

The Flower Garden

by
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"These are for you, Grandmom." I was three years old. It was Easter Sunday and I was dressed in a navy blue coat and bonnet trimmed in white lace. And I was giving my grandmother a handful of her prize tulips which I had picked from her flower garden. There was about two inches of stem left on each bloom.

"Kadie, Kadie! What have you done? They are my best, my very best."

"But, Grandmom, that's why I picked them for you." I started to cry. "Uncle Frank and Aunt Anna and Uncle Herman and Aunt Theresa brought flowers and I didn't have any for you. So I picked these."

She knelt down and hugged me.

"Liebchen, Liebchen. Of course. I thank you. Only the best for your Grandmom. I thank you, Kadie. No more tears. It is a wonderful thing you did."

Except when Grandmom spoke, every "j" sounded like "ch" and every "w" was a "v". She had come here not once, not twice, but three times from Lókút in Austria-Hungary, steerage class each voyage. The loneliness for her husband brought her here the first time. Homesickness for her family and friends took her back. But because my grandfather was adamant that the old world held nothing for them, she came back once again. But there was sickness in the village and she went back to be with her family there. It was then that my mother was born. Finally my grandfather said that she must come back or things were over between them. She came but she still didn't like the cement and asphalt "everywhere." She loved real earth under her feet.

The early days were terrible. I know more of them from my mother than my grandmother. It was a good day when there was lard for their bread and Christmas was an orange from the local police precinct.

The Catholic sisters, who ran the German-speaking parochial school the children attended, served every child in it a hot lunch during the school year. Sometimes it was only cabbage soup and several day old bread, but it was warm and filling. And conveniently there were usually leftovers which had to be taken home because it was a sin to waste food.

My grandfather was a stone mason, a man proud of his trade. But he had to learn English and establish his reputation and that took time. And an influx of Irish and German immigrants was not doing much for the indigenous tradesmen. He went to the parish classes in English for adults and insisted that the children speak English at home. My grandmother was not to be left out of the mainstream of life in the new country by not being able to speak its language.

Eventually things got better, my mother said. The two sons were taught to be stonemasons. The girls were allowed to work in the local spinning mills after Grade 7 and were, of course, taught to cook and clean.

My grandmother was sent to Budapest to work for a Jewish family when she was ten years old and considered herself fortunate to have the work. She began with polishing her employers' shoes and was their cook when she left to be married. Her table was a marvelous combination of German-Hungarian-Jewish cuisine when I was old enough to eat at it.

Finally, my grandparents saved enough for a down payment on a house. It needed a lot of work, my mother said, but my grandfather knew he and the boys could do it. My grandmother wanted it because although it was a house that came with a half acre lot adjacent to it. The house sat immediately on top of a hill and the lot sloped away from it down the hill. The lot was to be her garden, her flower garden, not her vegetable garden, her flower garden. It sat idle for several years, my mother recalled, while the family continued to grow. There was a vegetable garden behind the house and my grandparents worked it diligently. In the area for the flower garden, my grandfather planted fruit and shade trees under Grandmom's supervision in the area that was eventually to be lawn.

When the youngest child was twelve, my grandmother announced to the family a new division of labour. It was time for her to plant the flower garden. The four girls were responsible for all the cooking and cleaning except for holidays. If my grandfather wanted home-grown vegetables, he and the boys got to do that. By the Easter of my tulip transgression, the garden was a paradise.

There was a white rambler rose along the fence that fronted the street. It bloomed all summer and its edges were tinged with pink. Immediately behind it were rows and rows of rose bushes. There were red and

yellow and white roses and her own experiments. I saw my first gray rose in her garden long before Sterling Silver was on the market.

She had a wonderful pinkish, reddish, orangeish, yellowish rose she named "St. Theresa's Flower". Later, I realized it was named after a young Carmelite nun who had promised to shower "roses from heaven" on those who loved God. My grandmother had great devotion to her.

There was clematis over an arbor that led into the garden. There were banks of lilies—day lilies, tiger lilies, Easter lilies. In the spring, there were beds of tulips, crocuses, hyacinths, snowdrops, Stars of Bethlehem. Each year the tulip bulbs were dug up after they had bloomed and were left to dry over the summer until they were replanted in the fall. . When I look at the coloured pages of a flower catalogue, advertising annuals and perennials, it is like being in that garden again.

The perennial garden was to the right as one entered the garden. At the end of it was a huge rhubarb patch. When I once asked my grandmother why it was there and not with the vegetables she said, "Yah, I don't know, Kadie. It is happy here, so it stays here."

I was the second grandchild, the first was ten years older than I. I was not indulged but I was cherished. There were no other grandchildren for five years after me, so in the winter when my grandfather couldn't work at his trade, I often sat next to him in the afternoons drinking root beer while he played pinochle. Sometimes there was the inevitable accident of too much root beer and too much shyness to ask if there were a "Ladies Room"!

In the fall and spring and summer, I worked with my grandmother in the garden.

"Little fingers pull weeds very well," she would smile. I wasn't enthusiastic about the worms I encountered in the earth. "The fatter they are, the better the earth is," she would say.

My very favourite job each year was scratching tulip bulbs before we replanted them in October. There was a small gardening shed where the bulbs had been drying in old onion bags over the summer. Each was carefully labelled with colour and variety and we would take some of each colour and scratch a cross on them in three places.

When these bulbs bloomed in the spring, yellow ones would have red/orange stripes on them. White bulbs had pink and red slashes in them. I remember one deep purple bulb with an imperfectly shaped lavender cross on it. My grandmother and I stood in awe of it.

My grandmother had one major rule about the garden. And when I came to know of it, I realized why she had been so horrified with my offering to her that Easter Sunday. The flowers were never cut except to be put on the altar at the parish church. It was a rule. When I needed a garland for my hair for a church procession, that was acceptable. Fruit from the friends and neighbours but never the flowers.

But one telephone call from the sisters taking care of the sanctuary in the church and the peonies and dahlias and the roses, even the roses went to "Grosser Gott".

"Yah, Kadie, God gave the flowers to us. To God it is all right to give them back." I remember thinking at the time that my grandmother had at least as much to do with the flowers as God did and being upset with myself for even thinking that way.

"When I worked with her in the summers, we would always stop and "chust rest a bit und shmell und look." The flowers were not to be a chore and burdensome. They were "for pretty."

The summer before my ninth birthday, I was in the back part of the garden near the rhubarb, out of sight behind a weeping willow tree that was almost touching the ground. My mother had told me that when a weeping willow touched the ground someone in the family died. That was why it was called a weeping willow. I didn't like that idea and was contemplating cutting off the lowest parts of the tree to be sure that nobody in the family died, weighing my pruning against what kind of punishment that might bring.

My grandfather had been in the hospital. He was home then, looking weak and pale. My grandmother helped him to a chair in the garden. I heard him say in English, "Annie, when I go, take a sandwich and come and sit beside me and make it pretty there."

"Yah, Joe", she said. "Yah, I will come and make it pretty there. I will come, Joe. I will come "

On December 28th of that year, my grandfather died. I remember the altar at church filled with poinsettias. In those days, Catholic funerals were all in black but the flowers had been allowed to stay on the altar because of the holiday. I cried for days. I couldn't understand it. I had hated the wake which was in my grandparents' home. And I hated the baskets of flowers, the cut flowers. The stink of them was unbearable. They smelled of death, not life.

After my grandfather's death, I got into the habit of going to visit my grandmother after school. She

was at the kitchen table one day with a plate in her hand, crying.

"Kadie, I was just going to set your Grandpop's place. It is hard, Kadie. It is so hard. Call your mother. See if you can stay and eat with me."

I did and then as we washed the dishes, I said, "Grandmom, the flowers for Grandpop, for the funeral. They were all such horse's nagels, weren't they?" The only flower in the world my grandmother did not like was marigolds. She wouldn't even have any in her garden. She called them horse's noses – nagels - and once asked me to smell them in a neighbor's garden. I didn't like the smell of them, it was true. But they were kind of pretty, I thought. Somehow that smell had been the one that came back to me at the wake.

"Yah, Kadie. They smelled like horses' nagels. Did you hate their smell, too?"

"It was like smelling death not life, Grandmom. Is that what we should do when someone dies?"

"What we should do and what we do do are different things many times, Kadie. Kadie, when I die they will want to put a corsage on me and dress me up in clothes I never had in my life. Maybe you can stop them. Please, at least will you tell them?"

"Tell them what, Grandmom?"

"Upstairs in my dresser you will find a long brown robe. It will be with all my other clothes.

"It is called a habit. I belong to a group that tries to live today like St. Francis of Assisi did when he was alive. Remember at school how the sisters tell you they are Franciscans and how they love the earth and the flowers and trees. I am one, too. You can be married and live this way. Kadie. Ask them to bury me in that robe and no flowers, please."

I didn't want to talk, about her death or think about it, especially so close upon my grandfather's, but I promised her.

Grandmom sold the house to one of her sons and became a boarder in it. The first year after my grandfather's death, I tried to help her with the garden and it was passable. What we used to do a lot, though, was pack two sandwiches and walk an hour in each direction up and down hills to my grandfather's grave. We put geraniums on it and made a border of candy tufts around it. We put small evergreens at each side of the tombstone. In the winter, we made a blanket of evergreens on mesh fencing and covered the whole plot with it. Many times my grandmother went there without me. The arrangement with my uncle was not working well. My uncle's mother-in-law lived with them and Grandmom was not welcome in the kitchen. And the old lady ("She's Polish, Kadie, what should she know about flowers?") considered all that "for pretty" a waste. Grandmom began to visit her other sons and daughters for long periods of time but their homes were small. She regretted the sale of her home.

One day Grandmom arrived at our house with two shopping bags. Since it was enroute to the cemetery, I wasn't surprised, but why the shopping bags?

She usually traveled only with her sandwich and bought the flowers she would need at the small stand at the cemetery entrance. I greeted her. When she didn't answer my greeting or even seem to recognize me, we knew something was wrong. My mother called the doctor and she was hospitalized. It was a blood clot they said. Eventually they amputated one leg.

I was thirteen and snuck up the stairs in the hospital into her room. No one under sixteen was allowed to visit. I don't think she recognized me but I took the four bouquets of cut flowers and stuffed them into the waste baskets in the women's washroom. My mother told me subsequently that she didn't know what hospitals were coming to when someone could steal flowers from a sick person's room.

Grandmom went back to the garden briefly. She sat there uncomplaining, uncomprehending in the wheelchair. I sat with her as much as I could. I tried to work in the garden but wearied of the fractured Polish-English non-dialogue with its new owner. I was to find out years later that it was his mother-in-law's money that had made the purchase of my grandparents' house possible for my uncle. My uncle was to pay for that for years in very uncomfortable ways.

When Grandmom died, I told the family about the habit and no flowers. "But your grandmother loved flowers", they told me. "But not the kind that smell of death," I cried, "the kind that are full of life."

I lost. She was dressed in lavender chiffon with a purple orchid on her shoulder. My grandmother whose hands were calloused and nails grimy with the good earth, in lavender chiffon and orchids and horses' nagels everywhere! I tried to think past all this to how much that earth-coloured robe would have suited her better.

At the coffin I said to her silently, "I tried, Grandmom. Who listens to thirteen-year-old kids except people like you? One day I'll make it right for you. I'll have a garden of my own. It will be a living garden. . . just for pretty."

Her flower garden is no more. The lots were sold for row houses that are two stories in back and three in front. My grandparents' grave is no longer "for pretty". The cemetery officials want to be able to mow the grass without hindrance from "decorated gravesites." I saw my grandparents' grave and my mother's when I took my husband's ashes there to rest with them. He had once said he wanted me to put his ashes all over his vegetable garden, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. But that's another story ...maybe.

I do have my own flower garden. I relished working it except for the summer after my husband's death. I hated it for growing. I hated everything for growing. I worked it so reluctantly that year. But eventually I could feel something evil and sick draining out of me as I made that effort. That earth was "mothering" me in some special way, urging me to make this small piece of the world "for pretty" as Grandmom had once done with hers and in that process once again making the same of myself.