

Great Aunt Ella's Treasures

By Colleen Messina

¹ Erica lazily lounged in bed and breathed in the delicious smell of clover wafting through her open window. Her mother had already called her once, but Erica loved the luxury of sleeping late on summer days. She knew she should strive for a more disciplined schedule...starting tomorrow.

² "Erica Magdalena, GET UP! Remember, you have to visit Great Aunt Ella," called her mom. Her mother's voice sounded dissonant. Erica was averse to her old-fashioned middle name and felt disgusted when her mother used it.

³ Erica felt that visiting Great Aunt Ella would be a trial. Ella looked like a sweet woman, but sometimes she was a vixen. She wore her silvery hair pulled back in a modest bun, and her wire-rimmed glasses were perched demurely on the end of a nose as rough and rosy as a partially ripe strawberry. However, sweet Great Aunt Ella usually launched into a pugnacious discourse about modern fashion when she saw Erica's tight blue jeans and spaghetti-strap tops. Erica tried to conduct herself respectfully, but it took time for her bruised feelings to subside after Ella's criticism.

⁴ "Coming, Mom, but I've got to shampoo my hair," called Erica.

⁵ "Your great aunt is expecting us at 10 am sharp, and it is 9:40 now, so I'll call and reassure her that we're on our way," answered her mom.

⁶ Erica was relieved that her mother's voice sounded buoyant again. Erica had lots to collect for her 4H project on genealogy at the Crawford County Summer Fair. Erica hoped to find a family tree, birth and marriage certificates, heirloom jewelry, and old photographs at her great aunt's house, if she could survive the visit.

⁷ It would be worth it, though, if she won a blue ribbon at the fair! Erica loved going on the dizzying rides, then eating homemade bratwurst followed by sparkly cups of shaved ice in obnoxious neon colors. The county farmers were jubilant about their harvest each year and proudly displayed their enormous cucumbers, saucer-sized zinnias, and delectable tomatoes. The livestock barns housed fuzzy lambs, bleating goats, and lethargic pigs, but Erica secretly admitted that the animals were not the real reason she visited the barns. What she really liked to do was to chat with the boys who tended the animals!

⁸ "Mom, I'm ready! It's only 9:52," said Erica.

⁹ "Here is a bagel to eat in the car," replied her mother with a devious smile, as she deliberately handed Erica a hot cinnamon bagel spread with cream cheese. Breakfast consumption had been an ongoing discussion between mother and daughter for some time. Erica thought the idea that breakfast was the most

important meal of the day was ridiculous. If she did not feel like eating a meal, why was it so important? However, the toasty bagel made her mouth water in anticipation, and soon Erica was munching happily.

¹⁰ The drive took them on roads lined with cornfields and lumbering cattle. The corn's golden, translucent tassels waved against the turquoise sky like triumphant flags. Occasionally, they passed a square Victorian house with delicate wrought-iron porch railings and overflowing vegetable gardens nearby. The fields were comforting, but Erica was looking forward to graduating in two years and going to college in California.

¹¹ They cruised up Ella's driveway, and Erica noticed that the large, luscious, lavender lilacs next to the porch were in full bloom. Voluminous, decorative pots of red geraniums sat next to the door. Great Aunt Ella peered at them through the screen.

"Well, there you are! Come in quickly, and don't let the flies in," she snapped.

Erica and her Mom slipped in. The screen door slammed shut with a terrific bang.

¹⁴ "Hello, Great Aunt Ella," Erica said nervously. She waited for her great aunt's usual caustic remarks about her clothes but, surprisingly, none came.

¹⁵ "Your mom told me you need things for your 4H display about the family. Let's go to the attic to help you in your foray into genealogy," replied Ella.

¹⁶ "OK, great!" answered Erica, astounded at her great aunt's sudden graciousness.

¹⁷ A single bulb hanging from the ceiling at the top of the attic staircase eerily lit a vast collection of mahogany furniture, black-and-white portraits in broken frames, and lamps edged with beaded fringe. Great Aunt Ella's many treasures were a revelation to Erica!

¹⁸ "Over there is a box of antique jewelry, and here is my old photo album. You may have my superfluous photographs," explained Ella.

¹⁹ Erica leafed through the crinkly yellow pages cautiously and looked carefully at the somber white faces that seemed to stare back at her. Why didn't those people ever smile? Some photos featured people with tinted pink cheeks, but that was the only trace of color. Erica was startled when she found a photo of a delicate, young girl in an ominously dark bathing suit. The girl, who bore a remarkable resemblance to her great aunt, was not smiling, but her eyes held a mischievous twinkle.

²⁰ "Yes, that photograph was taken when I was sixteen. I had quite a reputation as an accomplished swimmer! I would have loved one of those multicolored suits

you wear now rather than those horrible trunks!" Great Aunt Ella said wistfully.

²¹ Erica realized with amazement that Ella was a teenager once, too. Did Ella actually like some of the flamboyant styles of today? Faultless script under the photograph noted: *Ella Magdalena, age 16.*

²² Magdalena! Erica looked at her great aunt with renewed appreciation, and now she was sure her 4H project would be a success. She suddenly had an idea! Turning to Great Aunt Ella, she asked, "Can you help me shop for a bathing suit?"

²³ Great Aunt Ella's eyes lit up with a mischievous twinkle.
