

Country Roads, Take Me Home

by Callie Dean

This essay first appeared at Coffee + Crumbs, November 6, 2020:

<https://www.coffeeandcrumbs.net/blog/2020/11/6/country-roads-take-me-home>

I drive along the highway in my gray Subaru, my infant son bundled up in his carseat. The road to my grandmother's house feels equal parts familiar and foreign. As I turn into her yard, I realize the trip is shorter than I remembered: 30 minutes at most, a straight shot from my neighborhood.

Throughout my childhood, Mimi's home was a haven of home-cooked dinners—roast beef, mashed potatoes, and brownies—all made from scratch and with love. We held slumber parties on her living room carpet, played endless rounds of an obscure card game called Rook, and heard cautionary tales about copperhead snakes lurking in the grass. We spent hours exploring her expansive backyard, which stretched past rows of potatoes, into the woods, and down to a small creek bed.

Mimi is 89 years old now, almost deaf, and she lives alone on that same plot of land. There is no driveway, just well-worn tire marks notched into the dirt. The house is gone now. A mobile home stands in its place, and it already shows signs of disrepair; the front door doesn't lock, and there is a loose board in the stairs. A local church group built her a wheelchair ramp a few years ago, but she refuses to use it on principle. Instead she braves the rickety steps each time she leaves her house.

We did not warn Mimi we were coming. Though she has a telephone, she cannot hear it ring. She doesn't answer when I knock on the door. After a moment of panic, I push it open and am relieved to see her watching TV in her recliner. She looks perplexed, then delighted.

"Oh, hello!" she says, standing up to give us hugs. "What a surprise! Come in!"

I look for a place to sit. The bright red couches are filled with balls of yarn, crochet needles, and half-finished scarves. Stacks of newspapers and Christian romance novels cover the linoleum floor. Photographs line the mantel, some in frames and some leaning against the wall. I pull a muslin blanket out of the diaper bag and clear some space for my three-month-old, Luke, to play.

"What have you been doing lately?" I ask.

Mimi looks at me blankly.

"WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING LATELY?" I repeat, speaking directly into her hearing aid this time.

She smiles, nods, and proceeds to answer an entirely different question. I wish I knew her well enough to ask better questions: about the books she is reading, the pictures on her mantel, the memories she keeps stored in her heart. The kinds of questions I never thought to ask as a child but can't figure out how to broach now. Especially not when small talk requires so much effort. I give up and let silence fill the space instead.

Mimi has only met Luke once, but she picks him up and bounces him on her knee. "You are such a sweet little boy," she coos. Then, as if worried I might feel left out, she adds, "And you have a sweet mama, too!"

I watch as she and Luke break into matching grins. Perhaps she is communicating just fine, after all.

Growing restless, I check the time on my cell phone—not that we have anything else planned for the afternoon. I scrounge around for an extra piece of paper and write with a Sharpie: "Do you want to go anywhere?"

She scrutinizes the paper. "Well," she says, "I need to go to the grocery store and take these books back to the library."

"Just show me the way," I reply.

As we climb into my car, she comments, "I used to have a little Mazda that I crashed into the fence over there. I keep saying it's time to go back to the car lot and pick out a new car, but no one has taken me yet."

I nod. For the next several weeks, she will repeat this story to me, as if her words can conjure a new car into being. Everyone has talked about the wreck in hushed voices: *Can you believe she drove into the fence in broad daylight? She probably should have stopped driving a long time ago. Maybe her vision is starting to go, too.*

I don't tell Mimi the truth: she will never drive again. It's not my place, I figure, to constrict her world any further.

The Dollar General is not difficult to find, just a quarter mile up the same highway. Inside, she is greeted as "Ms. Ina" by the cashiers and fellow shoppers. I suspect a few of them have me pegged, correctly, as one of Jim's daughters. Hoisting Luke into his carrier, I search his face for a hint of family resemblance. With the slightest twinge of disappointment, I confirm he is the spitting image of my husband. Any connections to my side of the family have yet to materialize.

"Ms. Ina" fills our shopping cart with staples: a loaf of bread, cereal, and milk. Before we check out, she stops by the small frozen section and, almost impulsively, picks up a gallon of ice cream. I will soon discover that she chooses a new flavor every two weeks. After nearly nine decades, she has

earned the right to eat as much ice cream as she wants, and I find myself both surprised and touched to notice we share an insatiable sweet tooth.

Next Mimi directs me to the library. We pass two traffic lights that comprise the entire "downtown" before turning right.

I hear a siren behind us. This is my first time ever to be stopped by a cop, but I dutifully pull to the shoulder of the road. I dig in my glove compartment for my registration while he walks to the side of my car.

"Ma'am," he asks, "do you drive this way often?"

"No," I say, my heart pounding. "I'm visiting my grandmother."

"Are you aware this is a school zone?"

I am not. The surprise on my face is genuine as I stammer my apology.

He lets me go with a warning. After a moment, Mimi says, "I wondered why you stopped. Were you going too fast?"

She heard neither the siren nor the entire exchange with the police officer. My cheeks burn, hoping I haven't disappointed her. But out of the corner of my eye, I see a twinkle in hers.

Two minutes later we reach the library: a landmark I didn't anticipate but recognize immediately. Mimi used to drive me here, where I would lose myself in the bookshelves. Now that our roles are reversed, I wonder if I owe my love of reading, in part, to this old building.

On the way back, I reverse my route to return home. Once we reach the main highway, she nudges me. "You missed my house," she says.

Sure enough, as I pull into the next driveway to turn around, I see her familiar lot a few houses behind me. The fence marking the property line is the same one where she wrecked her car a few weeks ago.

I am mortified. Never mind that I have an atrocious sense of direction in the best of times, or that I was coming from the opposite direction than usual. If I had been visiting more regularly, I never would have missed the turn. It would have felt intuitive, a road that I would know as much by feel as by sight.

After moving back to my hometown four years ago, I can count on one hand the number of times I have driven here. It was easy to imagine, or at least pretend, that her life was so full and busy that she didn't have room for me, just as I had filled my own life without making time to visit. Did it take becoming a mother for me to prioritize family ties? Or did I finally slow down long enough

to pay better attention? Mimi is my only remaining grandparent, and I'm struck with grief for what we have missed.

There was no judgment in her voice, just a gentle reminder to turn around. Somehow her grace—undeserved, as grace always must be—makes me feel all that much worse.

As I watch her say goodbye to her tiny great-grandson, I realize something even more important than the shame that swells through my body: *We still have time*. It is not too late for my children to know my grandmother. Even though the days of roast beef and brownies have long passed, I want them to love her and to be loved by her. Time itself: another undeserved grace.

I hug Mimi, feeling her delicate shoulder bones poke through her sweatshirt. "We'll be back next week," I tell her.

In the silence of her mobile home, she has lost track of time. Her days will string together into a blur, and our next visit will surprise her once again. But the words are as much for my own sake as for hers.

"See you next time."