

Near Drownings

Without warning, Lauren's grandmother slipped right out of Lauren's grasp, as if the water beckoned to her.

By Candace Allan

Lauren's grandmother was in her rocker, pulled up to the kitchen table, the comforter over her legs. Lauren knew that underneath the tartan quilt, despite the heat, she would be wearing heavy stockings with her housedress and sturdy shoes. She didn't think she had ever seen her grandma's naked feet. Lauren stepped into her waiting arms to feel the cool loose flesh of her grandma's skin tight around her.

The old woman gently pushed Lauren an arm's length away and then cradled her granddaughter's face in her thin hands. "You're off to Toronto. Oh my, it will be different." Forced to meet her blue eyes, Lauren was lured, transported back to the youth lost somewhere in the clouded irises. God, to be a kid again and hear her grandma say, "Let's knock the dust off some albums and kick up the carpet." She used to spend whole weeks out there. Her grandma would take her down to the river and show her where to find gooseberries and saskatoons, and in the evening they'd make jam. While it cooked, she'd give Lauren home perms or teach her dance steps in the living room. But that was a long, long

time ago, it seemed to Lauren. Her grandma sat still now or rested in bed.

The old woman's arms dropped. The connection broke. Lauren felt weak in the stuffy room. Her grandma looked past her then, focusing on the spoon collection on the opposite wall. "We went through in 1910, and it was a city then in its own right. It'll have changed though, my goodness, yes. And we weren't there long. We spent more time in Winnipeg. Everyone did."

She motioned with her chin to the table in front of her. "Isn't this nice," she said. "Teddie made us tea. We had a bit of a bad morning, Teddie and I. A bit of a muddle. That's past though."

Uncle Ted, who lived with and cared for his mother, had business in Calgary that day. He had met Lauren at the door, hat on, keys in hand, prepared to leave the house. "Good to see you, Laurie. And you're headed east. Big city, Toronto. I was there in '65, it was big then." And then he had cocked his head and whispered down to her. "Gram didn't have a very good morning. She wanted to make bread." He straightened up and raised his

voice. "You're okay, then, Ma? I'm off. You be good."

It had been Lauren's father who had suggested she fill in as temporary caregiver. "It might be easier to get her to talk about the old days now," he'd told Lauren over breakfast, holding his cereal bowl with both hands, absently swishing the leftover milk back and forth. "She's started to slip. Into the past, I mean." Milk spilled over the rim of the bowl as he lifted his shoulders, the gesture indicating it was something they could still shrug off. "Just when she's tired."

Lauren couldn't figure out what it was that her dad wanted her to get from the old woman. But she quit her job three days before she was due to fly to Toronto and borrowed her dad's Buick for the drive from Calgary to Gairloch.

Lauren watched as her grandmother pleated the tablecloth between her fingers into perfectly even folds. "You know something that I'll never forget about Toronto—that was the first time I ever saw a woman wearing trousers." Seventy years later the old woman still had never worn pants. There was a long pause, a fade out,

Lauren thought, and then her grandma was back. “Teddie got the cookies out for us. They’re store bought but tasty. Lord, when did I last bake a cookie, you tell me.”

“Oh, Gram, you probably baked enough cookies for four lifetimes.”

“The boys liked the sugar ones.”

Lauren sat down with her and nibbled around the edge of a filled wafer. “I’ll have to get the recipe from you.”

“Oh, sure. Your dad would like that. He said mine were the best but you follow the recipe just how it says. Dang, I have that here, too.”

She didn’t get out of her chair but she looked over her shoulder at the drawers and cupboards behind her, shaking her head. It didn’t matter. Lauren hadn’t come for recipes. She spoke so timidly that the old woman didn’t hear her question the first time. She had to lean over the table towards her granddaughter.

“I said, ‘Can you tell me how you met Grandpa?’”

“I was a telephone girl and he was a lineman.”

“Did you think you’d marry him when you first met?”

Gram sat back in her chair and sighed deeply. “Lord, no,” she said. “No sooner than I thought I’d fly to the moon.”

“But you did.”

“I guess he convinced me. Your Grandpa was a charmer,” she told Lauren then. “I was sheltered. Young for my age. Young girls fall for charming men.”

For most of Lauren’s life she had seen her grandfather only on Sunday afternoons. On those occasions he had sat in a recliner and played solitaire. He chewed tobacco but never

spat it out. Lauren used to snuggle into the corner of the couch in that darkened room and eavesdrop on adult conversations. She remembered things she shouldn’t have heard, from grownups who got caught up in emotional matters and forgot she was there. But she couldn’t recollect any of what her grandfather ever said.

She wanted her grandma to deliver

and the following year there were nine more. I remember because they had to put in another cord board. See, they each could only handle 75 drops. But you know, I can’t remember what I had for lunch today.”

She paused for a moment, her hand on her belly, “Did I have lunch?”

Lauren didn’t know what to say. A small bird was fluttering at the feeder outside the kitchen window—a sparrow or a finch. Her grandma would be able to identify it if she drew her attention that way.

“It’s 2:30, Gram.” Uncle Ted would have made her lunch long ago.

She felt the older woman’s eyes studying her and watched her cautiously ease herself out of her rocking chair. She leaned on the table, adjusting her weight from it to the dark wooden cane. “Of course it is, Laurie. Of course.” The bird trilled at the window, ruffling its winter-white breast feathers. Almost instinctively, her grandma turned to the glass, as if she had felt the bird’s presence there. “Oh, my. Dickie bird is here to say hello.” She crossed the floor slowly and gently tapped on the



Illustration: Larry Bowhay

the other man to her, not the silent one, home on Sundays because the bar was closed, but the charmer.

“How long did you work for the phone company?”

“Oh heavens, I quit in ’24, two days before I got married.” She reached for another cookie, and dunked it in her cold tea. She was shaking her head, staring blankly at the china cup in front of her, not seeing the tea with the cookie crumbs floating on top or her own narrow, deeply veined hands laid flat on the table before her. “I know that in 1921 I worked exactly 223 lines

glass above the sink. “Hey there, my little fellow. Were you calling to me?” The bird stood stock still, a tiny crust of bread visible in its bill. “My little feathered friend,” she said, and the bird cocked his chestnut brown head to one side and then slowly dipped it in the opposite direction. “We’re friends, this little sparrow and I. We take care of each other.” As if her turning away had indicated an end to their communication, the bird flitted up out of view. She looked back to where it had been. “I’d like to do that, too. Just fly away. I’ve been thinking

about it for some time now. There's somewhere I'd like to go."

How long, Lauren wondered, was a long time? Weeks? Months? She'd tell her father and Ted—they could arrange an excursion. "Where would you like to go, Gram?"

"Up to Cataract Creek, past the Highwood House. I've got my things together, my dark glasses and my handbag. The sun would blind me today if I hadn't found my specs. Shall we bring something to drink, juice maybe?"

Panic was rising in Lauren from the pit of her stomach and washing over her, reaching into her fingertips. "Gram, I don't think..."

"Aren't you able to take me, Lauren? You've got a good car, haven't you? You're not worried about transport?"

Lauren was torn. Torn between being a little girl and a grown woman, between being the old woman's granddaughter and her temporary keeper. Her grandmother simply didn't go out anymore. Until that moment, she hadn't questioned the fact that her grandma hadn't gone out in years. She'd just come to accept it.

"What about Uncle Ted?" Lauren needed time to collect her thoughts.

But her grandmother had already taken the house key from its hook and was wrapping the thin, wire-framed glasses around her ears.

"I told Ted we might step out. Teddie laughed. He laughs at me a lot these days. It's my own fault, though. I just haven't felt like going out for a while."

It was almost ludicrous, the scene taking place. Lauren wanted to phone somebody, to sound an alarm. She didn't know when her grandmother had last left the house except to sit on the porch, and even those occasions were rare. Yet, though the old woman's request was so out of character, she didn't appear disoriented. She was uncannily clear and concise. But Lauren was convinced that no other family member would go along with this without holding a family conference and consulting a doctor first.

"Perhaps you can bring the car closer to the house, just mind Teddie's roses."

Lauren was compelled to obey her grandmother's instructions. If anyone's mind was disoriented, it was her own as she helped lock up, guided the old woman down the steps, moved the car and eased her grandma into it. She drove out of town slowly, cautiously, as if she were acting out a dream. The old woman shifted about in the vinyl seat, her one hand shielding her eyes from any light that could angle in despite the dark glasses.

"Are you all right, Gram?"

"I was just thinking that some things don't change, do they? They can't tear down the mountains or that blue Alberta sky, though I don't remember those two farm houses and there was a stand of trees up ahead on the left."

Her grandma's comments brought to mind that, though she was about to fly east to Ontario, Lauren was bound to this landscape. The soft blond rippling of the unharvested fields, stretching far across the foothills and the azure sky—it was her territory. She wanted her grandma to reveal some small bit of her roots in that familiar place. "Was it a good job, Gram, at the phone company?"

"It was one of the best jobs a woman could have, aside from teaching or nursing. In 1921, I worked 60 local lines and 163 rural. Good gracious, it seemed there was no end—everybody wanted a phone, but by dusty old 1932 your Grandpa took out more phones than he put in, and then, like so many folks, he was out of a job." She paused to sift through her purse for a package of hard candies, unwrapping one for each of them. "After that he drove for the dairy for as long as Curt Westly could keep him working. He delivered to families who just couldn't pay because Curt didn't like to cut off anyone with kids. Still, old Curt made it through the hard times to the boom. That's when he named it the Two Cities Dairy. He was an optimist all right. The two cities were Longview and Gairloch."

They were approaching Longview then, a scattering of buildings—the local hotel, a restaurant, the butcher's and two gas stations. Her grandma was laughing. "You know what they used to call this place? Little New York. Yep, this place was going to explode."

Lauren stopped at the gas station for a root beer; she was sticky and hot—and as nervous as when they had left. They turned west towards the steel grey mountains, the white peaks zigzagging against the blue sky. The rough road seemed to bother the old woman at first, especially when they bounced over the cattle guards. She groaned and held tight to the door handle but was sound asleep long before they turned off at Highwood House, her sweater pulled around her despite the heat.

Lauren knew the camping area at Cataract Creek would be shockingly different to her grandmother. It was divided into symmetrical circles, with neat gravel patches for tents and RVs and signs saying do this here and don't do that there. When she tapped her grandma's hand to rouse her, her skin was remarkably cool. "We're here, Gramma."

"We'll have to watch the kids then, around the water."

"Gram, we're at Cataract Creek. I'll help you out."

"Never mind helping me. Look after the boys. Keep them away from the edge and the fire, too. Don't make it so big this time."

Lauren knew she could start up the car and take her home, possibly even get her settled into bed before Ted came back, and if her grandmother later talked about the car ride it might just be taken as an old woman's raving. If she had paused to consider the possible consequences of her actions, she likely would have done just that, but she got out of the car, inhaling the woody air as she moved around to open the passenger door. "Are you going to get out, Gram?"

"Shush. Look, there's a bird. In the tree just above you."

Lauren saw the brown sparrow,

twittering an arm's reach away. Her grandma was stepping out, but lost her footing and fell back. "Don't you bring up my slipping into the creek again, either. Just mind the boys."

Lauren took hold of both of the old woman's thin arms and helped her plant her feet firmly on the grassy earth. It appeared they were alone that weekday afternoon, though there were a couple of tents further down the road and two silver trailers behind them. "I wanted to bring cold chicken but he always insisted we cook over a fire. My dad was the same way."

"I think your dad was right," Lauren said, deciding to address her in whatever far away place she was in.

"Lord, it was scary falling in. I was trying to pull up a little willow to plant in the yard. The creek just took me along, tumbling over and over. I couldn't rise above it. Finally he hauled me out."

"Grandpa pulled you out?"

"No, daddy. My daddy."

Near drownings, Lauren thought. There had been three in the family—her grandma's, a cousin's in a crowded pool, and her own.

"Let's go down to the creek, shall we?" her grandma said, attempting to walk away, but immediately she stumbled and leaned her weight heavily on her granddaughter's arm. Then she turned and studied Lauren, her grey eyes barely visible behind the dark glasses. Perhaps it was the limitation of her own movements that brought her back to the present. "Will you help me down to the water, Laurie? It's so pretty here. I don't mind going slowly if you don't. There's often wild flowers along the water, we could bring back a fistful."

Lauren guided her around gopher holes, tumbleweeds and gangly seedlings. "It's awful being helpless in the water, isn't it Gram? Remember the winter I fell through the ice? That was the worst, being able to come to the surface but not to break through. I could see the others though, above me."

"Oh, dear Lord, yes, it's horrible," she answered, but then their attention

was taken away by the sight of the wide creek rushing by, deep blue, spurting up between rock piles and rolling over cast away dead wood. Without warning, Lauren's grandmother slipped right out of Lauren's grasp, as if the water beckoned to her.

Afterwards, Lauren could close her eyes and see each motion of the old woman's losing her footing and stumbling to her skinny knees, frame by horrifying frame, but right then she was incapable of preventing any of it. She saw her grandma's left shoe turn end over end and hit the water. It was carried off like a hush puppy boat, travelling swiftly towards the lower falls.

"Dear God, Gram, are you okay?" The tension inside Lauren snapped. "This whole thing was stupid. It was a stupid mistake. What were we thinking of? Why did I listen to you?" She could see her grandma was holding herself rigid. She had fallen hard on her knees. Who knows how badly she may have jostled herself, maybe her head too. She might say any crazy thing now. She was wincing—adjusting her dark glasses—and staring down at her stockinged foot. "Talk to me, Gram."

The old woman closed her eyes, her chest rose up and fell, rose and fell. "My leg," her voice was hoarse, "it's cut."

Damn it, Lauren thought. Damn her. There she was in the wilderness, with her 83-year-old grandmother suffering a cut leg and a missing shoe. Lauren scrambled down to the water's edge, untucked her T-shirt, dipped the lower half into the icy water and went back to press it against the badly scraped leg. "Could you scoop me up some more of that to rinse my face?" her Gram asked, breathing heavily. Lauren got the water, letting it trickle from her own hands into her grandma's cupped palms. "I was right," she told Lauren, "about the flowers. I'm almost sitting on some black-eyed Susans and there's a clump of purple daisy over here, too."

Forget the damn flowers! Lauren

wanted to yell at her. “Gram, we have to get you out of here.”

“I wanted to tell you,” the old woman said, “I wanted to tell you something else.”

“Can you tell me in the car, Gram? Can we just concentrate on the task at hand?” They worked in silence after that, her gram dragging herself up with Lauren as support, then leaning most of her weight into her granddaughter, scuffing the shoeless foot behind her. Perspiration blurred Lauren’s vision but she managed finally to belt her grandmother into the car, dusting the bits of twigs and sharp grasses from her one stocking. “It would be nice to bring back a few of the black-eyed Susans, just as a reminder of the trip.”

By that time Lauren had had enough. She went back and snatched three flowers out of the dirt but didn’t bother to wet the roots in the river. Weren’t the missing shoe and cut leg enough of a reminder? They left the camping area in silence and were almost at Highwood House before the old woman spoke. “He asked me to marry him down there. He wasn’t showing off for anyone. We were all alone. It was so nice. He had me sit down on a blanket and gave me a bunch of wild flowers, whatever he could gather up and he told me, he told me...” The rest was inaudible. She was asleep again.

She slept soundly as the car rolled over the brown foothills. The enormity of what Lauren had done was still sinking in along with the explanations she’d have to come up with, when an RCMP cruiser passed her just north of Longview, signalling for her to pull over. Having located them, the officer insisted on following the car back to town. Her grandma’s head was still lolling against the headrest but Lauren saw that somewhere along the way she’d slid her foot out of the other shoe and shuffled it under the seat. It did make more sense to have left without them, than to have lost one. The officer must have radioed ahead and sent messages to the house because

when Lauren approached, both her parents and Uncle Ted were pacing across the front yard.

Ted was opening the door before the car had stopped. “Hello, Teddie,” his mother said, waking. Lauren prayed she wouldn’t be confused, that she would take some responsibility for the crazy trip. “We’ve only been for a car ride, Teddie. Just a lovely ride in the car. But I do need to lie down. I just need to put my head on the pillow before dinner.”



Uncle Ted assisted the old woman into the house and Lauren’s mother fluttered after them. Lauren’s father followed close behind his daughter. “I seriously question your actions, Lauren,” he said to her back. “We were sure you’d taken her to the hospital, that something was wrong.” She could feel his angry eyes boring into her.

“I’ve been questioning my actions all afternoon, Dad,” she told him. She left him there on the walk looking perplexed and stepped past her mom and uncle to follow her grandma.

She sat in the wooden chair beside her grandmother’s bed and thought about opening a window. The cloying scent of lavender hung there. Lauren helped arrange the comforter over her grandma’s legs. “I’ll put on fresh stockings when I wake up, they won’t see the scrape.” The old woman lay back, motioning to her cluttered bedside

table. “Have a chocolate, sweetie. Your mom brought those out last time. She’s awfully good to me, your mom. I like to have a nibble before bed.”

Lauren picked up the pictorial guide to the swirled dark strawberry nougats, almond crescents and cherry creams. Her grandma’s eyes were closing. “Laurie,” she whispered, “can you put the flowers in water?”

Lauren knew she should have spent the week here. She wanted to know about the charmer and the words he had whispered to convince her grandmother to marry him. She wanted it chronicled on clean white sheets in her mind and now she was afraid it was too late to creep inside her grandmother’s heart and hear the stories.

The old woman opened her eyes again, her voice lifted, though her body seemed to sink further into the mattress. “Did you see if he got the flour? It was the last thing I mentioned to him, bring back a sack of flour and at least I can make bread.”

“Gram, are you hungry? I think they’ve got dinner on in the kitchen.”

“Hungry? Oh no, just awfully tired.” She closed her eyes again, drifting, but then raised her hand limply from the comforter. “I think I’ve left a cherry chocolate. You like those...the cherry ones...” In seconds her chest rose and fell, heavy with sleep.

Lauren knew they expected her to join them in the kitchen, to seek a reasonable explanation from her, scolding the way you do an adult child. She felt heavy, weighted, sinking down against the chair. She closed her eyes, and the last thought she concentrated on was a deep desire to wake with her grandmother, so they could surface together.

Candace Allan’s work has been broadcast on CBC Radio’s *Alberta Anthology* and published in *Canadian Living* magazine and the *Windsor Review*. When not writing, she is employed as a shepherd by her four teenage children.