



Family Jewel

Grandma ditched the guy but kept the diamond By **Peggy Orenstein**

When my mother was 16, she found an old photograph of my Grandma Betty, dressed in a seed pearl-embellished wedding gown. She looked so young, so beautiful, and so...not with my grandfather. "Mother!" my mom yelled, shocked. "Who is this man?" Grandma glanced at the photo. "Oh," she said airily. "That's just my other husband. Throw it away."

It took years for Mom to pry forth the whole story: Apparently, a wealthy older man had fallen in love with Betty, who'd fled the pogroms in Eastern Europe at age 5 and was raised by an aunt in Minneapolis. Though Betty didn't return his affections, she was 19—on the precipice of spinsterhood—so her aunt urged her to wed. "You'll learn to love him," the aunt promised.

Needless to say, she did not. The man gave Grandma a stunning engagement ring—a one-carat European-cut diamond flanked by two smaller ones set in filigreed white gold. He bought her the sumptuous pearl-studded gown. He bought her whatever she wanted—and discovered, decades before Paul McCartney was born, the one thing money can never buy. A year later, Grandma divorced him—a scandal!—and returned home to a disapproving aunt who declared no man would want Betty again.

For five years, Grandma taught typing and worked as a pianist in silent-movie houses. She gardened. She read. She enjoyed her life. And when she met Sam Dolf, a homesteader from North Dakota, he didn't give a hoot that she'd been married before, nor that she was a doddering 25. She didn't care that he didn't have a dime. Their romance would last a half century, during which time he always referred to her as "my bride." Every Friday night Sam came home with a dozen roses and a box of chocolates. He wrote her elaborate love letters. Later, when she was bedridden with rheumatoid arthritis, he moved his law office into their home so he could nurse her himself, which he did until she died.

Grandpa might have had a big heart, but he had lousy taste in jewelry. The engagement ring he gave Betty sported only a modest onyx stone. She "lost" it within a few years and replaced it with the beauty from the first husband.

I was 19 when I inherited the ring—the same age Grandma had been when she'd gotten it. But oh, how different my life was! A college sophomore, I spent my evenings with a boyfriend I never intended to marry. My future was wide open, full of choices I wouldn't make for years.

Even so, the ring became my touchstone, my guide. It was Grandma's voice in my ear, reminding me every time I wore it not to compromise, not to let anyone talk me into the safe choice; to have the courage of my convictions, faith in my own heart. Three-quarters of a century after it graced her finger, those lessons were still relevant, whether applied to waiting for the right man or pursuing a chancy career as a journalist.

When I finally met my husband, at 29, I told him I didn't need an engagement ring—I knew a good thing when I found it, whether it was jewelry or a man. Now I tell my own daughter, who is 7, the story of Great-Grandma Betty's ring: how it taught me to live courageously, to have the strength to pursue my dreams. I plan to give it to her on her 19th birthday, to remind her of her great-grandmother's wisdom—and to reinforce my belief in her own. ■

*Peggy Orenstein is the author of **Cinderella Ate My Daughter**, to be published this month.*