

Grandma's

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By J Wyman

The child world is peppered with whimsy. Its colors are primary, its music is laughter. It smells like cinnamon and tastes like brown sugar and butter. For the fortunate, the child world is riddled with magic places, musty basements, stuffy attics.

Nowhere was this wonder more profound than at Grandma's and Grandpa's. Their house throbbed with a magic that powered its soul and flowed through its veins. I knew its secret. The master magician behind the curtain, the controller of this Oz, was none other than my grandmother. She would deny this vehemently, but I know better. For it was a magic crafted from enduring love and tempered by overwhelming faith.

I was lucky enough to enter this Neverland once or twice a year when my family, complete with parents, siblings and even dog piled into the New Yorker and embarked on an eight hour trek. After a long, smoky, haze filled with elbows, "not yet"s, "keep it down back there"s, and not nearly enough bathroom breaks, we were there.

There is something about arriving at your destination late at night that only amplifies its mystery. The slow crescendo that began eight hours earlier reached its fortissimo with a left-hand turn onto Ardsley Drive.

I remember it like a pop-up book. The ground unfolding, opening to reveal lush grass, rolling hills, statues sprinkled throughout the lawn, a magnificent castle sprouting up from a glade surrounded by a sweeping forest. Well, that's how my seven-year-old mind saw it. And that's how I choose to remember it. My eyes were glassy with sleep and dazzled by the magic of the arrival, of the anticipation, of the promise of what was to come.

We tumbled wearily out of the car. The body gets used to movement, and after having been in a car for so long, the ground seemed unnaturally still beneath my feet. I soon got my bearings, though, and I bounded up the driveway and into the garage.

I had been to my grandma's house many times, yet its charm never waned, always captivating, ever new. Everything warranted exploring; everything was a treasure waiting to be discovered. Even the spare key hidden on the windowsill in the garage was a glorious secret that only very few were privy to.

Through the side door in the garage, there they are! "Hello, hello, hello!" boomed my grandfather. We would all crowd around each other, each of us in turn greeting our grandparents. My grandmother, not so much taller than me, would enfold me in her arms, "Hello, Jenny dear." And suddenly everything was flowers, soap, bread, and linens.

Grandma's Smell. For that moment, I was all that mattered. She has a habit of doing that. When you're in her presence, you matter, you are important, you are loved.

As we moved into the kitchen, I was assaulted by so many smells. I could identify a couple immediately. Sticky buns. Eucalyptus. Some kind of pine or spruce. A lingering scent of a roast or stew. The tantalizing mustiness of the basement. The other aromas blended together and faded into the background creating a warmth and ease that I could only identify as Grandma's House.

Although the day had been long and our beds beckoned, that first night I always had to make a cursory scan of the whole place as if to reassure myself that everything was where it was supposed to be. Bathrooms? Still five. Microwave? Still old. Stairs? Still gold and slightly curved. Living room? Still impossibly white. Refrigerator? Still equipped with ice dispenser. Satisfied with my exploring and eager to raid the cookie tin I spied on the counter in the kitchen, I made my way back there before heading off to bed.

I knew what would be waiting for me in the bedroom and I was filled with both anticipation and dread. I looked first to the head of the bed. Grandma never disappointed. There, on my pillow, was a puzzle book, a few pieces of candy, and a box of crayons. My mother followed me into my room to help me get ready for bed and, as I showed her my new acquisitions, my eyes traveled unbidden to the wall. I grew very still, my body filling with dread.

Hanging there was an oval picture frame housing four pairs of unblinking eyes. I didn't know this at the time, but the three men in the photograph were my great-grandfather, his father, and his grandfather. Nestled in his father's arms was my infant grandfather.

Unaware of my blood ties to these four apparitions, I could not fathom why my grandma, a seemingly benevolent creature, would choose such nefarious bodyguards to protect the guest bedroom. Terror overtook reason and I could not be convinced they weren't looking at me. The unearthly glow of light (likely a lighting prop) behind their heads could easily have been a gateway to the underworld straining to break free. It was so obvious, was I the only one who could see it?

Nevertheless, I was able to sleep as in the battle between fatigue and paralyzing fear, fatigue won. The mural of terror, as it came to be known, invariably found its way into the closet after the first night, face down, of course. My grandmother never asked how it came to be there, and I never offered an explanation. It would be back on the wall the next time I visited and the entire dance would begin again.

My days were filled with exploring. Each room had its own magic, its own way of tantalizing my senses.

Where to? Upstairs, of course! The staircase which, in my mind, had three full spirals and golden gilded banisters, was itself a playground tempting me to slide down its silky gold carpet one satisfying bump at a time. I could generally get away with doing this two or three times before... “Jenny! I better not catch you sliding down the stairs! You’ll ruin the carpet!” I can’t tell you whose voice this was, very probably it was a different one each time, but I can tell you whose voice it wasn’t. Grandma would never yell at me not to slide down the stairs.

No matter. The stairs could wait. They would be there tomorrow, and so would my zeal for sliding down them. Onward and upward. Next stop, Aunt Hope’s bedroom. Now, my Aunt Hope had only recently left home. Her bedroom still resonated Hope-iness. Four poster bed? Check. Homemade doll and bed? Check. Toe shoes in the closet? Check. Lace bedspread? Check. What more could a little girl ask for? I was a ballerina, locked in a tower, asleep on a bed of lace for 100 years, waiting for my true love to climb through the window to save me from the evil photograph on the first floor that held me captive. It was a great story, for about 10 minutes anyway until the call of Uncle Mark’s room grew too strong to ignore.

I wouldn’t brave Uncle Mark’s bedroom alone. I needed reinforcements. You see, it was the antechamber to the attic, a room that threatened to eat us if we weren’t careful. It was generally around this time that my cousin Brent came charging through the house. Thank goodness, with Brent by my side, I could tackle anything the attic could throw at me. Most times, it was on its best behavior, generally leaving us to our exploring. Occasionally though, and only in the summertime, the attic, in its sulky nonverbal way, would voice its annoyance at our intrusion with a blast of hot air guaranteed to suck the oxygen from your lungs forcing you to retreat to Uncle Mark’s room every so often to regroup.

If you were good and, let’s face it, Brent and I were angels, the attic would grudgingly share its forgotten treasures with you. Dusty books, G.I. Joe dolls, decades old dresses on hangers. The books held stories from another era, one where girls wore bobby socks and saddle shoes and boys had names like Skip and Stu. I even remember one book promised to teach me how to starch my husband’s collars “just so” in order to avoid a spanking. I mentally filed it away for future reference. I don’t like spankings.

I can't tell you if I enjoyed the action figures more or if Brent enjoyed the dresses more, but it was one or the other. At the time, I was sure I was stumbling upon long forgotten history but, in retrospect, I imagine my grandmother knew how much children like secret hideaways and the treasures of yesteryear.

A child's attention span is a fickle mistress and, since it didn't seem like the attic was going to come alive and swallow us up (to this day I still think Brent is mildly disappointed about that), and we still had a third stop on our tour of the upstairs, we left Uncle Mark's room to its own devices.

Past the French doors, I would get to those tomorrow, around the corner to the Holy Grail, Grandma and Grandpa's room. We had to be really quiet, it wasn't entirely on the up and up to be this far down the hallway, but the pull was just too great, the laundry chute needed us. It needed to have G.I. Joe dolls thrown down it. With solemn resolve, we tiptoed through the master bedroom, careful not to look too long or too hard at anything lest we turn to stone, and arrived at our destination. The master bathroom. (Not to be outdone was the master closet which held no less than 40,000 pairs of shoes; it was more or less content with a mere acknowledgment of its grandeur, so we obliged it with a cursory glance before moving on to bigger and better things.)

A laundry chute is a happy little piece of carpentry. It doesn't ask for much, only that you throw things down it once in a while. Its door is always open and it doesn't turn away anything. Everything can fit down the laundry chute. Everything. Socks, dolls, toys, crayons, larger dolls, shoes, balls — bouncy balls, golf balls, baseballs, superballs — even, just once, part of a small person before she got too scared and changed her mind. I don't think there is any way to get bored with throwing something down a laundry chute, running downstairs and watching it materialize in the laundry room.

In order to get to the laundry room, you have to go past the basement. Attention diverted, we abandoned our G.I. Joe rescue mission to brave the belly of the house. With Brent by my side, the basement was just a little punk kid. It couldn't scare me. Well, it could, but I would stay away from the part that was really scary — the gaping maw in the back corner that was clearly the gateway to an underground labyrinth of doom.

The pearls of any explorer's booty are generally found in basements. This particular basement could keep any little person (and even a number of big people) busy for hours. I'm excited even remembering it. The basement was my grandpa's romper room. It had toys aplenty.

The first thing that desperately needed my attention was the great big bell. This bell was huge and weighed a good metric ton. I was sure my grandfather had pilfered the Liberty Bell from its moorings in Philadelphia, which was odd considering my grandpa was a God-fearing man. Stolen or not, it made the most satisfying carillon clang. I could keep this up indefinitely. Indefinitely, as it turns out, does have its limits. Generally, they consist of, “Don’t make me come down there!” or something equally portentous.

No matter. There was plenty more to keep me entertained.

My grandpa, you need to realize, was a big kid himself. He didn’t let too many people know this. To the outside world he was a formidable man, brilliant, conservative, meticulously groomed, deeply Christian, lover of words and books and fine things. But I knew better. My grandpa loved reading out loud, he loved laughing, he loved popcorn and whistling and making stuff. He loved Boggle, Paul Harvey, the sound of music, and the Sound of Music. He wore Cornhusker red on University of Nebraska game days. He called me Jen Jen and read me poetry. And he loved, with all the fervor of a child at Christmas, locomotives.

My grandpa carried his boyish love of trains with him throughout his entire life. I think it kept him young. There was a train or some reference to a train in every room of the house. He converted half of the basement into a model railroad and town. When I think of what must have gone into constructing it, the meticulousness, the hours spent on every tiny detail, I shake my head with wonder. He had several train tracks circling a sprawling exurb, presumably a 1940s or 50s generic heartland town in the Midwest. There were apartment buildings, row houses, subdivisions, streetlights, cars, jaywalkers, shoppers. I used to imagine this was how God saw the world. The trains actually ran and, on very lucky occasions, Grandpa would treat me to a show. Lionel locomotives crisscrossed and changed tracks and went over bridges and through tunnels. Steam whistles blew and cars chugged merrily along. It was captivating.

All too soon, the show would end; grown-ups have more important things on their plates after all, matters of state to discuss, future trips to plan, general busyness to conduct. With a playful pat on the bottom and a promise of more tomorrow, Grandpa left us to ourselves.

Still, the basement hadn’t exhausted its possibilities. Up next? The fat machine. Now, I’m not sure how to describe this to anyone who hasn’t seen one, but the fat machine is quite possibly the most glorious piece of equipment ever made. Promising the user a trim belly

in under 10 minutes, the fat machine has you standing on a small platform while a large nylon belt wraps around your midsection. When you turn it on, it jiggles, shakes, and vibrates your entire body in an attempt, presumably, to liquefy your fat molecules, much like a blender. Far be it from me to challenge the scientific veracity of a high-tech piece of aerobic equipment. It must have lived up to the hype for it to be so proudly on display in such a highly trafficked dark corner of the basement. The fat machine was nothing if not regal.

However, the basement and its charms could not hold me forever especially given its proximity to the kitchen.

If a house is a living entity than surely the kitchen is home to its beating heart. Nowhere was this more true than at Grandma's. Dorothy Wyman is a force of nature in front of a range or an oven. Even at 96, she can put many would be chefs half her age to shame. Roasts, turkeys, potatoes, green beans, soups (oh, the soups!), molasses cookies, sugar cookies, oatmeal cookies, chocolate cookies and the pièce de résistance, sticky buns. Many an unsuspecting passerby got trapped by the lure of Grandma's culinary machinations. I was no exception, in fact, I was the rule. I can see it now, the yellowing cookie tin on the countertop sending out subtle pheromones like tendrils in the air tickling my nose. "Just open me," it would coax, "I promise, you'll like it." As if I needed an invitation. Creeping up on my victim stealthily lest I disturb any household denizens that might disprove of such a cutpurse as myself, I brazenly robbed my victim of its delicious bounty. I still don't know how she did it, but somehow Grandma always knew the best cookie to make. This time it was oatmeal cookies, but tomorrow maybe it would be molasses. And each time, it was the best thing I had ever eaten or would ever eat.

I can't tell you the subtle flavors that made each confection so delectable or which meal was my all-time favorite. I probably can't name even half the dishes I sampled. What I can tell you is how I felt in that kitchen. There is a presence there so profound, so full of peace and joy and love, I'm not sure its equal exists anywhere else in this world. It is a rightness, a contentment, a security. It is love, finely cultivated. It is God.

There were many other smaller things about Grandma's house that, while not as awe-inspiring, were no less novel or magical. The snow white living room and its merry organ, the big foreboding grandfather clock and its partner, the equally standoffish chandelier, the balcony that wasn't a balcony, the tree growing right through the roof of the back porch, the porch swing, the second-floor bathroom which always, always managed to smell like rose-perfumed soap. These things and more made up the silent symphony that

helped to shape my childhood. It was not chance, could not have been the luck of the draw that made the flavors of the house marry so nicely. Over time, they were woven together delicately, intricately, and nurtured with a woman's patient love.

I didn't know this at the time, but I do now. God gave me my grandma so that I might have a small glimpse, the briefest glimmer, of how He feels about me. Her gifts have been too many to number. Her stories at bedtime, her hugs and kisses, her undivided attention, her enduring kindnesses — a gift on my pillow, a letter in my mailbox, a lovingly packed lunch box for the trip home — and none of it, not a single thing, given with reluctance, conditions, caveats.

When I die, I will owe many debts, to my parents for giving me my amazing life, to my sisters for caring for me through illness and struggle, to my friends, the precious few who stand by me through it all, to my comrades in faith who motivate and encourage me, but none so great as the debt to my wonderful, stalwart, ever loving, always present, rock amongst straw, calm amidst stormy seas, beautiful, courageous grandmother.

I love her always.