

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Diane Webster

LETTER TO GRANDMA

DEAR GRANDMA,

My last letter arrived on the day you died. I wish you'd gotten to read it, to know I cared about you or thought about you that day. Mom sent it back. I threw it away. It was supposed to be yours. You were supposed to read it.

I never told you I loved you, but I hope you knew. I knew you loved me even though I never heard the words. When I'd come home, you'd always rush over for a hug. Even Grandpa walked a little faster. I felt special then.

You made me feel special lots of times. The week I spent with you and Grandpa each summer stirs many memories.

I was allowed into the henhouse when you collected eggs. Chickens must have been pretty frightened birds because you told me to stay by the door and be very quiet. You didn't want me to spook them, didn't want them to quit laying. We carried the eggs into the basement, and cleaned and candled each one. I was amazed to see inside the eggs and was excited to weigh some on the egg scale -- the pointer indicating small, medium, large, extra large. Wondering if the extra large held a double yolk and asking to see it under the light.

I remember you pulling a carrot out of the garden and wiping the dirt off for me. No carrot tasted any better -- even if some gritties mixed with the carrot. Maybe because of it.

Even now RC Cola reminds me of you because we shared a bottle, I thought Mom never knew.

I remember "helping" Grandpa milk the cows. Going out to the pasture with him and Ginger, the dog, to herd the cows into the barn. Once stalled, I could go inside and watch Grandpa wash the cows, attach the milking machine and pour the milk into the milk cans. Were they kept cool in a water trough? I think so. Grandpa lifted the cans onto the cart, and I got to stand up with them. Grandpa pushed us all to the road where he set the cans for the milk truck to pick up. Rattling down the gravel driveway with Grandpa was like riding in a convertible. Years later Mom got the cart when you sold the farm, and I couldn't believe Grandpa had gotten four milk cans and me on it.

I learned to eat peanut butter and honey from Grandpa. He ate it often enough that I wanted to try it. I'm sure I mixed in more honey than he did, but I was a kid. Amazing because I don't try many different foods, but I felt safe enough to try it with you two.

At night I felt kind of scared. A room all to myself with a big bed where at home my sister and I shared a bedroom with bunk beds. But I liked it too. A room to myself. My room. You didn't have indoor plumbing so you set a pot in the corner of my room so I didn't have to go outside, to the outhouse, in the dark, all alone. It seemed weird, but better than going outside by myself, or maybe getting you to go with me.

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It was strange that you took out your teeth, brushed them at the kitchen sink and left them in a glass. I don't think I knew you had false teeth until then. How easy to brush teeth if you could take them out!

I remember taking a bath once at your house. Since no bathroom existed, the kitchen was the substitute with heat and water right there. A big, round galvanized tub was the bath tub. It was scratchy on the bottom which I didn't mind so much, but it did bother me that Grandpa might come in while I was bathing. I didn't want him to see me naked. I imagine I took record baths at your house. I think maybe you pinned a towel in the door window so no one could see in. Somehow you made it okay. You made it safe for me.

As much as I love cats, I don't remember petting many around your house. Cats had to earn their keep by catching mice, so they didn't come to the house much. They always got milk in the barn though. I had more fun following you and Grandpa around and watching how you did things than to worry about petting cats. Besides, I had cats at home.

I helped you feed milk to the calves too. You poured milk in a bucket that had a cow's udder built into it, hung it over the fence, and the calves sucked it dry in no time. I was impressed by how fast they ate.

I always wanted to visit you when I came home after being out on my own. Mom thought it was a chore or a duty I had to fulfill. Maybe because that's how my sister felt, but I didn't. I wanted to see you.

One time you and Grandpa were driving downtown, and Mom and Dad flagged you down. When you saw me, you jumped out and hurried over to give me a hug. I felt so special, so loved. You thought I was special. You loved me. I never thanked you for that.

Over the years we wrote letters. It was never a chore for me. I didn't always know what to write, but you always wrote back, and it meant a lot to get that \$2 bill at Christmas. It wasn't the money. It was that you sent it. It was mine. Sadness waves over me knowing I'll never get another one from you. That first year was especially hard. I waited. I shuffled through mail. I knew a card wasn't coming, but I looked for it.

I know you didn't plan it, but Thanksgivings are harder for me now because you died the day before. It was so hard to mourn for both of you. I'm not even sure I really cried for you. I just wanted to get through it, didn't want to feel the pain, didn't want to feel the loss. I put your photograph in a drawer because tears blurred my vision.

I felt a little guilty about not coming home for your funeral more because of what I thought the rest of the family might think, but I felt no desire to burn the double coffin ceremony into my memories.

I felt no need to see your headstone, but Mom wanted me to see it. It was for her that I went. Not you. Not me. You weren't there. You were in my heart where you are now. Where the tears are. I miss you today, Grandma. I miss eating the carrot out of the garden. I miss riding on the milk cart with Grandpa. I miss that \$2 bill at Christmas.

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I love you, Grandma, and I never told you. You loved me, and I never heard the words either. But I feel it, Grandma. We loved each other. No regrets there.

Sometimes I wish I could talk to you, Grandma. We never had serious talks, but I wonder if we could have. It's like I think it amazing that you and your family immigrated to the United States from that land that couldn't decide if it was German or Russian. How brave! You were only six when you came to America, but you must have had memories. I can't even imagine that, Grandma. I would have been so scared.

Maybe that's what I'd like to talk to you about. How did you handle being scared? I'm scared a lot. Scared I won't do the right thing. Scared of what people might think. Scared I might make a mistake. How scared were you? You made it. You survived. Where did you get your strength, Grandma? Can you give it to me? Or maybe it already runs in my veins. Where is it? Where is it, Grandma?

I want to lie in that big bed at your house again. I want to watch you and Grandpa getting ready for bed. The lights going out. To hear you sleeping. Funny I never heard either one of you get up early. Grandpa to milk the cows, and you to make breakfast or your morning chores before Grandpa came back and then left again for the fields. You were there when I got up. You were there when I went to bed. I was safe.

How did you make me feel safe, Grandma? I don't feel safe now, and yet when I think of you, I feel safe. Was it because I felt more like myself around you? Even my own parents? I know I had to behave myself, and I wasn't allowed to run wild or anything with you. It felt right with you. Maybe for a week I felt special. I mattered. I was an individual that week. Not my parents' daughter. Not the little sister. Not even your grandchild. I was Diane. I was me.

That's what I miss now, Grandma. I miss being me. With you. Without you. I was a pretty happy kid when I was with you. I wish I felt that now.

I'm trying. I'm going to therapy now. I know. Or maybe I don't know how you'd feel about that. Maybe you'd say if it helps, then it's okay. Maybe we'd sit in awkward silence. Maybe you'd tell me we need to gather the eggs from the henhouse, and afterwards we'd sit under the tree and sip RC Cola, and I would look forward to riding the milk cart.

Do you think Grandpa would push me fast enough for the wind to blow my hair? Fast enough to be fun, but not too fast where I'd be afraid he'd tip me over, and I'd have to pick gravel out of my elbows? No. He'd never go that fast. He'd be careful. He'd make sure I was safe. Just like you did.

I love you. I hope you get this letter this time.

Love,

Diane