

We all called her Nana. I remember her best in the kitchen, wearing an apron with big pockets, as she stirred soup on the big enameled kitchen stove. She wore her gold and gray hair held back in a bun by huge two-pronged hairpins. When I was about six years old or so and staying at Nana's house, after the dishes were done, she took off her aprons, brought her box of big hairpins and her ivory comb, out of the drawer and let down her hair. It fell to her shoulders and it was my job to give her a new hairdo. She sat in front of me in a straight chair where she patiently waited for what could have been hours, while I struggled to lock the strands of hair into a bun or a braid with those two-pronged celluloid hairpins. When I was finished, she would look in the mirror, nodding approvingly, and kept the hairdo to show my parents when they came to pick me up. What a sweet, laidback, and creative Nana!

Her kitchen with its high walls and tall windows was kept cozy by the modern ivory-enameled gas stove. Grandpa sat in his rocker by the window, smoking his pipe, and read the papers. I don't remember Nana sitting down – ever! (Except when I was doing her hair, or course.) She kept the house orderly and perfect. But my prime memory of her was stirring a pot of soup that bubbled on the stove. She was thrifty and used any and all leftovers to make the most delicious and original soups. After a beautifully presented lamb dinner we knew that lamb stew would be on the menu for the next several days. I named my grandmother, SOUPY NANA.

Inside the side entrance, Nana had an oak icebox where she continued to keep fruit and butter long after she had a refrigerator. Upon entering the house through that entryway, the sweet smell of apples greeted me and lingered in the entry long after she died. (I wonder if the scent is still there?)

We used the side entry because it was closest to the garage. Rarely did anyone climb the steep front steps to the closed in porch. The double front door had an ornate doorbell key that stayed permanently in the door. It needed to be manually turned, to ring. The house was built before electricity and gas outlets

could still be seen on the walls. I don't recall anyone coming to that front door – except the pastor's wife once.

My cousins from Rhode Island came on school vacations, and we would put on a show! We closed the floor-to-ceiling doors that divided the parlor into two sections. The audience sat in rows of chairs on the other side and waited for curtain time. We'd sing, dance, and my father would do vaudeville and sing. It was to be expected as the family was musical and gifted. Her brother had a traveling orchestra; her sister who was an accomplished harpist, married a musician and they had a conservatory in Vermont. (All her sisters had their pictures taken in front of the shiny golden harp.)

But I don't remember Nana playing any instrument. However, one day when I was having trouble playing a piece in the Key of E on the piano, she came into the parlor and said, "Students often have trouble with four sharps. Pretend it is in the Key of E Flat - and no one will know the difference!"

I did it – and it worked. I never did find out how knowledgeable she was with music, but I realized there was a lot about Nana that I didn't know.

Nana was also very perceptive about her grandchildren's feelings and treated us as individuals. She knew I loved words and reading, so we often discussed words. When she mentioned a friend, who was "a handsome woman" I objected.

"Women are beautiful. Men are handsome!" I declared.

"I see," said Nana thoughtfully. It wasn't long before she presented me with my first dictionary and thesaurus.

Later, she gave me a book of short stories by O. Henry. "You may like these," she said. "O. Henry was the father of the unexpected ending."

I didn't realize until years later that O. Henry probably was not the originator of the unexpected ending, but I enjoyed speculating on his charming endings. My favorite short story of his was -- and still is -- The Ransom of Red Chief. Did Nana know I would grow up to be an author? I wish she had lived long enough to see at least one of my books be published! She most certainly encouraged my personal

abilities and interests as I'm sure she did with her other grandchildren with their various talents.

The big house had two stairways. A winding stairway stretched gracefully up to all three floors.

Everyone used the big staircase with the lovely carpeted stairs and a polished mahogany handrail. But not me. I used only the back stairs – the servants' stairs – which were bare oak, and very steep. I did fall several times on those stairs, but to me it was better than climbing the winding stairs that led up to the second floor. I dreaded even looking up the wide stairs to the top because where stairs made their turn, in a nook in the wall, stood a statue of a Gainsborough-type old fashioned boy, in a blue silk suit, who stood, hands folded, looking sadly down at an English Setter laying at his feet. That boy and his tears plagued my thoughts and put a cold lump in my chest. I had to keep myself from even remembering or peeking at that heart-breaking scene on the stairs.

Nana told me the dog was sleeping, but I knew better. That boy was crying, and the dog was dead, with its mouth open and tongue sticking out. Blue Boy stood in that nook for years, just waiting for me to climb those stairs and feel the familiar a black hole in my heart. I would rather risk falling on the steep servants' stairs in the back, that see that miserable blue boy and his dead dog.

One day that statue mysteriously disappeared, and I never knew or asked – where it went.

Nana was very sweet and took pity on me because of my hair. All my cousins who lived in Rhode Island, had beautiful, curly thick hair. Mine was thin and flat, always looked uncombed – a problem that plagues me to this day. Whenever people met all of us, grandchildren, everyone praised my beautiful cousins. While I stood by with thin, flat hair. One night when I slept over Nana's she washed my hair and brushed it until it curled over her fingers. When my folks came home with the aunts and uncles, Nana brought me downstairs in my pajamas. "See Joanie's beautiful curls?" She said proudly. "Her hair curled right around my

fingers as I brushed it. “But no one else took the time to curl my hair, so it stayed the same wherever I went.

On weekends, Nana and my Aunt Ruth dutifully went to visit those elderly relatives who were ill or in nursing homes. They took me along. The nursing homes had one big room with white iron beds lined up on each wall. The love shown by Nana was obvious and she was concerned and kind to them. One was her eldest sister, Jessie, who had hands deformed with arthritis. She had been an accomplished pianist, and now couldn’t do much at all with those bent twig-like fingers. I felt sad and reflective after those weekends visiting the old folks. Was this what old age brought? Is this everyone’s fate, I wondered.

Nana didn’t stop with the nursing home visits, because she also visited those who had already passed on -- or so she hoped – by attending seances. I had to wait in the car with an aunt while she went to the mysterious meetings, that were usually held in private homes. When she came out, she seemed troubled and a bit unsure of what had happened, although she didn’t talk out loud about those visits.

She whispered to her sisters— who anxiously awaited to find out who stepped in from the grave – to say hello. I strained my ears, trying to hear who had visited from the beyond that day. I heard the name “Elvira” whispered among the sisters and wondered if the mysterious “Elvira” who was always spoken of in whispers -- was really dead or alive.

One day on my Saturday excursions with my Nana and great- aunts, to visit the infirm, she said in an offhand manner, “Joanie, it’s your father’s birthday next week. I found this wallet, and I thought someone might like to give him. But of course, they need to pay me for it – or it wouldn’t be really from *them*, would it?” She showed me a leather wallet made of ostrich (or maybe pigskin) and wrapped in tissue paper in a nice white box.

“Let me buy it from you,” I begged wanting to surprise my dad. “How much.?”

“It cost a quarter,” she said.

I knew a good bargain when I saw one, and I quickly summed up in my head the money I had in my piggy bank. I could do it, if I would be paid next week's allowance of 25 cents. But I had no money with me, and I wouldn't take the wallet without paying for it first. When we got home, I begged my dad for a quarter. He was not one to part with a quarter easily, but somehow, I managed to get that quarter and presented my father with the beautiful wallet for his birthday. Nana knew I needed to believe the gift was truly from ME. She was a clever one, my Nana

One night when I was sleeping over at Nana's, she came into the little room where we grandchildren slept when visiting. "Get up, Joanie," she said. "I'm taking you across the street to something special. You don't need to get dressed."

It was dark when she led me (in my pajamas) across the street to the neighbor's big house. The front porch light was on, expecting us – and the other neighbors who were there, too. What was going on this time of night? I wondered.

In the living room a waft of glorious aroma perfumed the air greeted us. People stood around a huge, strange- looking plant with large flat leaves with spiny fingers. In the center of the leaves were huge pink and white blossoms at least six to eight inches across, that emitted the sweet, fresh, spicy scent. It was such a magical moment, that everyone spoke in whispers. Nana explained to me later, that the flower only bloomed once a year – and only at night. A night blooming something or other.

I recall a silence in the room as the neighbors payed homage to the gorgeous cactus. I stood there in my pajamas and slippers on the exquisite oriental rug and looked sleepily at the flower, never knowing that moment would stay in my memory forever.

I only heard Nana cry once. It was when her husband – my Grandpa – was dying. I heard his loud breathing as my cousin, and I sat in the library of the house. No one told us he was dying, but we knew he was gone, when the gasps of breath eventually stopped.

A few years later, when I was fourteen Nana contracted pneumonia and was very ill. I visited her as she lay in the big oak bed, looking tired and pale. I visited her in her bedroom, and suddenly realized she was old. But I hoped she would recover from her illness in time to see my in my high-school performance of a play that Tufts College had arranged with the library in my town – Medford.

I knew she was better when she decided it was time to get out of bed, clean the house, and do a laundry. She collected the many sheets she had used when she had a high fever and carried them in a huge wicker basket down the steep back stairway to the cellar stairs the led down to the laundry. She was still weak, and the basket was clumsy, and the stairs were narrow and dark. Nana slipped and fell down the cellar stairs to the cement floor, until she was finally found there in dreadful pain.

That night, she died from a blood clot caused by the fall. It was strange and sad after she was taken away, for my father and aunt to sit down and eat the prepared breakfast she had made for everyone before her trek to the laundry.

The day Nana passed away no one told me. My folks were busy for several days, but I didn't know what was going on. No one told me she had passed, for fear I would be terribly upset. I did get a phone call from a neighbor, to express sympathy, and that was how I found out. I broke down and sobbed for hours. I still feel sadness remembering that day when I experienced my first encounter with death.

She never got to see me in the play but that opening night, I could see Nana's sister, my charming and delightful Aunt Alice Louise smiling from the audience. She came a great distance to see me in my premiere, to make up for Nana's absence.

At every family get together throughout my long life and in my fondest dreams, an empty chair is still in my heart, waiting for my precious Soupy Nana.