



Karla Feather

by David Gifaldi

“GRANDMA,” I SAID, as we were about to leave the nursing home, “who am I?”
Grandma rubbed the tray of her wheelchair. Her tired eyes looked up at me, searching. Her voice was as small as her wrists.

“Feather,” she said.

“No,” I said. “It’s me, Karla.”

“Feather,” she said.

“Karla!” I said. “Why can’t you remember?”

“Feather,” she said, picking at her sweatshirt.

“Maybe we should change your name,” Mom said.

I didn’t laugh.

“She doesn’t even remember who I am,” I said to Mom on the drive home. “She doesn’t know anything. She just sits in her wheelchair and whispers words we can hardly hear.”

“I know it’s hard for you,” Mom said. “But the Grandma we know—the old Grandma—is still there, I know she is, even if she can’t let us know. It’s her sickness, Karla.”

“I want the old Grandma back,” I said, thinking of the Grandma who used to make S’mores on the barbecue. The Grandma who dressed up in full Easter Bunny costume every year for our egg hunts when I was little. Who took me to see my first PG movie. Who taught me to call squirrels to her cellar door

by tapping walnuts together. The Grandma without Alzheimer's.

"I'd like the old Grandma back, too," Mom said. "But it can't be."

I looked out at the passing houses. When I turned back again, Mom was smiling.

"What?" I said.

"Remember the time you and Grandma covered the kitchen floor with rose petals?"

"We were playing Kings and Queens," I said. "I wore Grandma's wedding veil. Grandma thought royalty should have rose petals to walk on. I still have some of those petals."

"You do?" Mom said. "Where?"

"In my special box, the wooden one Grandma gave me. Remember? She said it was special, 'cause it came from the other side of the world. She liked making things up."

"Maybe it *did* come from the other side of the world."

"Mom, it came from the church bazaar! Don't you remember? We saw a whole table of them the year after Grandma gave it to me for Christmas. I used to put stuff in there."

"I'd forgotten all about that box," Mom said.

"Me, too," I said.

In fact, I hadn't forgotten. Not really. I just wanted it out of sight after Grandma started forgetting things and acting strange. I can't say exactly why. It was as if I wanted to keep the Grandma I knew separate from the one who couldn't remember where to put the clean dishes when she emptied the dishwasher.

That night I couldn't sleep. It had been a long time since I'd stashed Grandma's box in the back of my closet. Now I found it there, in the corner, between a tea set with little plastic cups and a stack of I Can Read books. Had Grandma been sick that long?

I wiped away some dust, letting my fingers glide along the shiny surface. When I opened the hinged lid, the wood smell from inside came right up. I set the box on my bed, eager to see what treasures lay within.

There was the silver dollar Uncle Joe had given me with my birthday year on it.

Our dog Buddy's first collar.

A pair of white, plastic sunglasses with one green lens missing.

A valentine from my friend Mikey, who had moved to Alabama.

A picture of me and Grandma Easter Bunny, my hand clutching a basketful of eggs.

Dried, wrinkly rose petals covering the bottom like confetti, a fingertip thick.

And . . . “A feather!” I said. A feather, bright blue and white and black, that fit perfectly across my palm. The edges were straight and smooth, without a nick or bend.

“Mom!” I called. “MOM!”

On our next visit, we found Grandma in the sunroom. Other people sat in chairs or wheelchairs around the edges of the room, some looking at a big-screen TV, others talking or just staring off into space.

I wheeled Grandma up and down the halls for a “walk.” Mom came, too. She was giving out Vanilla Wafers to anyone she knew wasn’t on a special diet. You wouldn’t believe how glad everybody seemed to get a few cookies. It was as if Mom were passing out hundred-dollar bills.

When we finally got to Grandma’s room, I unzipped my backpack and carefully took out the feather. “Grandma,” I said. “Look what I found!”

She thrust herself back in her wheelchair, as if the feather were alive or something dangerous. Then she moved forward for a closer look, delicately taking the feather between her fingers, sniffing at it before running the tip and one edge along her cheek.

She made a soft sound.

“Grandma,” I said. “It’s me . . . Karla! Remember when we found the feather together, the quill part sticking in the sand-box at the park? There was a blue jay making all kinds of noise in a tree nearby. And you said, ‘Quiet down, big fella, or you’ll shake ‘em all loose!’ And I said, ‘No, send down another one,’ because I thought the feather was so beautiful, so bright and smooth and perfect.”

Grandma let the feather drop onto her tray. And started rubbing . . . the thumb of one hand rubbing hard at the soft





place between the thumb and finger of the other hand. Her eyes squinched with concentration, as if trying to find something there in the rubbing, as if her fingers and the rubbing were the most important thing in the world.

"Ma!" Mom said. "Stop that! Look what you're doing—it's all red now. You're going to bruise yourself again!" She pulled Grandma's hands apart, and Grandma let out a tiny, scared sound.

"Don't!" I said to Mom.

"What?"

"I don't know. . . . You might hurt her."

"Oh, honey," Mom said.

Grandma's attention drifted back to the feather on her tray. She drew her fingers across the feather as if to smooth it. She looked past us, toward the yellow wall covered with the family photos that Mom and I had put up for her. She touched the tip of the feather to her cheek again and said something we couldn't understand.

Then a tear started in one of her eyes. The tear seemed to bunch up, getting bigger. I kept looking at it, wondering how big it would get. It got so big, it slid over onto her cheek, rolling slowly like a raindrop on a window.

"You look tired, Ma," Mom said. "Why don't you take a nap? We should be going, anyway."

I told Grandma she could keep the feather. "It's a blue jay feather. Remember? We found it together. I'm Karla."

Grandma continued to stroke the feather, her gaze steadied on the photos.

I was behind Mom, just at the door of the room when I heard her say it.

"Feather."

I stopped and turned.

Grandma's eyes moved over me, straining.

"Feather," she said, a little louder.

"Yes, Grandma, yes!" I said.

I rushed over and threw my arms around her, breathing in the shampoo smell from her hair.

"You *do* know me," I said into her ear. "I'm Feather. Karla Feather. It's a good name, Grandma." 🦋