

Intertwining Memories

by ReadWorks



Debra holds tightly to the railing as she walks down the stairs. These stairs belong to her 90-year-old grandmother, Nana Kay. Debra has been coming to this house since the week she was born. Nana has lived in this house for 50 years.

The railing's cherry wood is smooth and reflective. At the end of the railing is a curved circle. Deb loves this shape, like a snail's shell. It's called a *curlicue*. When she was younger, she could fit her whole hand inside the curlicue, run it along all the edges with room to spare. Now, she can only fit a couple of fingers along the slick, circular curve. How she has grown!

As a 5-year-old, Debra would press her cheek against the cool, slick wood. Then she would carefully sit herself up on the railing and put her arms out to the side, like she was flying. She called this "playing airplane." Nana used to scold her for it.

"Come down from there!" Nana would say, sternly. "You'll fall down the stairs!"

Debra never felt like she was going to fall, but Nana didn't know that.

That was 15 years ago. Debra is 20 now. This is the home Nana was married in, where she had two children-Debra's father and her aunt. All were born here. Old photos of her father as a young boy hang on the wall, some in the same spot, along the same stairs. Photos of Debra hang there, too. Pictures of her in the hospital on the day she was born, wearing a tiny white bracelet with her name on it.

No matter how hard she tries, Debra doesn't remember being born. She doesn't remember wearing that bracelet or having that picture taken. But there it is, hanging on the wall. She was there, even if she can't remember it. The photo remembers for her.

There's also a photo of her father in the hospital at the age of 5, in a hospital gown, smiling and eating ice cream. Debra doesn't know why he was in the hospital. She assumes he had his tonsils removed.

Today, the family is packing all these photos away. They are packing up everything and moving out. Nana has gotten too old to stay here all by herself now. She's going to a new home. It's called Pine Bluffs. It's a complex of apartments, specifically for the elderly, where people can look after her.

There are three bedrooms upstairs, but recently, Nana took to sleeping on the couch in the living room. She said the house was too big and empty, and she didn't like going up and down the stairs. The truth is, she couldn't climb the stairs safely anymore.

Last week, Nana lost her footing on the bottom stair. She slipped and fell, but didn't fall far. She wasn't hurt -thankfully-but the family knew it was time to get her a smaller place. So now Nana is being moved to Pine Bluffs. In Pine Bluffs, there are no difficult stairs; no lonely, empty rooms.

In Nana's new home, there will be a bus to take her to the supermarket or the doctor. She will have close friends and neighbors. There will be a community room just off the lobby, with a piano and a television. Nana won't be lonely in her new home. But there won't be any memories there, either. No more railing or fireplace. No more tiny flap in the cellar door so the cat may come and go as she pleases.

As Debra walks down the stairs, she removes framed photographs of her father as a teenager and packs them away in a box. As she pulls the photos off the wall, they leave white, clean squares on the wallpaper behind them.

One photo, one sheet of bubble wrap, another photo on top. She packs carefully.

When Debra was a very young girl, she looked at these photos of her father as a teenager and thought he looked so old and wise. Now, she's older than he is in these photos. He was 18 when he moved out of the house and went to college.

Holding photographs of her father as a young boy, she feels like she has entered a time machine. She knows everything about him now, but the young boy in these photos couldn't possibly have known that one day he would have Debra as a daughter.

Sometimes, Debra stops packing and pops one of the bubbles on the bubble wrap. It is a familiar sound and feeling-a tiny gush of air between her two fingers. It's there for only a second, and then it's gone. The air disappears but the memory stays. She imagines it over and over again. Pop. Gush. Pop.

Deb figures that this memory is the same for everyone. All children pop bubble wrap, don't they? And, later in life, all adults probably pop bubble wrap to remember what it was like to be a child. She thinks this must be a universal joy: the joy of popping bubbles. Does everyone feel what she feels? Remember what she remembers?

The stairs Debra used to slide down when no one was looking-they've become a hazard to Nana now. Deb looks up the stairs and imagines herself at the age of 5, sliding down the railing as if she were invincible. Back then, she thought she could never be hurt.

She puts herself in Nana's shoes for a moment. Imagines what it would feel like to stand at the bottom of

these stairs and watch a small child sliding down the bannister. Arms outstretched, holding onto nothing. No concept of fear.

A shiver passes through her. She feels short of breath. It must have been so frightening to look up and see a 5-year-old playing on the stairs so carelessly.

Debra closes her eyes. She can feel it all now. She feels the sensation of flying down the stairs.

Then, the time machine comes back. Her memories mix with the present day. What it felt like to slide down the railing is tempered by current wisdom. That's not safe! If only she knew back then what she knows now! That was such a foolish game to play. Nothing but luck stopped her from breaking bones.

Fifteen years ago, Nana stood where she stands now. Their roles were reversed.

"I wish I had been here to help you when you fell, Nana," Debra says out loud to herself. "You were always there for me, to stop me from getting hurt. But now, you are the one who ended up needing me."

Debra walks into the living room where Nana had been sleeping. The couch is still made up like a bed, with fluffy pillows and a pretty floral comforter. The furniture is being removed by movers, but the couch will be the last thing they pack.

Deb walks over to the fireplace, cold and empty. When she touches the marble mantle, she is shocked by a very, very old memory. It comes back to her all at once.

She was 3 years old. She remembers that Nana was shouting. "That's hot! That's fire!"

And something hot and bright was raining down on her. Some sort of sparks, she recalls. Debra had crawled too close to the fireplace. This is one of her earliest memories: the spatter of burning wood, the embers that flew at her dress. She remembers, too, how her father scooped her up, saving her.

"That was so very close," she remembers hearing her father say. Tears welled up in his eyes. He was crying for what could have happened, not what did happen. She had never seen him so scared.

Yes, she remembers it all vividly now, touching the same fireplace. How had she forgotten about it up until just this moment?

And that was when it all made sense-the photo of her father in the hospital, eating ice cream. He hadn't had his tonsils removed, as she'd assumed. He had been burned by the fireplace! And that's why he was crying when he rescued her from the fireplace. He saved her from being hurt, too.

The memories of this old house are also her father's memories. They're Nana's memories, and everyone else who has ever walked through here. Now the movers will have memories of this home as well.

She runs her hand along the walls and wonders how different her memories must be from someone else's, or how similar. Every day in her life was also a day in someone else's life. Their worlds intertwine.

She touches the railing and remembers the feeling of flying. She says goodbye to this old home.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is Debra doing throughout the story?

- A. eating ice cream in the hospital
- B. unpacking Nana Kay's furniture
- C. imagining her life in the future
- D. recalling different memories

2. What is the setting of the story?

- A. Pine Bluffs
- B. Nana Kay's old home
- C. a hospital
- D. Debra's new home

3. Read the following sentences: "I wish I had been here to help you when you fell, Nana," Debra says out loud to herself. "You were always there for me, to stop me from getting hurt. But now, you are the one who ended up needing me."

Based on Debra's statement, how does she most likely feel about Nana Kay's fall?

- A. Debra feels guilty about not having been able to prevent Nana Kay from falling.
- B. Debra feels it was Nana Kay's fault that she slipped and fell down.
- C. Debra feels indifferent about not having been able to prevent Nana Kay from falling.
- D. Debra feels horrified about not having been able to prevent Nana Kay from falling.

4. What makes Debra recall different memories from her life?

- A. a conversation she has with her dad
- B. a conversation she has with Nana Kay
- C. objects in Nana Kay's home
- D. sounds in Nana Kay's home

5. What is this story mainly about?

- A. the changes one experiences in old age
- B. Debra's relationship with her family and her reflections on the nature of memory
- C. the dangers Debra and her family members have faced throughout their childhoods
- D. how roles reverse among different family members with the progression of time

6. Read the following sentences: "She runs her hand along the walls and wonders how different her memories must be from someone else's, or how similar. Every day in her life was also a day in someone else's life. Their worlds **intertwine**."

As used in the passage, what does the word "**intertwine**" most nearly mean?

- A. to connect closely
- B. to stay far apart
- C. to start conflict
- D. to grow quickly

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

After reminiscing about her childhood, her father, and Nana Kay, Debra _____ realizes that everyone's different memories of Nana's house are intertwined.

- A. initially
- B. ultimately
- C. yet
- D. instead

8. What will Nana Kay's new home at Pine Bluffs not have?

9. What memory from her childhood comes rushing back to Debra as she stands by the fireplace at the end of the story?

10. Debra recalls being nearly burned by the fireplace when she was three years old. She then concludes that her father was burned by the same fireplace. Why do these two memories make Debra realize that memories intertwine?
