

## the gate

I would go to my grandmother's house after school. She lived in a little wooden cottage surrounded by a tall brick wall, beside a stream, in the midst of many trees. My most vivid memories from childhood are walking just a few blocks beside the gas stations and stores from my grade school on 63rd Avenue, then turning a corner and finding myself suddenly in a different world. I would take a little path down to a slightly larger path at the bottom of a ravine. Then as if a switch had been turned I would be surrounded by trees, leaves, flowers, birds, and grass. That is the image in my memory: springtime, with light green, almost transparent, leaves, a scattering of dark conifers, and purple and yellow flowers pushing up through the new grass. It only took ten minutes to walk along the path in the ravine, though I always wanted it to take longer, and then I got to the cottage. Or rather to the wall, since you could not see the cottage until you had passed through the gate. There was just one gate, and the path from there to the cottage was dark and winding. There was a trellis over the path, as winding as the path, and vines grew on the trellis so that even in the middle of the day it was shadowy in there. We lived in northern Alberta so it was quite dark for much of the day during half the year. I would get out of school at about 3:30, and then stay around for some after school activity designed to keep us out of our parents' hair for a little longer, often wait through a detention I had got for some original thinking, and then make my way the three quarters of a mile to Granny's place.

My mother would say of her mother "she's a rich one." That was a standard phrase of my mother's, and I did not know exactly what it meant. I presumed it meant that Granny

had some money, though I wondered why she didn't give it to us, who were always having to scrimp to get through the month. So I did not think it was surprising when I would arrive at Granny's gate and her servant was waiting for me. A very tall woman dressed all in black with a sort of a scarf covering much of her face, except for two piercing dark eyes. She was always there when I arrived, and I guessed she had some way of watching for me. We would walk through the trellis to the front door, never speaking, and then she would suddenly and silently be gone, so I would knock on the door and Granny would let me in. I supposed the dark lady had gone around to a back door. But I never saw her indoors. I was too young to be puzzled about it, just as I did not wonder how Granny managed to share that tiny cottage with a servant. Granny would give me dinner, and a couple of hours later one of my parents would come to take me home.

I took this path from grade 4 to grade 8, at all times of year. It is remarkable that what I remember is the transparent green leaves and the yellow and purple flowers rather than the white of winter or the red and yellow of fall, since I walked the distance as often when this is what you would see. In grade 8 I knew that I would be going to high school next year and since the high school was several miles in the other direction I wondered if I would still be visiting Granny so often. I asked my parents but they never gave me a straight answer. One afternoon when there were only a couple of months of school remaining I took my usual route and waited by the gate. No one came to meet me, so I waited a little longer. Still no one came, so I opened the gate and walked beneath the trellis to the front door. I knocked but there was no answer. I turned the handle and went in. Granny was not there in her kitchen where she had always greeted me in the past.

Seeing this as an opportunity, I explored the cottage, hoping to find out where the mysterious servant stayed. It did not take me long to tour the whole tiny cottage. There was only one bedroom with one tiny bed, and Granny was not in it. I did see the back door, though, which I had never noticed before. So I opened it and went out.

The light was somehow very sharp out the back, as it is sometimes after a thunderstorm. There were vivid smells of earth and leaves, and insistent birdsong. I remember a white-throated sparrow giving its unmistakable short but perfectly structured call. I walked into this bright but not fierce light amid these sounds and smells, and crossed the grass to the wall. There was a gate in the wall, directly behind the house. I had never found the back door nor been on this grass so it did not surprise me that I had never seen it before. I walked to the gate and considered opening it.

There was Granny, hand-in-hand with the tall lady. The lady was still in black, sort of, but the black was somehow glowing, as if it was made of music. The light was sharper, though not brighter, and the smell of earth and the sound of birds was overwhelming. "Granny" I shouted, and pushed the latch of the gate to go to her. But the gate would not open. As I struggled with it Granny and the lady faded away. They became transparent green and transparent yellow and transparent purple; the smell was of transparent grass and earth; the birds were singing transparent songs. When I could not see them any longer and still could not open the gate I went back into the cottage and waited for my parents. Eventually they came and took me home.

A few days later they told me not to go to Granny's after school. They hesitated when I asked why, and then very cautiously explained that Granny had died. Alone in her cottage. But I know where she is, I said, as if I was six rather than twelve. So we all went to the cottage. On the way I explained about the tall dark lady, and they insisted that there was no such person. When we had arrived I took them to the back door. But there was no back door. We searched all around the kitchen, and even pressed on the wall with our fingers, but there was nothing to open. We looked in other rooms. No door, though their windows looked out onto the grass behind the cottage. So I insisted that we go outside through the front door and walk around the cottage. We found the grass at the back, and a few stone slabs of an old path leading towards the wall. But there was no back gate.