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A Polish Grandmother

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It was easy to understand why my grandmother was such a unique woman. Her father was reported to be a practitioner of the occult practices, painting an enormous eagle on their garage, meant to ward off evil spirits. His spell books were purported to have a page with an attached piece of mysterious skin. Her mother held séances to communicate with the dead and enjoyed chasing her young grandchildren with a vacuum cleaner.

My grandmother met my grandfather at age 16, and he was the first and only man she ever kissed. On one of their early dates she held her arms out and proclaimed, "Kiss me like they do in the movies." These were the days when a kiss meant a lot, more than just "I kissed a girl and I liked it." This was a kiss that sealed the deal; babies, grandbabies, the whole ball of wax—that kiss took her on a journey from New Jersey to Jamaica, to California, and finally to Washington State.

This woman was entirely irrepressible, her strength was legendary. While her husband was out saving the world with the cause du jour, she was working to support her family and raising her two daughters. Animals and children loved her; she was like Mother Theresa with a Jersey accent. I recall how effectively she handled my grandfather's occasional fits of rage. During the peak of yelling, he would begin an exorcism process, making the sign of the cross and compelling the spirit of my great grandmother, Helen, to go back to the grave. "Christ commands you, Helen, leave the body of my wife." Her retort was typically a raspberry and a bird. Argument over. And yet despite the work, the children, the arguments with grandpa, she always left time for her life's passion, her art.

My grandmother was always an artist, she loved to draw, paint, weave, but it wasn't until my grandfather built her a studio that her ability to produce art really took off. Interestingly this was about the time she began to show signs of the horrible disease that would take her life: Alzheimer's. It was almost if somehow she knew this was her last opportunity to give birth to the art that was inside her. Her tapestries are breathtaking. Her piece de resistance is a 30 by 15 foot tapestry of various colors and figures which still hangs in my grandfather's home. Of course their home is a converted barn, only such a large room could house such a large piece of art.

Over time her comments became more and more bizarre. Upon leaving the dinner table, she commented that my cousin "not get any fatter." She noted that my brother had a "nice round face." After my grandfather commented on my good looks (he's very near-sighted), she made sure to add "and he's got a big nose too." After a visit I put all my bed sheets in the hamper to aid the cleaning process. She took my mother aside in private to tell her that I had wet the bed and stuffed all the sheets in the hamper. I'm pretty sure I didn't wet the bed. Pretty sure.

Little by little she disappeared into the nebulous fog that characterizes Alzheimer's disease. The horrible, soul killing disease that rips loved ones away piece by piece, leaving behind a shell that only serves to mock the greatness of the former being. But I'll remember my grandmother not the way she was when she was sick, but the way she was when she was enjoying life with her family. I'll remember sitting on her lap as a small child while she showed me a book about exotic animals, and I'll remember her in the kitchen cooking up one of her extraordinary creations. But most of all I'll remember her keeping my grandfather in check.