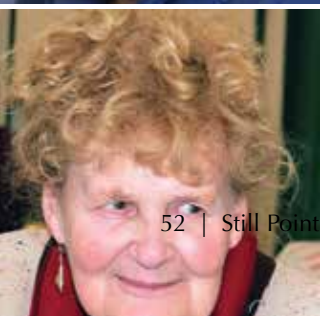




Ode to Majestic Matriarchs

by Stephani E. D. McDow

REMEMBERING POUND CAKES, CARE PACKAGES, AND QUILTS IS EASY. Being able to close your eyes and go back to that place in time where colors were the most vivid they'd ever been and memory-laced fragrances possessed you with unfathomable joy. When love embraced you so tangibly that you could describe, down to the opaque stockings, what it looked like, what she looked like when she stole your heart the way only a grandmother could—the matriarch of your family. When she instilled in you those bits of herself that her own children, your parents, may have forgotten or overlooked. When she poured into you her experiences and realities, her heritage and culture, her truths and stories. When her cheeks were at their fullest, smiling down on you with the most biased belief that you were the greatest thing she'd ever seen. Remembering is easy. “When I grow up, I want to be an old woman.”

And when she's gone, it's the missing and losing that's hard. While you know in your heart of hearts that she is in or heading to sheer glory, peace, and pain-free joy, you can't help but acknowledge your need for her to still be here in the way you remember her best: doing the things that helped shape who you are, assisting you through life's beat-ups and let-downs, cheering you through your successes, being that irreplaceable matriarch that was such a solid constant in your life. Everyone wants Grandma to live forever.

It's days like this that I wish Grandma Lois were still here. When I was younger, whether she knew I was ailing or not (truth is, I'll never know), she could always comfort me. I'd bounce my way through D.C. city streets, heading home from school carrying books and the burdens and demons of urban city life. I'd find

her laid across the bed watching Oprah or the news that followed thereafter. I'd kick off my shoes, climb up on the bed, and lay next to her with my head resting just beside her bosom. And she'd take her heavy, aged, hard-working, Monroe, North Carolinian hand, undo my hair tie, and stroke my hair with long, weighty, meaningful, loving strokes. As if, with the mere motion of her hand moving from the roots at the crown of my head to the strands' ends, she grasped whatever it was that was on my mind or panging my heart and pulled it away from me with her love and strength. Then let it go and kept it away from me. Remember? Remember when Grandma could just make everything right?

Sometimes life can whip us relentlessly, make us feel as though we're standing on the edge of a cliff. The depths at the cliff's edge are unknown—endless, perhaps. We're wearing platform, high-heeled shoes—Giuseppe's even—with our toes, setting just atop the cliff's edge, pressing firmly down into the shoe's base to steady ourselves. Pressing so firmly that the toe joints have gone white and numb. The earth beneath the shoes is gritty; pebbles, sand, and dirt make for a foundation less than firm. But we're standing.

In our hands are many plastic bags full of eggs—oversized, highly sensitive, shelled eggs. So many and so full are they that the weight of the bags makes the handles cut into the flesh of our palms and fingers so they are purple, bleeding members now. The bags are so heavy, and we can't put them down because the eggs will crack, and it's somehow our responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen. If that isn't enough, on our shoulders are books stacked high. Ancient books. Forgotten books. Thick and varying in size. Can't let them fall, we want them, need them. We're told that the knowledge in these books

is ours to have if only we can pull them down and open them to receive it. But how? Without letting the eggs go. How? Without neglecting our responsibilities. How? When any movement we make may cause one of the books to fall off the cliff or worse—cause us to fall off the cliff? How? Our spines feel like they're going to break in two from the pressure of it all. But we're still standing.

How I so desperately need the stroking of Grandma Lois's hand in my hair when life's whip has welted me raw. She'd fix it—somehow. Grandmas have that power. But the mere fact that in spite of all that—the imagery of life's beating—I'm still standing and reflecting upon the memory of her taking my pain away is a testament to the importance and grandeur of the matriarch. She matters. And when she's gone, we long for her.

So how is it that we find that place—that “happy” middle—between the easy and the hard? How do we cope with needing our matriarch in life when she can't be there in that same way anymore? Here's what we do: remember her story and her way, all that she taught you, directly and indirectly. Remember and laugh at her flaws that are perfectly imperfect. Remember everything that resides in our hearts. Close our eyes and remember the smell of pound cake baking in the oven, or hear her humming some tune we never knew the name of. She's still there, living in what she gave to us and our memories.

And, I'm sure that if I close my eyes and squeeze them shut just hard enough—I'll feel Grandma Lois's hand in my hair. For the Bettys and Mediels still here to feed us that love and wisdom, and for the Ruths, Loises, Lorraines, Eloises, Merlices who've gone on ahead and are waiting to hold us later. I want to be like you when I grow up—matriarchs, majestically. ❖