



# Home-Canned Magic

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**M**Y NANA'S HOUSE IS MAGIC TO me. Of course, it's really Nana and Papa's house, but Nana is so completely the queen of her domestic domain that I often use only her name when I talk about their home. It's nothing fancy—just a little white Kentucky farmhouse, two stories and a basement. The closets smell like mothballs, the linoleum floors smell like Lysol in the brown bottle, and the kitchen smells like homemade cinnamon rolls hot out of the oven. I have twenty-three years of memories made in that house, a lifetime of living next door to my grandparents, of humid summers spent drinking milkshakes and climbing trees in the front yard, of frosty winters spent eating piping-hot buckwheat cakes after the men of the family came in from deer hunting with cold fingers and hearty appetites.

Nana's house is a map of my childhood. Memories linger with a faint glow in the corners, on the kitchen counter where I used to sit and eat cookies and chatter ceaselessly while Nana baked, in the spare bedroom with the lace curtains where I slept when I spent the night, in the wood-paneled basement where all the Morrow kids played dress-up and Legos and board games. This is the magic: how memories accumulate like snowflakes over the years, drifting through time, settling lightly on the windowsills, covering a plain white farmhouse in layers of moments, giving it texture and meaning and power beyond its four walls and shingled roof. It is the magic of how a house becomes a home.

Nana's kitchen is the first room you enter when you step into her house. It's small and bright, walls lined with pale wooden shelves, half a dozen Longaberger mugs that hang from a display rack on the countertop when they're not filled with strong black coffee for my dad and uncles. So many of my memories of Nana

take place in that kitchen. It seems like she's always baking something—apple dumplings or cinnamon rolls, chocolate chip cookies or chocolate pie. She knows the recipes by heart, measuring out the flour and sugar and cinnamon with the quick assuredness of a woman who has gone through these same motions hundreds of times before, who knows these measurements like she knows her own reflection when she looks in a mirror. When she bakes, she is an artist.

Nana hums while she bakes, and sometimes she sings. I love to hear her sing. When I was little, she sang so many songs to me—"A Bushel and a Peck" by Doris Day and "See, See My Playmate" about a little girl who can't slide down the rain barrel because her dolly has the flu. Nana knows nursery rhymes too. My childhood favorite was one that I think of now as the Button Song. She had a special white shirt with buttons down the front, and every button was a different color. She would hold me on her lap and count the buttons while she chanted the sing-song rhyme, "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief." It was a game—whichever button you ended on was the type of man you would marry. I was always intrigued, always ready to sing the Button Song and learn my future. It didn't matter that the number of buttons on her shirt never changed, that we always ended on the same one. For my five-year-old self, the game was magical.

Nana is a strong supporter of the magical. Once she took me for a walk in the woods, and we looked for fairy homes among tree roots and beneath toadstools. By the time we returned to her house, I was almost positive I'd seen a fairy flit across the path in front of us. She also showed me magic in more subtle ways. She would invite me and my sister and my cousins to sleep over at her house, and



once we were all lying on her giant green air mattress in the living room, covered in mounds of blankets, she would tell us stories. She made up new ones for us every night, and her skill with weaving adventures out of thin air never ceased to amaze me.

She also made us animal pancakes. We would place our orders:

"I'll take an elephant!"

"I want an ostrich please!"

"Can I have a zebra?"

And undaunted by the artistic difficulty of our demands, she would merely say, "They'll be ready in a jiffy!" and get to work, pouring the pancake batter onto the griddle one careful spoonful at a time, drizzling it into the shape of a lion or a giraffe or whatever other animal creation we had requested.

Sometimes the animals turned out to be

exactly what they were supposed to be. She had a good imagination and a steady hand, two important skills for an animal pancake artist. But sometimes the batter would run where it wasn't supposed to, and tails would become abnormally thick and long, and legs would fuse into one another, and necks would disappear altogether. When this happened, she would just laugh and improvise. "I know you ordered a rhinoceros, but this pancake decided it wanted to be a little man wearing a sombrero."

We didn't mind the improvisations; they were usually better than the animals we'd asked for anyway. It was all part of the magic.

Nana knows all about magic. And over the years, as she's shared her magic with me, I've begun to learn a bit about it too. The secret with magic is that it's hidden inside the little things, in buttons and fairies and pancakes.

Nana is a magician because she knows just where the magic is hiding, and she can coax it out into the open and share it with others.

When I was younger, my cousins and I would crawl into Nana's attic, packed like small, sweaty sardines between cardboard boxes and old trunks, to type on her old-fashioned typewriter. The sheer age of it invoked awe in our elementary-school hearts. Nana had used it in high school, and her mother had used it before that. It was an ancient artifact, a hulking monument to history, to words thought and written before our parents were born, in the dim mists of antiquity. I loved the cold gray metal of the typewriter's frame, the smooth finger indentions on the shiny black-and-white keys, the satisfying click of the letters striking the blank page, the sweet smell of the ink that was vaguely reminiscent of libraries and intelligence.

I remember the day that the ribbon ran dry. We were working on the latest edition of our *Family Newspaper*. We'd been spying on the adults for hours, writing down disjointed snippets of their conversations in notebooks and transcribing them on the typewriter, slowly and painstakingly pecking out each letter but still somehow managing to make a copious number of errors. Then, one of us struck a key, and the letter appeared so faintly on the paper that we could barely see it.

"The typewriter's broken!"

I don't know who said it. Maybe I just thought it. I don't remember. What I do remember is that we pressed all the remaining keys, hoping that the nearly-invisible letter had been a fluke, but none of them worked. Broken. We had broken the greatest treasure that Nana had ever entrusted to us. Shame flooded my stomach as we plodded downstairs to tell her the tragic news.

One of the best things about Nana's laugh is that it sounds like comfort, like forgiveness, like the wave of relief that washes over you



when you know everything is going to be all right. "The typewriter's not broken," she told us, laughing her gentle, joyous laugh. "The ribbon just ran out of ink. We've been using that ribbon for years; I can't believe it's lasted this long."

My shame evaporated, only to be replaced by sadness and a poignant sense of loss as the typewriter was stowed away, awaiting the unknown day when a fresh ribbon would arrive and its ink would be restored.

I forgot about the typewriter for years, but recently I thought about it again, how much I would like to hold onto that piece of my childhood, that connection with my grandmother and her mother, with the heritage of words and storytelling that I carry within me. The typewriter holds a kind of mystic literary power that resonates deeply with me. It is a piece of Nana that I want to call my own.

It took a year for me to work up the courage to ask her for the typewriter. I was afraid it would seem like an insensitive request, or even a morbid one. “Please, can I have your typewriter someday?” As if this was what concerned me about the thought of losing her: whether or not I would inherit some thing that belonged to her. But when I finally asked her last summer, nervously perched on the edge of my seat in her living room while the fan whirred softly overhead and the birds chirped in the branches outside the living room window, Nana just smiled at me. Her smile is like her laugh—gentle, wise, comforting. “Of course you can have it,” she told me without a moment’s hesitation. “It’s yours.”

She wasn’t offended. She could hear the words beneath my words, the truth of my request. It wasn’t about the typewriter at all,

but what it stood for: the memories it held, the meaning it carried, the power of its history that would continue to grow as I typed new words with the same keys that had typed the words of women in my family for almost a century. Nana understood because she knows the power of history. She knows the power of family.

**N**ana and Papa built our family from the ground up. Their roots stretch back to West Virginia, to harsh winters and cast-iron stoves and home-sewn clothes. They carried fragments of that heritage with them to Kentucky: funny squished vowels that make the word “Wednesday” sound like “Windsdee,” quaint made-up phrases like “botherskyte,” and an unusual preference for eating pancake syrup in soup beans. They have lived in Kentucky for almost fifty years, but they still proudly consider themselves West

Virginians. A dreamy look comes over their faces when they tell stories of their childhood: skiing in Canaan Valley when the snow was so deep you could sink right down into it, eating an entire pan of freshly-made fudge after school, talking on the phone back when an operator had to relay messages from one party to another. Their stories show me glimpses of a simpler time, of a sense of home and belonging that few people ever truly achieve.

Nana is the fifth of eight children in the Friend clan, where familial pride runs deep and strong, where stubbornness and loyalty are two sides of the same coin. The Friends stick together through thick and thin, and their love for each other is as tough and enduring as the Appalachian mountains. It is a testament to the depth of her love for Papa that she agreed to move away with him after they got married. She was so devoted

to that dark-haired boy with the huge grin and the gap between his front teeth that she left behind the only life she’d ever known—her parents and her siblings and the farm that she still refers to as “Home” after almost sixty years.

Now, five children and seventeen grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren later, Nana is once again surrounded by a rowdy, loving, close-knit family—one that she and Papa created together. She has nurtured it, prayed over it, and watched it grow over the years until it fills her house to overflowing. Every Christmas, the forty-one members of the Morrow clan gather in the dining room while Papa reads aloud the story of Christ’s birth from the second chapter of Luke. Then, he prays over all of us, dedicating our family to the Lord as we look ahead into a new year. Sometimes I open my eyes during the prayer just so I can





look at my grandparents sitting side by side, Papa's hand resting on Nana's, tears leaking silently from beneath her eyelashes as her heart echoes the words of his prayer. This is my heritage, I think to myself. This love, this fervency, these two souls turned heavenwards in supplication and praise. These are the roots that give my family its strength and vitality.

**N**ana has a green thumb. She makes everything grow. Her back patio is surrounded by a small paradise of flowers—tropical hibiscus in pots, hardy petunias, top-heavy peonies, lanky poker plants, and even a thorny rose bush. Nana and Papa also put out a vegetable garden every year—half an acre of green beans, tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, zucchini, cabbage, lettuce, potatoes, turnips, and sometimes a few stalks of corn that the raccoons ravish before the ears are ready to harvest.

The green beans are an awful amount of

work. Hours of kneeling in the soil between the rows, sweating through your blue jeans and t-shirt, back bent under the merciless summer sun as you painstakingly pluck each bean from the laden plants, trying your best not to break the delicate stems and destroy the chance for a second picking.

If it were up to me, I would give up on the beans, stop growing them altogether, replace them with a less work-intensive vegetable. But my grandparents won't hear of it, and so every year we sweat away in the humid Kentucky heat, picking and picking and picking beans. When we're finally finished, we snap them in the shade of the back patio, the clink of the beans hitting our empty saucepans gradually fading to a muted thunk as the pots fill up. Snapping becomes a social event, a celebration of another round of picking completed, a chance to talk and laugh and "just visit," which is one of Nana's favorite ways to pass the time.

After the snapping, Nana cans the beans, lining the shelves in her basement with rows of gleaming mason jars that she'll pull out when the weather turns cold. Those green beans, home-grown and cooked with bacon grease, are a family favorite. Nana grows the beans because she knows how to make everything grow, and she keeps growing them year after year because she knows how to recognize when difficulty is worth the reward. This is true of her vegetables, and it's also true of her family.

She has weathered many storms as our matriarch. She stands strong through angry words flung back and forth in the heat of notorious Morrow tempers, through heartbroken tears sobbed onto her shoulder by her daughters and granddaughters, through long nights spent in prayer for the bodies and souls of those she loves. When we hurt, so does she. When our hearts break, so does hers. Amid all of our family's trials, from tumultuous divorces to agonizing battles with cancer, Nana is always right there, ready with prayers and wisdom and helping hands. Through all the worry and fear and pain that time has woven into the tapestry of her seventy-nine years of life, her trust in God has remained solid and unwavering, a compass pointing due north. The force of her faith and the power of her prayers are incredible to me. She is one of the most revered Saints in my inner reliquary, glowing in my mind's eye as if embossed with gold. It makes me feel small to see a faith that big. But it also fills me with hope, the hope that someday I can shine resplendent with fervor and love before my family in the way that she does before hers.

**T**hese days, Nana's house is quiet most of the time. On holidays, of course, it's roiling with happy chaos—adults laughing and shouting, kids running around pell-mell, a televised



football game roaring in the background. But most days, it's just Nana at home alone while Papa works on the farm and the rest of us live our busy lives. Sometimes I drive down to visit her on the weekends, even if it's just to say hello and drink a glass of sweet tea on her back patio. The way her eyes sparkle when she sees me fills me with love, and also with a tinge of guilt. I should visit her more often. I should take time to call her during the week. I should tell her how much she means to me.

Whenever I step through the screen door into Nana's kitchen and hear her call out her traditional greeting of "yoohoo!" from wherever she may happen to be in the house, I'm suddenly flooded with the countless other times I've stepped through that doorway and heard her voice. I can envision my younger self, laughing, singing nursery rhymes while I sit on her lap, eating popsicles with my cousins on the patio, hugging her goodnight after eating dinner with her and Papa. I can hear her laughter like the wind chimes on her patio, see her smile like coming home. Her house holds memories like a mason jar full of homegrown green beans, and they are always waiting for me every time I come back. ❖