

Making Way for Miss Mary *Barbara Darnall*

When I was a little girl there lived in our town an elderly lady named Miss Mary Terrell. She was a retired schoolteacher, never married, who was much respected and not a little feared by the many former students and other inhabitants of our small West Texas town. (This was back in the days when adults and children alike were still in awe of schoolteachers.)

I was five or six, and Miss Mary was eighty if she was a day, when I first became aware of the rare and unusual position to which she had been elevated by the people of our town. You see, Miss Mary drove an old Model T Ford, almost as ancient as she was, in a manner that could only be described as “herding it between the curbs.” When she was espied coming down the street, mothers on the sidewalk would snatch up their cherubs and duck into the nearest storefront, “just to be on the safe side.” To say that she was a clear and present danger to everyone and everything in her path was, at the very least, a masterpiece of understatement. Neither cars, cats nor children could be considered safe when occupying the same right of way with Miss Mary.

One day, as my mother was taking me to town to buy new shoes – I wanted red ones, I remember, and my mother was holding out for more serviceable black – she suddenly pulled to the side of the road and parked a good two blocks short of the shoe store. “Why are we stopping here?” I asked. “I’m just

say genes skip generations. Maybe that’s why grandparents find their

making way for Miss Mary,” my mother answered, and sure enough, as I stood up in the back seat and turned to look out the window, Miss Mary did indeed come meandering down the middle of the street in her Model T Ford. With head held high and eyes straight ahead, she seemed completely oblivious to the frantic scrambling of pedestrians and vehicles alike as they hurried out of her path.

Observing this hasty retreat brought to mind another peculiar occurrence which I had often found curious but never before understood. Every Sunday morning after church let out, Miss Mary would hobble determinedly to her car and set out purposefully down the street. Everyone else, however, stood around in front of the First Baptist Church visiting with one another and talking about the sermon, the weather, and whoever wasn't there, in a manner which indicated that we hated to leave good company and were certainly in no hurry to be on our way. A glance up the block would reveal our Methodist brethren similarly engaged. This fellowshiping continued unabated until someone would step out into the middle of the street, look toward town, and then call back to the assembled group, “She’s gone.” This was the awaited signal for everyone to scatter to our respective cars and drive the two blocks to the post office to collect our Sunday papers and morning mail, there being no home delivery of either in those more innocent days.

You see, it was Miss Mary’s custom to go by the post office after church, too, and in the past she had sideswiped, dented or otherwise raised the blood pressure of enough fellow churchgoers so that by the time I was old enough to observe this extraordinary phenomenon, the townspeople had already arrived at their own solution to the problem: they simply did not leave the church until Miss Mary had picked up her mail and departed, leaving the roadway free and relatively safe for the rest of us.

It was a small thing, to be sure, this practice of “making way for Miss Mary,” but it was indicative of the care and regard in which people held one another back then. I don’t think she ever knew why she found the streets so wide and empty whenever she chose to venture out, and certainly no one ever told her. It was all a part of the mystique, the benevolence bordering on genuine reverence in which we held one very special retired schoolteacher, in grateful recognition of her many years of faithful service. Many years later I saw England’s Queen Mother ride in state down the streets of London, and the feeling of the crowd was much the same: *“There goes somebody special, someone we love and hold in high esteem.”*

It may sound overly simplistic by today’s more sophisticated standards, but it was her due, her recompense, her reward. We knew it – we who chose to honor Miss Mary in this particular way – and she knew it, too. Every time she navigated those wide, near-vacant streets in safety, we were saying, “Thank you for being who you were in our lives.” And every time her snow-white curls, topped by the inevitable black hat and veil, nodded right or left in recognition as she drove past, she accepted our gift. Every time we “made way for Miss Mary,” we felt a little glow inside, the enduring warmth that kindness brings. I learned it as a preschooler, watching in fascination as a Model T Ford zigzagged regally down the street of a small West Texas town, and the lesson has not faded with the years.

The Widow Plans with Her Husband

Bruce Lader

Change your place, change your luck
– Sholom Aleichem

Should we move to Eugene, Oregon
where the *mishpocheh* can live together?
We don't want to get tangled
in our children's lives. I'd get to nanny
my only grandson there, the baby
would give you such *naches*...

It's exhausting by myself, old age
like tons of ironing. Sometimes
my mother looks at me in the mirror—
when I'm lonely we *shmooz*.

Yes, Eugene has temples, but the town's
dead at night. In Fort Lauderdale
chaverim bet *jai-alai*, the trotters, play cards.
In life you take chances. What is money
if while you have health you aren't living it up?

full human being." Margaret Mead ~§~ "To become a grandparent

A cozy house came on the market
next door to the kids—
a better investment for the golden years
we couldn't find. It's definite then.
I'm phoning them and the realtor.
Look at these photos. We'll be a family.

mishpocheh—entire family
naches—great pleasure from pride
shmooz—talk heart-to-heart
chaverim—friends
bet jai-alai - You bet!

I Only Call Her Lola

Jim Pascual Agustin

She gazes at the wooden window, shut,
wave-patterned, corrupted
by the ceaseless struggle
between caress of rain, sting of sun.

It is bolted tight. Through the thread-
like gaps between window and wooden frame,
the finest light. But she isn't looking there,
she is staring at the brown-skinned darkness.

I wish to speak to her but I grasp
only a handful of words in the language she knows.
And the distance between us grows
as her hearing fades, her eyes go white.

I only call her *Lola*.

“Lola” means “grandmother” in Filipino

Hero of My Heart

Karen O'Leary

Slight of frame, with shoulders stooped, the elderly man exuded the kind of courage few seek and even fewer find. His quiet strength and unwavering faith held his family of twelve together during the depression on a farm in rural Minnesota. The bond he fostered links those living yet today.

Church was an important part of nourishing his Christian beliefs and instilling values in his children. In the winter, he would park the family car a mile from home near a main road. When Sunday arrived, they hitched up a team of horses to a wagon, loaded up the family, and made the trek through the snow to their vehicle. If the car didn't start, they used the team to pull it until they could get going. From there, they would journey another four and one-half miles to their church for mass.

Money was tight for the rural family. They worked hard to obtain the capital to add an extension to their barn. Before it was completed, a storm blew in, destroying the entire structure. Tears streaming down his face, the hard working farmer stood surveying the devastation. He squared his shoulders. God would provide. Neighbors and friends pitched in to help with cleanup and rebuilding. They milked the cows outside until they had the framework up. By December of that year, a new barn replaced the pile of rubble. He carried buckets of feed to animals, milked cows, and spent long hours working in the field to provide for his family. For years, he wore copper bracelets around his wrists

I'm the oldest thing in the world. And after two or three hours with

that were said to help with arthritis. When asked how he was doing, he quickly responded, "I'm OK."

When his grandchildren walked beside him, in back of him, and sometimes in front of him, blocking his way, he never raised his voice. A gentle smile would cross his face as he ruffled a little boy's hair or helped a frightened toddler pet his dog, Fido. If he doled out a wink in the process, that child felt truly special.

At other times, he could be found bent over a utility sink washing eggs with a little girl standing on a stool beside him. He patiently demonstrated how to carefully place the fragile ovals in the carton slots, readying them for sale to supplement the other farm income. Though the task took him twice as long, he praised his granddaughter and thanked her for her help. She beamed. The two became kindred spirits.

After retirement, he told his son, "I'm not going to feel guilty about not going to church every day." His faith was not confined. He carried it with him in his walk through life, showing others by example what it means to be Christian.

It was often said, "He would give the shirt off his back" to help another in need. He served without fanfare, letting others bask in the limelight. He donated his time and from limited treasure to assist with benefit breakfasts, church sponsored events, community projects, and individual problems. He gave freely, expecting nothing in return.

His mild-mannered approach to life endeared him as husband, father, brother, grandfather, and friend. He preferred to build up rather than to tear down. To the troubled, his gentle touch was reassuring. When the world rushed, he took time to listen. During times of turmoil, he had the courage to stand up for what is right.

Those who knocked on his door were greeted with a smile and "Come in. Come in." Though at times he had to be weary, his enthusiasm made those who entered feel special. Guests

them, I believe it, too." Gene Perret ~§~ "I loved their home. Every-

rarely left his home without “lunch,” which was often a spread filling the table. Children were led into the kitchen to pick out treats from his candy bowl or the stash he kept in the cupboard.

One day, he listened with sad-looking eyes to the gossips that invaded his living room. “Have you tried walking in their shoes?” his quiet, calm voice sliced through the chatter, stilling them all. He allowed a few silent moments to pass before leading the conversation in a positive direction. His granddaughter sat in the corner, awed.

As a man of faith, he was slow to judge and quick to encourage. He accepted great-grandchildren born out of wedlock and grandchildren’s divorces with the philosophy that everyone makes mistakes. He welcomed prodigals back into the fold with warmth. He did not pry, satisfied to let individuals share what they were comfortable with.

He usually relinquished center stage to his bubbly, outgoing wife. His eyes sparkled at the sound of her laughter, sharing her joy. He often faded into the background with a contented look on his face, not caring that no one noticed him.

Yet, when a meal was served, the seat at the head of the table was saved for him, honoring his gentle leadership. If he tried to slip in another chair, his family was quick to protest, thus “the last shall be first.”

He treasured Sunday afternoons gathered around the kitchen table playing cards with family. Frequently, a child was seated at his side or nestled in his lap, “helping Grandpa.” In those special places, children were educated about more than just a game. They learned about patience, the honor of admitting mistakes, how to win and lose gracefully, and what it felt like to be loved. Frequently, several conversations were going on at once. If one near him yelled out, “Pa said...,” the others hushed, a testament to the respect they had for him.

thing smelled older, worn but safe; the food aroma had baked itself into

Not claiming to have all the answers, he kept up on the news and chose to formulate his opinions based on fact rather than impression. He frowned on quick criticism, preferring to give others the benefit of doubt. Yet, he did not shy away from the truth.

He talked little about himself. His acts of kindness and ability to accept the imperfections in others were models for the world. His way of life is etched forever in my mind. The quiet man of strength and faith was Lambert Orth, my grandfather. Though he resides in heaven now, he will always be the hero of my heart.

Heart-Keeper

Carol Lynn Grellas

Where that house stands vacant
 now; some jays still make their nest
 in juniper greens, small rabbits scamper
 back and forth beneath the bramble
 growth of blackberries, all windows
 left unlit scenes, between a chain
 of homes with turnstile-trees, old
 mailboxes bent or warped from sun,
 rows and rows but one with numbers
 hanging from a tiny nail; a cockeyed
 box with rusted marks that once
 housed mail to a woman who
 used to knit and sing, who opened
 doors to vagabonds or any needy

the furniture.” Susan Strasberg ~§~ “My grandmother is over eighty

thing. Her eyes the wettest blue,
no hue I've ever seen compared —
and music spilled beyond her door
she'd welcome you with patient smiles
but hidden deep were stories spared
long decades never shared, like secrets
saved for church, wrapped tight inside
a Bible's leaf beside the pew. Where
that house stands vacant now, a woman
knew the way an orchard smells
in spring with apricots of golden-
fur adorning grass, where everything
of gardens made her laugh. I'd like
to write a poem, diarize her life
reveal divine details, untold years
diminished by her death and tell her
she lives inside me still. How every
day I see that house, instead of all the
nothingness within, I'm reminded
of a woman whom I loved but never
had the chance to tell. I wish she'd
reappear again, swing open her front
door; an apparition hollow as a violin —
because I'd bow to soft unfettered
grace, beg the mysteries of her heart
until she'd let me in.

and still doesn't need glasses. Drinks right out of the bottle." Henry

A Summer Day

Gary Bloom

Wind rattles the corn stalks;
A plane is flying overhead.
The radio is playing, my grandpa
Listening to the Twins game
On WCCO, "The Voice
Of the Upper Midwest."
My grandpa sits
In a dusty green chair,
The ticking of a grandfather clock
Becoming louder
With each passing minute.
A Hamm's beer is sweating
On the kitchen table.
I bring it to him
And he offers his thanks.
I remember
Him sitting there
And wish I would
Have thanked him.

Layers of Living

Lynn Pinkerton

In the tenth week of my third year in elementary school, we moved into the house my grandparents had built. The same house where my mother and her two sisters were born and grew up. The station wagon and moving van piled high, we trekked across town and set up the base camp that would sustain each of us the rest of our lives.

The low-slung, sand-colored brick house sat on a big welcoming corner lot, across from the elementary school and a tree-packed city park. Three towering pecan trees, planted in faith many years earlier by my grandfather, stood sentry on the west side. Sprawling grass and flowerbeds surrounded the rest of the house, providing plenty of room for one last twilight game of hide and seek, and endless squabbles about whose turn it was to mow the yard.

We moved into the familiar territory and unpacked. Across the boxes were scrawled my mother's now legendary labels. Breakable. Very breakable. Very, very breakable. Decades later, none of us is clear on the distinctions, but do know that there are degrees to fragility...both in objects and in people. Some break more easily than others and should be treated as such.

I claimed rights to the front bedroom, the same room where my mom and her two younger sisters lay in bed and whispered dreams about beckonings beyond the city limits sign and tall

choice, I should advise every one of you straight away to become one.

handsome boys who would romantically whisk them away. Being sprung free from sharing a bedroom with my younger brother, I relished the possibilities of privacy. Diaries. Secrets. A pink Princess telephone. Dreams and prospects.

The room was also witness to a terrifying childhood memory. It was the bomb-shelter era of I-will-bury-you-Nikita Khrushchev and we had seen a “Duck and Cover” film in school...public education’s well-intended, but ridiculous response to atomic bomb emergency procedures. One night, as I lay in the safe haven of my bed, a car turned the corner, flashing its headlights into my bedroom. A BIG flash of light. Someone had dropped the atomic bomb! Almost a half century later, I can hear the pounding of my heart and my footsteps as I bounded down the hall to the safety of my parent’s bedroom. The same room where my mom had sought the steadfast sanctuary of her parents.

We lived comfortably side-by-side with the friendly family ghosts of yesterday’s stories. Our Christmas morning magic shared space with the rich memories of long ago Santa gifts and stockings hung at a common fireplace. In the kitchen, our family sat down to steak dinners around our yellow-topped Formica table. The same space where my mama and her family gathered for Depression-inspired suppers of pinto beans and corn bread.

My barefoot brothers mounted stick horses, brandished six-shooters and chased each other down the canyons of our hallway. Several years earlier, on a routine visit to the bathroom one early November night, my amiable, Alabama-drawling granddaddy clutched his chest, slumped onto that same bare hallway floor, and died.

I regularly climbed our sprawling sycamore tree whose shade was almost as big as our house. It is the same tree, according to my grandmother, whose dancing leaves

mesmerized my infant mother as she lay in her crib, gazing out the window.

The big backyard embraced the squealing sounds of summertime sprinkler baths, playing cars under the dogwood tree, sun-dried sheets waltzing in the wind, growing a record-big okra plant that got my brother's picture in the paper, chasing fireflies with a hopeful fruit jar, and the back porch where my mama, and her mama before her, stood watching the clouds and almost always accurately predicting rain.

It is the same backyard where a young me had watched in horror as my soft, sweet-powdered, lullaby-singing grandmother held a chicken by his neck, swung him in circles until he died, trapped his neck under a broom handle, yanked it off, plucked his feathers and plopped him into a pot of boiling water for Sunday dinner.

It was several houses and many years later that I began to glimpse the dual existence we all shared. In the cold winter days before central heat, my mama would get up before the rest of us and light the gas stoves, so our feet were welcomed by a warm floor when we got out of bed. In much the same way, the house I grew up in was warmed by the layers of living and love left by the family that preceded us.

KP Duty

Glenda Barrett

“We’d better get in there
and wash those dirty dishes!”
my three-year old grandson says,
if he sees any sitting in the sink.
He rushes to get him a chair.
Side by side we start our jobs.
I squirt extra dishwashing liquid,
knowing he’ll like the extra bubbles.
He jerks the faucet from side
to side, until we get our sinks full.
He lets the water fall through
his fingers making tiny waterfalls.
I enjoy the warmth of my hands in
the sudsy water. It is so soothing.
Sometimes, we pretend we’re cooking
in the galley of a big ship. He calls me
matey. He’s the captain of course.
Our imagination, so alike, runs wild.
This job is not a chore to either of us,
We’re on an ocean voyage, fighting
pirates, landing on deserted islands
and trying to survive bad storms
with a plastic bowl for a ship,
and tablespoons for a paddle.

suck it out of their grandparents.” Gene Perret ~§~ “A grandma’s

When we near the end of our journey,
I notice we have water not only on us,
but on the floor as well, and not just
a little. Laughter erupts from us.
Like my grandmother before me,
we have a deep connection, the kind
where it seems to only take a glance
to sense what the other is thinking
or feeling. How rare that is.
We finish up, and he feels grown,
while I feel the deepest gratitude
to be able to carry on the legacy.

Restraint

Joy Harold Helsing

Dear one, I resolve
not to be a foolish grandma
forcing strangers to admire
photograph on photograph,
boring everyone with tales
of how you burp

I'll just secretly adore
your perfect face,
tiny fingers,
precious toes

name is little less in love than is the dotting title of a mother." William

Feed Sacks

Bonnie Stanard

Grandma kept laying hens in a tin-covered house
and bought feed from a man
who made deliveries in a pickup truck.
He stacked in the shed sacks of cracked corn and mixed feed
in calicos and prints. In a closet
of her house, Grandma collected the cleaned bags.
There was hardly a dress
on the place but of feed sacks.
If threads showed in our clothes, we dug
through the designs to find duplicates enough
to cut out pattern pieces and sew an outfit.
When, in the affluence of time, we discovered
Sears Roebuck catalogue,
cotton cloth by the yard came with the mail.