

Just an Old Letter

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I have in my possession several photographs of my maternal grandmother Calla May Welton Hendricks. In the pictures she is young and beautiful with her high collar and her dark hair piled on her head. Since I have no memories of my grandmother, I occasionally study the photos to try to learn something about this woman who was my mother's mother. Was she serious? Or did she have a sense of humor? Was she hard working? Or did she tend to be lazy? Did she enjoy being the mother of two daughters?

My mother couldn't help me with answers to these questions; she had no memories of her mother either. Calla Hendricks died of scarlet fever in 1912 when her baby—my mother—was nine months old.

In the summer of 1989, my four sisters and I spent three days helping my mother sort through 77 years of possessions—organizing, making piles, and filling garbage bags for several trips to the village dump. While my mother was in the kitchen filling the house with smells of freshly-baked cinnamon buns, I was sorting through the papers of Mom's late sister, Helen. Suddenly I held in my hand a letter beyond price; it was a letter my mother did not even know existed. The letter was dated October 4, 1912, the handwriting looked remarkably like my mother's, and the signature read: *Calla*.

We gathered in a circle and wept as we read aloud the words of a healthy young woman who would be dead in less than three months. This was like a window into my grandmother's personality. The pictures we already possessed took on new meaning. For the first time in her life, my mother "heard" her mother speak lovingly of her two daughters.

Did Calla have a sense of humor? You bet! She was still laughing as she recounted the antics of her two-year old. Was she lazy or hardworking? I'll let you decide:

I put up about 100 quarts of berries and currants and have a lot of pears to do up yet. Have eight quarts of corn and a lot of jelly. Have been making tomato pickles today but didn't get it all done. I picked most of the berries myself. Wasn't I smart?

Somehow, even more moving than when she called her two little ones "dears," was when she wrote, "We all went to the Eddy yesterday. I got some cloth to make baby some rompers."

Those written words caused the unsmiling face in the pictures to burst into life for me. Now I could see her lovely face, tired from a day of picking berries and chasing babies, bent over the treadle sewing machine. The flickering light from the kerosene lamp is casting shadows on the walls as Calla makes rompers from the cloth she had carefully chosen for her precious Geraldine. Now I could see those arms, hanging stiffly at her side in the picture, reach out to lift her baby, still warm with sleep, from her crib.

Just a few words breathed life into those photographs and my grandmother became a real person, not just a stiff face on a glossy piece of paper. I feel quite certain now that, had she lived, she

would have slipped pennies in my chubby little palm after I helped her with the dishes. Most certainly she would have sent me cards on my birthday, and I suspect that she might have casually mentioned to her friends at the church social that her granddaughter was the sixth grade spelling champion.

One letter, in Calla's own handwriting. What price tag can be placed on that? \$100? \$1000? No thanks—I'll take the smudged, faded letter written by Calla May Hendricks over 90 years ago.