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ACCEPTANCE

By Karen Graves Goffinet

Illustration by Trey Wright

Chocolate-banana ice cream and dominoes. That's what kept running through my head as we drove to the cemeteries where both of my grandfathers are buried.

My day had started out fine. I had three hours of classes and lectures. My English Comp class called for a paper on an unusual subject, so I thought to myself, "How about tombstones? The ones from the early 1900's ought to be interesting." Thinking that I had come up with a good idea, I reasoned that I could do my research by haunting some graveyards. Just to test the reaction of a totally unbiased person, (after all, I liked my idea, but some folks might think it morbid!), I called my mother to see what she thought. Her reaction wasn't exactly what I had hoped for.

"Great idea," she said. "I'll call your dad and we'll go pick up Granny and Grandmother, and we can go check on Granddad and Granddaddy's graves. See you in a couple of hours."

AWRK! Me and my bright ideas. Their graves were the last places I wanted to go. There were plenty of other cemeteries around without having to go to those two in particular. I hadn't been there since the days of the funerals. All I could remember about those times were bits and pieces of the funeral and crying; after all, my teen-age heart was breaking.

I remembered the dark hole gaping at us. It looked so hard. And cold. Was this to be their new home? I had thought, "I want to take them home. They don't belong here." The mound of freshly turned earth was discreetly covered with a green cloth and the flowers that had been brought from the church. Why did they cover the dirt? Was it because we would be reminded of where that dirt was going the minute the last car drove through the gates? And the flowers. There were so many flowers. The churches had been filled with them. Their cloying fragrance had made the air so sticky-sweet. I guess almost everyone in town had

sent flowers. That was nice of them, but what were we supposed to do with them now? Do you cover the grave with them, and then are you supposed to stop grieving when they wither and die? Do you ever stop grieving?

Well, I had one more hour of reprieve. I headed out on I-40 to go to Dill City to meet my family. I had to pass by the Foss Cemetery, so I thought I had better stop in there while it was still daylight.

The cemetery was green and peaceful. Every now and then, I could hear the sounds of trucks and cars as they sped past on the highway. The hot wind brought the sounds to me as I wondered where they might be headed for. What were their destinations? What happens after a person dies? What is the final destination of THAT trip? Religions have their own beliefs of heaven, hell, or purgatory. Well, if there's a heaven, I know that's where my grandfathers are.

At the far end of the graveyard, I found two unusual headstones. The dates on them were of the years 1911 and 1918. The names were almost illegible and looked as if they had been scratched on by hand. The stones were decorated with five rows of marbles, the kind children play with. They were still bright and shiny as if the winds and rains had kept them polished. They were set into little holes that had been hewn with love; I tried to imagine the hard work that had gone into the making of these stones. Whoever lay beneath these stones must have been special; they probably weren't rich in dollars, but after seeing these stones that were engrained with love, I know that they had riches beyond comparison.

I had thirty minutes left. Driving slowly down the road, I noticed a cemetery north of Burns Flat. I turned off onto the dirt road and stopped in front of the cemetery gate. The silver wrought-iron sign indicated that this was the Page Cemetery. As I struggled to open the gate, a farmer drove by on a tractor. Just as he jumped off the

tractor, the gate popped open. I waved and said "Thanks," and he headed for the next field.

Here the only sound was the whispering of the trees as the wind brushed through them, and far away, the put-putt of the tractor. A beautiful stone, shaped just like a tree, with three limbs in the form of a cross, marked the grave of a young boy. Beneath the tree/cross lay a lamb. The lamb seemed to be awake, watching over the boy. Its stone features relayed the feeling "he is at peace." This stone was dated 1903.

My time was up. I met Mom, and we picked everyone up in her car. She had called an order in at the diner, and we got the food on our way out of town. Grandmother said she wasn't hungry, but she kept sneaking tater tots while Granny sampled the fried okra. It was nice being with them like this—just like old times, almost.

Granny said, "There are quite a few of our relatives buried there in Retrop. I don't think you remember any of them. You were pretty little. My sister, she died before you were ever born, is there and a bunch of my cousins." One person I DID know was there—right there in the north section under the tree. Daddy stopped the car under a shade tree, and I got out and headed for the south section.

There were several five to six foot-tall headstones scattered about over the graveyard. These stones, looking like tree trunks with the tops chopped off, were the stones marking the graves of the Woodmen of the World. This was a men's society in the late 1800's and early 1900's. It was along the same lines as the Shriners and Masons of today.

The stones were decorated with the logo and insignias of the Woodmen of the World carved on the stone. Figures of woodworking tools such as the wedge, hatchet, and sledghammer along with the dove of peace were above the eternal sign of friendship, the handshake. On one of these stones was the photograph of the man who lay

beneath. He looked immortal. I guess only the stone—and the photograph—is for a little while anyway.

As Granny and I walked between the graves over the spot beneath the trees where Granddad was buried, the wind whipped her shirt-tails and mussed her salt and pepper hair. The graves around his were all of kinfolk, related by either blood or marriage. Granny bent down and plucked a weed growing by the headstone and tossed it aside. I saw her eyes water, but not one tear spilled. Standing to the left of the stone, she patted it gently, and I wondered what she was thinking; but I didn't dare ask. As for myself, I kept seeing Granddad in his best suit, asleep in his coffin. All dressed up and no place to go. No place except here, that is. Then I remembered the dominoes and all the fun we'd had.

Granddad had always kept a table set up to play dominoes and checkers. He taught all his grandchildren to play. We would sit there for hours playing. The clink of the dominoes and the ice in our tea were the only sounds made. I had to really concentrate because he was such a good player. He won most of the time, but I did occasionally. He never *let* me win, though; I had to work for it.

The tip of one finger was missing, and the nail was mangled. The story, according to Granddad, was that he had been bitten by a mouse when he stuck his hand into the cookie jar. From that time on, I always checked cookie jars before putting my hand in. He said, "There was the ugliest ol' mouse in that jar. I dumped him out and stomped on him. Got my finger back, too. He hadn't chewed it any, so I thought I might be able to stick it back on; but we didn't have any Super Glue, so I had to throw it away. Got the mouse good, though." I never really found out what had happened, but I know that the truth couldn't have been as good a story as the mouse-stomping was.

When we didn't play dominoes, we'd go out to the fields and chop cotton or bale hay or plow. Granddad always wore overalls and a hat. He never took that hat off, so all the rest of him was tanned except for the bit of his forehead that never saw the sun. I was a little kid then; but if I ever got in his way with my "help," he never said a word about it. In his later years, frail and sick as he was, he was always my big, strong Granddad, champion of

dominoes and stomper of mice. Then he was dead. He wasn't anything. Granddad was gone.

Granny and I slowly made our way back to the car. I was trying to be as tough as she was. She had raised ten kids during the Depression years and could handle anything. I'm her granddaughter, and I don't cry. What's that song—"Don't Cry Out Loud?" I'm okay. Why do we have to leave you here? Why did you have to die?

I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice how much time had passed. We were almost at the Lone Star Cemetery entrance.

This was where Granddaddy was buried. Uh-oh—here we go again. I helped Grandmother out of the car and stood there for a moment, looking out across the graveyard with its bouquets of plastic flowers adorning the mounds of dirt. She clutched her sunbonnet in one hand, her fingers nervously working the seams, and held on to my arm with the other. Some of the graves had sunk down during the recent rains. If they sank any farther, the coffins would probably be visible. I didn't want to look. The pine trees scented the quiet atmosphere. Mom and Dad got out of the car and headed for the grave—the one I didn't want to see, Granddaddy's.

The sun was starting to set, and I wondered that time it was. I looked at Grandmother's watch to see and noticed that she was wearing one of Granddaddy's watches. Probably not a minute goes by without her thinking about him. As we walked down the sidewalk, she said, "Guess I'll have to bring the poison out the next time. The weeds and crabgrass is starting to grow back." She still takes such good care of him—my ice-cream Granddaddy.

He liked ice cream. So did I. We made a good pair. Our favorite was chocolate-banana most of the time; but in a pinch, we'd settle for vanilla. Grandmother's homemade ice cream and candy were the best. There was always a can of hard candies on the floor by Granddaddy's rocker or in the floor or on the low shelves of his closet. Needless to say, I know from whom I inherited my sweet tooth.

Granddaddy was tall and lean—a gentle man. Although he was in ill health most of his life, he was still strong enough to carry me to the hospital when I couldn't walk. Many times, we'd sit on the front porch rocking and drink iced tea or Dr. Pepper. In the summertime, we'd sit in

the backyard and listen to the birds singing in the branches of the apricot trees. After a supper of fried chicken and jappers (homemade dumplings), we'd pick dessert right off the tree. I remember how hard he laughed when I helped Grandmother and him plant onions. He taught me that the proper way to plant them is with the fuzzy end on the bottom and the green sprout on top—not the reverse.

Granddaddy had never watched me play basketball. The night after his funeral, I was scheduled to play in a game. I didn't want to, but Grandmother told me to play and play my best. I did play, and it WAS one of the best games I had ever played. All my shots swished through the net perfectly. They had to be perfect because this was the first game Granddaddy had seen me play.

I was hurt when he died. I realized that he wasn't suffering anymore, but that didn't help my pain. I thought I had gotten over the hurt, but it really hit me a few years later at my wedding shower. I am probably the only girl to have cried at her own wedding shower. Grandmother brought a gift, and the card was signed "Grandmother"—not "Grandmother and Granddaddy."

On the way back home, I realized that I really hadn't done any research for my paper, but I think I learned something much more important. I had forgotten what wonderful grandfathers I had had. Granny and Grandmother are also special to me. Thank God I still have them. Even though I don't get to see them as often as I want to, I know that they are always available.

It's been several years since Granddad and Granddaddy left this world. I still miss them, but I'm thankful for the time I had with them. Not every little girl has both sets of grandparents living less than a block apart. For a child, that's heaven.

For now, I have my memories—memories that go far beyond the days of their funerals. We had no generation gap, even though there was a fifty-year difference in our ages. I hope I can help my daughter cope with death when it touches her life. I can tell her stories about her great-grandfathers, who taught me so much with their quiet strength. Their memories will always shine in an endless day. ●

*KAREN GRAVES GOFFINET
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