

John RC Potter
The Fern That Fell

"Are you awake? Can I call you?"

The Whatsapp message early that spring morning appeared innocuous, but it set off a warning sign for me. For many years I have had a tendency to be a very early riser, of which my family and friends in Canada are well aware. The time difference between the city of Istanbul and the town of Clinton where my siblings live is seven or eight hours, depending on the time of year. I stared intently at my mobile phone, reading the message over again and was just about to respond to it. Then the telephone rang.



Origin of this oil painting and the painter is unknown.

"Boo!"

My sister Jo Ann shouted as she jumped up from the back seat of our grandfather's old and dusty sedan, that I think may well have been of pre- or post-WWII vintage. I had been crouching down with her on the floor as we waited for Grandpa to make his way up the lane from the barn. Grandpa opened the driver's door of the car and sat down with a heavy sigh, then backed the car out of the driveway onto the country dirt road where we lived. He had barely started down the road before Jo Ann had done her jack-in-the-box routine. Grandpa acted surprised as he glanced in the rearview mirror and then momentarily turned his head to look behind him. He was, of course, pretending to be surprised because this was a regular routine: Jo Ann hiding in the back seat of Grandpa's car in order that she could have lunch and spend the afternoon with him and Grandma. That said, Grandpa may well have been surprised that particular day, because I too was hiding in the car with Jo Ann.

On that sunny and warm late spring day in the early 60's I was around four years old, and Jo Ann two years older than me. My sister adored our paternal grandparents, and they doted on her. What I was not aware of at the time - but would learn in the future - was the underlying reason for their close relationship. My mother had suffered from post-natal depression after my sister, Jo Ann was born, which was complicated by my mother's history of nerve trouble. Thus, when my mother was so severely depressed after Jo Ann's birth, our paternal grandmother stepped in, and in effect became the maternal figure in my sister's formative first few years of life. It created a long-lasting bond, particularly during the years prior to Jo Ann starting the first grade in the stone school just down the road from our farm in the early autumn of that same year.

It made sense for our paternal grandmother to take on this role, because both she and my grandfather were often at our home. My father

had purchased the family farm from his parents when they moved to the town of Clinton in the mid-50s, and my grandfather continued to help with the daily barn chores on our farm for several years until his death. My father had a milk run and worked during the day with that job, then did the farming in the evenings and on weekends – usually with Grandpa at his side. It was an ideal set-up having Grandpa help with the chores, and it meant that he was able to be on the home farm every day for several hours, usually both in the morning and then again in the evening. Grandma would sometimes come out with Grandpa, for the opportunity to visit with my mother as well as to give a helping hand at the same time.

When my mother was so severely depressed for several months after Jo Ann's birth, and sometimes in the hospital for treatment, it was a godsend that Grandma so effortlessly and willingly undertook the maternal role with the new baby. As I later found out, other relatives assisted with my two sisters who were older than Jo Ann, in order that Dad could continue working. Grandma tended to Jo Ann sometimes at our home on the farm, but often at our grandparents' residence. What transpired is that the standard maternal bond between mother and baby, in this instance, changed to that of a grandmother with her granddaughter. It meant that my sister identified with Grandma and Grandpa to a significant degree, and as a baby and toddler loved them as deeply as one does one's parents. Therefore, when my mother had improved and was sufficiently able to manage two young children and a baby-turning-toddler, the relationship between mother and child had been affected. Fortunately, years later as an adult, my sister had a close relationship with my mother and spent much time with her, which was convenient because she lived with her husband and daughter just down the road from the home farm. However, as a young child, Jo Ann still wanted to be with her paternal grandparents on a constant basis, and basking in their adoration and love. For that reason, she regularly took advantage of hitching a ride back to town in Grandpa's car -and perhaps in her mind, back to the home of her heart - when he was leaving our farm after the morning chores.

When Grandpa, Jo Ann and I walked into the kitchen at our grandparents' cozy home in the town of Clinton, Grandma was talking on the old-fashioned wall telephone. Our mother had soon realized that two of her brood were missing from the yard and their probable current location, and had called Grandma. I am not sure if our grandmother was glad that I had joined my sister on her great escape from the home farm, but she was obviously pleased that her darling little granddaughter had come again for a regular visit. I recall that after a short time playing in the yard, my sister and I sat down at the kitchen table and joined our grandparents in what most people would consider lunch; back then we always called it dinner, whereas the evening meal was referred to as supper. The tasty noon-time meal that Grandma had prepared was reminiscent of what one would have in front of them at the kitchen table on a farm. Our grandparents loved root vegetables; thus potatoes, carrots, beets and parsnips were often served with whatever meat had been cooked. That particular day, in addition to other food, Grandma had prepared parsnips, a vegetable that I did not care for as a child, although I very much came to like as an adult. Grandma was rather displeased with me because I would not eat the parsnips on my plate. In fact, I only nibbled and poked at my food, as was

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my custom as a young child. Food was never that important to me, and customarily the main course was eaten only in order to be able to have the dessert afterwards!

After lunch, Jo Ann and I played and explored in our grandparents' small but charming asphalt shingle bungalow. As was common back in those days – in even smaller homes – there was a long and narrow pantry just off the kitchen. It was always a rather darkened, cool and mysterious room, a veritable treasure trove for children, with tantalizing scents of spices teasing one's nostrils. There were jars, boxes, trinkets, food stuffs, preserves, timeworn board games, and of particular interest to us, Grandma's Button Jar that sat on top of the old pantry cabinet. Jo Ann and I had a wonderful time pouring out the buttons and trying to find the most interesting ones, and made a game of it to see who could find the most buttons that had duplicates. Our Grandmother was a soft-spoken and gentle woman, with a sweet smile and a kind face, framed by a halo of fine, white hair. As was the custom then for women, particularly of that age group, Grandma always wore a dress, often with an apron over it, and she was constantly busy and in motion.

When Jo Ann and I grew bored with the the button jar, we decided to play tag as well as hide-in-seek throughout the house. Although our grandparents' home was not a large one, and all on one floor, when we were children it did indeed seemed spacious. The livingroom had an old-fashioned french glass door that opened into a hallway at the front of the house, leading to a sunroom that looked out onto a long front yard and the street in the distance. Off of the living room were three small bedrooms: Grandma slept in the corner bedroom that was the largest, the guest room was on the other front corner of the house, and then Grandpa's room was the smallest and narrowest bedroom, situated beside Grandma's room and closest to the kitchen. Grandpa's habit was to retire to his bedroom for a nap after lunch. That particular day, Grandpa went into his bedroom to have a rest. Jo Ann and I did not know then - nor did anyone - that Grandpa was suffering from cancer, but was not yet aware of it. Months hence he would suddenly become extremely ill and by the autumn of that year would pass away.

On the day we visited them, our grandparents no doubt informed us to be careful playing and to not make a mess or create a disturbance. Always sweet-natured, Grandma would have done it in a kindly manner; Grandpa, however, always appeared stern and distant, except in his relationship with my sister, Jo Ann. That seemed strange to me because my Dad had a wonderful and witty sense of humor, quite different in nature than his father. In any case, whether or not we were warned ahead of time to take care when playing, the inevitable of course happened and there was an accident, albeit minor in nature.

Grandma's house was always as neat as the proverbial pin. In retrospect, the home was rather modest, but definitely homey and with a certain old world charm. Grandma was proud of her living room, which was always picture perfect, but comfortable and welcoming. The sofa was old-fashioned with doilies on it, and above it an old painting hung in pride of place. Our grandmother was particularly proud of her television (black and white back then, of course!), on which she enjoyed watching wrestling

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matches, which always seemed surprising to me, and no doubt to others. Moreover, Grandma had a green thumb and lovingly tended to her plants and flowers in the house, the crowning glory being a fern that sat on a tall, round occasional table near the small picture window in the living room. The fronds of the fern hung down on all sides of the table, green and glorious. Grandma no doubt gave the same kind of devoted attention to all her greenery (both in the house and in her garden outside) as she had done with her six children.

Unfortunately, when the games my sister and I were playing in our grandparents' home ended up in a minor accident, it was in the living room and involved Grandma's prized fern! To use an expression, Jo Ann and I were 'horsing around'...be it tag, or hide-and-seek, or just playing and pushing each other...and in our jousting the fern was bumped and crashed with a deafening bang to the ground, the fern and soil inside the metal container spilling out across the shining linoleum floor near the picture window.

Grandma rushed from the kitchen with a concerned look on her face, whilst Grandpa appeared from his bedroom, putting on his suspenders: he was indeed wearing a grave countenance! I do not recall if Grandpa warned there would be a punishment of some kind, and that may well not have been the case. However, in times of crisis it is human nature – even for small children – to make a decision: fight or flee! My sister and I chose the latter, and crouched down and hid behind the sofa in the living room. Both Grandpa and Grandma tried to lure Jo Ann and me out of our hiding place, burrowed as we were like a pair of little bunnies behind the sofa. I remember our grandparents may well have given up and let us stay there for a time, because we could hear Grandma cleaning up the soil and putting the fern back in its metal pot.

Finally, Grandpa pulled the sofa away from the wall and ordered my sister and me to come out. As I recall, Jo Ann started crying (crocodile tears, no doubt) and I was shaking with fright. My grandparents were angry at me because they assumed I was the one who had bumped into the occasional table and made the fern fall, but I think it may well have been Jo Ann. In any case, the enjoyable visit came to an end and in short order we were returned back home. Fortunately, it was a minor accident and did not involve injuries, but the calm oasis of my grandparents' home had been disturbed, and it happened on my first visit there with my sister on one of her 'great escapes' from our familial home.

Jo Ann, of course, continued to hide in the back seat of Grandpa's car and do the jack-in-the-box routine in order to go spend time with my grandparents. I never went back with Jo Ann; thereafter, I was only at my grandparents' home when visiting with my parents and sisters. Perhaps I just did not want to go again, but I expect it may have been indicated to my mother that although Jo Ann was indeed most welcome and wanted for her regular and 'unexpected' visits as a stow-away in my Grandfather's car, the invitation was for her only.

Within months, my grandfather became ill and died. After a few years living on her own, my grandmother had to go to live in a retirement care facility (referred to then as 'old people's' or 'old age' home). Although Grandma seemed elderly to me at that time, she was only then approxi-

mately 70 years of age. Grandma had dementia, and as I recall back then I only ever heard it referred to as 'hardening of the arteries'. Apparently the signs had been there for years and only later was it understood by our grandmother's children that she had been progressively suffering for a long time. When still living alone in her home as a widow, Grandma would sometimes be found walking around the town, rather lost, sometimes without a coat on a chilly day. It was no doubt a difficult decision for her family to put Grandma in a nursing home, but her dementia was progressing rapidly. Grandma lived approximately ten years in that retirement facility, increasingly unresponsive and bedridden.

After her children had put Grandma in the retirement home, her house was sold and most of the belongings, except those that her children wanted to keep. If memory serves, at that time one of my paternal aunts came into our house one day carrying a rather large, rectangular item covered in plain packing paper. When unveiled we saw it was the old-fashioned painting that had always hung over the sofa in our grandparents' home. My aunt explained that when they took the painting off the wall, they found there was writing on it. Our grandmother had written on the rear of the painting the following words: This is Jo Ann's picture. from Grandma.

At that time when asked about it, Jo Ann recalled one day as a very young child – perhaps two or three years old – when she was staying with our grandparents and had been ill with a fever. Grandma had been holding Jo Ann in the rocking chair in the living room. Jo Ann had pointed to the old oil painting above the sofa and told Grandma how much she liked it. No doubt our grandmother found the painting at a garage sale or second-hand store; she was an inveterate and talented bargain hunter. The painting appears to be from the Victorian era, the setting being the inside of a traditional country cottage in England, where our forebearers were from. In the painting, a young mother is sitting in a chair with her two young daughters beside her, with a baby in a large straw basket on the cobbled floor in front of the hearth. The mother is showing the baby a wooden toy, and there is a small wooden horse on the floor beside the baby's basket.

At that same time of Jo Ann's illness or shortly thereafter, Grandma must have taken down the painting and written on the back of it that it was to be given to Jo Ann eventually, the beloved granddaughter on whom she had bestowed such devoted attention and so much love as a new-born baby and young child.



During the pandemic, my siblings and I began to have weekly online conversations – which I had by way of a tongue-in-cheek manner dubbed the 'Zoom Doom Chats', due to the wide range of topics discussed and emotions evoked. Fortunately, because all of us had inherited a well-honed sense of humour from both our long since departed parents, the chats were often hilarious and filled with laughter. Unfortunately, Jo Ann sometimes had technological issues that dearly tested her patience.

It was only a few days after our most recent chat in the third week of April of 2021 that I received the news that my dear sister – with whom I had an adventure at our grandparents' house six decades previously - had died instantly at

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home of a heart attack. I likened it to the turning off of a light. It was a blessing that our sister did not suffer, and that she departed this world when in her house, the place that she loved so dearly. Interestingly, my sister and her husband many years earlier had purchased the stone school down the road from our family farm, that had previously been renovated into a house. It was where Jo Ann had been a student in the first grade, prior to all students in that part of the township being transferred to a newly-built and much larger school in a nearby village. The gravel-and-dirt township road where the family farm was located was in later years paved, and around the same time it became known officially as Stone School Line, not far from the juncture of Telephone Road.

When thinking about Jo Ann after her sudden departure from our lives, my mind travelled back in time over so many memories; however, the one that continued to reverberate was the recollection of that sunny day in our youth when my sister and I hid in the backseat of Grandpa's old and dusty sedan, and went on a journey into the imagination.