

My AMERICAN STORY

Toward the end of her life, when she had difficulty with even the simplest things, like remembering to turn the stove off after making a cup of tea, my grandmother (my father's mother) came to live with us for a short time. Her name was Valeria—a beautiful name, I always thought, for such a tough and unyielding woman. During her lifetime, this was her reputation both inside and outside our family. She was an immigrant from a small, rural village in eastern Poland, the kind of place that changed hands and would be overrun as a matter of geographical fact by the Russians and later the Germans. But she was safely in America before all that came to pass. The success of her sons allowed her and my grandfather to live in a comfortable Massachusetts suburb for most of their lives, but she always referred to our town—strangely, to me—as a village. Commenting on my mother's cooking, she would say, "Cin-cha, you are the best cook in this whole village." "Cin-cha" was as close as her eastern European tongue could come to pronouncing my mother's Anglican name, Cynthia. But it was flavor from the old country and we found it charming, though some of her Old World ways were less than endearing. For example, she refused to wait at the supermarket. When her cart was full she would push her way to the front of the line and God help anyone who tried to stop her. I imagine this came from fighting for every morsel of food back in her Polish village, but try explaining this to the gum-chewing sixteen-year-old girl at the register. To my grandmother, this was how you took care of your family, and being nice and polite didn't have much to do with anything.

And now that my grandfather was gone and she was failing in various ways, her toughness that had seen her through more than I'll probably ever see in my lifetime was being replaced by an ever-increasing helplessness. This is how she came to us, almost seventy years after getting off the boat in the New World. She was feeble and she was angry—not a good combination.

I thought I knew my grandmother, better than most of my friends knew theirs. After all, she and my grandfather only lived three doors down from us. There were no long car rides or plane trips for us to endure when we visited. Just walk down the street, and there they were, my grandfather reading his newspaper or scratching his lottery tickets, and my grandmother busy in the kitchen (I can still smell the cabbage). When my brother and I visited she would give us coffee ice cream, which came, lovingly, with glasses of warm water. Graham crackers with butter

on them were another offering—butter is still my favorite food to this day. But this was when I was in grade school. When she lived with us I was in high school, not at all pleased with the new arrangement. Who was this woman who couldn't take care of herself anymore? She needed help in the bathroom; she needed help dressing herself; her mind wandered. It made me nervous to be around her. My mother was angry because she bore the brunt of all this as de facto head nurse. My father was angry because he had to watch it all happen. I was angry because I was fifteen and life wasn't supposed to be like this, was it?

One day after school I languidly arranged myself on the couch in our den and started to peel a banana. As became custom at our house, my grandmother would take periodic rest breaks from her aimless room-to-room roaming, and not long after I started to greedily wolf down my afternoon snack, she came in to sit with me. More accurately, she sat in a room that I happened to also be sitting in. On her bad days she sometimes did not know where she was, never mind who was sitting next to her. And if it is possible to eat a banana petulantly, that's what I was doing when she started to wave her hand in my direction.

"Never, never," she said, and I almost could see her smiling.

"What," I said flatly, taken aback by her level of animation.

"Never before," she said, still waving her hand. It turned out she wasn't waving her hand at me.

"Never before I come to this country did I see a banana," she said in her suddenly endearing broken English.

And that was all she had to say on the matter. The world seemed, at that moment, miraculously huge; her journey, amazingly long.

I wish I could report that I had a lasting change in attitude that day, realizing the enormity of the challenges my grandmother (and grandfather) faced in coming to this country—of basically giving me a life I still for the most part take for granted. But I didn't. Unfortunately, that time in my life was consumed by potato chips and girls and Van Halen and my newest pair of German sneakers. It was high school.

Now I reflect back on that afternoon and find it so poignant (the writer in me loves the homely detail of a simple banana) that it oftentimes leads me into a labyrinth of fond recollection I'm never eager to leave. Our *Rambler* interview with *The Kite Runner* author Khaled Hosseini inspired this small piece of writing—I'd like to humbly say thank you to him. Enjoy this issue. ☺

—Dave Korzon, publisher