

Grandma No More

by Stephen Mark Golden

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“Perhaps we shouldn’t wake her,” Bill suggested.

We peered into the small hospital-like room. It had two beds. One bed was empty; the other held the body of a frail elderly woman — asleep.

“This is her room isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s what the sign on the door says. Maybe she needs her sleep.”

“I don’t know. I don’t get to this area of the country very often. I’d really like to see her. She’s ninety six. She might not live long enough for me to see her again.”

A pleasant middle aged woman’s voice from behind us spoke up, “Go on in, wake her up! She sleeps most of the time anyway, and she’d love to have some company for a spell.” It was one of the care personnel. She seemed to know what was going on around the place.

“Oh, is that right?” I queried. Not really expecting an answer. I didn’t get one. The woman had moved on down the hall to attend to another patient’s needs.

“Well . . .”, I said reluctantly as Bill walked in ahead of me.

“Grandma . . .” Bill touched her shoulder. “Grandma, are you feeling fit enough for a visit?”

She woke slowly. We waited while she sat up and straightened herself out. She reached for her glasses, and secured her teeth (which still didn’t seem to stay where they were supposed to, but instead shifted back and forth, up and down as she talked).

“Well, well, well, who is it?” She asked in a weak but pleasant voice.

“Grandma, it’s Bill and Steve Golden — your grandchildren.” Bill responded. I had already decided to let him take care of the preliminaries. He

was better at handling awkward situations than I was, and somehow I felt pretty awkward at just this moment.

“Who did you say it was?”

She didn't seem to have any recognition of us yet. Oh, she was smiling, and pleased to have company, but she hadn't quite realized who it was.

I spoke up, “We're the sons of Bill, your son, and his wife Rose. You know who we mean, don't you?”

“Yes”, she smiled, “I know who Bill and Rose are . . .”

Bill added, “well, we're their children.”

“Ohhhhh . . .” She looked somewhat bewildered. What am I saying? She looked downright confused! After a slight pause she exclaimed, “My! I don't believe I've ever met you boys!” This seemed to relieve her confusion as though she had suddenly figured out the answer to a puzzle.

Hmmmm . . . She doesn't believe she's met us? She knew us well. All the time we were growing up, we were two of her favorite grandchildren. She used to remark at how proud she was of us. She used to give us tiny stuffed animal mice that she had made. She used to recite little poems and stories to us, some humorous, some serious, but always with a message about how to best live life.

“Oh, Grandma! You know us! We're Billy and Stevie! Don't you remember us?” I was feeling a little frustrated. Her expression once again became uncertain. She placed her hand to her forehead, and paused.

“I must not have known you when you were little.”

I felt crushed. This was my grandmother. It's true, I hadn't seen her since her ninetieth birthday when there was a large reunion type birthday party in the old great house on High Street. But still, I couldn't believe that she had no recollection of us at all.

I had to respond. I had to defend my past memories. “But yes, you did know us when we were young. We visited you often! — The big house on High Street — the two bench tandem gliding porch swing.”

This was no ordinary porch swing, but an elaborate contraption designed and constructed by my grandfather. It was a suspended frame with two bench seats facing each other connected by a gliding floor. The seats rocked back and forth as you swung, but the suspended floor remained level.

“I remember all the cats you had around the place! Oh, and you used to give us little mice made out of felt. “

She became even more confused. I began to feel self conscious about putting an elderly woman into turmoil. She put both of her hands on her forehead and thought for a moment. Finally, a look of resignation came over her face, and with a smile, quietly apologized, “My memory just isn’t quite as good as it used to be.”

I thought to myself, “I guess not!”

From that point, it was clear that we were to have a visit with a small sweet elderly lady. It was a pleasant visit. We talked about the weather, the view from her window, and the cows that would occasionally come up to the fence near the window. We discussed people we mutually knew — as strangers who happened to have common acquaintances. She told us how she was doing rather well here, and that this home was much better than the last place she had been. At one point she marveled, “Not an empty spot in the whole place. Where do all the people come from?”

Across the rivers, hills, and streams
Almost an endless flow, it seems,
That find their way to homes like this
Before they reach their final rest.

And sadness fills my heart for these
With whom I find myself ill at ease.
Being placed in the midst of care
By their children who deem it best.

For their lifestyles should be not cramped
By the care of ancients, forever stamped.
Soon enough, the day will come
When they too will be taken from their own homes

And be treated as they have done these,
No longer able to do as they please.
And owing themselves they do believe,
To live life freely, and to achieve,

This their purpose throughout each day,
"Living is life", their actions say.
But what is life without love,
To bide the time, until taken home?

Toward the end of our visit, she asked us our names again, and had us write them in on her calendar so she would be able to tell (Aunt) Lavana who had come to visit.

It was a pleasant, and mostly enjoyable visit. But it was not a visit with my Grandmother. Though the face was the one I knew from my childhood, the person inside the body treated me as any other pleasant visitor whom she was pleased to see. After a while, I could not even bring myself to call her Grandma. It just didn't seem right. She had been a wonderful Grandmother. The most adorable elderly woman I could imagine. She was kind and thoughtful, and filled with the spirit of God. Though she was my Grandmother, she was my Grandma no more.

Bill and I were deeply affected by this visit. Conversation was subdued. We felt overcome with an unusual sense of sadness as we walked out of the

building. Glancing at the other elderly people in the lobby and recreational areas I thought: Some lose their mobility. Some lose their eyesight or hearing. Some lose their hair. But how many lose their past? How many lose the memory of their loved ones?

Later, I discussed these events with a friend who had spent considerable time working with the elderly. She indicated that this type of memory loss is quite common. Perhaps it's the mind's way of soothing the hurt caused by loneliness. Perhaps its just a natural process of old age. In either case, these people live day to day; the people by whom they are visited often become their friends and family.

Truly, these are people who can live in the present only.

And yet, in the future, I believe that "Grandma no more" will again be my Grandma. That one day we will all know more than we ever did in this life. We will all gain more than we ever had in this life. This is the hope in which she rests. This is the hope in which I rest. One day, all things will be restored, and we shall know as we have been known.