

Grandma Atkinson

(Courtesy of the Northern Illinois University Writing Across the Curriculum Program)

We pulled into the gravel driveway and nudged the front bumper of the 1953 Chevy up to the left garage door. Climbing out of the car, we walked across the driveway to the homemade brick sidewalk, past the patch of blooming, orange day lilies, around the corner of the large, white, frame house to the green screen door.

As we opened the squeaky door, we passed from the bright sun of a mid-summer day in Bertrand, Nebraska, into the back porch of Grandpa and Grandma's house. Our eyes needed to adjust to the darkness, but we could make out the coveralls hanging on the far wall, a bushel basket in one corner, and a pail with garden hand tools against another wall. We stepped up a step into the kitchen, a window to our left and old, white wooden cupboards with counters lining the two walls to our left. At the end of the isle between the two sets of cupboards was a gas stove on one side, and a squat-looking refrigerator with rounded corners across the isle. A coffee pot sat on the stove, and I could smell the rancid aroma of over-cooked coffee.

Passing on through the narrow kitchen, we stepped into the spacious dining room, dominated by a large round, wooden table. "Anyone home? You here, Mom?" My mother called out. About the same time, Grandma appeared in the door of her bedroom across the room from where we stood.

"Glory, be! Look whose here." Grandma said, wiping her wrinkled hands on her faded apron. She shuffled slightly as though she were about to step on into the dining room, but before she could make her move, my mother had dashed across the room and was giving her a hug. Dad and I followed sheepishly across the room, knowing that the mandatory hug was about to happen. When it was my turn, I could feel the soft, loose flesh of Grandma's sagging arms as she hugged me close and placed a wet smack on my turned cheek. Grandma's lavender-scented perfume obliterated the faint whiff of mothballs that permeated Grandma and Grandpa's house.

She was a small woman, not much taller than me, much shorter than my mother. She had pure white hair that she always wore up in an old fashioned bun. Her hair was actually quite long. I know because every night she would comb it out, leaning forward and combing the hair from the back of her head down to the floor in long strokes that looked like they tired her sagging arms. Grandma always wore dresses that hung to mid-calve, usually buttoned up the front, covered by one of her many faded aprons.

It wasn't long before we were all sitting around the large, round wooden table in the dining room, looking out through the large windows, draped in white sheers, to the large side yard where my favorite apple tree stood. It was time for the 4:00 coffee break. Grandpa had come in from the garden where he had been pruning tomato plants, their pungent odor still clinging to his hands. Grandma had made a pot of fresh coffee, adding an egg white to the boiling brew at the last minute to "clarify" the coffee. Even so, we would all find grounds in the bottom of our cups. Even though I was only seven years old, I had been drinking coffee at Grandma's house for as long as I could remember.

Each of us had a coffee cup with a flower pattern, which sat on a matching saucer. A plate of "rusks," dried toast pieces, was being circulated for dipping. There was also a tin with saltine crackers. I took two squares, and, when the creamery butter

came, I spread a generous portion on one cracker and pressed the other into it, making a cracker and butter sandwich, a favorite dipping item for the coffee. When I dipped the cracker sandwich into the coffee, the cracker turned soft, and a little bit of the butter melted, leaving an oily film on the surface of the coffee. I had to get the cracker to my mouth in a hurry or the soft part would fall off into the coffee. These coffee breaks were daily rituals in the Nebraska afternoons, and Grandma always offered us the same stuff.

"When did you leave today?" Grandpa asked.

"About eight," Dad responded. "Made pretty good time. Stopped to eat in McCook." Dad and Grandpa struck up a conversation about the lack of rain in the past couple weeks, speculating about the effects on the sugar beets in Eastern Colorado and the corn in Nebraska.

Meanwhile, Mom and Grandma started a conversation about Uncle Joe and Aunt Mildred. "Oh yes," Grandma said, "Joe now milks fifty cows a day. The dairy is doing good, and he brings the milk into town here, to Dad's creamery, you know." Joe was my mother's oldest brother, and "Dad" was Grandpa, who ran a creamery just a block from the large white house.

"Mildred is still having a hard time getting used to the new place, but she seems to be getting better," she continued, referring to Joe's wife, my Aunt Mildred. She dipped a rusk in her coffee and lifted it to soft lips.

I soon tuned out both conversations, thinking about the apple tree and the big side yard. "Can I be excused?" I asked.

"Sure you don't want another cracker?" Grandma asked.

"No, I want to go out to play." I said. Given permission, I was back through the kitchen and the back porch and out in the yard. In a couple hours we would be back around the table with a large platter of hamburgers already in their buns being passed around and another platter of juicy, red tomato slices fresh from Grandpa's garden. By then, my cousins, Mary Jane, Danny, and Elizabeth Ann, would have come to town from Joe's farm, and we would spend the evening playing Monopoly while the folks talked about the other aunts and uncles and cousins.

Grandma died in her sleep about fourteen years later, when she was eight-six years old, her long white hair having been bobbed a couple years earlier because it was too much work, her frame even more diminished, her arms even more flabby than they had been when I was a small boy. She joined her husband, who had passed on four years before. For the last year of her life she had lived in a retirement home, but before that, she and Grandpa had lived with my Mom, now a widow, and me for about five years. I can remember Grandma combing her long hair every night, and walking in soft slippers, shuffling across the dining room, her dress skirt swinging from side to side slowly with each shuffling step. She lived and died a Lutheran and a Democrat, but more importantly, she lived and died the mother of five children, a grandmother of many grandchildren, and a great grandmother to even more.