

*Patti Scheibel*

## **A Two-Story House**

While Fiona had actually been Charlene's grandpa's dog, it used to curl up at her grandma's feet under the table, receiving scraps and loving pats on the sly. Sometimes it almost seemed human, the way it cocked its head and stared up in seeming concern or confusion at Charlene's grandma's everlasting lonely conversation with it. Of course that all happened years before Charlene's birth, which has nothing to do with the recent past when Zeke, in all his gaudy splendor, pounded upon the front door. It's a big two story house or Charlene might have heard his wild thumps. Instead, Charlene huddled under the covers of her mother's old bed in her mother's old room, just like she huddles in the same fetal position in the same bed right now.

The front door of Charlene's grandma's house has long grooves down the surface revealing the wood grain underneath the paint. The door knob is pocked and battered. Zeke pounded upon the door, never noticing the scars across it. If he had noticed he might have assumed some Manson family reject had tried to knife their way into the house.

Actually, fifty years ago Fiona went rabid and had scratched at the door until her paws bled, chewing on the door knob and shattering her teeth in the process. Charlene's grandma came home to see the mad dog throwing her body against the door and gumming the knob in a frenzy, mouth foaming, still managing to stagger on legs that were broken and bent in unbelievable direc-

tions.

But Zeke didn't notice so he assumed nothing. Frustrated, he kicked the door and succeeded in stubbing the toes inside his yellow cowboy boot. He ran from the door, selected a medium sized quartz rock and hurled it up at Charlene's mother's window. It was the only window with a light on. The rock had the desired effect. Charlene peered out the window to see Zeke smiling up at her, his toothy mouth reflecting back the light. He gestured at the front door. Charlene staggered down the narrow stairwell to let him in. She said, "Damn it Zeke, it's three o'clock in the morning and you come round here like . . . like . . ."

Zeke waved a sickly bunch of carnations wrapped in cellophane under her nose. She blushed, reached for them smiling but he jerked them away and ran past her up the stairs into her mother's old room. "My grandma . . ." Charlene said to the blank space in front of her face. She snapped her mouth shut and followed him. He lay sprawled out across the rumpled sheets.

He tossed the carnations to her and said, "These are for the old dragon. Give them to her when she wakes up and be sure to tell her they're from me." Charlene threw the flowers on the floor, ran at him and halfheartedly punched him in the nose. He lay there open-mouthed, a slow trickle of blood running out from his nose as Charlene backed away with her hand over her mouth.

Zeke wiped his nose and when he saw the smear of blood on his hand he howled. Charlene clapped her hand over his mouth and said, "Don't you dare wake up my grandma. Shut up or I'll feed you to the alligators." Being Zeke, the thought made his lips twitch in a half smile under her hand. Charlene's grandma slept better back then. It would have taken more to wake her.

Now, however, Charlene's grandma tosses and turns and Charlene listens to her violent sleep through the walls. The extra dose Charlene's begun to give her grandma before bed time insures against her waking from whatever nightmares she has and crying. Charlene doesn't think of it as overdosing though, she thinks of it as giving her grandma the rest she so desperately needs.

Tree branches scrape against the wall. There's a row of

willows encircling the house that looks like oriental brush paintings on misty mornings, and a lemon tree that produces such sour lemons a drop of its juice would ruin an entire glass of iced tea. They surround the house with their gnarled overgrown branches as though embracing it or holding it up. Charlene's grandma's house has always been the shadiest one on the block. When Charlene turns on her mother's old Cupid lamp the darkness seems to linger in corners and under tables, waiting to crawl out again. Charlene might imagine she hears something sliding down the halls that stops at each closed door then slides on again. She probably dwells on toothless rabid dogs with legs all distorted out of shape. The story has been in her family too long for her not to. Being a strong-minded woman, Charlene's grandma had borrowed a neighbor's rifle after seeing Fiona foaming at the mouth. Charlene's mother was just a toddler, and she watched the whole thing from the back seat of the locked car. But then again Charlene might not think of it at all, stuck in the unfamiliar house listening to the lonely sounds of her grandma's sleep.

Charlene had lifted her hand off Zeke's mouth and had to smile at his off-centered grin. She studied his red nose as he held his head back to stop the bleeding. She said, "Zeke, you gotta stop taking drugs or you'll wind up looking like one of those Picasso pictures with both eyes on one side of your nose and God knows how many mouths."

"I'm not taking drugs. I think you're taking drugs. I think you're taking your poor old granny's drugs and not leaving her any. I think that's why she's so grouchy and that's why you tell me things like you'll feed me to the alligators."

Charlene said, "There used to be alligators, really. They'd come up from the swamps in drought years and Grandpa'd find their tracks in the yard. Sometimes he'd look outside and see their yellow eyes glowing, just pairs of yellow circles moving around real close to the ground. He used to have to hunt them."

"I think you taking drugs must be genetic. I bet old gramps dropped a little acid in his day." Charlene closed her eyes and counted to ten in a whisper while her grandma's eyes danced under

their lids in the next room.

At first Charlene's grandma kept giving Charlene her jewelry: old rings, necklaces and broaches of tarnished silver and green glass. Charlene would try and press them back into her grandma's withered hand, but the hand closed up tight into a bud like fist. The fingers would slowly curve up like some rarefied orchid, curving slowly because of the arthritis and years of flexing open then shut. Once Charlene tried to open those fingers but they seemed as feeble as match sticks and Charlene grew afraid and quit.

Every time Charlene slipped the bed pan under her grandma's tiny wrinkled ass it seemed as though she was violating the old woman. Her grandma would blankly stare up at a point somewhere above Charlene's head and blink her milky eyes over and over. "Was it tough in the depression," Charlene would ask. Or, "Were you scared when Fiona went crazy," even though she'd heard it all from her mother many times.

Her grandma would keep her eyes fixed up in the air and say, "I don't remember," or finally "it won't help matters much." Charlene took to looking the other way while awkwardly shoving the bed pan under. Then Charlene would disappear somewhere inside the house for half an hour or so. Where ever she went to she couldn't hear her grandma's hoarse voice calling her name, shriller and shriller until her grandma would clench her eyes and mouth shut, probably pretending she was some one else.

Charlene, however, did originate a more positive ritual. Every morning and every night she used the sterling silver brush her grandma gave her to comb out her grandma's waist long baby fine white hair. The first time her grandma had said, "I can brush my own hair." Her hands had shot up to grab the brush out of Charlene's hand but they wavered and fluttered back onto the quilt.

Charlene put the brush down and began to massage her grandma's pink scalp with soft fingers. She said, "When I was little I used to spend hours brushing dolls hair. Your hair is so soft and white. Please let me brush it." Her grandma snorted but didn't stop her. Now if Charlene is even five minutes late her grandma calls out her name and announces it's brushing time. Charlene brushes and brushes, even when her wrist begins to throb and her arm gets

numb. Charlene likes the feel of long hair.

It was probably her first tie to Zeke. They both admired the wild coils of his long hair. She frequently contemplated on the way it fell down his back, making her itchy, but she never suggested her brushing his hair. Zeke's long hair upset her grandma. The first time he dropped by after Charlene had moved in he gave her a long sticky kiss right at the top of the stairs. Her grandma toddled out of her room with the walker and stared, wide-eyed and outraged. Charlene abruptly untangled herself from his arms while he muttered a barely audible "hiya."

Carefully enunciating each word her grandma said, "Aren't you going to introduce me to your girlfriend, Charlene?"

"Jesus, I'm a guy," Zeke blustered.

"Well I'm not sure kissing a young man with long hair is that much better than what I thought was going on." Charlene's grandma stalked back into her room, rattling the walker. Zeke muttered about evil old dragons while Charlene sighed.

"I suppose in her day they wore so much clothes the only way they could tell the difference was by the hair," Charlene explained. Probably Charlene was glad her grandma hadn't caught them in bed, because her grandma's eyesight was so bad she might have made the same mistake, devastating Zeke for life. She patted his hand and said, "Oh, don't take herso seriously. She's a relic." Zeke wouldn't answer her. He pecked her on the cheek, picked up his red leather jacket and left, later calling her up to say he'd be by again when her grandma was gone.

"But you can't do that," Charlene wailed into the antique receiver, "just because she's old and crabby. You'd be crabby too if some grand kid you hardly knew moved in to keep an eye on you."

"How'd you like it if she accused you of being a guy?"

"I'd drop my pants and say guess again."

"I think your grandma would be better off if they just broke down and got her a nurse instead of inflicting you on her."

That all happened when her grandma could walk short distances with the walker. When her grandma stumbled she'd accuse Charlene of rearranging the furniture. Perhaps the furniture rearranged itself. Charlene never moved anything but it seemed like

she had each time a chair skittered away when her grandma tried to sit down.

The end tables perpetually drift into people's paths. The bruises on Charlene's grandma's shins have healed but Charlene's are still black and blue. Perhaps when Fiona was alive she noticed tables and chairs slow migration. Dogs are different than people; they sense what people can't. Perhaps her last act of trying to batter the door open was caused by a crazed desire to shred the over stuffed chairs and splinter the tables once and for all. Charlene's grandma had shot the dog, and Charlene's grandpa had been so proud of his wife's steady hand he never had the door sanded or the knob replaced. He did, however, pick up the bits of teeth scattered across the welcome mat. He kept them in a jar, like jelly beans on the mantle in the living room. The day he died Charlene's grandma buried the teeth in the back yard, jar and all. She told Charlene's mother at the funeral she took great comfort in burying those teeth. Charlene's mother never told Charlene this particular tidbit, though.

Charlene stretches and yawns. She wishes there was a warm body in bed with her, preferably Zeke but a dog would do. As her grandma whimpers in the next room Charlene's hands crawl across her body, almost as if she's reassuring herself everything's in its place. She presses her fingers together and whispers, "Zeke."

She had told Zeke the dead flowers he brought would never warm her grandma up to him. He put his finger to her lips and whispered "later" in a husky voice. They hadn't bothered to pull the curtains or turn off that horrid Cupid lamp. Since it was a two story house it probably didn't matter. Charlene's grandma started moaning in her sleep in the next room, a low rumbling sound rather like a cow's moo. Charlene stopped moving under Zeke and held her breath, waiting to see if the noise would stop. Zeke kept on pushing like a wind-up toy missing a part, a bear beating against a nonexistent drum.

A week later when Charlene made Dinner with a capital D for her grandma and Zeke to reacquaint them under better circumstances, Zeke wore a suit instead of his usual jeans and bright shirt. Zeke in a suit was something to behold. He had his hair tied back and tucked into the collar of his shirt. He could have been a business

man except for the necktie which was strictly Zekesque, hand painted red lobsters dancing across a background of tiny shining palm trees. Charlene too had made an attempt at dressing to please her grandma. She went so far as to shave her legs up to the knee, exactly where the hem of her demure cotton skirt fell.

Charlene's grandma didn't seem to realize Zeke was the same long haired man. The dining room chair even stayed in place when he carried her down the stairs and set her in it. She clung to his neck like a child and wouldn't let go for a moment, her old hands clutching onto the back of his sport coat. He bugged his eyes out at Charlene. Charlene's grandma's hands slowly unfolded, let go and drifted down into her lap. She said, "Such a nice young man."

The dining room hadn't been used in years and the weighty elegance of the old mahogany furniture seemed out of time. Charlene had set the table with the fine old china and good silver, also using the salad forks which hadn't been out in more than twenty years. From that time onwards the salad forks would refuse to dwell in their proper compartment in the silverware drawer. Now they tend to mix in with the other forks and occasionally the knives and spoons, rustling and clinking together.

The candles flickered, casting warm tints. Charlene's grandma insisted upon serving up portions onto the plates herself. She piled Zeke's so high it looked like an upside bowl. When Zeke said, "I can't eat all this," Charlene's grandma took a hunk of roast beef from his plate with her fingers and slipped it under the table. She winked at him.

They ate in silence, utensils clicking against the plates. Zeke kept looking at Charlene's grandma, opening his mouth and taking a deep breath then slamming it shut. Upstairs Charlene's grandma's bed unmade itself. Charlene crawled under the table to pick up the hunk of meat. Zeke giggled into his wine glass. Charlene's grandma turned on him, turned at the sound and said, "Why don't you share your joke with me?"

Charlene popped up from under the table, meat in hand. She said, "Grandma, I think the alligators are back. Last night I looked out the window and saw yellow eyes about the size of quarters."

"Alligators, what a crock. Your grand daddy might have had

your mother convinced with his alligator hunts but I knew all along he just wanted to get out of the house. Lord, child, think. The closest swamp is more than thirty miles away.” Zeke blew bubbles in his wine glass. Charlene watched her grandma’s hands hover over the table. The color of them seemed translucent.

The walls of the house are like elastic, they slip and at night they stretch to unbelievable proportions. Alone nights her grandma used to try and teach the dog to sit, beg, come. It was a big friendly Irish setter that would constantly jump into her lap as if it thought it were a little lap dog. It didn’t become a problem until Charlene’s grandma got pregnant. She tried to be strict then, ordering the dog to go lay down and stay. Fiona would collapse into a heap at her feet and sigh loudly. Her grandma got that same response for every order but come; then Fiona would happily run to her, jumping over the obstacle course of shifting furniture, tail wagging. Her grandma gave up after awhile and started talking to the dog about names for the baby. She started letting Fiona sprawl across Charlene’s grandpa’s wide empty side of the bed. But late at night when the front door would slam, rattling all the glass in the house Fiona would slink out of the bed and crawl under it, cowering. Charlene’s grandma would flick off the light then clench her eyes and hands shut.

Charlene’s grandma whimpers softly in the next room. Her mother’s old room strikes Charlene as a sort of museum. The pink flowered wall paper and the white lace curtains are nothing like the house Charlene’s mother raised her in. The white Cupid lamp is a fat leering baby with no colors painted in its white eyes. Zeke admired that lamp. He wrote his name inside the lamp shade with a red felt tip marker. “I have to have it when your grandma’s gone,” he told Charlene. “It’s so tacky it’s wonderful.”

“That’s terrible! Did you wait around for your grandma to go so you could take her stuff?”

“She was dirt poor. She didn’t have any stuff to take.”

Charlene pulls a pillow over her head to muffle the sound of her grandma’s pain. She used to check on her grandma for each cry, even that time with Zeke in her mother’s old bed. She had told him, “I have to check Grandma,” and had started to squirm away but he



didn't seem to hear her. Charlene panicked for a moment, then had the oddest sensation she was someone else, someone not inside her body. She watched Zeke with detached interest, then slipped away and entered her grandma's room. Her grandma thrashed around in her bed, scraping at the air with hooked fingers.

Charlene said, "Hush, it's alright," over and over until her grandma's body stilled and her fingers loosened and lay quiet. Charlene shuffled back into her mother's old room. Zeke snored between the cool sheets. She crawled in beside him and nudged him. He muttered something incoherent and turned over, facing the wall. Charlene brushed his hair, fanning it out across the pillow while he slept.

She woke him at dawn and told him to go. As she pushed him out the front door he told her, "You know you're abusing my good nature."

The pillow muffles nothing in this big two story house that creaks and groans under its own weight. Charlene throws the pillow across the room, gets out of bed and ransacks her mother's drawers looking for her grandma's medication. She finds the vial but there's only two pills left, twice the prescribed dose but half of what she's begun to give her grandma each night. Something slides down the hall. Charlene opens her mother's door and peeks out. Nothing. She walks down the hall towards the phone, out of reach of her grandma's voice. She stumbles over another misplaced table. With shaking hands she dials Zeke's number to invite him over.

"You sure you want me there?" Zeke asks.

"Yes," Charlene answers, wrapping the telephone cord around her wrist.

"You're not going to punch me?"

"No, I won't."

"You're not gonna throw me out at some God-awful hour?"

"No."

"You're not gonna disappear on me?"

"I might, I'm sorry but my grandma's real bad and I don't know what..."

"Yeah, yeah. Give me half an hour and I'll be there."

Fiona was a beautiful dog. Probably Charlene's grandma relives that day over and over in her illness: the gun in her hands, the frightened tearful little girl in the back seat of the Ford. She aims, fires and crumples the dog. It wasn't even her own dog, she didn't name it, she didn't pick it out and she never hurt it. The pills they keep giving her, round, hard and white stick in her throat like those damn dog teeth. She tosses and turns, outside of her body now, outside of her mind. They're rustling in the next room. Fiona's such a good natured dog, listening night after night, shadowing her on four paws through this house that batters and batters with drifting furniture and never stops.