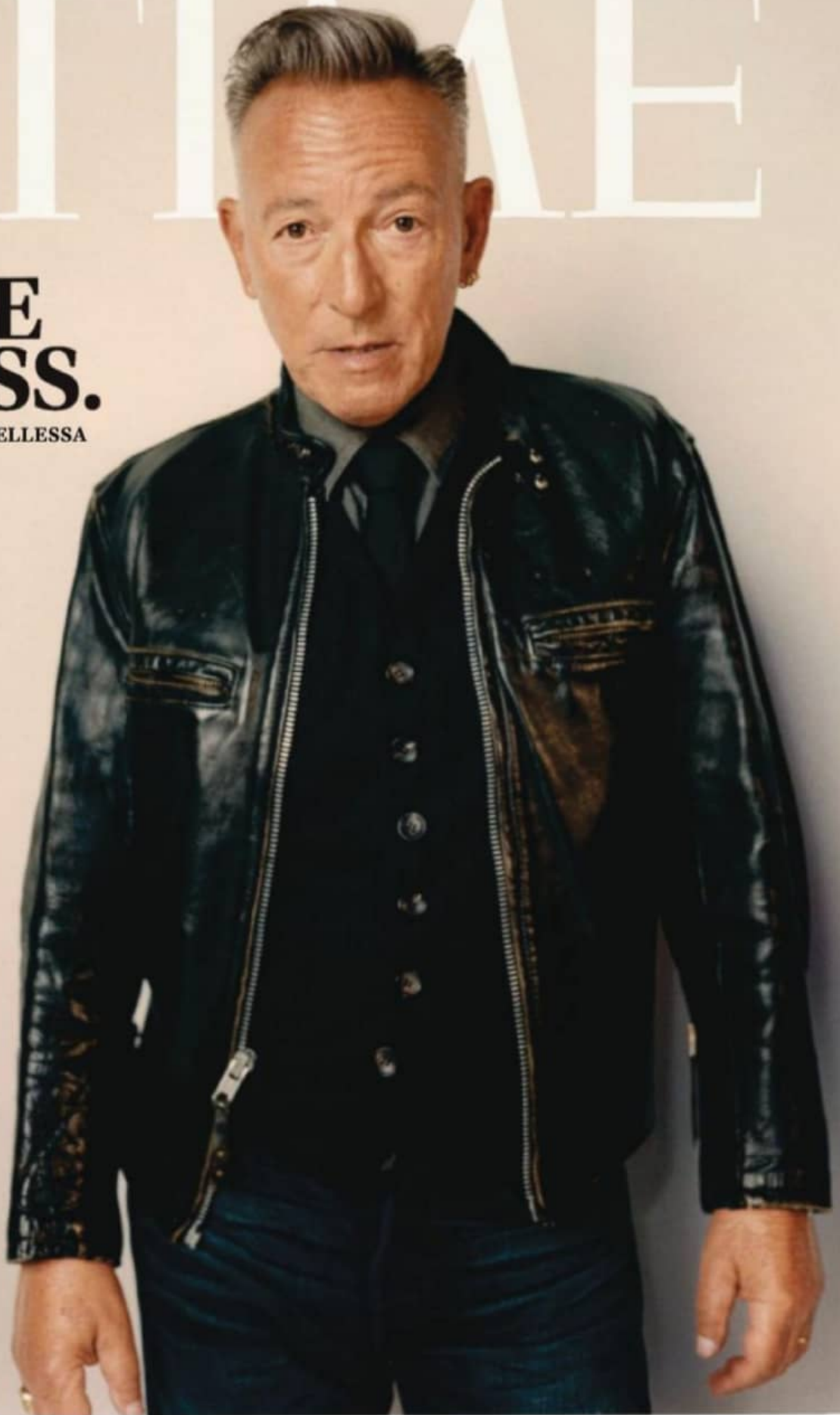


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What I learned from *The Golden Girls*

BY BETH NGUYEN

PICTURE IT: MICHIGAN, SEPT. 14, 1985. A YOUNG Vietnamese girl watches television with her grandmother on a Saturday night. Like everyone in her refugee family, the girl loves TV, which often feels like a lesson in American life. That night, a new show called *The Golden Girls* airs on NBC. From the first notes of the theme song—“Thank You for Being a Friend”—the girl is hooked.

The characters of Dorothy, Blanche, and Rose are in their 50s and Sophia is 80, but the girl feels an immediate connection to them. Perhaps because her own closest relationship is with her grandmother, or perhaps because she’s used to identifying with characters who look nothing like her. The girl loves everything about these women—how they laugh and play, how they gather around food to figure out their lives. She doesn’t realize that she has watched the pilot episode of what will become one of the most important, iconic TV shows of the 1980s. She doesn’t know that she will watch *The Golden Girls* again, over decades of reruns, DVDs, and streaming throughout her life.

That girl was me. I grew up watching these women. I never stopped watching, and now, at age 50, I am still watching them.

If you’ve seen *The Golden Girls*, you already know why it’s been going strong for 40 years, outliving all of the actors involved. *The Golden Girls* is about deep friendship and the specific experience of life for women beyond middle age—still groundbreaking. It’s got biting one-liners, incredible comedic timing and chemistry, and a fantastic ’80s Miami aesthetic. Over seven seasons the show covers topics like menopause, elder care, homophobia, estrangement, discrimination, and more. But it always returns to joy, including sex, dating, food, and the refusal to be invisible. The show is about creating family out of friends, and friends out of family. And it’s very much about the art and necessity of storytelling.

“Picture it,” Sophia often says, launching into a tale of long-ago Sicily when she was a beautiful young peasant girl. “Back in St. Olaf,” Rose begins, and we know we’re about to enter the magical-realist world of her hometown in Minnesota. Blanche reminisces about the sultry Southern landscape where she grew up. Dorothy talks of growing up in Brooklyn, and life with her *yutz* of an ex-husband Stan.

All of their stories do what stories are supposed to do—arc, show, tell, exaggerate, elevate, teach, contemplate. They allow the girls to understand one another and to make sense of their own lives. And after all, friendships, relationships, and intimacy are built upon the sharing of stories. I didn’t know it at the time, but watching



The *Golden Girls* aired on NBC from September 1985 to May 1992

and rewatching *The Golden Girls* helped teach me, a girl who wanted to be a writer, about the importance of sharing our narratives.

GROWING UP in a postwar world, I watched TV the way I watched books: to escape my own reality, to learn about others. Back then people would plan their lives around TV schedules, not the other way around. And so I would find myself on many a Saturday night watching *The Golden Girls* with my grandmother, sitting in front of a little TV that accessed network stations with an antenna.

I was 8 months old when my family came to the U.S.; in 1985 we were 10 years settled into postrefugee life in the American Midwest, where, increasingly, the only time I spoke Vietnamese was with my grandmother. I thought there was nothing *Golden Girls* about her except age, though later it occurred to me that like Sophia, Blanche, and Rose, my grandmother was also a widow. She had started over in new cities and homes. And *The Golden Girls* was very much about four women learning to begin again.

In the last episode of Season 1, titled “The Way We Met,” Dorothy, Blanche, and Rose are wide awake in the middle of the night, so they eat



cheesecake and reminisce about how they came to be friends and roommates. Always, each woman is a character: Dorothy's robe is blue and practical; Blanche's is pink and cozy; Rose's is soft and cozy. The show begins and ends in the kitchen, but most of it is storytelling through flashback scenes. This is what the girls do best. Each time I return to them—this scene, this setting, this dialogue that I almost know by heart—I feel at home.

We call it comfort watching for a reason, and for me *The Golden Girls* is the ultimate comfort. I feel like I'm being invited into their lives and onto their lanai. I understand their sorrows, their family worries, their relationship woes. I have, in a very real sense, grown with them. At some point, the jokes I didn't get when I was a kid made hilarious sense. (Blanche: "I was wearing little black French lace panties bearing the word BONJOUR!" Pause. "Or was it BON APPÉTIT?") The anxiety of aging, like when Dorothy wistfully says that age 40 now seems young to her, became more real.

When *The Golden Girls* ended, in May 1992, with Dorothy getting married and moving away, I was about to graduate from high school and go to college. In the finale, the girls struggle to say goodbye. As Rose puts it,

The series is about creating family out of friends, and friends out of family

"What can you say about seven years of fights and laughter, secrets, cheesecake?" The fade to black is tearful. Still to this day, it makes me want to cry.

To this day, I hate that everything *The Golden Girls* are not ageless, but, in the way *The Golden Girls* loves that endure, they seem to exist outside of time. They are permanently beautiful and lively, and they fall into the same scrapes, telling the same wild stories from their youth.

MY GRANDMOTHER HAS BEEN GONE for more than 15 years now. I don't know if she watched *The Golden Girls* in syndication after I left home. Sometimes I wonder if I'm looking for her in the feeling of that show when I rewatch it. I think about those Saturday nights in her company, in the lamplight of her room. How she would knit and I would do homework or we'd work on a puzzle together while watching TV. How soft our world felt then, if only for half an hour.

If we are lucky, we will all get to be Golden Girls. Wouldn't it be lovely to know that if we woke up in the middle of the night we could throw on our robes—satin, cotton, terry, chenille, depending on who we are and how we're feeling—and go into the kitchen where people who love us would be ready with cake and ice cream, ready to share stories and gossip?

In *The Golden Girls*, there's always one spot open at the kitchen table. One day I realized that it's for us, the audience. We all get to be there, laughing together, contemplating the people we once knew, the people we once were, the people we are still becoming. I can't think of a better way to get through the night.

Nguyen is the author of two novels and two memoirs, most recently Owner of a Lonely Heart