

# I REMEMBER

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## Home, Home On The (Iron) Range

GRANDMA'S PANTRY  
HELD MORE THAN  
GOOD SMELLS

by JOHN PRIN

In the doorway of her home stood Grandma, waving and greeting us with tears. She moved out onto the front porch, a small and somewhat hunched-over, white-haired lady in her plaid cotton house dress. I can see her now, framed by the white trim of the door and the green hedge bordering the steps, wiping her tears as we hugged and kissed after our eight long hours cramped in the car.

Riding up old Minnesota Highway 61 to Grandma's, I was always tingly with anticipation. We'd leave the Twin Cities early. We boys counted the Burma Shave signs the first hundred miles, the clumps of birch and pine trees the next. Over the years, we became familiar with the towns spaced every few miles along the two-lane route: North Branch, Pine City, Hinckley (always with a stop at the original Tobie's Cafe), then Sandstone, Moose Lake, Cloquet, Cotton, Eveleth. And finally the big sign:

Virginia, Minnesota

Gateway to the Iron Range

On the timeworn streets and modest houses, the five of us — Dad, Mom, Tommy, Dave and I — would catch sight of the red dust, iron-ore residue from the open pit mines. At 608 10th Street South we'd pile out. There, in the middle of the block, stood a two-story, peak-roofed gray house, a carbon copy of every other shingled house in sight. Like many of its companion "company houses," built by the mining companies in the late 1880s for iron mine workers, it



conveyed a sense of welcome.

In the doorway was Grandma, crying. Tears were something we all came to expect, always accompanied by her wet kisses and Swedish-inflected exclamations. "My, my! Look at youce boys! How you'f grown!"

Grandma was only as tall as Dad's chin and was graced with many facial wrinkles; her cheeks looked like two shriveled grapefruits. I'd hug her especially hard at the door — longer than anybody else, I'm sure — then close my eyes and wish to stay with her forever.

While Mom and Dad greeted our aunts and uncles congregated at the Formica kitchen table for sandwiches and coffee, we boys, amid loud laughing and back-slapping, would indulge in the eagerly awaited ritual of raiding Grandma's refrigerator. We'd dig into Jello molds jiggling red, orange or yellow on her refrigerator shelf. Or we'd sample the donuts she'd made that morning, then search the pantry for homemade cookies and candy. Her kitchen was always the source of fresh smells, like baking

bread and brewing coffee. Of course, she never minded if we ate two or three of everything.

When Grandpa came home, finally, the party really started. He would be coated with soot, having just shoveled nine tons of coal at the Power and Light since 6 o'clock that morning. He'd call for the whisky bottle, then hug my Mom, his daughter, and shake Dad's hand, rubbing some soot on her cheek and sweat on his palm. He'd greet everybody else with a firm, "Uuf tah!"

The night always stayed lively until 2 or 3 a.m. Grandma only went to bed after everybody had been fed at least twice. She'd get up a few hours later, cook Grandpa breakfast, see him off to work and then plunge right into her chores: washing clothes in the cellar, cleaning the house, baking rolls in her wood-burning oven and tending her berry bushes and flower beds.

For reasons I thank God for even today, the lucky one to remain at Grandma's house during each visit was me. My family would stay for a week during Christmas or for a few weeks during summer, and Mom and Dad occasionally left us while they vacationed by themselves. Early on, Tommy chose to stay at one nearby aunt and uncle's; Dave chose to stay at another's. This was dandy because we could play together almost any time we wanted, but I got Grandma all to myself most of the time.

Mornings, she made breakfast and let me sit as long as I liked at the

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kitchen table. I'd linger sometimes to study her gentle, loving way with food, neighbors, her cats and, of course, me. Because Grandpa was working — many times on Saturdays and holidays, too — she and I were one another's soul mates.

**Grandma's pantry was a universe of tins, bins, cans, pans, boxes, sacks and utensils.**

"Johann," she would say. "Youce be a good boy and get me some flour from da pantry, yah?"

I'd hop down from the wooden chair and go into the pantry. Grandma's pantry was a world unto itself. Here was a universe of tins, bins, cans, pans, boxes, sacks and utensils. Labels like Sunshine, Taystee, Robin Hood, Gold Medal and Crystal greeted me. My nose celebrated the aromatic feast of baked goods, raw ingredients and spices. The linoleum under my feet was sticky, worn down to the black backing from feet that, like mine, were fond of entering this haven.

It usually took me an extra minute every time I went to get what I'd come for. At least 10 coats of paint were visible on the walls, decades of oozings and drippings were everywhere, even on the nails that acted as pegs. A tiny window let in sunshine. Sometimes I would go in for nothing in particular, only to discover something new. I'd leave chewing a morsel I'd snatched, feeling a palpable security.

One time when I brought Grandma the flour sack, she said, "Now vatch vhat I do." She mixed a handful of flour into a small dish with warm water, then stirred the lumpy mixture until it was smooth. "A smart boy like you need lots to do.

Go get some picture magazines from da front room and find something to cut out."

I took scissors from the drawer and went to the front room, finding *Look* magazines piled on the coffee table by the brown mohair sofa. I brought them back and sat down at the table. Grandma put the dish of paste in front of me and gave me some sheets of construction paper. Soon I was positioning the photos on the paper, covered to my elbows with paste and trimmings.

"Ah! Vait! I forgot something!" Winking, she went to the pantry for a tiny bottle and stirred a few drops from it into the paste. As I pasted more cut-out photos, I discovered the candy-like extract of peppermint on my fingers.

I didn't stop cutting and pasting photos for three whole days.

Now and then I'd head down to the cellar. There were no uniform walls of cement or cinder block here, just a hole chopped into the raw pungent earth with sides slanting to a drain where the wringer washer stood. The air smelled of Tide and Fels Naptha, years of cat urine and Grandpa's rusty beer-making apparatus. Cobwebs, never touched from the 1880s, covered the two small windows. Only the 25-watt bulb hanging from a wire offered any light. Here I'd watch Grandma wash clothes in the noisy wringer washer and sometimes help her feed soggy bed sheets through the rotating cylinders that "could grind your hand off."

Grandma was always one to promote trips to nearby lakes, too: picnic outings to Lake Leander, fishing at Sand Lake, a week at a cabin on Ely Lake. In the summer months, I had the run of the woodshed outside, as well as the berry patches, the alley with its friendly ruts and the entire town of 12,000. It never mattered to me that I didn't have any neighborhood playmates. Every

minute with Grandma was an adventure.

She might be on the phone to the Popular Store placing her daily grocery order when I went inside. "Yah, Swen, a nice plump head of lettuce wittout wilt on da edges; not from yesterday or rotten on da bottom." Or she might be taking a nap "to help my heart breedth;" pains in her chest had kept her up half the night before. Her naps allowed me to navigate the confines of her closet, a rich assortment of shoes, clothes, blankets and piles of dime novels.

The novels were often stacked next to various *True Confessions*, and I could only guess if they were stored or hidden. I would thumb through them, noticing dog-eared pages that hinted of places and events she would never experience. The smell of sachet and the warmth of flannel and woolen garments created a nest — a refuge known only to me. The feeling was one of utter privacy.

When she awakened, I would chat, or listen, or pass the time with her in little ways to draw myself even closer to her. She'd often hug me and say, "You're my boy, Jonngie." Or I'd hug her and say, "I love you, Grandma." I said that hundreds of times.

Over the years, the crowded rides in our '50 Chevy gave way to solo stints on the Greyhound headed north. Interstate 35, constructed in the '60s, meant Highway 61 was forgotten. A somber tempo had gripped Virginia, replacing the vitality I remembered. Along with the original Tobie's, my boyhood seemed to be disappearing. Little remained the same. High-grade iron ore had given out to taconite. Unemployment was as rampant as drifters with long hair.

While I was a spirited teenager of the '60s, Grandma was shorter and frailer than ever. I'd listen to her talk about Auntie Flood's funeral, and

wed'd wait for Grandpa to come home; now past 75, he still worked long hours. Sometimes, when Grandma would sleep for four hours during her "can't breedth" naps, I would hear her cough and gasp. I was unable to do much more than go up to the attic and sit in the vacant bedroom.

During my last summer there, I painted several paint-by-numbers in the vacant bedroom-turned-studio. I also slept up there on the creaky iron bed with its pathetically sagging mattress and the alarm clock that ticked so loud I couldn't get to sleep. During the days, I had ample time to look out the dormer window and ponder. My gaze might fix on the neighbor's grass growing a foot high to where it bent like hay in a field. Nobody was living there anymore. Or I would think about my busy school schedule, peppermint-flavored paste, my future career and place in the universe and Grandma napping downstairs.

I thought about her often, but there was really nothing I could do about what was happening. Inside, I knew.

And then, while back home in the Twin Cities, the phone call came saying she had died of a heart attack.

We all went to her funeral. Every one of us cried the kind of tears she knew so well. We talked about how Grandpa would have to get along without her now.

For reasons I can't remember anymore, I sat on her pantry floor instead of going to the burial. It didn't matter that my pants stuck to the linoleum. I would visit the attic and cellar and front room later. She was everywhere, and, for the moment, I was visiting her again just like always.

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