

Aunt Nell's Time Machine
by Amy Jackson
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Chapter 1

It was Christmas holiday season, and Carol was home from college. The excitement was building for everyone in the family to be home to celebrate Christmas together again. She and her mother had been baking banana bread and cookies for gifts all week, and it was very comforting, making the house smell great. After putting some loaves of bread in the oven, Mama and Carol were taking a break. Mama was getting ready to go run some errands, while Carol was curled up in the green easy chair in the den, reading a mystery novel. Suddenly, the phone rang in the kitchen.

The phone call came just like any other, but the news was bad. Mama went into the kitchen to answer it, and Carol could hear from her hushed tones that something was wrong. Great Aunt Ladybug was in the hospital, she said. She has a bad cold, but it's serious. They had to take her from the nursing home.

Several hours later, waiting for Daddy to come home, we had another call. Great Aunt Ladybug had passed. There was nothing they could do to save her.

All of this came as a shock, as we were getting ready for the holidays in earnest, the week of Christmas. Ladybug wouldn't have been able to come home for Christmas, but we would have gone to her in the nursing home that afternoon, taking her presents and making her day as bright as we could.

But now she was gone, and a dark wave of loss, a hole, opened up and continued to wash over us, as each of us in the family realized what had happened, and memories of Ladybug rose in our hearts and thoughts. It didn't seem possible, and a level of surreality covered everything, every simple task became more difficult, and we lost interest in preparing for the holidays.

Mama and Daddy prepared for Ladybug's funeral quietly, as they had for Great Aunt Nell, for Grandma J, my father's mother – we were spared the details of what would happen to honor and bury our dear Ladybug. A few days later, Mama said we would need to get dressed and go to the funeral home, the night before the burial, to be with Ladybug one last

time, and to be with friends and family who were there to say goodbye to her.

Carol got dressed in a nice dress, somber, remembering Ladybug, her laugh, her silliness, her afternoon toddies, and her love for playing bridge on Fridays with her friends, back when she was still living at home. Ladybug would pull out one of her lovely and elegant suits and get her hair done, put on a little makeup and go play bridge with her friends, who also had gussied up for the occasion, and they would have a lot of fun together.

Sometimes Carol would get a call from Ladybug on Friday afternoons, and Ladybug would say, "I won you a dah-la-la!" A dollar was the kitty for the bridge games, and Ladybug would give her winnings to Carol. Remembering this, Carol started to cry again, her waterproof mascara running down her cheeks. The sobs wouldn't stop coming, and her aching heart felt as though she could never stop crying, but eventually she did, for now, and got a tissue to her cheeks and eyes, to set up upon redoing her makeup.

At the funeral home that night, so many faces of so many people who loved Ladybug, now so sad that they could barely look at each other, for fear of crying. Ladybug lay in the casket, in a beautiful dark blue suit with big black, ornate buttons, a suit from her heyday in the fifties. Everyone said how good she looked, that they had done a great job on her makeup. Her face was calm and still, with a slight smile, and rouged cheeks and lips. She did look beautiful. She didn't seem dead to Carol, just resting, just asleep. She couldn't think that Ladybug was dead that night – it would have been too much to bear, to see her and realize the truth.

It wasn't until they were on the way home again in the golden taupe Buick, that Carol remembered that Ladybug was dead, and she started to cry quietly, so as not to upset the others, huge tears streaming down her face. She could tell everyone in the car was so sad, Daddy driving the car slowly home, Mama biting her lip, stoic, and Carol's older sister Anne, also home from college for the holidays, also crying quietly. Carol could tell from her sister's breath, both of them looking out at the Winter trees at night through the windows of the car, just watching them pass, nothing seeming real anymore.

Carol was home from college herself, after a rough first quarter her freshman year, very challenged, and thankfully so, academically, but somewhat tired from working so hard. She had hoped for a restful

holiday, to return to college with a fresh energy and rededicate herself to her studies. How could she have known that such a blow would come, and over Christmas? It was unimaginable. Now she was consumed with grief, she couldn't imagine returning to school. It was overwhelming. She would just have to see how she felt closer to the time to go back, she thought, before saying anything.

It was different when Grandma J passed away, and when Great Aunt Nell had, many years later, a few years ago. When Grandma J died, Daddy's mother, Carol was in the second grade. She didn't know what death was back then, only that they said she couldn't see Grandma J anymore, that they had put her in a coffin and buried her, with beautiful flowers, she remembered, gladiolas that Grandma J had loved. Then after that, for weeks it seemed, family friends brought over food for them to eat, that there was so much food that it was confusing.

So much eating when she didn't feel like eating, now that Grandma J was gone. Eating without feeling it, feeling full, tasting anything. Daddy sitting in his easy chair just staring, not wanting to play with her anymore, of seeing Daddy cry for the first time, and not being able to soothe him. Of Mama telling her to leave Daddy alone for now, and not understanding why she couldn't sit in his lap while he read the paper after work each night like before.

When Aunt Nell died, she was in the nursing home and Ladybug was living alone in the home that they had shared. Grandma J and Aunt Nell had gone in together so long ago to buy the simple house and lot, that they made into such a lovely place to visit, a warm white kitchen with sunny curtains, Grandma J's black iron Singer sewing machine with the fun pedal to make it sew, daffodils on the windowsill, Ivory soap, making bubbles for fun, her Grandma feeding her oranges in her lap, warm.

Aunt Nell then was more active, making breakfast along with Grandma J, different breakfasts, because they liked different things, with country music, Patsy Cline and Hank Williams, Sr. on the radio, soft and slow and warming as the Sun streaming in through the windows.

Aunt Nell had been a schoolteacher, teaching first of all in a one-room schoolhouse that had a history of its own. The schoolhouse had been built before the Civil War, in a town called Stilesboro, a town so small that larger local towns had eaten it up by the time Carol was born. Her Daddy would joke that he had gone to the Stilesboro Academy, his joke name for the schoolhouse where he had also been taught growing up, even having his own Aunt Nell as his schoolteacher for some time, wincing at

the memory of how hard she could hit his hand with her ruler as punishment.

The schoolhouse had "In God We Trust" printed over the wall the students would see when facing the teacher, and some said it was for this reason that Sherman's troops had paused before burning it to the ground, as they had been commanded during the Civil War, that they had decided to spare the building instead. They said it was because of a shared belief in God.

But Daddy said that really what happened was that one of the ladies in Cartersville, where Carol's family now lived, had sent word ahead to Sherman's troops, to the officer in charge of the regiment headed to burn Cartersville, Cassville and Stilesboro, to say that her husband had known the him at West Point before the war, and to spare the towns.

So, Carol's Daddy said, only Cassville was burned, since the woman lived in Cartersville, and since the Stilesboro schoolhouse had the banner that said "In God We Trust." To this day, Cassville had been trying to catch up with Cartersville, with their high school football teams and academic standings, an old rivalry stemming from such a distant time, because before its being burned, Cassville was the larger town. But by the time Carol was in college, the two towns were on an even par, with the building of steel and railroad car factories in Cassville. Cassville levied property taxes on the factories, leading to the building of a better high school, a better football team, and better grades among its students.

Aunt Nell had taught in the Stilesboro schoolhouse until she moved on to the local school system and retired, and whenever Carol was dreading the return to school after a too-short Summer, Aunt Nell would tell her how many days of Summer she had left. Aunt Nell would eagerly await school registration to see which teachers they got, when she could proudly tell Carol and her siblings that she had taught this or that teacher, what she knew about his/her teaching style, and that she would put in a good word for her if she knew the teacher well enough.

When the school year would begin, Carol would most likely be called to the teacher's desk, and the teacher would say they knew Aunt Nell, or Carol's siblings, hoping that she would be more like her sisters as she had been so far, not like her unruly, wild brothers had been. Carol would nod, of course, for she was a good student, well-behaved, respectful, and quiet. The teachers would report back to Aunt Nell, and she would ask how school was going during the year, knowing the answers full well.

But more and more as she got older, Aunt Nell retreated into her room and into silence, or out in the living room, talking mostly to the soap opera characters she loved so much to watch on TV, getting closer and closer to the small TV as the years advanced with her worsening eyesight, but with the same vigorous dialogue with the characters, "No, don't go with him!" she would advise the hapless female heroines.

Great Aunt Ladybug would steer Carol and her siblings past Aunt Nell and the television, back down the hall to her room, where they would watch Ladybug's TV on the chaise lounge, while she watched and did crossword puzzles from her wicker rocking chair, sometimes telling stories, always making them laugh about something or other, giving them sour ball candies and V-8 juice over ice while she had her own drink, "with a little something in it," she would grin.

Ladybug was the wild one among her sisters, Grandma J and Nell, having started working in town for a man, Uncle Mac, who she later married, and, apparently, with whom she had partied her way up and down the highway from Cartersville to Atlanta to Williston, Florida, where they eventually settled down.

Ladybug and Uncle Mac were childless, but they adopted Carol's brothers for the Summers for several years, where they were allowed to basically run wild around Williston, the adventures of which were part of the secret agreement between her two brothers, of things never to be told, as if they had made a blood brother pact, and sworn each other to secrecy forever.

Carol would imagine what it must have been like in Williston back then, and all the people and places around there that her brothers would have met and gotten into, of the house there and a wildness and timelessness of the South that she could barely glimpse falling away into the disrepair of the 60s and 70s as she grew up, sanitized and straightened up from its wispy and horrific past.

Mama and Daddy had lived in Williston for a time after they got married, but once they decided to have children, they decided to move back to Cartersville, as a better place to raise children. Carol had wondered what life was like back then for Mama and Daddy, a more carefree time, partying with Ladybug and Uncle Mac, what Florida had been like then, before all the major tourist development, another willowy, lush green and wispy time of the past.

For now, with five children to take care of, Mama and Daddy hardly ever seemed to have any fun, except on the weekends when they would go out to dinner or to a movie. How she loved to see them dressed up and somewhat excited to go out, how excited she and her siblings were to have the freedom to be in the house alone without their parents, and she would look forward to all of them having a little fun, her parents and her brothers and sisters.

Ladybug's life took a horrible turn for the worse, when Uncle Mac got appendicitis and had to go to the hospital. Due to errors made at the hospital, he was given a transfusion with tuberculosis that caused him to die quickly. As Daddy would later say, Ladybug had "bought the hospital" when she sued, because the hospital had made such a grave mistake. She had sued with the help of a dapper old friend of Ladybug's and Uncle Mac's, and to the whole family, Mr. AJ, as he was called, a man fond of pleasant manners and white linen suits, fine cars and Ladybug and Uncle Mac. Ladybug had been so distraught, Mr. AJ had stepped in and handled matters for her, and pretty much took care of her until she decided to move back home, to move in with Grandma J and Nell.

After Uncle Mac died, Ladybug didn't really know what to do with herself and her grief, so Mr. AJ took her around Latin America, on cruises, where Ladybug developed fine and exotic tastes, smoking small lady-like cigars in a special black cigar holder, like guava jelly and avocados, their adventures clouded almost as much as the wild summers of Carol's brothers.

Ladybug had such wonderful clothes and costume jewelry, such audacious wit and such a good heart, she had regaled them all with allusions to their travels and the world, encouraged each of the children to leave Cartersville and find the world, that they could return to Cartersville if they wanted, but only after seeing the world.

To the day she died, Ladybug would start to cry at the mention of Uncle Mac, and when Mr. AJ was killed in the 1970s in a car crash in Florida, anyone mentioned Mr. AJ.

And now Ladybug herself was gone, all of her laughter and high spirits, her gray pigtailed in mismatching colorful ribbons just for fun, all of the memories of her now tainted with the loss of her, bitter and sweet, making them all cry and grieve as they never had. Carol began to learn that with the loss of an individual, that the lack of him/her left a mark and wound in

her heart in the exact shape of that person's impressions on her life, that could never be the same.

Her memories of her grandmother and Aunt Nell were different, for their lives seemed sadder and less full of laughter, though still very fond, shaped by memories, the reverse-side of which was now death, that she would bravely hold up in her heart and say no to. No death, for I will always remember them, for who they were, for who they were to me, how they touched my life, always.

Her memories of Ladybug, however, were so vivid that it seemed that they had a life of their own, until she felt that Ladybug hadn't died, would never die, would always be part of her life, that she could feel her in the kitchen, or when she was falling asleep, that her life, or her ghost, didn't want to leave. It was a comforting thought, so Carol welcomed Ladybug's presence in any way she could, in some form of denial that Carol now clung to, as Christmas approached, day by day, without the family being aware of it almost, as if it were some sort of approaching dream.

The day of Ladybug's funeral had arrived, and the family had breakfast and got dressed almost wordlessly, for what was there to say? They were so afraid of crying, or causing each other to cry, that they kept as quiet as possible, just kept moving forward, doing simple things and letting other things go for now.

Daddy drove the women in the family, Carol, Mama and her two sisters, and one of her brothers drove his car with her other brother and her brother-in-law. They made it to the funeral home and waited until it was time to get into the limousines and make their slow way to the cemetery. By the time they got there, Carol felt like she could barely walk, barely see, for tears and feelings. It was cold and rainy and it made sense that it was, and she barely felt the freezing wind on her legs, coming in between her gloves and her winter coat, or on her face.

Their minister was saying something but she couldn't hear him, only seeing the flowers on top of Ladybug's casket, so fresh and full of life, in contrast to the green cotton awning overhead, to the artificial green Astroturf placed under the folding chairs beneath them. She just wanted it to be over, to go back home and go to bed. She felt so tired. Nothing seemed real anymore, and no one. It seemed as if each of the members of the family had retreated into their own memories of Ladybug and their grief, into isolated towers of silence.

Christmas came and went and no one really was in the spirit for it this year. The decorations seemed hollow, and the candle flames and the fire in the fireplace seemed to be the only life in the home. Carol would get lost in some sort of space gazing at the flames flickering, until someone, usually Mama, would have a task for her, to keep her busy, to keep her hands moving, as always, but especially now.

The family followed the traditions as they did every year, baking and cooking, although they didn't have the energy to make quite as big a feast as they normally would, and no one felt that things really tasted as good, that they could really taste anything, as if they were eating pictures of food instead of real turkey and wild rice, mashed potatoes and red eye gravy and biscuits, coconut cake, lemon squares, rum balls and brownies.

They opened their gifts and expressed their thanks to Santa Claus and one another, but everyone wanted Christmas to be over because it was so painful, looking at the places where Aunt Nell and Ladybug used to sit to open their presents when they were still living at home, before they were in the nursing home, when things used to be so different.

Finally, Christmas Day was passing into evening and as usual, they each found a place to nap after the feasting, but this time with a relief, finally able to be among their feelings again, to cry and mourn quietly, without disturbing the others. By midnight, the coals of the fire in the fireplace were almost all the way out, and each of them had found their sleep, respite from mourning for now.

Chapter 2

Several days passed after Christmas, and although everyone was still in some kind of bruised spaciness and fatigue, Carol's brothers went back to work, and it remained to be decided what would happen with Grandma J and Aunt Nell and Ladybug's house and belongings. Carol and her brothers wanted to keep the house, but it didn't really make sense. Ultimately it was decided by Carol's parents that they would rent out the house instead of selling it right away.

One Saturday, Mama, Daddy, Carol and her sisters piled into Daddy's truck and Mama's car and rode the block and a half to the now empty house, empty in a way it never had been, even with Ladybug in the nursing home. Even when she went to the nursing home, everything except what she needed for her care there had remained intact, just as she and Aunt Nell had left it.

Now they would have to go through everything, every room and every closet, and decide what to keep. Carol wanted to keep everything, and so did her sisters to a lesser degree, being older, so it fell to Mama and Daddy to make the hard decisions. It was decided that the majority of their clothes were so worn that they should go to the church's clothes closet, where the needy could get clothing for free or for cheap.

It was so hard to see Aunt Nell's housedresses go, still seeing her in them, weeding in the yard, or sweeping the driveway and front walk as fastidiously as she once did before she fell one day there and broke her hip for the first time.

It was so hard to see Ladybug's fine suits and dresses, her fun shoes, the playful and elegant hats in all of their hatboxes, and the drawer of colorful and sparkling costume jewelry being sorted through and packed up for the clothes closet. Carol could still see Ladybug all dressed up with her lipstick on, getting ready to go to bridge, she could still remember playing dress up with her clothes, with her jewelry, could see her hands lovingly playing in the jewelry drawer, remembering when and where she got each piece, remembering when she had worn them, when Ladybug would get that happy lost look in her eyes, full of memories with Uncle Mac and Mr. AJ and all of their fun times and travels.

Mama could see that Carol was not wanting to let go of the jewelry, after telling her daughters that they could keep some of it, if not to wear, then to remember her by. But even when Mama came back after spending time sorting through another part of the house, she could see that Carol was still upset and her daughters were having a hard time deciding what to keep and how to share, even at their age, because all of the pieces had such memories attached. So Mama said that she would go through the costume jewelry herself, and decide who got what.

Carol was so upset to see the drawer dismantled, and to have no say in what she could keep, that she had to take a break from the work and go outside, unable to hide her feelings and not wanting to upset anyone. A wave of cold air hit her as she opened first the kitchen door, then the screen door to go outside.

Daddy's truck was parked right there, and he was having a cigarette inside the cab, listening to the radio. She didn't want to talk to him, to anyone, so she hoped he wouldn't see her, slipping behind his line of sight carefully, until she was past the kitchen windows, the truck's rear view mirror, and had reached the yard. The foliage was frozen in time, all of her Grandma J's hard work to landscape it, still seeing the bones of what

she had created, remembering the daffodils, the camellias, the tiger lily, the waves of green moss and gray stones under the oak tree in back.

Carol circled around the back yard, avoiding the windows, not wanting to be seen, wanting to run away from all of it, to cry, and sure enough, tears starting rolling down her cheeks. Then she saw it -- the door was open.

The whitewashed garage had a place to park a car, but the other side of it held a workshop, a place of mystery for Carol, since it was almost always locked. Today, the door was open, probably because it was one of Daddy's tasks to clean it out. Carol had only seen the inside of it twice, once as a very little girl, when she discovered Aunt Nell and her father in there, only to be shuttled quickly outside again, and another time -- a few years ago, when she was outside and discovered the door open. She had opened the creaking white door and peered inside into the dark shed. She had seen rows of shelving and brown wooden work tables on either side, the walls lined with every sort of tool imaginable, a wondrous place for Carol.

Carol's father had trained to be a mechanical engineer before being drafted for World War II. He had served admirably in the Corps of Engineers, disabling landmines in Europe, nearly losing his feet to frostbite on long marches, to recuperate in hospital and ultimately serve as the temporary mayor of Nancy, France at the very end of the war, only to be told after the war that all three years of his pre-war engineering training at Georgia Tech was outdated due to advances during the war. He could either go back to school to catch up, or try his hand at something else. When he and Mama had just gotten married and were living in Williston, he was having trouble finding a job, until he was invited to work at the second-ever bank to be created in Cartersville, and thus entered a career in banking that lasted until retirement, resulting in his achieving Executive Vice President of the bank for many years until it was time for him to retire, even staying on as a consultant for many years after that.

Her father had gained such respect in the community that the mayor declared a day in his honor soon after he retired, and Carol remembered her quiet father agonizing about his acceptance speech, how well he spoke, how people wanted him to run for mayor and she and others had advised him against it, how it would change his life, change everyone's lives forever.

Carol believed that because she was her father's daughter, that she had inherited his love for things mechanical, and the tool shop was just her sort

of thing, fascinating – but for some reason that she didn't understand even now, she had not been allowed to spend any time at all in the tool shop, until she stopped asking, as a little girl, to see it.

But now the door was open, and her father was taking a cigarette break, so she decided to have one last look inside the workshop, maybe even to find out why she hadn't been allowed to explore it for all of this time. She took another look back at Daddy's truck and at the kitchen windows – and she could see no one – before pushing the creaky door open enough to slide through and return it to its former position behind her.

With a big breath she looked all around her. The bare bulb lights were on above her, so that she could see everything. Sure enough, every tool that she could imagine was there, lining the walls, in drawers, on top of the work tables along either side of her, all the way to the back of the room. She wanted to touch all the tools, to ask Daddy what each of them was used for, with a hunger that was insatiable, especially since there was no way she could ask him for this information now.

She began to touch the tools on the left-hand table, on the peg board full of tools on either wall, awls and drills and drill bits, stirring up ages of dust. This was all Aunt Nell's doing – this was her workshop, although she had only seen her in here once. Several times in her life, Carol had seen Aunt Nell enter it, to close it and lock it behind her, and she had seen her coming out, sometimes with her father or brothers, and locking it behind her. Why such secrecy? Carol couldn't see anything that had been made in here, just an enormous amount of tools, screws, nuts and bolts.

Carol kept exploring the left side of the tool shop, her eyes eating up all the metal and dust and wood, the certain glow of the wood, the darkness of the metal, except for where the tools had been polished into bright silver when they had been used. She looked under the table to find more gadgets and tools, giddy with excitement and forgetting that her father could come back at any moment ...

(To be continued)