

## **Grace**

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My grandmother Grace, known to close friends and family as “Gracie,” was a gentle steady presence in my childhood. She lived with our family more or less until she died around my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, and was a surrogate mother and role model. A handsome, soft-spoken woman with silver wavy hair pulled back in a bun, her stern no-nonsense demeanor, upright posture, and New England stoicism intimidated my mother but belied the tenderness and love she bestowed on me, her first granddaughter.

Born destitute, raising herself and her tow-haired brother on the city streets of Boston mill towns while her widowed mother worked as a housekeeper, Grandma learned early in life to hide her feelings. I remember her face so often frozen in a grimace as she stared blankly at nothing. Most of all, I remember her hands – wide with short fingers and paper-thin skin – hands that expressed warmth and tenderness. Never once were they raised to us in anger, although I later was told they fended off blows in her former married life.

Recalling Grandma Gracie invokes memories of a wide-eyed, six-year old girl perched high on a stool at the enamel-top kitchen counter, entranced as large white-floured hands kneaded the dough, inviting the pixy girl to do the same, enjoying together the first slices of warm yeasty bread from the oven, smothered in butter.

I remember those broad hands brushing my fine tangled hair in slow easy strokes – a daily ritual passed on to my father, her son. Her hands beckoned me whenever I was distressed or sad, finding the small of my back, and then lightly caressing my shoulder blades in ever widening circles. It was these back-stroking sessions I recall most fondly, sitting on a worn leather hassock, my back to her, anticipating her gentle touch.

She performed this and other small rituals with all her grandchildren as she visited each of her sons, always careful to not stay too long, living among their young broods in towns nestled in the mountain hollows and river valleys of New England. She traveled with very few possessions, took up residence in a spare sewing room or a small bedroom, and gently blended into the fabric of a new household. She never complained. Year after year, it seemed she wore the same shoes, the same winter coat, and the same housedresses. While I never heard her sing, Grandma whistled beautifully – the only person in our

home to do so. It was always the same tune. Perhaps a hymn from the Methodist church. Today, whenever I quietly wash dishes or fold laundry, I hear in my head the same few bars she whistled as she mended or ironed or pattered about the house. Long after she died, when I was a grown woman, I came to appreciate how poor she must have been, and how enriched I was by her presence and her memory.

Years later, when family reunions brought everyone together at our sprawling Massachusetts farm home, our parents would find a dozen teenage cousins cross-legged on the living room floor in a wide circle, quietly performing our Grandmother's back-caress ritual in unison.

Decades later, alone and far away from my childhood home, I invoked Gracie's touch again, teaching my new husband her caress magic. After he and I parted ways, I worked hard to rebuild our friendship. Once, he returned to my bedside as I recovered from emergency surgery for a life-threatening ovarian tumor – his hands caressing my feet or my back just as I had once caressed him. Gracie's ritual of touch always quieted my racing thoughts and brought me back to center, just as Grandma herself once had.

When I moved to Baltimore some time later, I bought an old tiny row-house and soon began inviting neighbors and other strangers and stray cats to my cozy kitchen for tea or supper. Like Grandma Grace, I blended quietly into the fabric of a new community, a new job, a new life. The gift of a smile, a few measures of conversation with neighbors who also lived alone or faced big challenges, or a small kindness made my life less empty, more full. Local merchants and clerks called me by name whenever I dropped in. And I began to forge new friendships.

Last fall, near Thanksgiving, I began dating a man – a gamble with my heart, still fragile. Our relationship evolved gently, stoked by warmth – not heat. One evening as he readied to leave, he asked, "Could you lightly tickle my back?" I grinned. And so began a new conversation rooted in the vocabulary of touch. Months later, sitting in my cheerful kitchen at my antique green enamel-top table, sipping mugs of chamomile tea, our conversation drifted to our chance meeting... "I feel I've known you all my life," I said. "That's nice," he said shyly, surprised.

But in the spring he left. Now, as the crisp autumn nights bring full circle another year, and the leaves blush scarlet and orange once more, I sit quietly in the amber glow of my kitchen in the evenings, letting go of grief, inviting stillness, invoking grace.

Visions of Grandma Gracie – her steady gaze, her quiet voice, her silver-fine hair pulled up off her neck, and silk fingers caressing my shoulders – drift into my consciousness, into a canary yellow kitchen infused with the smell of chamomile and fresh Christmas narcissus, into the light warm home I recreated in memory of her – and all she had been, all she had given.

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