

*Flash Nonfiction***GRANDMA'S LETTERS**

PAIGE WALLACE

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Our correspondence began when I went to college. I remember my campus mailbox, a tiny aged steel door tucked into a wall. The little key that opened it, crunching metal gears as it cranked the lock. Hundreds of mailboxes on that wall, but only one held a letter from my grandmother.

She always used pretty stationery. Often a pale green, her favorite color, with sweet pea blossoms vining around softly scalloped edges.

She always wrote in the room she called her den. I remember sitting with her at the thick oak table as she crafted letters to friends and relatives. My little girl legs swung wildly below my chair, too short to reach the ground. My chubby arms stretched above my chest to reach the tabletop. Grandma's handwriting swirled and looped, a perfect example of the penmanship a proper young lady learns inside a one-room schoolhouse on the Nebraska prairie. I would "write" along with her, colorful crayon curls on an oversized pad of scratch paper.

Her letters told me the stories of her life. Stories of her neigh-

bors and relatives, courtships and deaths, plantings and harvests. Church picnics and dances at the Elks Lodge. The floats she saw in our hometown's Strawberry Festival Parade. Which of her beloved flowers were blooming, and what kind of pie she made yesterday.

She also sometimes wrote about the memories she carried with her from her past. The time Grandpa drove his new Model T Ford through a gate because he tried to stop it by yelling, "Whoa!" Memories of the baby they lost, their first child, because antibiotics did not exist yet—at least not for people who lived miles from a doctor, on a rural ranch, with little money.

Grandma also wrote to me when I lived in a small apartment with a boyfriend I thought I would marry. One morning, he woke me before my alarm.

"You're going to have a busy day at work."

"Why?" I asked, still groggy. I briefly considered my job as a news copywriter, then rolled over to get some more sleep.

"A plane just crashed into the World Trade Center."

By the time I had showered, the second plane had hit. It was, indeed, a busy workday, and a strange time. Like so many of us who lived through 9/11, I began to think about the fragility of life, the uncertainty of tomorrow. About the people we love.

The following Sunday, I wrote to Grandma. I told her about the wedding I had attended that weekend, four days after the attack. How the couple considered canceling, but ultimately decided they needed to go through with it. How the groom asked local friends to stand in at the last minute, because his groomsmen from the East

Coast could not get here, with planes grounded. How the caterer drove up to the reception in his food truck, with the words “Bomb the Bastards” blasted in spray paint across the cart’s metal siding. How it felt good to celebrate love in the wake of so much hatred.

She wrote back, right away. We began exchanging letters more intentionally and more often.

In one letter the following summer, I mentioned how much I hated the Fourth of July. Fireworks exploded right outside my second-story apartment window all night. My cat cowered underneath the bed. I felt like doing the same. Grandma wrote back that she, too, disliked the holiday. She said she once watched a little girl lose her hand in a fireworks blast, back in the day when explosive devices could be sold without warnings or legal limitations. This is not the kind of thing she would ever tell me in person. It was too graphic, maybe, or too sad. Written words made some stories possible.

When my relationship with the boyfriend ended, I took solace in my grandmother’s letters, in her reassurance that I would find the right person someday. I read her words, sitting alone in that second-story apartment, and tried to believe. I always trusted the stories she shared with me. Perhaps I could trust this, too.

What I loved most about her letters was that each one began with the same salutation: “Dear Paigey Girl.” No one ever called me that, except Grandma and Grandpa. It’s a nickname I will never hear spoken again. After seventy-seven years of marriage, they died within a month of each other.

Years later, as my childhood home was about to go up for sale, I

discovered a box of our letters in my mother’s desk drawer. Some from my grandmother, addressed to me. Some I’d written in return. I marveled at this. Through various moves and purges and life changes, we had saved each other’s letters. Somehow, they all ended up in my parents’ house, where my mother presciently thought to store them as a single collection.

I didn’t know this, though, when I picked up that unlabeled box. I unfolded the cardboard panels and immediately recognized Grandma’s handwriting. The first letter I reopened has two blurred and inky water spots where once you could clearly read the words she had written. These dots are not a flaw. They simply compound everything she was trying to say.

I reread every one of those letters, reabsorbing her stories, her curved script swirling through me and marking me with the permanence of pen on paper. Folded into each envelope, along with her letter, was an unwritten message that I’d not understood until that moment:

I took the time to write these pages, crease the paper, lick the envelope, affix the stamp. I formed the script that makes up your name. I remembered your address, by heart. I crunched the gravel down the winding driveway, pulled open the rusty mailbox door, and raised the flag. The postman will come, and he will carry my words to you.

There is a story to share. I’ve written it for you.