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## Back-Home Memories

Slurping, gurgling and swooshing; the waves rolled in right below me. I lay on my back in the bed that was my mother's when she was a child. I had been awake for hours but heard no footsteps, just the creaking bones of the old house as it waltzed to the music of the swaying tides. I smiled. I was in Canso, a small fishing town in Nova Scotia and my favorite place in the whole wide world. Although we lived in Cape Breton we spent every summer of childhood in Canso, visiting my grandparents and running free with the wind. This was my sacred place, my place that knew no sorrow, caused no pain. For an 11 year old, this was Neverland.

A seagull called for me and I could wait no longer. I bounded out of bed, frantically searching for yesterday's bathing suit. There it was, hanging out the window to dry. It was salt crusted and ready to swim in. I pulled it on as fast as I could and ran downstairs. I was just about to bolt out the back door when I heard "good morning little one." I froze. I was sure no one was up yet. I turned to see my grandmother, Mom Fanning, sitting at the kitchen table in her favorite chair in the corner. She was smiling at me, her silver white hair pulled back with a baby blue scarf that perfectly matched her loving eyes. I automatically smiled back with a sheepish grin; she had caught me trying to escape. "Going swimmin'?" she asked. I looked down at my hands which were all tangled up in each other and shyly admitted that I was. I knew I wasn't allowed to go swimming alone but I just couldn't wait any longer. She reached down under the table and pulled out a big red towel, "you'll need this" she said. I bolted to grab it and reeled around as I booted 'er out the door, down the steps, across the front yard and splashed into the freezing-cold Atlantic ocean. I didn't have a care. After duck diving a couple of times to feel my ocean's salty caress, I looked up at my grandmother's house. I knew she would be in the window and she was. She had moved to the sitting room and was watching me intently, supervising my every move. It was like this every morning and I just couldn't seem to get ahead of her. I thought "she must sleep in that chair by the window and that's why I don't hear her get up." I duck dove again.

Fact was, she had my number. She knew if she wasn't up, I was going swimming alone. She was wiser than my mother and all the aunt's put together. She would never tell them, it was our secret. I stayed close to shore for her sake, sitting on the ocean bottom with the water right up to my eyes. I needed to be as immersed in it as I could be. I sank farther down, figuring that my waist-long dark-brown hair would float on top. I didn't want to completely disappear and scare her. I thought about her running across the yard at full tilt to save me and it made me giggle and blow bubbles. I had to come up for air.

Just then I heard my cousin hollering. "Hey, Boo, what are ya doin'? Digging fer clams?" She was standing on my grandmother's lawn with one hand on her hip and the other shielding her eyes. She looked like a long-lost sailor desperately searching for land. "Ahoy Captain, I'm swimming for Gram, can't go over my head or she won't let me swim anymore" I explained. I always had to explain everything to her. A steady stream of cousins oozed from the house and enveloped my ten brothers and sisters. "Guess it's time to go in" I thought. I didn't want to share my ocean with them. I towed off for Gram's sake and walked up to meet them. I was the second youngest in this school of minnows and I had to make sure I got in on the daily plans.

Gram came out with a bucket of salt cod and started hanging it on the clothesline to dry in the sun. "Here gully, gully, gully" she called. Her giant pet seagull careened by and she threw him a big slab of white succulent fish in the hopes that he would then leave hers alone. I looked way up into the deep blue seas of her adoring eyes, ran up the steps as fast as I could and hugged her with all my might. My arms didn't meet on the other side and she felt soft and squishy as she held me tightly. "Thank you Grandma" I said and stood on my tippytoes to kiss her on the cheek. She bent way down so I could reach her and said "don't catch my wrinkles." Her smile was as wide as the ocean is deep. I giggled and bounded off again to catch up to my clump of look-alikes before they swam off without me.

Summers with Gram were the best summers of my life. So many things have changed since then. I am 38 now and live in Alberta. Canso is no longer a thriving fishing industry, the fish are scarce and the fish plant is closed. My

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beloved grandmother died 17 years ago at the age of 93, deeply saddening hundreds of people. It rained hard that day, tears from heaven.

I still visit Canso as often as I can. It is like the moon, forever pulling me back with its magnetic force. I am thankful for all it has given me: Cherished family, genuine love, and adventurous memories I can never forget. Canso is warm and accepting and forgiving. It runs in my blood like salt runs in the sea. I am one with this beautiful, mesmeric, rough and rugged oceanland. It is the pearl of all pearls, the jewel of all jewels and the best kept secret of the universe. I wouldn't trade my memories of Canso for all the fish in the sea.