

1. The formica table which sat below the window that was far too high on the wall. Or maybe I was so much shorter, and it seemed abnormally high to me. The table was always full of projects, papers, coupons, and bowls. The deseeding of figs for her sister, the coupons to give away.

There was nothing particularly special or beautiful about the white and black table, but I remember how we sat in the battered chairs and discussed many things. Like why she deseeded figs, and the immense time it must be taking. The interruption to her explanation as I notice the guy next door working out in the window far above the table.

"Wow, does that happen often?"

She had no clue what I was talking about.

"Does what happen often?"

"Never mind, tell me about the figs."

I stared longer than I should at the guy working out on his elliptical, only half in tune with the story about figs. Was he aware his windows were wide open? Did he even care?

Attention back on the table now, I notice it has room for a leaf. Did the family once eat around this table as opposed to sitting in the dining room? Is the leaf under the table? I don't look, I must concentrate on the fig conversation. Grandma's making fig cookies, which are still my favorite. But she must deseed them in order to give them to her sister. Colitis is an unfamiliar word to me, and the disease sounds painful. I wonder now about the lowly cucumber seed that has caused the aunt I don't really know so much pain.

2. The walk-in pantry I'm sure once was glorious. Now it's strewn with newspapers scattered on the floor. Discarded Tupperware lids that probably have no containers to be paired with. The shelves are full of things, their contents a blur in the back of my memory. Many cabinets are ajar, but I don't take the time to peer inside them. Instead, I stare out the window as I make this mental walk through my grandmother's house. I stare out the windows and wonder

why they are in the pantry. Although in fairness, the pantry has room to mix up cookies and other delights, and the natural light would have been a treat. I spot the edge of a curtain out of the corner of my eye. It may be green and white checked, or my memory might be deceiving me. Those windows look out onto the enclosed back porch, its screen door ajar. I don't have to ask why. I am certain of what Grandma would say.

"For the stray cat."

She collects stray and injured pets as much as hurting people. There's always a plate of food or bowl of water for the animals who wander into her yard. She wants to come back and own a big farm in her next life, where all the animals who need a place to live can go.

"You want to be reincarnated?"

"I'll have to be," she says. "Until I can get life right."

"I thought you said growing old was painful. Why would you want to do it a second time?"

"You don't always get a choice in these matters."

The memory of our odd conversation, with the faults in the logic that my young mind believed, still brings a smile to my face. My adult mind still sees them as odd theories, but I'm more distracted as she rubs at an aching knee and reminds me I shouldn't partake in "this getting old stuff."

3. The stove. White and gleaming ran on gas. It had more doors than normal and was probably the cleanest item in the kitchen. I am reminded of the time I dug out a dry erase marker and left a note on the clean white stove top before going to bed one night. In the morning, I find Grandma staring at the note, smiling. Soup already simmering on the stove. She notices me and asks who wrote the note. I confess, and mention it's a dry erase marker. She has no interest in the marker. Her curiosity lies in finding out how in the world I am familiar with who Howdy Doody was. I shrug, admitting I've never seen the show, but I've heard the phrase often enough.

A flash in my mind, and now a bowl of lentils is on the table. She's attempting to shell them.

"Grandma, why are you shelling lentils?"

She glances up, unfazed by the question, as if people husk lentils, deseed figs, and remove the string from celery daily. Her love for others drives her to do these strange tasks. She read if you husk lentils, they are gentler on the digestive track.

I'm confused, but I don't tell her. I glance out the window, and thankfully the guy next door has closed his curtains today. A towel covers the bowl of figs, making it impossible to see how much progress has been made — if any.

4. The sink sits in a small nook on an inner wall separating the kitchen from the dining room. It's white and full of dirty cold water. But she's scrubbing away as if she has the cleanest, hottest water in the house. The hot water doesn't work, and she needs to boil more, but in failing to mention this, I pick up where she left off, presuming I'm helping her.

The sink and the small area around it are old, but I see the sink gleaming and white, a light on overhead. The counters and walls are old and dingy from use, and I can't remember if they were green or yellow, or another color that has escaped my memory. Is there tile around the sink? I can almost see the tiled backsplash pulled from a faded memory. The floor is a worn green and white checkered patterned. Or is it black and white? My mind can see both as it tries desperately to remember.

How many plates and bowls were washed at that sink? How many tears spilled into it? Foods rinsed, pastas drained. It's such a small sink, a small area compared to what I am used to, and yet there's no complaint as she does the work. In fact, she tells me the same familiar story again, about the neighbor who borrowed a pot having burned all her own and had nothing to make her own dinner in.

I wonder at such a feat, to burn every pot you own and be brave enough to ask the neighbor if you can borrow one. The pot unreturned, Grandma went to retrieve it, but the neighbor says it's still full of food. Over time, the truth is revealed; the neighbor burned the pot and in

shame buried it. The pot was dug up and brought home. It's gleaming now, because it only took a little elbow grease and the right tools to restore it. I stare at the gleaming pot and wonder about the tale.

"Is this a true story?"

"Of course," she says. "Why else would I scrub that pan?"

5. The stories, many repeated often enough that I can still tell them as they were told to me. The story about the burned pot, which I still wonder about. There's one about a stray cat, which I know is true because, long ago, when I peered out the backdoor I saw the cat on the screened in back porch. The story about the car engine and the tireless effort a cousin and his buddies put into fixing it, only to learn their problem was forgetting to lower the engine back into the car. It sounds strange. How does one forget such a thing? But she's laughing so hard as she tells me, I don't ask.

The story about the family dog, Fritz, the sweet, laid back kind, until a neighborhood bully was pestering my father. Fed up with the nonsense, my father apparently told the dog to "sick him", and for whatever reason the tame dog went psycho unexpectedly, freaking everyone out. There are stories about people who knocked on the door, about family members I've only vaguely heard of. Stories about the power of aloe vera, lost pets, reunited pets, and my father's childhood. There are stories told in English and German, and we beg her to teach us the language so we too can recite the poems and tales, but she refuses, much to our disappointment, and launches into another story. A story that is lost in time and memory, and in a house that has long been forgotten.

When I close my eyes, I can still see the house. In my mind, I walk a lap downstairs, making it through each room, pausing at the circular dimmer switch in the dining room that was always fun to play with. I stare at the wall I watched my father paint, and linger by the picture window that only peers out over the driveway. I jog up the first five stairs and peep out the landing window before running up the next five stairs and turning into the room I slept in when visiting. I don't think of it until now, but I wonder which of my aunts slept in here, or was it Dad's room? Whose room was this, and what stories does it hold? As I fall asleep

wondering about this, it's quickly discarded when I'm woken by the trash truck. I'm not used to city noises, and there is no trash collection where I live. I lay in bed gazing out the window and wonder how anyone who lives in the city ever gets any real sleep.

The house is full of mystery and wonder, not because it's magical, but because its memory is magical. It is the place my father grew up; the place my grandmother lived before she was a grandmother. When she was young, like in the photos, I know are her, but don't quite seem like the her I know. This is the home where I only know of the good that happened, but later learned difficulties lingered here too, hiding in the shadows, buried in the basement. It doesn't steal the magic or mystery, but it pricks the heart as I wonder at the family who lived here. The people I know, but don't know. The time and place that was before now. Before me. Before today. It's hard to imagine, to envision it as described. You know it's true, but it feels too far away to grasp.

So I settle back at the table, and listen to the reason behind deseeding figs once again, hope that the resulting cookies are worth the effort, and dream of eating one.



Author's Note:

This piece was inspired by a writing prompt entitled: *Things I Miss From My Grandmother's Kitchen*. I figured writing Grandma five times over wouldn't really be fitting, and so I sat with the idea for a while, eyes closed, the home unfolding before me.

As I sat and reread this piece, convinced my grandmother's house had been a lovely shade of blue, but then my memory began pulling other colors to the front of my mind and to settle the matter, I hunted her house down on [Google Maps](#).

The house is no longer whatever color it once was, but several shades of tan. The old worn front steps freshly sanded and stained a deep reddish cedar. If I close my eyes long enough, I can see her old husky, Toby, tied to the porch, which brings back memories of the time he killed a pigeon and she became quite cross with him. When she came home the next day,

she found a pigeon buried in her front yard, its little feet sticking up, and Toby quite proud of himself. Is the story true? I may never know, but it makes me smile to recall.

I took a quick tour of the home through the magic of places like [Zillow](#) and felt overcome with a deep sense of sadness. The kitchen is no longer as I remember it, instead having a cheap modern look to it. A sink crammed in by a window, the nook for the stove far too small for the range that once sat in that kitchen. The floor is a faux wood linoleum, and the window far too high to clean properly seems a distance memory. A half bath has been added, and it appears to be in what was once the walk-in pantry. The upstairs, formerly adorned with a beautiful wood floor, now has carpeting.

It is strange that a home I have not visited in well over twenty years should change and elicit such strong emotions, but it did. Maybe it's because I have written that very house, or at least aspects of it, into stories I have created. The wonder and marvel of a home we only see once its occupants are grown, and we struggle to imagine them as the children we are assured they once were never seems to dim in our memories.

The attic that holds innumerable treasures to children, and a few pesky squirrels that would give you a fright when they scrambled to escape. The stairs to the basement aren't in any of the photos, and the memory of a room you only visited rarely, are no longer distinguishable. All I see is an egg carton atop the dryer filled with lint. Yes, you read that correctly. My grandmother read about many things in her lifetime, and one was a way to create fire starters. Save up lint, pack it into an egg carton, cover with wax. Why she would require a fire starter in a home with no fireplace wasn't a question I ever had. Even as a teen, which was the last time I visited that home, it was still not the question forefront in my mind.

Rather, I was more baffled about what time she'd gotten up, that she'd already washed, dried, and ironed our clothes. I say our, because on that trip my brother and mother were there as well. We'd encountered car troubles along the way, and when the car jerked, hot cocoa spilled all over my brother's t-shirt. My grandmother went to great lengths to scrub that shirt, announcing over breakfast she'd done her best, but there were tiny flecks she simply could not remove. We did not have the heart to tell her it was a natural off-white t-shirt with flecks of brown woven in. How could we when the shirt was now a shocking white

with tiny flecks of grayish brown upon it?

Please note the photo attached to this post is not a photo of my grandmother's kitchen.

The Reluctant Author.

