

# Visiting Grandma

Memories of Visiting Grandma Groeger  
In Humphrey, Nebraska



Collected for my sister,  
**Janet Lorraine Atkinson McClain**

For her 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday

By  
**Dhyan (Kathleen Marie) Atkinson**

Visiting Grandma Groeger



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## ***Note about the pictures:***

*Some of the pictures in this personal history come from family albums but many were pictures I searched for on the internet. Like many families, we took pictures of each other but didn't think to take pictures of things that were common then, but uncommon now – like saddle shoes, or the big tube fire escape on St. Francis School in Humphrey, Grandma's garden, Kool-aid packages, the inside of Grandma's house, or even main street Humphrey. So I have used Google to find pictures that reminded me of the things we don't have photographs of in family records. I hope it adds to the enjoyment of the story seeing things "as they might have been" and "were."*

## ***A note to Janet:***

*Well, I started this for your birthday but it just kept growing. Merry Christmas!*

*Dhyan*

# Introduction



It was the late 1950s. Saddle shoes were in.

Pedal pushers (long shorts that ended just below the knee) were in.



Flouncy dresses, patent leather shoes and curly hair were in on Sundays and special occasions for little girls.

For everyday there were pigtails, shorts, and little, sleeveless, button up, shirts.



Televisions had tiny screens, were big, clunky, black-and-white, and only showed three stations... if it was a good day!



Telephones went 'ring-ring-ring,' and you really dialed them, sticking your finger into a hole in a wheel and turning it round.

Cars were big, spacious, came in bright candy colors, and had headlights like big round eyes, a silver hood ornament, and fins along the back.



*These memories come from those times.....*



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**Kathy, Grandma, Janet, Erma, & Casey, the toy fox terrier**

My sister, Janet, and I were that wonderful age between 5 and 10, not little girls anymore but still charmingly young.

**I think it would be fair to say that our Grandma Groeger, our mother's mother, loved us to pieces.**

She was thrilled when we were old enough to come visit her by ourselves and for several summers before she died we stayed with her for a couple weeks at her home in Humphrey,

Nebraska.

Our parents would drive us up to Humphrey on Friday after my father had done a full day at work. (I just called Dad and asked him what that was like for him because it suddenly occurs to me that the drive must have been long for someone who had just worked a full day. He says the trip was 350 miles on two-lane country highways, twisting and curving and not straight like interstates are now. He said, *"You kids would be asleep in the back seat. Erma would be asleep in the front seat and sometimes I had a really hard time staying awake. I don't know why, but it seems like I would be fine until we hit Columbus sometime around one in the morning and then I could hardly keep my eyes open. I would just get so sleepy that I would have to stop the car, get out and walk around a bit, and then drive on biting my tongue to keep awake. There were a few times I dozed off and woke up suddenly when the wheels would go off the pavement! But it was only 10 miles between Columbus and Humphrey and we were almost there."*

For us little girls, sleeping in the backseat of the car was an adventure but it was a necessity. We could read books or entertain ourselves in other ways while there was still light in the sky but once it got dark there was little to do in the back seat except sit in the darkness... so we slept. I remember Janet and I pleading with Dad to drive with the dome light on in the ceiling of the car so we could play a game or play with cards but Dad was firm in saying it wasn't safe to drive that way. We could have the dome light on for a minute if we dropped

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something on the floor of the car and couldn't find it, but we couldn't have it on long enough to, say, continue reading a book.

Sometimes we all sang. I have fond memories of Janet and I leaning over the back of the front seat, the headlights illuminating a stretch of naked country road, singing songs with Mom and Dad. Probably our very favorite was "My Grandfather's Clock" which went like this:

"My grandfather's clock was too tall for the shelf  
So it stood 90 years on the floor  
It was taller, by far, than the old man himself  
But it weighed not a penny-weigh more.  
It was bought on the morn of the day that he was born  
It was always his treasure and his pride  
But it stopped ... short... never to go again  
When the old... man... died!

Ninety years without slumbering  
Tick! Tock! Tick! Tock!  
Life's seconds lumbering  
Tick! Tock! Tick! Tock!  
But it stopped ... short... never to go again  
When the old ... man... died!"

The second part went "tick! tock!" all the way through the song and Janet and I liked to do that part best. I will drop in the words to a couple more we liked and then I'll put some I scared up on the internet in the appendix:

### "The Itsy, Bitsy, Spider"

The itsy bitsy spider climbed up the water spout  
Down came the rain and washed the spider out!  
Up came the sun and dried up all the rain  
And the itsy, bitsy spider climbed up the spout again.

There was also Clementine

In a cavern, in a canyon, Excavated for a mine,  
Dwelt a miner, forty-niner And his daughter Clementine.

**Chorus:** Oh my darling, oh my darling

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Oh my darling, Clementine  
You are lost and gone forever,  
Dreadful sorry, Clementine.

Light she was and like a feather, And her shoes were number nine,  
Carrying boxes without topses sandals were for Clementine

CHORUS

Drove she ducklings to the water every morning just at nine,  
Hit her foot against a splinter fell into the foaming brine.

CHORUS

Ruby lips above the water, blowing bubbles soft and fine,  
Alas for me, I was no swimmer, so I lost my Clementine.

CHORUS

Probably the most endearing song for my parents and I was Little Janet's rendition of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." The words were:

My Bonnie lies over the ocean  
My Bonnie lies over the sea  
My Bonnie lies over the ocean  
Oh bring back my Bonnie to me!

Bring back! Bring back!  
Oh bring back my Bonnie to me! To me!  
Bring back! Bring back!  
Oh bring back my bonnie to me!

Janets version went:

My Bonnie lies over the oat-chen  
My Bonnie lies over the tzee!  
My Bonnie lies over the oat-chen  
Oh bwing back my Bonnie to me.

Bwing back! Bwing back!  
Oh bwing back my Bonnie to me! To me!  
Bwing back! Bwing back!  
Oh bwing back my Bonnie to me!

Sometimes Janet, who was too little to count yet, would get stuck on the "Bwing backs" and they would go on for a long time until she thought there were enough and then she would go on to the "Oh Bwing back" part. : )

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There were a couple “little girl unique pronunciations” we cherished from Janet. ‘Lello’ for ‘yellow’ was one. We were all sorry when she outgrew that one because it was so cute. We were always handing her yellow things and asking her the color. Independent even as a small child, Janet came up with her own pronunciations for things after she started to read rather than ask someone to tell her and these unique versions of words would pop out from time to time. Once we were passing through a small town in Nebraska and a house had a sign in the front yard advertising “antiques” for sale. “Oh look,” Janet exclaimed. “The Aunty Ques live there!” On another trip we were amusing ourselves by taking turns reading aloud from a Charlie Brown comic strip book. When it was her turn, Janet was reading along and started to say: “Scoo-ford says...” “Scoo-ford?” we all said. “Who is Scoo-ford?” Turns out Scoo-ford was actually the piano-playing Schroder.

When driving to grandma’s we would take turns thinking up which songs we wanted to sing. I spent an evening scaring up various lyrics (and sheet music if I could find it!) on the internet. See the appendix for the following:

America	Mr. Ed
America the Beautiful	My darling Clementine
The Ants go marching	My Grandfather’s clock
Battle Hymn of the Republic	99 bottles of beer
Bicycle built for two	Oh Suzanna
Bingo	Oh when the saints
Camptown Races	Oh where oh where has my little dog gone?
Clementine	Old McDonald had a farm
Did you ever see a Lassie?	Oh top of old smokey
Dixie	Oh top of spaghetti all covered with cheese
Do your ears hang low?	Pop! Goes the weasel
Down by the station	Que Sera, Sera
Down in the Valley	Red River Valley
Farmer in the dell	Rock a bye baby
Found a peanut	Row, row, row your boat
Frere Jacques	Scarlet Ribbons
Good night, ladies	She’ll be comin’ round the mountain
Home on the Range	Sidewalks of New York
How much is that doggie in the window?	Standing on the corner
I’m a little teapot	Sweet Betsy from Pike
I’ve been working on the railroad	Take me out to the ball game
Little bunny foo-foo	There was an old lady who swallowed a fly
London bridge	This old man
Love and Marriage	Three blind mice
Man on the flying trapeze	Twelve days of Christmas
Mary had a little lam	Twinkle, twinkle little star
My Bonnie	Yankee Doodle

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Sometimes we played word games but not often. The only one I can remember is Twenty Questions, where one person starts out by thinking of some object which is “animal, vegetable or mineral” and the others take turns asking yes or no questions until the correct object is guessed. Our games were pretty simple but I remember that later in life, when I was in my 20s, I took a trip with several friends to the tip of Florida and we played a very sophisticated version in which the object chosen could be animal, vegetable, mineral, idea or concept. The games would go on for hours! I remember three specific games that played for

1. The round glass plate over the red light on the very first stoplight we passed leaving Kansas City.
2. B flat
3. Queen Elizabeth (That game was particularly fun because everyone in the car except me was into theater and the person who chose Queen Elizabeth as the secret word answered 'in character' the entire game until her majesty was correctly guessed.)

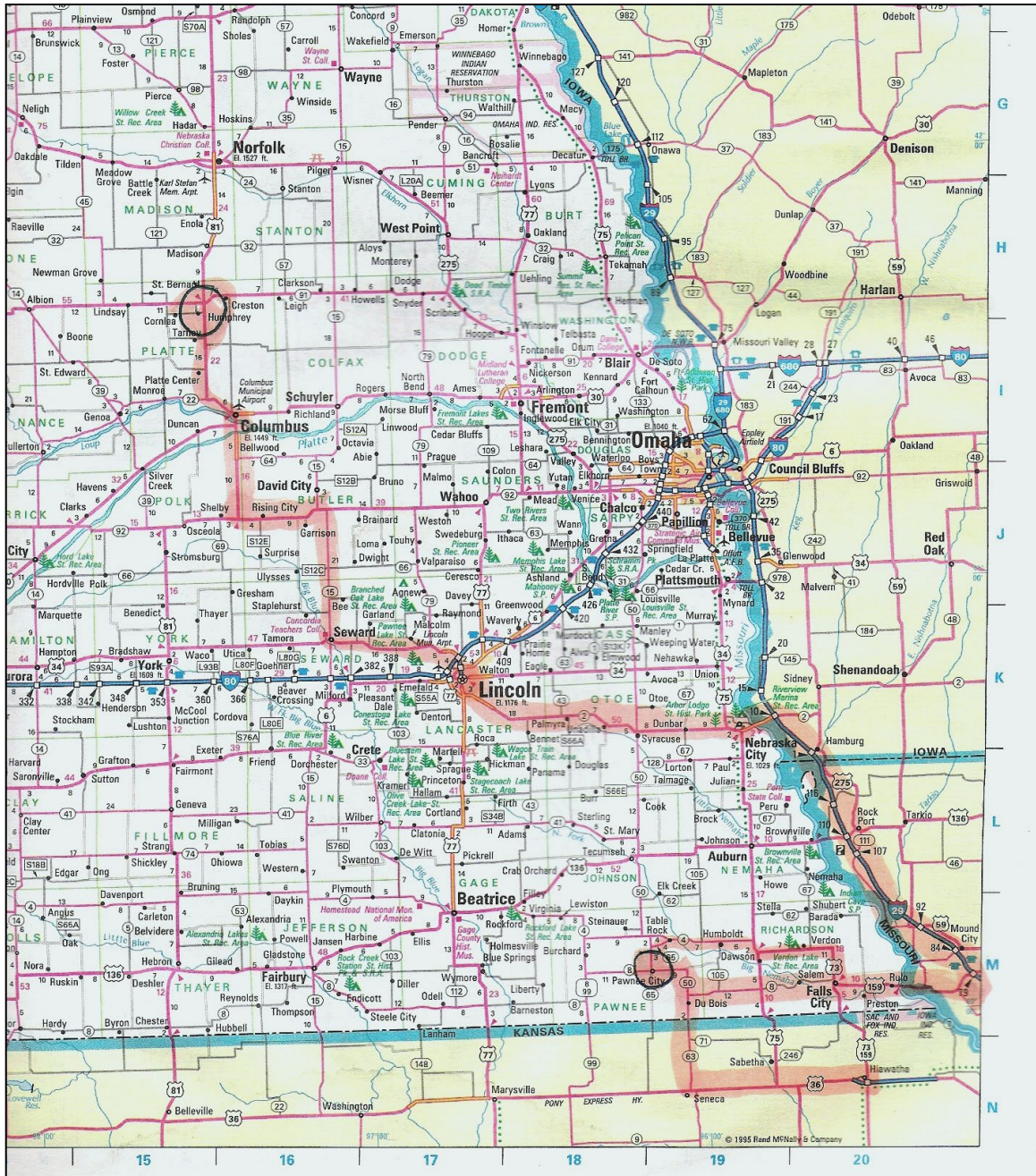
Our family games were not nearly so complicated!

I asked my Dad about the route he used to drive to Humphrey and was surprised to hear that there was more than one. Below see a map with the routes highlighted. Sometimes we stopped in Pawnee City for an hour or so to sit at the kitchen table at Grandpa and Grandma Atkinson's house and eat something good Grandma had prepared for us as a snack.



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**Main Route:** Up Highway 29 from Kansas City. Cross the river at Nebraska City, travel through Lincoln, then travel up and over to Seward. From there travel north on Highway 92 through Rising City. North to Columbus and from there on north to Humphrey. Down in the lower right hand corner are several routes taken into Pawnee City. If we went through Pawnee City we probably went up through Beatrice and Lincoln to get to Grandma Groeger's house.





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We had a Chevrolet, (I think it was) a big, spacious, gas-guzzling American car of the 1950s. Ours was pink and white with plenty of room inside and no seatbelts. Seatbelts hadn't yet been invented. There was also no air-conditioning so during the hot summer months we drove with the wind pouring through the windows and through our hair. Cars back then had little "wing" windows in the front which you could turn and they would funnel air directly into the car. You can see one in the picture. I wish my car today had one on the driver's side!

The breeze felt good because summers in the Midwest were HOT! Often over 100 degrees in the summer and it would stay hot long into the night.

For quite a while when we were young we took turns sleeping, one stretched out on the backseat and the other tucked into the curved space between the back windshield and its ledge. I remember that was a magical place to sleep! (*Totally unsafe if there had ever been an accident! – but we didn't know that.*) You could look up through the glass curving above you at the stars and on either side of the road you could see the tops of trees flashing by. Sometimes we would both try to sleep on the seat but there was always a lot of someone's feet ending up in the other person's face or waking up to find that the pillow you were using was the other person's bottom.

Eventually when we both had outgrown the space under the back window, Dad, who was very ingenious about inventing these sorts of things, created a kind of hinged shelf that fit down in the foot well of the car. In those days, there was a hump in the middle of the foot well where something passed through on the undercarriage of the car from front to back. This shelf evened things out.

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Padded with one of Dad's old army sleeping bags and covered by a scratchy olive-colored, army blanket, it was very comfortable and easily the more exotic of the two places to sleep, so once again we took turns. I remember that the steady vibration of the car wheels passing on the pavement just inches below your head would cause a tickle deep in my nose that made it almost impossible to sleep. Somehow I had to cradle my head just right so that the vibration of the car didn't pass right into the bones of my skull but eventually we would both doze off, Janet with her trademark two first fingers stuck between her front teeth and Raggedy Ann tucked in the crook of her arm.

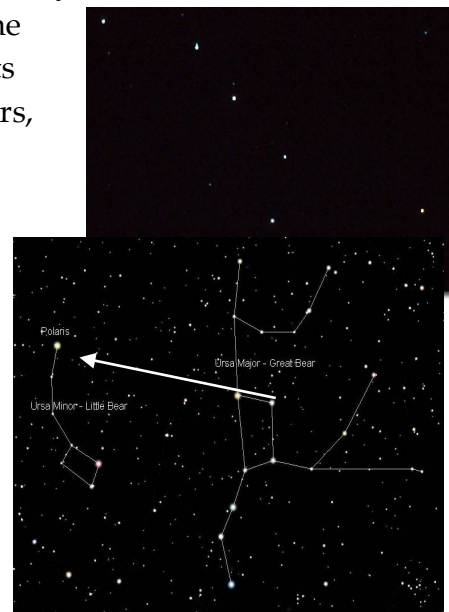


Maybe it was part of his trying to stay awake that last part of the drive, but I remember my Dad sometimes stopping the car next to a cornfield in the dead of night and he and I getting out of the car to look at the blazing stars. Even back then, the light pollution in Kansas City made it difficult to see all but the brightest stars at night. It was only on the clearest nights, when there was nothing at all in the air to reflect back and brighten the sky, that we could see the Milky Way. Here in the Nebraska farmlands there was nothing between you and the stars. We would stand by the side of the road beside the rustling corn, with the sound of a zillion crickets and night bugs in our ears, looking up at that magnificent sky!



Sometimes Dad would have brought his old army binoculars and we would look at the moon – which admittedly didn't look quite as detailed as this through the old binoc's. -- but still amazingly round and full of craters.

Then we would look for the Big Dipper and Dad would point out how you could find the North Star (Polaris) by using the front two stars of the dipper itself to point to it.



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Once we got back on the road, you could always see a steady stream of bugs and moths heading straight for the car in the twin cones of light from the headlights. In the 1950s, farmers were not using the tons of poisons and pesticides they do today and the night was still full of bugs flying around – a fair number of which would end up splattered on the front of the car attracted to their deaths by the headlights. Bug juice was yellow and dried hard! It was not easy getting it cleaned off the front of the car or wind shield. Years later I learned that shellac was made from beetle wings and I readily believed you could make varnish from bugs! Sometimes the splatters would get so bad you could hardly see out the windscreen, but I wish we had that problem today.

The eco-system was a lot healthier in the 1950s and the things that fed on bugs (like bats and birds and frogs and fish and turtles and snakes) were also thriving, unlike today. I haven't seen a thrush in years and their song was so beautiful, and you could creep up to the bush where it was nesting, part the dense foliage carefully with your hands, and encounter the bright eye of the thrush mother sitting on her nest in the cool airy darkness between the leaves. We were always finding little snakes in our backyard. My sister, Janet, was particularly fond of catching and holding them. We often found box turtles, even in the city. It sometimes seems to me as if many of the creatures of my childhood have just vanished.

If I had fallen asleep after getting back into the car, I always wanted Dad to wake me up when we were within sight of Humphrey, making our arrival in the dead of the night pretty mysterious and grand. Humphrey was on the prairie in Nebraska. The earth was flat and fertile, and Humphrey was surrounded by corn fields, pastures and farms. You could see for miles in every direction from the highway. As we looked out the windows of the car into the darkness I remember seeing the rows of corn zipping by like giant fields of corduroy. As the aisles between the rows flashed past, we got the briefest glimpse into the identical darkness between each row. The farms were few and far apart; each was illuminated by a yard light that looked like a lone streetlight, stuck off by itself in the darkness. If there was a moon, it would be floating through the sky with a bright nimbus of moonlight around it -- like an enormous plop of cream melting all over the sky masking all but the brightest stars with its light.



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The grove of trees that covered the town of Humphrey would rise up out of the darkness of the surrounding corn fields. You could tell it was Humphrey because the lit-up steeple of the clock tower on the Catholic church would be sticking up above the crown of the trees. I can still remember that clock tower. It had a clock face on each side, lit up by lights so you could read the time for miles around and probably the sounds of the bells striking the quarter hours and the hours reached out farther than that.

We would get to Humphrey in the middle of the night. The streets would be all silent and dark. The old fashioned street lamps had a pointed top which shed light all around in the darkness. We don't have lights like that anymore because they are both wasteful and put out a lot of light pollution.

Now our streetlights stand looking shyly at their own feet but back then streetlights stood tall and shed their light in all directions. The night air would be chill because we would arrive long after midnight and the grass would be cold and wet with dew. The silence of the night would be filled with little, natural sounds: the leaves of the trees rustling in the night wind, crickets singing, maybe a dog barking somewhere way off on some distant farm, or a pack of coyotes singing.



Dad would park the car and Janet and I would crawl out, asleep on our feet, and wait as the trunk was opened and the suitcases were pulled out. Grandma would always hear the car pulling up and she would be down at the front door in her bathrobe waiting for us, her hair up in pin curls with a night-scarf tied around her head to hold them in place until morning. Most likely Janet and I were put straight to bed but, as at the Atkinson grandparent's house, I have a few small memories of sitting around the kitchen table in the wee hours of the night having a snack.



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**Grandma's house**

My parents would stay the weekend and go back to Kansas City on Sunday around noon. Janet and I would stay with Grandma for the next two weeks. I don't remember minding being left. There were lots of adventures to be had at Grandma's house. One of the first things Janet and I would do the first morning was tramp down the stairs into the basement to see if our Indian bows and arrows were still behind the door or the big water heater where we left them. Yes, they would be but, of course, any suppleness they once had would have been long gone by the time we came back, the string hanging loose where before it had been tight, the wood dry and brittle. Grandma would help us cut new ones, thick green sticks about the thickness of an adult's thumb. She would cut the sticks from the hedge that lined the back edge of the garden. Grandma would trim off the thin part at the top and any side twigs and make a bow about half as tall as we were. She would notch the stick on both ends. Then she would take out the ball of white string and string the bow, bending it before tying the string tight.

Last year's arrows could be used again, of course, but Janet and I were not the best of fletchers. There was hardly a straight stick to be had which, of course, makes shooting with any sort of accuracy pretty problematic -- not that we were too bothered by the fact that we couldn't really hit anything we aimed at. We just liked the idea of pulling back the string and letting an arrow fly. (*The rule was, of course, no shooting at each other and nothing else that was alive.*)

Grandma had a great yard. The house was surrounded on all sides by lawn. To the west and south there was sidewalk and then a narrow strip of grass again

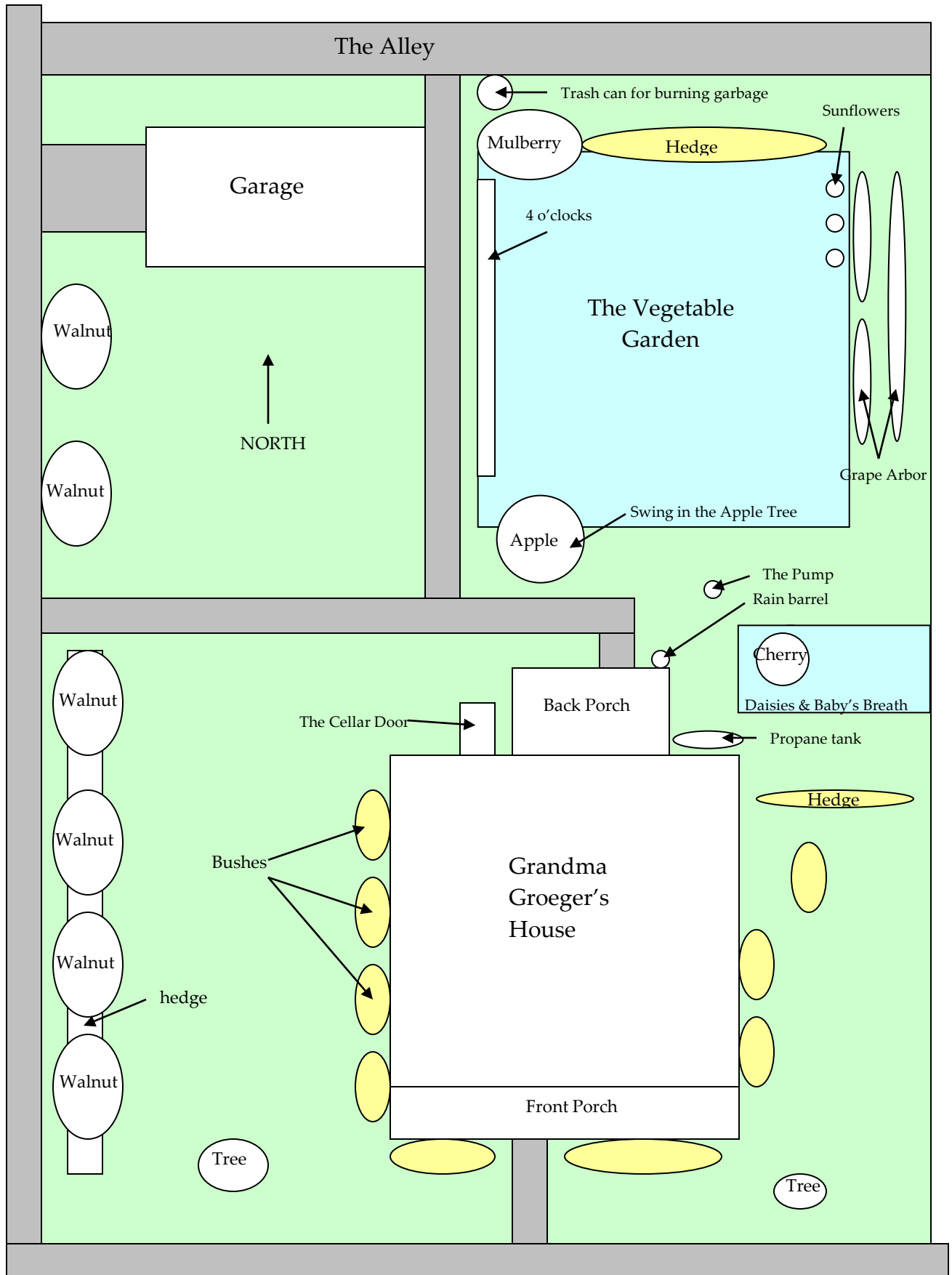
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before the street. Her yard ran into a neighbor's yard on the east and on the north there was the garage and the hedge behind the garden. Behind them was the alley. The alley was something of a wonder to Janet and me because where we lived there were no alleys, one street's houses had a backyard that ran right up against the next street's row.

Here's how I remember Grandma's property:



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Grandma Groeger's House and Property, Humphrey, NE

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Grandma's alley had a **mulberry tree** and mulberries were often in season when we were there in the summer. Being short Janet and I couldn't reach very many hanging from the branches but it was only the true black-black mulberries that were really good and a lot of those fell to the ground. Sometimes Grandma would give us each a

bowl and we would gather as many of the black ones, or nearly black ones, as we could and then we would eat them the next morning on our cold cereal. We were always competing with the birds who also like mulberries and left big purple-tinted "splats" on the ground after their mulberry feasts.



Under the mulberry was an old metal trash can with holes poked around the bottom edge which was where Grandma burned her trash. There is a distinctive smell of burned trash and garbage that is hard to describe. It is kind of sour and burned smelling at the same time. Janet and I were not allowed to reach down into the trash can (*the sides of the can were always covered with a greasy, black soot*) but sometimes we would poke around with a stick and see if we could identify what had been burned. We would see charred cans, bits of milk carton, and the unburned remains of vegetable peels and scraps of newspaper.

The back of the house was divided into about 1/2 grassy lawn to the west and 1/2 garden. (Maybe it was more like 1/3 and 2/3. It is hard for me to remember.) Grandma always had a big garden every summer.



Grandma had bordered her garden along the west with a long row of one of her favorite flowers – the Four O'Clocks which are wonderful, wonderful flowers! They grew right beside the sidewalk that ran from the house to the alley. Four O'Clocks are bushy and about knee-high with dark green leaves and lots of little trumpet-like, fragrant flowers in candy colors: pink, hot pink, red, white, orange, salmon,

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yellow, lavender and, (*my very favorite*) a lovely bi-colored flower of white with peppermint-pink stripes.

It's actually not the time of day that makes the Four O'Clocks open but the drop in temperature. The flowers wouldn't open during the heat of the day but as the sun dipped low in the west, and the shadows from the big walnut trees to the west of the house cast long shadows across the grass, the Four O'Clocks would open and big gray hummingbird moths would come out in the twilight to sip from the open trumpet of the flowers.



I probably learned my friendliness toward squirrels from Grandma. She or grandpa had nailed a platform to one of the walnut trees (not too high for an adult to reach but too high for kids) and every morning Grandma would put a handful of nuts or peanuts on the platform. The squirrels would come running!

Between the Four O'Clocks and the grape arbor on the east were row upon row of vegetables: potatoes, carrots, green beans, leaf lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, and sweet corn. Rhubarb, strawberries, raspberries, and dill rounded the garden out. In addition to the mulberry tree, there was an apple tree, a little sour pie-cherry tree with luscious translucent red cherries, and a chokecherry tree out in the alley.



When I hear the words "cherry red" I always think of my grandmother's pie cherry tree.

The cherries were translucent and absolutely shining red!

They were a lot of trouble to "pit" but

Grandma would sit on the

back steps with a bowl on her knees and, holding the cherry with one hand, she would remove the pit with the other by pulling gently on the stem. Out would pop the pit! As you might imagine, it took awhile to pit every cherry! Grandma fought with the birds for the right to the cherries. I remember that along with the dark green leaves and the bright red, dangling cherries,



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Grandma would hang aluminum pie plates that turned in the breeze and sent out bright “scary” flashes of light to discourage the birds from landing in the tree. Grandma seemed to get plenty of cherries from the tree. She would make delicious cherry pies or put away some of the cherries in the freezer for later, packed with a big spoonful of sugar.

I have a story about that cherry tree. Sometime before Janet was old enough to come too, when I was 3 or 4, my Grandmother came to Kansas City for a visit and spent the whole visit asking me if I wouldn't like to go back to Humphrey with her ON THE BUS! She painted the fun we would have in vivid colors and, of course, I wanted to go.



It was very exciting being driven to downtown Kansas City and boarding the huge Greyhound bus at the terminal. Grandma and I climbed up into the coach and I knelt on the seat to wave goodbye to my parents!

Soon the bus was rolling along through the countryside. It turned out that there was a mother with a little girl about my age on the bus and we soon

shifted seats. The mother went to sit with Grandma while we two little girls played all day on the double seat in front of them. The bus ride was much longer than it would have taken by car since we had to change buses in Columbus. The other little girl and her mother got off somewhere along the line and, exhausted, I fell asleep with my head in Grandma's lap. When I woke up it was dark and I suddenly wanted to be at home with my mother! I told Grandma, very seriously, “I'm ready to go home now” and when Grandma explained to me that we were really far away from Kansas City by now, I realized for the first time that every minute we were on the bus was taking me further away from home. Up until then, I hadn't understood this concept. Hadn't my mother and I driven around and around Kansas City at different times, seemingly taking forever doing one errand after another, but always been able to finally turn around and head home any time we wanted to? I guess I somehow assumed that we could drive around on the bus all day and still “turn around and go home” anytime we wanted. No such luck.

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I was distraught and cried. Poor Grandma was reduced to bribery. Didn't I want to see the cherry tree in the backyard when we got to her house? It was full of bright red cherries and we could have some with sugar on them for breakfast. Didn't I want to try that?

Well, no, not really. But since there was no turning back I said okay, I'd look at the cherry tree, but then I wanted to go home!

Next morning I was up at the crack of dawn and crept downstairs and outside to look at the cherry tree. I then went upstairs, stood by Grandma's bed and woke her up. I told her I had seen the cherries and now I wanted to go home. She said didn't I want to see Johnny Turnis's white rabbit? It was bound to come hopping into the yard sometime later in the morning. Maybe next time, I told her, and then we had to have a heart-to-heart talk about the fact that I really couldn't go home. Daddy, Mommy and Janet were coming up to get me the following weekend and I would just have to stay until then. I cried and cried. Grandma didn't even have a telephone at that point but she promised that that evening we would walk over to the next door neighbor's house and we would call home so I could talk to my parents. The next door neighbors had a very old fashioned house. I remember tall narrow windows with curtains half drawn and arm chairs decked out in lace antimacassars on the back and arms. The phone was big and heavy and it took both hands for me to hold it to my ear. Yes, my parents confirmed that I was stuck but I assume the rest of the visit was okay because I have no more memories of this event which, if nothing else, gave me my first lesson in the relationship between travel, time and distance.

There was at least one other time I was taken to visit my grandmother when I was very young but I don't remember that trip. My Dad says I was a cheerful little person the whole way up in the car, tickled to death over a joke I had made up myself which went "Little pink pigs have blue eyes!" My Dad says I laughed about it all the way to Nebraska.

That time I was only two and my mother, who was pregnant with Janet, didn't come with us. She tells me she wanted to come but couldn't. She says I told her, "Don't cry, Mommy. I'll be back." And off I went to grandma's wearing my little red plaid coat, one of my stuffed animals clutched in my arms. I remember nothing about that particular trip, not even why "Little pink pigs have blue eyes" was so funny!



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Back to the cherry tree -- under it my grandmother grew a great big patch of daisies and baby's breath. Grandma devoted almost six feet by ten feet of her available garden space to these lovely, cheerful



flowers -- clearly favorites. All summer long there

would be a big vase of these two flowers on the big dining room table.



The grape arbor on the east side of the garden lay behind the tall row of Grandpa's sunflowers. These sunflowers towered over us too high to reach and had faces as



big as dinner plates. I have very few memories of my grandfather because he died when we were fairly young but I do remember



sitting outside one evening on the white painted lawn furniture between my mother and my grandfather and Grandpa joking about his sunflowers. "Now there's a flower!" he said. "Put one of those in your buttonhole and walk to town!"

Speaking of walking to town, my grandfather was apparently not careful enough about the language he used when he was around me. One day, so my mother says, she got me all dressed up ... picture cute little blonde headed girl with baby blue eyes ... and as we were walking down main street I didn't realize I was being shown off and picked that time to blurt out something I had heard my grandfather say, had been impressed by, and had tucked away to try later: "Damn! It's hot!" My mother blushed with shame and her tart-mouthed little



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daughter, went home and told her father to be more careful about what he said around me since I was a little sponge!

The grape arbor was like a green corridor covered over and thick leaves and clusters of usually too-green-to-eat grapes. The east row was unbroken but the west row had a gap in the middle so you could enter into the space between the rows. Janet and I had never seen any grapes like these because they were not the kind that we typically saw in grocery stores. Later in the summer these grapes turned so deeply purple they seemed black, the skin slipped off very easily when ripe on a layer of thin sweet juice. Inside there was a fleshy pale green globe embedded with seeds. My mother and I think they were concord grapes. Whether the grapes were ripe or not, the arbor was a great place to play.



Another place we liked to play was right outside the door to the back porch. Straight across from the door, and so tall it leaned over the upstairs balcony off Grandpa's room, was a Jonathon apple tree. Grandpa had put up a little

swing for us. If you pumped hard enough and reached real far with your foot you could JUST touch the back screen door with the tip of your toes. And this was a very interesting screen, unlike any you would see nowadays. It had a covering of plastic embedded with a criss-cross of string. More than once Janet and I got in trouble because we wanted so badly to pop those little squares of plastic from between the lines of string. In the picture above you can't see the rain barrel because it is hidden behind Mom-holding-baby-Janet, but you can see several of Grandpa's Adirondack chairs. That's me in my red and white sun dress with the rick-rack on an apparently new tricycle complete with a nice horn.

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Janet and I spent a lot of time playing in and around the back porch. For one thing, Grandma had fly swatters and a zillion flies and Janet and I were death to flies. Grandma would give us a penny for every 10 so we were always swatting away.

There was also a big, old fashioned gas stove on the back porch about which we were nervously fascinated. We had been told (by who, I can't remember) that Nancy, the half crippled, semi-retarded lady who was our mother's age and our grandmother's friend, had played under such a stove in her childhood and had hit her head every time she came out from under it until she gave herself brain damage. (*Yes, unlikely, but we believed this story.*)



We wondered to ourselves how many times a child would have to hit her head coming out from under such a stove to end up like Nancy!



In the picture above of Grandma's back steps, you can just see a little bit of the propane tank behind my mother's head. Janet and I loved to clamber up onto the propane tank tucked up next to the house beside the back porch.

The gas tank had been blessed with so many coats of silver

paint that was all bubbled and chipped under its most recent coat. We dragged one of the big lawn chairs over and even then it was touch and go whether we would get to the top or not. We used to pretend the tank was a horse (*it would have had to have been a Clydesdale! You can kind of see the resemblance from the pictures!*) Sitting on the top, our legs would straddle widely on either side. That tank became many things in our imagination: a covered wagon, submarine, sailing ship... as well as a great big horse! Getting up was one thing, getting down was



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another. I remember our looking at the long distance between our perch and the ground and then holding our breath as we slid over the curve and off.

Either Grandma or our mother taught us the old "Playmate Song." When I was little I thought it had been written specifically for my Grandmother's property. After all, there WAS an apple tree to climb, a rain barrel to holler down, and a cellar door. Janet and I actually tried to slide down the cellar door once because of the song but it wasn't tipped enough and was way too splintery. Still, we happily sang the song at the top of our lungs from time to time. It went:

Playmate! Come out and play with me!  
And bring your dollies three!  
Climb up our apple tree.  
Holler down the rain barrel  
Slide down the cellar door.  
And we'll be jolly friends  
Forever more!"

And if you sang the one song you had  
to sing the companion!

"I don't want to play in your yard.  
I don't like you any more.  
You'll be sorry when you see me  
Sliding down the cellar door!  
You can't holler down our rain barrel  
You can't climb our apple tree!  
I don't want to play in your yard  
If you can't be good to me!"



Two of my mother's dollies plus Janet and my Kewpie doll. The one doll is holding a photograph of my mother as a child holding the doll when she was new.



Yes, there was also a rain barrel by the back door. We had never seen one and chances are, most people today have never seen one. Rain barrels stood at the bottom of one of the rain spouts running down from the gutters along the





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eaves. They were designed to catch and hold rain water. Grandma collected rainwater because it was “soft” and the city water that came through her pipes was very “hard.” This was a very difficult concept for Janet and I to grasp when we were small. Soft and hard water? What we knew was that Grandma’s water smelled funny, kind of sulphery, and we didn’t particularly like the taste although, back in those days, there were no alternatives: no water filters or softeners, nothing to take out the smell. It also didn’t soap-up or lather like our water at home. Somehow you felt kind of “sticky” when you bathed.

We were not allowed to play in the cool water in the rain barrel but we could look. There were always “wrigglers” in the water, which I assume now must have been mosquito larva (*which, since they were not removed before use, must have also be there in the heated rain water Grandma used to rinse our hair after it was*



*washed.*) Grandma would take a saucepan full of rain water from the barrel and heat it while she was washing our hair. Then, as we stood on a chair with our heads bent over the kitchen sink, our long hair thrown forward, she would carefully dribble hot rain water over our tingling scalps until all the soap was gone.

Another feature of the back yard which we loved was the water pump. Once upon a time the house was served by a well and the water pump still stood outside behind the house. There was a loop of wire that held the handle in place but from time to time we were allowed to slip the wire and work the handle. I don’t

remember water ever coming up and out the spout but it was great fun to pump the handle up and down.

In this picture of the house you can see along the west side yard all the way to the garage. This garage was a mysterious place that still



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smelled of oil dripped into the packed dirt floor from my grandfather's long gone car, and my grandfather's oil-based, painting supplies. Up in the rafters above our heads were several old deer skins from ancient hunting days which were in the process of gently sifting their hair into piles on the garage floor. Janet and I didn't get to go into the garage very often but we always went in when we had the chance. There was no car in the garage anymore. My grandmother had never learned to drive and didn't need to in tiny Humphrey anyway. She was within walking distance of everywhere she ever needed or wanted to go.

I remember something that happened in the garage once with my grandfather before he died. Grandpa Groeger was a fisherman and hunter. Before he got ill during the Depression he supplemented food for the table by bringing in deer, rabbits, pheasants, fish, etc. during hunting seasons. Even after it was no longer a financial necessity he enjoyed fishing. I remember he took Janet and me fishing with him once and we got back home with a whole bucket full of smelly fish. He got a chair out of the garage and sat down to clean the fish. I watched. It was fascinating seeing him scrape the sides of the fish and the clear and faintly opalescent scales coming off. Grandpa let me pick them up and look at them. They were like tiny windows. Next he cleaned out the guts (no, treasures there!) but he showed me the insides and identified what all the slippery parts were. Next he cut off the head and, since he had let me hold and look at the scales, and he was going to throw the heads out anyway, I begged to be allowed to hold the shiny eyes. They looked like the glass eyes from my stuffed animals and, if he was going to throw them out, I wanted them! So Grandpa obligingly cut the eyes out and handed them to me, not realizing that I would run right over and show my handful of new treasures to my mother.



A picture of our family in Humphrey when Janet was about 2 or 3 and I was 4 or 5. Dad still had a little hair on top! And he wore that soft suede jacket all through our childhood.

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“Mommy, look!” I said triumphantly. “Grandpa let me have them!” As my mother looked down into my handful of fish eyes she said “Oh, Daddy! Why did you give her eyeballs?”

“She asked for them!” he said.

“Well, you didn’t have to give them to her!” she replied hotly, and then unwilling to touch the eyeballs herself, she lead my by the wrist over to the bucket of offal and shook my hand to make the eyeballs drop. I remember being terribly confused by all this. First of all because I hadn’t really gotten it until that moment that “grandfather” meant this person was my mother’s “Daddy!” That was a new thought! And secondly, my grandfather and I had been having a great time with the fish with never a thought that there was anything disgusting or dirty about them but clearly, from my mother’s reaction, there was something wrong with wanting and holding those lovely, jewel-like eyes in my hand!

Here are some of the fish we may have caught with Grandpa:



Bluegill



Sunfish



Crappie



Bullhead catfish

I remember all of these names... and I think I remember Grandpa showing me the “whiskers” on a catfish he had caught. (*By the way... aren’t the eyes pretty?*)

My sister, Janet, had a run in with Grandpa of another sort. She and I apparently used far too much toilet paper when we wiped and, in consequence, the pipes had gotten clogged in the basement. Grandpa went down to fix things after sternly telling all of us NOT to use the toilet but if we did, to be sure and NOT



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FLUSH! Little Janet forgot. She told me years later she never forgot the roar that came from down in the basement as she innocently flushed the toilet and Grandpa came roaring up the stairs. Of course, the pipes were still disconnected and the contents of the toilet went everywhere. Janet told me confidentially she thought her last day had come!

I remember the inside of the houses from my childhood vividly – so much so that I can walk back through the houses in my mind and remember what went where and what was to be found in which closets. It is a comforting sort of ritual remembering the places I loved.



Here is what I remember of the layout of the ground floor of Grandma Groeger's house:

Janet and I both loved Grandma's front porch. It was the site of many a game of pretend. I

don't know what we would have done if there had been three or more of us, but for "two" the front porch was perfect. Equally divided we each had "half" including our own half-walls to sit and walk on like tight-rope-walkers as well as the little wall on either side of the stairs which were good for sitting on. Our half became our house and we played with our stuffed animals out there, and our dolls, had tea parties and best of all, ate our "Indian dinners" (about which more later)

I also remember the utter frustration of trying to roller skate on the sidewalk that bounded Grandma's property on two sides. Easier to shoot a crooked arrow from a crooked bow than to skate on that sidewalk that was all pushed up and down and cracked. We wore the kind of roller skates that were supposed to (*theoretically of course*) attach to your shoes. Janet and I both wore shoes with thick soles... mainly saddle shoes... and there was a rim around the edge. You placed the



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roller skate against the sole of your shoe and carefully tightened the toe clips in the front with the roller skate key. You then put your foot in and buckled the straps across the top of your shoe. If you were lucky, the skate would stay on your shoe for maybe two or three sweeps before something knocked it off... a crack, a place where one slab was higher than the other, a stick that had fallen



from a tree, a stray blade of grass. I swear! You could probably lose a skate going over an ant. I remember crying in frustration over those skates but they would never stay on. Skates that had their own boot were out of the question because little girl feet grew too fast and they were too expensive so Janet and I tried and tried to make those clip-on skates work... but they never did!

Humphrey was incredibly safe by current American standards. Grandma rarely locked her house and if she did the key to the front door hung just inside the screen door, up high, on a nail stuck into the door frame. It was one of those old fashioned, long stemmed keys with loop at the top and I remember Janet and I waiting as Grandma reached up, got the key, and let us into the house if we had been out somewhere at night.



When you came through the front door you were in the large and spacious dining room area. Along the west wall was a long, glass-fronted china cabinet where Grandma kept all her good china and crystal glasses. Above this china cabinet

was the house's sole stained glass window. I remember when Grandma died staring hard at this beautiful window knowing I would never see it again as I remember it best: slowly sending creeping ribbons of colored light down onto

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the table top and floor as the sun slowly descended in the west. You can see the window in the picture below. It is the small rectangular window on the west side of the house high up on the wall. I tried cropping a copy of the picture above and zooming the window to a larger size but, alas, I am not skillful enough to capture any detail and, in any case, it is not in color!



As long as we are looking at that picture, also notice the dormer windows jutting out from the roof which were at the top of the stairs. Grandma had a slender little table at the top of the stairs in front of those windows which held philodendron and “spider” plants, the first I had ever seen. She used to let Janet and I take turns carefully carrying the watering can that looked something like an Aladdin’s lamp with a very long slender spout up to very carefully water the plants.

The big family dining table was in this first room where we ate on holidays. It was big enough to easily seat Grandma, all four of us Atkinsons, and the three Sienknechts. I remember the Thanksgiving I asked for and received an entire turkey leg all to myself. I had begged for it and begged for it but once it was on my plate I couldn’t believe how big it looked! Although I was told I “had to eat it all” since I asked for it, I think I actually got a reprieve from the governor and the chance to gnaw away at it some more later.

I believe there was a coat and hat tree behind the front door where Grandma kept the coats and jackets she wore the most often and her rubber boots underneath. At the far end of the table against the wall under the stairs was another sort of storage cabinet – maybe a “high boy” which opened up underneath into shelving. This was where Grandma kept her wooden boxes of silver. There were a couple drawers under the top in one of which was Grandpa’s collection of pencils printed with various companies and vendors. So-and-So’s insurance company. The Something-or-Other Garage. Most of them were unused but the ones that were had been sharpened with a knife or a razor blade. Behind the high boy, in the center of the house, lay the stairs going up to the bedrooms.

The table, as I said, was huge and it had claw feet like a center podium upon which the table rested when it was not pulled open and the leaves inserted. When not in use, my Grandmother kept it covered with any one of her beautiful crocheted table cloths looking like lace. In the center of the table, all season long,



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was a tall crystal vase full of daisies and baby's breath which, to this day, remains the height of elegance to me.

Also in the dining room was a deep mysterious hole in the floor covered by a decorative metal grate. This had something to do with the furnace but to Janet and me, it was a mystery. We used to play a game of our own invention called "alligator" which primarily involved lying on the polished wooden floor and pulling ourselves around by our elbows, our legs dragging along behind, making fierce noises. Every so often we would drag ourselves over to the grate and putting our hands around our faces (the better to see into the dark depths) we would see if we would see the Christmas tree bulbs that lay at the bottom of the hole. It was always a mystery to us how those Christmas tree bulbs got down there but I suspect one or other of us took them off the Christmas tree one year and dropped a number of the bulbs through the enticing holes in the grate before it was discovered what we were doing. In any case, there they lay, years later, all covered with dust!



To the right of the front door as you entered was the formal living room. All her life, my mother wanted a formal living room like her mother's which could be kept "for good" and not lived in! Personally I never saw the point of that, but we all have different wants in life! Grandma's living room was where company was entertained and the Christmas tree stood. The pictures painted by my Great Uncle of the Canada geese flying against the sky and the mountains

hung in this room and the wooden lamp with the hand-carved shade also lived in here. You can see this lamp and one of the two pictures in this **photograph of the two Groeger girls and their husbands**. My mother and Dad are on the left. Interesting drapes, yes? I don't remember them but I do remember the spider plant and its little plant stand.

The best part of this room for Janet and I were the twin, glass-fronted display cases that sat on either side of the entry. The shelves contained my mother's collection of china dogs and tea cups and saucers as well as a fascinating pyramid of four clear glass balls (one perched atop the other three) all of which

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shone with a kind of opal patina. My mother still has these balls in her own curio-cabinet, I believe. Janet and I used to beg to be allowed to take out and play with the china dogs but were only allowed to do so every so often, and only when there was an adult nearby to supervise. You can see this glass case behind all of us in the picture above right. **Left to right, is Lisa, Grandma, me, my mother, Aunt Merle, and Janet – all the Groeger family women in one place!** Looking more closely I can



see Grandma has one of her daisy and baby's breath bouquets on the coffee table with a crocheted doily under glass beneath. I don't remember that very interesting wallpaper – if it IS wallpaper and not some of the decorative painting my grandfather was famous for.



To the left is another picture taken in the formal living room, this time at Christmas when I must have been one year old. The Christmas tree was always in the center of the east wall, right in front of the picture window.

Here is a picture of me having my first year birthday at Grandma Groeger's. I was busy eating the animal crackers off the cake since they were obliging enough to put the whole cake on my high chair tray while they took the pictures.





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Probably the most lived in room of the house was the kitchen. It was here that my Grandmother did her sewing (*which she never did when we were staying with her so I have no memories whatsoever of my grandmother actually doing the thing she clearly did the very best.*) In the picture on the left you can see my Grandmother's beloved treadle sewing machine behind my mother and me. I see another little spider plant stuck up there on the wall! Along the window sill Grandma kept all kinds of little bottles filled with colored water that shone like jewels when the sun came in through the windows which faced west. (*more about this picture is below*)



Grandma also kept a number of small bottles of fingernail polish there. Janet and I would come in from playing of an evening, our arms and legs already rising up with mosquito bites and with chigger bites under the elastic bands of our shorts and other

places where our clothes were tight. Grandma would get us in the tub because chiggers will linger on your body for awhile before biting. Chiggers are very tiny red bugs

(see picture to the right) Grandma would sometimes throw in a handful of baking soda to stop the mosquito bites from itching. After our bath, she would then dab each chigger bite



You could tell a chigger bite from a mosquito bite because the chigger bites would be hard, raised and whitish while the mosquito bites would be red. We must have sometimes looked like we had come down with some deadly pox since we chose bright red nail polish more often than clear. Somehow putting nail polish on a



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chigger bite effectively killed the itch but until it dried it stung like crazy! Janet and I assumed that this was because there was actually a chigger under our skin excavating a little house and the nail polish covered over its door. The stinging was the chigger in its death throes desperately trying to get out from under the nail polish. At least this is what we thought!

In the picture above you can see the door to the basement stairs is open and you can see the tall cabinet where the brooms and things were kept. You can just barely see a corner of the stove. There is old Casey-dog lying on one of the scatter rugs. Looks like maybe he had a bone or something to chew on. I also remember clearly my mother's vanity case which had a mirror in the lid and held umpty-nuggle small bottles of this and that. In this case, it probably held the brush she is using on my hair. Janet is perched on the kitchen counter next to the sink probably waiting her turn to be groomed. (See the red rubber mat next to her? You put those things in the bottom of the sink so you wouldn't inadvertently break any china or glasses.) The floor was a kind of yellow-with-red-streaks linoleum.



Horehound drops

Oh, Grandma's kitchen was a friendly place! The drawer under the oven was always full of jars of cookies. There was a glass jar of pink and white mints or horehound drops across the way.

Janet and I would sit around the table with Grandma at meals laughing and struggling with the toaster! (About which more in a minute!) And every time we came to visit, at least once, Grandma would thread a good stout needle

with some strong thread knotted around a button at the end and she would let us empty out the middle



Peanut butter cookies ALWAYS had criss-crossed fork marks!



drawer on the left of her sewing machine which was full of all kinds of buttons she had clipped off of clothes over the years and saved. People used to do that! Especially people who sewed because you could almost always find a replacement in the drawer for any button you had lost. Janet and I liked to make button necklaces and

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we would sit across from each other at the kitchen table taking turns choosing one button after another and threading it through our needle. There weren't enough buttons for each of us to have a full necklace but when the pile was gone, Grandma would cut the thread off the needle and tie the ends together and we could wear our necklaces for awhile. It was almost as much fun cutting the threads and pouring the buttons back into the drawer as threading them in the first place. We were also sometimes allowed to sit in Grandma's sewing chair and push the treadle but not too fast and not for too long.

I remember my grandmother at the kitchen sink doing the dishes and just singing like a canary. My grandmother was always singing. She had a regular repertory of favorite hymns and other songs. I can remember a few. There was one that went:



Oh, if I had the wings of an angel,  
Over these prison walls I would fly.  
And I'd fly to the arms of my darling  
And there I'd be willing to die.

[Here is the rest of the song which I found on the internet. The writer, Tom Isern, who put together a Great Plains Songbook, says "it was wondrously popular on the plains" which, of course, is exactly where Grandma lived.

### **The Prisoner's Song**

There is no regional association in the content of this song, but it was wondrously popular on the plains. Older folks recognize the melody instantly, and as I sing it, I notice people mouthing the words along with me. It came into popularity via radio; Vernon Dalhart's great recording set it off, I'm sure, but the song became a standard for other radio singers across the country, and also found its way into ballad books on the plains. My mother in western Kansas, when we kids were growing up, only knew two songs to sing as lullabies, and they were "The Strawberry Roan" and "The Prisoner's Song."

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### **The Prisoner's Song**

Oh, I wish I had someone to love me,  
Someone to call me her own.  
Oh, I wish I had someone to live with,  
Cause I'm tired of living alone.

Oh please, meet me tonight in the  
moonlight,  
Meet me tonight all alone,  
For I have a sad story to tell you--  
It's a story that's never been told.

I'll be carried to a new jail tomorrow,  
Leaving my poor darling alone,  
With the cold prison bars all around me  
And my head on a pillow of stone.

Now I have a grand ship on the ocean,  
All mounted with silver and gold,  
And before my poor darling would suffer,  
That ship would be anchored and sold.

**Now if I had the wings of an angel,  
Over these prison walls I would fly,  
I'd fly to the arms of my poor darling,  
And there I'd be willing to die.]**

Here is another song I heard Grandma singing in the kitchen:

### **The Red River Valley**

*These are the verses I remember her singing...*

From this valley they say you are going.  
I shall miss your blue eyes and sweet smile,  
For you take with you all of the sunshine  
That has brightened my pathway a while.

So consider a while ere you leave me,  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,  
But remember the Red River Valley  
And the cowboy who loved you so true.

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Here are another two songs I only remember parts of:

### Sweet and Low

Sweet and low, sweet and low,  
Wind of the western sea,  
Low, low, breathe and blow,  
Wind of the western sea!  
Over the rolling waters go,  
Come from the dying moon, and blow,  
Blow him again to me,  
While my little one,  
While my pretty one, Sleeps...

### Just a Song at Twilight by J. Clifton Bingham

*The melody of the chorus on this one was incredibly sweet!*

Once in the dear, dead days beyond recall,  
When on the world the mists began to fall,  
Out of the dreams that rose in happy throng,  
Low to our hearts love sang an old sweet song,  
And in the dusk where fell the firelight gleam,  
Softly it wove itself into our dream

*Chorus:*

**Just a song at twilight, when the lights are low;  
And the flick'ring shadows softly come and go.  
Tho' the heart be weary, sad the day and long,  
Still to us at twilight comes love's old song,  
Comes love's old sweet song.**

Even today we hear love's song of yore,  
Deep in our hearts it swells forever-more.  
Footsteps may falter, weary grow the way;  
Still we can hear it at the close of day.  
So 'til the end, when life's dim shadows fall,  
Love will be found the sweetest song of all.

Grandma also sang a number of hymns. Some of her favorites were: Heaven is my home, Abide with me, What a friend we have in Jesus, Rock of Ages, and Beautiful Savior. The image suggested by the next one made a huge impression on me!



## Visiting Grandma Groeger

### **There is a fountain filled with blood**

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emanuel's veins  
And sinners plunged beneath the flood  
(Seemed fairly unlikely to me!) Lose all their guilty stains.

### **Abide with Me**

*To this day, I share Grandma's love of "Abide With Me." I remember one Lenten season when Janet, Mother and I went to Our Savior's every Wednesday night for a Lenten Service. Each one closed with the large, full-moon-like lamps being dimmed above us and the congregation singing just these two verses of the beloved old hymn.*

Abide with me, fast falls the even tide;  
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide!  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!

Hold Thou they cross before my closing eyes,  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies  
Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

### **What a friend we have in Jesus**

*Janet and I learned this one in Summer Bible School*

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear  
What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer!  
Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.

### **Beautiful Savior**

*This one we knew in another context. It was on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas album which has been played in our family every Christmas since I can remember.*

Beautiful Savior, King of Creation, Son of God and Son of Man!  
Truly I'd love Thee, Truly I'd serve Thee, Light of my soul, my joy, my crown!

Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands, Robed in flow'rs of blooming spring.  
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is pur-er; He makes our sorrowing spirit sing.

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations, Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, Praise, adoration! Now and forever more be Thine!

*For the music to these hymns go to "The Lutheran Hymnal" which is in family archives.*

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Abide with Me.

HENRY F. LYTE.

<http://breadsite.org>

WILLIAM HENRY MONK.

1. A - bide with me; fast falls the e - ven - tide; The dark-ness  
 2. Swift to its close ebbs out life's lit - tle day: Earth's joys grow  
 3. I need thy pres - ence ev - 'ry pass - ing hour; What but thy  
 4. I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless; Ills have no

deep - ens; Lord, with me a - bide! When oth - er help - ers  
 dim, its glo - ries pass a - way; Change and de - cay in  
 grace can foil the tempter's power? Who, like thy - self, my  
 weight, and tears no bit - ter - ness; Where is death's sting? where,

fail, and comforts flee, Help of the help - less, O a - bide with me!  
 all a - round I see; O thou who changest not, a - bide with me!  
 guide and stay can be? Thro' cloud and sunshine, Lord, a - bide with me!  
 grave, thy vic - to - ry! I tri - umph still, if thou a - bide with me.

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A Mighty Fortress is Our God. Martin Luther.

Martin Luther.  
*Maestoso.*

(Ein Feste Burg.)

"Luther's Hymn" from  
J. Klug's Gesangbuch.

1. A might-y fort-ress is our God, A bul-wark nev - er fail - ing;  
2. Did we in our own strength con - fide, Our striv - ing would be los - ing,  
3. And tho' this world, with dev - ils filled, Should threat - en to un - do us,  
4. That word a - bove all earth - ly pow'rs—No thanks to them—a - bid - eth;

Our help - er He, a - mid the flood Of mor - tal ills pre - vail - ing.  
Were not the right man on our side, The man of God's own choos - ing.  
We will not fear, for God hath willed His trust to tri - umph thro' us.  
The Spir - it and the gifts are ours Thro' Him who with us sid - eth;

For still our an - cient foe Doth seek to work us woe; His craft and pow'r are  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Je - sus, it is He; Lord Sab - aoth is His  
The prince of dark - ness grim, We trem - ble not for him; His rage we can en -  
Let goods and kin - dred go, This mor - tal life al - so; The bod - y they may

great, And armed with cru - el hate, On earth is not his e - qual.  
name, From age to age the same, And he must win the bat - tle.  
dure, For lol his doom is sure, One lit - tle word shall fell him.  
kill; God's truth a - bid - eth still, His king - dom is for - ev - er.

253

There is a Fountain.

WILLIAM COWPER.

<http://breadsite.org>

Tune:—FOUNTAIN, C. M.

1. { There is a fountain filled with blood, Drawn from Immanuel's veins, }  
 And sinners plunged beneath that flood, *Omit.* . . . . . }  
 D.C.—And sinners plunged beneath that flood, *Omit.* . . . . .

2 FINE. D. C.  
 Lose all their guilty stains. Lose all their guilty stains, Lose all their guilty stains.  
*Lose all their guilty stains.*

2 The dying thief rejoiced to see  
 That fountain in his day;  
 And there may I, tho' vile as he,  
 Wash all my sins away.

4 E'er since by faith, I saw the stream  
 Thy flowing wounds supply,  
 Redeeming love has been my theme  
 And shall be, till I die.

3 Deardying Lamb! thy precious blood  
 Shall never lose its power,  
 Till all the ransomed Church of God  
 Are saved to sin no more.

5 Then in a nobler, sweeter song,  
 I'll sing thy power to save, [tongue  
 When this poor, lisping, stamm'ring  
 Lies silent in the grave.

236

Rock of Ages.

A. M. TOPLADY.

<http://breadsite.org>

Tune:—TOPLADY, 7s.  
 FINE.

1. Rock of A - ges, cleft for me, Let me hide my - self in thee:  
 D. C.—Be of sin the dou - ble cure, Save from wrath and make me pure.

D. C.  
 Let the wa - ter and the blood, From thy wounded side which flow'd.

2 Could my tears forever flow,  
 Could my zeal no languor know,  
 These for sin could not atone,  
 Thou must save, and thou alone:  
 In my hand no price I bring,  
 Simply to thy cross I cling.

3 While I draw this fleeting breath,  
 When my eyes shall close in death,  
 When I rise to worlds unknown,  
 And behold thee on thy throne,  
 Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
 Let me hide myself in thee.

269

# Holy, Holy, Holy.

<http://breadsite.org>

REGINALD HEBER.

Tune:—NICEA. 11, 12, 10.

1. Ho-ly, ho-ly, ho - ly! Lord God Al-might-y! Ear - ly in the  
 2. Ho-ly, ho-ly, ho - ly! all the saints adore thee, Casting down their  
 3. Ho-ly, ho-ly, ho - ly! tho' the darkness hide thee, Tho' the eye of  
 4. Ho-ly, ho-ly, ho - ly! Lord God Al-might-y! All thy works shall

morn - ing our song shall rise to thee; Ho'- ly, ho - ly, ho - ly,  
 golden crowns a-round the glass-y sea; Cher-u-bim and seraphim  
 sin - ful man thy glo-ry may not see; On-ly thou art ho - ly!  
 praise thy name, in earth, and sky, and sea; Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly,

mer - ci - ful and mighty, God in Three Persons, blessed Trin-i - ty!  
 fall-ing down before thee, Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.  
 there is none beside thee, Per-fect in pow'r, in love and pur - i - ty.  
 mer - ci - ful and mighty, God in Three Persons, blessed Trin-i - ty!

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That grace and pow'r . . . . are in his hand.  
 That grace and pow'r



240

What a Friend.

H. BONAR.

<http://breadsite.org>

C. C. CONVERSE.

I. What a friend we have in Je - sus, All our sins and griefs to bear!

What a priv - i - lege to car - ry Ev-'ry thing to God in pray'r!  
 D. S. - *All be-cause we do not car - ry, Ev-'ry thing to God in pray'r!*

Oh, what peace we oft-en for - feit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,

Used by per.

2 Have we trials and temptations?  
 Is there trouble anywhere?  
 We should never be discouraged,  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
 Can we find a friend so faithful,  
 Who will all our sorrows share?  
 Jesus knows our every weakness,  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer.

3 Are we weak and heavy laden,  
 Cumbered with a load of care?  
 Precious Savior, still our refuge,  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer;  
 Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer,  
 In his arms he'll take and shield thee;  
 Thou wilt find a solace there.

## Visiting Grandma Groeger



The bathroom was next to the kitchen and had a peculiar smell to it compounded of things like Campho-phenique, which was a kind of liniment and bug itch fixer, Peppermint toothpaste, Lava and Ivory soap, and very hard water. Our favorite thing was the big claw foot bathtub which was so large Janet and I could bathe in it together (about which more is below.) I also remember there were several large ceramic angel fish on the wall and some beautifully painted bubbles in a merging range of pastel rainbow of colors painted on the wall behind them by my grandfather who was known for his ability to paint decorations and had decorated, my mother once told me, nearly every house in Humphrey at one time.

The bathroom also had a door into the family room. Grandma had a mirror on the back of the bathroom door. One morning I was already downstairs lying on the couch reading a book when Janet came down the stairs with one of her eyes stuck shut. It had been fine the night before and her other eye was fine but she just couldn't get the stuck-shut eye open. She walked over to the mirror and strained to open her eye, pulling at the eyelids with her fingers and then making faces trying to get the eye open. It was really funny to see her making faces as she tried to pull the eye open with all the muscles of her face. Unfortunately, Janet didn't think it was funny at all. She was panicked because she couldn't open her eye and became angry because I was laughing. She burst into tears and went running to Grandma.

We had a word for the crusty yellow stuff that sometimes glued little girl's eyes shut in the night. We called it "sleep." Grandma got a warm wet washcloth and held it to Janet's eye until the "sleep" softened and wiped clear so she could open her eye. It took Janet awhile to forgive me for laughing although once her eye was better she was better able to see the humor. Once she was able to see the humor of it, we could give each other the giggles just by mimicking funny faces with one of our eyes held firmly shut.

The room I was in when Janet came down the stairs was one Janet and I hung out in a lot. There were any number of doors into this room: first there was the one on the west right across from the stairs. There were two doors on the north side of the room, one into the bathroom and one into Grandma's walk-in closet.

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

There was another huge door on the south, a “pocket door” which slid into the wall on either side. This pocket door led into the formal living room.



A big upright piano was on the west wall. It had an old, red, crushed-velvet shawl across the top with the point and the fringes hanging down the front. On top was the statue of the lion (which lives at Janet’s house these days.) We liked this lion and would stand on the piano bench to get close enough to pat and stroke it. Inside the piano bench was the music our mother had used to learn to play piano. We used to take out the books and look at the drawings of

old time children which decorated the pages and, as we got older and took piano lessons of our own, we gave playing the pieces a try. The best part of the piano was lifting the heavy front cover and watching the mechanism that struck the wires when the keys were touched. We loved to play the piano and watch what happened inside.



Grandma’s house had the bathroom downstairs and all the bedrooms upstairs. It was a long walk in the middle of the cold night if you had to use the toilet! Probably because the bathroom was downstairs, Grandma had chosen to put her clothes in the walk-in closet next to the bathroom. There was no door directly from the bathroom to the closet; you had to go through the piano room to get there.

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

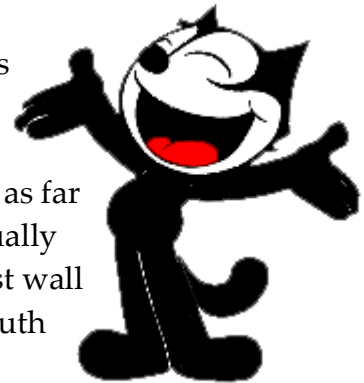


Janet and I loved Grandma's closet but we were not allow to play in there. We could go in if Grandma went with us. The best thing in Grandma's closet was the diamond shaped window that looked out into the side yard. Too small for anyone to look in if Grandma was dressing, it was still large enough to let sunlight into the little room. Along the back wall was a pole on which all her dresses were hung. Right next to the door there was a dresser. On top of



the dresser was her box of body powder. In the days before air conditioning and deodorant, a woman powdered her body. Grandma used a scented talcum powder and it, plus a faint whiff of camphor moth balls, plus just the fragrance of "Grandma," made the smell of Grandma's closet quite unique. Although I cannot put the scent into words I can still remember the pleasant scent of Grandma's closet vividly.

In the corner, in front of the door to Grandma's closet was her big rocking chair. This chair is now at my parent's house. Just as with the swings, Janet and my favorite thing with this rocking chair was to rock just as hard and as far as was possible without actually tipping over (which actually happened more often than it should have!) Along the east wall was a long coach. Grandma had a television along the south wall but I don't remember that we watched it much. It didn't get very good reception. When her brother, our Great Uncle Bill, was ill and lived with her he slept on the sofa in this room and watched television.



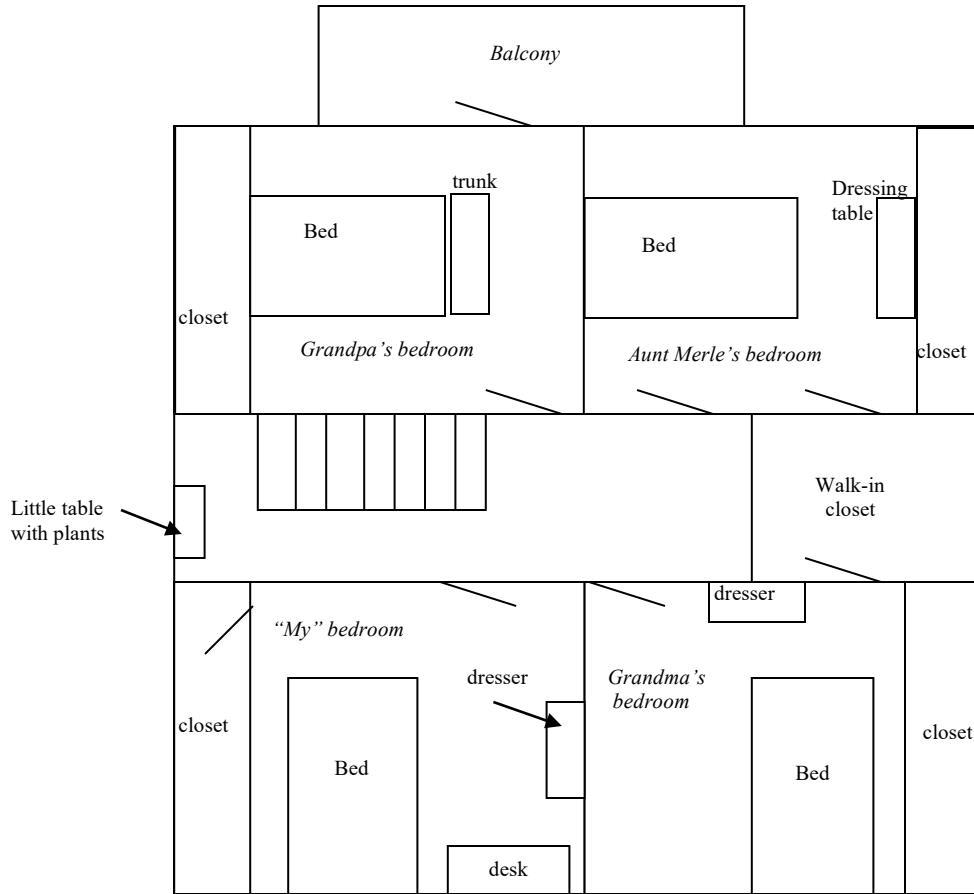
Also on the south wall, behind the door on the west wall, was a book case that contained two treasures. One was a stack of McCall's magazines, which Grandma saved for us, and the other was a jointed, wooden Felix the Cat doll which eventually went to live with my cousin Lisa. Janet, Lisa, and I all loved this Felix the Cat and played with it a lot.





# Visiting Grandma Groeger

Here is a drawing of the upstairs of Grandma's house.



## Visiting Grandma Groeger

Interestingly, in doing this drawing I see that I don't remember as much about what was in the upstairs as I do about the downstairs. For example, what was in Grandpa's room besides the bed? Maybe a trunk or cedar chest with a braided rug on top at the foot of the bed and was there a tall dresser? The only thing I remember for sure was that there was a picture frame above the bed with five oval holes in the mat surrounding five pictures of my mother as a little girl. I liked Grandpa's room better than Grandma's because of the door that led out onto a balcony with a silver painted floor which was really the roof of the back porch. It looked right out into the apple tree which, depending on the season, was full of flowers, or little green apples, or nice plump red-striped Jonathans in the fall. The railing was not very tall, only about as high as a grown-ups knees, and I suspect that is the reason Janet and I were not allowed to play out there nearly as much as we wanted to!



I remember the fancy dressing table in Aunt Merle's room which was the kind with two little sets of drawers



on either side and a table and stool in the middle in front of a big mirror. Aunt Merle had left her brush, comb and mirror set with the "ivory" celluloid handles on top of the embroidered dresser scarf and Janet and I liked to sit on the bench and pretend we were ladies powdering our noses and putting bright red lipstick on our lips. Aunt Merle's dressing table looked a little like the one at left and a little like the one on above – notice the brush and comb set which is a lot like hers was.

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

Grandma had thick, ironed sheets and Janet and I were generally put to sleep together in what was known as "Grandpa's room" even after he died. I think they must have slept apart because they each had their own room.



When I got older, Grandma let me have the room across the hallway as "my" room. She said I was the oldest grandchild and it could be mine. (Although, by default that meant the room across the hall, which we called "Grandpa's room," became Janet's so everybody was happy!

I was so proud of my room! You have to remember that up to this time, Janet and I shared a bedroom. Having our own rooms was an entirely new thing! Grandma let me go through her cedar chest of quilts and pick out one for the white painted iron bedstead in "My Room." I picked out a Sunbonnet Sue quilt with the little sun bonneted girls in all kinds of printed cotton



dressess all over the top. (People still make Sunbonnet Sue quilts and I found a picture of one quite like Grandma's on the internet.) I had an embroidered dresser scarf on the top of the chest of drawers, embroidered pillow cases with crocheted trim, and a little set of fairy tale wooden bookends (I believe it was either Sleeping Beauty or Rapunzel- I think Janet has the bookends now) carved by my grandfather to hold my library of about six books!

I remember deep in the night waking up because of the chiming of the Church Steeple clock. That was the loneliest sound in the world in the middle of the night! Scary somehow! All the windows would be open and I would stand there in my babydoll pajamas and look out. The trees would be rustling and making speckled shadows on the sidewalk all jumbled by tree roots that had pushed up the paving slabs. Sometimes there would be a summer rain and I would wake up to find Grandma in my bedroom shutting the windows. The room would



## Visiting Grandma Groeger

already smell of the rain blown through the metal screen from across the corn fields and the now-wet dust on the window ledges. You could hear the rain drumming on the roof. I know insulation is a great thing and saves jillions of dollars in heating costs but there was something magical about being in a house where you can hear the rain drumming on the roof over your head.

Sometimes if waking up in the middle of the night was too scary I would pad into Grandma's room and crawl into bed with her... or over her really because she slept on the near edge of the bed and apparently had for years. Her bed slanted pretty badly. I remember having to hold on to my edge so that I didn't slip downhill and end up scrunched tight up against Grandma on hot nights.

About Grandma's bedroom I remember the least of all. All I remember is the bed and the door to the walk-in closet which contained, among other things, a tall wardrobe and boxes and boxes of treasures in storage. I sometimes wonder if my Grandmother felt at all lonely living in that big house all by herself and sleeping in the farthest corner of the house upstairs. She never had any pets to keep her company. But she had a very active life working in her garden, sewing all day, making stuffed animals and doll clothes for her beloved grandchildren, washing and cleaning, walking to town for her mail, groceries and other sundries, putting up vegetables for the winter, walking to church every Sunday and visiting or playing bridge in the afternoon with her friends.

My grandmother had a very active life right up to the end. One night when my mother called my grandmother she found her very disoriented and not herself. She called some neighbors for help who got my grandmother to the hospital right away. Janet and I were shipped to the Hyde's across the street and my parents rushed to Nebraska arriving there just before my Grandmother died. When they went to her house, they found all the card tables up and set for bridge club the next day. My grandmother died in the midst of her very active life.

Although we were not allowed to attend our grandfather's funeral we attended our grandmother's. Dr. Hyde flew us up to Nebraska in his small plane and on the way, I remember, he climbed really high in altitude and then dropped the plane suddenly so we could experience weightlessness. I remember he told me to put the book I was reading on my lap and when he dropped the plane it flew up off my knees and floated into the back of the plane with Janet. We always liked to fly with Dr. Hyde who needed to put in so many hours per month to keep up his license and whose own children all got air sick.



## Visiting Grandma Groeger

I couldn't believe it was really Grandma in the casket. She didn't look like herself at all plus she was the first dead person I had ever seen. I remember Aunt Merle holding Lisa up and making her "kiss grandma good-bye." Lisa came away crying that Grandma was so cold! I was only brave enough to reach out and touch her hand, that hand that had washed our hair, and held our hands while crossing the street, and fixed our food, and scrubbed our backs for us in the big bathtub with a scritch-y wash-cloth, and reached up to get the key to the front door – how could it be so still and so cold?

I think my grandfather died on a Saturday night because both Janet and I remember having crawled into our parent's bed and being there when the phone call came on Sunday morning. My Dad went to the phone first and then called my mother to the phone. When she came back she was weeping violently and threw herself onto the bed to cry. Janet and I were terrified. We had never seen either of our parents crying that way.

Once we all got to Nebraska, Janet and I were told we were too young to go to the funeral but we were still curious. That night as we lay in the bed in Grandpa's room Dad came in to say good night and tuck us in. We asked him what the funeral was like. And he told us that Grandpa was lying on his back in a long narrow box. He folded my hands on my chest and said they had laid Grandpa out like this and that he would never move again. I was scared to death! Not having seen him dead I imagined him alive but for some reason unable to move and then buried in a box in the ground. I cried and cried which my Dad, naturally enough, took for grief but most of it was fear. And as for my grandmother, even though I could see "death" and see how different a person looked after they had died, I still couldn't believe she was gone. I couldn't believe I would never see her again. She had been so much a part of my life all of my young life. How could she be gone?

I made friends with Derek's grandmother, Alma, in the year or so before her death. I never thought I would have the chance to have one more grandmother in this lifetime but we adopted one another and I called and talked to her almost every night and read to her over the phone -- (She loved "Because of Winn Dixie," "Walking Across Egypt" and "Having our Say" all of which I read to her. Those were her favorites.) -- until she could no longer hear well enough to talk on the phone. We talked a lot about her past and what it was like getting old and how she felt about her impending death and dying. Although, of course, neither of us could have predicted for sure that she was the one who would go

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

first, it still seemed likely since she was 97 years old. I used to tease her: "Don't you want to get to 100?" I'd ask her, and she would say, "No, not particularly."

But there was one thing she talked about over and over that struck a chord with me and that was when she would tell me, "You know, Dhyan, I haven't seen my mother for 50 years and yet I still miss her. And it seems like the older I get and the closer I get to death, the more I wish my mother was here to help take care of me. Don't you think that's strange? You'd think I would most miss my girls, I do miss them and I am older than my mother was when she died, but still I wish I could see her one more time." I understood that because I have felt the same way about my grandmothers one of whom (Grandma Groeger,) I got to know very well as a child) and the other of whom (Grandma Atkinson) I got the chance to live with one summer as a teenager and so got to know very well at a very different part of my life. So I wish I had had a chance to know Grandma Groeger as I got older but, still, how lucky am I that I got to know her at all?

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

I guess the only part of the house I haven't talked about yet was the basement. There were two entrances, one at the back of the kitchen and the other as cellar stairs that lead up to the back yard. (Remember the famous "cellar door" from the playmate song?) I would guess that at some time in the measurable past, this door was used to allow coal to be shoveled into the basement but the furnace didn't burn coal anymore.



When you came down the stairs you entered a large room with a concrete floor painted brick red. The main article of furniture in this room was a huge chest freezer. Both my grandmothers had these freezers. In the "old days" they had canned enormous amounts of garden produce but now a considerable amount of food was frozen and stored in these freezer, a process which was considerably easier than canning and reserved more of the nutrients of the food than canning. A child such a Janet or I could barely lift the lid on the freezer and to reach into its depths was almost impossible. Things were stored in a freezer in wire baskets that stacked one atop the other. Grandma bought square plastic freezer boxes and froze everything from garden vegetables to strawberries and rhubarb. There were also boxes of home-made soup, ice cream, cake and cookies. Janet and I were less interested in the asparagus and more interested in the chocolate covered ice milk bars.



Grandma's electric, wringer washing machine sat in the next room. I remember to this day the smell of very hot, soapy, Clorox and hard water hovering in the basement on washing days. In those days to get things really clean they used very hot water for washing. Janet and I were fascinated by the wringer on Grandma's wringer washer. There was no "spin" cycle on the washer in those days (and no dryer either, for that matter) so when the clothes were clean, Grandma turned on the electric wringer and carefully fed all the clothes through.

The clothes passed between two rollers and a significant amount of the water got squeezed out. Janet and I always wanted to help put the clothes through the

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

wringer but Grandma was reluctant. If so much as a fingertip got between the rollers they could pull your entire arm through! (Janet and I had seen cartoon characters accidentally pulled through a wringer and come out absolutely as flat as a paper doll on the other side.) Grandma said your arm could be broken before anyone could get the machine turned off. (Janet and I thought maybe all your skin could get pulled off!) Nevertheless we soooo wanted to be the one to poke that corner of something between the rollers and watch it come out flat, hot and almost dry on the other side. One day, of course, the accident actually happened. Despite my caution, my fingers got too close and, sure enough – lickety split – my arm got pulled through almost up to the shoulder! I'll never forget the sensation. There was absolutely nothing you could do to stop it. Shaking, Grandma turned off the wringer but, although I was frightened, I was undamaged. My arm was too small to be crushed between the rollers.

The laundry basket of wrung-out clothes was then taken outside and hung on the line where it snapped and blew in the breeze until dry. A lot of the wrinkles



would get snapped out of them by the breeze but still nearly everything was ironed after it was washed anyway. Grandma would roll the "to-be-ironed" things in a damp towel and then take them out one-by-one and iron them in the kitchen. There is a smell to freshly laundered, hung-outside-in-the-fresh-air-to-dry and then ironed clothes that is indescribably pleasant. In addition Grandma's clothes had an extra fragrance because she put little cloth bags of lavender in the drawers or even unwrapped bars of scented soap.

The other room in the basement held a huge furnace behind which Janet and I stored our bows and arrows. I only remember one other thing about the basement. I remember one time being down there with Grandpa Groeger and his telling me that once upon a time he had the job of climbing all the way up to the top of the St. Francis steeple to get the cross, bring it down, repair and repaint it. I was astonished to learn that the cross, that looked so tiny up against the sky, was actually so large it had to be laid on the floor in the basement because otherwise it was taller than the ceiling! Even after Grandpa died, I remembered that once upon a time he had



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## Visiting Grandma Groeger

climbed all the way up to the top of the steeple twice, once to bring the cross down and once to put it back up! Looking at the picture again, even now I wonder how in the world he managed!



In the morning there was often toast burned black on both sides by the toaster for breakfast. Janet and I learned to savor the exotic taste of charcoal. I found that if you buttered the toast right out of the toaster with lots and lots of butter the black actually had a rather nice taste and certainly a rather interesting crunch!



Maybe it was because they came from farm chickens but the eggs tasted better in Nebraska. The bacon was crisper and saltier and thicker. The orange juice was, alas, never enough since we always had our juice in those little 4 oz juice glasses that used to be filled with jelly. Last year I was at a jumble sale at a church where they were selling off their collection of jelly jar juice glasses and I bought a whole set. I still feel some kind of thrill sipping my juice from the tiny glasses painted with flowers.

Another thing we often had for breakfast were Kolache's which, to tell you the truth, I didn't like very much. They were traditional German or Czechoslovakian pastries made from yeasted, sweetened bread dough and filled with a (way too small) dollop of jam or



nutmeg flavored, sweetened cheese in the middle. I also had my first jelly-filled donuts in Humphrey. We also had hot dogs and baloney that didn't taste ANYTHING like the Oscar Meyer variety we were used to back home. To this day, I don't know what it was seasoned with that made it taste so strange.

## Visiting Grandma Groeger

After breakfast we were likely to be paraded downtown. Grandma liked very much to show her grand-daughters off. Grandma didn't drive and we walked the four or five blocks to town in the morning. We would go to the post office where one of us would be lifted up and held while we worked the brass knob on the little glass door over Grandma's post office box. Back in those days you didn't even need a street address what to say about a zip code. "Emma Groeger, Humphrey Nebraska" was enough of an address to get to her although I think you could also put her box number on the envelope too if you wanted to.



Then we would go to Warner's across the street. This was an old fashioned dry goods store. I never saw anything like it in Kansas City or anywhere else. It had old, wooden floors that smelled like old wooden floors



and years of being swept clean of dirt. The counters kind of went around in a circle with a few isles in the middle. You could buy toasters and tablecloths and what I would call "generic" clothes (long before the term generic was popular). You could buy tools and sewing supplies and silverware. You could buy toiletries and writing paper and curlers.

Best of all, you could buy 5 cent toys. Janet and I coveted the rings at Warners.

They sparkled like real diamond rings... and rubies, and emeralds, and sapphires. The rings were very democratic. They consisted of a double band that could be sized to fit any little girl finger. We could only have ONE each and oh, how difficult that choice was! And you couldn't try all of them on,



either, because you couldn't stretch out the band unless the ring was yours. Janet and I held the rings flat-wise between our fingers and held our hands out to be admired the way we had seen women do in the movies until we finally had to choose the ring we wanted.

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Last place we would stop was the little grocery store. (the pictures above which I found on the internet look quite like the kind of grocery store Humphrey had back then.) You stopped there last because there was no air conditioned car and you wanted to carry any meat products around in the heat for the least possible amount of time. That store smelled like cold raw meat. I can't describe it if you haven't smelled it for yourself. The butcher had a big block in the back and you could have him chop up the meat with his big cleaver if you wanted smaller pieces. Grandma would buy a chicken and he would wrap it up in white paper and tie up the package with string. She would buy a Kolache for each of us... I favored the ones with red jam in the middle although I tried not to pick raspberry because of the seeds. Then we would skip home... or, Janet and I would skip home and Grandma would walk.



We always passed the Turnis's house and Janet and I both thought it was fine! The Turnis house was the first house we had ever seen that had both a wrap-around front porch AND a turret! Oh, how much we wished we would one day be invited inside so we could see what those rooms



inside the turret looked like. I don't think either of us ever got the chance because none of the Turnis children was really our age. Margaret, known as Muffy because her father called her





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little Miss Muffet when she was small, was older than me and Johnny Turnis (who was Grandma's particular friend and who owned a white rabbit that was allowed to hop around where it would and was often to be seen first thing in the morning cropping the grass on Grandma's lawn) was younger than Janet. We still sometimes played Indians with Johnny or played with him in his sand box but we never got to go inside the fairy tale house.



Janet and I were enamored of Indians when we were in Humphrey although I don't remember playing Indians at home. We had a game we called Indian dinner which Grandma was patient enough to let us play. Indian dinner involved going out to the garden with Grandma (we were not allowed to pull things up in the garden on our own) and she would thin out the

rows by pulling us each out a stray carrot, a single potato each, and who knows what else... maybe a green bean each, or some peas in their pod. The best thing was when she would carefully cut each of us a big stem of rhubarb with its leaf and give each of us a salt cellar (a little tiny bowl to hold salt by your plate into which you stuck the ends of things like celery or little green onions before you ate them. This was in the days before they knew that eating salt straight out of a bowl was probably not all that good for the health.) In any case, we would get a little bowl of salt or one of Grandma's amber bowls ribbed like the outside of a pumpkin and shining with a sort of opalescent finish into which she would scoop up a fourth cup of sugar and we would go to Grandma's front porch and pretend to be Indians eating raw food.

Who knows where we got the idea that that Indians ate raw vegetables and just imagine our thinking eating raw vegetables was a treat! But I still remember the earthy taste of carrots pulled fresh from the ground with their feathery tops still attached. Or the joy of nibbling at rhubarb, raw and sour, dipped in sugar. Afterwards we made ourselves sunbonnets out of the huge leaves. Grandma would give us some string and we would poke a couple holes on each side, threading the string through, and then tying them onto our heads.

Grandma's porch was absolutely evenly divided. Each of us had our own side, which had its own wall to climb on and its own cement wall up the side of the steps.



## Visiting Grandma Groeger



Friday evening Grandma would put some quarters in her snap purse and a hankie in her pocket and take us to the movies. There was only one tiny movie house in Humphrey and it played one movie, probably one a week. If the movie was appropriate for children, Grandma would take us. We saw "Journey to the Center of the Earth" with Grandma at that theater. We were taken with it for days. Of course, at 7 and 8 years of age, neither Janet nor I thought to question how it was that there seemed to be sunlight underground and it was certainly spacious under there... even having a "sky" of sorts at one point. But I remember we were both Thrilled! when the giant lizards emerged and again when the actors come to the room full of crystals and (being greedy!) one of them breaks off a crystal unleashing an underground river from which they only barely escaped. I remember how funny we thought it was in the end when Pat Boon, who was just a lad in the movie, was blown sky high and lands in a convent garden without his clothes and has to hold a sheep in front of him to hide himself from the Sisters. (Or at least this is how I remember it!) I saw the movie again years later and thought it was awfully hokey but at the time it was the most exciting movie we had ever seen in Humphrey!

The downside of visiting Grandma was that she had to show us off to everyone. There was an absolute round of visits that had to be made. Grandma would get us spanking clean. Our hands, arms, feet, legs, faces and necks got well scrubbed. I used to get dirt beads along a crease in my throat which my mother called my "pearls." It came from being both dusty and sweaty at the same time. My "pearls" would get scrubbed off. Then we were changed into clean shorts and tops. Our hair would have to be re-combed and then either rubber-banded into pig-tails on either side of our head which were then decorated with satin or flowered ribbons over the rubber bands, or it was braided with crisp, ironed, ribbons on the ends. Then we would walk to town with Grandma and stop by one of her friends' houses to be shown off. It was soooo boring sitting on the scratchy sofa in someone's living room while Grandma and her friend chatted. They would drink coffee or tea and we would be given Kool-aide or lemonade. I wish now I had the recipes for all the family favorite cookies we were served. Although we only stayed 15 or 20 minutes, the visits seemed interminable to us as children.

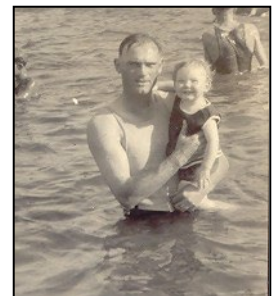


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My least favorite place to visit was at Nancy's house. Nancy was our mother's age but she had never married and she had the mental age of perhaps a child. As I said above, Janet and I believed the story we had heard that Nancy had been born "normal" but that she had become the way she was through hitting her head too many times on the hard metal of the old fashioned stove she liked to play under. As an adult, looking back, I think probably Nancy had some kind of a stroke in childhood. Her left leg was shorter than the other which made her walk with a pronounced limp, and she carried her left arm close to her body, the hand curled up in a tight "claw." If only for her deformities I might have been afraid of Nancy but she also had a child's mean streak. She liked very much to chase my sister and me around the kitchen table with her rolling gait and that claw-hand extended to catch us. If she did, we got a hard pinch from that clawed hand. None of this, naturally enough, endeared her to us.

The only real argument I ever had with my grandmother was about Nancy. One day I looked out the window and saw Nancy rolling up to the house and I ran for the stairs. My grandmother saw me passing and asked where I was going in such a hurry. I told her that Nancy was on the way and I didn't want to see her. "You get right back down here!" my grandmother told me. "I'm not going to have you being mean to a guest in my house!" But Nancy had been particularly gruesome the last time she had been there and I defied my grandmother, telling her there was no way I was going to come down. "Do you want me to come up there and warm your fanny for you?" my grandmother asked threateningly. "No," I told her. "Then you get back down here and be polite to company." I must have said something back that my grandmother didn't like because the next thing I knew, Nancy had been shown into the family room and my grandmother took me back into the bathroom, shut the door, and proceeded to wash my mouth out with soap. I was utterly outraged! Not only did my grandmother refuse to hear what Nancy had done to us the last time she was there but I had never, in my whole life, had my mouth washed out with soap. I was an angry little girl who sat silently in the family room enduring a "visit" from Nancy. My only consolation was that, because Nancy was also incontinent, she was not allowed to sit in my grandmother's formal living room but had to sit in the family room with a towel on her chair.

Sometimes in the afternoons Grandma would get us in our bathing suits and flip-flops and walk us over to the swimming pool to cool off. Grandma never got in the pool with us and I don't think she knew how to swim, but she



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would sit outside the fence, cheering us on for every “Grandma, watch this!” The Humphrey pool was old enough that our mother and grandfather had once enjoyed it. We still have the bathing suit my mother is wearing in that picture. When my parent’s moved from Kansas City to Dallas I saved a number of the classic clothing sewn by my mother or grandmother and this swim suit was among them. My grandmother made it for little Erma and it is made of wool – of all things!



Walking home we would pass the Catholic church. I knew this was Grandpa Groeger’s church and I wanted to go into it so much because I had memories of it from years earlier when Grandpa took me inside at Christmas to show me the life size figures of Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus in the manger with his arms up and a halo around his curls, the shepherds and wise men. I wondered if it was there all year round but we were not allowed to enter. At the time I had not yet heard the story of way the priest had tried to force my grandmother to be Catholic.



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I missed Grandpa although I had been somewhat scared of him when he was alive. Grandpa was tall and boney, often with a stubble of beard, and a cigarette between his fingers. He had bright blue eyes and something about him that easy and friendly. My mother says I wouldn't go to him when I was very little and then always reproachfully added "And he Adored you!" – but children know who they feel safe

with and who they don't. Later, I remember sitting between him and my mother on one of the old white painted wooden double Adirondack chairs in the backyard as the day cooled down into evening. My feet stuck out straight over the edge of the bench but I thought myself very fine to be sitting with the grownups. My mother and her father were talking about his prize sunflowers which were particularly tall and plate-faced that year. "Yup," I remember Grandpa saying "Put one of THOSE in your buttonhole and go to town! Now THERE'S a flower!"



After dinner (which in Nebraska they called "supper") when the swelter was just going out of the air from the blazing summer sun (remember! No air conditioning!) Grandpa would back the car out of the dirt-and-oil-floored garage and take us all for a drive. My favorite evenings were the ones where the day had been scorching hot and now, with the sun having gone down, just a breath



of blessed coolness began to gather in the hollows and along the creeks. Driving past you would catch just a bit, like a cool hand briefly touching your face, as we drove past. I suspect our going for a drive in the country served a dual purpose of cooling everyone off and making Janet and I sleepy and ready for bed. We would drive up and down the

country roads for an hour. All the windows down. Our hair flapping around our faces. There was no squabbling whatsoever because Janet and I were both utterly intent upon one and only one thing and that was jack rabbit ears. Grandpa was the champ. He could spot a pair of jack rabbit ears sticking up and



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fanned wide like reverse radiators cooling the rabbit off as its hot blood pumped through its ears in a snap but it wasn't so easy for Janet and I to spot them.



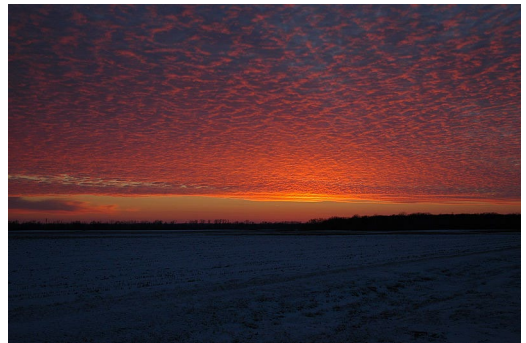
"There's one!" Grandpa would comment.

"Where? Where?"

"Right there!" he would slow down the car.

We would both pile over to the same side looking and Grandpa would patiently leave the car idling until we picked the nicely camouflaged rabbit from the background. Then we would drive slowly off down the country road looking for another.

Gradually the light would fade from the sky. Janet and I were totally lost. Put down like Hansel and Gretel we would neither one of us have had a clue how to get home but eventually all roads seemed to end up at "Four Corners."



I don't know how Four Corners made enough money to stay in business but it must have. It was literally at a cross-road, out in the middle of nowhere. You could see if from a distance its yellow bug lights shining in the darkness.



They didn't do any good. We would pull up to "Four Corners" and pile out of the car in great excitement. The menu would be covered in bugs, flying, crawling, and zipping around. Janet and I felt strong attraction/repulsion. Of course you wanted to get up close enough to read the sign and choose your own ice cream but there was always the possibility you might get

bugs on your skin, or down the neck of your sleeveless blouse, or into your ear since your braided hair left them exposed. You might open your mouth to say something and swallow a bug! And we were both afraid of those big lazy June bugs that looked like miniature Volkswagens. Dad taught us how to pick them up from behind, pinching their shell between your fingers and the little legs waved and wiggled. You could then threaten to put it down the collar of your sister's shirt which was "no fair" if it was being done to you but thrilling if you were the one with the bug between your fingertips.



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Mostly Janet and I wanted the biggest soft swirl Grandma would allow and Grandpa would pay for and we wanted it dipped in chocolate coating. The coating was hot when the ice cream cone was dunked, head down, into the vat of melted chocolate but quickly hardened upon contact with the cold ice cream. The guy at the ice cream stand was a master at swirling the ice cream and then dipping it into the chocolate all the way over the edge of the cone so it would hold in the drips but, of course, on those hot summer nights, dipping ice cream in hot chocolate sauce only made them that much messier to eat. It was always a mad scramble of licking around and around to try to keep up with the melting. We would sit as carefully as we could in the center of the back seat, pressed together and as far away from the slip stream of the windows as we could get (because the wind also made ice cream melt) and watched the cornfields passing in the while Grandpa drove us home. No matter how long and winding the road was to Four Corners it was always a short and straight trip back.



Nebraska was FLAT around Humphrey, hardly a dip or a hill, but when the view wasn't hidden by cornfields and the road went up even the smallest rise, you could see for a 100 miles in all directions. On those summer nights as we drove home you could

sometimes see towering cumulus clouds off in the distance. Sometimes you could see the streaks below of rain falling. Before the sunset the clouds were burgeoning towers of white which turned apricot, peach-colored, pink and then



scarlet and gold. When we turned around after Four Corners and drove home through the darkness you could then see the flashes of lightning within the clouds or flashing down to the ground. The storm was so far away you couldn't

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hear the thunder but you knew, especially if the storm was off to the south west that perhaps in an hour or more it would be passing over Humphrey.

I remember many hot nights waking up when the storm arrived, feeling the soft splatter of rain as it bounced off the sill and in through the screen. I would get out of bed and look outside where the normally quiet street was ablaze with flashes of lightning which illuminated for a moment the



hard pounding of rain, the streets awash, and the trees bending and lashing their arms about wildly. I

loved the cool feel of the rain that bounced off the sill and in through the screen and onto my face and arms. Then Grandma would come and close the window and tuck me back into bed.



We would often have been given our bath before the evening drive through the country. Grandma's tub was a big old thing with high walls and stood on lion feet. We wanted to stay in the tub for hours playing. Grandma would make us some bubbles by putting dish soap into the water as it thundered from the faucet (no water savers yet!) filling white porcelain tub. Janet and I



would get naked and climb in. We had cups to pour with and wash cloths to play with and things that floated. I don't know what all we had. Our very favorite game was to both get to one end of the tub and slid down the slope into the water creating a tidal wave in the bathtub. No matter how educational this might have been, making tidal waves was something we were not supposed to do because invariably we got carried away and the tidal wave got over the sides or the end. Grandma did not appreciate cleaning up floods. But it was tremendously enticing to try it again!

When we were tucked into bed, Grandma would come to hear our prayers which were the same prayers we said in Kansas City:

Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep

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If I should die before I wake (*Horrors! Is that a possibility?*)

I pray the Lord my Soul to take.

Bless Mommy and Daddy, and Janet and Kathy (*nice how it kind-a rhymed*)

And Grandpa and Grandma Atkinson

And Grandpa and Grandma Groeger

And Aunt Merle and Uncle Helmut and Lisa

And all the other aunts, uncles and cousins.

Amen

Oh, and Casey too.

And the goldfish

And the guinea pigs

and Thumper the rabbit

Amen



Gradually a few more of Grandma's neighbors became as familiar to us as the neighbors at home. Directly across the street was Helen, a nice unmarried lady who suffered from some debilitating illness. She walked slowly with a walker and played the first little electric keyboard I had ever seen complete with buttons that supplied fascinating rhythms to go along with the simple melodies she played. She also made Janet and I hand-crafted little treats every time we came to visit: baskets woven of colored paper with nests of shredded Easter grass inside hiding jelly beans, cookies with our names written in icing on the top, little things made of pipe cleaners, matchboxes covered with popsicle sticks and beads, cupcakes she had made herself and decorated with colored frosting and sprinkles in pretty designs. I'm sorry I didn't get to know her better; she must have been a very creative person.

We also picked out Fanny from among our Grandmother's friends as a person to remember. She was notable to us because our Aunt Merle used the word "fanny" when referring to a young girl's derriere. Our cousin Lisa fell into uncontrollable fits of laughter every time my Grandmother mentioned her friend, 'Fanny,' because she thought it was such a hysterically funny name for a woman.



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The other family we got to know was the Werners who lived down the street, just across from the St. Francis playground. The Werners had the distinction of having the most children of any family we had ever known. Twenty, I think! Coming from a 2 kid family we wondered how twenty kids was even possible in one house! Some were even grown up by the time Janet and I met the family and had children of their own making the youngest Werner child, Judy, an "aunt" before she was even born! My special friend among them was Becky Werner, (see picture) who was one of (I think) two sets of twins. She had a twin brother, Bob, who I don't

remember at all, but Becky was my intermittent pen pal for a number of years.

We met Becky at the playground. The playground was only a block or so from my Grandmother's house and sat on the west side of the St. Francis Catholic Elementary School. Really the whole block across from my grandmother's house was part of the St. Francis complex which included the church on the east, the convent in the middle, and the parochial school on the west.

When I was little I was terrified of the nuns who could be seen billowing along the sidewalks going back and forth between their convent and the church or school in their black habit complete

with veil. All you could see of the actual person were their hands and their faces tightly framed by the wimple. I had never seen anything like them and even though I am told on the rare occasions when

we actually encountered one of the nuns face-to-face they tried to make friends with me, I would have none of it, hiding my face in my mother's skirts and crying until my mother would consent to walk away.

This fear of the nuns made one aspect of the playground very fascinating. The school was several stories high and on the



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west side of the building there was a fire escape made of a long metal tube from the second floor to the ground. It looked as if it was made of a number of metal barrels soldered together. We and all the other kids in the neighborhood were absolutely forbidden to play in this fire escape but of course it was irresistible! A long streak down the middle of the barrel floor, polished smooth by the passage of numerous sliding bottoms, attested to its popularity.

The fire escape was a place of mystery! Janet and I would crouch at the opening, shoulder-to-shoulder and heads together, and look up into the darkness. Within a few feet all light failed to penetrate and you would be looking up into a tunnel of pitch darkness. The metal of the cans was usually hot from the sun but we couldn't resist starting up anyway. The inside was slippery and hot as a griddle. You had to brace yourself against the floor and the sides with your hands, elbows, toes and knees as you crept up into the steep blackness. It was a miracle to me how the darkness stayed in front of you but when you glanced back over your shoulder the tunnel behind you would be clearly visible and full of light. How did that happen? : )

It was hard to tell how close to the top you were but the higher you got the more tension you felt. It was so slippery inside that at any moment you could lose your grip and slide down. If someone was coming up after you, it was disaster! But eventually, if you were lucky and didn't lose your tenuous grip, you would get to the top. There was a little platform at the very top just big enough to perch on. You could sit there and watch as the next person made their slow, toe-gripping way up the tube. The barrier between the fire escape tube and the classroom beyond had cracks in it through which we could peer into the room.

'This was the room where the nuns taught!' we told each other. 'This was the room where the Catholic kids went to school.' We assumed the nuns beat the kids on the palms of their hands with rulers like our Catholic kid neighbors told us happened at St. Agnes, the Catholic Elementary School near our house back home. We looked through the cracks in the barrier for the ruler on the teacher's desk but could never see it. I had been told that at St. Agnes the nuns would draw a circle on the blackboard just high enough from the floor that you had to stand on tiptoe to put your nose in the circle – and there you had to stay until the nun said you could sit down. I also heard they would take you into the long coat closet if you were bad, take down your pants and spank your bare bottom with the ruler. One inventive youngster even told me the nuns would hang you up by the back of your clothes on a clothes hook in the coat closet! I believed him and shuddered! All this rumor, plus my innate fear of the billowing habit, added to the thrill of sitting at the top of the forbidden fire escape peering in through the cracks in the board into the summer-empty classroom.

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Then came the best part: letting go and sliding down the tube, faster and faster through the darkness over the slick polished metal until you shot out of the opening and landed with a plop on your bottom at the foot of the tube. It was very exciting. A number of times we wore the skin right off our bare knees going up that tube and had to tell Grandma we had done it falling down in the gravel. Nothing kept us out of the fire escape, not even the loss of skin!



There were other attractions on the playground. There were some very long, tall swings of the kind you can see in the background of this picture which I found on the internet and also teeter totters of various lengths. The St. Francis teeter-totters were much taller than the ones in the picture. One must easily have been 12 feet tall!

Neither Janet nor I needed to be pushed on swing sets any more. We knew how to “pump” with the best of them. As you came forward in the swing you reached out just as far as you could with your toes. Then you made a grab at the air, as if pulling it toward you, knees bending and feet coming under you and you swung back. Going forward you would reach out again. I never have been able to figure out the physics of this but it works (!) and Janet and I would slowly gain altitude. Sometimes we tried to swing together, doing our best to pump exactly the same amount so that we swung backwards and forward exactly the same, up and back like twins, but this was very hard to do. Even the slightest difference and within a couple of swings you would be criss-crossing at odds.

We also tried to see how high we could go. As I mentioned, these were no slouching swings when it came to height. Although my memory may be skewed by the world being seen from the height of an eight year old, still it seems to me that the chains that held the swings might easily have been ten or twelve feet long. Our own swing set at home (where Janet eventually mastered the art of tightrope walking across the bar at the top) was six feet tall at the most. If you have ever swung before and tried to go just as high as you can, you know that at the apex of the curve, right at the point where the swing changes direction there is a stomach dropping moment of almost weightlessness. We loved that moment but it was scary. At that point, if a child was not holding on tightly, you could fall right out of the swing and plummet the 10 or 12 feet to the ground.



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Alternatively, it sometimes felt as if you might swing right on over the top. No one we knew had ever actually done such a thing but it “felt” possible. In any



case, we were always pressing that magic point in our competition to see who could actually swing the highest.

Really, playground equipment was a risky business in those days. There might be a little gravel under things but mostly not. Our elementary school in Kansas City had

some wonderful equipment that you never see in playgrounds these days because they are just too dangerous. One was a merry-go-round with a handle on both sides that you alternately pushed and pulled to make the merry-go-round turn faster and faster. As I remember it, there was nothing covering the gears in the middle although I don't remember any child ever falling into them. Another sort of merry-go-round just had handles that stuck up and divided the circle of the platform into pie wedge shapes. (See the picture above) This sort of merry-go-round was pushed by running children who then jumped on the platform at the last minute when it got to a speed that threatened to drag you off your feet. We dared one another to stand up in the exact middle and “not hold on” and pushed the merry-go-round just as fast as we possibly could. It was thrilling to feel pressed to the bars and held there by centripetal force.



But of all the ways one child could put another at risk on playground equipment, Janet and I found the best one on the teeter totters. Because we were not the same age, height, or weight, using the teeter totters together was a challenge. Janet had to sit as far back on the board as she could and I had to sit forward in order to achieve a balanced weight but once we had accomplished that there was really nothing to do on a teeter totter than to go up and down, and up and down, and that got boring pretty quickly. As I said, there were teeter totters of various lengths and our favorite, of course, was the longest but this meant that when you were on the “up” side you were



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pretty far up in the air. Because we had balanced on either side, it was pretty easy, just by shifting your weight a little, to keep the other person involuntarily suspended up in the air. If you were the 'trapped one' you found yourself, a thousand feet up in the air, with the other person grinning up at you because there was nothing you could do to make your end come back down. Naturally the challenge became "how do I get myself off and send the other person crashing?" – which we eventually figured out. You simply get off the teeter-totter while your sister was trapped up in the air. Somehow the tears of rage we felt when it was our turn to come crashing down on our tailbone didn't stop us from wanting to be the person on the other end, the one in "control." The triumph was always short-lived however because the one who came crashing down would run in tears to grandma and we both would get punished by not being allowed to return to the playground for awhile. So for the most part we were careful not to hurt each other "too" much because then we didn't get to go play on the playground at all.

Every Saturday night, Grandma got us in the big white tub with the claw feet, soaped us up good and scrubbed all the ground-in playground dirt from behind our ears, around our knees and under our fingernails. While we played in the water, she warmed up a saucepan full of rainwater and then she washed our hair, carefully pouring the warm soft water over our tipped-back heads. Then she set our hair in curlers and sent us to bed. In the morning our Sunday dresses would be crisply starched and ironed and we set off with Grandma for church, our patent leather shoes tap-tapping on the sidewalk.



**"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**

**I will fear no evil; for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."**

**Psalm 23:1-6**

Church at Grandma's was pretty much like church at home except the church was lots smaller—and maybe a little more friendly/cozy. We slid in to the shiny wooden pew with the tall backs and pulled the hymn book from the holder in front of us.



Our legs dangled, not long enough yet to reach the floor.

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At the front there was a wooden plaque on the wall where big number cards were slid into rows announcing the hymn numbers. Janet and I would find the first hymn in our books and look at the bulletin as we waited for church to start. The service was exactly like the one in our Lutheran church – same ritual and responses, same places to sing hymns, and, of course, the sermon. The thing I loved about Grandma’s Church was the lovely carved altar piece which looked like some sort of gothic cathedral, all spires and “gingerbread” trim. There are pictures of this altar in the family album from my parent’s wedding.

FAITH AND JUSTIFICATION

If Thy Beloved Son, O God

5 My guilt, O Father, Thou hast laid  
On Christ, Thy Son, my Savior.  
Lord Jesus, Thou my debt hast paid  
And gained for me God's favor.  
O Holy Ghost, Thou Fount of grace,  
The good in me to Thee I trace;  
In faith do Thou preserve me.

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me 376

1 Cor. 10: 4  
Augustus M. Toplady, 1776, alt. Thomas Hastings, 1850

1 Rock of A - ges, cleft for me, Let me hide my-self in Thee;  
2 Not the la - bors of my hands Can ful - fil Thy Law's de-mands;  
3 Noth - ing in my hand I bring, Sim - ply to Thy cross I cling;  
4 While I draw this fleet - ing breath, When mine eye - lids close in death,

Let the wa - ter and the blood From Thy riv - en side which flowed  
Could my zeal no res - pite know, Could my tears for - ev - er flow,  
Na - ked, come to Thee for dress; Help - less, look to Thee for grace;  
When I . soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judg - ment - throne,

Be of sin the dou - ble cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.  
All for sin could not a - tone; Thou must save, and Thou a - lone.  
Foul, I to the foun - tain fly, - Wash me, Sav - ior, or I die!  
Rock of A - ges, cleft for me, Let me hide my-self in Thee! A - men.

Neither Janet nor I liked going to Sunday School after Church because we didn't know anybody and felt very shy but attending was not negotiable.

Grandma wanted us to go and escorted us to the basement door where one of the Sunday School teachers would be waiting to take us down. The basement was cool and dark with a checkerboard pattern of linoleum squares on the floor.

There were no separate rooms, each class met in a semi-circle around the teacher's chair. We didn't know any of the kids and sort of clung together while someone sorted out which class we would attend. At least we were allowed to stay together

and attend the same class. There was always the ordeal to be gone through of being introduced. We would have to stand up and one of the teachers would introduce us, tell our names, that we were from Kansas City and were Mrs. Groeger's granddaughters. Every pair of eyes in the basement would be turned our direction, I was always happy when we got to sit down.

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We were handed a pamphlet with the bible story for the day, some questions and answers about the story, maybe some discussion questions. There might be a story along the lines of the famous "Little Visits with God" book. Here is a typical plot-line:

*Old Mr. Smith was grumpy and crabby. Tommy didn't like him. When one of the kid's balls went into Mr. Smith's yard, he didn't give it back. The kids seemed to lose a lot of balls to Mr. Smith. His yard was close to the playground and it seemed as if he was always near his window waiting because the moment any ball went into his yard he was out there in a flash. "You should be more careful and not let your balls go into my yard," he would yell at the kids. And then he would march back into his house with the ball which was never to be seen again.*

*"Mean old man!" Tommy would say to his friends.*

*Then one day they were playing baseball and Tommy hit the ball crookedly. It went sailing toward Mr. Smith's house... and right through his plate glass picture window!*

*"You, boy!" yelled Mr. Smith. "I know you! I'm going to call your parents!" Tommy went home with a sinking heart.*

*That night at dinner, Tommy was very quiet and didn't feel hungry. Finally Tommy's Dad said, "Do you have something you want to tell us, son?" Tommy blurted out the whole story – how mean Mr. Smith was, how he always kept their balls if they landed in his yard, how he hadn't meant to hit the baseball crooked, it was an accident, and while he was sorry he broke the window he didn't really feel sorry about it being Mr. Smith's window."*

*His father listened quietly and then he said, "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way about Mr. Smith. He called me this afternoon and he was pretty mad about the window. I told him you would go over to his house every day and work for him until the window was paid for. It was an expensive window, Tommy, plate glass isn't cheap, and so you will probably be working for Mr. Smith for a long time.*

*Tommy didn't want to argue with his father but he said, "Why do I have to be the only one to work for Mr. Smith? There were other guys playing ball with me."*

*"You broke the window, son. You need to take responsibility to pay for it."*

*As the story goes on Tommy works at crabby Mr. Smith's house after school, doing yard work, washing windows, etc. At first he resents seeing the other guys playing ball while he has to work but he does a good job and it gets easier. Slowly he and Mr. Smith become friends. One day, Mr. Smith asks him*

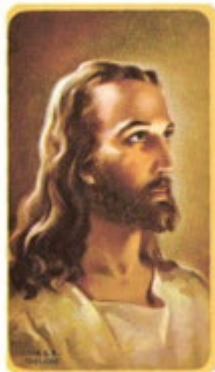
## Visiting Grandma Groeger

*to help clean the windows. When he goes in the house to clean the inside glass, he sees pictures of Mr. Smith with his wife and child. He finds out that Mr. Smith's wife and child died in an accident years ago. He sees a chair by the window and realizes the Mr. Smith must sit there so he can watch the kids playing ball. He suddenly realizes that Mr. Smith must be lonely. He also sees a picture of Mr. Smith in a baseball uniform and finds out he used to be a great player when he was younger. Tommy talks his friends into inviting Mr. Smith coach their baseball team.*

The story, like all the "Little Visits with God" stories always had a happy ending and a moral written at the end of the story... just in case you missed the point!

We would finish the story, maybe work on a little Bible art project and then it was time to go home. We didn't like going to Sunday School in Humphrey but it always turned out okay once we were there.

These are all familiar religious pictures from our childhood:





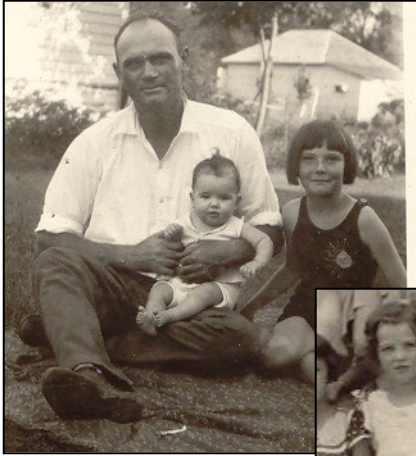
## Visiting Grandma Groeger



My mother had only one sister, our Aunt Merle, who had one child, our cousin Lisa Marie. Lisa's father, my uncle Helmut, was my all-time favorite uncle. Uncle Helmut was tall and thin, with sharp intelligent eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses. He had curly brown hair and he smoked a pipe. I loved the smell of his tobacco before it was burning, it had a rich aroma tinted with a hint of cherry, and I used to like watching as Uncle Helmut followed the familiar ritual of filling, smoking, and cleaning his pipe. Naturally, he always had a good supply of pipe cleaners and now and then he would

give a package to us girls to make stick figures with.

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Our Aunt Merle (Merledean Marie Groeger Sienknecht) was a tall, slender woman with sharp features, manicured and brightly polished nails, and dyed hair. Looking at her black roots I once decided I would never in my life color my hair, no matter what shade it turned once I was an adult.

Aunt Merle looked and carried herself like a fashion model. In the photos my mother has of her as she was growing up, she went from a curly-topped, bright-eyed little beauty (she was born the same year as

Shirley Temple and my grandmother curled her hair and made her dresses that mimicked the child star), to an attractive teen-ager, to (suddenly, it seemed from the pictures) a fashionable, groomed-to-perfection young



woman. She was talented in art and there are still examples of her drawings in family records...

birthday cards she drew for Janet and I when we were babies, and quick sketches of fashionably dressed young women of the 1940s with hair piled on their heads, tight dresses, and impossibly tall stiletto high-heels.

Amongst my grandmother's framed family photos was one of my Aunt Merle in a long ballet gown with full netted skirt, up on her



toes in a very dramatic pose. Aunt Merle was a drama queen.

Among my various aunts, I was not so enamored of my Aunt Merle who, like grandma's friend, Nancy, had a bit of a mean streak. In my world back home, no one smoked, except some of the people who came to our



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house on Saturday nights to play bridge with my parents. I didn't like the smell of cigarette smoke at all. It was acrid and unpleasant and made me cough. One day I must have decided that my aunt must not know how unpleasant it was for the rest of us if she was smoking in the house and I decided to tell her. I remember she was lying on the couch in the living room smoking and I walked up to her and said "I think you shouldn't smoke in the house. It makes the whole house stink." Without missing a beat my aunt turned and blew smoke right in my face. The message was plenty clear – she didn't care if she was making life unpleasant for anyone else, she would do as she pleased. And that about summed up most of my experience of my Aunt Merle during my childhood.

I remember only one time when I had close experience with my aunt when I was a child. Janet and Lisa and I had been playing with Johnny Turnis over in his sandbox and Lisa took a shovel full of sand and put it on the top of my head. I had just had my hair washed, which was no easy experience since it involved standing on a chair with your head hung over the sink while your hair was soaped and then carefully rinsed with warmed up rainwater and I didn't want to have to go through all that again. I went crying home only to find that my parents and grandmother were gone and only my Aunt Merle left behind. Aunt Merle took me out to the back steps with a hair brush and comb, sat me down between her knees and carefully brushed and combed out all the sand. I don't remember how it happened but pretty soon we were chatting about this and that and she got me laughing so much I was almost glad Lisa had topped me with sand.



Years later one summer after Uncle Helmut had died and she was estranged from her daughter, Lisa, my parents sent me to Joliet, Illinois by train to help my aunt pack up her house and drive her back to Kearney, Nebraska. I was thrilled to be traveling by train all by myself and my parents said I definitely should go now because there probably wouldn't be passenger trains much longer. My aunt couldn't drive so one of her neighbors picked me up at the station and took me back to Aunt Merle's house. On the way home, she warned me that my Aunt had been very depressed and she hoped she would be okay while I was there.



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She told me, if Aunt Merle wasn't, to just come get her next door. This didn't dim the vague dread I already felt (remember things like the cigarette-smoke-in-the-face incident from my childhood) but in this instance Aunt Merle turned out to be charming. She was funny and witty. On the hot summer evenings, we sat out on her back porch with her boxer, Bruno, (who had succeeded old Brownie the Boxer of the 1950s and 60s. Aunt Merle told me her next dog was going to be a Great Dane and she was going to name it Alexander The Great Dane) and regaled me with stories of her father (my grandfather) and other stories from her life. I wish I had had a way to record them as they were, perhaps the only stories I had ever been told about my grandfather with whom she was particularly close. Whatever the stories once were, I do remember she had me laughing so hard at times that I got a stitch in my side! It was a side of my Aunt Merle I had never known.



Lisa was an only child! In the years before she first went to school, it was clear she was used to playing by herself in the way she wanted to and she hadn't yet learned how to "give" when it came to playing with other children. Younger than my younger sister, she and Janet were closer in age and had more things in common. They naturally gravitated toward one another. I seemed to lose my sister and companion when our cousin was around. Still, we had some good times with my cousin playing at hide-and-seek in the back yard, playing with the Betsy McCall paper dolls and Felix the Cat, and doing other kid things that were easier done with three than with two. We especially liked it when my grandmother allowed us to poke around in the upstairs walk-in closet. We could open any boxes we wanted to as long as we put everything back. Tucked away in its hot, moth-ball smelling darkness were boxes of treasures! -- Fancy clothes laid aside between layers of tissue paper, gloves, manicure sets, trinkets and jewels, bird houses, ceramic figurines, china, Christmas ornaments, stuffed dogs made of real fur, and other treasures.



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Unfortunately, a lot of the time when our two families were together I felt like a fifth wheel. Janet played with Lisa, my mother hung out with her sister and grandma, the fathers hung out together, and where did that leave me? One year I brought along a book for company, Daphne Du Maurier's book "Rebecca", which is a page-turner mystery and thriller about a naive young woman who marries a rich widower and goes to live with him in his gigantic mansion. Aunt Merle, seeing me nose-buried in this book for hours asked what I was reading and then ruined the book for me by commenting "Oh, isn't that book where the house burns down in the end? Turns out the housekeeper is jealous and making it seem as if the first wife, as a ghost, is haunting the house?" I could have killed her for giving away the ending! But that was Aunt Merle.

My uncle, on the other hand, seemed to realize I was lonely and made efforts to connect with me and talk to me. He regularly walked Brownie, the family boxer dog, every evening as the sun went down and things had cooled off and he took me with him. I remember thinking he was the only adult I knew who ever "just talked with me" and that was enchanting! After grandma's funeral I went upstairs to my bedroom, closed the door, and cried and cried. My Uncle Helmut was the one who came looking for me. He knocked softly on the door and when I didn't answer he came in anyway. He closed the door behind him, came over to the bed and picked me up and held me while I cried. Bless his heart!

The week after the funeral both fathers had to go back to work and our mothers plus the three of us cousins stayed behind in Humphrey to take apart my grandmother's house. My mother and her sister were, understandably, very upset through the whole process. I remember feeling a sense of horror that our world had turned upside-down with my grandmother's death. Janet and Lisa, too young to really be affected by the grief for very long, would be upstairs playing together with dolls while I crept half-way down the stairs to sit and listen to my mother and aunt as they went through the things in grandma's closet. One minute they would be laughing over some trinket they had found that grandma had saved. "Do you remember this...? Do you remember when...?" they continually asked one another. Then in another minute they would be totally distraught -- as when they discovered my grandmother's false teeth in a box in the closet. No one had realized she had been taken to the hospital without her teeth and the funeral home hadn't thought to mention it, they had simply packed her mouth to make her look as natural as possible, but to my mother and her sister this omission epitomized the loss they felt and any things that were left unfinished between them and their mother since she her sudden death. They became hysterical over the fact that my grandmother had

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been buried without her teeth and I sat, frozen on the stairs, listening to emotions from adults I didn't have any context for understanding. To me, it felt as if my whole world had shifted, if even the adults in my life were falling apart.

We received so many hams from compassionate neighbors that practically all we ate that week was ham. Ham for breakfast. Ham for lunch. Ham for dinner. Afterwards I couldn't eat ham for years without associating it with death and trauma. I remember asking my Dad before he went back to Kansas City, "But WHY do we have to take the house apart? Why can't we just leave it the way it is and come back to visit just the way we always have? If nobody wants to sell it, why do we have to?" It just seemed as if we were losing grandma twice over.



I still miss my Grandma. I wish Janet and I hadn't been so young when she died because there are things I would like to talk to her about and things I would have liked to have learned from her. She was, for example, a remarkable and extremely gifted seamstress. During World War II my mother had only to clip a picture of a dress from an ad in the newspaper and send it to her mother with a request for color and Grandma could make it up even without a pattern. Since she sewed for a living, she had lots of material scraps and every Christmas she would make new clothes for our dolls, amazing things really. My Sweet Sue doll has a blue woolen coat exactly like the one she made for me as a little girl right down to being completely and flawlessly lined with silk, fitted, and having tiny buttons and button holes. For years I thought the satin and corduroy drum majorette outfit my doll had was store-bought it was so professionally trimmed until one day I happened to inspect the inside of the hat and found it was lined with cardboard from a cereal box. And then there was the wedding dress of the same ivory satin as my mother's, flounced with tier after tier of netting and sleeves that pointed down the back of Sweet Sue's hands. When as an adult I looked at these things and realized how many hours they must have taken to make, and I suddenly knew in a very tangible way how much I had been loved by my grandmother.

There is one more I found out one more thing I found out about my grandmother's life years after her death which had a profound affect on my life as an adult. My mother and I found something in her sewing machine years

after her death that changed the way I remembered my grandmother. I would like to close this book with a tribute to my grandmother's brilliance:

### Sitting at my Grandmother's Sewing Machine

Dhyan Atkinson

My grandmother, Emma Groeger, had a treadle sewing machine that sat in the corner of her kitchen facing a west window. You can see it in the picture below of my mother, sister, our dog Casey, and I hanging out in the kitchen in the



1960s. The kitchen was the heart of my grandmother's house. Not only did we all spend a lot of time in her kitchen when we visited but when we were gone she spent her days in that sunny west-facing corner sewing for her neighbors and friends in the little town of Humphrey, Nebraska where she lived.

I had a deep nostalgia for that sewing machine. My sister and I were allowed to sit in the chair and work the pedals. We watched the sharp

little needle flashing up and down. We got to go through the drawers looking at the spools of colored thread, the tiny scissors, thimbles, cards of rick-rack and ribbon, and other sewing paraphernalia. Best of all, the middle drawer on the left was full of buttons. Big buttons, baby buttons, cloth covered buttons, pearl buttons... every shape, color and size. My sister and I would pour them all out on the kitchen table and take turns choosing until we had divided the whole pile. Grandma then gave us each a needle threaded with a long thread and a button at the end and we made ourselves button necklaces.

My grandmother died of leukemia very suddenly and her sewing machine came to live at my parent's house. It got tucked away down in the basement in a corner.

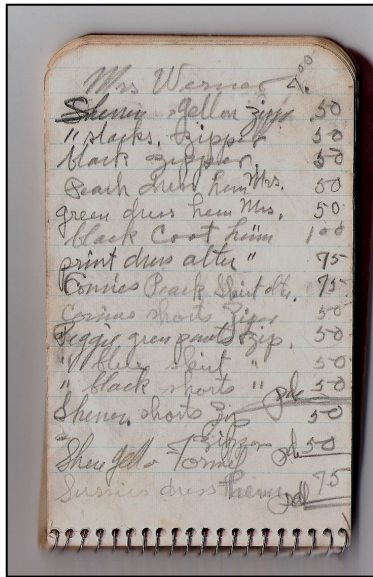


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We could see it, but it wasn't easy to work the pedals any more and the middle drawer on the left was blocked by one end of the sofa.

One afternoon, 20 years after my grandmother died, my mother and I were reminiscing about Grandma and I suddenly said "Do you suppose the buttons are still there in the machine drawer?" My mother said she didn't see why they wouldn't be; nothing had been touched or moved since Grandma last used the

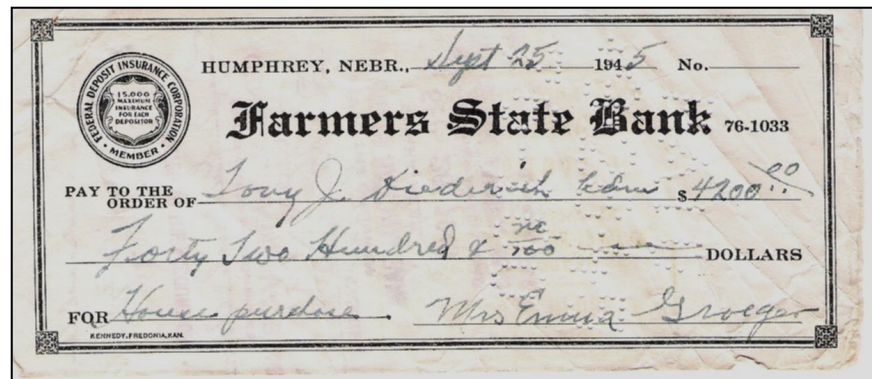
machine. In a flash, we were down in the basement pulling the old sewing machine out into the middle of the room.



It was amazing to sit where my Grandmother had sat so many hours of her life and to know that her machine was just exactly as she had left it the day that she died. Yes, the buttons were all there! And, as we opened the drawers, there was also a faint scent of my grandmother and clear evidence of her life right down to the pencil stubs that were sharpened by razor blade, and the little spiral notebooks she used to keep track of her jobs.

Most importantly, we found something that day that completely changed my view of my Grandmother. We found, tucked into the most current of her little spiral notebooks, the final, canceled check she used to pay for her house from all her little 10 cent, 50 cent, and one dollar sewing jobs. The check was dated 1945 and my Grandmother died in the late 1960s. Clearly she had transferred that cancelled check from job book to job book over the years to remind herself of what she had accomplished with her work.

I had never thought of my grandmother as a business woman. My



family thought of Grandma as a "housewife who took in a little sewing on the side." However finding this canceled check prompted my mother to tell me the fuller story. My grandfather was sick, hospitalized, and unable to work for many years during the Great Depression. At times the family was so poor they



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lived on tomatoes and bread. My grandmother gardened and made all the family clothes but still my mother had to quit taking her beloved piano lessons because the family couldn't afford the 50 cents per week they cost. Eventually my grandmother was hired by the WPA to run a youth center in her town which she did so well the WPA wanted her to relocate to another town to run its youth center and programs when the one in Humphrey was shut down. Later, after the Humphrey center closed, she boarded students from farm families during the school week, often getting paid in chickens, eggs and vegetables which kept her family fed.

Grandma began "taking in sewing" (*which should really read "began her own custom sewing business"*) during a time when other job opportunities were not open to women and at a time when small town families could not afford "store-

boughten" clothes. (*Read that "she found a great niche for her services."*) All during the Depression she not only kept clothes on her family's back and food on the table but she managed to set a little money aside each week until she had enough to purchase a lovely two story house, the very house she had dreamed of owning for years. It cost her \$6,000 in the 1940s but she



paid for it with the pennies, nickels and dimes she earned with her sewing.

There are many ways in which my life was enriched by my grandmother's presence and love when I was a child, but as a grown-up business woman and entrepreneur, it means a lot to me to know that I am not the only woman in my family to start her own business. And the canceled check is a tangible reminder of my grandmother's success.