

## LOOKS THEY GIVE

Glinnah Howard

My mother told me stories. She sat, poised over her Singer sewing machine in the basement of my Grandmother Stalnaker's tall brick house on Dixie Street where we went to live after my parents divorced, and, talking right around the straight pins in her mouth, she told me stories. About growing up on the Kanawha River bank in West Virginia, about being the only girl on the debate team in the first class to graduate from the first high school in Spenser,. about working as a public 'health nurse in the coal mining camps during the Depression. But the stories I liked best, and the ones she told most, were the stories about her Grandmother Otes.

Grandmother Otes was one of those powerful women--large and sure --who saw herself as responsible beyond her own family and house. Better educated than many of the town, Grantsville, West Virginia, and day, the 1920's, she kept a basket of rolled bandages ready by the door and served the school committee from a tea cart she brought from Pennsylvania when her husband made the move to supervise a tamping business for the

Cabots. On summer evenings she sat on her front porch and straightened out any child who was foolish enough to swing on her gate.

My mother's father, John Norman Otes, whose dark photographs show to be a tall, thin man with hunting dog and gun, died of a burst appendix when my mother and her twin were young-- maybe two or three, around 1917. Though within a few years her mother remarried a widower with three daughters and they proceeded to have two sons, ties with my mother's father's family remained strong.

Every summer her Grandmother Otes invited all of the cousins to visit separately for two weeks each. These were some of the best moments of my mother's growing up years, I think, because through her grandmother she validated her own strength, her tough, rebellious spirit at home.

My mother saw her father's family as superior, more sophisticated. Her mother, my Grandmother Stalnaker, was raised in a log cabin with a hard-packed dirt floor and had only attended school sporadically as weather and crops permitted. My mother resented

her mother--the platitudes in place of listening and concern, her lack of sensitivity. She felt mortified when her mother used vulgar language, saying such things as someone being "whipped until the pee ran down her legs." My mother thought of herself as separate from her family. At the age of nine, she strung a clothesline between two rafters in the attic and moved all of her belongings there because she could not tolerate keeping her things in the same space with her fraternal, and opposite, twin, Velma, who was docile, good natured, and sloppy.

The summer my mother was eleven, Grandmother Oles taught her to sew and sent her home with an old treadle machine. She promptly began to make all her own clothes for she told me she had long been dissatisfied with her mother's sense of style. Now clothes in those days consisted of two black wool middy jumpers, two pairs of black woolen bloomers, two blouses, underwear and stockings. These were cleaned and rotated each week, with one for school and one for Sunday. What changes my mother made I have no idea, but I gather she leaned to more color and dash and that she was not too concerned with the fine points of tailoring, sewing herself into things in lieu of zippers and using a large basting stitch for a hem to have an outfit ready for the next day. Her home ec. teacher pursed her thin lips and said she doubted if my mother would ever learn to sew because she refused to do French seams. My mother said

they were much "too fat" and ruined the svelte line she was after. "I didn't tell her that I already knew more about pretty clothes than she ever would," my mother told me while her can-do anything fingers steered a sea of blue satin beneath the updownupdown needle of her whirring machine.

As a young girl growing up, I know I used to love to go in my mother's room when she was out on dates, or working at the hospital, to try on the beautiful clothes she made. I put on her black full circle skirt and her aqua one shoulder top, and wearing her very high heeled purple velvety shoes with the pointy toes, I tried to whirl around in front of her long mirror.

Not only did my mother learn to sew from her Grandmother Oles, but she told me she got her love of reading and her interest in history and politics from her as well. A long hall was completely lined with bookcases. Besides books, Grandmother Oles kept her magazines there, all filed by date and marked for specific articles. She was very definite about her books. You must never leave an open book face down or "ear" a page. She was happy to loan you any one of them, but you must return it to her personally before it went on to someone else. Everyone in the Oles house had their own chair beside which stood a stack of currently being read books, sometimes going as high as the arm. When my mother spoke of the chairs was the only time she mentioned Grandfather Oles, a mild, loveable German who held her on

his lap as he sat in his Morris chair to sing her songs and tell her stories. One whole section of the upstairs bookcase was filled with his collection of all of Zane Grey. Though by the time my mother made her summer visits, the Oles's four remaining sons were all grown, and involved in a riverboat business with their father, they often dropped in to read in their chairs once a day. Tall, lanky men, they sat on their shoulders with their feet up on the side of the fireplace. They read a few chapters and came back the next day to continue.

My mother formed some of these same grandmother bonds with my two sons. When she worked as a program director at a church in New York (and where she pushed birth control info to the poor Catholic women of the neighborhood), each summer she had **M**y grandsons down to 'do the town.' She took them to see 'Pippen' and the Guggenheim, the Museum of Natural History and The Bronx Zoo. When we would visit, her in her tiny apartment, the two boys would sleep on the floor of her bedroom on Japanese beds that she'd made. I still remember the pleasure of waking to hear the three of them in the next room, watching the morning news on T.V. and discussing the beliefs of Martin Luther, King. When these grandsons did their first major term papers in fifth grade, my mother sent them each a large box of research material: one full of articles on Kennedy and the other on Carter.

Though in later years after I left

home, my mother became quite meticulous--she ironed her nylon underwear and taped all of her cancelled checks back in her legal size bank book--when I was growing up, our house was often a chaos of activity. Her Singer machine surrounded by stacks of costumes in progress for the community players' production of 'The Spirit' or the dining room filled with the stage curtain from our church which she was refurbishing. I often thought during those years when I longed for more order that she had been influenced by her Grandmother Oles in the art of housekeeping as well.

Certainly Grandmother Oles's approach was unusual for her day. She insisted upon immaculate bedding, airing everything often, and stirring the cotton sheets in big tubs that sat on natural gas rings in her yard, but general tidiness was not a priority. One entire end of her bedroom was filled with baskets--baskets of mending, baskets of darning, baskets of cut out, but unmade dresses. **MY** mother said the Oles's had a large dining room table, one end of which was always stacked high with books, magazines, and various current projects. The number of places needed for dinner was set at the other end and then Grandmother Oles simply spread the rest of the tablecloth up over the stacks. I always thrilled at the audacity of such a thing.

My mother, a high 90's student, the moving force behind the school newspaper, the writer, set designer, and

often director of the class plays, grew up, divorced, moved North, and became pretty audacious herself, an audacity that I did not always appreciate when I was an adolescent. For some years I longed for a mother like everyone else's: someone who wore an apron and stayed home making well balanced meals rather than this wiry woman who stayed up into the night reading Beckett, who once told a youth fellowship group just prior to chaperoning them on a bus trip to Washington in the 60's that indeed they could not put a banner on the front of the bus that said "Jesus Saves," that in fact she'd actually feel more comfortable with "Burn, Baby, Burn."

My mother looked a lot like her Grandmother Oles, a feisty look she leveled me with when I used to signal her to be more ordinary in public. Now at 48, sometimes I see both of their faces in my mirror, and I usually accept the looks that they give.

