

The tiny trinkets on two grandmothers' bracelets reveal a treasure trove of family secrets

I GREW UP IN THE MISSOURI OZARKS, just a few rolling hills away from both of my grandmothers. In my earliest memories, my eyes barely reached the hems of their embroidered aprons as they cooked cobblers or worked their Singer sewing machines, the jangling of their charm bracelets as ever-present as the burbling of the creek, the whistle of passing trains and the flutter of hummingbirds in the honeysuckle that trailed up their front porches.

That sweet tinkling was the background music of my childhood. My grandmothers were both seamstresses. One sewed in a local factory, the other in a church basement, but each had dreamed of being a fashion designer when she was young. "You should have big dreams," they told me, "but know how to be happy with the simplest of things, too." The simplest of things included watching the sun set while drinking iced tea and

the reward of being polite — saying thank you and opening doors, making the small gestures that possess powerful meaning. Also included was paying respect to those who had passed away.

So every Memorial Day, before my summer vacation could officially begin, I accompanied my grandmothers and my mother to Ozarks cemeteries to decorate the graves of family members and local veterans.

"But it's summer," I'd complain. "Can't I go swimming?"

"You have all the time in the world for that," they'd say. "But not for this."

My grandmothers, my mom and I loaded ourselves into Grandma Rouse's big old Chevy, filling the trunk with miniature American flags and flowers from my grandmothers' gardens, among them their favorites, white peonies with soft pink centers that smelled like heaven. They all wore black dresses and carried tissues to wipe the mud off their sensible shoes and the tears from their faces.

It was during these visits that I got to know family members I had never met as my grandmothers shared stories of those who had gone before us. Many of the stories were reflected in their charms.

"This is for my baby," one grandmother told me as we stood by a dogwood tree. She showed me a charm with the silhouette of an infant and a date on the back. "He was stillborn," she said. "I planted this tree here so his memory would always bloom."

My other grandmother stopped at a veteran's headstone and pointed to her charm of the Eiffel Tower. "He brought it back for me after the war," she said, telling me how she dreamed of visiting Paris to see the fashion but knew she could never afford the trip. "He gave me a piece of my dream."

Both had charms of thimbles and sewing machines, given to them by their mothers to help instill a love of sewing. They talked of how their mothers had made clothes from feed sacks as they placed peonies on their mothers' graves.

I began to ask my grandmothers more about the charms to better understand their lives. I found that each charm was a key that unlocked a secret part of their dreams and histories, and that

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while the charms were simple, their symbolism was grand: a dragonfly charm for a life filled with good fortune; a puzzle piece for a life filled with friends who completed you; a loon charm for a love that always called you home; a mustard seed charm for a life filled with faith.

And both of my grandmothers had charms of ice cream cones, because life was sweet (even when it wasn't). We always stopped to get ice cream cones after our Memorial Day visits.

Those charms were a path to discovering that my grandmothers were incredible women who had lived

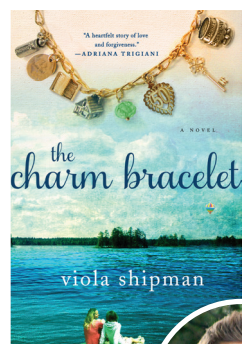
extraordinary lives filled with beauty, hope and tragedy.

I've accomplished many of the "big dreams" they had for me, including becoming a writer. But I still say thank you and open doors. And every Memorial Day, I try to make it from my Michigan home back to the rolling hills of the Ozarks to decorate my family members' graves. I dress nicely, wear sensible shoes and pack the trunk of my car with miniature American flags, tissues and flowers from my garden, including peonies that are the descendants of those that grew in my grandmothers' gardens and whose seedlings I planted in Michigan.

I wind my way from grave to grave, knowing that each of these people — their lives, their love — helped make me who I am today. And when I stand perfectly still in front of my grandmothers' graves, I can hear the burbling of the creek, the whistle of passing trains and the flutter of hummingbirds in the honeysuckle.


I can also hear the tinkling of their charms, in my mind and in my pocket. My grandmothers and my mother — now all gone — gave me their bracelets and their stories.

So now, when I watch the sun set over that cemetery, I jangle those charms and thank my grandmothers for teaching me that the simplest things in life truly are the greatest gifts. — Wade Rouse



THE SURPRISE AUTHOR

Wade Rouse wrote not only this essay, exclusively for *Good Housekeeping*, but also *The Charm Bracelet*, a new novel about three generations of women who reconnect through the charms on a treasured family bracelet. So why does "Viola Shipman" appear on the cover as the writer? "She was my maternal grandmother," says Wade. "I thought her name summed up the heirloom feel of the novel, and this was my way of honoring my two grandmothers." Readers will be charmed by the characters, most of all by kooky but wise Lolly (a mix of Viola and Madge Rouse, Wade's paternal grandmother), who teaches her stressed-out daughter and granddaughter lessons in life and love.



Photograph by Mike Garten

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