Passing the Secret

ALLISON HOWARD

"Passing the Secret" est une histoire vraie autour de la grand-mère maternelle de l'auteure, une femme complexe qui a laissé sa marque sur ses quatre enfants et ses 15 petits-enfants.

When I was a child, other grandmothers seemed to be cozy, ample-bosomed women who scooped up scampering grandchildren in arms covered in loose cardigans that hung shorter at the back over hunching shoulders. Their homes were filled with the smells of fresh-baked cookies, pot roasts on Sundays, and lavender cachets that snuggled amongst flannel nightgowns in oak drawers. Purple and white African violets grew in plastic pots on ancient chipped saucers along their east-facing windowsills and dusty canning jars sat in neat rows on pantry shelves. They belonged to bridge clubs and served tea in their "best sets," dainty flower-covered china that had been collected by young brides and later given on birthdays by dutiful relatives who didn't know what to give grandma who "has everything she needs." They lived alone in white bungalows with neat flower borders and cedar shrubs that their sons-in-law dutifully clipped once a year into oval silhouettes with little scruffy bits left at the top where the ladder didn't quite reach. Smiling warmly, complaining only mildly about bum knees and the darn pigeons that made a mess all over the back steps; they could be counted on.

My "Nana" wasn't much like other grandmothers. She had blonde curly hair with only a little gray in it, and she was "skinny as a rake," a highly considered compliment given freely by her eager-to-please daughters. Nana wore silky dresses with big pink and purple flowers and swirly diaphanous skirts with wide belts to emphasize her tiny waist. Her front teeth had slits of gold along the sides that flashed when she giggled and she wore dusty powder blue eye shadow on eyelids that dropped in soft folds over her pale eyes. Nana chain-smoked and that meant that the fingers on her right hand were stained permanently yellow. Still, everyone said she looked so young for her age, and nothing could make her day like being mistaken for a sister to her three daughters.

Nana wasn't keen on baking, or for that matter, performing most domestic chores, except when she made her specialty: foamy white angel food cakes for family birthdays. I had the enviable privilege of being allowed to help her decorate her creations by carefully arranging a whole box of smarties among the frothy waves of whipped cream icing. She had a big candle that said *"29 and Holding"* that replaced the smarties on the adults' cakes. It was never actually lit, but she thought it was a big laugh and acted like it was a new joke every time she got it out.

There wasn't a lot, though, that Nana seemed to enjoy doing. She mainly wanted to "visit" all the time, a ritual that involved sitting at one of her daughter's kitchen tables all day long, smoking and drinking coffee, and "yakking." Nana's talk usually revolved around petty criticisms, focused especially on her sons-in-law who elicited her ill-concealed disdain. Their manhood was questioned, their earning power snickered at, and small faults mercilessly explored. Wise sons-in-law stayed out of her way, resenting the hold Nana had on her daughters.

Nana's transparent dissatisfaction with life, which had to do with her husband, my Grandpa, dying and leaving her a widow at the age of 56, was raw and bitter. Hidden behind girlish giggles and coy looks, her words could be like daggers, leaving permanent scars when thrust at battle-weary family. Nana, never considered "getting on with her life" after Grandpa's death; instead she simply gave up, never again driving, never cultivating a social life outside her own family, and never, never being pleased with the act of living.

Earlier memories of Nana and Grandpa provide a sweeter picture. My grandfather, a flamboyant man would sweep into town to visit, with his glamorous, blonde wife at his side. They drove the normally two-day drive from Calgary in one breathless day, always in the latest model car, never staying more than a night or two. Then Nana was in her

element. With a flourish she would dump her purple drawstring bag of pennies on the kitchen table for me and my sister and brother to divvy up. While I took charge of distributing our treasure—"one for me, one for you"—Nana would flash her golden smile as she reached into her purse for chocolate treats. On one memorable visit that coincided with my fifth birthday, she presented me with a beautiful solid gold bracelet given to her on her fifth birthday by her father. By chance, her girlhood initials, carved in the tiny face were the same, as mine, the ornamental script reading "*AH"* and underneath it *"1907,"* for the year it was given to her. I treasured that gift, and still do.

When I was ten years old, Nana moved from Calgary to Penticton, where we lived. My mother was going back to work and Nana would baby-sit my brother, sister, and me after school and we would all have dinner at her place on week days. I was pretty excited because all my friends had grandmas in town and I thought a resident grandma would be helpful in elevating my somewhat shaky social status.

Nana chose a third-floor penthouse apartment to rent, squelching my picture of a grandma ensconced in a cute little house with an ample yard for play. My friends found her a little intimidating and Nana wasn't really too keen on me inviting them over after school, anyway. She never actually said that, but she had a way of getting in a snit when I showed up with them, that was sort of embarrassing. It was easy to tell when Nana was in a snit because she just sat in her chair, smoking and staring out the window with her pink fluffy slippers quivering as her feet tapped up and down against the embroidered footstool.

Nana's apartment did have a big patio on the roof that was higher than most things in town so you could see all the way to the lake from her place. She brought most of her fancy things with her from Calgary and I spent day-dreamy hours examining the fine details of her treasures: elegant Royal Doulton figurines in net skirts poised in eternal readiness; a gold clock encased in a tall oval glass tower which allowed examination of its quietly moving parts; and bouquets of china flowers on pastel doilies that lay on ornate polished tables with arched legs and tiny brass toes on their graceful feet. Most beautiful of all, was a cylindrical lamp with a paper lampshade that rotated when it warmed up, projecting dancing images of sunsets and rushing streams across the walls and ceiling.

Nana was crazy about Patti Page and every Thursday I rushed home from school to watch the *Patti Page Show* with her on television. We didn't have a television at home yet, so I was happy to watch almost anything. I think Nana thought she was as beautiful and glamorous as Patti Page because they both had blonde, curly hair and slim waists. She sang along at the top of her lungs to *Mocking Bird Hill* and after a while I would join in the *tra la, tra lee* part. Other days Nana would have a deck of cards ready on the kitchen table and we would play rummy until it was time to get supper ready. She kept a little scribbler in the kitchen drawer with all our scores in it. I always got to write them down because I had neat handwriting and at the end of each month we would add up all our scores. She was very serious about winning, although neither of us had any real strategies, so it was usually pretty even.

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Though Nana was often mean-spirited, pointing out faults and making cruel jokes about others, I relished our time together after school. Perhaps, I felt an equal, for she treated me as an adult, often confiding in me as adults tended not to in those days. And perhaps the orderliness of her home was a comforting antidote to the usual chaos of my own, where my mother, ahead of her time, bucked tradition, struggling with balancing a professional career and family. Whatever the case, Nana became my friend that year, albeit, in a perverse kind of way.

Nana always changed out of her "work dress," into a clean dress for dinner and "put on her face," although I'm not sure anyone in our family but me ever noticed. After everyone else arrived, my sister and brother tumbling through the door in a boisterous commotion of dust and marbles and school books, my parents tired from their "hard day," the quality of the interactions became spare. An economy of conversation kept tension minimal, but not unnoticed. Dinner was rushed and strained with Nana making critical remarks and jokes that stung. Everyone was in a hurry to get home for the evening.

Predictably, the "arrangement" with Nana living in Penticton didn't work out well. At the end of the year she packed up and moved back to Calgary. By listening quietly, eavesdropping outside the living room where my parents had their evening talks, I heard bitter tones of explanation; my mother telling my father that Nana was tired of being a "maid" to all of us. My mother said Nana was leaving us in the lurch, but you could hear the relief in Dad's voice when he said he thought we would manage.

A year later, our family loaded up the '53 Dodge and

drove to Calgary for a summer visit. We stayed at Nana's place and walked back and forth the four blocks to my Aunt's house every day, being tourists to their visiting ritual. One afternoon, while the others went shopping, Nana, uninterested in the excursion, invited me to walk back to her place with her. Delighted, I accepted, freely gloating at my perceived status as "favourite" grandchild.

Nana had always had a way of talking to me as though I were an adult when we were alone, which gave me a special sense of power. This time though, her conversation turned away from the usual stories of her girlhood endlessly pursued by amorous beaux. Instead, she began to tell me how hopeless her life was. She described days and nights of unending boredom and loneliness. She said she barely slept at night and ended her torturous time in bed long before dawn. Each morning, she would sit in the darkened window staring out to the street, simply waiting for the day to begin. When 8:00am chimed on the beautiful antique glass-encased clock, she would walk the three blocks to my Aunt's house, where she stayed until after dinner each evening, returning home to sit in the dim rooms until bedtime. This endless tedium was repeated day after day with nothing to break the self-induced monotony. She had no desire to see or cultivate friends, and refused offers to volunteer or work. Housework was done in desultory bursts; she cooked nothing for herself and ate little.

As we sat at her kitchen table, Nana, in a flat monotone, told me that she wished to commit suicide. She said her belief that it was against her religion prevented her from doing so. This caveat against taking her own life both puzzled and relieved me. I had never known Nana to be a pious person, but I took some comfort in this hitherto unknown stricture of dogma however unconfirmed it might be. But, in my 12-year-old naiveté, I was overwhelmed by this desperate and unsolicited information. Nana's confession lay as a heavy burden over my own pubescent worries. I told no one according to our unspoken promise, but I lived in fear.

I never again looked forward to seeing Nana, nor did I ever anticipate her three-week annual summer visit with anything but dread. I was wretched every time I approached our house, sure I'd find her still and silent on the kitchen floor. My imagination never performed the task of contemplating the form the suicide would take, only its' cold consequence. I felt a future responsibility, sure that others would immediately read my secret and demand explanation and meaning, of which I had none.

As I grew older, I stopped hoping that Nana would snap out of her dreary, endless depression and become a "real Grandma." And in time, I no longer expected to hear she had taken her own life, but instead began to resent the cruel weight she had placed on me. We never spoke again of our conversation. I will never know what despair would compel a woman nearing 60 to bear [or bare?] such troublesome thoughts to her 12-year-old granddaughter.

Allison Howard is a former social worker living in Penticton, B.C. where she is renovating an old house with her husband. She has recently edited with her mother, A Memoir of Friendship: The Letters Between Carol Shields and Blanche Howard *(Penguin Canada, Viking Press, April 2007).*