Grandma and Sylvia – A Class Apart

By Barbara Hudspith

A year after grandma died, her life began to surround me. It took that long for the lingering shock to subside, and the reality of her absence to set in. As I pondered the complex inner-workings of her mind, I became keenly aware of the part of grandma's mind that I could never fathom.

She had lived at the turn of the century, lived in Edwardian England, the stuff of PBS serials. Grandma was born and raised in rural Derbyshire less than an hour's train ride from Manchester. Sylvia Pankhurst had been born just five years earlier, in 1882, and yet grandma had never uttered the Pankhurst name in my hearing. Contemporary with both the mother and the daughters of that illustrious clan, she had remained singularly unconcerned about women's rights. How could a young woman maturing at the dawn of a new century find the entire suffrage movement peripheral to her existence? Disbelief gave way to shame. My lineage was tainted! My grandmother had been one of those women who did not understand the gravity of the situation ... who did not recognize patriarchal oppression.

The puzzle grew more complex. Grandma had never liked men. She made no secret of the fact. That she had once been married was a wonder to those of us who knew her after the fact. What could have held her back from involvement in the suffragette movement? Surely not lack of courage, or fight!

A niggling quote, used somewhere at the end of an old thesis, rumbled into my memory. *Be cautious of additive analyses when trying to understand the complexities of women's lives*, said Elizabeth Spelman. There is more to life than an awareness of sexism:

> *The additive analysis says that all women are oppressed by sexism, some are further oppressed by racism, classism, nationalism, ethnicity. The suggestion is that a woman's racial identity can be subtracted from her combined sexual and racial identity. 'We are in fact all women.' But this does not recognize that different women may look to different forms of liberation just because they are black or white, rich or poor, Catholic or Jewish ... Our mothers, our daughters, our sisters, our lovers, are not generic women ... there are no short cuts through women's lives.*

To grandma, the Pankhurst women were denizens of an alien class, inhabitants of a superior world. While they were running for office and publishing manuscripts, grandma was blistering her knuckles on a scrub board.

Class consciousness was a monkey that clung to grandma's back. Why wouldn't it be in Edwardian England? It clawed its way through to her subconscious and never lost its grip. Her parting advice to me when I first fled the family nest was enigmatic: "If you get into difficulties, tell them that your father owns his own home!"

Grandma knew the stigma attached to her class. Having no claim to aristocracy, she was born into the merchant class. Money gained by trade, rather than blood, was not highly regarded. The daughter of a once-prosperous saddler who lost both livelihood and family due to drink, she felt a double stigma. The family was reduced to penury in full view of the local village society. Once a favourite at the fashionable yeomanry balls, her mother was forced to take in lodgers to put food on the table. When the Pankhursts were fighting for the vote, grandma was sent out to char at a country hotel. Adequately fed and housed by her employer, she never set hands on a paycheck. All of her earnings went straight into her mother's pocket to pay for an outstanding debt accrued by the family. While the Pankhursts disrupted Parliament, grandma vomited her way across the Altantic to join the young man she was "keeping company" with. Her mother was ambivalent, indifferent. Content that she was, at least, improving her social status, permission was granted for the journey.

It was grandma's choice ... the choice to leave the known and the familiar for a strange land and a young man she barely knew. Although their families were known to each other, grandma and her betrothed had formally "dated" only twice before he emigrated to the colonies. Five years and dozens of letters had intervened before her ticket arrived and freedom was in sight. Grandma landed on an alien shore, green from seasickness and naive about marital relations. Her betrothed was still a shy, awkward young man, three years her junior, and the wedding date was delayed in spite of his attempt at haste. Back in the old world, his status might have been superior, but here in the new world, it counted for nothing. He was an unskilled labourer and paid as such. Long hours of tedious factory work had crushed his spirit.

Two children, both girls, were born in quick succession. Childbirth at home, without benefit of female support, was traumatic for grandma. The doctor, she always told us, was "cruel and unfeeling; callous when it came to pain; impatient." The doctor was a woman. Grandma had hoped for the sympathetic support of a sister. She found none, and to the end of her days, kept alive an active hatred for the woman who had betrayed her. The doctor, who chose never to bear children herself, became a legend in her time, a role model for women who were attempting to penetrate the barrier of the profession. Public buildings were erected in her name and grandma would click her tongue in disgust every time the newspaper sang her praises.

Grandma was not lonely for female companionship long. Her sister and mother arrived close on her heels — but if she had expected sympathetic support from this quarter, she was sadly disappointed. Her

sister, young and "full of herself," as grandma put it, grew willful and independent overnight. The freedom of a new city was her delight. Instead of gaining two extra hands to help with the babies, grandma found herself instead with an added burden. Her own mother arrived, not because of strong filial affection, but of necessity. A second liaison after the first marriage failure had soured, and she felt it was a good time to begin afresh. Mother was, however, an irritable tyrannous woman who made the tiny apartment oppressive and taught little girls the meaning of fear.

The First World War spelled marital crisis for both grandma and grandpa, although their agonies were separate and distinct. Grandpa, still a young man in his mid-twenties and decidedly peaceful in nature, felt it incumbent upon him to enlist. Grandma resisted with fervour and determination. Make no mistake — grandma had no Pankhurst blood in her veins; her fervour was neither left-leaning nor pacifist. She did not want to be left a widow with two small girls. To enlist meant desertion on the homefront. Grandpa, on the other hand, considered himself a coward if he refused to do his military service. He had no desire to leave the babies he loved, nor the wife who struggled so hard to exist on his modest salary. But enlist he did, and as he walked away from the house that grey morning to board the train, there was a cold silence. Not so many months later, he died at Vimy Ridge. Grandma pictured him lying unattended, in a muddy field, with a deep bayonet wound in his breast.

A widow's lot was hard in 1917, especially a widow with two small children and an assortment of unwelcome family members to feed. Grandma knew how to be frugal ... how to sew every garment by hand and mend it till it looked like new again, how to wheel and deal with the butcher and the greengrocer. She set her hand to survival.

When a long-overdue letter of sympathy arrived from her father-in-law in the old country, she was gratified. He spoke of bringing her back to England to live in comfort, but when he mentioned, in passing, a proviso, she cringed: the children, of course, would be sent away to boarding school. She declined, but kept up an aloof correspondence with him over the years. Grandma never saw her home soil again.

Suitors came and went. Some made offers of marriage. But all were declined by grandma on the grounds that a second husband would never love her girls as they should be loved ... might never treat them fairly. Men were never high on her list of priorities, and the fact that she spent the next sixty-five years of her life without the intimacy of male companionship never seemed a burden or a disappointment.

As her "girls" reached maturity and married, grandma considered herself to be a non-negotiable part of the package. Houses were built less than a block distant from each other, with a separate room designated (in each) for grandma's residence. She floated wraith-like between the two dwellings with a toothbrush and house-coat at both ends of the block. To her joy, the girls had female progeny of their own and a happy fivesome of feminine interest and solidarity prevailed over and against the male contingent. To have a breadwinner who was reliable and reasonably healthy was high on grandma's agenda. That the same breadwinner had to be male, was a necessary evil. It was a fact of life that men made greater salaries than women, and so they were undeniably the gender to rely on when it came to putting bread on the table and clothes on our backs. It was a matter of common sense to grandma, who was no lover of men, who considered them peripheral to her own world — an intrusion upon the convivial female hearth.

It would never have occurred to grandma that wage inequity was a wrong to be righted. Her solution was singularly unPankhurstian. Even though the inequality touched her beloved daughters, she regarded it as a non-issue ... one of those facts of life that a soldier's widow, who scraped by on a military pension, had no hope of addressing. The daughter who excelled at school, who dreamed of University, was unceremoniously removed from classes by the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, and sent to work in a business office. The charitable women who felt it their duty to guide and decide her future were lauded by grandma for their thoughtfulness. The added salary was a delight. Grandma's long-range plans had never included academia. To see each girl suitably married, ensconced as the matriarch of her own home, and spared the wearisome lot of the office or factory worker, was grandma's chief aim in life. The world of shop girls and piece workers was detestable. 'Career' was not a word that had any meaning in grandma's vocabulary. To be married to a faithful breadwinner, who would brave the hostile work-world each morning at dawn, was indeed a blessing that no woman could despise.

The working day then became the sole possession of the happy housewives and their female relations. Chores would be accomplished in concert, gossip would wile away the hours, plans would be made and excursions would be taken before zero hour approached. Zero hour was the return of the husband-breadwinner. The world of the factory and the office was to

be avoided at all costs. It sapped the energy and intruded on the intimacy of the female unit. Outside interference was to be kept at a minimum. Grandma designated herself the guardian of the drawbridge. Neighbours who made overtures of friendship were warded off with a curt word and a refusal to pass on messages.

The idyllic family unit that grandma experienced and created was largely a product of her own mind, but she believed in it. She fed on it; it empowered her to survive.

Grandma's solution to wage inequity worked. She saw to it that her daughters both understood and lived by the rules. A hot meal on the table at 5 p.m., a decently-kept house, frugal expenditure, and total responsibility for childcare was the wife's contribution. The care and feeding of two small girls was by no means an onerous duty when shared by three women, and grandma's rules were a small price to pay for the peaceful intercourse that prevailed from eight-to-five each day, exclusive of weekends. Holidays were planned that included only the women. Weeks by the lake, swimming and shopping, train trips to the deep south, long afternoon drives in the fall countryside, teatime at quaint restaurants — all these were the delights of grandma's life. In her ninety-five years she lived to enjoy many of them.

Career moves and pay equity, academic prowess and recognition were never a part of grandma's world. She didn't make it to senior elementary school in the old country. Charing at sixteen was not only expected of her, but accepted with good grace. When her grandchildren aspired to attend university, she was incredulous and worried. Why would anyone want to spend so much time at bookwork? she queried. Why would you want to tire your brain with so much reading?

Grandma was not illiterate, understand. An avid reader, she positively inhaled anything in print that pertained to the Royal Family (British, of course), Liberace and his mother, or her favourite movie starlet. The newspaper was read religiously from front to back. British tabloids were pure gold. But grandma had no desire to "improve" her mind by delving into a world that did not interest her.

When women of another class were beating down the doors of Oxford and Cambridge to gain entry, grandma was content to spend her days scrubbing sheets by hand and making blood puddings. When the Pankhursts were chaining themselves to railings, grandma was pursuing independence across the ocean with her betrothed. When the vote was finally gained, grandma was likely at home mending torn stockings and catering to the tedious whims of her demanding mother/lodger.

She did not see her own lot as unusually hard; the other women of her class who shared the modest dwellings on her east end street were sisters in hardship. They passed the time of day at the butcher shop, but never linked arms or marched in protest: it was not their way. A subtle competition prevailed amongst them. Whose daughter would marry well? Whose son rise to a white-collar position? It was a society in which the colour of a man's fingernails determined status.

How can a twentieth-century middle-class feminist raised on feminist theory and the glory of the Pankhursts understand a woman like grandmother? Was she a dinosaur? An ostrich? Making a tender pie crust and bleaching the towels till they should made her happy. Female solidarity and intimacy was her delight. Something empowered her to struggle undaunted through two world wars, to say on her 80th birthday, "Who knows, you might have me with you for fifteen more years yet!" And we did.

While my blood and my instinct tell me that this woman was strong, that she was worthy of respect, that she found a way to survive, and that she would make a fine role model for any woman who finds in her a kindred spirit, my modern feminist sensibilities tell me another story. They tell me to judge her ... harshly.

Grandma did not link arms with her "sisters" in the suffrage movement. She did not recognize "sisters." She did not concern herself with the intellectual potential of her own daughters. She accepted inequality as an unshakeable fact of life. She did not know how to organize against the prevailing structures, but sought instead to make her own life, and that of her daughters, more bearable in spite of the structures. She did what she could, given the limitations of her narrow vision.

It is just over a hundred years ago since grandma was born. I knew her for forty years, from the moment I first drew breath. We shared the same table, the same family feeling. We breathed the same air. As flesh of her flesh and blood of her blood, I am as alien to her today as were the Pankhursts at the turn of the century. I have been taught to look more broadly at the world, to link arms outside the family circle, to deal with men as both cohorts and adversaries, to undervalue the making of pies and the bleaching of towels. Never again can I be satisfied with the simple intimacy of five women who share bloodlines. I have been thrust out of the working-class nest, the small sheltering place, and brought face-to-face with an overwhelming world.

I have lost the ability to see grandma's solution as my solution — but I dare not hold it up for ridicule. I dare not defame it as an inferior choice for other women ... women who experience life as grandma experienced it, who find in her solution not the wrong way, but simply *another* way. For there are no short cuts through women's lives.

If I persist in comparing grandmother, a tradesman's daughter from rural Edwardian England, with the Pankhurst women, and if I come away from the rich interweavings of her story with only criticism, I will have learned nothing. I will continue to be guilty of middle-class feminist moralism. Audre Lorde will despair at my impoverished understanding. Elizabeth Spelman will remind me once again that I am making an "additive analysis."

When Audre Lorde wrote to Mary Daly to protest the exclusion of black women from the American feminist movement, she said:

I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force toward change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share and some of which we do not ... the oppression of some women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within the differences ... to deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood is still racism.

And, might we not add, beyond sisterhood is still classism.

References

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ANNE MARRIOTT

Retrospective

Where did the train start?
All our eyes
were blind with blood and
sleep.
For miles a low mist covered the
ground.
We think we travel northward
speculate: *is there an engineer?*

Odd things lie beside the track —
clues to locality?
There was a doll
eyeless in gravel
a fishing-rod left spearing
a wide stream, prune-coloured
just now a store, steps worn
wood hammered on
to cover its cracked windows.

Late afternoon now. Some passengers begin
to take down coats and bags
their final station imminent?
Outside a blade of sun
cuts out a single aspen.
It confirms our season —
all the leaves still gold
all of them tinged with grey.

(from *Aqua*, Wolsak and Wynn, 1991)