

Sometimes I think about my grandma Rachel. I'm sure most of us sometimes think about our grandmas. But, it's springtime, and I think about grandma quite a lot in the springtime.

My grandma Rachel died in 1985. She was seventy-nine years old. And, while I remember that too, what I like to remember is the way my grandma was when I was about 12. She would have been about 60.

I grew up in an extended family. The family consisted of my parents, my sister, my maternal grandparents, and my uncle. We lived in a seventeen-room farmhouse, that was pretty much right in the middle of a 360-acre farm that spread across the hills and valleys of southeastern Ohio. The farm had been in Grandma Rachel's family for two generations before her.

Like most farm people in southeastern Ohio, we always referred to parts of the farm by the names of the long-dead previous owners. By the time I was in grade school I knew the summer pasture for the cattle as the *Niceswanger Place*, the old barn across the highway was the *Curran Place*, and the barn we could see across the meadow from the house was the *Shartle Barn*.

That farm was just about the most important thing in my grandma's life. (At least until she had grandchildren to dote on.) She was really proud of the farm, and stubborn as hell when it came to letting go of even the tiniest part of it. That's a lesson I learned well.

I think that's how I was instilled with a sort of reverence for the earth, and a deep love and respect for all the component parts: the soil, the trees, the rocks, the wildlife, the water, and so on, and so on.

Maybe that's why springtime is the time when I am most reminded of my grandma. It's that time when the earth is coming out of winter dormancy, and everything seems so alive. I get outside as early and as often as I can. I just try to bask in all that life, to absorb it, to feel the energy from it.

Springtime is like sensory overload, especially after winter's bleakness and silence. The feel of the warm sun on my back, the smell of freshly turned dirt in the garden, the sound of March peepers down in the creek or birds early in the morning, the super-saturated greens, reds, and yellows that replace the grays and browns. And those are the things. Those are the things that remind me of grandma.

The way the sunlight streams in through the east windows in the early morning. The color and angle of that light triggers something deep in my brain and I am just instantly back there. I'm waking up in that big old bed with the carved dark wooden headboard and the mattress that is too hard. It's the "spare" bed where I sleep sometimes, just for a change. It's on grandma's side of the house. My feet are hitting the cold linoleum floor, and then I'm descending the steep narrow stairs with their bare wooden treads which have the brown paint worn off in the middles where everyone steps.

The sparrows are chirping in the trees right outside the window, and I can smell breakfast. In the kitchen, grandma's at that enormous gas range with the big lighted orange knobs, and eggs are frying and popping in a cast iron skillet with a generous layer of bacon grease to keep them from sticking. And there's that sunlight, coming through the kitchen's east window and filling the room with a bright yellow glow that only happens in those first few hours of the day.

I sit down at the table with grandpa and uncle Dewey. The bacon is thick and salty and is fresh from the meat packing plant that is so close down the road that most mornings I can smell the hickory smoke and the hams from the smoke house. I slather my toast with some homemade strawberry jam that grandma put up last spring. And while grandpa and Dewey had their eggs fried, grandma would scramble mine. It's the only way I liked them.

It's all those sensations that take me back there. Smells, sounds, tastes, the color of the light.

Grandma Rachel was a big woman, a farm woman. She wasn't what you would call fat, just big. She was tall and "big boned." Her family was big. Her father and his father were large men. As soon as warm weather came, she would always wear her sundresses. They were floral prints, without sleeves, and sort of just hung like a shapeless sack. She had a penchant for pinks and greens. Funny, I can't really remember her shoes.

Grandma Rachel had gray hair, until much later in her life when it was usually white. She would try tinting it occasionally, and it might end up blue or purple. I don't know when she turned gray, and I'm not even sure what color her hair was before. But, I do know that red hair ran in her family.

Grandma was a farm woman all right. She gardened. Flowers and vegetables. I remember her kneeling at one of her beds of petunias with a little hickory handled paring knife and digging weeds out by the root. She used the worn out tractor tires from grandpa's John Deere Model A as her flowerbeds. And she'd use the knife to cut off dead blossoms and leaves.

On Memorial Day, grandma would go out and cut flowers for the cemeteries. She cut mostly iris and peonies, which she called "pinies." She would make up arrangements in canning jars, which grandpa and Dewey would load into the trunk of the car. With grandma at the wheel, we would all head off to the two cemeteries where our ancestors were buried. It was one of the rare occasions when we all would go somewhere together.

Grandma's role in vegetable gardening was more of a supervisory one. She would send Dewey to the garden to "bring up a mess of string beans" for lunch. He would dutifully return a half-hour later with a two-and-a-half gallon galvanized water bucket brimming with new beans. Then grandma would sit in a lawn chair in the shade of the big Box Elder tree and snap beans. She'd toss the beans into a big kettle and let the stems fall into

her lap. When she was all done, she'd gather up her dress just above the hem to form a little pouch in which she carried the stems to where she'd drop them back into the bucket.

We always had a big garden. Huge was more like it. And back then, we had another patch up the road that we called the "truck patch." That was where grandpa would raise sweet corn, tomatoes, beans and peas to sell in town, or give away. But, in *our* garden we had everything. We would raise turnips, potatoes, parsnips, radishes, onions, eggplant, squash, sweet corn, pop corn, lettuce, cabbage, several varieties of beans and tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and sometimes even peanuts.

There were a couple of rows of old fruit trees near the house that were the remains of a once sizable orchard. There were some red apple trees that bore only small hard misshapen fruit. There were a few peach trees and some cherry trees. But, the best was the "transparent" apple tree. These apples are the kind that turns yellow when they're really ripe. Even though they rarely get the chance to ripen, because they're really best when they're green.

Grandma used those transparent apples for cooking. She made pies, cobblers and applesauce with them. They were a very early apple, and were usually gone by July. So, grandma froze a lot of apples. And she froze a lot of applesauce. I used to love to eat the frozen applesauce before it was thoroughly thawed. It was sort of like sherbet or sorbet.

All that gardening and canning and preserving and freezing came from a self-reliance that was handed down to my grandparents by their grandparents. Grandma would tell me about how when she was a little girl she could remember the farm supplied almost everything that was needed to live. In addition to the produce, they raised Jersey cattle for milking, Herefords for beef, chickens for meat and eggs, sheep for wool, and hogs.

She told me about the coal mine that went back under the meadow. Across the road from the house, down in the hollow near a little spring-fed creek was a tunnel that went back in the hill and led to large rooms where her grandfather and her father would dig out enough coal for their own use. They had laid narrow track over which they pushed little mine cars, and when she was just about seven or eight, her dad had let her ride back into the rooms.

When I was old enough to hike into the woods on my own, I found the collapsed entrance to the tunnel, and some of the wheels and axles from the mine cars.

Grandma told me that in the coldest months of winter, her dad would cut big blocks of ice from the little pond in the cow field, load them onto a sled and bring them back to the ice house, where they were packed in saw dust, and that way would stay frozen practically right through the summer.

There was very little need to go into town back then. Down the road at the next farm, (the *Knox place*) there had been a salt works. My great grandfather had a portable sawmill they used to cut lumber for the buildings. My great-great grandfather had a

license to distill spirits. He produced brandy, wine, applejack and who knows what. His still is stored upstairs in the old “cider house.” (It’s been disassembled for legal reasons.)

So even when I was growing up, we didn’t go into town often, though it was only “two miles to the court house,” as grandma used to say. We didn’t need to go, because we still raised most of our food. We would go on Saturday morning. Grandma would take her car and grandpa would take the pick up truck. Grandma’s car was always a big one, and each successive one got bigger. The first one I remember was a late forties/early fifties DeSoto. The next one was a Buick and the last car she owned was a massive Chrysler Newport. It was so big she had to have someone back it out of the garage for her. When I was old enough, I was the one who backed it out for her. The Chrysler still sits in a shed at the farm. I’m not sure why we’ve never gotten rid of it.

Another reason we didn’t go into town often was that much of what we didn’t raise on the farm, was delivered. We had a milkman, a bread man and the “Watkins” man. The Watkins man brought spices, herbs, salves and other remedies. Sometimes the smell of gasoline exhaust from a truck that burns a little too rich takes me back to mornings when the bread man would come to our house.

I can hear the squeak of the brakes of the step van as he pulls up in front of the house, the ratcheting sound of the parking brake being set and the thud of the foot brake being released as climbs from the single seat and goes into the back of the truck to fill his carrying rack. In the warm months, he rides with the door open, so he just bounds down the step and up onto the front porch.

The bread man is on the glassed-in porch by the time I get there. Grandma has already picked out a couple loaves of bread and some powdered doughnuts. The carrying rack fascinates me. It has a big black curved handle and two fold out trays that, when opened, reveal the lower level which has the interesting stuff like pies and cakes and cupcakes and crème-filled-iced “sticks.” I, of course, persuade grandma that we need a half-dozen of those crème-filled sticks. I love the smell of that tray.

Those smells of exhaust and dust, and fresh baked goods, and the sounds of squeaking brakes. Those are the sensations that take me back.

Everybody on the ridge knew when it was lunchtime at our house. Grandma had a dinner bell that she would ring. Grandpa and Dewey could hear it even when they were up the road at the sheep barn putting hay in the mow. It was likely that there would be a big crowd for lunch if we were working in the hay. Some of the Knox boys or Denzil Lighthouser would be helping.

String beans and new potatoes, roast beef, cabbage, wilted lettuce with bacon and onions, sliced tomatoes. It was loaded with real butter, and salt, and fat, and cholesterol and other stuff we now believe to be bad for us. Grandpa was 94 when he died. He ate that food everyday of his life.

Of course, being a farm woman, grandma was also likely to eat things that a little boy wouldn't get past his nose. I guess that was an artifact of the "waste not, want not" syndrome. Maybe it was leftover from the depression. We would have brains, tongue, heart, gizzards and, of course, liver. And, grandma would tell me about even worse things she was made to eat as a youngster. She would tell the stories about head cheese and faggot pudding. The latter was made from pigs' teats.

Grandma was not what you would call a religious woman, even though she attended McKendree United Methodist church every Sunday. I think she was a spiritual woman. She believed in God, and heaven. She read the Bible and knew parts of it from memory. Some parts she used in things she did. One thing I remember is how she could "witch" warts. She would loosely wrap a thread around the wart, and silently read a passage from the Bible. She did that to one of my friends and to his total astonishment, the wart vanished within days.

Grandma was raised by a little woman named Phoebe Johnson. (My great grandmother died when grandma was very young.) Phoebe was just a child herself when my great grandfather sort of "adopted" her, long before grandma was around. Phoebe's family was crowded into a small house that used to be on the *Niceswanger Place*. Grandma told me that her dad "took a shine" to Phoebe. She was a bright, energetic, outspoken pre-teen. And, grandma's dad thought she was being neglected at home because there were just too many siblings in the little house.

So, one day, grandma's dad just said "why don't you come live with us, Phoebe." And she did. Phoebe helped my great grandmother with caring for the house and farm. Later on, when grandma and her brother Willis came along, Phoebe helped care for them, too. Then, when my great grandmother died very prematurely, Phoebe became a surrogate mother.

I still remember how grandma would recall "Phoeb" when she was working in the kitchen. Perhaps in some ways, the things I think of family traditions were really handed down from Phoebe's family.

Grandma was a professional working woman long before that was fashionable. She taught school even before she was married. She rode a horse to the Normal School, which was one-room affair, and taught all the subjects to a group of about twenty pupils that ranged from first through eighth grades. She kept on teaching until she had her children, and then resumed after they were raised.

In the evenings, she would sit in her big overstuffed gray chair and grade papers. Before I was old enough for school, I would watch her and pretend to grade papers of my own. At that time she was teaching sixth grade. And, at that time, teachers were expected to care and nurture and love and even hug their students. Grandma was always the favorite teacher. In the springtime, she would bring her entire class out to the farm for a picnic.

When I was about twelve, grandma finished her bachelor's degree at Ohio University. I don't know how many years it took her, but I do know that she had done it by taking one course each semester. I suspect that grandma would be especially proud to know that I now teach, at Ohio University.

Of course, I was always the apple of grandma's eye. I could pretty much talk her into anything. When I was six or seven, an especially harsh winter kept us inside for weeks. Grandma would get me a sack of cornmeal from the cellar, which I would dump out right onto the carpet. I would spend hours pushing cornmeal with my Tonka bulldozer, constructing an elaborate system of highways in the dining room.

I was allowed to keep a pet pig in the house. Years later, grandma drove me ninety miles to Columbus so I could get a haircut like the Monkees. She took me to see *Easy Rider* at the drive-in theater.

And grandma saw to it that all her friends knew that I was precious. When grandma entertained the Farm Bureau Women, or the "Never Silent Club," or her euchre club, I was often called upon for a short piano piece, or a recitation, or just to come in and showcase my wit. Her friends are all gone now too, but I remember them well, and how they fussed over me, each and every one: Blanche Devoe and her sister May Racey, Georgia Chrisman, Margaret Kreidler. Most of them were school teachers.

Helen Betz was grandma's friend and corset fitter. Corset sales were a sideline for her; she also owned a wallpaper store. Helen Betz would arrive at the farm in her big purple Cadillac, carrying her case of corset fitting paraphernalia. Helen Betz was a really big woman. Bigger than grandma. And, Helen Betz wore a lot of really garish makeup. If I were around, she would make over me, always leaving the scarlet imprint of her big puckered lips on my cheek. Then they would sit and gossip for a while before going upstairs to begin the process to determine just the right corset for grandma's frame. Springtime was when grandma would get her new corset.

In her later years, grandma lost a lot of weight, and the need for corsets. She had always walked with a bit of a limp, and it became much more pronounced. She could barely get up the stairs to her bedroom sometimes. She finally relinquished the driving. That's the part of remembering grandma I don't like.

Near the end of her life, she had several hospital stays. Each one was longer and more serious than the one before. Thinking back on it, I'm pretty sure the doctors mismanaged part of her care. But, times were different.

She knew that she was dying. Three incidents stand out in my mind that were among the saddest in my life. Those incidents all were related to grandma's decline. First, was the day I was visiting her in Good Samaritan Hospital, and she had no spirit left. Grandma was always happy to see me. We would talk about the farm, and grandpa and Dewey. But, that day she didn't say much of anything at all. Her eyes seemed dull, and she wasn't really interested in talking about anything. I was finishing graduate school, and she was worried about how I would make ends meet. My firstborn son was about six,

and the younger son was an infant. I told her how I planned to make it through the summer painting signs, and I was going to look for a teaching job. But, she didn't seem to hear.

That night, the hospital called at about two a.m. Grandma's heart had stopped. They resuscitated her, but they weren't sure she would live until morning. I raced to the hospital with my mom. Grandpa was probably ninety, and we agreed he should not go.

She was conscious when we got there. She was teasing her nurses, as she always did. We talked to the charge nurse (there were no doctors there at the time), and she told us that grandma seemed stabilized, and that we should probably go back home and get some rest.

The next day grandma was in intensive care. Her doctor was there and explained that grandma had taken a turn for the worse. As he put it, her body was just shutting down. Kidneys, heart, everything.

My mom and I went to her bedside. She was just sort of semi-conscious. The pastor from her church was there. I don't know if she was hallucinating, or what, but she said the strangest thing. She said "he's here for me." She wasn't talking about the preacher. She asked all three of us "can't you see him? He's here to take me."

I kissed grandma's cheek, and I told her we all loved her. She said "I know you do." And then I had to leave the room. That was the second really sad moment

Just minutes later, grandma was gone. We were in the ICU waiting room. The nurse asked if we wanted to go in and see her. I couldn't. I'm glad I didn't. I like that memory of her knowing that I loved her. She seemed happy.

On our way home, my mom told me that she couldn't tell grandpa. She wanted me to do it. I agonized all the way home about what to say, and what it might do to him. Grandpa was pushing ninety. I'll never forget walking into the living room where he and Dewey were watching TV. He looked up at me and smiled, with a look that was expectant of some sort of good news on grandma's condition.

I went to his chair and knelt down beside him, and the smile was gone. He knew. We both started to cry. I took his hand and all I could say was "she's not coming home."

"I knew she wouldn't," he said.

I took care of most of the arrangements. At the funeral grandpa was so tough. He had his best suit, and he even wore his hearing aid, which grandma could never get him to do. He greeted guests with a melancholy smile. He only cried a couple of times. But, it was really hard on him. Just before they closed the casket, he nearly fainted.

Grandpa lived several more years, and lived at home right up to just a few days before he passed away.

I like to believe that grandma's faith and spirituality were well founded. I like to believe that they're together, watching over the farm. Maybe Phoebe, and grandma's mother, who she never really got to know on earth, are there as well, along with all the other ancestors who walked these hills and hollows. Sometimes I think I can hear them. Especially in the springtime.