

A Queen Remembered

Shirley
GRACE
writer / editor

BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

Once, when I was six years old, I walked upstairs to find my mother crying. Perched so precariously and mindlessly at the edge of her bed, it seemed only sheer luck that the mattress happened to be there when her knees had buckled. A letter lay in her lap.

Curiosity arose faster than sympathy. My mother was alternately cheery or irritable but never sobby. I stared questions at her. She choked out that her grandmother had died, but no one had told her until too late. Too late to fly eight thousand miles back stateside and attend the funeral. Her wet, wordless grief spilled out, but even at six I could sense the anger too.

Because of my father's job as a defense contractor radar engineer, I had a mobile childhood. We followed a round-robin sort of circuit from South Jersey's RCA-Moorestown plant to the Lincoln Lab think tank near Boston to the remote reaches of Micronesia on the tiny island of U.S. Army-controlled Kwajalein, located in the Ralik chain of the Marshall Islands. Kwajalein is a missile testing site, tracking missiles aimed from Vandenberg, California, with a calculated trajectory to reenter the atmosphere right at this minute spot in the Central Pacific. This was completely lost on my siblings and me. We lived as children do, minute by minute,

the past a quickly fading memory, the future so hard to visualize. We moved roughly every other year, depending on my father's project phase. My mother raised us four kids as best she could under such transient conditions.

coming back stateside and seeing these people as I would enjoy going to summer camp — an adventure of temporary friendships and fun. But if I am to be truly honest, my recollections are no more than pieces of emotional

But if I am to be truly honest, my recollections are no more than pieces of emotional lint sticking precariously to the corners of my mind, translucent and fragile.

Every summer we returned to the U.S. for our annual 30-day leave back to the "real world" of southern New Jersey, where my father would continue his work, and every year bore witness to the repercussions of our self-imposed isolation. The absence of daily interactions with extended family left an expanding vacuum where I should have been stockpiling nostalgic experiences.

This is not to say I didn't care about my relatives. I enjoyed

lint sticking precariously to the corners of my mind, translucent and fragile. I am careful now not to sweep them away.

We'd always stay with GranGran, my mother's mother. I know little about her: Born Ethel Dern in Taneytown, Maryland, she came from a childhood of hard work on the family farm. She worked in the fields rather than the kitchen — not enough boys in the family. GranGran labored her whole, stoic life. She managed to

graduate from Emmitsburg High School in 1925 — the only one in her family to do so — eventually leaving the fields to teach at the Maryland School for the Deaf; then, after marriage, restaurant work.

By the time I knew her, GranGran lived in a non-descript, post-war split-level in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. She rarely smiled, never hugged us kids, had few words for anybody, really. She kept her feelings for her grandchildren inside a kitchen drawer brimming with Hershey's Kisses, Twizzlers, and those long sheets with the colored dots of hard candy stuck to them.

GranGran worked in restaurant kitchens for fifty years, but strangely, she couldn't cook much, barring a small, eclectic recipe collection that revealed her German roots: coleslaw, egg noodles dried on the clothesline, chiffon pie, and corn fritters. All good. For me, though, GranGran and those fritters have cooked down into one memory.

She made them only with Silver Queen, the *Grande Dame* of white, small kernel corn. Toward the end of our vacation stays, with late summer cresting the downhill run into autumn, we'd all pile into her red 1966 Ford Galaxy 500, scorching our legs on the no-A/C wicked black vinyl interior. We three older kids would elbow each other for a window seat, shunting our much younger sister to the middle front between the grown-ups. We'd bicker our way over to the pick-your-own farm — *He's poking me! Am not! Are too!! Mommm!!* — dismissing our frazzled mother's powerless litany — *You kids better shape up! I'll give you something to cry about!* — while GranGran drove on, unengaged.

My mother held only one ace: *Knock it off or no TV!* Them was stop-fightin' words. Kwajalein is five thousand miles southwest of California — well beyond the reach of the nation's networks. Catching up on last season's cartoons ranked number one with us kids.

would corner me with a pointed glare. I'd harrumph over to the market area and perfect my "bored" look as GranGran picked up an ear, yanked back the husk, then pierced a kernel with her nail. The literal rule of thumb was in the spurt: A healthy burst of corn

She kept her feelings for her grandchildren inside a kitchen drawer brimming with Hershey's Kisses, Twizzlers, and those long sheets with the colored dots of hard candy stuck to them.

We'd arrive with collective relief. My mother would head for the blueberries, her favorite fruit. We kids would pick a little, play a lot. But GranGran would toddle in her rocking, arthritic gait to the clearance aisle of the open market, with piles of old corn strewn on a table, fourteen ears for a dollar.

The farm was fun enough to lure us away from the hallowed afternoon cartoon line-up, but it came with a caveat: My mother always conscripted one of us to help my grandmother collect her corn. I was good at ducking this obligation, but occasionally, Mom

juice? Dismissive sniff, drop the ear, pick up another. I didn't know then that she was searching for the driest, most unwanted castoffs, nor would I have cared. I shifted from foot to foot, impatient, itchy. Holding the bag was dangerously close to working. I was missing Felix the Cat for this?

But that night, she'd make corn fritters. Not those breaded, deep-fried, donut-like horrors served at some seafood restaurants. These were tender, yellow pancakes. Corn cut raw off the cob; held together with the barest addition of flour, egg, milk and salt; fried in

a black cast iron skillet smoldering with lard. I'd stuff them down as fast as she served them, competing with my brother and kid sister, and secretly glad my older sister didn't really like them — more for me. GranGran, silent as usual, would occasionally ask, "More?" with brows arching over eyes as bright as the bubbling pork fat.

Life schlepped on. We often found ourselves in mid-move during the vacation months, unable to stay at GranGran's. No big deal. I'd become good at leaving people anyway, treating relationships like a vacation-found river pebble tossed onto a messy dresser top - special enough to save but essentially forgotten. I looked forward with concern only for my place in each new school's social hierarchy. By 1981, I was ensconced in the college life, and my idle vacations in the southern New Jersey suburban heat had ceased; I rarely thought about GranGran.

Then, in the spring of 1983, I open a letter from my sister Kathy. Did I know that GranGran had died of a heart attack two weeks ago? I flash froze in the Florida heat on the steps of the student union as the quietly ignorable tick-tick-tick of passing time popped in my ears like a thousand kernels of Silver Queen. A glacier of grief heaved up from deep in my gut, guilty memories cleaving off: GranGran's one-time proposal to teach me to tat lace, shrugged off; me, rushing around primping for a date and she, suddenly blocking my way with my freshly ironed skirt; the mounds of nuts she chopped every year to help bake

my favorite Christmas cookies, Lucky Stars. The letter, blithely ignorant of its own contents, fluttered gaily.

But then, hot flares of anger blasted the guilt with scalding eyes as I recalled a parallel scene.

difficult; overwhelmed, she'd flown back stateside and buried GranGran herself. My rage collapsed into a cold slush of resignation. Doing what she believed was best at the time, I couldn't blame my mother for bonds I never both-

*Yes, I have her recipe,
but somehow, even
after repeated attempts,
I can't duplicate it.
I never learned how.*

Hadn't my mother, robbed of the opportunity to mourn her own grandmother back when I was six, perpetrated this same sin?

My parents were stationed back in the Marshall Islands for yet another stint overseas. Communication was a hassle, but not impossible. I dialed the international operator, battling busy signals and dropped lines. When I finally broke through, my mother defended her actions by saying she hadn't wanted to interrupt exam week, that collecting us all from three different colleges would have been very

ered to forge. And what did it matter anyway? GranGran was gone.

Gone also are her corn fritters, a simple expression of love from a reticent, standoffish old woman. Yes, I have her recipe, but somehow, even after repeated attempts, I can't duplicate it. I never learned how.

I can't treasure what's not there. But still, the bits left make me smile, so I cling to what I have: GranGran, standing at the stove, saying little, smiling less, watching me make a pig of myself with her fritters.