



GRAMMA'S PANDEMIC BIRTHDAY

by Monique Polak

"I can't let you in," the guard tells me. Like me, he is wearing a mask that covers his nose and mouth. But I can see his eyes, and they have a steely, serious look.

I raise the Styrofoam plate I'm carrying, to show him the cookies. I covered them in two layers of cellophane so no COVID-19 germs can get in.

"They're double chocolate chip," I tell him. "My grandma's favourite. I baked them specially for her birthday. She turned eighty-two today."

"I still can't let you in," the guard says.

I'm wondering if I should try bribing him with a cookie. But when he adds, "Rules are rules," I decide it would be a waste of a perfectly good cookie.

Gramma moved to the seniors' residence after Grampa died two years ago. There wasn't room for her in our house, and besides, Gramma said the last thing wanted was to be a burden. The good news is the residence is close enough to our house that I can walk there. I usually go twice a week. Mom says it's super kind and that she's proud of me, but I don't go because I'm trying to be kind. I go because I love hanging out with Gramma.

Mom warned me they wouldn't let me in. She said she'd sent flowers and signed all our names on the card. She said we could have a double celebration next year when Gramma turns eighty-three.

"What if she doesn't?" I asked Mom.

Mom looked up from her laptop. She's been working from home since the pandemic shut the city down. "Doesn't what?"

"Doesn't turn eighty-three."

“Of course she will.” Mom went back to typing on the keyboard, which is how I knew the conversation was over. I didn’t get to say what I wanted to – that Grampa didn’t make it to eighty-three.

I feel the guard’s steely eyes on me as I walk across the driveway and out to the street. When I’m sure he’s gone back inside, I loop around the block. There’s a back entrance to the residence, but when I try the door, it’s locked. I crouch behind the recycling bins. To help me think, I eat two cookies.

It isn’t right for an eighty-two-year-old woman to be alone on her birthday.

How can I get inside?

If I get in, and I get caught, I can always talk my way out of it.

I’m an excellent talker.

Besides, twelve-year-olds don’t get sent to jail.

At least I don’t think they do.

In the end, I don’t need to think up a way to get inside. The janitor lets me in. He doesn’t mean to. But he leaves the back door propped open when he goes for a smoke. When he sits down at one of the picnic tables and takes out his phone, I make a run for it.

Do all seniors’ residences smell like a combination of pee, cleaning fluid and mothballs?

I take the back stairs to the fourth floor. “Gramma,” I whisper from outside the door to 402. Gramma’s hard of hearing. I turn to check for nosy neighbours, but there aren’t any. So I call for Gramma again – a little louder this time.

Light footsteps, and then Gramma is looking at me through the peephole.

“Dylan!” I hear her say.

The door opens a crack and I slip in.

I reach for a hug, but then I stop myself. “Happy Birthday, Gramma,” I say.

She looks at the plate I’m carrying. The cookies have drifted to one side. “Double chocolate chip?” she asks.

“Your recipe.”

Gramma puts the cookies on the side table.

“Let me look at you,” she says.

And that’s what Gramma does. Looks at me and smiles.

“I can’t stay long,” I tell her. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“I know,” she says. “But between you and me, Dylan, you’re the best birthday present a grandmother could have.”

My throat starts getting sore that night. I've had sore throats before, but this one's worse. It can't be COVID, can it? I've heard on the news that one of the symptoms is losing your sense of smell. I pull the top sheet over my head. I smell detergent. Phew.

But when I wake up the next morning, my throat is still sore, and I can't smell detergent. I also can't smell the usual morning coffee smell from downstairs.

"Dylan?" my mother says when I walk into the kitchen, "Is something wrong? You're pale as a ghost."

"Sore throat." I don't mention the not being able to smell.

My father looks up from the newspaper. "Thank goodness you didn't see Gramma."

My sore throat is better in three days. It takes another day before my nose works again. If it was COVID – could it have been COVID? – I'd had a mild case. But if it was COVID, I could still have passed it on.

I watch my parents for symptoms. Nothing. At least not so far.

A week later, my parents are still fine, but we learn about the COVID outbreak at Gramma's residence. My parents get an email from the residence – and it's on the evening news. Twelve confirmed cases; one death. And Gramma isn't answering her phone.

Mom calls the residence in a panic. They say they'll send someone to check on Gramma.

"I think I should drive over there," Mom says to Dad.

"There's no point. They won't let you in," he tells her.

"I got in." I say it in a small voice. At first, neither of them say anything.

"I snuck in. On her birthday." There, I've said it. I'm glad I got it out.

My parents look at each other.

"I brought cookies."

"What were you thinking, Dylan?" my mom asks.

"He wasn't thinking," Dad says.

That's when the phone rings.

I hear Gramma's voice on the other end. "I must've been in the tub when you called. I forgot to check the messages. I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

"There's COVID in your residence," Mom says.

"Of course I know that," Gramma says. "It's frightening. But I can assure you, dear, I haven't left my apartment. Or seen anyone."

“Dylan told us –” Mom starts to say.

Gramma cuts her off. “I adore that boy.”

Mom shakes her head. “He had a sore throat. You need to be tested for COVID, Ma.”

Gramma tests negative.

Mom still thinks a punishment is in order. That I need to learn a lesson.

“You could ground him,” Dad suggests.

Mom doesn’t laugh. COVID has grounded all of us.

In the end, I come up with my own punishment. I make twelve batches of double chocolate chip cookies (I pay for all the ingredients out of my allowance money) and deliver them to Gramma’s residence, with a letter of apology.

I leave the cookies and the letter with the same guard who didn’t let me in on Gramma’s birthday. I explain that the cookies are for the staff. And I thank him for looking after Gramma.

“My pleasure,” he says. This time, his eyes aren’t so steely.