

## The Trouble with Grandma

by Tanya E. E. E. Schmid

When my Scandinavian grandmother turned eighty-two, my Aunt Sharon suggested she give up driving, but Grandma wouldn't hear of it. Shortly thereafter, with her foot accidentally on the gas instead of the brake, my grandmother launched her car into a telephone pole along the local grocery store parking lot. Two store employees carefully disentangled her from the airbag and helped her out of the car. The store manager brought her a chair and sat with her until the ambulance arrived. He told Sharon that Grandma never stopped smiling. Her upper body was bruised and sore, but she suffered no serious injuries.

"Best thing that happened to me all week," she told Sharon. "That manager is awful handsome!" Soon as she could, Grandma baked him some cookies.

At age eighty-six, despite my aunt's warnings and threats, Grandma secretly climbed the old ladder propped against the cherry tree in her backyard. Like a picky shopper, she reached with her parchment-skinned hands and carefully selected the ripest, sweetest fruit, just as she'd done for over fifty years.

My aunt discovered her up in the tree when she stopped by to pick up Grandma's dirty laundry—laundry which my grandmother had already washed and ironed herself.

"Why didn't you call me? I told you I'd pick those cherries for you!" Aunt Sharon called.

"Well, you're so busy, and they're ripe now. No use waiting till the birds get 'em."

"Mother, that's it. I warned you."

The next day two men from the garden center in LaCrosse showed up and cut down my grandmother's beloved cherry tree with her watching on silently, her lips pressed tightly together.

The following week, my aunt caught Grandma atop that same ladder, this time washing the living room's picture window.

"Mother! Lord's sake!"

"Well, you've got better things to do."

That was the last time my grandmother saw that ladder.

When I stopped by to pick her up for church a couple of weeks later, Grandma was on a different ladder, taking down an enormous box from high on the shelves in her garage.

"Halloween decorations. Don't go tellin' Sharon," she winked. "And run this ladder over to Wilma's garage before she misses it."

"She doesn't know you borrowed it?" I asked disbelieving.

"She's the one who called Sharon on me that time I cleaned the windows."

Grandma couldn't cook worth a darn, always burnt the meat and over-salted the gravy, but she had the most beautiful garden, with corn, squash, carrots and a long row of raspberry bushes. Everyone vied for her somewhat-runny raspberry jam. That year, Sharon didn't get any.

"Mother," Sharon asked as we all gathered in the kitchen for my cousin's birthday, "got any raspberry jam for me?"

"Nope. All gone. I got some canned cherries," she said, without looking up from the burning pork chops.

Sharon also got none of Grandma's famous gladiolas that year. They decorated Wilma's porch instead. I guess Wilma found out about the borrowed ladder.

Grandma teared up every time she mentioned my grandfather, yet she blossomed after he died in his seventies. She finally had time for long-kept hobbies like quilting. For years she won blue ribbons for quilting at the Wisconsin State Fair. She sewed a large patchwork quilt every year, giving one to each of her seven grandchildren, her two sons, and even my mother—who she never much liked because she wasn't of Norwegian heritage.

“When am I going to get one, Mother?” I heard Sharon ask as they washed the dishes.

“Oh, I've got one planned for you. It's comin' along.”

At Christmas, Aunt Sharon unpacked the most beautiful patchwork quilt. The branches of a lush cherry tree spread across it.

Grandma never took medication, except during her final weeks. She had been dying of cancer over a decade after the doctor had told her “since you've refused chemo and radiation, two years max.” At age ninety-eight, Grandma's only regret was that she hadn't made it to one hundred. But we had already thrown her a big party when she turned ninety-six. Even Wilma came.

During her last few days, she again refused pain medication, saying, “I'm past all that now. I finally get to meet my maker and I don't want to miss it just 'cause you've got me all doped up.”

Aunt Sharon was there when Grandma passed. “She died smiling and naming all her sisters and brothers, friends and family that she saw come to pick her up!” Sharon said proudly.

Years later now, my aunt still gets teary any time she speaks of my grandmother—“despite,” she offers, “all the trouble.”

