

Grandma

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MY FATHER and his brothers all called their mother "Ma" and their father "Pa," which I used to think very tacky until I learned more about older life and ways in the South—mainly from reading *Gone With the Wind*, where the O'Hara girls, appropriately for the times, called their own parents by those names. But I never knew my Grandmother Drake, who died thirteen years before I was born; so in the back of my mind, I usually thought of her simply as "Grandma" and let it go at that. But always, for the Drake brothers themselves, she was "Ma." And they had all adored her.

Her name was Elizabeth Burks, but I think Pa (I did actually call him that because I knew him: he lived until I was nearly eight) and everyone else in the community—out at Maple Grove—called her Betty. And I've been told that, if I had been a girl, I would have been named for her: Elizabeth Currie, with that latter name in remembrance of my maternal grandfather. Of course, I always thought of her as an old woman: Pa was over ninety when he died—a Confederate veteran. And so I couldn't imagine her otherwise. But actually she was only sixty-two at the time of her death—for

those days considered an old woman, I believe. And they all said she had literally worked herself to death: for her husband and five sons (her two daughters had died). And also she had grieved inordinately over the untimely death of the younger daughter, Eashel (really named Sarah Adeline): Eashel was her pride and joy, and she simply never got over it.

I suspect, of course, that both accounts of her death were correct: her love made her spend herself utterly for her family; but, by the same token, her love made her more than susceptible to any loss from that quarter. Grandma had worked, indeed she had loved her life away, to hear them tell it. And she must have been a wonderful woman, But somehow I never resented her wonderfulness as I did her daughter, Eashel's. I used to hear so much about Eashel's perfections that I became weary of the whole idea: surely no one could ever have been so beautiful, so talented, and so good. But Grandma wasn't so held up as a paragon of all virtues. Why? Well, for one thing, she lived long enough to more or less realize her life: one could never sit around and ponder on what she might have done, if only she had lived. She had raised a fine

family, she had served her husband devotedly, and so there she was—and her life. You could “see” them both, and there could really be no romantic speculation about them.

But still I felt deprived for not having known her: Pa was the only one of my grandparents I actually ever knew. And I was very envious of my friends and playmates who had four living grandparents—to love and be spoiled by. And I felt cheated: I ought to have had a grandmother in my life, I knew. Surely, her existence would have opened new horizons for me, given me a new perspective on the whole family and my place in it, to say nothing of giving me a firmer grasp on understanding the generations of men—how my parents were themselves children too and thus had no absolute stranglehold on authority and power. It always made me come up with a start to think that my parents were themselves someone else’s children and had to conduct themselves accordingly. Perhaps that’s difficult enough for anyone to imagine. But I felt deprived, as I said, and wished very much that I could have known Grandma.

I’ve often wondered what her own family life was like. I used privately even to wonder whether Pa had considered himself as marrying beneath himself when he married her. Now of course I have no overt evidence for such a speculation at all. But he had come out to Tennessee from his home in Powhatan County, Virginia, after the Civil War (trying to recoup his failed fortunes, which I’m sorry to say he never did). And his family had been well-to-do landholders who had owned slaves. And he had been sent off to school to an “academy,” from which he ran away to join the Confederate Army. And I gather that he had come from mighty good folks. His name was William Ball Drake, and he was from Ballsville, Virginia, where he grew up in the house of his maternal grandfather, Isham G. Ball. I’ve even been told that this was the same

Ball family to which George Washington’s mother belonged, but I’ve never lost any sleep over that. But he *was* an aristocrat—in his looks and very much in his demeanor. I remember his looks—the aquiline profile and the tall slim figure erect and proud (until he broke his hip). And I’ve heard about his demeanor—imperious and peremptory on occasion and often not terribly easy to get along with, especially as he grew older.

But Grandma was apparently the wheel behind the wheel there, and my impression was that they all might have starved to death if it hadn’t been for her. She was a worker in her house and garden and all that concerned her family; certainly she never seemed to take a seat, to talk over old times and old ways, as Pa was reputed to have done. In fact, I’ve often wondered whether, with all due respects to everybody concerned, Pa wasn’t just naturally lazy. Yes, I know he must have had to come down from the slave-holding days, to make all the adjustments everybody had to in those days (he came out to West Tennessee in the late 1860’s). But I suspect there was something of a constitutional weakness there too. Not so with Grandma, about whose reminiscences I never heard a word: she apparently wasn’t much of a talker or else didn’t have much time to be. And perhaps it all comes down to the same thing.

But anyhow, I can’t be sure that Grandma was “beneath” Pa all that much. It was her little farm they lived on—the home place, they called it; and it was she who kept things going. And if some of her own kinfolks—the ones I knew later on—seemed a little on the tacky side, perhaps that was my own lack of understanding. They apparently had been landholders all along, though I suspect they never owned many slaves. And I imagine now that they were part of the large body of yeoman farmers who populated the South both before and after the war—living on their own small farms but with no high flying and beholden to nobody in

this world and fiercely independent. Again, this is mostly surmise on my part. But the other members of her family I came to know later on—cousins, mostly—were not people of any worldly ambition. They were well content to occupy whatever niche Providence had placed them in and seemingly had no higher aspirations. A number of them even intermarried with the Woods—my mother's family, though she and my father were not actually kin to each other. And the Woods were not long on the things I had come to value like education and self-improvement either, though, like my father's family, they were people capable of great affection and "feeling." But then, as someone has remarked of such folk, they didn't any of them *talk* about the good life: they simply *lived* it. That construction is certainly possible, as I look back on all of them now. And there's a lot to be said for it too, certainly in the light of our characteristic American middle-class itch to let us then be up and doing. (Of course, as some wise soul has long since pointed out, Longfellow never did prescribe *what* it was we were to do; and there's the rub.)

But anyhow, was that one reason why I always felt uneasy in the presence of talk about Grandma—that somehow it was she, the more humbly born of the two, who kept things going, who really raised the family, who made it all possible—the life they led, the affections they shared, she who had not the background and the manner that Pa certainly had? Did I somehow resent her living the good life rather than talking about it? Did I somehow feel this was a reflection on Pa and his background in the Old Dominion? Was her life too narrow, too confined for anything like wider knowledge, much less, sophistication? Was I even perhaps just a little ashamed of her?

I've often wondered. She was apparently literate, but I never heard of her indulging any particular taste for literature. Perhaps her reading was confined to

the Bible and the Sunday School quarterly. And think of this: she was never on a train in her life! We can hardly imagine such a thing, and certainly the Drakes were something of a traveling group, for those days. Pa went back to Virginia several times for Confederate reunions and to see his family there, and Eashel went with him. Uncle John, who later became a Methodist preacher, had even gone to school for a brief time out in Texas, and later to the Vanderbilt Divinity School. Later on, Daddy even went to New York to market and to New Haven, Connecticut, to attend a Winchester Repeating Arms convention; but this of course was after he was out in the world, established in the hardware business. But by the time I came along, neither he nor my mother ever expressed much interest in travel (it wouldn't have bothered either one of them if you had told them they could never leave the county again), whereas, as long as I can remember, I very much wanted to go places and see the sights. But think of Grandma never riding on a train! The first time I heard this I could hardly credit it: surely, she must have gone to Memphis to shop; surely there were people there she wanted to see. But it was not so. She could do all the shopping her time and her means allowed in Woodville, the county seat; and whom did she have to visit away from home anyhow? All her family lived right there in that one county. So where was there, really, for her to go? It's hard for us today to imagine such a life, but I never heard that she was dissatisfied in any way with hers.

But again, what passions, what desires might have been hers, if only her circumstances had been different? For all I know, she might have longed desperately to get away, to try herself in the wider world; but the conventions of the day, the exigencies of her home and family life must have made any such thoughts seem not only out of the question but even downright treasonable as well. But again

I don't know. There's nothing to go on here. In some ways, she even seems colorless, with few anecdotes told about her (not nearly so many as about Pa!). And I never heard much about what she said in casual conversation, as they sat on the front porch or round the dinner table. But perhaps that's indicative too: she had no time for such matters, her work was too pressing. And yet she must have given all her family a great love: they all adored her, as I've said. And later, when they were all old men, they could scarcely talk about her without tears. They could not have been so moved had they not been given a great deal, I'm sure. But that's the enigma of Grandma. Whereas, on the one hand, I used to feel that I had heard entirely too much about Eashel—that all the family were, knowingly or not, trying to turn her into a legend, I never felt that I knew enough about Grandma—except of course how much they all loved her. And was that her reward, and was it enough—to be carried so long afterwards in memory and in love?

Pa, on the other hand, was very different indeed; and the tales about him were legion, especially as he got older. But then he had the time or, rather, he took the time to be remembered. And he was very colorful too, with a mind and a will that you couldn't have changed with a sledge-hammer. And once it was made up, it was like concrete. Not so with Grandma, who, I gather, especially with outsiders, was shy, diffident. Did she feel that a woman's place was merely that of the center of the family and let it go at that—the wheel behind the wheel—and was she content with that? Many people today might find such a status not to their taste, but I never heard anything to indicate that she found it offensive. In the family photographs, of which a good many survive, Grandma is always half-hidden behind somebody (they said she always hated having her picture taken) as if reluctant to put herself forward. And she looks not meek but perhaps serene

there. Surely, though, she must have known who she was and where she was, even, more important, where she was going. Her eyes indicate as much there and the thrust of her chin. Quiet and retiring she may well have been when confronted with the wide world; but, as someone else has said, it was enough for her, like many women of that time, to be rather than to *do*.

Thus the "color" surrounding Grandma was mostly provided by Pa and a few members of her own family—Aunt, for instance. Aunt, who was Grandma's aunt, later married, as his second wife, my mother's grandfather and thus further complicated relationships between the two families—"one of those Wood-Burks arrangements," as one of the cousins somewhat peremptorily dismissed it. And Aunt was the finest cook in the world and the best housekeeper and so on and so forth, Grandma always taught all her family. And there were many tales about her and my Great-grandfather Wood. Once when asked who had ironed the clothes, which apparently were not so crisply done up as they should have been, she observed drily that "Susan [a colored servant] had *folded* the clothes." Another time, when my great-grandfather had come into town to buy a new suit of clothes, he took one look at himself in the new three-way mirror and somewhat querulously asked, "Adeline"—Eashel had been named for her—"why didn't you tell me I was bow-legged?" To which she replied, "I've been knowing it for twenty years but never thought it worth saying anything about."

And there was Grandma's own sister, Aunt Fannie, with whom she was more than commonly intimate. And there were many tales about her too, I believe. But the overwhelming fact of her life was that, within a year of Grandma's death, in the winter of 1917, Pa and Aunt Fannie, who was a widow with many children, decided to get married. And of course the Drakes were all scandalized: they thought their

father, who surely must have been more lonely than anything else, had showed scant respect for their mother and, furthermore, had acted like an old fool. Later on, after several years of marriage, they separated—why I'm not able to say. But it was not until I was nearly grown that I even learned of their marriage. It was all something that the Drakes simply preferred to ignore, I gather. And never once, around me, did they refer to Pa's remarriage: they apparently wanted to forget the whole thing. And it was a cousin, on Aunt Fannie's side of the house, that told me all about it.

I don't feel that I've come to terms with Grandma very well here: there seems so little to tell. And yet perhaps that's the key to her whole character: nothing happened to her. Her life was thoroughly quiet and domestic, and she stayed at home and looked after her family. She never *went* anywhere, she never *did* anything; and yet she was apparently so loving and so much beloved. My father told me that when he went home for the last

time to see her before her death, he sat for a long time before the fire, with his head in her lap, neither of them saying a word to each other, perhaps sensing that words would be useless anyhow on what might be their last time together. In fact, I gather that, with Grandma, words were always somehow superfluous: I've heard very few things she ever said, and even fewer anecdotes told about her. But again, she simply *was*. And who among us now in these latter days can say that she did not thereby realize her life?

When I was home for Christmas some years ago—almost ten, I guess it was, Uncle Buford, with whom I always stayed after my parents had died, remarked, seemingly apropos of nothing, that the following morning would mark the fiftieth anniversary of Grandma's death (he even gave me the exact time but I've forgotten it). And I marveled that, after all those years, her death—and her life—could still mean so much to him. But, as I said, I'm nearly ten years older now; and I don't wonder at it at all any more.