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Age and Wisdom: Hand-in-Hand

By Linda Johnson

Grandma Carpenter was a mystery to me as I was growing up. Her name was Ida and she was 65 years old when I was born, but I never thought of her as old. She was a striking figure with silvery white hair like cirrus clouds surrounding her face and a porcelain-like complexion that showed scarcely a wrinkle. Her skin felt like velvet and she smelled like roses when I hugged her. Her azure blue eyes seemed to shoot like lasers through any object she focused on, so I tried to stay out of her sight. She wasn’t the typical grandma that most of us saw in old black-and-white movies. She was a trifle bossy and no-nonsense, but she was never mean. When she was with my siblings and me, her demeanor seemed detached, as though she was leery of letting her guard down to play with us. My impression of her was that she was attractive, fairly pleasant, but not very emotional. I never spent nights at her house, nor went to the park with her, nor did anything fun with my grandmother that I can remember. As I got older and learned more about her, I came to appreciate the hardships that she went through in her life: hardships that I feel certain would have broken me.

Grandma was the granddaughter of two fire-and-brimstone preachers, the niece of another, and a devout Southern Baptist. The life journey my grandma took would have tried even a saint. In 1902, Ida married her first husband, Alison Dosier Bennett, in Falls County, Texas when she was only fourteen years of age. By the age of twenty-seven, she had given birth to seven children. One baby died when he was only two days old, and—although not an uncommon occurrence in those days—losing a child was still tragic. Ida was scarcely beginning to recover from the loss of her baby son, when within a six-week period in early 1916; she delivered a new baby girl, lost her husband and lost a six-year-old daughter during an epidemic of the Spanish flu. Three months shy of her twenty-eighth birthday, Ida had become a widow, lost two children, and was left with six children to nurture and raise.

In the early twentieth century, widowed women needed husbands to support them and widowed men needed wives who would mother their children. In May 1917, Ida married James William Taylor Carter. Known to his friends as Jim, Mr. Carter had four children from his first marriage. He and Ida had three children together—my mother being the oldest one of them. By 1922, Jim and Ida had a family with thirteen children. She was a rock and worked as hard as any man: sewing clothes and quilts, canning food in a kitchen that was probably hotter than Hades, gardening, keeping house for a family of fifteen, chopping cotton in the Texas heat, and raising a family. Through all of the ups and downs of her life, she depended on her faith in God, but she was sorely tested. Ida was widowed again in 1932 when Jim died from a cerebral hemorrhage, and she also lost a third husband, Owen Carpenter, to leukemia in 1969. By 1963, she had lost her oldest daughter and five more sons; two were killed in farm accidents, one was killed in World War II, one died of kidney disease, and two died of heart failure. Only two of Ida’s ten children survived her—Marie, the baby girl born in 1916, and my mother Pauline, Ida’s first child with Jim.

My mother was convinced that Ida was psychic. After Jim Carter went missing on a cold, icy November day in 1932, his friends and family members looked for him for two days. Waiting at home for news of her husband, Ida was in a high-backed rocking chair that was groaning from the frenzied movement of its occupant. Suddenly, she ceased her wild rocking and called her family to her side.

She took a deep breath and said, “I know we have to keep looking

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for your daddy so we can bring him home, but you need to know that his spir­
it is with the Lord.”

His oldest son, Scrap, was not ready to hear that his father would not
be returning home.

“He’s the toughest man I know,” cried Scrap, “and we’re not giving
up on him!”

“You don’t understand, sweetheart. He just gave me a good-bye kiss
on my cheek,” Ida said through her tears.

Family, friends, and even strangers kept searching for eight more
days; on the tenth day they found Jim and brought him home.

Jim and Ida’s son Kelton was the baby of the family. In 1943, he was
twenty years old, blonde, tan, and handsome. With blue eyes that danced and
a smile as wide as Texas, he was loved by everyone. Kelton joined the Army,
but was stateside until early 1945 when he was sent to the Philippines. He had
not been there long when the war came to an end. An announcement of the
war’s end was made to the troops in the camp and they were given leave to go
into town to celebrate. Kelton and his friend stayed at the barracks because
the friend had duties to finish before leaving camp. As Kelton sat waiting on
the steps of the barracks, relaxing while smoking a cigarette, his friend acci­
dentally shot through the screen door and killed him almost instantly. Cleaning
his gun was one of the duties the friend needed to finish. Thousands of
miles away in Padgett, Texas, my mother received a message that Ida needed
immediately. Mama raced to Grandma’s house, knowing that something
horrid must have happened to upset her mother enough to send someone
after her. Upon entering Grandma’s kitchen, Mama saw Grandma collapsed
in the in the middle of the floor. Somehow she knew that someone dear had
died; her mother was a proud woman and she would never let anyone see her
in that manner unless she had totally lost control of her emotions. She could-
n’t speak or get up. Mama sat on the floor beside Grandma and stroked her
hair for what seemed like forever until Grandma finally spoke.

Sobbing, Ida said to her, “Kelton is gone—he won’t be coming
home.”

Whispering, Pauline asked, “Where is the telegram?”

“There isn’t one,” she gasped. “I know he’s gone because a white
dove flew in the kitchen window.”

Pauline didn’t question her mother’s assertion, and later that day,
they received the telegram telling them of Kelton’s death.

Ida Carpenter died in 1984 at the age of 96 years. When I was a very
young adult, without much thought, I came to the conclusion that my grand­
mother was not a very loving person. Because my brothers, sisters, and I did­

n’t have many fond memories of her, we believed that she was indifferent to
us. As I have aged, and hopefully gotten a little wiser, my opinion of my
grandmother has been radically altered. I no longer doubt that she deeply
loved all three of her husbands, her children, and her many grandchildren.

Today, when I think of everything she went through and the losses she sus­
tained without giving up on life, I feel a little ashamed and regretful that I did
not try harder to get to know my grandmother. I had no right to judge her,
especially since I have never come anywhere close to experiencing the gravi­
ty of the losses in my life that she experienced in hers. I no longer believe that
she was cold-hearted, detached, or unemotional. Maybe she was simply trying
to protect herself from getting too close to those she feared losing. Perhaps
she believed that she had already given all she had to give.