

## Time To Come Home

When I ran away from home, I took grandma with me. I'd taken the afternoon off from a futile day of job-searching. Nothing available. Just fast food and factory temp jobs. The kids were in school, the sun was shining, and I had no special place to be. I felt a heavy weight in the center of my chest. Who was I? What was I meant to be?

Take a break, I said to myself. Go see grandma in her assisted living home. I had a few errands to run in Cedar Hill about ten miles north of town, and since I'd drive in that direction on my way, I'd stop in for a quick visit.

I needed to stop at the grocery to get dog food and some makings for homeroom brownies on Monday. The best place to get those was at the Wal-Mart in Cedar Hill. I also needed to buy new shower curtains for the kids' bathroom—maybe something with fish or sail boats. They would be cheaper at the Dollar Store. Not as fancy as the ones Abby had seen at Macy's, but cheaper.

I found Grandma sleeping in the old pine rocker in her room; chin tucked carefully into her chest like a nesting bird that had just settled. Her glasses had slid down her nose and hung there precariously, waiting for a breath of air for take-off.

"Grandma," I raised my voice hoping to rouse her, but not loud enough to startle her. The pink of her scalp was shining through limp wisps of yellowed white hair. Her hair had always been thick and heavy, I'd always thought of it as a wavy white cloud that stood high on the top of her head before it fell around her checks. It had hovered in my imagination somewhere between the angel in the children's bible, and the cloud just above the heavenly hosts. Where and when had that disappeared?

She jerked awake with a snort, the rocker rearing on its haunches. She looked at me with a glazed unfocused expression like it took her a few minutes to realize who I was.

“Grandma, I thought I’d come over and say hello. I’m going to run to Cedar Hill for a few things for the house. I wanted to see you for a few minutes. Do you need anything at the Dollar Store or Wal-Mart while I am over in that direction?”

“So, where are we going? I always like to travel in the fall. It’s my favorite time of year.”

“No, Grandma,” I kept my tone gentle; “I had the notion that I’d take the afternoon off to go to Cedar Hill to run errands. It’s nowhere you’d want to go. I just had the notion.”

“Oh,” she said with a faint breathy sigh of relief, “I’ve always loved going to the ocean. How long will we be away? I must have someone pick up the mail and feed the cat.

Since the cat had been dead for at least 15 years, and all her mail went to my mother to be sorted before delivery, I didn’t think Grandma had anything to worry about.

“Oh,” I said, not trying to be evasive, but trying not to commit to anything I couldn’t weasel out of I said, “I’ll only be gone for an hour or so. Need to run a couple of errands while everybody is at work or school.”

“Oh good,” she said. “Let me get a few things together. I mustn’t forget to take a hat. I just love going to the ocean, don’t you? It reminds me of when you were a little girl. Remember when we walked together on the beach, just you and me, while your parents went around to the shops? I thought it was a pure shame that they did all those

things they could do at home. Too bad they couldn't be troubled to walk on the beach, pick up shells, and play in the tide pools. Still, if they had, we wouldn't have had our fun times, would we?"

"Later, Granny. Maybe later. I'll think about it." Her mouth drooped turning down like melted wax. She didn't say anything else. She just started rocking back and forth. She wouldn't meet my eye. I gave her a kiss on the top of her head that smelled like it hadn't been washed in a while. I missed the vanilla smell it always used to have—a warm sweet smell of baked cookies.

A picture came to me of a small-sunburned girl with a plastic pail and a shovel carefully scooping piles of sand to make a misshapen lopsided sandcastle. Wet ginger hair stuck to her forehead as she frowned in earnest concentration. At her side, her grandma patiently scooped and mounded globs of wet sand with strong, brown-spotted hands; long bony legs patterned with little blue and red veins like Daddy's road map thrust in front of her as she sat humming a contented scrap of melody. How could I disappoint her in a way that she chose never to disappoint me? What would a few days hurt? Since I'd been laid off for the last month, who'd care, anyway. Well, the fat woman at the employment office could just be reminded that I could do job search on-line. It wouldn't be like I couldn't report back to her next week or the week after.

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"David," I told my husband, "Everything is driving me crazy right now. I am losing patience with the house, the kids, both dogs, and even after a month I can't find a sign of a decent job. I need to get away for a few days, a week, maybe." As I spoke, he looked straight at me, but his face tightened, and his habitual little boy smile slid right off

his face. His eyes darkened from their normal gray blue to a deeper sharper color. I think he believed he was a part of the crazy making, but he never asked, and I never said. He must have thought because everything looked smooth and pretty on the surface, it was that way underneath. It wasn't.

It was churning and fermenting like yeast in a copper kettle—slick and glistening on the surface, poised to break through any minute.

“Where do you plan to go?” he asked tapping his finger on his wrist: a habit that he had when he was uncomfortable.

“I don't know where exactly.”

“I suppose it will be in the mountains,” he said, since that is where we usually went.

“Maybe. Not sure yet.”

“What about a plan? Where do you plan to go and for exactly how long?” he asked still tapping his finger.

I shrugged and kept a cheerful smile stapled to my lips. I'd always planned everything, except, of course, to be laid off, so to be honest his asking was a natural question. I always do a fair amount of planning. I create detailed lists of groceries that need buying, bills that need paying, and shots that need scheduling—for both dogs and kids. I schedule carpools, play dates, ballet lessons, and soccer. I get teacher lists early and have everything bought and labeled in color-coordinated folders at least two weeks before school starts. I make healthy meals from ingredients that I'm challenged to pronounce, and low fat low sugar snacks to put in the pantry. I put notes on the computer, notes on the refrigerator, and notes on the pantry door. I do those things,

usually. Of course, I knew David expected me to go to the cabin near Ashville where we went on most holiday weekends. I simply told him I'd let him know when I got there. I said that since I was taking grandma, I wasn't sure what the plan would involve.

In the end, all he said was that it wasn't a good idea to be gone too long because we hadn't done anything about Halloween. With money tight, this didn't seem to be a good time to be gallivanting around the country dragging a sick old woman. I told him that I had a dragon slayer outfit for Ryan and a kitten costume for Abby. Mother was close if she was needed, the kids had instructions about what they needed to do to help Daddy, and there was stuff in the freezer made up, so he wouldn't have much cooking to do. I'd promised the kids that they could splurge and order pizza one night, and if they ordered two mediums, each could pick one with the toppings that they really wanted.

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Grandma and I walked slowly along an almost deserted strip of beach. Thank goodness we'd missed the fall break crowds. Hard to believe that we'd been here a week already. It'd been hard in some ways. Grandma had some difficulty getting around, and I'd forgotten that she tired so easily now. We'd be heading home after breakfast in the morning. I think we were both beginning to feel that we'd been away long enough. I know David was a good dad, and he could cope. I had talked to him and the kids every night since we'd been here. The hurt hadn't totally left his voice, but his tone was softer.

The sun was sitting on the edge of the horizon ready to make its plunge out of sight. The clouds showed deep and purple with pale pearl undersides in the distance massed in thick heavy piles. The day had been unseasonably warm with thick heavy humidity even though it was late in the season. I expected that it might storm later. Still,

the clouds barely diminished the glitter of light playing across the tops of the waves. We walked slowly along the edge of the water our feet and ankles chilled in the splash of cool, brown-edged water. I walked toward the shore letting my bare feet sink into wet sand where the heat of the day still held.

Ahead of us, we could make out a pair of oystercatchers their bright red bills and tuxedo chests making them stand out even from a distance. Grandma stood staring at them, shading her eyes with her hand.

“I remember you used to say you wanted to see the birds with the red noses and fancy shirts. You don’t see them much anymore. At least, I don’t think you do. Of course, it’s been so long since I’ve been to the beach that I really don’t know.”

“No, I guess the beaches are getting too crowded for them, Grandma. Too many people here now. Of course, it’s been a while since any of us has been to the beach. You always expect that it’ll stay the same.”

As we approached, the birds screamed in fright, and took off flashing the chevrons on their wings. I marveled at the sight of their beauty and strength. I wondered why it had taken me so long to get back. Why had I always taken my children to the mountains when there was so much at the beaches of the Carolinas to share with them? Not that the mountains weren’t beautiful, but still.

“I wonder, Granny, why it has taken me so long to get back here.”

“You’re here now.”

“But it’s been years.” Of course, David and his family had always gone to the mountains. It was their family tradition to go to the mountains, so there we went.

“Grandma, your feet must be cold. Maybe you need to get up here out of the water.” Her feet looked grey with cold, the little curled up nails yellowed and thick. I’d forgotten to bring her beach shoes, and I was afraid she would fall with flip flops. All we had were some run over backless tennis shoes, and I hated to get them all full of sand, so we’d left them up by the beach steps.

She acted as if she hadn’t heard me. She took several more shuffling steps forward. “Remember how the ghost crabs used to scare you? It’d be about this time of the evening when they’d scuttle across the sand and disappear into their holes. You’d squeal like a little stuck piglet afraid that you’d step on one. Still and all, you remind me of one—ghost crab, not piglet.” She smiled.

“How could that be? I don’t even like ghost crabs all that much. They prey on sea turtle hatchlings. They are scary looking—those weird eyes on the ends of stalks.” I ran my fingers through my hair. I didn’t want to just snap at her. I felt grouchy and out of sorts when I was hoping that our last evening would be a sweet reminder of what we’d be missing. I wondered why I couldn’t have reminded her of an oystercatcher.

“Still baby, you remind me of one. Always scuttling and scampering trying to disappear down your hole, I reckon. You run backwards, forwards, and sideways, you do this, you do that, and run your legs off all the time. Like those Ghost Crabs, though, your shell isn’t thick and protective, not like the other crabs.”

I tried to make myself believe that she was old and not thinking as clearly as she used to. She didn’t know what she was talking about. She was a sad old woman who’d conned me in to taking her along on my time out, my time of discovery. This was not what I’d planned for. This was my time out to find what I needed, not a long trip down

memory lane, even though it brought back thoughts and feelings that I hadn't thought or felt for years.

“Remember baby, these crabs can move fast when they need to, but they can also manage to make themselves blend in—to appear to be a part of whatever's around them. I think I told you that before though, didn't I?” She looked confused and anxious. She placed a hand on my arm—her knotted fingers clenching at my forearm. I looked at her. I hadn't realized that she looked so frail.

“Yes, Grandma,” and I put my arm around her and pulled her close. The bones of her shoulders felt small and hollow against my side. “But you also reminded me that although Ghost Crabs are in the process of becoming land animals, that it is important for them to return to the ocean. They know that it is essential to remember that to survive and to know who they really are, they need a sense of purpose in their lives. For Ghost Crabs they still need to keep their gills wet.”

I looked down at her, and she looked inordinately pleased at what I had said. She smiled and nodded, and then began to hum a tuneless song and continued her way up the beach.