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## Cuttings

"Say, have you got a scanner?" Gram asks. She must have a reason, because women her age don't monkey with computers. Not that she's not literate -- she pens a couple dozen letters a week to grandkids like me, to lifelong friends stumbling through widowhood, to acquaintances she meets in store dressing rooms and on airplanes.

She still writes to the families who shared the intensive-care waiting room with her all those years ago, the ones who knew she'd had to turn off life support and watch her husband die. "Take care of each other every day," she writes to me at the end of the page, in her skittering curly script. "Keep paddling."

Some people know their grandparents only as shuffling, off-smelling residents of nursing homes. I'm a little luckier. I've shared my life entirely with this particular grandma, my dad's mom, Verna, just as she shared a bedroom in her childhood with hers (that's how the ratio of kids to beds worked out).

We've split sandwiches and sundaes (she eats the nut sprinkles). We've dug in raspberry divisions, roses, peonies, irises, lilacs, lilies, hostas, catalpa, basswood, redbud -- some as old as cultivation in her part of the Midwestern tall-grass prairie. We've sorted out a livelihood's worth of tools and machinery in my late grandpa's farm shop and weeded the red, red geraniums on his grave, her name on the headstone, too: "1920 - " I know the loss marked by the "tubal" pregnancy scar east of her navel, having traced it with my finger as a little kid, sharing a bathtub. I'm sometimes embarrassed, sensing my mom's jealousy, that Gram favors me, the girl she never had.

"I found some photos of Mama's house for you to keep," Gram says, all in one breath. "Maybe you could make some copies?" She is the shelver of photos in her family -- decade upon decade mingling in pleathery albums or loose in boxes in the room I sleep in when I visit her. The composite -- compost -- is rich. I'm the one who's always turned and stirred it, pulling out my favorites and arranging them on the bed. In this way, I got a look at generations out of sequence: my grandfather as a wiggling toddler, held in the frame by his older siblings; my dad and a cousin who would be killed the same year -- they were 8 -- when he rolled a tractor in a ditch; my homesteading great-great-grandmother and her daughters, delicate round faces floating above what was likely their only taffeta. Lots of people in their church clothes on rare leisurely afternoons, gotten-together because relatives were visiting from a few states over. In many of the photos, people have turned their full attention to the camera, nothing for granted, knowing they might never pull these sisters, cousins, kids into a hug again.

Gram, now 90, is a woody-stemmed perennial of this stock, blending easily in nodding silence. Sometimes, like now, am I reminded that when she is gone, the names on the backs of her photos -- Ludvick, Hulder, Thora, Ragna, Turina, Eddie, dozens of others -- will be all that's left, severed from her rhizominous memory. I know the shape of the legends: of children who left mothers in Norway forever and crossed an ocean in boats no bigger than modern yachts. Big, sturdy immigrants who folded themselves onto child-size benches to learn English in one-room primary schools and craft for themselves prosperity.

Gram knows the legends themselves and how that ambition worked out.

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She takes out her address book -- her personal devotional -- bulging with return addresses torn from envelopes, bits of paper scrawled with quotes she likes, a Nestle Morsels bag she carries so she always has a recipe for chocolate chip cookies. She retreats to this spiral-bound collection, thumbs through names and their associated memories, when loneliness and worry get the best of her. I know she's had to soothe herself plenty on my behalf, watching me lose a child, too. Watching me struggle to live and work with and still love my husband, as was expected of her. Watching me farm in an era in which you can't sell two hogs to buy a car, as she once did.

She opens her book to a stack of brittle original photographs, the oldest dated to 1900, and hands them over like loose change, picking out a wadded grocery receipt. That's how her memory works these days -- the priceless and worthless live close together, and she worries quietly about losing both. To me it's all valuable, and I encourage her not to filter what she remembers, though she can hardly help it. I can't put my own insecurities into context if I can't see how she grafted hers.

The house in the photos is a landmark in her life, a pivot point for both her childhood and her growing old. I know the shape and smell (dust-crusty) of the prairie Victorian -- "Mama's house" -- without looking, having wandered its eight angular rooms when I was young. Gram has always been its caretaker, as she was of her mother, Clara, who grew up there and continued to live alone there long after her husband, Nick, died and her seven children scattered. A pillowy woman with gray eyes and calves that didn't taper, Clara slipped eventually into the fog of blindness, dragging Gram -- the child who lived closest at hand -- into her shadowy purgatory peopled by both reality and memory.

"She would feel the afternoon sun coming in through the window and fly up out of her chair, hollering that the house was on fire and she had to get Nick, get Nick!" This was no small challenge for Gram, always smaller and finer-boned than her mother even in those years of decline. I can just see Gram barely turning the tide, a rudder at Clara's baggy elbow. "Other days, she was certain Nick had another woman and would lunge out of the house looking for 'the little tramp.'"

The house was built by Clara's father when he, his wife and his mother-in-law ("They all lived together -- can you imagine?!") had worked their way out of the sod-roofed dugout by the creek, the one Indians used to tread silently past, barefoot on an ancient path. Betting their survival on the harvest and murmurings of statehood -- her father eventually served as state senator -- they had hired an architect and dug a full basement cool enough to store cream, acres of canned goods, and barrels of meat in brine. ("We took turns churning butter down there. You had to do 100 strokes before you were off the hook.") They buried a cistern with a long-handled pump for "running" water in the kitchen and routed chimneys for both winter and summer kitchens. It was the only house in the township with the luxury of closets in every room.

In 100 years, walnuts and nearly two-story lilacs grew to shade the house porches. Willow and ash crept up from the creek so that the buildings never looked lonely. Two barns -- one for horses, one for cows -- and a handful of cribs and granaries held enough wealth to weather drought, then Depression, the windmill churning high above, drawing water, cooling the milk. The hum of living even attracted a hive of wild bees to the crawlspace above the kitchen, accessible by the cubbyhole at the turn in the stairs. Not a week went by that a kid didn't get stung.

“They would get tangled up in our hair, pulled up on our heads,” Gram explains. “Eunice had it worst, since her hair was curly.” She pauses, veers into darker waters -- her blonde, big-eyed little sister is dead, a ghastly victim of brain cancer. “But, oh, the honey.”

Besides the mythical hive, I loved the house’s tall, narrow closets. Left to my own devices, I would spend afternoons shutting myself in them, then opening the door and trying to imagine how each room looked when ten people lived there. Every bobbypin I found under the carpet edge was a clue.

During one sweltering family reunion, I found and wore a woman’s full-length slip the color of a bruised plum. When I ventured back outside to the horseshoe pit, someone tied the straps together in the back so it wouldn’t gap in front.

A water balloon fight broke out that particular evening and soon kids and adults were dousing each other with pails of water filled at the pump in the yard, shrieking in the twilight, hiding in the grove, in the corn, in the shadows between the shrubs and house. Smiling into the mid-distance, Clara clucked from her chair under the horse chestnut tree, off limits, a home base in the free-for-all. All around her, bare feet thumped on soggy lawn. It was a Midsummer’s Night: kids the right age to swoon in innocent delight, adults of the right age to remember how that felt. It never happened again, though I asked about it, tried to encourage it, for years afterward.

Clara died at 102, and the house -- unrentable without modern plumbing -- soon became a target for teenagers with booze and BB guns. When they put a hole in the lilac and emerald stained glass panel above the sitting room window, Gram cleaned out everything valuable in earnest. She divided the glass panel between four siblings. She parsed through the canning jars and now-antique kitchenware in the cellar and hauled out her grandmother’s -- Turina’s -- oak dresser. I got a gray tulip-edged apron with dainty flowers the color of dried blood and white rick-rack at the seams, hand-sewn from one of Clara’s dresses.

Upstairs in the boys’ room, we found Joe’s army uniform jacket. It fit my 15-year-old frame. Of all Gram’s siblings, I know the most about Joe, who was two years older. He was shot in the back on his second tour in the Pacific and lived the rest of his days with one kidney. Discharged from a military hospital in Oregon, he went to work at a mill pulling incoming logs from the waterway with horses, a farm boy with useful instincts. He retired 40 years later in protest, when logging abandoned use of the river altogether.

Joe had wild steel-blue eyes and curly hair that wiggled away from his head even when it grew white and thin. He played clarinet. He pulled pranks on Clara when she couldn’t quite tell him apart from his brothers, in her dim-sightedness. He was notoriously late on arrival. One summer he turned up two whole days late to a reunion, red and cracked as a boiled lobster, having stopped at a water park someplace in South Dakota and waylaid a day recovering from sunburn and dehydration.

Joe was standing on Gram’s mousy teenage head in the eddy in the creek, upon a time, when one of the neighbor boys’ hearts turned and he rescued her, claimed her awkwardly, eventually, as his bride. “I must have looked like a drowned rat,” Gram says, shaking her head in disbelief.

This boy, my grandfather Marlin, appears in several of the photos in my hands now, usually by himself, a dark-tanned man in a dark suit, in front of what must have been his car or truck at the time, parked by the kitchen door of Gram’s childhood home. He is broad and sturdy, narrow at the hips. I knew him as smelling sweat-musky and like the onions he ate raw like apples.

Gram peers closely at one snapshot and laughs. "You know, once he forgot to put on the parking brake, and that car rolled down and crashed into the shed north of the house. You never knew a shed there, did you?" she asks me. "No, probably not.

"Dad thought it was funny. He teased Mar, told him he better teach me to drive before he smashed up his car altogether.

"Mama was hopping mad -- it was her garden shed -- but she knew Mar was already embarrassed enough, not working his car right. She let him take me to the church social anyway."

I have Gram's dresser, the one she preened in front of, an olive-skinned, startling bird, in those girlhood days. She shared the mahogany-stained bureau and most of her clothes with her sisters Ethel, then Eunice, two and eight years younger. "It's not so nice," Gram says when she sees the dresser, embarrassed somehow. I point out that none of it is veneer; even the backs of its three drawers are solid wood, the corners dovetailed. The dresser's mirror is cloudy now and tilts funny, but I don't mind. Often, rummaging in the top drawer, I hear Gram describing her first nylon "panties" -- "we thought we were so fancy" -- a gift from a city aunt, one pair for each girl.

My name is on the back of Turina's dresser, too, and I'll eventually get her walnut kitchen table and heavy straight-backed chairs. To this day, Gram will line them up, nose to back, when she pulls them away from the table to wash that part of the floor. "I'm playing engine and caboose," she says, grinning.

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Verna married Marlin in November 1944. The photo of their stoic wedding party -- a creamy, mirthless fan of silk, dark wool, and white mums in front of the alter -- is not in this stack, but I have dibs on the 8x10 original, mounted in a gray cardboard folder with a tissue paper veil. It was an Indian summer day -- the mums didn't need covering to get them from the car to the church. The season's first snow fluttered in the next morning.

They received mostly Depression glass as gifts, since there were few other fine "boughten" goods to be had in wartime. Besides, everyone knew the big deal was their home, 80 acres with a house and barns, six miles as the crow flies from Clara and Nick's, one mile due south of Mar's parents.

His father had pieced together four homesteads, one for each son, and bestowed on Mar arguably the best one, the one with the creek just behind the house. Mar had earned it, having worked all that ground-in-waiting alongside his dad, while the other three brothers went off to war.

Family also gave them two hogs, a milk cow and 40 chickens. The cream, butter, eggs and salt pork paid most of their way until the next fall's harvest came in. Then, for five decades, they milked a barn of Holsteins by hand, and raised two sons, some grain and hay and hogs.

They sent their kids to college and welcomed their decision to take white-collar jobs as teachers -- self-selecting more for refinement and portability, less for versatility and symbiosis with particular soil.

"I'm just sayin', you don't want a milk cow," my dad warned when I gushed over the fresh milk from the first Jersey "house cow" I bought with my husband. "It's every day. You can't get away from it."

Today Gram lives alone, mowing the grass, moving sun-loving black-eyed Susans and roses now shaded by trees she planted a lifetime ago. She tends things, picking up sticks and raking leaves, prepping for the next chapter, whatever that is. When her brush pile gets big, she carefully lights a fire and roasts wieners and marshmallows, her lawn chair pulled up close.

She's been working with her local Resource Conservation District and my uncle, an absentee arborist, to plant, water and fence hundreds of pines, walnuts, oak, and native shrubbery in her pastures. Every few years she starts a new apple tree, though she has trouble keeping rabbits and deer from stripping the leaves and bark. I'll find her a solar fencer for her next birthday. Or maybe sooner, since time gets by her faster than it does me.

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We park the car in the field access at the crest of the last hill before Clara's house and pick spring beauties in what was once the horse pasture. Gram has been doing this since she ran barefoot here, knows where these and dozens of other patches of wildflowers and berries bloom, though the barren expanse of tilled crop ground eats away at the pasture's edges every year.

She wants to see the house from this angle, on the next hill: solid, a firm commitment. She's done all right by it, even after she and her siblings decided, finally, to sell it. She mowed its yard, swept "mouse mess" out of cupboards and bird shit out of chimneys, gathered up the walnut limbs that fell during storms, back-filled the outhouse pit and capped the well, hired contractors to reclaim wood from outbuildings that were falling in. She hates that she's helping reduce that wide way in the world to exactly the number of acres and water rights printed in the auctioneer's bulletin. But what can she do?

The neighboring get-big-or-get-out farmers, cousins even, who bought the land have been taking the place apart for a year now. The trees have been dragged out, roots sprawling, by giant excavators. The barns, already caving for lack of new shingles, have been flattened and buried. They ran a grader from the house yard to the creek to level it, make it ready for a 24-row corn planter. Finally, they tilled the water away, erasing the reason for building a life there at all.

"It was a fine thing, once," she says, leaning into the distance, her sweatshirt hood tied close under her chin. She hands me her bunch of flowers so she can scrabble up the slope, using both arms for ballast.

She puts her wiry leather fingers in mine as we walk back to the car, padding across grasses sprouting greener on the southern slope. I take her picture, smiling with our flowers, the roofline of the house pale behind her.

"Sure glad you're here, Teenie," she says.

Then, "Do you think you have a place for Ma's fern peonies? Fall is best for digging them, but they're small enough they'd survive disturbing."

We grub around by Clara's decaying south porch until we find the shoots -- small clumps of spidery foliage, fine as filament. These will bloom pale pink -- simple silky flowers against jade leaves -- just as they do in the gardens of all Clara's daughters, and their daughters', and theirs again.

I've read that these peonies, slow-growing from tubers, don't like to be divided often -- only a handful of

times per generation. But once established, they are among the longest-lived of cultivated perennials.

“Best to dig the whole clump,” Gram says, her hands already in the dirt, spading with the trowel she keeps in her car. “Ooooh, Mama would be so happy.”

“Next week,” she says in passing, nestling the plants in a plastic grocery sack, closing the trunk, “they will burn the house.”

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Kristine Jepsen studied English, then off-roaded in magazine, college recruitment and parenting, landing eventually in rural northeast Iowa, where she founded and runs a farm and grass-fed beef company with her husband. Also a former wilderness guide, musician, and oral historian, she writes for regional and national publications, virtual and in print.