

GRAM'S SEARCH AND RESCUE

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Gram needed to find her Imari ware platter or suffer Dotty's intermittent digs at the Ladies' League luncheon. Gram recently committed a cardinal mis-step at one of the League's teas, a faux pas that demanded every remedial effort she could make.

After decades of china serving-ware oppression endured during endless Ladies' League events, not to mention entertaining throughout Sal's career and running the family holiday gauntlet during the years when the Harris clan still held family holidays, Gram finally admitted to herself that, just for once, she'd like to use paper plates and disposable platters. And then, although she could have easily kept this revelation to herself, she revealed this tiny truth of the soul to her girlfriends at the League's Tuesday tea.

Looking back on the disclosure, Gram realized her moment of weakness, confessing this desire to relax this time-trusted rule of decorum. Sure, all the ladies of the League probably used paper plates at home all the time. Especially

the widows like Gram, without a man of the house to protest if the china didn't come out for lunch and dinner. But not one of them—not one!—would back Gram up when she suggested taking a simpler approach to the luncheon this year. No one would concede to cutting one tiny corner so old bony hands could avoid soapy dishes, an act that now seemed to demand a jeweler's precision and a tightrope walker's concentration to ensure the dear china remained intact.

If Gram had known she would need to defend her idea, not to mention her reputation, she would have sold the suggestion so differently. She would have wound them up with a sales pitch, like Sal taught her to do, one that would have made him proud. She would have painted a picture of the success of paper plates and plastic utensils. Encouraged them to imagine the glory of post-luncheon full tummies and sleepy heads, free to proceed directly home to beckoning beds, unburdened by the drudgery of cleanup. Promoted the skin care benefits of avoiding hot dishwater before going out into the spring chill.

Or maybe she just wouldn't have mentioned it at all.

“Why, Sarah Harris, the next thing you know we'll be serving Vienna sausages and canned soup,” Irma said to Gram, her condescension obvious.

“I hardly think we’re ready to compromise our decorum for the sake of a teensy-weensy bit of convenience,” Dotty echoed, drawing a clear line in the sand. Dotty, who would sweep Gram’s feet out from under her with a cane if it would earn points from Irma.

Sitting amidst the tasteful doilies and her oldest and most prestigious friends, with her honor as a Duchess of the League on the line, called out in front of the other ladies, who were quite more like sheep than the lioness Irma, Gram backpedaled.

“Gotcha! You ladies will fall for anything!” She snapped her fingers and winked, causing relieved bleating amongst the others and a suspicious look from Irma. Luncheon-planning was, after all, a serious matter. She who jests may not be trustworthy.

The slipup at the planning meeting meant that Gram needed to bring her “A” game to this luncheon. That meant her Tiffany silver teapot, her Waterford crystal salad bowls. And absolutely required was the Imari ware platter.

Trouble was, she couldn’t recall the last time she used the platter, nor could she remember where she stowed it. After going through the overstuffed closets of her cozy house, sifting through her cabinets and cubbies with no

particular methodology, she came to wonder if she left it somewhere. Oh, the carelessness of such an act! How could she be so absentminded?

Yet she couldn't recall any of the ladies calling her to tell her she left the platter behind. Was it the sort of thing one might e-mail about instead? With some consternation she managed to locate her password and get into her e-mail. But she quickly became absorbed in forwarded news and got drawn in by the plaintive subject lines from charity messages. Then it was lunchtime and where had the time gone? Frittered away on this silly machine, and now she needed to move on. Which was why she didn't see the months-old message from Ethel, who'd be leaving soon for warmer climes and wanted to return the platter to Gram before she did.

Gram had just switched on a rerun of *CSI* after lunch when the platter popped back into her head. She would check the attic.

The attic door hovered precariously in the ceiling at the top of the stairs. For that reason, Sal always forbade Gram to go up there unless he was home to open the chute and keep her steady while she climbed up. But now Sal wasn't here, wouldn't be.

Gram stood under the attic door contemplating the operation. There was the matter of getting the door open for starters, and then the matter of not

breaking her neck getting up or getting down. Or she could abandon the whole thing and forget about the platter. Wouldn't Dotty and Irma just love that? Gram could almost hear them now, tittering to themselves about Gram's dulling sense of presentation. Or worse, judging her out loud, asking her pointedly, didn't she own a nice platter she usually brought out for these gatherings?

A seed of certainty germinated inside her and quickly burst into full-throated bloom, commingling with visions of the approving ladies serving themselves petit fours from Gram's platter: she *knew* the Imari ware platter was in the attic. She could see the platter in her mind's eye, wrapped in a pillowcase and tucked carefully between one tub filled with Thanksgiving decorations and another with her daughter Jenny's old albums.

Getting the door open took some doing. Ultimately, she remembered a trick Sal taught her years ago, how one could slip the end of a broom handle through the loop on the door, then lean on the handle and use it like a lever. Cracking the seal was the hardest part, but the door was also heavier than she remembered. Gram made a note for Sherman, her handyman, to make sure the door hadn't taken on water, or perhaps the hinges needed oiling.

No matter for now, because the stairs held—if protesting a little—and allowed Gram to carefully navigate the ascent.

The last time Gram stood in the attic had to be spring three years ago. Sal passed just after that Thanksgiving, and rather than restoring the house to its normal post-holiday state, Gram stacked the china and other holiday serving accoutrements in neat piles on the sideboard and various other surfaces in the house. It took her about six months to bring herself to gather those wares and return them to the attic. Samantha, her helper, came over, retrieved the storage boxes from the attic, and helped her pack the breakables neatly back into their respective containers. Gram carefully handed Samantha each box, and Samantha stowed them as directed once Gram carefully climbed the ladder to survey the scene.

Had it occurred to Gram that it had really been that long, she would have realized there was no way the platter could be up there, her search would have continued, but her rescue would never have come. But as it was, Gram gave the hanging cord a sharp tug to illuminate the room and set about the task of locating the platter she could see in her mind's eye hiding in any number of cubbies.

She lost track of time, peeking under dust covers, wiping off a filigree-framed mirror. Sparing a few moments to polish the Hepplewhite handles on the bachelor's chest Sal would never part with, even long past the time when

Gram could work it suitably into their home's decor. She even opened one of Jenny's boxes, which she kept, although she had long since given up on the possibility that Jenny would ever come to get them. Gram had lost faith in the strength of the mother-daughter bond long ago, having washed it away during the race to the bottom of many a bourbon bottle.

This particular box held a couple of Jenny's old high school yearbooks, various teenaged-girl flotsam and jetsam from the 1980s, a wedding album, and a small album that would fit in one hand, the last album Jenny ever sent to Gram.

Gram flipped open the powder-blue leather cover with a satisfying snap as the spine gave way to the pressure of her hands. And there, smiling back at her with an open-mouthed, toothless mirth, was her grandson, Doug. Taken right before he struck out into a full crawl, his expression triumphant after having pushed himself up on his hands and knees.

After Jenny cut Gram out of her life, a simple envelope would arrive addressed to her and Sal, every other year or so, often with a single photograph of Doug. Sometimes a school portrait, other times a candid photo taken of Doug manning second base or squealing in the rain as he jumped into a puddle, or singing in earnest at a birthday party as the honoree puffed at candles on a

cake. Never accompanied by any note. Just Jenny's precise hand-printed name, date, and descriptor on the back of each photograph.

Gram suspected that Sal never forgave Jenny for walking away from her parents at age 17 when Gram's alcoholism reached a fever pitch. Gram, now with many miles behind her down the road of sobriety, understood that Jenny needed room to take care of herself. To preserve her own hopes and dreams, possibly to shield whatever optimism remained in her worldview, and certainly to shield Doug.

Yet, according to Sal, Jenny's pulling away was an act of self-absorbed treason that warranted informal disownment. He said Jenny should realize that families stick together. Sal seemed to expect her to come back begging for forgiveness, child in tow, admitting her selfishness in abandoning her mother during a time of crisis. For that reason, he told Gram not to reach out to Jenny beyond the initial (rejected) attempt to make amends. And Gram was ever faithful to Sal, never once going behind his back for any reason, other than the times when she hid her drinking from him. So mother never again extended her hand to daughter, and aside from those widely spaced arrivals of crumbs from her grandson's life, daughter never supplied the groveling apology that Sal silently demanded. And when Sal died, Jenny didn't come to his funeral.

Only afterward had Doug begun to visit Gram during his breaks from college, never with Jenny.

But most of this understanding and history was lost to Gram at this point, drifting on the edge of her consciousness and easily pushed aside by the current need or task at hand. So, standing in the attic with her baby grandson smiling back at her, she thought of the young man Doug had become and simply felt happy to be a grandmother. Happy to be “Gram.” Even if, to the Ladies’ League, she would only ever be “Sarah who used to drink.”

Having stowed the baby album back into the box with the rest of Jenny’s artifacts and carefully tucked one dog-eared cardboard flap under the others to seal the box, Gram turned to continue her errand. Which was...she found she could not recall why she came up to the attic. But Gram was familiar with that quandary, even expecting it, and so she simply consulted the list in her apron pocket, where she was quickly reminded of her current mission.

The platter continued to elude her as she picked through the bins of carefully wrapped fragiles. Finally, she decided perhaps she had stowed it in her steamer trunk along with the other items she kept aside to use “for good.”

Once uncovered, Gram marveled at the size of the trunk and the fact that she and Sal dragged that thing all over the country with them during the early

part of his sales career, before he finally put down roots near Portland and opened his own store. The trunk's burnished brown hide and bronze corners presided over the attic, giving the space a stately air.

The hinges protested miserably when she lifted the lid. The smells of leather and tobacco filled her head with gauzy memories, her early life and early years with Sal wrapping her in his warm embrace.

She carefully lifted each item out of the trunk, this time firmly committed to finding the platter. Her heart went cold when her fingers brushed against a hard case with the texture of snakeskin.

It couldn't be.

Her hand closed around a cube-shaped case about the size of a baseball, and dread gripped her heart, knowing she was right about what she was holding.

Sal had promised.

She pulled the box out and let her feeling of betrayal sink in. He had promised, and in all their years of marriage she had never known him to break a promise or keep a secret from her. He had *sworn*.

This box and the relic it contained belonged to the Freemasons, and Sal swore he returned it on what turned out to be his final trip to Alexandria,

Virginia. Gram hoped with all her heart that he had only kept the box, but when she opened it, she saw for sure that her hopes were in vain.

Sal's promise, all these years unfulfilled, tugged at Gram's mind, fully displacing the Ladies' League and her endless efforts to prove herself there. She would need to do what Sal, for whatever reason, had not.

Depositing the precious trinket in her apron and making a note on her pad, she buried herself in the trunk once more until she located the second-most-important keepsake related to Sal's unfinished business. Her spiral-bound ticket to anywhere, the dog-eared road atlas that guided Gram and Sal all through their travels.

The one her grandson would need in order to take her to Alexandria.

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