

Grandma



By Anna Von Reitz

It seems there is a picture in everyone's mind when you say the word, "Grandma".

My own Grandmother was tall and lean, with bright green eyes, and a wicked smile. She had her own sense of humor. When we'd fall down and scrape our knees (as long as it wasn't broken and only a temporary end of the world) she'd shake her head and say, "Come here, I'll pick you up."

Pretty soon, she'd have us laughing in spite of ourselves. Wincing and sobbing and laughing all at the same time. Mad at her. Loving her.

She loved rocks and minerals and was an inveterate observer of the landscape in all its detail. Give her a piece of beach and she happily walked along the strand for hours, peering bird-like at every bit of detritus, every shell. She had a fine eye for every nuance, and whether she was scanning the sand or the horizon, I always had the sense that she was seeing all of it.

And I do mean---- all of it.

Sometimes we'd hold hands and wade out into the surf for no reason, other than to feel the sea tugging and swirling around our bare feet. Her eyes would go unfocused then, thinking of other times and places, of young men who went away to sea and never came back again, and very quietly, almost to herself, she'd sing songs in a surprisingly melodious voice.

Over the Sea to Skye. The Marine Hymn. Eternal Father.

It seems strange looking back that the sea had so much to do with our lives, considering that we lived most of the time in the middle of the continent, where the only seas were seas of grass.

My Father asked me to sing "Eternal Father" at his funeral, too, which I know must have sent a shock wave in all directions. Whoever heard of a daughter singing at her Father's funeral service? And such a song, at a graveside in the middle of Wisconsin?

Mine is not to reason why. That's what he asked of me. So, that's what I did.

Maybe it's because his Grand-Uncles were Admirals in the German Navy? Men who trained on the last of the Tall Ships, and who knew every sail and splice and knot, every kind of rope?

Their lives were supremely odd, too.

After the First World War, there wasn't much for a German Admiral to do. So they came to America and used their Midshipman skills learned on the Tall Ships, as trapeze artists traveling around with Barnum and Bailey's Circus.

When we went to visit them at their winter camp in Delavan, Wisconsin, they were so tall I barely came up to their knee caps, and very handsome and fit, despite being at least seventy years old by then. They had a merry gleam in their eyes despite all of it, and a small Fox Terrier named Bailey that knew every trick in any dog book ever written.

So my Grandmother, who loved the sea, and my Great-Granduncles, who were all about the same age, came to sit around the campfire in Wisconsin with snow all around, and more snow filtering down among the caravans parked there for the winter, and they wrapped her in a fur blanket and talked quietly about a world that was no more.

And I listened, quiet as a mouse in a room full of cats, hoping to catch a glimpse of it.

It was a gilded, glorious, hopeless age, the vanished Belle Epoque. The men went to sea and learned to fly stunt planes for fun. Grandma went to France and learned to play concert piano.

How could they ever dream that they'd wind up in Wisconsin? She, the matron of a dairy and herb farm, they, wearing funny costumes and flying on trapezes around the Big Top, a thousand miles from the sea?

Their lives seemed so tragic, yet, they all smiled about it just the same.

Come here, I'll pick you up.

They would never give up, so they could never taste defeat. Any of them. Not for any reason. Ever. That's just the way they were. Bon chance, mon ami.

And come the springtime when the apple trees were in bloom again, the two old knights rode up to her farmhouse on horseback just as the late afternoon sun touched the windows upstairs; I saw them and ran to the dooryard, staring in disbelief.

They were riding two of the biggest, shiniest, blackest horses I could even imagine, at least seventeen hands high at the shoulder. I suppose they borrowed them from the circus.

It was as if the past had come alive again, or as if it had never died. They swung easily down out of their saddles, attired in elegant gray tunics and trousers, wide, black leather belts and black leather riding boots. They were two figures out of a dream, stepped out of the old black and white tin-type photographs, and onto my Grandmother's doorstep.

Just in time for dinner, they said, and grinned like two school-boys up to a prank.

Come here, I'll pick you up.

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