

**SHARING LIFE STORIES**

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In 1997 I annotated the short story, *Old Mrs. Harris*, for the on-line Literature, Arts and Medicine Data Base. In choosing the Key Words from the approved list for the data base, I chose:

Aging, Children, Death and Dying, Empathy, Family Relationships, Individuality, Mother-Daughter Relationships, Pregnancy.

I felt that all of these topics were related to the story and also to the significant life stories of most people. Persons who are searching for pieces of literature that address any of these topics would be directed to this story among many others. In my commentary I said that the story would be appreciated because of the simple and meaningful way in which it documents the life of a family in which the differing needs of three generations are represented; that it shows the many ways in which people can relate and be helpful to each other. By the time I first read the story and wrote this annotation I had experienced the roles of the three generations of women in the story; that of the ambitious young high school student, that of the mother of several children and that of the grandmother. So it was easy and comfortable for me to identify with the happenings even though that story had been written long before I experienced those roles. The universality of the story was what was so remarkable.

The reason I submitted the annotation was because, in my teaching of medical students, I was seeking literature that could illustrate the important issues which affect most human lives, and thus help students understand better the needs of their patients. This story proved to be an ideal choice.

In doing some preparatory reading for using this story in teaching a medical humanities class, I was interested to find that Tomas Masaryk, a Czech philosopher and statesman and the first president of independent Czechoslovakia, was a great admirer of Willa Cather, and that he wrote to her that as a rule he did not prefer short stories--"I like the whole drama of life" -- nevertheless he liked *Neighbor Rosicky* and could quote the last page of *Old Mrs. Harris*. (Robinson 261) This stimulated my interest even more and when I began to prepare for the UMKC Spark class that I taught, I chose *Old Mrs. Harris* as the first reading and extended

my study to include more about the events in Cather's life that provided the inspiration for the story.

Her biographers have shown the many ways in which her own life experience provided the themes and characters for the story and that it is probably the most autobiographical of her writings. So many of her memorable characters were modeled from people she observed with her acute sensitivity and this story seems to show a deep emotional attachment to the three women who are so vividly portrayed. Elizabeth Sergeant wrote:

" that (Cather) in the story returned very quietly and unobtrusively, with the eyes of an elder daughter observing the past, to the roots from which she sprang. Dated 1931, it must have been the means she found in a moment of deep grief to 'let go with the heart'."  
(Sergeant 258)

The story was written when Cather was on the edge of sixty. ( Of the photographs available to me this one seemed to be nearest to her probable appearance at this time.) It was long after the death of her grandmother in 1893 and shortly after the death of her father in 1928. Her mother suffered a stroke not long after her father's death and she finished the story just before her mother's death in 1931. There is a certain freedom that comes with the separation by death in describing the emotional connections which writers have to those they write about. I became very aware of this in my research into the autobiographical writing of women physicians. When they chose to write late in their lives, which many of them did, they were able to be more open in their descriptions of their relationships with friends, family and associates, many of whom were no longer living.

As with many of Cather's stories and novels, *Old Mrs. Harris* was first published serially. With the title, *Three Women*, it appeared in the Ladies Home Journal in September, October and November of 1932. Some suggested that it might have been titled *Family Portraits* for, in addition to the three main women characters, the father character, referred to regularly as Mr. Templeton, resembled her own father and the faithful Mandy of the story is patterned after Margie Anderson who had moved with the family from Virginia and lived with them until her death in 1928. It was the third short story to become part of *Obscure Destinies* which was published in book form in 1932 also. *Neighbor Rosicky* had been written in 1928 after Cather's father had died from a heart attack just as Neighbor Rosicky succumbed. *Two Friends* was written in 1931 while she was visiting her ill mother

in California. (Chronology 997-999) Edith Lewis wrote that in the book containing these three stories "one still feels the full flood of her power". (Lewis 167)

It was easy for me to make a personal identification with the story of the *Two Friends* because it took place "in a little wooden town in a shallow Kansas river valley" (Collected Stories 315) not unlike the small Kansas town in which I grew up. In fact I lived in a house that was just two blocks east of the Bank building and I could have been the girl who listened to conversations which took place on the surrounding sidewalk. On Main Street there was even another bank just across the street as there was from Mr. Dillon's bank. Politics was a very big subject in my town and in my family and most people were very aware of the political affiliations of their neighbors and friends.

Likewise, as I read *Old Mrs. Harris*, it was easy for me to move backward in time to my life in my home town, that occurred not too many years after Willa Cather was growing up in Nebraska. There were some similarities but many differences as I was an only child and both of my grandmothers had died long before I was born, so I missed out on the sharing of a childhood with a grandmother, brothers and sisters. But there were relationships with parents, aunts and uncles, neighbors and many friends, old and young, from whom I could develop my own views of what mattered, just as the grand-daughter did in the story. There were also people like Mr. and Mrs. Rosen who cheered me on my way. I hope children today are finding the same kind of loving support.

In the family story of *Old Mrs. Harris* Cather gave her grandmother, Rachael Seibert Boak, the fullest most affectionate portrait of a family member in all of her fiction. As her first teacher, her grandmother had been especially important in Cather's life. She had read to her, cared for her when her parents were away and when she was ill and had been quietly responsive to the needs of a lonely child. The bond was formed in Virginia and continued throughout the lifetimes of both. Though the grandmother had been married at fourteen years of age, she had had some formal education at a boarding school and she saw to it that Cather's mother also had this opportunity. The family lived with her at the time of Willa's birth and she remained with the family until her death. She was very concerned that Willa have the opportunity of a good education. *Old Mrs. Harris* shows the same concern for the grand-daughter, Vickie, who is a portrait of Cather's adolescent self. In fact the truth is altered in the story so that Grandma Harris arranges for Vickie to be given the money she needs for college tuition. In reality Cather's father borrowed the money that she needed to attend the University of Nebraska..

Cather first introduces the readers to Grandma Harris through Mrs. Rosen, a neighbor who resembles a real neighbor of the Cather Family in Red Cloud. Mrs. Rosen admires her from afar and hopes to do something special for this woman whom she suspects is not really appreciated. She has often used the gift of her own special coffee cake as a way to make contact with the grandmother, hopefully without the interference of the daughter and the grandchildren. She feels that the grandmother is not cherished by the family and yet the author tells us that it is the grandmother, herself, who does not feel comfortable receiving attention.

Cather also used this special scene to describe the "cluttered hideous room" (Collected Stories 263) which is the grandmother's domain. Anyone who reads the story certainly will remember the description of this room and its contents of a rocking horse, a sewing machine, an empty baby buggy and the wooden lounge with the thin mattress and red calico spread. And Cather's description of Grandma Harris, as seen by Mrs. Rosen, details the way she held her head, her deep-set eyes which "seemed to ask nothing and hope for nothing" (Collected Stories 264) and the nobility about her carriage. It is in reality a loving description that says much about the regard Cather had for her grandmother. The literary connection between the grandmother and the grand-daughter becomes evident in the story as they both read aloud to the Templeton children and Vickie sometime takes over when the grandmother is too tired. Mrs. Harris is described as being lonely and tired only when the glowing tide of child life does not wash about her.

The grandmother's view of her role in the family is told to us in many different ways. In one interesting statement that is printed in parentheses, the author says:

"(Nobody did anything about broken arches in those days, and the common endurance test of old age was to keep going after every step cost something.)" (Collected Stories 289)

She goes on to say that when Mrs. Harris heard the children running down the back stairs, she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; she became part of a group, became a relationship. Unfortunately it is the intergenerational relationships which have been lost in so many families today, and with them more comfortable roles for grandparents as they age. The desire for eternal youth extends much longer than it did at the time Cather was herself reliving these stories.

In her Memoir of Cather; Elizabeth Sergeant describes Old Mrs. Harris as "an innocently sacrificed old woman, taken for granted by a whole crew of young children; by a gay oblivious high-handed Southern daughter; by a courteous son-in-

law who is trying his best; even by Vickie, the oldest child full of rebellion and high personal determination". (Sergeant 258)

Cather allows Mrs. Rosen to introduce us to the relationship between the grandmother and her daughter. Victoria is a handsome woman and, as Mrs. Rosen tells Grandma Harris, she is "very popular with the gentleman". (Collected Stories 266) Grandma Harris acknowledges this and tries to explain the expected roles of a popular young southern woman and her mother, who steps back from the limelight and into the background. The mother's role then moves from mothering to grandmothering.

Through another encounter Mrs. Rosen sees much to admire in Victoria. When the two women return in a blinding snowstorm from an afternoon card party, she admires Victoria's childlike joyousness in the experience and her warm hospitality plus her comfort in caring for the baby after they return to the Templeton home. Another incident at the local church ice cream social allows both of the Rosens to see Victoria's generous concern for the poor children of a local washerwoman. Mr. Rosen remarks that he has always admired her way with her own children. All of these descriptions show Cather's feelings about her mother. She is said to have remarked that she was more like her mother than any other member of the family, and one can understand her desire to describe the mother of the story as she remembered her own mother. Also she is said to have told one of her nieces that her mother, in addition to keeping the children warm, clothed, and fed, gave them freedom to be themselves.

In thinking about the mother daughter relationship described in this story, it is easy for me to return to my relationship with my mother, who was a very strong woman, confidant and self-assured, and in many ways like the Victoria of the story. She had lost her own mother when she was four years old and, according to her older sisters, she was very spoiled by their father. I felt distanced from her in some ways and she never spoke to me about what being a mother meant to her.

Edith Lewis wrote that "there is no doubt that (Cather's) self portrait as Vicky in *Old Mrs. Harris* shows her much as she appeared to her family and neighbors in the early Red Cloud years--good humored, confident, self-absorbed, pleased with life for the most part, curious and eager about it, but too intent on her own interests and pursuits to question it much". (Lewis 28)

Mrs. Rosen continues to keep a "tender watch" over the comings and goings of the household next door and draws her own conclusions about the roles being played out, particularly those of the three women. She admires each for her

individuality and honesty. Grandma Harris seems to be the only one who escapes the boundaries of her own ego in connecting with others.

It was Mandy who first appreciated that Grandma Harris was beginning to show signs of ill health. She murmured "pore soul" when she soaked and rubbed her swollen legs at the end of a long day. Cather describes this scene in eloquent prose:

"She put Grandma's feet in the tub and, crouching beside it, slowly, slowly rubbed her swollen legs. Mandy was tired too. Mrs. Harris sat in her nightcap and shawl, her hands crossed in her lap. She never asked for the greatest solace of the day; it was something that Mandy gave, who had nothing else to give. If there could be a comparison in absolutes, Mandy was the needier of the two, --but she was younger.....Mrs. Harris dozed from comfort, and Mandy herself was half asleep as she performed one of the oldest rites of compassion."  
(Collected Stories 270)

The death of the family cat, Blue Boy, portends the death of the grandmother. When he becomes ill she provides a comfortable place for him and promises the children that she will look after him. After a day of happy play they return to find Grandma sitting with the suffering cat. When the children ask why, she replies: "Everything that's alive has got to suffer". (Collected Stories 292) When Victoria coldly arranges to have the dead cat taken away to be thrown on a trash pile, Grandma encourages the children to dig a proper grave and bury Blue Boy "right". These are the statements that Mrs. Harris really makes about herself and her own desires.

As the grandmother of the story realizes that her health is deteriorating she knows that she has another task to complete before she joins Blue Boy. That is to find support for Vickie to be able to take advantage of the scholarship she has won. As I mentioned earlier, the story tells that she accomplished this through intercession with the Rosens even though this was not true in Willa Cather's own life. Perhaps she felt that because her grandmother had so often supported her dreams the grandmother should play that role in the story. It is comforting to know that Grandmother Boak did live long enough to see her grand-daughter succeed at the University of Nebraska.

When Grandma Harris realizes that death is near she says: "I don't want a doctor. I've seen more sickness than ever he has. Doctors can't do no more than linger you out, and I've always prayed I wouldn't last to be a burden." ( Collected

Stories 305) Grandmother Boak had nursed many people in her life in Virginia and also in Nebraska and Willa Cather knew that. And as the grandmother of the story neared the end she "fell to thinking of her blessings. Every night for years, when she said her prayers, she prayed that she might never have a long sickness or be a burden" (Collected Stories 312). Thus she was blessed in the peaceful ending of her life. There are many people who have similar hopes but are not so blessed and must continue their suffering which is, as Grandma Harris said, something everything that is alive must do.

I was not well prepared for the death of the grandmother in the story though I had shared with my own mother, before she slipped out of our story, the graduation of her grand-daughter from college and I know how important that was for her. The last few lines of this wonderful story helped me, as a reader, to bring closure to my feelings and to thank Willa Cather for sharing this life story with me.

"Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they are old they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her and remember things they never noticed; and their lives will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves; "I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know." (Collected Stories 313)

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