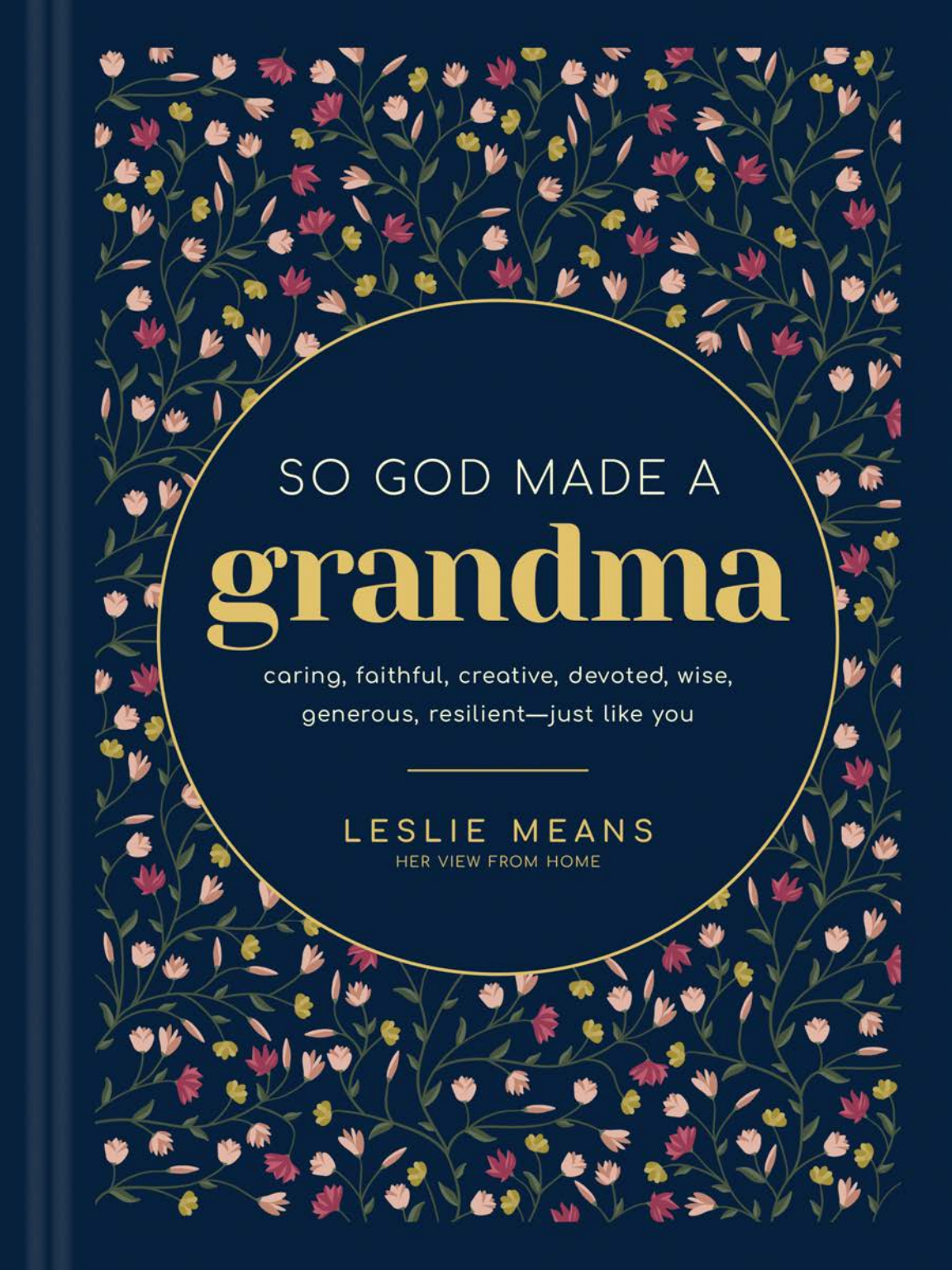
SO GOD MADE A
grandma
caring, faithful, creative, devoted, wise,
generous, resilient—just like you
LESLIE MEANS
HER VIEW FROM HOME

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So God Made a Grandma: Caring, Faithful, Creative, Devoted, Wise, Generous, Resilient—Just like You

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Introduction

LESLIE MEANS

I hadn't opened this Bible in years. A gift on my confirmation day, it was packed away when I left for college, along with trinkets and embarrassing photographs from high school. There it sat—in a dark, tattered grocery store box, next to a dollar-store homecoming crown and a yearbook that read "Shoot for the Stars: Class of 2000."

I unboxed it again during my family's recent move to our forever home. My name is inscribed on the front; the cover was pristine.

Not the look you're going for in a used Bible.

I took it from the tattered box and placed it on a shelf next to my first book, *So God Made a Mother*.

And there it sat, yet again.

The next part of this story is what I like to call a "whisper story."

You might call them God winks, intuition, or just coincidence, but I call these moments God's whispers—nudges from the Holy Spirit.

Nearly a year after the Bible's unboxing (and twenty-eight years since it was first gifted to me), I thumbed through its pages and discovered this photograph.

It's a picture of my maternal grandmother and me in 1997. I am wearing her wedding dress—the one she wore to marry my grandaddy in 1947. They were celebrating fifty years of marriage and wanted me to walk down memory lane in Grandma's dress.

I couldn't button the back, so the lane was shortened to the living room, but I shimmied my way into it and snapped a photo with my beloved grandma anyway.

I hadn't seen this photograph since high school, when I'd tucked it into a place I knew would be safe.

But on this day, when it fell from the pages of my Bible and floated gently to the floor, I remembered Grandma and her unending love for me.

And it was this day we finalized our plans to write the very book you're holding.

"Okay, God, I hear you," I told Him. "Thanks (again) for the whisper."

I pray this book takes you down your own memory lane—when you first tasted your grandma's cookies or delighted in her beautiful home. Or perhaps you are a grandmother, and you find joy and comfort in reading the stories of other women in this season of life. Or maybe you are grieving, praying for a wound to heal, or searching for comfort and community. Or you're a forty-something woman like me, grateful for your mother, who is now a grandmother to your babies, and you pray, someday, you can be half the woman she is.

One of my favorite things about putting this book together was talking with my mom about my grandma—someone I didn't get the privilege of doing life with as an adult. I called Mom nearly every morning while I was writing, and talking with her helped me learn more of my family's story.

And that's the beautiful gift of this book.

So God Made a Grandma connects women—no matter who we are, no matter what stage of life we're in, no matter what memories and dreams we tuck away in our hearts.

This book is for the love-givers. The tradition-keepers. The heart-holders. The memory-makers.

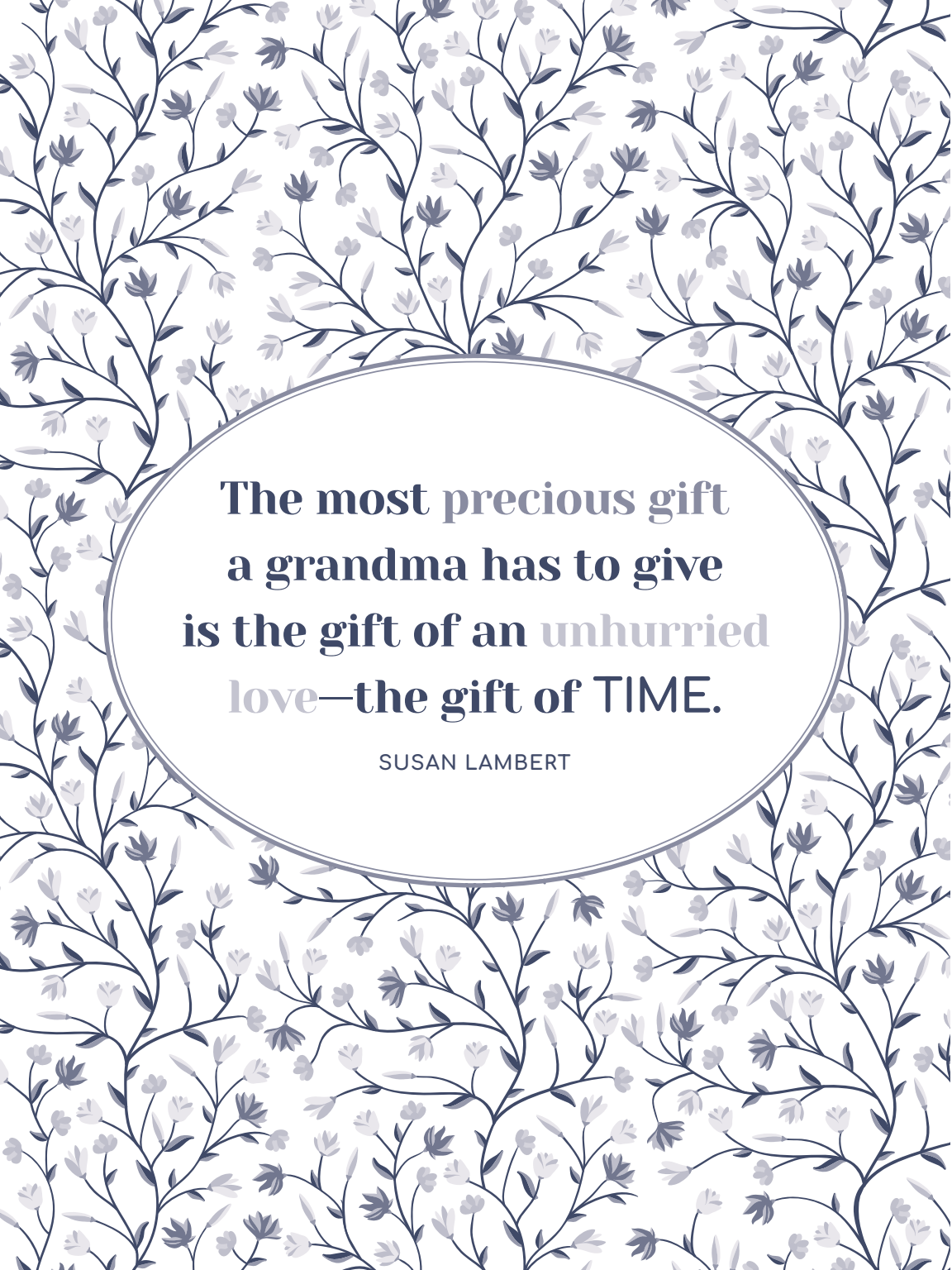
This book is for you. We hope you find your own whisper story tucked inside its pages.

xo,
Leslie

PART 1

SO GOD MADE A GRANDMA

gentle


The most precious gift a grandma has to give is the gift of an unhurried love—the gift of TIME.
SUSAN LAMBERT

The Tea Set

LESLIE MEANS

My paternal grandmother, Vera, died in her early seventies. Grandma didn't have much. She was raised by a single mother, who I'm told was loved by many.

And I sure loved my grandma.

When Mom and Dad moved to the farm, Grandpa and Grandma moved into town. They owned a small home near the grade school, which was convenient for me.

I walked home many days after school, probably when Mom was working and Dad was in the field. On those long afternoons between school and supper, I'd sit with Grandma and watch *Wheel of Fortune* or play a mean game of Uno. Sometimes when she was resting, I would wander around her home and casually glance (aka snoop) in boxes, drawers, and anything I could get my hands on.

One thing that always caught my eye—a treasure I couldn't wait to discover—was her glass cat tea set.

It was in perfect condition and came with little spoons, plates, saucers, and even a small container for milk and sugar. She kept it in a hutch near the kitchen. I don't recall ever removing the dishes from their glass home. Still, I spent hours staring at their dainty details, and I even used to reach in and use the spoon to stir imaginary milk and sugar into imaginary coffee.

After Grandpa died, she was never the same. A tiny woman, she struggled with diabetes for most of her adult life.

Maybe she knew she wouldn't be around long or was simply preparing for the inevitable, but at some point, she started leaving names on items around her home so we'd know how to divide all her things properly.

One day, I opened the lid on that small glass teapot and found a note written in her shaky cursive that read simply, *Leslie*.

Grandma was planning to give the cat tea set to me.

I was honored.

I was thirteen when Grandma died. She was seventy-three. The tea set relocated to my childhood room.

I kept it on a shelf for everyone to see for a while. But after a few years, I was too cool to have something childish on display, so I decided to pack it away. CDs and pictures took its place.

It stayed hidden in a shoebox for twenty-five years.

When we moved into our forever home, I unpacked boxes and discovered the cat tea set.

My then-five-year-old son, Keithan, named after my dad, Keith (Vera's only son), was with me.

"What is that?" Keithan asked.

I told him about his great-grandma and her tea set.

He wondered, for a moment, if he could play with it.

"Do you want to get Ella and Grace to play with you?" he asked me. (His older sisters were fourteen and twelve at the time.)

"I would love to have tea with *you*, Keithan," I told him.

He stirred the imaginary milk and sugar. I poured him a second glass of tea. Finally, we clinked our glasses together for a well-deserved imagination celebration.

Then he helped me carefully place the tea set in its rightful place—the glass hutch near my kitchen.

"It looks so nice, Mom," he told me.

I agreed. Grandma would be so proud.

That tea set takes me right back to Grandma's house—and the feeling I had whenever I was with her. It's what grandmothers do, isn't it? They love us in quiet ways and teach us to find the beauty in simple things, in a life well lived.

I hope these next few stories remind your heart of that feeling—I know they did for me.

Grandmothers Live for the Details

KIT TOSELLO

After my widowed mom retired from decades of secretarial work, her kitchen table always held a grouping of three items: a beautiful English floral cream pitcher filled with erasable pens; a small sunny-yellow legal pad; and a bottle of petal-pink nail polish.

The floral pitcher Mom used as a pencil cup had been a thank-you gift from my husband, something he'd purchased on a business trip while I remained home, sick during my first pregnancy and needing my mother's care. The erasable pens? A necessity, given Mom's daily crossword habit. Ever the secretary, she also employed them to record an endless series of lists on her little yellow legal pad. Lists I couldn't make heads or tails of. See, Mom often used a combination of letters, curlicues, lines, and circles—the secretarial shorthand she'd relied on for rapid notetaking throughout her professional life.

As for the nail polish, I suppose after all those years as a typist and stenographer, speedy fingers and pretty hands had become Mom's trademark.

My petite mother rejoiced in choosing a grandmother title, finally landing on "Gram." It wasn't long before it became apparent Gram Doris had a superpower: If her grandkids took an interest in something, so did she. Dinosaurs? Olympic figure skaters? *Hannah Montana*? She did the research.

As the grandkids aged, so did Gram Doris—and those lists on her yellow

legal pad grew beyond to-do lists into to-remember lists. Reminders of the ever-changing interests and happenings in my three children's lives. This became even more important once we moved a state away.

Between visits, she and I stayed connected across the miles through lengthy phone calls. Was my mother's memory declining at all? If so, I hardly noticed. Thanks to her efficient notetaking, she always remembered what the kids were up to. With her trusty yellow notepad at her side, Mom might say, "How's Marissa enjoying her new ballet class?" or "Did Chelsea and her little friend get things worked out?" or "How is Sean's wrist healing?"

Then came the day Mom called to cheerfully wish me a happy birthday—a day early. My heart squeezed with sadness. Still, after shaking off her embarrassment, she followed it up with a timely inquiry about each of the kids.

More time passed, and after a dangerous fall, Mom decided to move to assisted living. Still, although her balance was unreliable, her notetaking about the grandkids was not.

"Was Marissa able to change college roommates?"

"Did Sean decide to go on the mission trip?"

"Has Chelsea written any new songs?"

Nothing in life prepares you for the first time you walk into your mother's world when she is no longer in it. After my mom passed, I scanned her room with its buttery walls and her butterfly bedspread, sniffing her pajamas, longing for signs of her presence—this one small woman who faithfully loved me and my children in such large ways.

And there they were. Her pencil cup full of erasable pens. Her soft-pink nail polish. Her small yellow legal pad. As usual, Gram Doris's final notes on the pad were hard to translate unless you happened to know shorthand. Weird lines. Curlicues. But also my kids' names. Tears pressed. These were the updates I had given her during our final phone call before she entered the hospital, never to return.

Some years have passed since that tender day when I gathered Mom's last yellow legal pad as if it was a treasure of infinite worth. Today, Mom's English floral "pencil cup" adorns my desk. And—joy upon joy!—I have two grandchildren

of my own. Which means I now understand something about Gram Doris I couldn't have grasped back then: those shorthand squiggles had been much more than memory-nudges.

Every inky curve embodied her grandchildren's presence in her heart despite their physical distance. Every line testified to her bottomless love. I know this because between visits and phone calls, I find myself longing for the same kinds of updates about my grandkids.

"Is four-year-old Leon still into *Bluey*?"

"What is eight-year-old Olivia's favorite book today?"

Turns out, these little bits are the golden nuggets of grandparenthood. There is nothing trivial about the details that make each grandchild unique—hearts and minds growing, interests taking root, personalities blossoming. We grandmas cherish it all.

When, someday, my memory and handwriting go wobbly like Gram Doris's, I'll still be storing up every detail about my grandchildren in my heart. And if necessary, on a sunny-yellow legal pad.

Kit Tosello, author of *The Color of Home*, writes bighearted small-town novels and loves making bubble tea for her grandkids. Find info and inspiration at *KitTosello.com*.

Unhurried Love

SUSAN LAMBERT

I never thought I would feel the soft closeness of a tired toddler leaning against my body at the end of a long day ever again.

I thought the days of roaring dinosaurs and fast red toy race cars had well and truly passed me by.

And as hard as this empty-nest mama tried, I simply could not remember.

I could not remember all the lasts.

I could not remember the last time I carried your heavy, tired body on my hip as we walked home from the park.

I could not remember the last time your soft little toddler hand tucked inside mine to keep you safe when we crossed busy roads together.

I could not remember the way your bright eyes sparkled when you learned something new.

I could not remember the sound of your voice when "I love you, Mama" rolled off your lisping toddler tongue for the very first time.

I thought all those precious moments were over forever.

But then I became a grandma.

And suddenly, I found myself in the season of second chances.

A second chance to take in all the beautiful parts of childhood.

A second chance to feel it all again, without the heavy weight of responsibility that stole some of my joy the first time around.

A second chance to fill the love tank of my children's children.

And as this season of second chances unfolded, I began to understand the most precious gift a grandma has to give is the gift of an unhurried love—the gift of time.

Time to be fully present this time around.

Time to stroll slowly and be fully immersed in endless grandchild chatter.

Time to feed the fish and find birds nesting in trees.

Time to stop and look at planes and clouds and nighttime stars.

Time to embrace them with an unhurried extra layer of unconditional grandma love.

Time to sow seeds of love and faith into a new generation.

What a privilege it is to be a grandma.

Empty-nest mama, wife, and grandma Susan Lambert believes the power of faith and sharing stories changes lives. Find her on Instagram @mamastories_.

Of Course She Can

KELLI BACHARA

The other day, my son's stuffed animal got a tear in it. Upset, he asked me, "Do you think Memaw can fix it?"

"Of course she can," I answered,

It's the same answer I have whenever my daughter asks, "Can Memaw watch us when you leave?"

"Of course she can."

There's a question that often swirls around my head when I think about my mom: *What would we ever do without her?*

She's the one who brightens our days with her treats, her creativity, her energy, her ideas.

She's the one we call when we need the recipe, when we're looking for advice on how to handle a tough situation, or when we just want to talk to the person who truly loves us more than anyone else on the planet.

She's my mom, the one who has loved me since I was known to exist. And she's their grandma, loving them like a mom does—but somehow better.

I never had a grandma like my kids have. I didn't know the absolute treasure it is to be raised by a mom and *her* mama. What a blessing to be loved so deeply by two hearts that hold a child so dear, who would do anything for them.

I truly dread (and sometimes sit too long in) anticipatory grief when I think about the day she is no longer with us.

I know I shouldn't, but it's a reality of life. And I fear the hole in my kids' hearts will feel almost as big as my own.

Because what would we ever do without her?

But the thing is, a grandma's love extends beyond her life here on earth.

It lives in us. It's wired into our DNA.

God made her love special and fierce like that.

When she's not physically here, there will be a huge void in our lives, to be sure.

But even from heaven, can she remind us we are covered by her love and bring us that unique mom and grandma comfort like she always did?

Of course she can.

Kelli Bachara is a wife and mom of four from Minnesota. She loves writing, pickleball, Jesus, and her smoking-hot husband.

Lessons in Loss

KAREN PETERSON

Tucked away in a dark corner of my closet is a mug I hold dear. Looking at it makes me sad, but I can't bring myself to throw it away. It's my only connection to a grandchild I won't meet until I get to heaven.

The day my daughter, Beth, announced she was pregnant, my husband, son, and I were sitting in a restaurant with her and her husband, Michael. She offered me a gift bag. When I opened it, I saw the mug. It said, "Not Your Average Grandma." My husband and I looked at each other. I let out a whoop. "We're going to be grandparents!" My son was going to be an uncle. We jumped for joy and hugged each other and cried. We had waited so long for this day.

We took a group photo.

It's hard to look at that photo now.

The call came a few days later. Beth was crying. "I think I'm losing my baby." We were out of town, and I felt helpless. We prayed with her, but we couldn't be there physically. When we finally got there, she had miscarried. I held her in my arms while she sobbed. She described for me the agony she experienced, all the while knowing where it would lead. It seemed like a dirty trick had been played on her and on our family.

My husband likes to say, "When they're young, they sit on your lap. When they're older, they sit on your heart." My heart felt that weight as I watched my

daughter and son-in-law walk through the whys and what-ifs of losing their baby. They tried to act like everything was okay so we wouldn't worry. They carried on normal conversations and laughed and joked with us, but I could see they were heartbroken. I prayed that as they struggled, they would be able to integrate what had happened with their faith and come out stronger for it. But I worried. After all, I'm a mom. And I longed to be a grandmother.

One of the hardest parts of being a parent is watching your children suffer. I wanted to comfort my daughter, but I didn't know what to say. I felt awkward talking about her miscarriage. I finally told her, "Something must have been wrong with the baby. That's why the body rejected it," as though that would comfort her. I cringe now, thinking of the pain those words must have inflicted on her heart.

A similar scenario repeated itself a few years later when my son, David, and his wife, Holly, invited us out to dinner. We were still in the parking lot on our way into the restaurant when they could no longer contain their excitement. "We're going to have a baby!" they told us. We hugged them and cried and jumped for joy. It had been a long road for this couple, full of waiting and fertility treatments. We sat down to eat and, between bites, talked about their hopes and dreams for this little one and what we as grandparents could do to help them.

When the call came that Holly had endured a miscarriage, we were heartbroken. But this time, I knew to be more sensitive. Platitudes were not appropriate. I knew just to be there, to listen, and to pray. Always to pray.

My daughter-in-law loves plants. During one of our visits, I gave her a prayer plant. My voice broke as I told her, "We're giving you this plant so every time you see it, you're reminded we're praying for you. And if something happens to this plant, we'll give you another one because we're not giving up praying for you."

God has been gracious since those days of sorrow. He has made us grandparents three times over, with another one on the way. I'm comforted by the thought that those little grandchildren I haven't met yet are being spoiled by their other grandparents and great-grandparents in heaven. Here on earth, I've learned

a lesson about supporting my children and their children during difficult times. Now I stay away from platitudes and instead listen or just sit with them and say nothing. I'm learning to give my children and my grandchildren to God.

And to pray. Always to pray.

Karen Peterson speaks and writes about her passion: building healthy Christian marriages and families. She blogs at *To Grow a Family*.

Grandmothers and Friends

ALI FLYNN

As my wedding approached, my soon-to-be mother-in-law called my mom from the dressing room of a bridal store and asked her to come down.

She was trying on dresses, and as a mom to two sons and an only child, she wanted another opinion. She was nervous; was it the right style? The right fit? Was the color too close to my mom's dress?

An hour later, she ran out of the store to greet my mom, giggling like a schoolgirl. Immediately, I knew it—these two different yet remarkable women would be lifelong friends, two moms leaning into the opportunity for friendship.

Months later, they were hand in hand, lighting a candle at our wedding, and their friendship was sealed. They were not just friends; now they were family. They chose to put their adult children and future grandchildren front and center. With many phone calls over cups of hot tea, they laughed and prayed, building a lifelong friendship. A friendship that would model, mold, and shape traditions to span generations.

Once they became Nana and Grandma, they supported each other through stressful times at work, health scares, heartache, and loss. My children—their grandchildren—saw a bond that will impact them for the rest of their lives. They saw Nana and Grandma spending time together laughing in the kitchen on holidays, telling stories of the past, and cradling young babies while singing

lullabies. They saw Nana and Grandma sharing family recipes and faith—and most importantly, praying with and for one another. They saw two women who loved each other and their grandchildren unconditionally.

Many years have passed since their laughter echoed in the kitchen, but Nana continues to keep Grandma's spirit alive now that she's gone. Each year as the peepers come out and birds begin to chirp letting us know spring is approaching, a warm Irish soda bread appears on our kitchen counter. It's Nana's little reminder that Grandma is forever with us.

She makes the bread using Grandma's family recipe, and I can only imagine as she stands at the counter, hands covered in flour while measuring raisins, how many conversations she recalls with her old friend, Grandma.

Now my girls stand next to Nana, aprons covered in dusty flour, as she teaches them how to make Grandma's bread. It's a balm to their souls and a beautiful reminder of Grandma. It's a recipe Nana also holds close to her heart and wants to pass on so her grandchildren never let go of their Grandma, her sweet friend.

When I listen to my mom share stories of Grandma with my kids, my heart is full.

I'm blessed these two women decided to come together rather than be at odds with each other, as many in-laws are.

I'm blessed they formed a friendship based on respect and understanding, communication and compassion.

I'm blessed these two women, who didn't always see eye to eye, put their differences aside, saw the big picture of a healthy family dynamic, and acted on it.

I'm blessed by two women who modeled what being a kind, compassionate woman and friend truly means.

But most importantly, I'm blessed my children had Nana and Grandma love them "a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck," while sharing a warm slice of Irish soda bread.

Creator of *Hang in There, Mama*, Ali Flynn offers encouragement to moms while reminding them they are not alone on their motherhood journey.

In the End

MIKALA ALBERTSON

It doesn't matter, in the end, the size of your house or the quality of your clothes. That petty disagreement you can't get over or the title behind your name. The wrinkles around your eyes or those fancy vacations (or lack thereof). The number on the scale or in your bank account. Your awards or accolades. The resentment you've kept buried deep in your heart.

None of it matters, really. We can let it go.

Because what matters are the people.

What matters are the relationships. The connections built over decades, some hard fought and largely flawed.

What matters is the making of us—the people mixed together with all that love and all those memories into one loud, imperfect family. The family left behind when my grandmother died.

We celebrated her life in a way she would've loved. With chicken salad and homemade ice cream spread on plastic tables in eastern Nebraska. With children in wet swimsuits running in from the rec hall pool to cram a few cookies into their mouths before sprinting back to the water. With uncles playing rounds of cornhole and aunts giving earsplitting screams through shrieks of laughter when someone finally got an answer right in family trivia. With stories, all of us laughing and crying in turn. With hugs, long and close. And with tears mingling on our cheeks.

What matters now is how we remember her.

Remember her hands kneading dough for cinnamon rolls or German kolaches?

Remember how she loved polka music?

Remember her teddy bear obsession and that ridiculous sound one of the teddies made that sounded more like cows mooing?

Remember her funny accent? Her laugh? Remember the story of how she cut her boys' hair? Or that time she tucked a one-hundred-dollar bill up my sleeve on Christmas?

Remember how she loved babies (especially squishing their chubby little feet) and violets (south-facing window, talk to them every day, water from the bottom)?

Remember . . . *her*?

She did the best she could to love her family. This family. Us.

In the end, it's all that matters.

Dr. Mikala Albertson is the author of *Everything I Wish I Could Tell You about Midlife: A Woman's Guide to Health in the Body You Actually Have*.

A Grandma Shows Up for Her Grandchildren Before They're Born

JENNY ALBERS

"Are you scared?" my mom asked.

"Yeah," I croaked into the phone, my cracking voice giving away the tears in my eyes.

Her question might seem an unlikely response to a pregnancy announcement, but my mom offered the exact one I needed. I *was* scared, and her question told me she didn't expect me to pretend otherwise.

Not many people understood this pregnancy announcement wasn't a standard one. This was a pregnancy announcement steeped in grief. One bound by uncertainty, on the heels of a stillbirth. The announcement from my previous pregnancy still lingered in the air, unfulfilled in ways too sorrowful to sufficiently describe.

So, yes, I was scared. Afraid of enduring the heartache of another loss. Fearful another pregnancy would end in unspeakable grief. Terrified of delivering a baby but coming home empty-handed. Again.

My mom understood this.

Though she didn't explicitly say it, I knew the thought of watching me endure another loss scared her, as did the idea of losing another grandbaby. A mother is deeply invested in the well-being of her children, and a grandmother in the well-being of her grandchildren, no matter their age or life stage.

Days later, after an unexpected OB appointment, I hesitantly made another phone call to my mom with an update. I was just days into my second trimester, and there were already concerns. I had been told to stay off my feet, to get as much help as possible for daily tasks and responsibilities, to take it easy in every way—all to help prevent complications and keep my baby growing inside my womb for as long as possible.

"Do you need me to come?" my mom asked. I didn't need to respond; she already knew the answer was yes.

So she came. Again and again, she showed up. But she wasn't just showing up for me—she was showing up for the baby I was carrying. Her grandchild. The baby we both wanted to hold in our arms.

My mom understood what was at stake. My heart, for one, but more importantly, my baby's life . . . her grandbaby's life. She was determined to do what she could to help bring this child safely into the world. Despite a calendar full of other commitments, she was committed to showing up for her grandchild—even before the baby was born.

Because that's what a grandma does.

During those long months of my anxiety-filled pregnancy, my mom's love for the grandchild housed in my womb showed up in the form of service. Love looked like cooking meals for my family and preparing freezer meals for when she wasn't there. It looked like standing in for me when I couldn't pick up my young daughter or participate in play as actively as I had before these restrictions. It looked like sacrificing the time, energy, and freedom semiretirement is supposed to provide, all in the name of caring for me and my unborn baby.

As time tiptoed by, her love showed up in the form of grocery shopping, washing dishes, doing laundry, and cleaning up after my family even though she was supposed to be done with that stage of life. She picked up where I had abruptly left off when an ultrasound suggested my pregnancy was high risk.

More than seven months after that phone call announcing my pregnancy, my mom showed up again. This time, anticipating the arrival of the baby she'd helped care for. But the baby didn't come. Not yet. And I know she felt it too—the disappointment, the fear, the anxiety.

Two weeks later, she showed up again and at last held in her arms the baby she'd done everything in her power to protect—her grandson. All eight pounds, fifteen ounces of him.

My mom started showing up for my son before he was born, and now she has the privilege of showing up to watch her grandson grow from a baby into a boy. I can't think of a better gift for any grandchild—or mother.

Jenny Albers is a Midwestern wife and mother, and the author of *Courageously Expecting: 30 Days of Encouragement for Pregnancy after Loss*.

Grandma Put the "Home" in Homemade

NATASHA SMITH

I traced her steps across the kitchen as I sat at the end of the table, legs swinging back and forth, watching her prepare a Sunday feast. Her favorite light-blue apron outlined in white eyelet ruffles was tied at her waist, and it shifted and swayed as she methodically stirred fresh-cut collards from her garden in the huge pot on the stove.

She walked from the chess (what she called a standing cabinet) to the counter, from the kitchen sink to the stove, and back and forth again. Her hands covered in flour, she was making homemade biscuits, of course, which paired delectably with her homemade pear preserves. All the vegetables she cooked were homegrown and fresh from her garden. She made just about everything you could think of from scratch, including her famous chocolate fall-apart cakes.

Grandma Emma's house was the go-to house after church. Many would stop by to see the family and, of course, see if they could get a plate of food and dessert. But they didn't have to think twice because there was always food there. And with open hands, she gave graciously and generously.

Grandma Emma was a homemaker if I've ever seen one. Everything she made was homemade, from food to handsewn quilts. Her quilts were so heavy I could hardly move under them in bed, but during the winter, they kept us warm and cozy under her love.

At her house, homemade food was and still is the language of love. To go to Grandma's house and not get something to eat when it was offered was like

cussing. You'd better grab a plate, eat, and get a glass of freshly squeezed lemonade to wash it all down.

Every time I went to visit Grandma Emma when I was younger, whether it was on a Sunday afternoon or for an overnight stay, I could find her either at the stove or in her rocking chair by the window. In the summer, the window would be cracked to let in fresh air. She'd sit there while she made conversation with guests. I loved being in that small sitting room adjacent to the kitchen, people-watching with her, seeing who was coming in and out of the house, and watching how Grandma loved on them all. It seemed like the entire town would file through to "say hey to Miss Emma just for a little while."

At five feet and a few inches tall, Grandma Emma was what you'd call small yet mighty. She raised eleven children, mostly on her own. She had a village, but she was the one who held it together. She was always sowing her love, time, faith, and talents into the lives of those around her—her family, friends, and the community. You can tell by the way people still come by the house today, especially on Sundays. They stop by to see if Miss Emma is up to seeing visitors (and, of course, to grab a plate of food on their way out).

She made such an impression on me with her beautiful spirit and how she loved me and those around her that I named my first baby girl Emma in her honor. God has truly blessed the work of her hands, and she has been able to see generation after generation.

Now when I visit, I find her either in bed or in her chair by the table. She needs extra assistance these days, but at one hundred years old and counting, her mind is as sharp as a tack. She speaks softly but with strength. Though she's changed physically, her heart is still as big as the sun, her smile as radiant as the moon. Her laugh is as jovial as ever and fills a room with warmth and joy. The heartfelt "You know I love you" she offers every time I see her floods my soul.

Though she hasn't been able to make anything homemade in years, Grandma Emma's presence means everything to me—and makes everything and everyone around her feel at home.

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Three Tiny Bibs

KRISTEN HOUGHTON

My grandmother lost three children, all under the age of three, over a period of seven years. Between the ages of twenty to twenty-seven, my grandmother had more than her fair share of grief—and I didn't know about any of it.

She never spoke about it; no one in the family did. I was twelve years old when I asked my mother why Nana never really smiled. My mother hinted that Nana had endured "family hardships" but gave no specifics, no context for my grandmother's sadness.

I didn't understand her emotional pain until the summer I had a miscarriage.

I had a loving relationship with my grandmother. She was always there; she rarely left her house—a sweet Italian lady who was happy to see me whenever I stopped by. I loved that she called me Bella, the Italian word for *beautiful*. There was always food cooking at her house; it smelled of lemon, basil, and fresh herbs. She made the best chicken soup I have ever tasted. Her Thanksgiving stuffing was out-of-this-world delicious. Her lemonade, made with fresh lemons, is a big part of my happy summer memories.

But as much as I loved visiting her, I sensed a certain reserve that kept affection at arm's length. As a teen, I attributed it to her generation, one that didn't openly show displays of affection. I would kiss her hello and goodbye, but as

far as saying "I love you," she only said it in response to me. I was the one who always initiated it.

"I love you, Nana."

"I love you, too, Bella."

Still, I knew that my grandmother loved me. Her seeming lack of affection was just part of who she was, the same as the neatly coiled bun and old-fashioned bib aprons she wore. It was just Nana.

These days, we want to know everything about our ancestors—who they really were, what happened in their lives, every little detail—to somehow help us know ourselves better through their stories. But in my grandmother's day, painful things that happened were rarely, if ever, discussed, even within the family. Whether it was from the desire to shield family members from things too personal and painful to talk about or a misplaced feeling of guilt over not having been able to prevent tragedy, her generation kept a great deal of pain inside.

I'd been married for two years when I became pregnant. Three months into the pregnancy, I miscarried. My emotions ran the gamut from sad to angry to hopeful for another pregnancy and back to sad again. The sadness always won. It was now a part of my life, and I didn't know how to help myself. Sadness followed me, my constant companion.

One day, I was sitting in my garden when I heard someone knocking on the gate. I was surprised to see Nana on the other side, holding a small package in one hand and a tall bottle of lemonade in the other.

"I want to sit in your garden, Bella, and drink lemonade with you. I want to talk to you," she said.

We settled into deck chairs in the shade to drink lemonade. My grandmother handed me the small package and told me to open it. Inside were three tiny baby bibs embroidered with the names *Jimmy*, *Rudy*, and *Eda*.

I looked at Nana in confusion.

She touched my hand. "Those are the names of my children, the ones who died," she said.

I shook my head. *Died?* Nana had children other than my mother?

"I kept the bibs in a closet for more than fifty years just to keep their memories

in my heart. But today, I bring them to you so you can know I understand your hurt."

As we sipped lemonade, she told me about her first three children. Generoso "Jimmy" was born in Italy when Nana was twenty. He died during a flu epidemic that swept Europe, and she felt as if her heart would never heal. Her second son, Rudy, died a "crib death" in New York City a few years after she immigrated to the United States with my grandfather. Her first daughter, Eda, a sweet little girl who had an unknown heart ailment, died a few months before her third birthday.

I was stunned. "I didn't know, Nana. I'm so sorry. Why didn't I know?"

Nana told me her tragedies weren't something you talked about, especially to children. She kept the pain inside.

She also told me when she found out she was pregnant with my mother, she was upset. She didn't want another baby because she couldn't go through another loss. But my mother thrived and was a healthy baby. She was a good child who became a wonderful woman. Nana thanked God for my mother.

We talked and cried together, and I came to know more about my grandmother in the late hours of a warm afternoon than I had ever known before. That she had kept her sadness to herself so as not to burden anyone else was heart-touching; so was the fact that she came to be with me, to help me with my own sorrow, which, though painful and sad, was nowhere near what she had endured.

That afternoon, our hearts connected in a way only two women's hearts ever can. I saw Nana as a beautiful light, one of bravery shining through grief in the form of three tiny bibs.

Kristen Houghton is a WNYC bestselling author who writes the popular series A Cate Harlow Private Investigation.