

The Message

As I sat in the back of the double metro bus, I could feel every bump on the much-traveled freeway. We began to slow and as I looked up, I could see a stream of red lights. I knew all too well that it meant a slow and tedious ride home. Possibly it was the cool weather that caused the wet roads to deceive drivers and cause an accident. As I heard the noise of the countless sirens in the distance, each with their own distinct sound, I began to think of the unexpected message I had received on my answering machine the night before. Those three words kept repeating in my mind like a skipping record.

I began to think about my years growing up in Wisconsin. I was actually born in southern California, but when I was two years old my parents decided to move to western Wisconsin; a small town where my father was born and had spent his years growing up. My parents purchased a home on the main street of this little town where they wanted my brothers and I to grow up closer to our grandparents.

My grandparents lived on a farm about five miles out of town. I can remember the excitement of finally being able to ride my purple ten-speed bike out to their house. It was always such a peaceful ride. I would take the country roads which wound around past farms, a lake or two, a few grueling hills, and then finally the "farm". (That is what our family had always referred to as my grandparent's place.) My grandparents have always lived in the same farmhouse and they raised six boys there, while my Grandpa did the never-ending farm work. I always took such pride in telling my friends that this house had been in our family for over one hundred years and when my great-great grandparents lived there it was a stage coach stop.

The old worn out doors on the house were never locked, so when you arrived you would just walk in and give a yell for Grandma. She would come running and hug and kiss you like it had been years since she saw you.

As soon as the greetings were over, without hesitation, Grandma would begin mixing up her famous pancakes (famous at least with our family). She would bake the pancakes on an old-fashioned wood-heating cook stove. The batter would sizzle as it hit the hot oil and within twenty minutes after arriving, the first pancake was ready to eat. The pancakes would cover the plate and I would quickly smother it with real butter and rich homemade maple syrup. The first bite was always the best. It did not take long to finish it off and only afterwards did I realize how full I really was. The good thing about her

pancakes was you would not need to eat the rest of the day except for the chocolate chip ice cream that was always a welcome treat for later.

If I happened to be at the “farm” on laundry day it was an added bonus. Doing laundry was always so much more exciting at Grandma’s house. She did not have the modern washer we had at home, but an old Maytag agitator wringer type. We would fill the large square tub with scorching hot water drawn from the worn green garden house. When we started the machine, the water would begin to swish back and forth like a violent storm at sea; and as we put the soap in, the suds would begin to rise. It was now time to add one of the mountains of clothes neatly sorted a time before. After the clothes had survived their journey at sea, the fun began. The machine was turned off and we would grab a less than perfect wooden stick to pull the clothes out of the hot murky water. We would then get to feed the clothes between the two round cylinder wringers slowly spinning around. The clothes would be sucked right through and come out flat and stiff falling in the basket on the other side with a thud. Grandma would always remind me not to get my fingers too close to the moving cylinders for fear my fingers would end up flat like the clothes. We would repeat the process once more to rinse the clothes removing the soap.

Now that our chores were done, it was time to play. I would run and grab the worn out deck of cards, which had numbers almost the size of the card itself, while Grandma cleared a place on the kitchen table. We would mostly play “500 Rummy”, but would occasionally get in a game of “Crazy 8” or “Go to the Dump”. We would play until one of us realized it was time for me to begin my journey back home. It always seemed harder and longer to ride the bike back home, but as I left I would think of the fun I had at the “farm”.

As I got older I began to spend less time with my grandparents. Football and basketball games, cheerleading, friends and of course boys became more exciting. Occasionally we would spend an evening at the “farm”, sitting in front of the roaring fire as the aroma of the wood smoke filled the air. If we had time we would fit in a game or two of cards, but always had to hurry and get home for a phone call, homework, or whatever else seemed pressing at the time.

My father became ill at this time and after a long hard struggle, passed away at a young age. My visits to my grandparents became even less frequent after that. Shortly after the death of my father my mother decided she would like to be close to her family in Washington. My younger brother and I decided we could

use a change and agreed to the move. It all happened very quickly and before I knew it were making Washington our home.

I had graduated from high school by now and became busy with work, meeting new friends, and exploring the wide variety of landscape Washington has to offer. My communications with my grandparents had come down to an occasional call or a short letter and card at birthdays.

I thought about the two quick trips I had made to Wisconsin. During those times, I was excited to see my friends and managed to squeeze in an hour or two at the “farm”, which had begun to show it’s years.

I then remembered the most recent trip I took back there. My grandparents were celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary. My aunts and uncles lovingly planned an open house for them, inviting people who have know Grandma and Grandpa. Of course, all the cousins, and aunts, and uncles would be there too. It had been a long time since we had all been together.

My brother, sister-in-law, and I decided to make the trip to Wisconsin for the event. We rented a plush Volvo sedan and drove straight through arriving twenty-eight hours later. It was different going back this time. I could see my Grandma and Grandpa through different eyes. All the stories, pictures, and bits of history became so much more interesting.

The day of the anniversary was wonderful. It was just like old times; playing a competitive game of volleyball with my cousins, while the adults tended to the details of the party. People came from everywhere to greet my grandparents and offer their best wishes. My Grandpa was wearing the same brown polyester suit coat he had worn for his fiftieth anniversary, but still looked as sharp as ever. My Grandma was wearing a new mint green dress one of the grandchildren had purchased for her. She walked around in her white medium heeled shoes she had purchased at a garage sale the whole day greeting people and so proud of all her family. No one would have thought she had been diagnosed with cancer.

As the bus came to a stop I was forced back to the present. When I arrived at home I listened one more time to the three words on the recorder, “Grandma passed away”.

