

MY GRANDMA CAN FLY

By Chris Pease

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MY GRANDMA'S name is Celeste. She's kind of small and she keeps her snowy white hair tied in a tight bun on top of her head. Her bright blue eyes sparkle from behind thick bifocals, and once I saw her take her teeth out and clean them in a glass. She plays piano, loves to go fishing, and whistles better than anyone I know.

Also, she can fly.

I found out when I was ten. One night after dinner, my dad said that Grandma was flying in from Florida.

"Don't we have to go pick her up at the airport?" I asked.

Dad only smiled, went to the basement, and returned with two big flashlights and a walkie-talkie. "C'mon, Sarah," he said, heading outside.

Mom was standing out by the curb, holding my little brother, Bert. He was goggling up at all the bright stars, and she squinted at them more closely, trying to separate one from the rest. It was windy, and I wished I'd brought a jacket.

"What's going on, Dad?" I asked, but he didn't seem to hear. He was busy scanning the night sky like Mom and Bert. Suddenly he pointed.

"There!" he called to Mom. "There, Mary, look. See her?"

Mom nodded. I followed her gaze and saw what appeared to be a star moving in a straight line from south to north.

Dad walked to the middle of the quiet street and turned on the walkie-talkie.

"Home base to Grayeagle," he said. "Grayeagle, do you read?"

For a moment, there was nothing but the hiss and crackle of static. Then I heard my grandmother's familiar British accent come over the radio.

"Grayeagle to home base. How about a bit of light down there?"

Dad turned on both flashlights and waved them over his head. The moving star suddenly changed course, made a sweeping turn to the west, and headed straight for us.

I still wasn't sure what was going on until the moving light reached the far end of our block. Bert squirmed in my mother's arms and squealed, "Gamma, Gamma!"

I looked again. It really was her. She swooped in just above the two big pine trees in Mr. Dorchester's yard, clipping the taller one with her ankle as she went by. A chorus of sleepy birds scolded her for the rude awakening.

"So sorry," she called back to them.

"Be careful, Mom," Dad said, waving her in with the flashlights. "Gear down!" he barked into the walkie-talkie.

"Check!" came her reply.

As she descended, she leaned backward, her feet straight out in front of her. She was wearing roller skates and carrying a rolled-up umbrella, and when she hit the ground she was moving very fast. She whizzed down the middle of the street on her skates, careful of the cars parked on either side.

"Dad!" I yelled. "She's going too fast! She'll run right into you!"

"Now, Mom!" he shouted. Grandma pushed the button on the umbrella, and *whoomp!* it opened up, caught in the air, and slowed her down enough so that she stopped right in front of us, using the toe brake on her skate. Everything was quiet again, except for Mrs. Wannamaker's dog, Tim, who was barking like crazy across the street.

Grandma was wearing the same blue calico dress she always wore, but with Grandpa's leather pilot's jacket over it. She had a white silk scarf around her neck, big goggles on her eyes, and a coal miner's helmet with a light on the front.

"Just flew in from Florida," she said.

"And boy, are your arms tired!" my parents replied together, and they all laughed and hugged.

Later, in the kitchen, Mom poured us all big cups of hot chocolate. While I watched marshmallows bump around like big puffy icebergs in my cocoa, I got the scoop on my flying grandma.

She was fourteen when she discovered what she could do. She lived with her parents on a farm in the English countryside, and one of her chores was to clean out the barn. One day she got too close to the edge of the hayloft and fell over the side.

She never hit the ground.

When her father came in to call her to dinner, he found her swooping gracefully among the rafters with a surprised flock of barn swallows.

“Great Caesar’s ghost,” he said, sitting heavily on a bale of hay. “I knew this day would come.”

So he called her down, and they had a long talk. He wasn’t very surprised that she could fly. They lived in a part of England where the magic of times past hadn’t been completely chased away. In fact, it was rumored that his own grandmother had flown on occasion, though he himself had never seen it.

“Celie,” he said, as that’s what they called Grandma as a child, “your mum and me don’t mind if you fly. Just have a care when you do. Mind the power lines, and stay clear of the planes over to the air base.”

She promised she’d be careful and soon became a very good flier. It came in handy around the farm. She could skim over a freshly turned field with a bucket of seed and have it planted in no time. She could airdrop lunch to her father as he plowed and even warn him of approaching storms long before they arrived. Sometimes she spent the whole day buzzing low over the top of the wheat field, scaring away the crows.

When World War II broke out a few years later, Grandma felt it was her duty to serve her country. She was too young to enlist, but after demonstrating her unusual skill to the wing commander at the RAF base, she was made a “reconnaissance observer.” Her job was to fly high over enemy troops and report their position. She was very good at this and even got a medal from Winston Churchill. (I got to wear it once. It was heavy.)

One night while following an enemy tank column, she flew into some thick clouds and bumped into the man who would become my grandfather. He was flying an American B-17. Hopelessly lost in the clouds, he ran right into her. As he stared in disbelief at the lady sitting on the nose of his plane, she yelled at him through the windshield to watch where he was going! He made an emergency landing in a soggy wheat field, and they had a huge argument. Two months later, they were married.

I drained the last of the cocoa from my cup. “And then you came along, right Dad?” I licked melted marshmallow off my lip.

“Well, eventually,” Dad said.

“Did you ever see Grandma fly when you were a kid?” I asked.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Mom, do you remember the time you did my paper route when I was sick?”

Grandma smiled and nodded at the memory.

“It was winter,” Dad said. “I was probably ten and I had an awful cold. I didn’t know how I was going to deliver my papers. So I’m lying there in bed, watching the snow drift down out of the sky, when all of a sudden, Grandma goes whizzing by my window. She’s all bundled up and has my bag over her shoulder. I watched her go straight up in the air so high I could barely see her, then come swooping down like a fighter plane, her breath trailing out behind her like a jet plume. She cruised by just above the hedges and started firing rolled-up newspapers at porches like little missiles, every one a bull’s-eye.” Dad smiled and leaned back in his chair. “You were quite a sight, Mom.”

“What do you mean, ‘were?’” Grandma said with a laugh. “I’m still quite a sight, thank you very much.” She shook her head, thinking back across the years. “I used to love flying in winter. The air so still, the stars so cold and bright, like diamond chips in the sky.” She smiled, reliving the memory.

I had a hard time getting to sleep that night. What a wonderful, magical thing my grandmother could do. What fantastic things she must have seen from so high above.

When sleep finally came, it was soft white and deep blue. I dreamed of birds.

That was two years ago. Since then, Grandpa passed away. It was a sad time for all of us, especially Grandma. She came to live with us because we didn’t want her to be alone, but she just wasn’t the same. She kept to her room mostly and was always worried about “being in the way.” She never wanted to play the piano or go fishing or even whistle. And she never ever flew anymore. I asked her why, since flying had always seemed to make her so happy.

“It’s not the flying that makes me happy, darling,” she said. “It’s the other way round.” She looked sadly out the window of her room. “There just isn’t much to be happy about anymore.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what Grandma meant, so later I asked Mom about it while she made my lunch.

“Well, honey,” Mom said, cutting my peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich into fours, “she misses Grandpa very much.”

“I miss Grandpa, too,” I said, “but there’s still lots to be happy about. Like you and Dad and Bert, all of Grandma’s friends, lots of things.”

Mom brought me the sandwich.

“You’re right, sweetie. She just needs to remember that, that’s all.”

I thought about Grandma while I ate my lunch. “Do you think we could help her remember?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Sarah. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, Grandma said that it isn’t the flying that makes her happy, it’s the other way around.”

Mom considered this for a moment. “Maybe she means it’s being happy that makes her want to fly.”

“So,” I asked, “if we could make her want to fly again, would that mean that she was happy?”

“I guess so, honey.”

One thing I’ve noticed about myself since I was little is that whenever I get a good idea, my ears get warm. They were starting to tingle now. I had to think of a way to show Grandma how much we loved her and also get her up in the air again.

“Thanks for lunch, Mom!” I said, heading for the back door.

“Where are you going, Sarah?” Mom called after me.

“Out to cool my ears off!”

I stood on the back porch, surveying the yard. I had an idea. It was crazy, and I wasn’t sure Dad would go for it, but I had to give it a try. I needed a yardstick, some paper and pencils, and a trip to the library. I also needed Dad to be in a good mood when he came home that night.

“You want to do *what*?”

“I know it’s a little crazy, Dad, but...”

“It’s not a little crazy, Sarah, it’s a lot crazy.”

“Sometimes the best ideas are. It’ll take some time and some hard work, but we can do it.”

“It’ll also take some bulldozers, if I understand you correctly.”

“It’s for Grandma,” I said. Then I explained to him what she’d said and my plan for making things better for her. I showed him the sketches I’d drawn up at the library and the measurements I’d made that afternoon.

Dad stepped off the porch and walked to the middle of the yard, looking around and thinking. It was evening and very quiet except for the chattering of the birds in the trees as they settled in for the night. I held my breath. Finally, he turned around.

“Sarah,” he said, “let’s do it.”

That night we let Mom in on the secret, and the next day we got started.

I was the first one up. The sun was just climbing over the edge of the world when I stepped outside and waited for the supplies to arrive. Just before seven, a big truck rumbled to a stop in the alley behind our house. The driver and his helper wrestled four big rolls of black plastic out of the back of the truck and built a makeshift tent that covered almost the whole backyard. This would keep everything safe if it rained—and it would keep Grandma from seeing what was going on.

By this time Dad was up, and he supervised the delivery of the rest of the supplies. A truck from Hansen’s Lumber stopped by, and one from Delacatto Electric Supply. There was even a cement truck from Monroe’s Ready-Mix. The last thing to arrive was a black-and-yellow bulldozer, just like Dad said. It grumbled into the tent like a bear returning to its cave. For the next week, the clattering, banging, gear-grinding sound of construction came from beneath the tent.

All that week, when I wasn’t helping out in the yard, I spent as much time as I could talking with Grandma. We talked about everything—her childhood in England, her life with Grandpa, the way Dad used to get into trouble when he was a kid. I told her about school and how fast Bert was growing up. We discussed fishing and soccer

and whether brownies are better with frosting or without. (I said with.) We talked about the world and all the places Grandma has been to and all the places she hasn't been yet.

And we talked about flying. Like the time one Christmas Eve when two jet fighters thought she was a UFO and chased her all the way to Kansas. And when she got bitten on the ankle by a migrating goose. And the time she flew too low and crashed into the Sea of Japan. She even laughed a little, remembering that.

"It's indescribable, Sarah," she said, "the freedom, the excitement of going just as high and as fast as you like. The world is so neat and orderly from up there, everything just so. And you're free, just as free as a balloon with a cut string."

Her eyes sparkled for a moment at the thought of it but quickly faded. "Those were wonderful times," she said, "but I'm too old for that now."

"Don't say that, Grandma. It's like giving up."

"No it's not, darling. It's called 'acting your age.' It's time I started doing that."

I left Grandma some pictures that I'd drawn in school. They showed her, happy and smiling, flying over our house while we all waved to her from below.

The big day finally arrived. Little by little, the building sounds in the backyard faded away. The workmen and their equipment trickled out as their jobs were finished. Just about sunset, Dad took down the black plastic tent. After dinner, Grandma would get her surprise.

Mom cooked a great meal—pot roast with potatoes and carrots, with homemade apple pie and cinnamon ice cream for dessert. They were all my favorites, and I couldn't eat a thing. I was too nervous. Would Grandma like what we'd done? Would it work?

Even Mom and Dad didn't eat much. Grandma noticed and quietly set down her fork, "All right, then," she said, "when Sarah doesn't eat pot roast, something's afoot."

Mom, Dad, and I looked innocently at each other, but I couldn't keep a straight face. "I can't stand it anymore," I said. "Let's show her."

"O.K., honey." Dad carefully folded his napkin. "Mom, would you come out on the back porch? Sarah has something for you."

A moment later, we were all standing on the deck in the dark. With the lights off, all you could see were the shadowy shapes of the trees moving in the breeze. Dad spoke up. "We know how hard it's been since Grandpa passed away. Hard for all of us, but

especially for you. It was Sarah who noticed just how hard. She wanted to do something to show how much we all care about you and that there are still things to be happy about.” He turned to me. “O.K., sweetie. Hit it.”

I was standing by the door, my finger on a big switch. It looked funny there, all shiny and new against the faded wood of our house.

“We love you, Grandma,” I said, then flipped the switch.

Out in the darkness of the yard, two rows of bright blue lights came on, one pair at a time. They were set into the ground on either side of a freshly laid strip of concrete and they seemed to march the length of the yard until they were all blazing. The smooth concrete stretched from one fence all the way to the other and had two bright yellow lines running down the middle. A wooden watchtower stood at one end of the strip, rising twelve feet into the air, red beacon flashing urgently on its roof. On the ground beside it, a small searchlight rotated mechanically, tracing the bottoms of the clouds with its cold white beam.

“Sarah learned all about runways at the library,” Dad explained. “She said we could build one, and I guess she was right.”

I went and stood next to Mom and Dad and Bert. “We just want you to know that we’re always here for you, Grandma. Wherever you go, you’ll always have a place to land.”

Grandma stared at the airstrip as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The blue lights flashed patiently as she stepped off the porch and slowly walked toward them. She prodded one gently with her foot.

“Halogen 350s?” she asked Dad.

“You bet, Mom. Only the best for you.”

Grandma was quiet for a long time. She seemed to be thinking very hard and once looked as if she might cry. But being British, she quickly got herself under control. She smiled. “Well,” she said, “I suppose it would be rude not to at least try it out.”

We all cheered, even Bert.

Mom hurried into the house and came out with a shopping bag from which she produced Grandpa’s leather jacket, his white silk scarf, Grandma’s goggles, and the miner’s helmet. Dad handed her a pair of brand-new roller skates. “New landing gear,” he said, and we all laughed.

“Hey!” he said, licking his finger and sticking it into the air. “Perfect takeoff conditions. Let’s go.”

We all walked over to the runway, helping Grandma on with her equipment as we went. Finally, she was ready.

“Thank you, all of you,” she said. “Especially you, Sarah. I’ve been grounded for too long, and that’s no way to live. Thank you for the reminder.”

Bert squirmed in my mother’s arms. “Up, Gamma, up!”

Grandma laughed. “A capital idea, Bert,” she said. “I’m off!”

She checked the laces on her skates. Satisfied that they were secure, she started down the runway, slowly at first, then faster, whizzing down the airstrip on her skates. Suddenly she was up and once in the air she moved even faster than before. In no time at all, she had dwindled to a speck of light in the sky.

I looked at the millions and millions of stars up above. It was nice to know that Grandma was among them.

That was a year ago. Grandma flew off to Florida to spend time with some old friends. She should be back any time now. Most days after school, I climb up into the tower with my binoculars and watch for her. I hope she comes back soon. If not, maybe I’ll go looking for her.

You see, something strange happened yesterday. I was up in the tower, watching for Grandma, when I leaned out too far and fell over the side.

I never did hit the ground.