

Grandmother

Hans Christian Andersen

Grandmother is so very old; she has so many wrinkles, and her hair is completely white, but her eyes shine just like two stars; yes, yet they are much more beautiful; they are so gentle, so wonderful to look into. And then she knows the most delightful stories, and she has a gown of heavy, rustling silk, with great big flowers in it. Grandmother knows a great deal, for she was alive long before father and mother-that much is certain! She has a hymnbook with heavy clasps of silver, and often reads from it. In the middle of the book is a rose, which is very flat and dry, and not nearly so lovely as the roses she has in the vase, yet she smiles at it the most sweetly of all, and the tears even come into her eyes. Why is it that Grandmother looks that way at the withered flower in the old book? Do you know? Why, every time her tears fall upon the rose its colors become fresh again; the rose swells and fills the whole room with its perfume; the walls sink as if they were made of mist, and all about her is the green, beautiful wood, with the summer sunlight streaming through the leaves of the trees. And Grandmother-why, she's young again, a lovely girl with yellow curls and round red cheeks, pretty, graceful, fresher than any rose. But the eyes, the mild, blessed eyes, they are still Grandmother's eyes. Beside her is a man, so young, strong, and handsome; he hands her a rose, and she smiles. Grandmother cannot smile like that now. Yes, the smile is coming back now! He has gone, and with him many other thoughts and forms of the past; the handsome man has gone, and only the rose lies in the hymnbook, and Grandmother-yes, she still sits there, an old woman, glancing down at the withered rose in her book.

Now Grandmother is dead. She was sitting in her armchair, telling a long, long lovely story. "And now the story is finished," she said. "I am very tired. Let me sleep a little." And then she leaned back, breathed gently, and slept. But it became quieter and quieter, as her face became full of happiness and peace. It was as if the sunshine spread over her features; and then they said she was dead.

She was laid in the black coffin, and lay shrouded in folds of white linen, looking so beautiful, though her eyes were closed. All the wrinkles were gone, and there was a smile on her lips; her hair was so silvery and so venerable, and one wasn't at all afraid to look at the corpse, for it was sweet, dear, good Grandmother. The hymnbook was placed under her head, as she had wished, and the rose was still in the old book; and then they buried Grandmother.

They planted a rose tree on the grave beside the churchyard wall. It was full of roses, and the nightingale sang over it; and in the church the organ pealed forth the finest psalms, psalms that were written in the book under the dead one's head. And the moon shone down on the grave, but the dead one wasn't there. Any child could venture safely, even at night, and pluck a rose there beside the churchyard wall. A dead person knows more than all we living ones know. The dead know what terror would sweep over us if the strange thing were to happen that they should return among us. The dead are better than we; and they return no more. Dust has been piled over the coffin; dust is inside it; the leaves of the hymnbook are dust; and the rose, with all its memories, is asleep. But above bloom fresh roses, the nightingale sings, the organ peals, and we think of the old Grandmother with the gentle, eternally young eyes. Eyes can never die. Ours will some time behold Grandmother again, as young and beautiful as when for the first time she kissed the fresh red rose which is now dust in her grave.