

RAMBLING VISIT AT GRANDMA’S HOUSE

It’s great to see you again, Grandma Mary. You look well. I’m so glad you invited me to visit, so we can share a meal and memories. Mamaw, your flower arrangement on the dining room table is lovely. I like to think I inherited a little bit of your skill for flower gardening, but no one can beat you at assembling varied and colorful arrangements.

I also fondly remember your lovely flower and vegetable gardens. Do you miss vegetable gardening? Someone told me you couldn’t manage the work after Papa Robert died. Mother made me help plant and weed her vegetable gardens, so I have a lifelong dislike of the work and time involved to produce vegetables. I trek to a Farmer’s Market instead. Sometimes when I am visiting a market, I think you would have been present every Saturday in garden season, selling your vegetables and flowers, canned and baked goods. You likely would have had difficulty selling anything at market, though, because Papa probably would have protested removing any foods he loved from his home. Thanks for all the things you have done over the years to show the family how much you love us. You are a gem, and I adore you!

I’m sad we didn’t see each other much during my teenage years, after I began stumbling into womanhood. School, and life in general, compressed my time. You probably recall that dating consumes lots of time and effort. What? Papa was the only person you ever dated? Wow! He sure captured your heart fast. Good man!

I note you have some magazines and books in different places around the house. The only reading material I recall being on display in your home when I was young were Bibles and a few

medical books. Boring, Mamaw! I’m guessing you must have more time now to devote to reading. I don’t remember there being any books around our house, either. Dad did pay for delivery of the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* newspaper. He and I devoured it daily.

Humm, I need to back up about my stating there were no books in our house, now that I recall the naughty, thin, paperback books I found stashed between the mattress and box springs of Mom’s and Dad’s bed. Those books first were discovered when I was changing bedsheets. The books contained nudity and graphic sexual content. Heavens! My face still flames when I recall them. You’re laughing, but I’m betting if Dad had learned about my digesting his porno, there would have been an eruption of mass proportion. That’s why I kept my mouth zipped all these years. My first discovery of Dad’s nasty mattress books would not have been so bad, if one visit had been sufficient, but I returned many times to read the new books. My being curious about sex at a young age no doubt was as common then, as it is now, but there is far more exposure now, at younger ages, because of movies, television, and crude language spoken in public places.

One of my best early reading experiences, was the romance magazine my other grandmother received monthly via postal mail. Grandma Fletcher, whose first name was America, lived in front of the house my parents owned for many years at River Jack, in Tazewell, Virginia. All of America’s grandchildren called her Maw. I knew the day the magazine would arrive, and that Maw placed it on the coffee table in the upstairs living quarters of her home, until she identified time to read it.

I would trek to Maw’s house the day the romance magazine arrived, and I read every story before I went home. This was my first exposure to romance. That magazine was tame stuff, considering the reading material available today, as well as television shows and the movies.

Aunt Jeanette always had good books. I used to love visiting in her home. I would read late into the night, so I could finish a book before my two-or-three-day stay ended. Swinging on the roped rubber tire that hugged a tree in her front yard, always was a treat, too. Netty treated me like a queen. I still love her dearly.

There were few literary books available for reading when I was young. No libraries were located in the lower grades of school in our small mining town; and none of the local stores sold books, to my recollection. The non-availability of books makes me more curious about where Dad procured his clandestine reading material.

When I started high school and discovered the library, I was elated. First thing I did was volunteer to work in the library. Since Study Period took place in the library, I had increased opportunity to pursue and read books. The smell of the library books intoxicated me, and I loved the free and frequent access to books. There was a small metal rack in the library, where new paperback books were available for sale. No one I knew received an allowance in those days, and surely an allowance was unthinkable in our family, with six children, and one employed parent. I saved my lunch money, a big twenty-five cents a day, to purchase paperbacks. Missing a meal was not of consequence, when I could purchase and personally own books. Books continue to have a huge presence in my life. My spouse, Larry Rubendall, and I have many shelves in our home crammed full of books.

Mamaw, I want you to know I still treasure all the warm memories of visiting and staying in your home, during my youth. While I loved all your daughters, Aunts Marty and Netty were big influences in my life, especially Aunt Marty. Marty was akin to a sister, or best friend. You likely remember, she and Netty are only a few years older than I am. Aunts Beatrice, Juanita, and Geneva married and left the area early in my life, so I didn’t interact with them too much. Your daughters all were beauties, but since you told me once I favored Juanita, I feel a special connection to her, too. It’s sad Aunts Bea, Nita and Gippy, and your four sons, all have passed. I know you miss them. Dad surely is missed by me. Don’t cry. Let me give you a hug.

I relish every hour I spent with Marty, and I often replay memories of time we spent together. We exhausted many hours in the play house Papa built. You know, I always thought the play house was built for Marty, but one time Netty, with words sharp as scissors, informed me Papa build that house for her; Marty just inherited it. While Netty was perturbed that day at my ignorance, I think she eventually forgave me.

The play house was so cool. Just like a real home, but little girl and pre-teen size. Do you recall Marty’s real, miniature electric stove? Although I can’t remember any specific food we prepared on the stove, I believe we baked cookies in the oven.

Marty and I played school frequently. She always was the teacher, and my hand often got whacked with a ruler. I took her cue later, when I was the teacher and my sisters and brothers-- and sometimes some cousins—were my pupils. I enjoyed using the ruler, too, which still produces teasing by various family members. If Marty ever talks to you about our playing school, tell her I blame her for my teaching transgressions.

You’re right, I always hoped to become a teacher when I finished college. I have not completed all the course work required to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in Literature, but obtaining my degree remains at the top of my Bucket List. If I’m recalling correctly, I lack about fourteen hours. You likely never knew I was unable to begin college until many years after Ed Young and I were married. Of course, I stopped classes after Ed died, to allow time for grieving and the reordering of my life. I’m hopeful I can finish most of my hours electronically, so that I don’t have to travel and spend hours in classrooms.

Do you remember Ed? The likely cause of his death was a brain aneurysm, since the partial autopsy I granted ruled out a heart attack. His death was a shock, but I’m glad he didn’t have to suffer for months, or years, with a serious illness.

I see you still have Marty’s piano. I’m surprised she didn’t take it with her. It was Marty who taught me to play piano—that is, she taught me to play Chopsticks—a song that contained the lines, “Take me in your arms and never let me go; everyone is sleeping so it’s quite all right.” The song’s title eludes me. I used my right hand to play my Chopstick portion; Marty used her left hand. I would have soared with happiness if I, like Marty, had been fortunate enough to have my own piano, although, truthfully, I don’t know where it would have found a place to exist in our compact house.

In high school band, I played the clarinet, and was pretty good at it. Mother sold my clarinet after I dropped out of band in my junior year. I was a little bent out of shape that the sale was not discussed with me, and I immediately lost interest in music making for a long time.

I did make one final attempt, sort of, at playing piano. Some years after we were married, Ed gave me a keyboard for Christmas. I learned a few tunes on it. The keyboard still is functional. I need to re-develop an interest again.

I often babysat my adorable siblings, which was a huge responsibility, and sometimes a bit overwhelming. I still recall bottle feeding and changing diapers—a task not so enjoyable. Do you recollect if any women in our family breast fed their children? Did you breast feed? Breast feeding always has been a curiosity to me, as it seems that route would have been a time-saver for mothers. No. I didn’t have a chance to breast feed, because I never was able to conceive, due to reproductive system problems. You might recall that Ed and I adopted a child—Ed’s sister’s child. Millie died in a car accident. Andrew has been a joy in my life. His birth mother would be proud of him.

When I had to babysit my siblings in cold weather, I fed the coal stove that heated our home, built fires, and did all sorts of grown-up jobs. One time, I let the fire almost die. Fearing my parents would be angered if the house was cold when they arrived home, I threw some kerosene into the stove. The flames shot out of the door and singed some of my hair and eyebrows, and I had a few minor burns on my arms and hands. I continue to be horrified with the thought that my parent’s children could have perished in a fire that also could have destroyed our home.

There were occasions I got scared while babysitting. I recall once having overnight responsibility. I was maybe twelve or thirteen. We didn’t have a key to lock our doors, and often we left our home for hours, or days, with unlocked doors. This is the way things were at the time.

Everyone was trusting, and thugs weren’t trolling in neighborhoods. Anyway, once while babysitting at night, I was seized with the brilliant idea of sticking table knives in the space between the door and the molding around all doors that opened to the outside. The knives worked. No buggers got into the house.

I loved it when my family lived up on the hill behind you and Papa, in the house Grandpa and Daddy built. Probably I was at your house more during those years than I spent in my own home, because it was just a skip and a hop between houses. I asked Dad one time how he learned to build houses; he said he learned from watching Papa Robert. You know, I’m just realizing my parents lived for years in houses located behind their parents. We lived up behind you and Papa; first, and then at some point we lived behind my mother’s parents, Pa and Maw Fletcher. That circumstance surely must be unique.

Did you ever tire of having me constantly in your home when I was a young girl? No. Good! Marty and I used to play Hide-and-Seek in the eaves of the upstairs, where you stored various things, like off-season clothing, and Christmas gifts. That was fun. Marty had a full-length chalkboard on the door in her bedroom. The bedroom was one of the places where we “played school.”

Can we eat now? My taste buds have been watering, trying to guess which foods you prepared. You know how much I love your meals, especially breakfast. Thoughts of your fat, homemade biscuits, covered with your churned butter and homemade jelly—or better yet, drowning the biscuits in homemade chocolate syrup, makes me salivate. Of course, those biscuits drenched in white or brown gravy, also was outstanding. I remember many a breakfast with

bacon and sausage, biscuits and gravy, and chocolate syrup. You let the youngsters have a Royal Crown Cola with our meals, if we wanted one. Of course, I never turned down an RC.

Oh, your meal isn’t quite ready, and you want me out of your hair. Okay. I’ll go upstairs and check out my old sleeping quarters. See you in a bit. Call if you need assistance.

Wow! Not much has changed. The same blue paint still covers the walls, and the bedspread hasn’t been upgraded. There thankfully are new cloth curtains at the windows. No ugly plastic, flowered ones, like those everyone used for many years.

I’m surprised to see my old high school annuals, stacked on the bedside table. I wondered what happened to them. Sweet to have those in my possession again. I must remember to take them home today, so I can take more walks down memory lane.

Heavens! Here is one of my ringed notebooks which contains drafts of some of the creative writing I did in high school—a short story I wrote in my junior English class, when Miss Sally Brown was my teacher.

For my year-end writing project, I wrote a short story, which I thought was darn good. Miss Brown promptly returned the story to me, telling me, in writing, my story sounded too much like Margaret Mitchell’s, Scarlett O’Hara, in *Gone with the Wind*. I did not plagiarize. In fact, I had not read O’Hara’s novel. To be accused of wrongdoing was an insult of the highest order. Nevertheless, today when I recall a piece of writing composed when I was a junior in high school was compared in stature to Margaret Mitchell’s skill as a novelist, I get pretty puffed up.

However, my dilemma, at the time was that I didn’t think I had time to create another short story, so I wrote my first poem.

I did not know until I returned to complete my senior year of high school that the poem I wrote the previous year, “Spring Plowing,” was published. Without my knowledge, Miss Brown submitted my poem to a contest, and my poem was accepted for publication in “*Young America Sings, National High School Poetry Anthology* (National High School Poetry Press, Los Angeles, California).

I encountered Miss Brown in the hallway shortly after beginning my senior year. She notified me of my win; gave me a copy of the book that contained the publication; and heartily congratulated me. Pretty fantastic! I must read this poem to Mamaw when I go downstairs. Maybe she will be impressed, and I’ll get a few extra grand-daughter kudos. She might even be enticed to make me one of her Old-Fashioned Molasses Stack Cakes. I’ll recite the poem now for practice.

Spring Plowing

My heart leaps forward as winter
fades away, and spring is here
once more, for then it is time to
plow again, in fields that slept before.

I love to take my plow at dawn
as I simply turn every furrow
my heart sings a happy song
as I eagerly await each tomorrow.

I crush the dirt within my palm
and sniff the cool, fresh soil
it makes me feel close to my native land.
then, I welcome the day’s long toil.

I linger a while after day is gone,
as the sun is fading away,
to give some thanks, alone,
and let the good Earth have her say.

for many this land is nothing,
but it means the world to me,
with the help of God and nature
and strength to plant the seed.

While my poem isn’t up to Emily Dickinson’s quality, it was the first one I wrote, and the first one published. Best of all, publication birthed an interest in creative writing for me. I love communing with other writers, where we share our work and give praise for those who win awards in contests and get books published.

Oh, look, there is my favorite childhood doll. I thought she got melted in the wood stove located in our basement. My recollection is that she was crammed into the stove oven by one of my siblings, and when my brother, Paul, built a fire for Mother to do some canning, my doll met her demise. I guess the melting was a dream. All aside, it sure is special to be able to hold her in my arms again. I can’t remember her name, but I do recall she wore lots of castoffs after my younger siblings no longer required them. It feels good to stretch out on a familiar bed, especially with no-name doll in my arms. I’m home.

My eyelids are weighted. I think I need a nap.

I hear you, Mama. I’ll be down soon. Give me time to splash some water on my face and wash my hands.

Here I am. Everything smells so good! You have fixed all my favorites, plus added cooked apples. Bless you! You are the best, Mamaw. I’m going to be stuffed.

Before we start eating, thank you for saving my things, especially my doll. May I take my belongings home? Thanks. I found a copy of my first poem upstairs. Remind me to read it to you before I leave. You want to hear it now? I also have an autographed copy of my first book of poetry for you. I left the poem on the hallway table, with my book and purse. I’ll fetch both.

You like the poem! Great! Is it worth your baking me one of your Old-Fashioned Molasses Stack Cakes? If not, perhaps you will be more inclined to bake me a cake after you scan my poetry book.

Do you want me to ask God to bless us before we eat, like I used to do when I was a little girl? It was special you gave all your young grandchildren a chance to pray before we ate. You made us feel grown up.

The alarm clock shamelessly blasts me from my dream. Sadly, my visit with Mama is over. While my grandmother has been deceased for many years, she still lives in my heart. The sweetness of the dream I just experienced will remain with me forever. There is nothing that equates to a visit with a doting grandmother. While a dream is not reality, it still can be savored.