

Thank you, Mark

My grandmother is dependent on Facebook. Yes reader, you gathered correctly. I meant to say my *grandmother*. I do not mean an insecure teenage girl at the innocent age of fourteen who has just been enchanted by the infinite spheres of a profit-oriented social media platform. No, I mean a grown woman of 76 years who worked for years, married, raised a child - and a grandchild - and is just about to get sucked into the downward spiral of Mark Zuckerberg's blue empire.

To be honest, it was a rather slow process and no one could really see it coming. Neither me, nor my mother. The dependency did not have the decency to present itself beforehand, to prepare us for what was going to follow. Instead, it struck us unheralded like some intruder, only waiting to hit us in the most unexpected moment. If I remember correctly, it all started with an interest in these "things younger people use".

"I also want one!", my grandmother exclaimed rather demandingly. "Everyone in my neighbourhood has one of these! Even the old Mrs. Smith from vis-à-vis!"

Well, I can tell you that this left us surprised and therefore we asked her why in the name of God it led to her wanting one as well.

"I have to go with time!", she reciprocated. "I can't possibly be the only one in this village without a mobile phone!"

For my part, I have never assumed that my grandmother of all people would be eager to call a mobile phone her own. Even if it might be a bit shortsighted, I always thought that the older generations would never need one. I believed that they were happy to live their analog life and despised these little electronic devices that distracted their poor grandchildren from talking to them. Nonetheless, I have to admit that I can also understand her need and desire to possess a mobile phone. Just imagine living in this utopian society where everyone around you has access to everything that is happening everywhere in the world and you are the only one excluded from this knowledge. Would you not want to be part of it? Would you not want to take a glimpse behind the hitherto sealed door that might disclose to you the temptingly unknown? Oh, of course you would! And you do not have to be ashamed of it. Because I would too and I would not blame myself for it.

Thus, it was agreed upon that my grandmother should get her own mobile phone. We did not want her to feel excluded from her friends across the street and wanted to spare her the embarrassing and uncomfortable situation of having to explain to Mrs. Smith why she did not have one yet.

Soon, my grandmother started to use her beloved new device in almost all forms possible. She phoned us in the middle of the day - or in the middle of the night. She took a lot of pictures - rather blurry ones - but still, she had fun with them. We had to take pictures of her as well. A lot of pictures. Every time she visited us, she came prepared. Beforehand, she had spent hours curling her hair which she always dyed blonde in order to appear younger. She wore either a complicated coiffure or a nice scarf or colorful bonnet wrapped around her head with her curly long hair being draped around her shoulders. She dressed in stylish skirts and

beautiful blouses, wearing harmonised jewelry and elegant shoes. Then, she always looked for the most fitting locations, placed herself in different poses and told us how we were supposed to take the pictures. She truly would have made a good photo model. During these shootings she always was in a buoyant mood. We thought that it made her happy to be in the centre of attention, to have nice memories captured in the tiny screen of the handy apparatus. We only intended the best, however, this was our first mistake.

Our second mistake took place a few months afterwards. My mother introduced my grandmother to the world of Facebook and I did not prevent her from doing it. My grandmother knew that my mother had a Facebook profile and although she was not really active there, she did follow some of my grandmother's neighbours, some of the other villagers, some third cousins or some friends of friends of friends. And my grandmother knew this. That is why she did not cease asking about them, what they have been doing, if there was any news from distant relatives or known people. Of course, my mother soon indulged my grandmother's wishes and showed her what she wanted to see.

It did not take long until my grandmother understood the operating principle of the new social media network that opened up in front of her. Quickly, she used my mother's mobile phone for a longer time than my mother herself. Being in control of the big F in front of her was like managing her old, worn out telephone book - only ten times better. Now she did not have to search for a specific telephone number written on yellowed pages anymore. Now she did not have to pull out the almost antique telephone equipped with a rotatable dial in order to hear about the new gossip in the village. Now, everything and everyone has become accessible through a single click. My grandmother had fun with finding out what her neighbours did in their free time, with rummaging in the personal lives of other people.

During her work years, my grandmother used to be an elementary school teacher, but now she has turned into a private investigator. And let me tell you, she worked as diligently as if her life depended on it. I bet that not even Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple would have been able to dig out the secrets my grandmother did. While sitting together at dinner, she said something like:

“Oh, it looks like the Meyers got divorced! I know that they have their wedding anniversary on the sixth of June. And they posted a picture each year together. But this year, they didn't.”

Furthermore, my mother's Facebook profile was also the perfect means for her to be an intruder into her neighbour's private sphere and to judge her plants and bushes:

“Look at the tedious Mrs Smith! Ugh, how she always wants to be in the centre of attention by proudly presenting her garden. Well, if they could only see mine! I bet that everyone would find it prettier than hers! Just look at these ugly bushes! And the flowers! All of them are withered!”

The ubiquitous platform also presented to her some of her former pupils, now grown up, having a job, a life, a family. When my mother was about to go to sleep, she would stop her by saying:

“Oh, do you still know Elisa? She was one of my pupils in second grade and used to play with you when you were little. Look, this is her now! Actually, she is quite pretty. But this dress really doesn't suit her. Don't you agree that her waist looks unfavourable in it?”

I know what you think! At this point we should have already stopped her. The alarm bells were ringing. The red flags were waving. Digging into other people's lives, judging, comparing, bad-mouthing, shaming. These actions are unkind, even mean. But is this not one of the major pitfalls of social media? Do not we all do this? You, me, my grandmother? We know that we should not, but we still do. And this is the reason why I blame myself for not protecting my dear grandma from this never ending circle of negativity.

As soon as my grandmother became accustomed to being a silent observer who lingered undercover and hidden by another profile, it soon did not suffice anymore. She wanted more. And since she had already started to explore the expanses of the blue land, she wanted it for herself too. So, we created her own Facebook profile. We thought that it would make things easier if she could just search for the Meyers and Mrs Smith from her own account. Then, my mother could finally have her mobile phone for herself again without having to fear a sudden and unwanted befriending of a certain Lea, Emma, or Anna, initiated by my grandmother who likely wanted to become friends with the whole country. Anna was the daughter of my mother's uncle's best friend Tom by the way. To be honest, we just wanted to be left in peace. But we should have known better. Peace never came. And so, the creation of my grandmother's own Facebook profile was our third mistake. And our worst so far.

It did not take a long time until she found out that she could also use Facebook to present herself. In the beginning, we liked how this platform gave her a new opportunity for expressing herself. She had fun with it and we thought that it would be good for her to have this kind of free time activity, to be spending her time with something she likes doing. She loved posting the pictures we already took of her, and of course, new ones had to be taken as well. Her profile picture had to be the most pretty one. It had to show her from her best side, from her best angle. Her hair should appear shiny and voluminous, her face smooth and her cheeks rosy. Only then was it acceptable for being considered as a profile picture.

Afterwards, she discovered the stories for herself. No, not the stories you would read in a book. No short stories, fairy tales or Christmas carols. I mean the story function brought into life through the meta empire created by the son of a dentist. These little glimpses into the lives of others you also see on other platforms. The stories became her only concern of the day. She wrote me late in the evening, asking me to send her facebookable pictures of the places I visited. So that she could pretend that she had been there. She spent hours upon hours applying the variety of tools offered to make her stories more interesting for her viewers. She searched for music, filters, stickers. Everything was used that could make her story more vivid and dazzling. "Making" stories was her new hobby. The only aspect that distinguished her from one of the influencers you find on Instagram was that she did not get paid for any of her creations.

Later, she started reaching out to others. She made plenty of new "friends". Everyone who had ever appeared on her page or whom she found by her searching skills, deserved to get the button pressed. It was only a click that separated those who were not accepted into her inner circle yet and she was generous with distributing her openness among others. She also chatted with a lot of people. Mostly men. She received all kinds of love confessions. There were men from Buenos Aires or Kuala Lumpur who praised her beauty and

wanted to make her acquaintance. When she told me about them, I felt anxious and worried. I warned her. I warned her several times that she had to be careful, that these men could be dangerous, that she did not know them, that she should not answer them, not write them back. If she listened to me or not, I do not know.

At this point, my grandmother's involvement with Facebook became a more delicate and concerning topic. Now you may think that my grandmother's discovery of the infinite functions of Facebook sounds rather funny.

“What of it!?”, you may say.

But let me tell you, my grandmother's obsession with Facebook, quickly turned out to reveal its dark sides. Whenever her mobile phone conked out, the consequences were of a dramatic extent. Not being able to turn on her phone made her nervous, relentless, obnoxious. For her, not being able to access Facebook for even a short amount of time was like an isolation from every human being on earth. She could not enjoy the small pleasures around her anymore but would angrily curse the phone - and everything else around her.

One day, we went out for a walk together. The three generations. My grandmother, my mother and myself. It was a beautiful autumn day in the midst of the golden October. The trees radiated in splashes of red, orange, yellow, green and brown, the birds lilted adorably, the sun shone brightly. Indeed, nature presented itself in its most delightful ways. Well reader, you might think that I am exaggerating. And maybe I am. However, it does not matter. The point is that my grandmother is not able to see such beauty anymore. Instead, she walks head down staring into her mobile phone, trotting around like one of these Pokémon Go players. While my mother and I were conversing and admiring the blaze of colour, my grandmother did not engage in our discussion at all but stopped every five seconds to take a quick picture she could share with her online friends. Hence, she fell more and more behind. We regularly turned around, told her to put her mobile phone away and to come walking with us instead. But she did not want to. That is why we moved on, walking arm-in-arm. Then, when we turned around a few minutes later, we did not see her anymore. We hurried back to where we last left her, but she disappeared, left no trace behind, seemed to have vanished. We looked everywhere for her. But she was not to be found. It was at this moment we knew that we had lost her.

Whenever I visit my grandmother these days, a normal conversation is not possible anymore. While I try to animate a discussion, she seems to be absent. My words seem to enter her right ear and leave her left one without reaching her brain, her soul or her heart. The only topics she wants to talk about are her new followers, the likes she got on her last post and the hours she spent creating her exceedingly creative Facebook story that had already been watched by 46 people. My mother and I, we do not know what to do anymore. Thus, feeling overwhelmed and overstrained with the situation, we started asking ourselves a lot of questions:

“What did we do wrong? Is this our mistake? How can we help my grandmother?

Does she need somebody to talk to? Do we need somebody else to talk to?

Does my grandmother have psychological problems? Does she need professional help?

What could we do to help her? Can we even help her? Does she even want our help?

Does she even realize what she is doing? Where did it all start? And where is this going?"

These are a lot of questions. Questions that seek to be answered. Some questions which cannot be and some others which can. Some that were already answered, some that never will. However, my mother and I decided on one thing about my grandmother.

We lost her.

We lost a loving mother.

We lost a caring grandmother.

We lost her to this scintillating world of posts, walls, likes and notifications.

We lost her to other people, to unknown strangers, to so-called "friends".

We lost her to the Meta-verse.

We lost her to Facebook.

Thank you, Mark.