

## Gramma Was A Readhead

An excerpt from the novel *50 Cents An Hour*

By

Donna Marie Seim

Gramma Burke was a real life grandmother. Some people are special, but she was extra special. As we piled out of the car and into Gramma's house every Sunday for dinner, I would already be anticipating the warm feeling that Gramma always gave me. Since there were seven of us in our family, I would often have to wait in line to get my hug. It was worth the wait because no one gave a hug like my Gramma did. She would sweep you up into her strong arms and squeeze as she rocked you back and forth. I often felt that it was a miracle that my ribs didn't crack in two. As she hugged you, she would sing out your name and laugh with pure joy at sharing a wonderful moment of reunion with you, her most special and beloved grandchild. Gramma had a laugh that came from so deep inside of her, you could feel it welling up, waiting to break loose as she hugged you. It was a delightfully contagious laugh that touched your heart and made you genuinely happy inside.

Gramma Burke was a redhead of German heritage. She was a big woman and strong too. She always wore a house-dress with an apron tied around her middle. She had a whole drawer full of aprons in the kitchen. The aprons and the house-dresses often had little printed flowers or patterns on them that didn't necessarily match. Her hair was no longer red but white, and her soft curls stayed close to her head. She wore glasses and her eyes were a soft, twinkly blue. When she smiled her nose crinkled.

Gramma never wore makeup or fancied herself up. She was not a frilly woman, but she was more beautiful to us than the most glamorous of movie stars. She wore sturdy shoes and heavy dark stockings. When she dressed for church or to go out visiting, she would wear one of her fancier dresses. These were remarkably similar to her house-dresses, but were a little shinier. Four outings she would wear her wool coat with the big buttons and her hat, which looked kind of like an upside-down flowerpot with some netting tucked here and there.

When Gramma came to visit, she would sit in the living room and give each one of us five children a chance to tell her everything about ourselves. Unlike most adults, she listened and was really interested in our little lives according to us. After we had rambled on about ourselves we would beg her to tell stories about when she was a little girl. She had had a mean stepmother who made her cook and clean all day, just like Cinderella. When she was older, my handsome Irish Grampa married her and took her away. They were wonderful stories and she would often get a little tear in her eye when she told us about her childhood.

Gramma always had a dog. Queenie. Every dog she had was named Queenie. She had pictures of all her Queenies and they all looked exactly alike. They were medium-sized, black, shorthaired mutts. Each one had golden eyebrows and gold highlights around the nose. We all loved Queenie and wanted to have our own Queenies when we grew up, just like Gramma.

The Queenie I knew best was not much to look at really, but her personality was great. She chewed tobacco with Grampa and would pick up anything you asked her too. Gramma never

had anything lying loose on the floor because if something fell, Queenie would pick it up immediately and bring it to her. We would tear up little pieces of paper and sprinkle them around the room to test Queenie. She would find every last one and return them to us.

Queenie was also a great watchdog. Grampa had a job as a night watchman for a high school nearby and Gramma spent many nights home alone. But she had Queenie, and no one could get past Queenie who was not okay by Gramma. Besides Queenie, Gramma had a baseball bat that she kept hidden under her bed. She only had to use that bat once. Unfortunately for Grampa, it was on him. He had forgotten his midnight lunch and his house keys so he figured he could just quietly slip in through the open kitchen window. Queenie was on the alert and, not used to Grampa coming in through a window, she let out her watchdog bark. Gramma grabbed her baseball bat and scurried into the kitchen. She saw a man's head coming in through the half open window so she clobbered him right then and there with the bat. Grampa never forgot his lunch or keys again.