

A Grandmother's Love

Beth Powning

On the day that our daughter-in-law, Sara, was in labour with our first grandchild, I made a path in my flower garden. I laid bricks in a loop through a bed of foxgloves. I named it the "children's path," and imagined grandchildren trotting beneath the fairy-hatted blossoms. It was my first grandmotherly act, and as I did it, I was unconsciously patterning myself on my own beloved granny, whose only thought was of how she might make someone else happy.

If she had been the sort to speculate, my granny would have thought that it would be her pies that I would remember, or the rambling house in a Connecticut village where our family had lived for five generations. She might have imagined me remembering applesauce boiling on the gas stove, releasing puffs of sweet-smelling steam. She might have thought that I would long for the expeditions up to the apple orchard with my grandfather to pick Gravensteins; or rummaging through chests filled with spectacles in leather cases, dresses with rusty hooks, ivory fans.

Her name was Helen Merriam Davis, and she was my father's mother. She had three sons, and nine grandchildren. She would never have thought that I would long for her. And she would be surprised to know that when Sara, and my only son, Jake, asked me what I would like the grandchildren to call me, I would name myself after her.

"Nammy."

I anguished over this choice, worrying that if I took her name, which came from my older brother's inability to pronounce the word "Granny", I would lose the feeling that floods me whenever I speak hers. But, I reasoned, I could refer to her as *my* Nammy.

She was the granny of a children's book. She was spare, and small, so tiny that by the time my girl cousins and I were twelve years old, we were the same height as she was. Her grey hair was always wound into a decorous bun bound with the finest of nets. Plagued by arthritis, she limped, and the tips of her fingers bent sideways. Her short eyebrows raised in a sweet, worried peak, their sadness the legacy of a younger sister lost to diphtheria, their quirked tension revealing her desire to shield her family from life's random tragedies; her eyes bore no secrets, no guile, no malice. She gazed at me, peacefully, hands busy in whatever act they might be engaged: stirring, folding, smoothing, digging, knitting.

Before marrying my grandfather, she had taught English literature, astronomy, and geometry. She could name the constellations, identify apples, read Latin. She loved gardens, but never picked the flowers she grew, nor encouraged me to bring her wildflowers, for it made her sad, she told me, to put them in vases and watch them die. She whispered to me of heaven, and how we would one day live there, all together.

When I hugged her, I felt how, beneath her soft wool sweater, she was hard and strong, like a winter tree, its skeleton softened by snow.

*

When Jake and Sara told us that they were going to have a child, my first reaction was conditioned by years of motherhood. I thought, first, of my own child. "My son," my mind protested. "He's too young!" I felt the familiar desire to protect, nurture. Then, within seconds, these feelings wisped away. The work of helping a child become an adult was over. The perfect life I had imagined for my son was replaced with the real life that he himself would shape.

Once Maeve arrived, the new baby seemed as natural as the first quiet snow flakes, and I had to remind myself to marvel at the fact that our son was a father, or that I was now a grandmother. What was surprising was that the feelings I had as a grandmother were so different from those I had as a mother. The visceral, overwhelming impulses to nourish, teach, protect, and defend were gone. I realized that I was perfectly content to observe, wonder, and love, leaving the rest to the parents.

Three years later, a second granddaughter, Bridget, arrived. Our son and his family moved just down the road from us in New Brunswick, so close that in the morning, we can see smoke rising from their chimney. We see our grandchildren often, but not every day. I'm as amazed every time they burst joyously into our kitchen as if I'm seeing them for the first time.

Just as I called my Nammy mine, I'm theirs. Our relationship is vigorous, easy, loving. They are neither in awe of me, nor overly respectful. "Come on, Nammy!" they say, tugging at my hand. Their little bedroom, once their father's, is upstairs next to the guest room. It has yellow walls, a sloped ceiling. My own childhood stuffed dog lies on a bed. There's a small table with boxes of shells, pebbles, scissors, crayons, a tea set patterned with lady bugs. A pull-out, child-height shelf beneath the sink has two blue-speckled enamelware cups, two

plates, two bowls. In the flower garden, besides the children's path, there's another path that winds beneath the tall raspberry canes and is bordered with zinnias; it's a secret way into the vegetable garden. That, too, is theirs. In the pasture, there are two ponies: Cricket and Puck.

There's nothing precious about any of these things. Toys get lost, or are tumbled in cupboards. The paths need weeding, or the ponies need burrs picked from their manes. But the point is that we do things together, my granddaughters and I. I lift them up onto the ponies, hand them pony-sized brushes. When we cook together, I give them eggs, let them smash them on the side of bowls, hand them forks to whip the yolks. We crawl beneath spruce trees and pretend to camp. In a forked birch tree, we're in an airplane: Bridget, two and a half years old, wild-haired, is determined to do things for herself. Her round, blue eyes are wide with the importance of her role as the flight attendant. Maeve, five years old, takes command. She's the captain. She has eyes the colour of winter dusk, grey-green; braids keep her loose blonde hair from her face, and make her look like the princess of some Scandinavian saga. I'm the passenger. I am, indeed, often the willing passenger, being dragged beneath the blanket-draped piano, or whirling with one girl while the other bangs the piano keys, or allowing myself to be draped with scarves and costume jewellery.

As we play, work, sing, read books, I hope that I'm making memories for them as strong as my own are for my grandparents, and that my home will be as wondrous to them as that long-ago house was to me. It was mythical, that house, with its barns, orchards, and bee hives, like a place set apart from the rest of the world, somehow safer than my own, imbued with an encompassing peace, its verandas lined with wicker-bottomed rocking chairs, its grandfather clock ticking, deep-voiced, in the hall, the screen door creaking as my grandfather

came from the sunshine carrying warm lettuce heads. It was changeless, unmarred by sorrow, failure, fear.

I'm not as much like my grandmother as I would like to be. I don't have her faith in an eternal home. I don't have her quiet, selfless ways. I'm restless, both agitated and an agitator. I would love to be a homemaker, as she was, but I itch for more. I know I can't reproduce that peaceful house. Yet I hope that when my granddaughters are older, feeling life's sorrows, they'll remember that there was once a place where all they had to do to be loved was to be themselves.

It's not so much the place itself that endures in my heart. It's the place as my grandmother made it, since always, at the heart of this child's kingdom, there she was; and at the sight of me, she dropped wooden spoons, or armloads of wind-dried sheets, or trowel-loads of uprooted dandelions. She threw her arms wide, smiling as if nothing gave her more pleasure than me. And I felt myself to be whole, incomparable, radiant.

I can't reproduce that peaceful place, in my memory, as it was fifty years ago. But I hope that when the children bound into our house, my face is like her's: gentle, delighted, and, like a mirror, reflecting all that's wonderful about them back to themselves.

*