



Full Circle By Bette-Jane Raphael

More Than a Mother

It's a bright day in early fall, a Friday afternoon, and my 5-year-old daughter and I are waiting in front of our apartment house for the ride that will take us to our destination, a small city two states away. At least I am waiting. She is dancing around me, sing-songing the same refrain over and over again: "We're going to Grandma's house. We're going to Grandma's house."

The grandma in question is not my own mother, but my husband's. And the house we are going to is not my own childhood home, but his. It is the house in which Rose, my mother-in-law, has lived for the past 54 years.

"You're going to your mother-in-law's for the weekend?" friends ask, aghast that I am making this visit by choice. No matter how much I explain, they can't seem to understand that my husband's mother bears no resemblance to the legendary mother-in-law of stand-up comedy, an unlovable creature and the butt of countless jokes. They can't believe that my relationship with her is not a burden, and that I actually want to spend time with this woman who by some happy circumstance came attached to the man I married.

But that is the truth of it, and the reason why, several weekends a year when my husband and adolescent son are out doing something manly together, like hiking, I pack a bag for myself and my daughter and pay a visit to Grandma—to *the grandma*. For Rose is a prototypical nurturer and playmate, a knitter and baker and storybook reader supreme, someone who knows, instinctively and unerringly, the perfect present for a preschooler and the perfect place to stash candy for small hands in search of M&M's.

Although she is well into her 80's, her disposition is—as it seems always to have been—nothing short of sunny. This is an absolute wonder to me, a phenomenon I have never seen at close range before; the women in my family, me included, tend toward the moody. Rose, on the other hand, has an unruffled response to the demands of everyday life and invariably makes the best of a bad situation, something I could no sooner do than fly. I love her not simply because she produced the man I adore, but because she has revealed to me what it is to possess equanimity. Her steady good temper, her resilience even in the face of real sorrow—her brother,

sister and husband have all died within recent memory—I mark with awe. Many times in the years since my own mother's death, her serenity has provided a soothing harbor from distress. Not the least of the many things she has taught me is what it means to bear loss with grace.

Our visit will be filled with simple pleasures. We will shop and cook together, me all thumbs, she serenely competent as she shows me yet another easy, altogether delicious way to make chicken. Together we will sit reading on her flower-filled front porch, go for walks on the streets of her quiet, leafy neighborhood and enjoy the antics of her lively granddaughter, whom we will take on outings to the park and to the movies. We'll chat companionably while sharing meals, news of one another's lives and the care of my little girl. Rose will reminisce about her childhood, relate with eloquence the oral history of her family, and tell me stories about my husband when he was a little boy, stories that will illuminate his behavior as an adult. I'll come back from my visit richer than when I left, carrying away with me memories, recipes, new pieces of the puzzle that is the man I married, and a package of his favorite cookies.

Over time I've come to understand that the quiet satisfaction my mother-in-law and I take in one another's company is due, in part, to the very fact that she is not my mother. For while we possess a mutual affection—and a shared desire for the happiness of her son and grandchildren—we *don't* have a history. Between us are none of the Gordian knots that invariably get tied by mothers and daughters during childhood, knots that would separate us as much as bind us together. We enjoy a relationship less fraught than that of mother/daughter, a love less intense than the feelings of that distinct, fearsome bond. We have no hidden weapons or agendas. We are simply good to one another.

To have this gentle woman as my friend has seemed a particularly fortunate circumstance in the last few years. She cannot, of course, take the place of my mother, whom I loved deeply, miss terribly and am not looking to replace. But Rose has given me solace and sweaters, kindness and cleaning tips, a loving relationship just when I needed one the most. She has been a companion, an adviser, a gift. What she hasn't been is a joke. ■

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