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### Who was Grannie?

My mother's mother, Katrina, was a twin, born in 1888 in Florida and adopted by a couple from upstate New York. She married a college professor and they had two girls and a boy. My mother, Katharine, was the oldest child, weighing in at over eight pounds (a difficult birth, her petite mother complained.) Both mother and daughter were nicknamed Kay.

Katrina kept house, entertained guests from her husband's academic circle, played the piano, crocheted (innumerable pot-holders), hand-painted china saucers, and collected knick-knacks like souvenir spoons, gifts from her husband's work-related travels. She didn't travel much herself. So, when her daughter married my father and prepared to drive across the country to his new teaching job in California, Grandma hitched a ride. She had always wanted to see California.

I can only imagine what that 1932 honeymoon trip must have been like, but it certainly serves as testimonial to filial deference. After Grandma returned to her husband in New York, my parents saw them infrequently. When I was about ten, my grand-father developed cancer, and he and Grandma moved to Solvang to be near my parents. My father bought them a little house, where they lived until my grandfather died in 1945. At his funeral was the first time I ever saw my mother close to tears. She didn't cry, but her voice quavered.

After my grandfather's death, Grandma did her traveling, spending weeks with a daughter in Claremont, months at a time with friends in Oregon, and years with her daughter-in-law (who had divorced my uncle) in Hawaii. I remember her glee at departure on the cruise ship Lurline, and the post-cards and letters she wrote describing the sights, and (favorite topic) the weather she observed. The Solvang house was sold, and Grandma's between-trips residence was with my parents at Midland School. In 1950, the school built a new faculty cottage, near my parents' house, and she was its first occupant. That's where my memories of her really begin.

Grannie (as she was re-named after her grand-children began reproducing) suffered from arthritis, which precluded the pursuits she had enjoyed in her younger days: piano-playing, handwork, cooking. She spoke nostalgically about the past: her favorite song was "This will be my shining hour." She rocked on her porch, dangled her cigarettes in a shiny black holder, watched television (she was one of the first Midland residents to have a set), eagerly enjoyed mealtimes at my parents' home or in the school dining room. She grew portly and developed type I diabetes. She learned to self-administer insulin but not to retrain her appetite. As treats for her great-grand-children, she stocked a generous supply of Crackerjacks boxes.

Grannie's main family-participation activity was washing dishes, a task she insisted on performing as her contribution to the household, accompanied by sniffs and sighs and by an apparently unconscious habit of whistling under her breath. The sniffing may have been a product of allergies; the whistling was just baffling and annoying. The habit grew to be a serious irritant to me and to other family members, who bristled and complained among ourselves, but never to Grannie. Once my husband innocently asked

her why she whistled so much. She responded, without apparent emotion, “I wasn’t whistling.”

On one warm summer afternoon, the family – my parents, Grannie, my sister, my husband and I and our child (our only one, at the time) - gathered for a picnic in the side yard, overlooking the soccer field and the mountain range in the distance. Hawks circled beneath a blue sky and puffy clouds; a gentle breeze blew, bringing whiffs of drying grass. A picket fence bordered the yard; shrubbery surrounded it. Underfoot, the terrain was uneven, with concrete pavers laid over gravel. The picnic table was laden with familiar foods, featuring a special tuna-fish-and-pineapple salad, my mother’s specialty.

As we assembled for the meal, my father came down the steps from the house, carrying a stack of small china saucers which had been hand-painted by my grandmother. They were regularly used in our everyday meals, but were definitely treasured. One of my favorites bore a picture of a red barn.

Stepping onto the patio, my father stumbled. The pile of plates fell to the ground and shattered. Everyone gasped. My father paled, barked a nervous laugh, and stooped to pick up the fragments. Others rushed to help, offering comforting comments: oh, so sorry; don’t cut yourself; what a shame. Grannie sat silently. The meal progressed, and no more was said about the plates. Amicably, we cleared the dishes, washed up, dispersed to our separate residences.

Several hours later, my husband and I were sitting in the living room of our home, at the opposite end of the Midland campus from my parents’ house. We heard a knock on the front door, and my husband got up to answer it. There stood my grandmother, who

had never before made the trip to our house without a specific invitation. She was holding a stack of twelve hand-painted saucers.

“I’ve been saving these for you, and I wanted to be sure you got them,” she said. “They need to be kept by someone who appreciates them.” She smiled, handed the plates to my husband, and declined his offer to come in.

“Thanks, but I’ve got to get back for my TV show,” she told us, and turned to go. And I wonder now, as I wondered then: how much did we miss knowing about my grandmother? And why?