

Drammy's House

As a child, I was never able to master the letter "G"

My Drammy taught me my very first tongue-twister. It was "Susie sells seashells by the Seashore". I practiced for hours in her dimly lit music room, where the large black piano sat. I was missing several teeth you see, so I found the process quite difficult. There was an ancient mirror, with a tiny crack in the upper right corner, which played the part of my critic, and the stage upon which I would rehearse. When I knew for a fact that I had mastered the tortuous words and their precise sequence, I would proudly announce my debut with a hand written invitation for the formal performance. My Drammy would arrive at my performance in her most colorful apron, and place her large body upon the piano bench. I would always wear my favorite pink pajamas, which were covered with poodles that had white bows in their hair. Drammy would nod her head which meant that I should not linger. I would lift my chin as high as possible for the most dramatic effect, and begin...

I rode the city bus to Drammy's house every summer. When I was very young my mother would accompany me. It was a very long trip, and I would sometimes snuggle up against my mother, and sleep the miles away. I always carried my small pink suitcase, which was covered with Dalmatians wearing red fireman hats. My small case contained all of the requirements of a very important princess. There was a pink dress and a pink pair of shoes, along with several books of mystery, and my favorite polka dot socks.

Drammy dressed funny sometimes. She often looked like a man when she wore those

flannel shirts which had belonged to my Grandfather. I saw a picture of my Grandfather once, but Drammy never told me stories about him. In the summer her gray hair poked from beneath her scarf which was tied tightly beneath her thick chin. One time, when she fell asleep in the big velvet reading chair, I spotted black hairs in her ear. They scared me, those big black hairs, and I ran to my room.

Lots of people came to Drammy's on the Fourth of July. The very important ones sat on folding chairs and drank glasses of fine wine. I did not know many of them, except for Uncle Jimmy who always made me bring him a piece of cherry pie. There was food everywhere. Casseroles and salads, biscuits and pickles, but Drammy's lasagna was what everyone came for. Drammy spent hours in her small kitchen that morning. I had to eat a cold bowl of cereal because she said she was too busy for pancakes. The air was ripe with the smell of tomatoes and garlic. Steam rose above the boiling pots and sometimes I could barely make out Drammy's shape as she moved silently around her task. People would come and go from the kitchen, but never stayed too long, they knew better. As the skies darkened in the cool of the evening, everyone prepared for the grand fireworks display which the City put on every summer. You could see the entire display right from Drammy's back yard. The important people would place their jackets upon their shoulders and continue their chit chat, even after the sky was lit with glittering lights and thundering explosions. Drammy sat with me, on her old wool Indian blanket that smelled funny, and we played with sparklers and sipped on cherry Kool-Aid. One Fourth of July, Drammy dropped the lasagna while she was walking down the small wooden steps that led from the back of her kitchen. I cried and ran to the chicken coop, where I did most of my hiding.

There was a very large cherry tree growing in Drammy's yard. I often climbed to the

top in order to see if the cherries were ready to be plucked from their cords. I would sit in the crook of two thick branches, and take my sweet time stuffing only the perfect ones into my small mouth. I would sit there for hours, eating the fruits of my labor, and surveying the kingdom below my perch. Suddenly my belly would cry out to me, and I would quickly climb down and throw up their redness.

My Drammy played long songs on the big black piano in the music room. I was terrified of its black and white teeth. Drammy played those songs so fast, I got dizzy in my head. She tried very hard to teach me to play those long songs, but my chubby little fingers kept slipping off those horrible teeth. She even tried simple songs like "twinkle twinkle little star", but that made me only want to go to the bathroom. What I did enjoy most about these music lessons was that this was a time I had Drammy all to myself. I loved the way her large body would bump next to mine every time a note would change. I felt important.

Drammy's car was big and blue. She would let me hold the steering wheel, with one hand, whenever we drove to the Chinaman's Market on Fourth Street. She always gave me five shiny pennies to gamble on the gumball machines at the front of the tiny market. The big problem was, you see, that there were actually six gumball machines. This made the decision of exactly which machines to play, quite a predicament for me. I would stand facing those six machines and carefully scrutinize their contents. The one on the far right had more pink gumballs, but the one on the left had a golden bracelet. Most often, Drammy would return to the front of the store, after making her purchases, and find me still standing there, the five pennies clutched tightly in my sweaty hand. She did not yell or give me a look, she simply took my hand and we left. The next time we drove to the Chinaman's market, I had ten shiny pennies in my hand, and I won three pink gumballs, a diamond ring, and two bouncy balls.

Drammy's garage was a small wood shack that was only large enough for one car and barely large enough for hers. Near the back of the garage hung a long piece of red string with a yellow rubber ball tied to it. Drammy always put on her funny looking glasses when she parked the big blue car. She would hug the large steering wheel to her breast, and crane her neck forward, carefully watching the yellow ball as we inched forward. I would tuck my knees up under me, and sit as high as I could in order to watch the ball getting closer to the windshield. The ball would creep forward and Drammy never flinched, until the moment when she thought she saw the yellow ball move, and then she slammed her foot so hard on the break, that I suddenly found myself on the car floor. When you went to open the side doors of the big blue car, you realized that there was exactly enough room to open them half way, before they would catch on the wood siding. You never wanted to catch on the wood siding. I had seen criminal evidence of catching the siding once, and it was not pretty. One night, when I was in my favorite hiding spot, under the adult's dining table, I heard the whispers telling a story about Drammy. Drammy had returned from a drive in a rainstorm, and was most likely quite nervous from the thunder. The whispers said that something had gone terribly wrong, and Drammy had driven right past that yellow rubber ball, and crashed through the wooden garage wall. I never saw it, and if you asked me, I would surely tell you that the whispers lie. Once I hear a loud whisper proclaim that there simply was no Santa Claus. Imagine that.

My Drammy reminded me of a royal Queen. She had silver hair and eyes like the ocean, but there was one thing that bothered me about her. It was her legs. I

peeked closely at them once, when I was hiding under the small breakfast table in the kitchen. I had to be very quiet in this hiding place because, I had once been caught, and could not have any licorice for a week. When I looked closely at Drammy's legs, through her cloudy nylon stockings, I saw that they reminded me of an elephant's legs that I had seen at a museum once. They were big and scratchy, and they had a hint of purple. They scared me.

Sometimes I was scared in the dark bedroom where I slept at Drammy's house. It was always cold, even in summer. My sheets were very clean and white, but Drammy would always put large diaper pins all around the bottom and sides. I was scared of these pins. What if they broke open and stabbed my legs? What if a fire started and I could not get out? When I got old enough to ask important questions like those, I asked her why she had to do this to me. She lowered her beautiful Queen's face to mine, and gazed at me through her watering eyes. "I put these magic pins about your bed to protect you from anything that would ever wish to harm you" she said. I didn't know what every word actually meant, but I knew the Queen was protecting her princess. I knew I was forever safe, and forever loved.

One night I had a frightened dream, and I tried to sneak into Drammy's room. I wanted so badly to lie next to her in her big white bed, and watch her mouth breathe. The house was very old and the wooden hallway floorboards were very noisy. They would scream at the lightest step. Drammy's light was on, and I peeked through the cracked door. I listened. I saw that Drammy's glasses were on her face, but they were crooked. Her head was tilted and laying upon her left shoulder, and I saw a patch of pink skin on the top of her head. Her mouth looked different somehow. Her lips were thin and formed a strange shape upon her mouth. One of her elephant legs was not covered by the silk sheet, and without her slippers I could now see the yellowed toenails that seemed to curl over her large toes. I was suddenly more

afraid of her than my frightened dream. I ran back down the screaming hallway and jumped onto my cold mattress. I threw the covers over my head and quickly arranged my bed sheet tent, where I often camped at night.

Drammy told me I could only play outside the kitchen window where she could always see me. This rather limited my playground, but that did not stop me. I had carefully arranged the entire yard, placing all of the most important things of play, within her window view. My shovel and pail, for constructing an exact replica of the Pyramids, my medical kit that I received from Santa, to heal the many sick and wounded who traveled this way, and my princess tea table. This grand setting consisted of a plastic milk crate for a table, and a tin bucket as my throne. I wanted to always be where Drammy could see me. There were large, strange trees outside my boundary, and sometimes they spoke scary words to me.

One day I spotted smoke above the trees beyond my boundary. I immediately reported this threat to Drammy, by shouting through her kitchen window. She quickly carried her heavy body down the wooden stairs and came to me. Her eyes scanned the black plume of smoke rising into the air, and told me, without smiling, to "never go to the smoke". I watched the smoke for a very long time, and then I went back to healing the wounded. I sometimes spotted the smoke when the sky was clear, and there was no breeze. Once, I even saw Drammy herself go to the smoke. She was carrying a shovel. I did not follow her. When I got bigger, Drammy took me to the smoke. She carried her shovel and I saw that her left pocket contained something.

As we approached the smoke, I saw a large black hole in the ground. When we stood on the lip of the dark hole, I squinted my eyes to see what lie within its blackness. I saw my box of cornflakes that I had finished last week, and my can of

tomato soup that I had for lunch on Tuesday. I looked closer and saw the morning paper, and my old toothbrush. Drammy shoveled a small mound of dead branches and leaves into the hole. She then pulled a long wooden match from her left pocket, and a small black rock. She struck the match upon the rock, which produced a bright flame. Drammy bent slightly and threw the burning match into the hole. I watched the dead branches from the red flowers, that always pricked my fingers when I picked them, slowly begin to burn. There were yellow flames now, and the large black plumes of smoke reached upward into the cloudless sky. I felt the heat warm my face, but my small body shivered. The flames were growing higher, and Drammy told me to go back to the house. I did not want to leave the fire. I wanted to stay with the smoke. I hid behind the big cherry tree and watched. Drammy pulled a large book from a sack which she wore under her flannel shirt. It looked to be the color of green. I suddenly remembered seeing that book one summer. It was when the whispers were at the dining room table, and talking of times long ago. When they had retreated to the music room, I had sneaked from my hiding place and stared at it. It was the most exquisite book I had ever seen. It was covered with beautiful green velvet, and contained photographs of people with strange clothing, wide eyes and tall hats.

I hated Drammy one summer. I had heard the whispers talking again from under the dinner table. Many of the important people in the family were there. I recognized each one of them by their legs and shoes. I had not seen Mrs. Jingles for a very long time. She was my silent partner in crime at Drammy's house. She never tattled on me. Not even when I stole those pink candies from the crystal bowl on the coffee table, or when I dug up Drammy's daffodils, on purpose. Mrs. Jingles got very fat that summer, and she never wanted to play. The whispers told me about a canvas sack, full of rocks, and firmly knotted with a heavy rope. My Uncle Jimmy said he drove the car to the muddy river in Charleston. I got sick that summer and had to go back home.

The happiest times were when Drammy took me camping. It took lots of days to pack everything we would need on our trip. Drammy cooked for days in the steamy kitchen, and I spent my time digging for earth worms in the black soil of Drammy's garden. I only kept the fattest ones, and they had to be boy worms, never girl worms. The drive up into the mountains was long, but Drammy taught me lots of road games. If I ever got hungry, I knew I could reach into the pocket of her flannel shirt and find a red and white peppermint. We slept in a big brown canvas tent that smelled of fish and campfire smoke. Our sleeping bags were soft, but cold. The zippers always got caught as I tried to close my heavy bag against the evening chill. Our fishing days were my favorite. I knew Drammy would catch large trout with my boy worms, as she was an excellent fisherman. I watched closely as she cut the soft white belly open with her large pocket knife, and gently removed the insides of our dinner. Drammy gave me my first anatomy lessons while we were fishing. I learned the place where a heart beats, and where the babies come from. Whenever she caught a girl fish, and we found the round red babies inside of her, we always threw them back into the stream. Drammy told me we did this so the babies could grow up and become mommy fishes. Many people came to visit Drammy's camp. Important ones slept in their heated trailers. They would sit around Drammy's campfire in their aluminum camping chairs, and drink hot drinks. Drammy always sat with me, on the blanket that smelled funny, and we burned our marshmallows together.

I never understood why Drammy had a big picture of Chinese people on her living room wall. It was magnificent. If you looked at the picture just like you would read a book, you could see a story. It had a big golden frame that made your eyes

squint when the sun hit it. I sometimes stared up at it as I lay on the big living room sofa. There were Chinese children playing Chinese games, and Chinese cats chasing Chinese mice. I had a dream once, that I owned the Chinaman's Market on Fourth Street. I dreamed that I ate gumballs all day, and yelled at the children who took too long to pay me their pennies.

One day Drammy told me to go to my room in the middle of the day. I wondered what I had done wrong. When she returned, she was holding an old brown box, tied with yellow string. She sat down on my mattress and her weight made the box springs whine. When she lifted the top I saw newspaper with words I had never seen before. I recognized the letters, but they were not in the right order and made no sense. Drammy gently lifted the newspaper and smiled at me. It was a new smile. It made me feel like the time Mrs. Jingles fell asleep on my lap, and her purring made my tummy tingle. I strained to see what was inside the box. Very slowly Drammy lifted something from inside the box. It was a doll. But, not like any doll I had ever seen. It was a beautiful girl, with a dress made of white lace and green satin. Her shoes were slippers, and her long brown hair was tucked up under a green velvet beret. Drammy let me hold the doll. She told me her name was Susie, and when I hugged her to my neck, I could smell her sweet, ancient perfume. I held Susie tight, as Drammy reached back into the box and lifted a round golden music box into her lap. Drammy would not let me touch the music box, but I begged her to play it for me. She paused, and her face became sad, then slowly her long crooked fingers began to turn the key. My child eyes grew wide as I watched the prince and princess dance while the music box sang to me. Its stuttering notes and tingling chimes grabbed at me, and I knew then that everything was different now. Drammy was different, just as I, and we were best friends for the first time.

When I got bigger and Drammy stayed in bed longer, she would sometimes let me say

goodnight to her in her bedroom. I was not allowed to enter her private sanctuary, unless invited. I would sit beside her on her soft white bed which was covered with beautiful silk blankets with pictures of flowers and birds. We talked about our secret plans for the next day, and what we would eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I watched as she swallowed the pretty pink and yellow pills that Doctor Johnson had given to her. I wondered if they tasted like gumballs. On special nights, she would let me sip from her grape juice glass, which always sat on her bedside table. It tasted warm and terrible. I liked it.

Drammy wore her funny glasses all the time now, but I never saw those hairs in her ears anymore. She never dropped the Lasagna again. She had the smoke hole filled with dirt, and planted red flowers which smelled pretty, but pricked my fingers whenever I tried to pick them for her. She told me were not Chinese, and that the China man sold his Market on Fourth Street.

An important man in a blue suit came to Drammy's house one windy day, and bought her big blue car. I watched him drive it slowly out the small wooden garage and drive away. We never went camping again.

Drammy told me she could not play the long songs on the big piano any longer. Her fingers were too crooked she said. I saw long blue lines and big brown spots on her hands. I did not remember those before. The cherry tree fell down in a big wind, and Drammy could not find Susie. The golden music box would not sing any longer, it would only make a ticking sound, like the kitchen clock. I quietly slid my hand into her pocket one day, and found no red and white peppermints, only a small wad

of tissue paper, and a button.

I got bigger. I learned lots of tongue twisters and taught my friends. I found a kitten that looked just like Mrs. Jingles but I named her Susie. The city bus changed its route, and did not stop at Drammy's house anymore. I learned to play the clarinet, and played in the city's Fourth of July parade. My friends took me to watch the city fireworks, but I was cold because I forgot the blanket.

I bought my first car. It was an old blue sedan. I drive it to my job because the city bus is too slow for me. I have yet to learn how to parallel park, the spaces are much too small for my car. I created my very own recipe for cherry jam, and it won first prize at the state fair. I bought a flannel shirt for my husband at Christmas. Sometimes I wear it when we take our young daughter camping. She says I look funny. She loves to sit by the campfire on the blanket that has worn well. This is where I let her win at Chinese checkers.

Our daughter is learning to play the piano, and her favorite subject is art, and specifically painting. Her favorite color is red, which explains why I am constantly finding pictures of red roses and red cherries throughout our house. She keeps asking her father for a kitten. I told her no because a kitten will grow to a cat, which will then have kittens, and it is too sad to give them away. I have a compost pile in my backyard. Every fall it is covered with red leaves from my maple tree. I must burn the leaves as they clog the black hole with their bodies. The mothers tell their children to stay away from the smoke

Every Fourth of July we have a party at our house. We barbequed steaks and hot

dogs. The invited people sit in padded lawn chairs and drink wine as they whisper gossip about the dirty doings within our humble neighborhood. My teenage daughter and her friends keep their distance, and play with the stray cat we found one night. We had just returned from our weekly Sunday shopping chore at the new super market on First Street. As the electric garage door opened, my headlights caught the cat hiding in the corner. I told my teenage daughter that we must take the cat back to its owners immediately. She cried and ran away.

One day my doctor told me I was ill. He was sitting in a very beautiful leather chair. Mine was plastic and uncomfortable. He gave me several vials of colored pills, and said they would ease my pain.

My daughter came to visit often, but she had to catch the bus from the city and make several changes along the route. It was a very long trip for her and she often forgot her bag.

It was hard to empty the house. Too many old brown boxes tied with yellow string. Nobody knew what to do with all of those boxes. When my daughter untied the yellow string from one of the boxes, she found a large book with a beautiful green velvet cover. It was full of photographs of people she did not recognize. The book looked very old, and she saw burn marks on some of the pages. When she drew it closer to her nose, the smell of smoke filled her nostrils. A feeling of uneasiness suddenly overcame her. She threw the big green book back into the old box. She cried and ran away.

My Granddaughter's name is Sofia. My daughter found the old Italian name upon one of the long branches of our family tree. Sofia, and her kitten Sam, loved pretending to be on a camping trip up in the attic of the house. They covered a broken black piano bench with an old canvas tent they had found. It smelled of fish and campfire smoke, and the two of them would pretend to roast marshmallows over a fire. One day they discovered a box. Sofia dragged the box into the tent so no one could see. The box was torn and battered and loosely tied by a yellow string. When Sofia pulled on the yellow string, the old box fell to pieces, and a cloud of black smoke filled the make believe tent. Sofia coughed, and she and Sam ran from the attic.

When Sofia moved away, my daughter decided to sell the old house. She had a hard time emptying the many rooms. There were so many boxes to go through. The attic came last on her list. She hated that place. She walked about, surveying the task at hand. The dust and smell made her sick to her stomach, and her eyes watered. She decided to leave it all, just the way it was. Her mother had told her to stay away from this place, it scared her.

The workmen found the box, when they were demolishing the attic. A new couple was moving in soon, and they wanted to change the attic into a bedroom for their young daughter. The workers found many old brown boxes in the attic, and they were not so pleased with this extra burden of getting rid of the waste. One of the older workmen was assigned to pick up the boxes, and throw them down into a big dark hole which was built to burn the trash. A long black plume of smoke rose up into the windless sky. The workman was happy to see that the number of boxes was slowly diminishing, and the fire was growing bigger with each drop of boxes. He wiped his

sweaty brow with his gloved hand. He sat down on an old piano bench and rested a bit. It had been a long and hot day for him. He scanned the room to see how many boxes were left to destroy. It looked like only one was left, so he pulled himself up, and shuffled his way over to where it sat. The box looked exactly like all of the other boxes had. Old brown cardboard, tied loosely with dirty yellow string. The workman grasped the box, but the string tore loose and the box dropped to the floor, created a plume of dust, which made the man cough and his eyes burn. When the dust had settled, he slowly walked back to the box on the floor, and attempted to lift it. As he leaned over the box, he squinted his eyes in order to see what the old brown box contained. He saw a large canvas sack. The canvas sack had been cut open at the bottom, probably by a large knife. The sack had a knot at the top, which was still tight and secured. It smelled of muddy water. There were old photographs strewn about the floor, which must have once been in the box, he thought. He picked several of the photos up, and tried to make out the pictures. They were yellowed with age and blackened by smoke. One of the pictures was easier to see than the others. It was a young man with several small children. They were playing with a litter of tiny kittens on a wooden step. The workman turned the photo over to see if there was a date perhaps. The writing was blurred, so he reached into his pocket, and put on his reading glasses. He held the photo up close and read the words out loud to himself:

Uncle Jimmy and girls at Grammy's house

