**Little Stone House**

Tawnya Gibson

There is a little stone house nestled amid the pine trees in a small town in western New Mexico. If I try hard, when I’m still and concentrating, I can hear the breeze above my head. With my eyes closed, I can feel what it was like to swing under those towering trees, feet dipping into the canal or stand and rock on the stone bird bath, sloshing the water just to the edge and back again, or how it felt to run through the brown grass once Grandma had that long, black hose dunked into the irrigation ditch, trying to provide a little respite from the golden July heat.

This house was where I spent parts of my summers. Early one morning, we’d climb into the back of my grandma’s canary yellow pickup and settle in for the two-hour climb up into the mountains. One hour in, we’d stop at the gas station for a little break, untangling hair with fingers, rubbing arms numb from the wind, and buy Welch’s strawberry soda and grape Jolly Rancher sticks. When we finally pulled up to that house, standing up in the bed of the pickup, urging it to go faster, one of us would open the gate wide and run alongside as my grandma pulled in. We’d pile out in one motion, anxious to explore and play and gather our favorites from around the house, treasures discarded at the last visit: the metal elephant whose trunk moved back and forth, my mom’s doll from when she was a child, the bingo set. After staking our claim to a bedroom, we’d simply be…free. Two weeks of nothing and boredom and wide-open space stretched ahead.

In the back bedroom, the one with the patchwork carpet, the one I always tried to choose, was a thick caramel brown edition of the complete works of Shakespeare with a red embossed cameo on the cover. I remember the summer when I was nine, reading the book in its entirety and falling in love with all things England. I spent hours sprawled on that carpet, at the foot of the bed, reading, lost in my world. Once extricated from my reading, usually forced out by my grandmother’s admonishment to “get some fresh air,” I would wander the fields, lost in thought.

Behind the home were buildings full of treasures: rusty license plates, beautiful blue-gray agates, electric pole insulators, pottery, cars—relics that stood still and tried to tell a story of a different time but mostly served to fill in for whatever our imaginations wanted. One of the buildings had a squeaky porch where, halfway down a board had rotted, leaving a sizeable hole. I can’t count how many times I tried to play different scenes in my head, writing story after story, culminating with my leg getting caught and needing to rest and read while I recovered.

My favorite part of that stone house was the kitchen. There was a mid-century fridge that made a deep latching noise when shut. It would always house my grandma’s favorite sandwich spread and anything else we brought to eat for our stay. The metal cups and the table were beautifully representative of the ’50s, and I loved how the feel of the kitchen was brighter and more open than the rest of the house. Just off the kitchen, you could step down onto a covered porch that was always full of firewood. The deep smell of piñon, stacked and waiting in that room, made you heady and immediately connected you to your place in the high desert. It was often the first thing you smelled as Grandma opened the house for the summer and the last thing you smelled as you jumped back into the back of the truck for the drive home. It was what you smelled every time you ran outside, screen door slamming behind you, racing for the swings. The kitchen was the great connector: outside to inside. Porch to play. Alone to together.

My grandmother kept scarves and dresses and jewelry from her past at this home where my mother was raised. Because she no longer lived there full time, things stood still and kept and used with each visit. Later, older, I would pour over drawers and closets and dress up in her scarves and skirts and jewelry. As I entered high school, I was given a green knit skirt and shirt set from that closet, and I loved pairing the skirt with Earth Day t-shirts and the sweater with ripped jeans. A little of my grandma in the ’40s updated for her ’90s granddaughter. I was certain there was never anyone as elegant in the ’40s as her, even when I was old enough to understand that elegant was not a word used to describe much of anything in my parent’s hometown, full of ranchers and farmers and hard work, miles from anywhere. But to my childhood eyes, pouring over scarves and costume jewelry and dresses, it was only full of elegance and grace and stories. I thought, for certain, that my grandma had LIVED. It’s funny now to see that she just…lived. The difference was years; I had few, and she had many, and the many is where the stories are born.

Sometimes I can’t quite discern which memories from that house are mine and which are embedded stories from my mom—taken over, fuzzy, and morphed. Other times, I can remember things so clearly that I startle—a smell, a sound, a feeling. Our wooden screen door slams as my son comes in, and suddenly it’s the metal creak of the screen door emblazoned with an “S” that I hear. A taste, a smell, or a sound…and I’m right there again, ten years old, dreaming of my whole life while running through the kitchen to hang upside down on that swing, hair brushing the pine needles below.