

“Do come in,” Gran said, her warm smile welcoming me at the door, “but be quick, I want to tell you a story before it slips my mind.” And like a gust of wind she is gone, back through her tiny entry way and around the corner, likely to the kitchen.

I paused in the entry way to slip off my shoes, coming by Gran’s every afternoon was a daily habit I had. You’d never know it though, Gran greeted me everyday like she wasn’t sure I’d come. It made me warm all over that she was so delighted to see me, but it also left me just a little sad too, because I knew Gran’s memory was slipping

So did Gran. Sometimes she might be telling me a story and then drift off aimlessly, staring out the window as if she forgot what she was doing, or she might ask me for help doing small tasks. I feel funny when that happens, like I should say something important to make her feel better and not worry about the lost words or forgetting how to turn on her microwave, but the words get stuck like sawdust in my throat.

I really want to cry when it happens. I want to scream that it’s not fair and that I miss the old Gran who knew all the answers and wasn’t afraid to try and climb a tree with me to surprise Dad when he came outside to find us. Or the Gran who wanted me to hold her hand when we crossed the street so the cars would see me. Now I hold her hand when we cross the street so she doesn’t wander the wrong way. I try to never cry in front of her though.

Gran is sad enough when all the words escape her, when her memory trips over itself. She tells me, then, in a hushed whisper, “I don’t want to forget all the good stories, just the bad ones.” And I look at her, fighting back the stinging sensation in my eyes that means I probably won’t be able to stop the tears. But then, sometimes, it’s like the old Gran is back and she notices my upside down smile, the flush of my ears as if she can even hear the rushing noise inside of them, and she shouts out something random and funny like, “Lamb chops!”

Dad says Gran has always known just the right silly thing to say to make people feel better. He said that when he was little and the sad parts of the stories came she would shout just the right thing to make them laugh. It doesn’t make you stop feeling completely sad inside, but just enough so you can feel the warmth of a sunshiney kinda hug.

I like those kind of hugs, the ones that make you feel wrapped in a blanket of sun. Gran use to be good at giving them out, and sometimes when she yells funny things I just know that she needs one, and so we hug each other tightly and we laugh until the stinging in our throats is gone and we are howling so loudly that the tears we shed now are from laughter.

“Are you coming Janie?” I hear Gran call.

“Yes,” I shout back, I have to talk loud now so she can hear me once my words are done bouncing off all the walls and windows and roof. “Just closing the door.” And I do just that, I close and lock the door. It’s how Gran likes it. Dad says she’s always liked to have the door locked, because they once lived in a house where the wind would blow it open. Gramps didn’t like it being locked, and I think that’s kinda odd, but Dad says that’s only because I am use to it being locked.

Dad says that Gramps was often caught on the wrong side of the locked door because he’d go out to do something and no one would notice and wonder why the door was open or unlocked and they’d just close and lock it. The first time he told me I felt bad for Gramps, but Dad said that Gramps would just stand there and make funny faces until someone let him in, and that made me laugh a lot, and not feel quite so bad inside.

I hurry though the small entry way and pad my way across the fluffy carpet of the small living room. It’s not very big so there’s only a single chair right by the window, and a sofa up against the far wall. There’s a small table in front of the sofa with stacks of books on it, and a lamp in the corner that Gran forgot to turn off.

There’s a small table on each side of the sofa and one beside the chair too. They are each piled with books, and the tables look heavy with their load. Most are ones Gran has read many times over, and she’s even read some of them to me before. She said she’s never really lonely because she can just open up a story and her friends are there to greet her.

I use to think that was funny, and even a little bit weird, but not anymore. When Gran reads to me, it’s like all the characters in the book have come right out of the page and are sitting there with me. I can see the garden hidden behind the stone wall, or the magic cupboard and

the snowy world beyond, or the red haired girl on the farm making up beautiful names for everything she sees. Sometimes, when no one is looking, I find myself looking around for all those characters because they feel so real.

As I cross the small bit of floor to the kitchen my nose is tickled by cinnamon and my mouth begins to water. Gran's baking molasses cookies and they are cooling on the counter just under the window. The dark cookies smell warm and spicy and I can't wait to dig into one. Gran always has a snack waiting, and she always has some with me and says funny things like, "This is why I don't have a figure anymore you know!"

Dad says that Gran means she's feeling kinda plump, but I think that's silly. I like my Gran just the way she is! She always smells like freshly baked goods, and her smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It makes me warm and cozy, and let's me know that all is right with the world. It dances across her cheeks and sparkles in her dazzling green eyes. Her hair is grey, I guess it use to be dark brown like the color of fresh earth when we turn it over to plant seeds each spring.

Now it's grey, and always piled on top of her head in some kind of messy shape that she can make in a second or two when she expertly twists a hairband around it. It's not short or neat like other Grans hair, and when she takes it down at night from the confines of that elastic band, it spills down her back like a rushing water fall, and I wonder in amazement about how long it must take her to brush out each day. She always laughs and says that's why she keeps atop her head.

My Gran is standing at the kitchen counter moving hot cookies from the pan she just took out of the oven onto the cooling rack by the window. I watch her as she expertly scoops and slides each dark reddish-brown shape with the crackled sugar topping from one place to another. A few strands of her hair have escaped the hairband and fly freely from the slight breeze at the window. Her cheeks are flushed from the hot oven, and the hair around her face looks damp from the sweat.

She's wearing dark blue pants and a red top, but you can barely see them from the red and white polka dotted apron she's wearing. It's stained from years of cooking and having the

food splash on her, but she doesn't mind. My Gran seems to like the old familiar things of yesteryears. They all hold stories, you see, and stories are what my Gran likes best.

"Gran," I call again as I walk up to the bit of counter that juts out like an L towards the cramped dining room. Gran has a table in the dining space, it's small and round and when everyone comes to visit at once there's never enough room because there are books here too, and papers and pencils. There's an old typewriter on the counter that weighs a million pounds, and even though Gran can't get ribbons for it anymore she won't let Dad get rid of it.

Gran turns around then as I lean in to sniff the fresh flowers in a vase that are on the counter. They are not store bought flowers, but ones someone has picked for her along the path from the big farmhouse my family lives in to the little cottage Gran lives in back here under the old hazelnut tree that has been around since before she was born. It's big and sprawls everywhere and drops it's spiny encrusted nuts on the ground in the autumn. It's funny, you know, Gran doesn't like hazelnuts, but she sure does love that tree!

"Do you like the flowers?" she asks, "Your uncle brought them in this morning. I don't know where he finds them all, but they sure are beautiful."

She isn't wrong. There are purple hues of the blue mist flower, whites from daisies and Russian Sage, golden yellows from sneezeweed, and pink from the stonecrop. I don't tell Gran, but I think my uncle knows all the best places for flowers and he tends to them to be sure they grow well and he can bring them to Gran.

"I love them," I tell her as I take a final inhale of their varying scents most of which I can't smell unless I lean in close because the spices from the cookies are still tickling my nose.

"Oh, Gran!" I say excitedly, "I brought your mail up for you. There's a parcel today!"

"Is there she says?" excitement rising in her own quiet voice. That's another thing I love about my Gran, she's always calm and quiet, until she's not. She gets excited about flowers, rainbows, and mud puddles just as if she was a kid like me! She gets excited about parcels in

the mail, and holidays and bright colours too. She never tells me I'm being silly to be so excited and if I say I can see a rainbow she asks me to show her where. When rain is looming she says, "I can smell rain, and that means puddles tomorrow!"

I pull the small brown wrapped parcel out of my pocket and place it on the table. It's wrapped with white string like in all the old stories when someone gets a package. Someone has written on it in a thick black marker with flowing curly script:

To: Mrs E. Pollard

c/o Thistleberry Farm

4 Hazlewood Cottage...

Gran's face lit up as if a sunbeam was shining down just on her, and I knew this was a package she'd been waiting for. The mysterious package she wouldn't tell anyone about. My Gran is often mysterious, but Dad says she always has been. He thinks it's because she writes stories and doesn't want to give away the endings. I don't tell Dad that sometimes Gran reads her stories to me to ask what I think of them, to see if they are too scary, too nice, too anything. It's not because I want to keep it a secret, but because it feels like my own special time with Gran, and if I talk about it, then it wouldn't be quite so special.

Gran rubs her hands on her apron and grabs a plate of cookies, "Let's open this up!" she says, her voice high and excited. She grabs a pair of scissors and the package, but I worry that it's too much and ask her if I can carry something. She hands me the plate of cookies, "And help yourself to as many as you like," she says as I take the plate and inhale the deep warm smell of all the delicious spices and rich molasses.

I don't hesitate to follow her instructions and greedily pick one up taking a huge bite, the sugar sprinkled across the top melting on my tongue, the chewy spiced cookie washing across my tastebuds. I must smile because Gran is watching me and says, "I'm glad you like them Junie!" as she laughs.

Her laugh is soft and kind and invites me to laugh too, and I do. Gran tells me that my Dad's laugh use to make everyone around him laugh when he was little. I think it still does, but I don't know if Gran knows that because her talks with Dad are often serious. They talk about moving out of her little house and into the big house.

But Gran likes it here with all her books and photos, she likes how it's quiet and the just right sunshine that streams in so she can read in the morning and write in the afternoon. My Dad is worried that she must be lonely and sad now that Gramps is gone, but I don't think she is, at least she never *seems* that way when I visit her.

I hurry to the table, nearly spilling the cookies off the side of the plate. Gran sticks an instinctive hand up and stops them before they spill and we both laugh this time, "We can't have our snack spilled across the table," she says through a couple of chuckles, "We need them in our belly!" I offer her a cookie and she takes a bite before putting it down and quickly cutting the white string on the package before her. Then she flips it over and slices through the clear plastic tape that's holding the brown wrapping closed, but she doesn't pull the paper off, she just sits there for a moment, staring out the window. I stop chewing my cookie and look up to see who's coming.

There's many of us, we all live on the farm in our own homes and we come and go as visitors to Grans cottage, but I always try to come when everyone else is busy, to have my own special time with her. There's nothing out the window, and I wonder what she's looking at, or if she's feeling sad.

I put my hand on hers, the difference between her aged and wrinkled skin and my young tight sun kissed skin is vivid in that moment. I like Grans wrinkles though, they each likely hold the secrets to every story she knows, and tuck them in safely so she can't lose them.

"Gran," I whisper, afraid to speak too loudly, but wondering if she can hear my voice when it's this quiet.

"Mmm," she replies her eyes still looking far away for a moment, and then suddenly she snaps back to where we are and smiles, "I'm sorry Janie, forgive me will you? I'm an old

woman you know, and often I can't help but think of things from long ago, of times both good and bad, and I wonder.." Her voice trails off for a moment and then she looks at me, her green eyes full and round, "and I wonder what your Gramps would think of this," and she places the package in my hands.

"What is it?" I ask trying to finish chewing my cookie without spitting bits of it all over.

"Open it and see!" Gran says, her excitement back again.

I pull back the brown wrapping and there's a book inside, written by my Gran. This isn't a huge surprise, my Gran has always written stories, at least as long as I have known her. Dad says she hasn't always written them, but that's hard for me to imagine because that's the only Gran I know.

The cover of the book is an old photo of my Gran and Gramps, but they don't look like my grandparents. I know they are, because I have been told this, but they look like people from a different time and place, almost like strangers to me. They are young, although not nearly as young as I am, and their hair is not white or grey or missing. Their skin is not thin and I can't see their veins, their eyes are clear and they aren't wearing glasses, but they are happy.

My Gran has always been happy, I think. I know there have been sad times for her, like when Gramp died, but she seems happy now. Sometimes, I think, I catch a bit of sadness in her eyes, especially when the forgetting is stronger, but for now I see happiness.

I run my hand across the hard smooth cover of the book and wonder what my Gran and Gramps were like when they were younger. I know their stories. I know all their adventures, I think. Like the time Gran met the famous sportsman and didn't know who he was, or the time Gramps nearly burned down the whole kitchen. The time they climbed a mountain just to see the sun set, or when they went camping and their tent froze closed. The time they traveled across the world, and stayed for a really long time before coming home. There are more, so many more, and I cherish them all, but I never imagine my Gram as young.

It seems too unfamiliar to me, to think of her with pig tails or braids playing with her dolls or

milking cows. It's hard to imagine her sitting in school or playing capture the flag, because when I imagine my Gran doing these things I've always thought of her as Gran, the lady beside me.

I stare up at Gran and see a look of distress on her face, "Oh Gran, what's wrong?" I realise she might have expected me to react differently to the gift, but..

"Do you like it?" she asks nervously interrupting my thoughts. There is concern etched across her face in the wrinkles I know so well. I see it in her eyes, and the quiet way she's rolling her wedding band round and round her finger.

I smile at her, "Of course I love it Gran, I just.." I don't finish my sentence as I glance back down at the book and read the cover: *Our Life In Stories*. I look up at her and feel a smile spreading over my face, "These? All the adventures?"

Her face lights up, the extra wrinkles on her forehead vanish. She stops spinning her ring as her hands come to rest on mine, "Yes, all of them- I think-, for you."

"Me?" I ask in surprise. I am not the only grandchild, there are many of us, we all wander in and out through the day. Some are too little to come on their own, some are too grown to come often, but I am not the only one, and I wonder why Gran has picked me.

Gran's hand is soft and warm on mine. I look up into her bright green eyes; there might be tears there, but I'm not sure because for a moment I think the only light in the room is shining on her face.

"Janie," she says my name, bringing me out of my racing thoughts, "because I know you will share them and they will not be forgotten."

I look up then, "But, I can't." I look away, too scared that I have hurt her with my words. It's not that I don't want to remember Gran's stories, I do! They are better than any fairy tales I've ever heard, because they are real, because even though it's hard to imagine my Gran as the young girl in the photos, I know she was!



I know she traveled to all those far away places, but this small house is her favourite home. I know how she's had many adventures, but how she considers her family the best one of all. I know this, but I can't tell these stories, they are Gran's and she must tell them.

It all reminds me she is older and sometimes fragile. I don't like to say old, because it scares me. It makes me think that I may wake up and my Gran will be gone. I want her to live forever even though I know she can't.

"Oh Janie," she says, her voice soft and calm as it wraps itself around me like a warm quilt bringing comfort on a cold day. "You know all my stories by heart, don't you?"

I nod my head, still not sure I can look at her.

"You love my stories as much as I do, don't you? You've never once let me forget a single line. I mean, I have, but you've always set me straight! You, my dear, do all the voices just right. You make me laugh when you tell me my own stories, because you do it so well and transport me back in time to the very moment and place you are speaking of. That's why I want you to have your very own copy, to share the stories so they aren't lost."

I look up then, and there is no sign of anger, or hurt, or disappointment, just pure happiness on Gram's face. I feel her words on my skin, I hear them tickling my ears, and I smile even though a part of me wants to cry.

"Will you keep them safe for me? Not locked in a box somewhere to collect dust, but told so they will be known. So others can laugh at my silly mistakes, and be as surprised as I was at those moments when I got things right."

I start to nod my head.

"And will you read them to me when I can't remember them? When I've lost all the words to tell them? Will you tell them to me, so I can be amazed all over again?"

I feel the lump rising in my throat, and I fight it by holding my breath for a few seconds and

then swallowing hard, but it's no use, I can feel it rising to my ears, the back of my eyes stinging, "Yes Gran," I tell her, and I mean it.

Grans face changes to surprise, and then the twinkle returns to her eyes, the pink to her cheeks, and I see her own lips fighting the laughter until she gives in and slowly starts to laugh. Her laughter only makes me laugh harder, and in moments we are laughing so hard we can't breathe.

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"Janie, are you in here?" a deep voice booms through the empty house. My old and tired eyes look up, and I am brought back to the present the here and now. I spend much of my time now lost in the past, simpler times some call them.

It's not that I don't love the present, there is much in it I am grateful for, but I miss my Gran. I miss them all, each loved one who has left this earth before me, and I wonder when I will see them again. I use what little strength I have left to pull myself up off the seat of my walker, "I'm in here John," I hear my old voice croak, it doesn't seem quite as familiar to me as it once did.

John, tall and husky like his father barrels into the room, "I've been looking for you everywhere Granny Jane! You've given us all such a fright."

"I came to retrieve something I left behind," I tell him.

I, like my own grandmother, have moved out of the small cottage and into the big house. It is noisy and busy there, and sometimes I feel lost in the chaotic movement of it all. Sometimes I need to escape to the sanctity of the small cottage that has housed many old Grans like myself. It holds so many stories I wonder how the old door can close without bulging on its hinges.

"Did you find it?" He asks, a mix of curiosity and concern on his face. It flashes only momentarily before his smile returns.

"I did," I tell him as I shuffle towards the door, for it was only memories I sought, "Have I ever told you the story of how I got this?" I ask him holding up my well worn book that shows how well read and loved it is. The book has a photo of a young man and women smiling up at us.

I pause, momentarily to look back, one last time, at the small cottage that one day he may call his home. I hope his own stories find their way within the walls, that they will not be forgotten or ignored, and then I turn and plod onward walking beside him.

He slips a comforting arm on my shoulder, "No Gran," he says, humouring me for what is likely the millionth time. Now we both smile as we descend the stone path to the house we both share.



The idea for this story just kind of crept up on me during a writing session one day. I call them good writing days, when the words fall from the keyboard, or pen, like rain on the scorched earth. They tumble out often as though I knew the story and had planned it, even when I haven't. As I sat at the table writing, Gran simply stumbled in front of me, not my Gran not my children's Gran, but Janie's Gran, and so I wrote about her.

Yet, as I wrote I felt drawn to Janie, how did she feel? What was she seeing? Having walked the road of caring for an aged parent with two children in tow who didn't always understand the sometimes bizarre and immediate changes in the grandparent they loved so much, I thought of them as the words tumbled forth.

One day after a particularly hard day caring for our own "Gran", I turned to my children and asked them one simple question: "What's the worst part of dementia for you?" I was tired and worn and tearful, and I expected them to say that I was absent a lot, both physically and mentally, I expected them to think of all the missed events because we couldn't get any help to sit with "Gran" so we could attend, or the canceled holidays when help backed out or simply failed to arrive.

But my children didn't see those things in that simple question, their responses were different, and somewhat unexpected: "Just that "Gran" isn't herself anymore." Each one elaborated in his own way. My deep thinker, though, said the words that most pained my heart, "I'm scared that one day we will show up to help her and she won't know who we are and it will make her more scared."

It was a legitimate concern, backed with the emotion of love for a grandmother who was no longer the person of his childhood. I remember sitting there and trying to find the right words to assure him that while it *could* happen, we hoped to have "Gran" in a safer environment by then.

To lighten the mood that day I said, "What's the best thing about dementia?" It seemed like a really crazy question to ask, but it was highly recommended by a dementia specialist to help our children process what they were enduring. There are a lot of resources out there for the sufferer and the carer, but so few for the children who are inadvertent victims of the disease too.

My younger didn't miss a beat when he piped up with, "The stories! "Gran" tells different stories to us now than she did before, and it's fun to hear about different times in her life." And, I suppose, in many ways Janie, in my story, is based on that single response.

Gran, in the story is not entirely based on our "Gran", but rather the combination of a few women who came to mind as I wrote. I borrowed characteristics from each of those women in order to form a new person, and created a softer less forgetful Gran.

Someday, when my heart is fully healed, although it will never be whole again, from our own "Gran" adventures, I feel somewhat determined to write a book for kids about the topic. To let them know they aren't alone, they don't have to be embarrassed, and they aren't alone in their fears.

But for now, I hope you enjoyed Gran & Janie, and the love they shared. I wonder, myself, if John ever lived in that small cottage, and exactly what mountain it is that Gran climbed. You see, even as the writer I don't have all the answers to such questions worked out, although I

do know a woman who climbed a mountain and perhaps borrowed a few of her adventures for Gran.

The Reluctant Author.

