

Orange Blossom Birthday

Whether or not we notice them, miracles occur. Some are great and loud and larger than life. Others are quiet and sweet and undeniably certain. But big or small, they are usually surprising, always wonderful and exactly what is needed in the moment. You may not believe in miracles but they will happen just the same.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman. She wasn't wealthy, she wasn't worldly; she had not been educated in a formal setting, but she knew who she was, her opinions were strong and she gave fullness to her life by doing the best she could with what she had been given. Her home was welcoming, her faith was sure and her love was big enough to surround each member of her very large family. The every day struggles she took in stride and helping others was her way of living. Most importantly, Grandma knew how to appreciate the simple things: bouncing a baby on her knee, planting flowers in her yard and gathering her large clan together to eat, sing and bond as a family.

As her children grew she continued to be an incredible mother. At the birth of each grand-baby her heart opened up an extra wee bit to let another child into her life. She was on the scene for each new arrival, even for the families who, like ours, lived far away. Growing up, I always felt as though I had two homes, the one I shared with my mom, dad, brothers and sister, and Grandma's house where everything was bigger and noisier, more magical and fun.

Because we lived away from her, Grandma would come to visit a couple of times a year. I didn't realize it as a child but many times she planned her holiday to coincide with my mother's birthday. Being a mother myself now I know that no matter how old my children get, I still want them to know that I love them and they will always be my "babies"; I guess Grandma felt the same way and so, she would come to celebrate my mom's birth and life and spend time nurturing the whole family in the process.

October can be a cold month where we come from and I remember more than once arriving home from school to find Grandma in the kitchen, piles of donuts on the table and homemade soup simmering in a big pot on the stove. Sometimes my Grandpa would come with her but often she made the trip on her own. If she couldn't be there she would always call to send her love and best wishes to her daughter, my mom.

Seasons passed, we kids all grew up, and there came a time when Grandma could no longer come to see us; her body old, tired and altered by life's mysterious ways, was unable to make the journey. So, as often as we could, her children and grandchildren would go to be by her side. Although she had changed in many ways, her heart was still as big as ever and having her family close remained the most important thing to her. One day, in early summer, my Grandma's life left her body and entered the realm beyond our understanding. The loss of her physical presence was a sad thing for each of us who knew her, but the love she left behind gave us a way to accept her passing with peace.

Just after Grandma died a friend of my mom's gave her a gift in memory of her mother. It was a tree (a Mock –Orange tree to be precise), and it was planted in the yard outside my mom's kitchen window. All through that month the tree bloomed with a beautiful white, orange-blossoms and when the flowering season was over, it was trimmed into a neatly shaped shrub whose greenery thrived for the rest of the summer.

As autumn approached, my mother watched the Orange tree like the other plants in her garden, begin to dry and wither in preparation for the long winter ahead. October came and with it the chilly realization that this year on her birthday and indeed in the years to come, there would be no visit from my Grandma; there would be no well wishing phone call for my mother. There would only be silence and dearly held memories.

Then on a crisp, bright morning, a few days before her birthday while she stood in the kitchen washing dishes, my mother glanced out the window. Her gaze fell upon something surprising, something quite unbelievable. There, on a stark branch of her little tree, bloomed a single, beautiful, orange- blossom. She couldn't take her eyes from this glorious sight, for as out of place as it seemed she knew meaning of its presence; it was a birthday visit from her mother after all. In her own words my mother was "delighted and excited" and immediately started telling everyone what had occurred. When *I* heard the story there wasn't a doubt in my mind that my Grandma had indeed "come to call."

Grandma has been "gone" for over twenty years now, but the tree is still there. It has become a part of the little world in that back yard: a shelter for baby birds, a thing of true beauty for all to see and a constant reminder of the miracle of love. Not once since that first year has it produced a blossom in October but I for one can't pass it by without feeling the spirit of my Grandmother, alive and well and watching over her family.

I have grown up in a different world than my grandmother. In many ways I have had far more opportunities that she ever could have imagined for herself. But she is and will always be a grounding strength inside of me. She kept things simple, she worked hard, she told the truth and she loved her family. She passed those values on to my mother who passed them on to me. I in turn am trying to teach these things to my children. I think about my Grandma often, especially when I am cutting vegetables or cooing over a baby, I feel grateful to have come from her and challenged by the way she lived her life. I love you Grandma, wherever you are blooming now