

## **Don't Stir the Pot**

My Polish grandmother moved in with us when she was 88 years old and I was 12. It was 1981 in suburban Detroit. My four older siblings had already moved out and the rhythm of life with my parents as they approached retirement was disrupted by her arrival. My dad was enjoying success with his automotive parts business and spending more time at the golf course. My mom's schedule as a sewing teacher was light, giving her plenty of time to decorate our newly constructed split-level home. My grandmother, who we called Babcia, was stoic.

We were an uncomfortable foursome.

Dinnertime was often spent in silence, tension in the air. My parents, after 35 years of marriage, didn't really like each other much anymore. Babcia and I were unwelcome witnesses to their strife. On evenings when I heard my parent's voices starting to rise, I would sneak out of my upstairs bedroom and hide behind the banister.

"Marge told me that you had chest pains on the golf course and had to take two nitros," mom said loudly starting to cry.

"Stay out of my business," dad yelled.

The new modern house looked good on the outside, but on the inside things were uneasy.

On the late afternoons when my dad was not at the golf course, we ate dinner together sitting at the gleaming new kitchen island. It had been designed to accommodate three upholstered stools. But we were four. My mom would pull up a step stool on the other side of the counter next to the sink, slide out the inset cutting board, and set her plate on it with a heavy sigh. One day, after serving portions of the hamburger pie she had made for dinner, she burst into tears and left the room. We just kept eating and didn't say anything.

Babcia often spent her afternoons sitting in one of the dining room chairs looking out the front window, slightly hidden from view behind the heavy drapes. Sometimes she read the Polish newspaper aloud in a slow whisper. Other times she sat as still as a statue with her hands crossed on her lap, her thumbs slowly twiddling. I wondered what she was thinking about. She was a mystery to me.

Before my mom and dad went off to work and I left for school, my mom occasionally left some simple chores for Babcia to help fill her days – ironing my dad’s shirts, mending his socks, watering the garden, or making us dinner.

I remember arriving home after school and sitting at the kitchen counter to watch Babcia cook. We were alone together. We didn’t talk much. We didn’t tell any stories. This silence was pleasant. Babcia was a comfort to me merely in the way she did her work, standing in front of the stove, sturdy and calm, wearing one her many simple cotton house dresses. She wasn’t in a rush and wasn’t distracted. She was focused on the task at hand: making chicken soup with delicate handmade noodles. Her nylons were rolled down and sat on her swollen ankles. Her grey hair was controlled in tight curls under a hairnet. The wrinkly skin on her upper arms swayed when she rolled out the dough.

Over the next few years, I spent less time at home and more time with friends. My parents had reached a truce. My dad was gone more often and my mom freely shared her frustrations with me, explaining how difficult it was to be financially dependent on a man and not have the option to get a divorce. Babcia was still there. I would catch a glimpse of her sitting in the front window as I rode off to the park on my 10-speed bike.

On some evenings, the four of us would watch TV together. I often chose to sit on the floor at the foot of Babcia’s chair, gently leaning against her legs. It was the most comfortable spot in the room. As Babcia got older, she spent more time sitting alone in the pink Lazy Boy recliner in her bedroom looking out the window at our backyard.

One day, a few months before my high school graduation and my parent's decision to move Babcia to a nursing home, I went into her room and sat on the floor next to her chair. She gently put her hand on my head. I looked up and our eyes met. Behind her horn-rimmed glasses, Babcia's blue eyes peeked out from her wrinkled cheeks. They were milky and moist, and they looked down at me with such love and acceptance. We smiled at each other.

A few years later when I was at college, my mom called to let me know Babcia had died. I was calm and composed as tears rolled down my cheeks. I had been nourished and shaped by her quiet, simple gestures. At her funeral, my siblings and I laughed and shared that we each thought we were her favorite grandchild. I wanted to tell them my stories about living with Babcia, about how she looked at me and me alone in that special way, but I didn't want to stir the pot.

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