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Lindsay Whalen, My Grandma, and Me

At 7:04 the morning after the parade honoring the Minnesota Lynx, the 2017 WNBA champions, Lynx point guard Lindsay Whalen posted an Instagram photo of herself working out—a poster of Michael Jordan, arms outstretched like a swan, on the wall behind her. Her photo made the pages of the *Star and Tribune*. There's been talk that, at thirty-five, she's getting close to retirement. Jubilant Lynx fans commented that if she had a sweat on that early the morning after the parade, Lindsay would be back.

Minnesotans love our Lynx players—our only contemporary Minnesota sports Dynasty with four championships since 2011. However, Minnesota especially loves Lindsay, a University of Minnesota alum from Hutchinson, a small town 60 miles west of Minneapolis. She was a three-time All-American who led the Gophers to the Final Four in 2004, taking the program from decades of last-place obscurity into the national spotlight in one fell swoop. We love Lindsay enough that her sweaty photo is all the talk in the “Strib”; her hometown high school marching band drove to Minneapolis to play in the parade with only a few hours notice; a banner of her playing college ball dangles from the dusty rafters at Williams Arena; and she is a member of the prestigious “U” Club. We applaud her sideline appearances at Vikings’ games, her appointment on a committee addressing women’s experiences at NFL games, and her position on the NBA Timberwolves broadcast team, and her recent hiring as the head coach of the Gophers’ women’s basketball team. (Season ticket sales jumped 600% the day after she was hired.) Thousands of fans on Facebook Lynx sites discuss her every move, photo, shot, joke, dance move, behind-the-back pass, and wedding anniversary plan. When she came to Minnesota on a trade in 2010, and the Lynx were not-so-good, she had fans over to her house for dinner.

Minnesota loves Lindsay.

So did my grandma.

*Chris*, she said one day when I visited her after Lindsay became a Lynx. *Your friend was in the paper again.* On my grandma’s refrigerator hung a photograph of Lindsay she clipped out of the newspaper. It took me a minute to figure out what she was talking about. Then I said, *Yep. There she is.* My grandma asked, *Your friend, what is her name?* *Lindsay*, I said, studying the photograph of Lindsay attached to the refrigerator with a magnet. I had never met Lindsay. *Thank you, grandma. That’s a good photo of her.* My grandma sat up straight, a photograph of all her grandchildren behind her on the wall in the assisted living apartment she’d just been moved into. *Lindsay*, she pressed her lips against her teeth, the way she always did. After that day, whenever I visited my grandma there would be a different photograph of Lindsay on her refrigerator. Every time, she’d tell me that my friend was in the paper again. Lindsay driving. Lindsay maintaining a dribble while sprawled across the floor. Lindsay swishing a jumper. My friend, Lindsay.

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I grew up in Minnesota in the 1970s. Organized sports for girls in my city had only begun a year or two before I joined my first team at eight-years-old. My excitement was palpable when I picked out my first softball and soccer jerseys, baseball hat, and plastic soccer shoes with the fake Adidas stripes. Beginning in 1976, I played on city-wide floor hockey, softball, soccer, and basketball teams year-round until I became old enough to play on school and traveling teams. In 1978 I attended a Kicks soccer day camp. Proud and excited, I pushed my bony shoulders up and smiled as my mom snapped my picture with professional soccer players Allan Willey and Ade Coker. Thereafter, I loved Kix cereal because of the Kicks. I watched Gophers men's basketball games when they were televised and I watched every Vikings game, slamming my bedroom door and throwing myself on my bed when the Vikings lost in the playoffs, as they always did. At eight and nine I practiced my cut backs in Target as my mom pushed the cart in front of me, my unwitting blocker. Dodging the oncoming shoppers, I knew I would be the first girl running back in the NFL. I didn't care if anyone believed me.

In the 70s it was unusual, even strange to some, for girls to play sports. I knew that. Thousands of girls across the country challenged sexism simply by doing what we loved: playing sports. Since I did not see any women athletes in the media beside tennis players, I emulated male athletes. Once, during a second grade coed floor hockey game in gym, I circled behind the goalie's net and slammed the orange puck in from the other side. The gym teacher blew his whistle. *How'd you know how to do that?* he asked. I did not look at him, but I knew he was surprised. I shrugged. *I saw it on TV.* I was already wary of being treated like a "dumb" girl who could not know anything about sports.

*Come on, let us play,* I complained when the foreign refs with their thick accents blew their whistles every time a girl so much as touched another girl during a soccer game. (No U.S. born refs existed in the early years because they didn't know the sport yet.) After my grandfather died from a three-year battle with cancer, my grandma showed up at my soccer games, unfolded her pastel lawn chair and watched her nine-year-old eldest grandchild run up and down the field. She, like nearly everyone else in Minnesota in 1976, did not understand soccer. She would say "good game" to me after soccer games, but she made no attempt to understand soccer. She showed up. And that was all that mattered to me. When my uncles and I watched football at her house, she asked the same, basic questions about the plays and rules every week. I felt a little embarrassed, as I had to fight to be taken seriously as an athlete and I felt she was giving girls and women a bad name by asking the same questions week after week. I didn't know that she hated football until years later. As an adult I understand her repetitive questions to be a passive form of expressing her dislike of the game that took over her house every Sunday for sixteen or more weeks.

Basketball, however, was second only to golf, in my grandmother's opinion, and she'd show up at my basketball games, her petite, five-foot body perched in the bleachers next to my parents. She was not competitive or expressive, but I knew she paid attention to those games instead of spacing out like she did at my soccer games, where she was probably as bored as she was during Vikings games. Decades later she, Ken (her

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second husband), my girlfriend, and I attended a Lynx game, eleven years before Lindsay joined the team. The Lynx had not gone mainstream yet, and the crowd was largely lesbian. Surrounded by lesbians in the stands, Ken's head swiveled more than the bobbleheads the Lynx now give away of their players and coaches (a few of whom are out lesbians). He kept saying, *What? What?* seemingly overwhelmed and perplexed by the number of lesbians at the game. My girlfriend did not notice his discomfort, but my grandma and I did. With the goal of avoiding whatever-it-was-he-might-do, my grandma coped in her passive, sweet manner by continuously drawing his attention to Prowl, the Lynx's mascot, referring to him as "that cute, fluffy animal." *Lynx, Millie. It's a Lynx*, he'd say for the fifth, sixth, seventh time, annoyed. *Yes, grandma, it's cute*, I said every time she pointed out Prowl, trying to even out his annoyance with her.

Even though I knew she was diverting attention away from the lesbians (and therefore my girlfriend and me) by drawing attention to the Lynx mascot as it skipped around the court, I was a little embarrassed and nervous. I knew Ken thought she was a bit "ditzy" at times and I knew he had a short fuse. Once he screamed at her when she and I were out at Burnsville Mall (without him) for too long, in his estimation, humiliating both my grandma and me. Both my grandmother and I had tough childhoods. Her communication consisted of the kind of communication survivors sometimes have—indirect, avoidant, and misdirected. When I was with her, I matched her communication style. Intuitively, even as a young girl, it felt that communicating with her directly would somehow push her over the edge, bring on more pain than she could handle. And then, in her 70s, there was Ken, who seemed nice, but both of us would have agreed—you never know when someone will become not-so-nice. Sitting with her at the Lynx game, as Ken processed his homophobia, evoked memories from my freshman year at the University of Minnesota when her then "boyfriend" Jack (they were in their early 60s) stalked her for months, ultimately threatening her with a knife. I would have done anything to keep her safe from Jack, and I knew the best way I could protect her at the Lynx game was to aid her in her attempt to avoid an outburst by Ken. *Yes, grandma, Prowl is cute*, I'd say again and again to take the sting out of her husband's responses. If I'd said anything directly to him at the Lynx game or after the mall incident, I would have made it worse for my grandma. So I did not.



In the 1920s and 30s in Milwaukee, girls were not allowed to take history classes at my grandma's high school. There was no need for girls or women to know history. When she told me this, I sensed regret in her voice and the way her face and neck stiffened. I do not know much about my grandma's past. When I was a girl, she did not speak of her biological mother, rarely spoke of her stepmother and only occasionally discussed her father's Indian heritage. But she told me more than she told others. When I was nineteen and attending school at the University of Wisconsin, she said her real mother was in a psychiatric ward near Madison. I was shocked, as no one had ever said anything about her biological mother, and I never asked. Oddly, I had not thought to even wonder. I knew her stepmother was, well, her stepmother. The wall my grandma had built about her real mom to protect herself was passed down to me as well. It

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kept all of us, her entire family, away from the truth of what happened to her mother, and therefore away from my grandmother.

Living a mere forty-five minutes away from Milwaukee where my grandma's family resided, I met that side of my family for the first time. According to my great-aunt and her son, my great-grandmother hid my grandmother and my great-aunt, who were four and five, from my great-grandfather. My diminutive, quiet great-aunt mentioned that he'd been abusing my great-grandmother and was having an affair with a woman he wanted to marry. At that time, he could not remarry unless his wife was dead or institutionalized. My great-grandmother and her girls stayed at my great-aunt's house for six months until he found her, and had her locked away for the rest of her life. Husbands could do that then.

Nearly ten decades removed from all of that, I now imagine my grandma as a teenager, in a dusty Milwaukee high school gym watching boys play basketball, their lanky bodies straining against gravity. I hear the slap of the ball on the court, the squeak of canvas high tops. Did she have a crush on one of them? Did she wish she could play basketball, the way she always wanted to be a writer but didn't have the training or confidence? I don't know. I do know after she was taken from her mom, she bounced between her stepmother and father in Milwaukee to her mixed Indian and white family in Amarillo, Texas. She grew up in poverty. Her stepmother locked her in closets. During the Great Depression, my grandma, very young at the time, handed out the oranges her family had received from some charity. She said she gave them to her neighbors because they had none. For her generosity, her stepmother locked her in a closet for a day. Even in her sixties, she still seemed pained and perplexed by the punishment. I also know upon her return to Wisconsin for high school to live with her father, she met my grandfather who was two or so years ahead of her. I know he flew B52s in WWII. He lost a brother in the war, his body never recovered. He returned, they married, and had seven children. That's what I know of the history of the woman who was my grandma, who said to me, "Love you," her lips pressed tight against her teeth as if she had to fight herself to get the words out. When I was a teenager one of my aunts asked, "Did you know you are the only person grandma tells she loves?" I had not noticed that I was the only one.



The black and white photos I have of my grandmother as a teenager and young woman portray a well-coiffed, beautiful and dignified young woman. The lighting is hazy, as it so often is in those old photos, and it's hard to tell where her cheeks end and the background begins, but it seems appropriate as she was always a bit ethereal, spacy, or as some would now say, dissociative. Part of her always seemed to be floating above it all—residing in another world, perhaps one where her mother had not been taken from her. My grandma said her life with my grandfather was "not that great," an aunt admitted to me once. Another aunt asked my grandma if she missed my grandfather. *I miss the sex*, she said. I imagine her pressing her lips together, holding back whatever else it was she had to say.

As my grandmother aged, she attended more women's sports. *Would you like to go to the University of Minnesota women's hockey game*, she asked over the phone. *Uh, okay*, I said, and made plans to pick her up that Satur-

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day and drive over to the arena. I never liked hockey, and never knew her to either. But we had fun watching the women skate around in their heavy pads, unable to check, according to the special rules for girls and women. We went to Gopher women's basketball games, including the time Lindsay led the Gophers to their first Final Four appearance. My grandma, I, and thousands of others sold out Williams Arena a few days after my mother died of cancer. Remembering the games I attended in the 1970s, when there were maybe thirty fans, I cried. Never could I have imagined that many people showing up for women's sports. I held my grandma's elbow as we walked down the steep, rickety 76-year-old stairs in the Barn and out into the cold night where our breath turned to smoke as we walked to the car, side by side, the generation separating us now gone.

Then my grandma and Ken who I'd come to believe was mostly kind to my grandma--except when his anxiety hit and he feared my grandma would not return--moved to Florida on his pension. But they returned every summer, just in time for the Lynx season to begin. Years later, after he died suddenly of cancer, my grandma's children moved her back to Minnesota, against her wishes, placing her in an assisted living facility thirty minutes from my house. When I visited, she expressed her anger at her children. I did not know what to think--could she have stayed in Florida with the help of meal deliveries? Her desire to stay in Florida, on her own and away from her family, at the end of her life shocked me. She told me how overwhelming she'd found all her numerous great-grandchildren to be and said she did not much like visiting with them. This surprised me, yet when I told a friend about this, she said she felt the same way about her great-grandchildren. I know some would say my grandma's anger and desire to live out the last years of her life were due to the early stages of dementia, but I am not so sure. Listening to her the last few years of her life made me reevaluate my grandmother as an individual, instead of as my perfect, most-favorite-person-in-the-world whom I gave stuffed animals to for her every birthday. Maybe she'd had enough of the family and all the demands and drama they placed on her--enough to want her independence in her late-80s, enough to want to die alone amongst palm trees?

My grandma, in the early stage of Alzheimer's, connected me with Lindsay because I played basketball and we have relatives from Hutchinson. As my grandma neared the end of her life, someone gave me free Lynx playoff tickets two rows up from the floor. Normally, my partner and I sat in the cheapest seats, far removed from the floor. It really is a different game when you're that close--you almost feel as if you know the players. At the game I'd won tickets to, Lindsay played brilliantly, making gutsy play after gutsy play, diving across the floor for loose balls, getting hammered under the hoop, and flipping proto-Lindsay behind-the-back-passes to her teammates. I took the strength, accomplishment, and hard work that not only Lindsay, but both teams exhibited, with me as I exited the arena back into my daily life. The Lynx, and my "friend" Lindsay made me stronger, prouder, bigger in the world because, well, they are women athletes, like me. The Lynx provide girls and women, including those women older than I who never had a chance to play at all, with an opportunity to live vicariously through them that we did not previously have. The night before the game I saw courtside, I spoke with my grandma. I mentioned I was going to a Lynx game. *Oh*, she said

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in that blank way she'd always replied, even before the dementia, when she didn't know what someone was talking about. *You know, the women's basketball team my friend Lindsay plays on. Oh yes, of course,* she said. *Lindsay.* And I knew she'd made the connections. At the end of the conversation she suddenly said, enthusiasm and joy ringing in her voice, *Oh, Chris, isn't it amazing that we found each other?* I paused for a moment, to keep myself from crying. *Yes, grandma. It is amazing.*

In the fall of 2017 when the Lynx were in the playoffs, my grandma had been gone more than a year. On Labor Day, my partner and our college-age neighbor friend who is now an ardent Lynx fan (I go to him for statistics and other arcane questions about the Lynx and the WNBA) were driving in Minneapolis's Victory Memorial Parkway neighborhood in search of garage sale deals. *Hey,* he said from the backseat. *I'm on Lindsay's Instagram and she just posted a photo of herself at the Victory War Memorial. Really?* I said. *Yeah,* he responded. *She said it was a good history lesson. Let's see if she's still there,* my partner suggested. We were a few blocks away from the tall war memorial statue surrounded by peppered grey granite benches. We drove down the grand, tree-lined parkway with its WWI stone plaques commemorating soldiers who'd died in the war, but Lindsay had pedaled off by the time we arrived. *What are you going to do,* I said, a favorite saying of my grandma's that I have begun saying with greater frequency myself. As we turned south down the parkway in search of a good deal, my thoughts veered toward my grandma on that hot and sunny Labor Day, to all the good she'd brought to my life. Then I thought, as I tapped the steering wheel in time to the song on the radio, I hope Lindsay doesn't tire herself out with all this bike riding. We have a big game soon.