

# HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

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## *Nana Had Scrap and Moxie*

by Heather Vogel Frederick

Some grandmothers teach their granddaughters how to knit. Mine taught me how to box. Nana's somewhat unusual skill wasn't all that surprising, considering she had five brothers and grew up an ardent tomboy, a recalcitrant pupil of the domestic arts if ever there was one, and an endless source of exasperation to her mother. What is surprising is that she actually put her brothers' early training to good use one day years later, when she was working as a cook (ironically enough, considering her less-than-promising beginnings in the kitchen) for a rough-and-tumble logging camp out in the Canadian backwoods. Rural Nova Scotia at the end of World War I wasn't exactly a wild frontier, but it did have its moments. Surprised in the pantry one afternoon by a would-be burglar, Nana emerged the victor in the brief altercation that followed, decking the hapless intruder with a right hook that would have done Joe Louis proud. The burly loggers who rushed in to her aid arrived just in time to witness the coup de grace, and promptly proclaimed her the establishment's new bantamweight champ.

Half a century later, Nana had switched venues but maintained her scrappy style. Life may have dealt her lemons over the intervening years, but she'd consistently made lemonade, rising above hardship through elbow grease and a deliciously salty sense of humor. By the time I came along, she was working here in the United States, a housekeeper in a tony Boston suburb. The house was what might be described as New England palatial, a rambling affair whose studied casualness belied the wealth of the occupants. As a kindergartner, however, I was vastly more impressed with Nana's snug quarters above the kitchen than with the grandness of the rest of the house. Her bed-sitting room and bath were a tiny, self-contained world as wondrous to me as Aladdin's grotto or Sara Crewe's attic, and seemed the very pinnacle of comfort, all that anyone would wish from life.

To be allowed to spend the night at Nana's was a high treat. I'd be dropped off after supper, when her day's work was finished, and if her employers were out for the evening, we'd make a beeline for the music room. Seated at the piano (a baby grand, naturally), my grandmother would proceed to rattle the ivories, thumping out one lively tune after another entirely by ear, from ragtime to honky-tonk to old Broadway numbers, and thunderous hymns. And always, always there were stories. Nana was what my family calls a Big Talker. She could spin words faster and more colorfully than anyone I have ever known, and she regaled me between sets with a parade of memories so extraordinarily vivid, filled with an array of characters and events so indelible that to this day the line between the real events of my own childhood and the half-remembered ones of my grandmother's still occasionally blurs. She told about how, when she first moved from the family farm to the big city, she and a stenographer roommate would go to the "pictures." There, her friend would jot down in shorthand the words to the latest songs while Nana memorized the melodies. Afterward, the two of them would rush home to the piano in the parlor of their boarding house and work out the songs together, weeks before the sheet music hit the music stores. Come Saturday night, theirs was the most popular spot in

Halifax, as a standing-room-only crowd of gentlemen callers rolled back the rugs for an evening of song and dance.

Later, after the music and memories, Nana would make popcorn and whisk me up the back stairs to her retreat. There was always a box of chocolates and an ample supply of soda pop – ginger ale for me, and for herself, fittingly, a vigorous soft drink called Moxie. Nana would pull out her little black-and-white television and we'd prop ourselves up on the bed, fortified for the evening's entertainment. Depending on which night of the week it was (and which year it was), we'd watch a full lineup. Jackie Gleason and the *Honeymooners*. Ed Sullivan, the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, Carol Burnett and her cohorts. Lawrence Welk, naturally. And of course, no evening was complete without that then new-kid-on-the-block, Johnny Carson. I didn't get most of the jokes, but who cared? What glorious freedom to be allowed to stay up so infinitely past bedtime! For my grandmother, though, the highlight of the evening was always the fights. Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson, Muhammad Ali (back then he was still Cassius Clay) – Nana knew them all. She knew their life stories, their trainer's names, their wives' and girlfriends' names, and she could and did dispense yards of information and statistics at the drop of a hat. An energetic armchair coach, she'd critique the boxers' form, alternately praising and scolding, and holler encouragement when someone flagged. Occasionally (especially if she disagreed with a call), she'd get carried away and spring to her feet, shouting wildly at the referee and dousing the room with Moxie. During commercials, she'd demonstrate bits and pieces of what her brothers had taught her, and we'd spar a bit.

Later, she'd cradle me in her arms and talk again, sifting back through a lifetime for stories to coax a small child to sleep. What it was like to grow up on a farm and walk miles each day to a one-room schoolhouse. How she used to ride along with her father in a horse-drawn buggy as he delivered the mail – a job he held for 75 years. The time she dressed up in her brother's clothes and very nearly succeeded in selling her spectacle-less father a horse he had purchased himself just that morning. I never tired of hearing her tales and begged for my favorites over and over again.

Boxing isn't something that I've kept up with, but Nana left her mark on me nevertheless. I still make bread most weeks just as she taught me, and I've come to know the leavening effect a good sense of humor can have on even the most difficult of circumstances. Perhaps most important of all though, Nana passed along her love of a good story. I'll never equal her verbal finesse when it comes to telling a tale, but that storytelling spark caught fire in me in its own way, and I have to think Nana would be pleased with my chosen path, breathing life into words on paper. Even if I never did master her impressive right hook.