

# FOOTSTEPS OVERHEAD

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A PROUSTIAN MOMENT suddenly awakened my senses when visiting an old house. Footsteps echoed loudly overhead, and once again, I was a small child, on my yearly visit to see my grandparents. Theirs was a world apart, back to past generations. I loved going there.

My grandparents, Mabel and Burt, lived in one of the many row houses that were placed like long ribbons on either side of the street. Each house held two families—one down, one up—and were narrow, close together, with open front porches that faced the sidewalks. My grandfather called the houses *railroad flats* as one room led into another with a hallway running alongside that ended straight ahead

in the kitchen. My little bedroom was right next to theirs in the row of rooms.

My grandmother's sister, Millie, occupied the upstairs with her husband, Vernon, who walked with a distinct thumping limp. I could trace their movements by the noises of creaking wood. "Millie and Vernon are up, I'm going to see them." I'd call to my grandmother as I raced up the steep shiny steps. They were childless, so my presence was a special gift, just as their sweet love was to me.

On the outside of their kitchen window was a clothesline on a pulley. Millie pegged the clothes on the line, one piece at a time, way up high. I was always worried they would fall, like flying leaves lost in the wind. My fears were never realized, as the clothes



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swayed gently until pulled back in, smelling fresh from the sun. Another object on a pulley was a dumb waiter used for taking goods up and down between floors. I begged, "Please let me ride in it." Vernon replied firmly, "Absolutely not, it's not made for people, it's too dangerous."

Vernon trusted me with the responsibility of feeding his large bowl of colorful guppies. I was mesmerized watching the tranquil tiny fish swim endlessly around and around to nowhere, pretending I was one of them, gliding under the little bridge and through the weeds. Sun rays slanted obliquely across their living room illuminating the simple mantel where stood a tiny bronze horse, possessing a mane, saddle, and reins. He was so flawlessly detailed, I didn't dare touch him. I told Millie and Vernon, "I wish he was mine to gallop wildly over hills and through green fields." They bestowed a feeling of complete acceptance that encouraged my imagination to blossom freely.

Downstairs my grandmother washed clothes in a big tub that hooked up to the kitchen sink. After the clothing swished back and forth in the water, she put each piece through a ringer that she turned by hand. I found this process intriguing, never dreaming it was hard work, making her hands red and achy. I asked, "Grandma, may I please do that too?" She replied, "You can help by handing the clothing

up to me to put in the ringer." "I want to do that," I replied. This job made me feel important.

Like Millie, my grandmother had a rope pulley that was attached to the same tree at the far end of the garden. She leaned down to the basket and reached up to the rope again and again. She asked, "Would you like to be a big girl and hand up the clean pieces in the basket?" "Oh yes," I said. "That's fun!" Then I would race in and out among the fluttering sheets. In the winter the sheets hung stiff as boards, making the job very difficult.

When not doing housework, my grandmother played cards with me and even sat on the floor to play Jacks. She took me to the nail salon, where the lady asked, "Would you like pink polish?" I nodded yes, never having had my nails done. The smell of nail polish still reminds me of that day. After the salon, we stopped at a toy store and my grandmother let me pick out a doll. I'd never had such treats, but I think it was mutual as she had raised two boys and was now enjoying a little girl.

At Christmas special festivities were planned with everyone participating. For several days Millie and I made ornaments out of pine cones, ribbons, and paper cutouts; Vernon made garlands using cranberries; and my grandfather set up a tree in the living room. He also had to string the lights, which was not an easy task. My

grandmother kept repeating, "Burt, be careful, come down now!" We all held the ladder while he put the star on the top. It took us a long time to hang each piece of tinsel.

At night we turned off all of the lights except those on the tree. Millie and Vernon came, and we sat in peaceful silence with just the sound of the wood crackling in the fireplace. This was the magic of Christmas. We were all together, feeling a strong bond, speaking not a word. On Christmas Eve my anticipation was intense. When I woke up the house was dark and still. Only a slight light from a street lamp reflected in my room. I wanted to get up so badly, but thinking of my grandparents, I laid back down. The clocks ticked endlessly. Finally, I heard voices and bolted out of bed and raced into my grandparents' bedroom, jumping up and down.

"Hold on, hold on, just a few more minutes, my grandfather uttered, yawning. "Run upstairs and get Millie and Vernon."

I fled away yelling, "Millie, Vernon, come on, come on, we are going to open presents." In a few minutes we were all in front of the tree. The first thing I saw was a shiny red tricycle with a huge bow on it. I couldn't believe it, exclaiming, "This is just what I dreamed of getting. I love it! Please, please, Grandpa, can we go outside, I want to try my new tricycle."

He replied, "Be patient, as soon as we open the other gifts and eat breakfast, I'll take you." It was bitterly cold with ice on the trees. I had to put on my galoshes and snap them shut plus wear my wool pea jacket that scratched my neck. My grandfather stood on the steps, holding onto the railing, while I raced like the wind along the sidewalk shouting, "Thank you so much for the best present ever!" He called back, "Don't go so fast. Watch where you are going!"

Later in the day, we all sat down to a big turkey dinner prepared by Millie and my grandmother, delicious pumpkin and apple pies, and cranberry sauce made by Vernon, which he had sent down in the dumb waiter with beer just for himself and Burt. My contribution was snapping the ends off the string beans. My grandmother spoke first, "The best Christmas present for me is having us all together." We agreed, held hands, and sang, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," and then enjoyed our bountiful dinner.

The basement was my grandfather's domain, and it was from here that he kept the house warm. There were two slanted doors that opened out to the street. This was the chute where coal came sliding down into the basement. My grandfather used a big shovel to throw it bit by bit into the open door of the burning furnace. He arose before the first light to keep the fire



going, allowing warmth to spread through the chilled house. Years later, I realized that I was saved from harsh winter dawns by my grandfather's unselfish labor of love. Every once in a while he had what they called a spell. He felt weak and had to lie down on the couch. The blinds were drawn and the house was hushed. I heard my grandmother and Millie talking about a mild heart track and early retirement. I wondered what that meant.

In fair weather, my grandparents relaxed on the front porch. As daylight slowly faded, I sat on the stoop and watched the noisy kids as they played games in the street—jump rope, stick ball, hopscotch, and roller skating. I leaped up excitedly at the sound of bells and joined the jostling crowd, reaching up to the window of the ice cream truck. The grown-ups talked across rows of open railings, sharing their daily lives. I heard my grandparents' calling, "It's time to come in, it's almost dark."

My grandfather had a long narrow garden in the back with fences on each side. At the end was the big tree to which the clothes pulley was attached, and behind it was another building. This created a secret garden that was only accessible from the house. We worked side by side in our beloved patch of green. Tiny tomato plants were staked with great care, hopes, and prayers. It was exciting to watch the garden grow and eat our

homegrown food. When not in the garden, my grandfather took me to the park and never walked too fast. He pushed me on the swing high up into the blue and let me skip home ahead of him, avoiding every crack in the sidewalk. In winter he pulled me on the sled to the park. I screamed with delight as the sled sped like lightning down to the bottom of the hill.

Except for one time, the house always had an enticing familiar smell as my grandmother cooked my favorites, such as lamb chops, puddings, and cakes. They worried about my thinness, so everyday an eggnog was carefully prepared. I took a dim view of this loving gesture. The concoction smelled like decaying leaves. I tiptoed into the front hallway and quickly and fearfully poured the drink into the big green urn. This went on for quite a while until noxious fumes wafted through the rooms. Noses were guided to the scene of the crime. I was in tears sputtering, "I'm sorry, really sorry, I just couldn't stand it." My grandparents expressed dismay but patiently understood.

My grandmother sewed soft colorful dolls for me, life-size renditions of Raggedy Ann and Andy. They both slept in my bed, and we had long conversations before falling asleep. We talked about faraway lands and having adventures on a tropical island. I didn't fully realize then just how special was my own row house island.



Railroad flat memories are unique, especially at night, as I felt safe sleeping close by, connected by soft voices and steadily ticking clocks. The house was a wondrous world of senses, with delicious smells and tastes of cakes, sounds of clocks and creaking floorboards, all of which were telltale guides to the special sights, sounds, and love to be found upstairs and down.

The row house is like an intricate painted canvas that reveals more and more each time it returns in my memory. When I look back, it becomes clear that my grandparents' quiet, unassuming love helped build the character of the woman I was to become. They made me feel like the brightest star, creating a perpetual glow that scared away the darkness, giving me the strength needed to face adult life with all of its challenges, joys, and sorrows. ❧



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