

## **The Last Olympian**

by **Karen O’Neil**

On the evening that my mother died alone in her Chicago apartment just short of her 100th birthday, I was 1000 miles away in Austin, Texas, standing in line with my husband and our eight-year-old grandson, Peter, waiting for Rick Riordan to autograph the very latest in his *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. This was a moment Peter had been anticipating for months. He had carefully instructed me the night before to get to Book People as early as I could to secure a prime place in line for the evening event. “Believe me, Grandma,” he had said earnestly. “You’ve got to go early. You don’t know how many people will be there. Go at 8:00. Go as soon as you wake up. You’ll get a much better spot.”

But on a sunny May morning, I had not fully heeded Peter’s instructions. First, I stopped along the way to have coffee at an outdoor café. I did the *Times* crossword (an easy Tuesday), and then I put in a quick call to my mother, basking in a pace of life that made such leisure possible. Dawdling in the morning was a heretofore forbidden treat, the first course in what felt to my husband and me like a feast of retirement—beautiful weather, beautiful grandchildren, enough work to be interesting, but not enough to be stressful. We were there for the semester while Bob taught a course at the University of Texas Law School, a long-awaited and highly prized shared adventure.

In what still seemed my real life, the one from which I’d just retired as English teacher and college counselor, by this hour I would already have taught a class, answered a dozen emails, tried to soothe at least a handful of worried parents, and been well into my third cup of coffee. But here, in Austin, I was sitting on a sunny patio, gazing at a skate boarder with puffy dreadlocks stuffed under a watch cap sailing cheerfully past a pair of fit, young women striding at warp exercise speed and locked in oblivious conversation. They might have been in a hurry, but not me. I was relishing the leisure of every passing moment.

The call to Mother was a daily ritual, one that I usually performed in the evening, but the previous night—too tired, too busy, too caught up in my own life—I had somehow neglected. If Mother was disappointed that I'd not called earlier, she didn't say so. Even faced with advanced Parkinson's and macular degeneration, she rarely complained, although everything that had always kept her going was rapidly slipping away—her husband of almost seventy-five years, the large family that now sprawled from one end of the country to the other, a lifetime of friendships, her capacity to read and write. At ninety-nine she had become almost totally dependent on others for even her most basic needs.

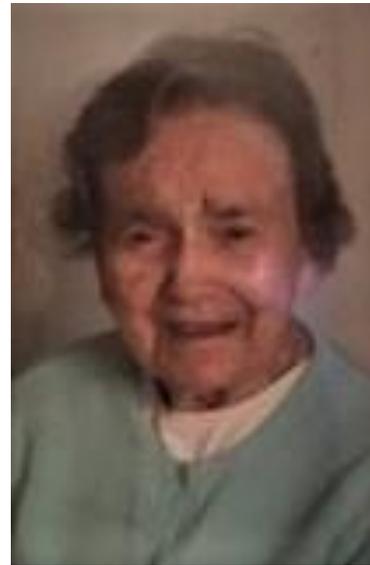
Listening to her now, sitting in that sunny cafe in Austin, struggling to hear her murmured words, it was easy to forget that she'd taught until she was ninety, consulted until she was ninety-five, authored two books, nurtured three generations of children, co-created an exemplary marriage, and run the most efficient and gracious household in our family. We used to joke that while others were feeding and caring for their ninety-year-old grandmothers, ours was feeding and caring for us. But that Mother, the one our children referred to as "real grandma" was making increasingly rare appearances these days. This Mother, the one I called daily, the "pretend grandma," wasn't nearly as easy nor as much fun to hang out with. Often in those calls I would find myself almost shouting, trying to make my voice heard across some rapidly thickening barrier that each day pushed her farther away. And often, if I was really honest with myself, I was relieved when she wanted to hang up.

Standing now in the Book People line with an excited Peter, all of that seemed so far away. We were there for an adventure, collecting him for the drive to the book store, cruising the parking lot for an open spot, finding our place in a line that snaked around the block. Here we were surrounded by eddies of children, swirling around us in the capes and helmets of Olympic heroes, many with their heads buried in the pages of *The Last Olympian* like diminutive ostriches. Periodically, a store representative would gallop through the crowd dressed as a Minotaur, and the small readers would look up distracted, as if unable to figure out exactly where they were, in that world or this.

Peter had been right, of course, in cautioning me to get an early start. By the time I had gotten to Book People at 10:00 that morning, there were some 400 people ahead

of me, and the letter I had been assigned for the actual signing was deep into the alphabet. We were facing a long wait, although no one seemed to mind much. Not Peter, who was by now some fifty pages into the book and utterly oblivious to the passage of time, and certainly not me. Here was life, energy, engagement. Who could possibly resist the sight of all those children willing to forego dinner for the autograph of a beloved author?

I hadn't known that morning that my conversation with Mother would be our last, that she had refused to eat breakfast, had slept a great deal of the day, and grown increasingly unresponsive. She'd answered the phone as she always did, "I'm fine, dear. You mustn't worry." It wasn't unusual that she didn't want to talk at length. If I'd called the night before, I might have captured her for just a moment or two by reading from the volume of poetry I kept by the phone for just that purpose, knowing that our shared love of words was one thing that could almost always draw her back into life. "Read that one again," she'd say, and then instead, she'd begin to recite, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes ..." and for just a moment, each of us would hold tight to a string of words that bound us together while time and space evaporated.



*Miriam Elson*

But the night before that hadn't happened because I hadn't called. And I hadn't called because, if truth be told, I was tired. Tired from high blood pressure and low blood pressure, from falls and strokes, from jumping on a plane and then rushing to the hospital. I was tired from the sound of the phone in the night and keeping a packed suitcase beside the bed, tired from running interference with doctors and caretakers, wondering whether I should make a trip to Chicago this weekend or that—tired of worrying whether Mother and before his death, Dad, were as comfortable as possible. I was tired of the endless question of whether I was doing it right, doing it well enough—fulfilling this assignment of helping my parents through the end of their lives.

Oh, sure, I knew we were lucky, as lucky as a family can be, and I knew that I had no cause for complaint. My parents had had a long lives, good health to the end,

ample resources, and highly competent and willing helpers. I could choose to keep Mother in the comfort of her own home. I could choose to be in Austin, choose to indulge myself in a perfect May day, choose the company of an appreciative eight-year-old, choose to postpone my next visit with Mother just a little longer. Or so it seemed then.

But looking back now with the perspective of time, I'm not so sure. Pretend or real, Mother was surely lonely, surely longed for the company and comfort of her family beside her, surely wished that I'd made the trip to be with her. Who wants to spend their last hours in the company of a paid caretaker? Who wants to end her life essentially alone? I could make myself hear Mother saying, "Stay where you are, dear. That's exactly where you belong." But is that how she really felt? Or was it just easier for me to pretend? And easier still to ignore recognition of my own place in a line, right behind her.

The line I was standing in with Peter was full of happy anticipation, eager children awaiting a new book to take its place in their lives. The line I was in? The line I'm in now? Not so clear. In our family at least, I'm up next for Pretend Grandma. Perhaps if I'd thought about it that way, I would have jumped on a plane to cross those 1000 miles.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps I would have stayed where I was, recognizing, as I suspect Mother did, that whether or not we read the last page together, this was a book that had only one end.



**Karen O'Neil** is a writer and retired English teacher, who lives in Washington D.C. She draws on her experiences with her own large family to explore the gratifications and complexities of multi-generational relationships. Her work has appeared in the online journals, *The Mindful Word* and *Embodied Effigies*.