

Toast With Vera

By Laura FANNING

When I was a kid my favorite season of year was the summer. At the end of every school year my mom would send me off to visit my father's mother, Nan, as I called her. Along with the endless cakes and cookies, I also enjoyed the fact that Nan generally had no idea what kinds of things kids could get themselves into. Not that I ever did anything terribly bad, but it was the thrill of being able to do almost anything that I wanted, as long as I was back to the house before dark.

I had several friends that I waited all year to see. My "best grandmother-house-friend" was Sia, she was Greek. Her full name was really Aspasia. Pronounced es-pa-ce-a, although I jokingly called her a-spaz-ea. This came about one day when she was leaving my grandmother's house and I yelled after her SEE YA, she turned around and came back to the house to see what I wanted. After that she was just a-spaz-e-a, it was not only easier, but we laughed hysterically every time I said it. All I remember about Sia's house was that it always seemed to smell like food. I do recall that her mother yelled a lot in Greek and her father terrified me (although he never did anything to deliberately instill this impression on me). Once they had a rabbit that got out of its cage and we had to chase it all over the neighborhood before we finally caught it. I was severely traumatized when I found out later that they ate it.

Summers were filled with baseball games, organized by the neighborhood kids and played on the small front lawns of city yards. Sometimes we would have to use two lawns because there would be so many kids. We swam at the local pool, played hop-scotch at the school park up the road, and explored every corner of West 19th Avenue. We made up stories about every house on the block. Witches lived in the red house at the end of the block. We assumed this of course, because their cat had six toes on each foot. The big white house at the other end on the same side as Nan's house was haunted. It always creaked funny when you walked by it and nobody ever seemed to live there. Once Sia and I even found the skull of a cat on their lawn confirming that our greatest fears were, in fact, correct.

The only house on the block (other than Nan and Sia's house) that was spared from our over-active imaginations was Vera's. She had three grandchildren that spent the summers visiting as well.

They would always arrive a little later than I did, and so every morning I would run to the window and pull apart Nan's heavy green curtains and check to see if their big Monty Carlo was parked out front yet. The oldest boy was a year older than myself and his sister was a year younger. Sia was the same age as me and when they finally arrived the fun would begin! With so many kids in the same age group, the baseball games became very competitive. We also had water fights, treasure hunts, and, although politically incorrect now, Cowboys and Indians was one of our favorite games.

As the summer would come to a close the kids in the neighborhood would slowly disperse. Out to buy school supplies and new clothes; find out what class they were in next year, or go on the last family holiday before September. Sia went back to Greek school in August and Vera's grandchildren were soon gone too. One morning I was so bored that I decided to knock on Vera's door and see what she was doing. A bit strange for a nine year old, I admit, but what first motivated me to do this was not the incredible desire to spend time with an almost total stranger over the age of seventy. Vera had birds, two to be exact. Her budgie's name was Joey (I know not original but true), and her canary was Twinkle. Yet, what started out as simple curiosity, quickly became a weekend ritual.

That first morning Vera invited me in, and proceed to tell me all about Joey and Twinkle. She seemed quite happy to entertain the rapid and continuous series of questions that I threw at her. I thought her birds were beautiful, and she was pretty great too. Throughout the winter Vera's grandchildren seldom visited because they lived so far away. I, on the other hand, visited Nan at least every second weekend, and when I was there I would get up really early so as not to miss it.

Scrambling up Vera's steps as soon as she opened the door I would ask, "did you have toast yet?" "No," she would reply, "Thelma (that's Nan) told me I should be expecting you." I would rush to her kitchen and sit very quietly to wait. Vera would pour me a cup of tea and hand me a piece of dry toast. Nothing on it, not even a stitch of butter. And then it would happen. Joey would fly out of his open cage and land right on my shoulder. For at least an hour he would pick at the dry toast right out of my hand. My tea would get

cold because I was so afraid that if I upset him by moving that he might fly away. Twinkle would sing and sing. Vera insisted that he only sang when I visited because I would always sing him his favorite song "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

This ritual went on for years. Then, when I was twelve, I came to visit as usual but Nan said I couldn't go to Vera's because she wasn't feeling well. For several weekends I was unable to see Vera or her beautiful birds. Then one weekend in February her family arrived to visit. I was not allowed to play with the kids either. In fact, I wasn't even allowed to go and speak to them. I became very upset and questioned Nan as to why I was suddenly not welcome in Vera's home. "Cancer," she said. "What?" I said. "Vera has cancer."

I only saw Vera once after that, but it wasn't really her. She had changed somehow. She was weak and sad. The cancer had ravaged both her body and her mind, and left only a shell for me to say goodbye to. Vera died that summer. "What would happen to Joey and Twinkle," I asked Nan? "They would be taken care of," she assured me. But it was-

n't really the birds I was worried about, it was me. Maybe it was becoming a teenager that year that fizzled my enthusiasm for weekends at Nan's, but I think losing Vera had something to do with it too. Vera gave me something that no one had ever given me: their time. She had listened to me, talked to me, appreciated, and even celebrated my need for connection. I missed her company every time I went to Nan's. Looking back I guess she was as lonely as I was. A young girl and an old woman brought together by their love for two modest little birds. Almost twenty years later I still remember Vera and her little birds. Now, even her house is gone, yet every time I visit Nan I realize more and more how much she gave to me in such a short amount of time.

Although I consider Vera to be one of the first angels to ever enter my life, there have been many more since her. I have never shared this story with anyone, but finding myself passing through another one of life's milestones, I thought that it might be an appropriate time to acknowledge my angels. So thank you, you know who you are. I hope you are able to recognize your angels too.

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