

The Inheritance

A Short Story by Susan Ioannou

Grandma died in early December. Winter lay heavy that year. The ground froze by the 5th, and the undertaker said no burial. Grandma must wait in a drawer until spring.

I was young. Later, Mother told me these things, after Father kept me home from the funeral. He said looking at Grandma's dead face would upset me. And whenever we waited for Mother at funeral parlours, the thick-sweet smell of carnations turned my stomach.

Besides, I wanted to imagine Grandma my own way: her smile wide as sunshine, a spray of forget-me-nots stuck in loose strands of bun-wound hair, and, as she bent toward me, the barn and spring orchard spread out grey-green behind. No weeping, no crimson drapes, no carpet plush under-foot. No hushed whispers, or hands grasped, or down-cast eyes. She ought to be dead softly, a soul hovering in sunlight; not some stranger rouged and powdered in the mortician's casket; not the emptiness, the finality, the sense of being robbed. With me, Grandma would be kept safe, despite having slipped into the upper air like a

good spirit of the Golden Age.

On the day of the funeral Mother told everyone I was home, sick. I kissed her goodbye. She wore her mink cape and black dress. Her hair was neatly waved, and her lipstick leapt crimson beneath powdered cheeks... A distant look misted her eyes. "Have fun, Mum." I had to say that. Did she understand? She didn't hit me. Wordless, she turned her back, and fumbled for the train ticket in her purse.

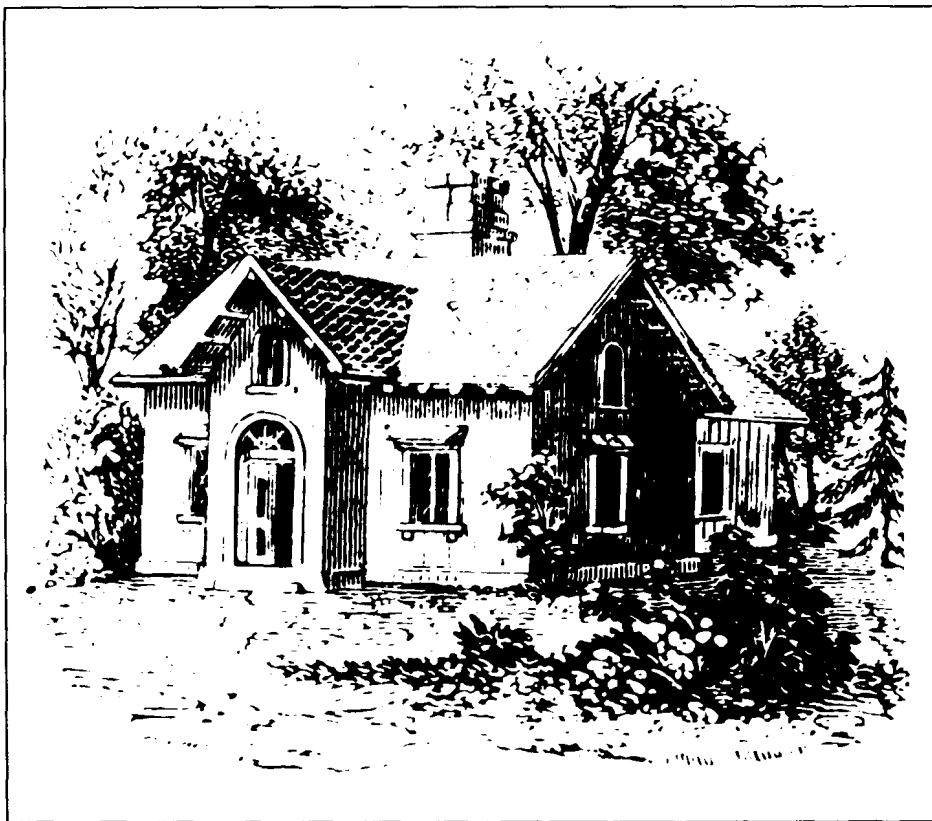
At school I worked long division problems all day, right through my favourite paper-bag lunch.

When Mother got back she was quiet. She slumped in the dim living room still in

her mink cape, sipping coffee till after midnight. When I crept in, she slid one arm round my waist. It was a good funeral, she nodded. They set the coffin on two wooden chairs in the front room, the way Grandma wanted. No funeral parlour. Yes, lots of flowers; she was surprised how many flowers. No, more chrysanthemums than carnations. And so many people. The front room hadn't bulged that full since the 80th birthday party. Everyone came: the Weitzels, the Leiskaus, the Merklinger boys, and cousins and farm neighbours she hadn't seen in ten years. Old Mrs. Wetlaufer died in September, and Aunt Leve moved into

The Willows last June. Yes, the minister talked a long time, and told what a fine woman Grandma was: her help to the church in younger years, her Christian courage at the untimely losses of husband and son. He read some sonorous lines from the Bible, Mother forgot which ones, and said a prayer for Grandma to find joy with the Lord. Then the hearse took Grandma away, and Aunt Ruby stayed on to supervise until Thursday. Uncle Hubert grumbled she wanted first grabs at Grandma's belongings.

In April the



ground thawed. Aunt Ruby, of course, took care of everything. Grandma looked well preserved in her drawer, she said, just a little rouge dusted off one cheek. Grandma had bought a steel case to enclose her coffin — waterproof, wormproof, just like her husband's. Two men from town were hired to sink her next to Grandpa and Uncle Arthur in the Lutheran family plot. Just outside the cemetery gates, Aunt Ruby said, three new houses were built that spring, and Johnny Merklinger had moved his mother, Grandma's best friend, into one.

Afterwards, Ruby took Grandma's pearls, the blue and white pitcher and basin, her Bible and the lace tablecloth. She felt superstitious about opals — did Mother want the engagement ring? The silverware Grandma willed to little Mary (that was me). No, the headstone really did not look that small, and would be ready in May. Would Mother please check when the time came.

So Grandma died and was buried. And I thought that was the end. Just a memory now and again, or an old photograph. I got older. I finished school. No more Grandma, I thought. I married. Then the dream started...

The farm house went up for sale. I drove back by myself, with no money, but hoping to buy it. It stood like a ship on the land, the woodshed a prow pointing into the past. The yellow brick walls were so long, I walked and walked the length, but never reached the end. Begonias still bloomed in the windows, and the blue-

grey shutters hung warm and rough in the sunlight. I ran my fingers over the slats, finding some loose and ready to fall.

As usual, the door from the orchard stood unlocked. The dining room hadn't changed, still weighed down with the massive black table, the chairbacks carved with gargoyle faces. The china cabinet leaned heavily into the room. The mirror behind its shelves shot back everything clearly, but where I stood, the reflection blurred.

Up the narrow, boxed-in staircase, the upper rooms opened, unchanged. Uncle Hubert's fat alarm clock crouched on the dresser, minus its spidery hands, the small door at the end of the landing invited, treasury of my past — baby carriage, ruffled clothes, trunks, a bird cage, yellowed books — piles dust-thick with memories, perched on the narrow open floor, casting down to the woodshed below. But when I bent and pushed through the door, the attic was gone!

A vast, barren hall yawned before me, like a rotted country church, crossbeams hung grey with moss. Thin streaks of sunlight sifted through cracks in the board walls. I stepped forward slowly. The floor sagged with each step, like wood sponged by fungus in spring. I stopped, afraid. Grandma, where are you? No answer. I backed to the door, and down the narrow steps.

Outside, a crowd of prospective buyers eddied and flowed, murmuring up from the plum trees, towards the old walls' trumpet vines. Nobody knew me. As I

drew closer, face after face blurred.

Again and again I dreamed of the house. Always I climbed to the attic. When I tried to cross the floor, it sagged, always I stopped and called out for Grandma, but could not see or hear her, although I felt she was near.

I found her on moving day. Finally Jay and I had bought our first home. With the unpacking mostly finished, we wanted to celebrate. I lifted Grandma's silver chest from a carton, wiped off the dust, and set it beside the sink. Sunlight filled the window above. In the distance spread a comforting blur of new green... I put my hand on the lower drawer. Then I remembered. Grandma was there. After she died, I tucked her into this chest, face upturned in the sunlight, smiling. But after so many years, what would I find?

The drawer stuck. I asked Jay to give it a tug. Up over the edge, showered a bright spray of yellow. "What th —!" Jay leapt back.

"That's just Grandma," I laughed, unprying the drawer from his grasp. Not a bone, not a bit of flesh. Grandma had turned to pure light, light that danced from drainboard and dishes, spilling into my hands.

I look at my mother now. Hips broadened by age, her legs grow heavy with fluid. Already her knuckles have stiffened. By the end of the day, her smile grows quiet, rouge a little smudged off. Although she still wears it short, sometimes I notice blue shadows, forget-me-nots blurred in her hair.

The Beanstalk, et al

A Short Story by Marvyne Jenoff

Jack hacked down the beanstalk with such fierce and exuberant leaps that the remaining stump reached well above his head. He flung down the axe, kicked at the giant to make sure he was dead where he lay, and ran off to find a girlfriend to whom he could boast. When he found her he brought her back to the stump of the beanstalk. There in the shelter of the few

remaining leaves Jack built them a simple house.

The giant's widow looked down through the hole in her cloud where the beanstalk had been, and she did not like what she saw. There, outside the little house were displayed the bag of gold, the hen that laid golden eggs, and the golden harp, all of which Jack had stolen from the giants' house. And there was Jack in front

of his girlfriend and a few passers-by, gesturing with his arms wide as if boasting about a fish he had caught.

Mrs. Giant could have killed them in one swoop. She could have simply let herself drop down through the hole in the cloud and landed on them and their house, doing away with herself in the process. But she didn't. For, by killing something so small, the principle went, she would