Shame

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The year was 1973. I was looking out the window of my eighth-grade history class when a tiny, stooped old woman came walking up the sidewalk to the front door of the junior high school. I sat up straight in my desk, shocked. It was my grandmother! She didn't know how to drive, and my mom and her sister had finally talked my grandfather into giving up his car, so I knew instinctively that she had walked from her house on College Street to the school. It was only about a six-block distance, but, for one thing, she was 80-something years old and not in the best physical or mental condition, to say the least, and, for another, hardly anybody ever walked anywhere in Nashville, Arkansas. What was my grandmother doing, walking to my school? Was she lost? Had she lost IT? Why was she here? Somebody would see her and possibly connect her to me! I would have to talk to her in front of my friends or, even worse, in front of some of the more popular kids by whom I yearned to be accepted. I would have to ask somebody to take her back home, and horror of all horrors, maybe I would have to go with them. I was mortified. Nobody's parents, much less grandparents, came to junior high. She looked like something off "The Waltons" with her baggy old cotton dress and rimless spectacles.

The only child of parents who were 43 years old when I was born, I was one of the few kids in my group of friends who had grandparents born in the 1800s. My classmates made fun of me for the old-fashioned, frugal ways that I had picked up from my grandmother, such as scraping out every last bit of the slimy egg from its

shell when we were making brownies. I wouldn't have dreamed of asking one of my friends to go to my grandparents' decrepit house in the middle of town; it had that old-person smell about it, no air conditioning, my grandfather's "razor strop" in the bathroom, and a chamber pot—a chamber pot!—under the bed in the guest room. Most of my friends' grandparents lived out in the country, which was much more prestigious than living in town—there were creeks to swim in, dogs and cats to play with, barns to have slumber parties in, horses to ride. If somebody had gone to my grandparents' house with me, my grandmother might have sat us down to do some embroidery, and my grandfather would have just stared at us, waxen-faced, saying nothing, the way he always did.

Now, here was this grandmother, my mother's mother, at my school. Several minutes passed, during which I suppose she went to the school office and found out which classroom I was in. I was sitting near the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom, which was entered from the back. I heard the classroom door open. I didn't dare turn around to look, but I knew with absolute certainty that she had walked into the room. I heard her sit down in an empty desk in the back row. A few students turned around and giggled. I was the littlest person in the room, but I tried to become even smaller, hiding my body in front of the boy behind me so that she couldn't see me. I prayed for the floor to open and swallow me up. Nashville is a small town where everybody knows everybody else—this very grandmother had been my father's first-grade teacher, and his mother had given my mother piano lessons, many years before my parents grew up and got married—so undoubtedly all the kids

in the room, and the teacher, too, knew that the old lady was “Miss Annye Jim” and that she was my grandmother. I wanted to die.

I sat immobilized in my desk, my mind racing—what to do? where to go? I couldn’t call my mother and ask her to come and get my grandmother. My mother was at the hospital in Little Rock with my father, who was recovering from surgery for a cerebral aneurysm. He had collapsed at work at Nashville’s only bank a few weeks before and had been rushed to the Howard County Hospital, and then on to Baptist Medical Center in Little Rock for emergency surgery. He had been in the hospital for quite a while, and my mother stayed with an old college friend in Little Rock most of that time, making the two-and-a-half-hour drive back to Nashville occasionally to pick up clothes and check on things at home. I stayed with Aunt Ruth, who was my dad’s aunt, and Charlotte, my dad’s unmarried sister, who wouldn’t allow me to call her “aunt” because she said it made her feel old. I didn’t comprehend the severity of this weirdly spelled thing called an aneurysm. When my mother came home, sometimes for just a few hours before heading back to the hospital, I would usually pester her about needing a pep squad uniform or staying overnight at a friend’s house or some other matter of grave importance to a 13-year-old.

I stood up and marched to the door in the back of the room, averting my face from the side of the room where my grandmother sat. So far, to her credit, she hadn’t made a peep, and I guess I thought that if I made eye contact she might say something in her quavery old lady voice (“Lynn? Is that you?”) and then my humiliation would be complete and I would never be able to show my face at school again. I would

never be popular, never be a cheerleader or on the homecoming court or asked on a date by a football player. I would have to go to school in Dierks, or Lockesburg, or some other town that was close enough to get to every day but far enough away that nobody would know me.

I banged out of the classroom and made a beeline to the school office, my face burning and my heart pounding. “My grandmother is in my classroom!” I blurted out to the receptionist. “What do I do?” The receptionist asked me which classroom she was in, and then she consulted briefly with the principal before leaving the office. I sat down in the office and waited with my face in my hands. I can only guess that the kind and understanding receptionist went to the classroom, led my thankfully docile little grandmother out, and drove her back home. The bell rang; I crept back to the classroom to collect my books, and I went on to my next class. The event was over.

Thirty-seven years later, as I type these words and stare at the computer screen, my face still burns—not from the shame of sharing my school day with my cartoonishly old-lady grandmother but from the knowledge that I cared more about my own reputation than about an old woman who, despite great physical and mental frailty, had remembered which school I attended; had walked what must have been for her a long distance to get to that school; had remembered my name, for goodness sake—she usually went through my mother’s, my aunt’s, and my female cousins’ names before she finally got to mine; all of that to try to get some news about my father’s condition, having repeatedly phoned our house without getting an answer. At the very least, I could have walked to the back of the room, sat next to her and held her hand or put an arm around her shoulders, and waited for class to finish so that I

could talk to her quietly and then find someone to drive us to her house. Surely missing part or even all of that school day to give my grandmother some peace of mind about her son-in-law would have been worth every snicker, every teasing remark. I remember very clearly how ashamed I felt in that classroom, but for the life of me I can't remember whether any of my classmates made a joke about it.

I also realize that, for the life of me, I can't remember much else about my grandmother, or my grandfather, or Aunt Ruth, and my memories of Charlotte, my father, and my mother become dimmer as each day passes. That, truly, is a shame.