**A Place to Run to**

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I was always coming up with plans for running away. One day after summer camp, when I was supposed to walk the two miles home from the local park, I got seven-year-old-side-tracked with my newest scheme. At camp we had learned to make a chain out of beer tabs (this was the 70’s), and I began collecting them along the road. I took the round-about way, planning how I would open a store to sell my beer tab necklaces so I would never have to go home. Just as I was wondering how many necklaces it would take to purchase a hot-dog at the A & W, my mom’s old Mustang stopped in front of me. “I’ve been worried sick!” she called out her rolled-down window. After she scooted me into the car and scolded me about the grungy beer-tabs spilling out of my pockets, I told her about my plans to open shop.

When we got home, my mother went to the linen closet and pulled down a hard-shell red carrying case the size of a hatbox. I undid the gold latches, lifted the hinged lid, and stared in awe at the mirror encircled with white ruffles on its underside. A freckled girl with blondish-brown hair escaping her two braids stared back.

“Put in anything you’ll need for running away,” my mom told me, then slid it under my bed.

The first year I packed my favorite toys – a Barbie, a jump-rope, a coloring book – rotating them out until the departure day arrived. A couple years later, it was PJs, a comb, an old toothbrush, a pair of socks, and underwear. I often forgot about the suitcase until another one of my father’s brutal spankings, after which I always pulled it out to make sure everything was still there, trying not to drip tears onto the ruffled silk lining.

“Where will you go?” my mother asked one such evening when she saw me repacking.

“Grandma’s. She told me I could,” I said, and pushed the case back under the bed until nightfall. Everyone always ran away when it was pitch dark, but I could never stay awake long enough.

I liked my grandmother because she let me eat the olives from her martinis. She lived an hour and a half away from my father’s wrath, and she had once said, “Anytime you want to run off, you just call me.” I figured that meant I could move into her blue bedroom with the princess bed, the one that had belonged to her daughter before it had become a musty guest bedroom.

By the time I was ten, pulling out the red suitcase had become a regular thing, and I found out about my fake grandparents. Some other children came to swim in my grandparents’ pool at the same time my little sister and I were swimming. I called out to my grandmother when she opened an upstairs window to watch us.

“She’s not your grandmother. She’s ours!” a strange young girl had yelled at me.

I put my hands on my hips, ready to stand my ground, but my mother swept us quickly into the car, wet bathing suits and all. My sister was five years younger, so she cried about our swimming being cut short. On the way home, my mother perfunctorily explained that when she was only nineteen and left Germany following the war, she had worked for my fake grandparents as their maid. She had slept in their guesthouse out back and they had practically adopted her. They sent her to college for two semesters until she met my father and got married.

But it was years before I figured out why my fake grandmother drank so much whenever we visited. She would disappear upstairs with a headache while my mother and fake grandfather lay in lounge chairs around the pool, drinking and joking. I remember my mother once saying to him, “I don’t know what she’s so upset about. I told her we were coming.” And Grandfather answering, “Maybe she’s afraid you still sunbathe naked!” My mother whacked him on the arm and shifted the straps on her bikini as she took another sip of vodka.

Whenever we returned from our fake grandparents’ house, we had enough money for extra school supplies and new clothes. On weekday evenings, when my father had finished rampaging about problems at work – after he had downed his Scotch and settled into one of the cushioned swivel seats in our small living room – he sometimes remarked about our new clothes and how impressed he was by how my mother could stretch a dollar. “Back to school sale,” she would say as she crossed her legs.

The next time we visited, no strange kids came to swim, and I realized I didn’t mind that they were only fake grandparents. I liked their pool and fancy house. Lunch was the typical pickled herring on crackers because they always ate out. Afterwards, when we had to wait an hour before going back in the pool – while my little sister napped, and my mother and grandfather disappeared somewhere – I wandered through the large home. I explored the mahogany and red velvet den with all its gold-trimmed books, and tiptoed upstairs to sit in one of the silky blue chairs of the princess bedroom. I found my fake grandmother there and we talked. It wasn’t like normal talk. Her words were spoken softly, like a secret. I told her about the little red suitcase. “Sometimes a girl just needs to get away,” she said, her words hanging in the air like the smoke from her long, thin cigarette.