw me start this journey. She never saw the success, the awards, the scholarship offers. And yet, I know what she would have loved most: not the accolades, but the spark in my eyes when I wrote my first program, the quiet pride in knowing her encouragement had taken root. She would have loved to see the moment I got my conditional offer to Durham University with the Brian Cooper Scholarship. I can picture her now, doing her little happy dance, bursting with pride. She would have delighted in the adventures I've had while at university, in New York, the Czech Republic, and Los Angeles, journeys she would have done anything to take herself on. Through me, she would have lived them too.



While she sparked my curiosity, her husband, my grandfather, gave me something less technical but just as foundational: love. He was hopeless with computers, he didn't even know what the power symbol meant, but he knew how to be resolute. This was a man who once played for Chelsea Football Club, who boxed professionally, and yet suffered brutal violence at home. If he lost a match, his father made him sleep outside in the dog kennel.

He was clever. Clever enough to pass the 11+ and win a place at grammar school, but poverty has its own way of shutting doors. The uniform alone was more than his family could afford, and so he never stepped into the school that his mind had earned him. At fourteen, instead of sitting in classrooms, he was in workshops, learning the trade of a carpenter. He never finished that apprenticeship either. Before long, the draft papers arrived, and the army claimed him. Even there, class and education shaped your fate. If you couldn't read, you were infantry, sent to carry a rifle at the front. If you could, as he could, you were given responsibility, made Military Police, trusted to enforce order. Literacy saved him from the

trenches. When he finally returned home, he carried that same determination into civilian life, joining the Met. Each time life tried to narrow his path, he found a way through. People say I get my willpower from him. That grit. That refusal to break.



Resilience didn't stop there. It flowed through the veins of my mother's side too, in the soot-blackened pit villages of West Yorkshire, where the story shifts again. My grandfather, "Grandfather in the Wheelchair," as I called him, was a quiet soul. He painted, wrote poetry, and made crafts. He kept sweets hidden in shoeboxes in his wardrobe, black jacks his favourite, mine the fruit salads. He would smuggle them to me like treasure, often against my parents' wishes. When my parents disciplined me, getting me to sit on the stairs, he would call me over, read adventure stories, and watch science fiction with me.

He broke his back twice. Once in the mines. Once again in a foggy crash when his motorbike collided with an unlit van. They didn't find him for two days. That's how he ended up paralysed from the neck down.

That accident derailed my mum's education. She was 14. It was the era of the miners' strikes, and losing the breadwinner meant real hunger. Poverty scars people. It reshapes their options. But my mum is wickedly smart. She started as a social worker, hated it, and became a nurse. She trained in the old-school way, hospital-based, tough and practical. She holds the equivalent of a degree, but never "went to uni." Not in the way we define it now.

And this, this is the nuance in the term *first-generation*. The edges are blurred. When do I fit the box? Why are we so obsessed with pigeonholes?

I lost all of my grandparents before I got here. Each loss was a heartbreak: ovarian cancer, toxic shock syndrome, multiple strokes. Grandma Blobby never saw me grow as a computer scientist. Grandfather never saw the university offers, the bursaries. Granddad in the wheelchair never saw me grow up at all.

And yet, their stories are part of me. Woven into my DNA. I still catch grasshoppers, watch butterflies, and build sandcastles like I did when they watched me do it first. I still doubt myself, wonder why I get to live a dream that they were denied.

But I carry their legacy like starlight.

They gave me history, not the kind in books, but in love, resilience, and doing what needed to be done. My grandparents didn't come from the North East, but they gave me pride in it. I carry the North East in my bones: the brass bands, the sausage rolls, the poetry of pit villages. My childhood was carved by hands that believed in a better life, even if they never saw it.

So no, I didn't get here alone. For all the adventures I have had, the stories I can tell. The friends I have made along the way. It is in part due to the experience of the generations that came before me.

So, I stand on the shoulders of ghosts.

And every lecture I attend, every award I win, every code I write, is for them.

