

Her Name was Gertrude

Grandma lived in northern California, deep in the redwoods outside a little town called Garberville. A trip to Grandma's was always so exciting for me. I loved her so. She was the only grandparent I knew. My grandpa died when I was four. My father's parents died before I was born, so for me, they have only been names in stories. But Grandma was real, and I knew she loved me too. Grandma was left alone at a fairly young age, so she managed to keep a youthful quality about her. She would always have her beautiful silver hair done and liked to wear makeup. But she was still a grandma. She wore dresses with aprons and smelled of perfume and cookies.

The drive to Grandma's house was long for us four kids in the back of the station wagon. We knew we were getting close when the smell of the redwood trees would drift into the windows and vents of the car. The roads climbed twisting mountainsides, and as the trees grew thicker, the scent of them became more intense. Before we knew it, the hill ahead would lead us into downtown Garberville. The town would pass you by if you tried to blink too long, so you had to take it all in pretty quickly. To the right was the dime store where grandma always let us buy something special when we went to town with her. Further down on the right side was the Peter Pan grocery store, where grandma shopped. On the left was the gas station where my uncle Charlie worked. If my memory serves me, we turned left to go to Grandma's, where we passed the post office and the ice cream stand.

The town of Garberville was on the side of the mountain, so to get to Grandma's, you had to go down the mountainside a bit, cross over the Eel River, and then go back up the mountain on the other side. I loved this part of the ride. The bridge over the Eel River was made of wood and steel beams. The tires of the car hit the beams just right, making a steady and familiar rhythm as the car passed over. There was a rope tied underneath the bridge and when we went swimming, we would swing out into the water like Tarzan. The only bad thing about the Eel River, were the pincher bugs. If you stayed still for too long, ouch! The bridge has been paved over, but I'll always remember the way it used to be.

The drive up the mountain to Grandma's was beautiful. Homes were far back off of the road, and far apart. We knew Grandma's house was close when the road leveled out. Her house was on the left and she lived directly across from the small airport. We could see the small planes take off and land right from her front yard. Before Grandpa died, they lived in what was referred to as the 'big house', a large country home painted white. I remember there was a wooden water tower in the front. We actually swam in it, although I'm not sure we were supposed to. I guess that house was too big for her by herself, so she moved into the house next door. It was small, but I loved it there. It was yellow with brown trim and had redwood stumps for stepping-stones up to her front door. It was back off the road a bit, and there were trees all around. My Aunt Patty and Uncle Charlie lived right in front of her, and there was a barn for Aunt Patty's horse, Molasses.

The driveway into Grandma's was like a big horseshoe. The curve of the horseshoe ran between Grandma's house and Aunt Patty's. When we'd drive up, we were greeted from both sides, and it was wonderful.

I confess, after I gave Grandma her hug and kiss, I had to make a dash to her kitchen to look in her cookie jar. Grandma had an apple shaped cookie jar with a wooden lid. If I didn't find her perfectly delicious chocolate chip cookies with walnuts, I was sure to find Oreos. As long as we were there, that cookie jar was never empty. Grandma was a good cook too. I remember one meal in particular, but not so much for what we ate, but the dishes we ate on. Grandma's dishes were the old blue and white country designs by Currier & Ives. We ate outside under the sweet-smelling redwood trees on the long picnic table. The setting was so beautiful with those charming dishes all around.

One of my favorite things to do was look at Grandma's jewelry. To me, she had the prettiest trinkets and baubles, and in every color! She didn't have pierced ears, so I could wear her earrings. Her jewelry box sat on her dresser that had a round mirror attached to the back. It was so fun to dress up with Grandma's things, and she never seemed to mind if I didn't put them back just right.

So many thoughts and memories come to me when I think of Grandma's house. My first bee sting, poison oak that made my face swell up like a balloon, the fire my sister and I started by flicking matches and then stomping out the fire. We swooshed instead of stomped once, and it got out of control. The fire department had to be called because the wind and dry grass made it grow so fast. We told a story about some boy who ran off, but the firemen knew, and Grandma knew who did it. She was upset, but she handled it well, and never talked about it unless we did. There was the time I was chased by the bull in the field until my brother, Jimmy, was able to scoop me up into the tree before it reached me. At night we could actually lay out in an open field in our sleeping bags and look up at the gazillion stars in the sky overhead, without thinking twice about being in any kind of danger. I remember Grandma's homemade blackberry jam.

I know everything wasn't perfect at Grandma's, and when I grew up, I saw her grow old. I saw her when she started to repeat herself a lot. I remember watching her stare off to 'somewhere', probably remembering happier times during her younger days. It was during this time I would ask her questions about her life when she was a young woman. I learned she was orphaned as an infant but was soon adopted. She was a flapper in the 1920's. She and her friends enjoyed car races when she was a young bride. She was married to my mother's father until he died when my mom was ten years old. She married one of his friends, my Grandpa, about a year later. He had a sawmill outside of Garberville, where they settled, and she became a full-time homemaker. She had a full, rich life. She was a beautiful woman, inside and out.

Grandma passed away the day before her 81st birthday. I miss her terribly. Grandma's house was a happy and wonderful place, and I thank God for the cherished memories from her being in my life.

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