

Janey's Girl

by Gayle Friesen

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To Brian — for saying when, not if

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1

“This is a bad idea,” Mom says, pulling the car onto the shoulder of the highway. A big semitrailer roars past, sending a rock cracking against the windshield. “What was I thinking?” she mutters.

I look over at her profile. She has less makeup on than usual, her weekend face instead of her work face. Her dark brown hair is pulled back into a neat ponytail with just the right number of wisps softening the angle of her determined chin.

“Gran’s counting on us,” I say.

She doesn’t answer.

We left Toronto five days ago and we’ve been driving across the country ever since, just me and my mom in a compact car. We had blistering heat for the first two days (no air conditioning), blinding dust followed by thunderstorms on the prairies, and torrential rain through the Coquihalla. Greasy fast food throughout.

Still, driving through Ontario and Manitoba was fun. Mom seemed relaxed, relieved even, to be

taking a break from selling real estate. In Saskatchewan, she was talking less and rubbing her neck more. By the time we reached Alberta, she was saying things like, "Is it really necessary to have three prairie provinces?" and I knew she was getting tired.

But now, only an hour away from Smallwood, British Columbia, she's having second thoughts? You'd think we were flying over the Bermuda Triangle instead of going to spend August with her mother.

Mom drums her polished nails on the steering wheel, then arches her back in a long stretch. A breeze lifts a stray strand of hair across her face, but she tucks it back firmly behind her ear.

"There's something about this place," she says, her lips pressed into a narrow line.

"What, Mom? What is the big mystery surrounding Smallwood Manor?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Don't be silly, Claire. I just have so much work to do. The McPherson house isn't sold yet, and you have music exams to study for.

"What was I thinking?" she says again.

"Uh, maybe that you haven't been on a holiday for a gazillion years," I respond. To myself, I add, "That you haven't been back home for sixteen years ... even when your father died last September." But I can't say any of these things. There are topics

we discuss and topics we avoid. And family is one of the topics we avoid.

My best friend, Julia, has opinions about this. The other day she said, "Your mother is in denial, Claire. Not to mention obsessive-compulsive with some serious anxiety issues." Julia wants to be a psychologist and practices on me constantly.

I can't remember the other ailments my mother supposedly suffers from, according to Dr. Julia. All I know is that my mom suffers. I've known it since I was a little kid.

"Holidays are overrated, Claire," Mom says now.

"You're right, Mom. I think there's an exit coming up. Let's just turn around and go back. I know I'm dying to trek across the prairies again!"

"Smart ass," she mutters, but there's a faint smile at the corner of her mouth, and I feel a small sense of accomplishment.

"It'll be good, Mom. Relaxing even."

She presses her fingers to the side of her head and rubs in slow, small circles.

"Another headache?" I ask. "Maybe we should take a break?" I offer this even though it's the last thing I want. I can't wait to get to Gran's.

"No, no. I want to keep on schedule," she answers.

"This is a holiday, remember?"

"Right." She sounds like she's trying to convince herself, but she's still rubbing her head.

"Maybe I could drive?"

She smiles at this. "Let's see. You're fourteen so, hmm, that would make driving ... what's the word for it? Oh yes. Illegal."

"Almost fifteen," I remind her. At least she's smiling again.

"So you are. And still illegal," she says, turning the key in the ignition. The engine grinds loudly.

"I may only be fourteen, but even I know you don't start a car when it's already running."

She grimaces as she eases the car back onto the road.

"Next stop, a town called Hope and then on to Smallwood," she says with determination.

I take out the crumpled map and stretch it over my knees. Using a felt pen, I trace over the red line of the highway. The long crooked path shows the distance we've traveled to get here. I can't believe we're so close.

"We're almost there," I say quietly.

"Yup," she says, driving well below the speed limit. "We're almost there."

"So, Smallwood's beyond Hope?" I ask, attempting a jab of humor.

"Yup," she says again, not noticing the pun, or if she has, deciding to ignore it.

I watch the brilliant green meadows filled with buttercups and foxgloves, black and white cows dotting the landscape. In the distance, pale mauve

mountains frame the valley where my mother was born. This is where it all started for me too.

"What are you thinking about?" Mom asks, looking at me sideways.

"Nothing," I say. I know she won't pursue it. That's one thing about us. We respect each other's privacy.

It's weird to think I was conceived in this valley. Maybe in a meadow filled with buttercups. Maybe in the back of a pick-up truck. Not that I like to dwell on this particular detail too much, seeing as how it involves my mother and someone named Harold. Still, it reminds me that my mother used to be connected to something other than me. Once upon a time, her life was bigger.

A small green road sign indicates the turn-off to Hope. As we drive past, I wonder what a town called Hope would look like.

2

Before we left on our trip, I asked Mom to tell me about where she grew up. She told me the valley had been formed from glacial and alluvial deposits more than ten thousand years ago. It wasn't exactly the kind of info I was looking for.

I open the window now and breathe deeply. "Wow, Mom. You can almost smell the rich scent of glacial and alluvial deposits." I grin wickedly at her.

She mumbles, "Smart ass," and keeps watching the road.

A strong breeze brings a new, ripe smell.

"Whew, what's that?" I croak, reaching for the window button.

"That would be the pig farm next to your grandmother's farm," she answers. "Get used to the smell."

"Ugh. Never." I bury my face in my shirt, using it as a filter.

As we drive past picture-postcard farmyards, I wonder which one belongs to my grandmother.

All I know of this place comes from one worn photo album and sketchy stories. Gran visited us in Toronto once when I was a baby, then again four years ago. I asked lots of questions about my grandfather, but details were sparse. I suspect she was under orders not to discuss him. The only thing I really picked up was that he'd had a very hard life. And that Gran's eyes were sad when she told me.

"Here's the turn-off," Mom says quietly now. She slows the car to a slug's pace as she makes the turn.

We drive into the shadow of a towering mountain that backdrops the cluster of buildings that is Smallwood. As the sun disappears from view, I feel a chill and shudder from something I can't name.

Julia would love that. My best friend wraps herself in mysteries the way a freezing person huddles under blankets. She's always probing me for details about my family.

"Maybe your grandfather was a war criminal? Or a spy?"

"I don't think so," I say.

"A drug runner with Mafia connections?"

"Yeah, right, living in a tight little farm community in British Columbia," I answer.

At first she thought I was holding out on her, but gradually she realized that I really know very little about my own family.

I used to imagine what a reunion would be like between my mother and my grandfather. But last fall, when he died and my mother wouldn't go back for the funeral, even Julia didn't know what to say.

The fields pass slowly, partly because I'm anxious to see Gran again and partly because of Mom's driving. I'm tempted to tell her she could be arrested for loitering, but I resist the urge.

Finally Mom stops the car at the end of a long driveway lined by tall, sweeping poplar trees. "Here we are," she says, looking serious.

I can see a green and white farmhouse with a sprawling front porch ahead.

As we draw closer, I see Gran, waving and grinning. She's wearing a loose sweatshirt and tights, with a lacy white apron wrapped around her middle. She has salt and pepper hair and a glint in her eye that crosses the yard like a lighthouse beacon. She looks exactly the way a grandmother should look and just as I remember her.

I jump out of the car before it has come to a full stop and run toward her. I slow a little as I approach, aware suddenly of the four years that have passed since I last saw her. She grabs me in a strong, warm hug. As I allow myself to be pulled into her arms, I realize with surprise that I am taller than she is now. The top of her head is level with my eyes, and her hair smells like apples and cinnamon.

"My dear sweet Clarissa. It's so good to see you." She pushes me away as suddenly as she took hold. Tears are brimming in her eyes.

"How was your trip? My, you must be exhausted. Are you hungry? You've grown so tall! Did you have any car trouble?"

"Um, the trip was good ... I'm not tired but I am sort of hungry, I'm still growing, and no car trouble," I answer, laughing.

Gran gives me another hug. "Dear girl. We'll have scads of time to talk, won't we? Let me take a good look. You're so lovely." She turns me around and I laugh again.

"Mom, Gran's twirling me." I pretend to be dizzy. Then I notice Mom is still standing beside the car.

Suddenly the air feels still, although the trees above continue to sway in the wind.

Gran approaches my mother and the two women embrace, a tentative touch at first and then there is no space between them. I look away because it's too intimate. I think I hear my mother say, "I'm sorry," but Gran hushes her as they rock slowly together.

Sorry for what? I wonder. The front door is open, so I walk inside. The hallway holds the same scent as Gran's hair magnified ten times, and as I move toward the kitchen, I see counters laden with cinnamon buns and pies and freshly baked buns. Something is simmering on the stove. Spices rise

up, mixed with the steam, and I give the thick soup a quick stir to keep it from bubbling over.

Sunshine streams through the curtains, particles of light lingering in the delicate lace, and I feel a sense of relief. I had expected a harsh and cold place. A dark house.

I grab a bun off the cooling rack and tear it open. It is still warm. I shove an entire half into my mouth.

"Claire." My mother's disapproval enters the warm room like an autumn breeze. "You might have asked first." She sounds apologetic and tense.

"Not at all, Janey," Gran says with a wave of her hand. "I've baked oodles of things."

"It's Jane," Mom corrects her.

I wonder for the millionth time what my mother is thinking.

"I'm sorry, Gran," I say, still watching my mother. "They smelled so good."

"Well, it's all for you. We need to get some meat on those bones," she clucks.

"She's fine the way she is, Mother," Mom says briskly. "I'm going to bring in the luggage. Claire, will you help?" She asks it as a question, but I hear the order.

As I move past her, my grandmother gives me a squeeze on the shoulder. I feel grateful.

Outside, Mom leans against the car, breathing deeply. I rush over to her. "Are you okay?"

"It was a mistake to come here." Her eyes look frightened.

"How come?" I ask.

She just shakes her head as she opens the trunk of the car and rummages, emerging with her running shoes. "Tell Gran I'm going for a run," she says, slipping off her sandals and lacing up the well-worn sneakers. "I've been sitting for too long. I'll help with the luggage when I get back, okay?"

Her movements are abrupt and tense. I nod as I watch her doing her stretches. Then she's off.

"I won't be long." The wind brings her words back to me.

"Fine. I don't care," I answer. I watch her straight back as she runs toward the gatepost. I grab my suitcase and pull it into the house.