

The Goodbye Girl

“Her children rise up and call her blessed...” (Proverb 31:28).

In June 1996, Scott and I had been married one week when Mom called me home from Seattle. The next two weeks passed between my parents’ house and my grandmother’s. Although my affection for my grandmother long since had dissipated, it was natural for me to be there, for the family to be together.

Previously, between college graduation and marriage, a brief stint in Nashville failed to launch me into the career that would’ve kept me in Middle Tennessee, my homecoming coinciding with the beginning of tax season. My presence was presumed to be a helpful comfort to Mom, who had her hands full with professional obligations and caring for my dying grandmother, as well as developing health concerns of her own. On this side of regret, I’m ashamed not to have been the help I could—and should—have been to her.

During the approximately two years my grandmother battled ovarian cancer, we watched her vitality wane as she fought to get out of bed each day, if only to go no further than the living room recliner. She had wanted to see spring one more time and knew the morning she remained in bed would be the day she never got up again. By June, she was too ill to attend my wedding, but a large chunk of the evening following the ceremony was spent at her house before Scott and I trekked to the Pacific Northwest.

When I flew home from SEATAC, Mom sent our cousin Carolyn to pick me up at the airport, not wanting to leave her mother as she had left her grandmother the night she died. White-Haired Granny previously had a stroke, and my grandmother cared for her at home until a winter night in 1979. Mom had stopped by to see them on her way home from work. Knowing she didn’t have long, but thinking she had enough time to come home, change clothes, and return, the ringing telephone as she made her way to the closet had been a death toll.

When Carolyn and I first arrived, my grandmother was conscious enough to ask if Scott had come with me. “No, he had to stay in Washington. He had to work,” I explained. “No, he’s sitting on the end of the bed,” she said, pointing and indicating there was “something white at the end of the bed.”

Strange phenomena and occurrences always had gone on at my grandparents’ house, which sat along Highway 29A and was formerly a site where a railroad company began building a track. Although the project was abandoned for the highway instead, my grandmother always attributed the unusual activity to the ghosts of slaves who died while working on the railroad.

When Mom and Kate were little, they used to hear what sounded like a woman wearing Mary Mules ascending and descending the staircase. Another time, when Mom and I were



arriving, Kate met us at the back door—her pants unzipped and a gun in her hand. She had just started to the bathroom when she heard “something” and was there alone and scared.

Before my grandfather died, an odd little animal appeared and kept him company for several days. He always drove away other strays or wild animals, but this one was his friend; he talked to it. No one ever saw the animal besides him and my grandmother, and neither he nor she knew what kind of creature it was. They’d never seen anything like it before, and she never saw it again after he died.

In the weeks before my grandmother’s death, a peacock suddenly appeared on their property, as did a mother hen and her brood of chicks. My grandmother also had complained of seeing “something run across the floor,” which her daughters took to mean mice, not such an unusual occurrence; but a grand total of zero rodents were caught in the traps they set.

Stranger still was her reaction when Mom and Kate were bathing her and washing her hair one day. As they were trying to turn her head, which happened to be in the direction of a window facing south, she immediately began saying, “You’re on the wrong side; you’re on the wrong side.” After they switched sides, she still held her gaze straight ahead with all the strength that was left in her, Mom and Kate arriving at the same conclusion: “Something scared her.”

Her friend Laura from Kingston, since having met each other in California, stayed with her one night, giving Mom and Kate a reprieve. She didn’t offer to stay again, though, after reporting hearing unusual sounds, “like someone walking upstairs.” She became even more alarmed when Mom and Kate reminded her that a bed was situated in the area from where the sounds came.

Mom and Kate were both staying with my grandmother during her final week. Upon hearing what sounded like a case of sodas falling off the kitchen counter, Mom got up to check on Kate. Finding her still in bed asleep, Mom walked through the house, not finding anything that appeared to have fallen. She mentioned the noise to my father, who said, “They say the dying person hears the door close three days before they die.”

July 1, 1996, I spent the night at my grandmother’s house for the last time, sleeping in her bed, which had been pushed against the wall where the dresser once stood. She lay in a hospital bed where her bed used to be. The ceiling fan was set on its lowest speed, and a small lamp provided a minimal amount of light. I woke up, for what appeared to be no reason; nothing disturbed me, no sudden noise or bright lights. Getting up and moving to sit on the corner of the bed, I felt something brush past my right ear, like the sound of beating wings. It was not like a mosquito that could be brushed away; physical action didn’t affect it; it was bigger, softer, heavier, and rushed by like the shadow of galloping horses.

Some say we must be helped to die, much like we must be helped in being born. When my grandmother, who had been on a morphine pump to help mitigate the pain, woke and tried to talk for the first time in several days, Mom and Kate were both there to say, “It’s okay, Momma. We love you. Go ahead and go.” Exactly three days after Mom was awakened by the



unidentified sound, that's when and how my grandmother let go of this world...and I wondered how I could say goodbye for the last time to someone I love with as much grace as the two daughters she left behind.

