

Personal Essay by Lee Bloxom

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Some Stories Grandmothers Don't Tell

My grandfather has been dead twenty years when she tells me their love story. How Brantley came to an event at the schoolhouse where she taught first grade. How they left the second floor at the same time, down opposing staircases, and how he laughed in her face when they met at the bottom of the stairs.

Miss Nannie Miles wasn't interested in him. She was thirty years old, an unmarried schoolteacher, but she was far from desperate. Times were hard with the Depression, yes, but she had work and a place to live on the family farm. Every summer she traveled by car and ferry across the Chesapeake Bay to Williamsburg to take classes at the College of William and Mary. Brantley was old enough to be her father.

"Why would I want to go out with that old man?" she told her friend. She had to be convinced to go out with him. On their first date, they went to the movies. The film was set in New York City.

She says he leaned over and whispered, "That's where we'll go on our honeymoon." This time she laughed in his face.

Exactly a year later, they were in New York City, celebrating their honeymoon. She never taught school again.

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Every weekday, tall and lanky as Abe Lincoln, my father crosses the highway at a jog and walks briskly across Mappsville's town square through the garage and into his mother's house for lunch. On most summer days, my mother, brother and I join them around the dining room table for

a meal of fried flounder or chicken and dumplings with fresh yeast rolls and boiled white potatoes or butter beans. We always drink sweetened iced tea.

My grandmother's rocker sits near the door to the screened-in side porch. On cooler days, once the work of lunch is done, she opens the door, sits in her rocker and reads her Bible, a well-worn modern edition. Behind her, a huge fern spills out of a pot big as a washing machine and fills the bay window. My brother and I are scolded for touching it and bruising its leaves. We are allowed, however, to play with anything else we could find. All Dad's toys and books and puzzles we drag out of closets and hiding places. There are WWII era guns and tanks, a stuffed monkey whose ear we tear off, wooden puzzles of farm animals in a large crock, a movie projector with 1940's era cartoons, and lots of wonderful picture books like the Uncle Wiggly series and *The Little Brown Bear*.

My grandmother's house, a three-story Victorian, towers over Mappsville's town square. Outside her doorway, eighteen-wheeled tractor-trailers hum past on the four-lane road, a blur at sixty mph. Inside the drawn curtains, it is 1940, the world of my father's childhood.

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My grandmother decides that I need to attend a funeral before I have to attend one for someone I care about. I am twelve and she loads me in the front seat of her big black Buick and takes me to a stranger's funeral. I sit next to her in a darkened funeral home on a folding chair; a minister I don't know reads from the Bible and says a few words. I suppress a giggle. Why is no one crying? This man had been old, but didn't anyone here care that he is dead? I guess my grandmother knew this corpse, but I didn't. Everyone attending this funeral is older than my parents. After the hushed service, we follow other cars slowly in a line to the cemetery behind Downing's United Methodist Church. Under a postcard blue sky with white fluffy clouds and a stiff wind, we bury the stranger with a few more words I've heard read before. Then we climb back into her Buick and drive away.

I understand her logic later, when the first funeral I attend for someone I care about is hers.

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I am six hundred miles away at college when my grandmother gets sick. My mother chides her for not getting up, preferring to believe that my grandmother is lazy than to entertain the possibility of a terminal illness. Shingles mask the cancer until it fills her body cavity with black fluid, leaving her nauseated when she moves.

I finish my junior year in college and come home about the time she is finally taken to the hospital. Alone with her, I lean against the hospital room wall and let it hold me up. She sits weakly on the edge of the bed, body swollen, round and painful, and she asks two haunting questions. "What was it about? What was my life about?"

We are crying. I want her to know the answer. I am the child. She my beloved grandmother, the woman who squirrels dimes and quarters in her kitchen cabinet for me to spend on junk food at the grocery store next door, the woman who takes the time to tell me stories, the woman who comforts me when I fall. She taught me to read. She is supposed to have the answers.

I tell her, "You loved us. That matters more than anything." She has loved us, completely and well. She loves people with an active, often silent love. She feeds people and remembers people with cards and letters and she visits people. She listens. I tell her this matters to me, to everyone.

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My grandmother dies quietly at home on a hot summer night. Her bed, in the parlor that adjoins the dining room, is just ten feet from the table where we have shared so many meals. We care for her ourselves. My mother and a woman my grandmother sheltered as a teenager administer the morphine she needs for the pain. It causes her to see people and animals we can't see. A few days before she dies, she sees my grandfather.

She says goodbye to me with a squeeze from her hand. I cry alone for an hour before I have to put on the white waitress outfit I hate and go wait on tourists who want me to show them how to crack open a steamed Chesapeake Bay blue crab. Near the end of my shift, I am told that my father has phoned, that my grandmother has passed away, and that I am to go by her house on my way home.

Driving to her house on the back road leading into Mappsville, I see a cream-colored kitten abandoned on the side of the road. Normally, I would have driven past it, knowing my parents wouldn't allow me to bring a cat into their home. But the night she dies, I stop and pick up the kitten. I want my life to begin, immediately. I want to take risks. I want to live before I am dead.

My family is horrified when they see the kitten. "What were you thinking?" they say. No kitten. Not now. Not tonight. My parents make my practical brother take the kitten and leave it near a farm where it can find another home.

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Nannie died in the same room where Brantley had lain in his coffin. Mourners viewed his body in the parlor before his funeral at Mappsville Baptist Church. Pallbearers in those days had to be strong; they had to carry the loaded casket through a house, down porch stairs, and out a front walk to a waiting hearse. No wheeled carts or hydraulic lifts. Backs, legs, and arms carried a brother to his place in the ground. Funerals were held in churches then. It was 1949 and my father was twelve. My grandmother lived as a widow for thirty-three years, almost three times longer than she was married. She said she never remarried because she never met anyone she knew would be good to her son.

Everyone says it's a tribute that so many young people attend her funeral. For me the funeral is a blur of angry pain. I want to throw plates at a wall. I hate everyone who says, "I'm so sorry."

What does that mean? Can *I'm sorry* bring her back, where I can touch her, where I can hold her hand?

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Twenty-six years have passed since we cried together in her hospital room. I believe her love mattered, but her questions haunt me. What price did she pay for her selfless love? Did she give from her soul's deepest desire or had she been derailed, captured even, and therefore lived a less than authentic life?

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