

## *The House on the Hill*

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Three five six two six seven one. The first five make an X of sort, the last one an extraneous line, drawn from the bottom up. I've known the pattern of those seven numbers since I was old enough to hold a phone; it doesn't live in my brain, but belongs to my fingers who know it by heart. Long before I got my driver's license, 356-2671 was my ticket to freedom and fun. One call and I could be at the house on the hill, ranch style and bright white with yellow, surrounded by the granite wall that my grandfather collected and built.

It is in this house at the top of a hill once so deserted that there was a petition for a streetlight and now unreachable without a traffic jam, that my grandmother has lived since arriving as a newlywed six decades ago. Though she has lived here as a widow even longer than as a bride, the spirit of my Grampa Warren lingers on in pictures and in stories like that of a living relative just out of reach. Also present in every polished spoon and revered toy are the pristine childhoods of my mother and my aunt. It is here, in turn, that pieces of my own childhood take shape; I am the third generation to learn and love in Gram's house on the hill.

Gram and I have spent this ideal winter day next door on the lawn of the Red Jacket Inn. With my electric pink flying saucer held above the sludge on the side of the road, I walk back up the hill beside Gram. I in my puffy new purple snowsuit and she in the same snow pants that I imagine she wore on the day she tried alpine skiing with Hannes Schneider at Cranmore. Unlike most of us locals, Gram's affection for these mountains does not stem from the thrill of flying downhill with boards on her feet. It is even deeper. It comes from being born and raised in the shadow of Cathedral Ledge, from working the soil alongside her parents and five brothers on the farm, from celebrating the marriage to the love of her life in the Eastern Slope inn, from saying her prayers every morning and night just before bed with the Moat Mountains keeping stoic watch outside her window.

My pink cheeks, still tingling from our afternoon of sledding, widen into a smile as she begins a story. I love these stories. They slide from her memory to mine like the velvet of a worn blanket. She has lived nearly her whole life in the Mount Washington Valley and at the edge of five years old I can't imagine anyone with a life better lived or a set of tales more compelling and romantic. I still can't.

Later that afternoon, my mom arrives to pick me up from my day with Gram. She walks in to find us enjoying grape juice and cookies in front of Sesame Street. *On the Persian rug.* She and my aunt were never allowed to even eat in the living room, much less *on the Persian rug.* But Gram just smiles knowingly and says something about things changing.

My mind is just starting to drift off when I feel her roll over on her side of the king-sized bed.

“We didn’t leave anything out for Santa Claus,” she says into the enchanted darkness that always seems to blanket Christmas Eves.

My returning consciousness stops me just short of replying that Santa would be fine without milk and cookies this year. *C’mon Gram, we both know who Santa Claus is and you won’t eat the cookies anyway* passes through my mind. But instead I say, “Oh my gosh! You’re right.”

The covers are already back and I have one foot on the floor, “What kind of cookies do you have?”

“I only have molasses. Do you suppose he likes molasses cookies? And what about the reindeer?” The fluorescent kitchen light buzzes and flashes on as Gram pries open the tin cookie jar.

She and I carefully set out a plate of cookies for Santa Claus and some carrot sticks for Prancer, Dancer, and all the rest. In minutes, the light is off, the magical darkness has returned, and the covers are once again pulled up tight around me.

Why did I bother to get out of bed? Why hadn’t I just snapped some teenager-esque *what’s-the-point-and-I’m-too-lazy* response? Because this is my grandmother. This is Gram. This year’s Christmas Eve sleepover has been moved from my house to hers for the first time in my life because she isn’t quite up to the overnight spent away from home. Why am I a sixteen-year-old leaving snacks on the coffee table for Santa Claus with my 81-year-old grandmother? Because it means that I still believe: in childhood, in innocence, in the magic of our Christmas Eves, in traditions, in the irreplaceable bond that we share. Because it is like being young again, if only in our hearts. I keep her young and she makes me unafraid of growing old.