

This is an excerpt from one of my favorite books (and not just because I live in Brooklyn).

“Who wants to die? Everything struggles to live. Look at that tree growing up there out of that grating. It gets no sun, and water only when it rains. It's growing out of sour earth. And it's strong because its hard struggle to live is making it strong. My children will be strong that way.”

That was a passage from “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn” by Betty Smith.

My grandmother’s kitchen was the best place on earth when I was a child. My sister, Kirsten, and I would arrive at family gatherings donned in pretty dresses, pink tights and patent leather shoes. Our hair secured in braids, adorned with ribbons. But by evening time, our tights were sagging at the knees, our hair plastered with sweat against our faces, the bows of our dresses trailing behind us. We allowed for latecomers and interluders during our performances. Sometimes our rotating audience of family members had to dance with us in order to reach the refrigerator – which was on our stage- grabbing refills en route back to the football game or to the dining room conversation. We were especially forgiving of our uncles who lifted us and our aunts who twirled us in circles. On occasion, my dad would leap into the kitchen, grab a coke and bow as he scurried back out of the room.

Nani’s kitchen was our family playground. It was fertile ground for our imaginations. And Nani was always there. She was our most captive audience member, clapping after each scene...sipping on her Red Rose tea and smoking a cigarette. In fact, in third grade I found myself with some extra pocket change when I was at a yard sale and bought Nani, what I thought, was an antique ashtray. I thought this was the perfect gift for our biggest fan and she accepted it as though I presented her with a dozen red roses. Of course, I didn’t realize at the time that a price tag of 50 cents did not qualify it as an antique.

When I was a teenager, in her kitchen was a fixture on the wall that was labeled “The Dog House” and all of my aunts and uncles, and my dad, had their names printed on little wooden dogs. Even Anita, Nani’s sister, had a dog with her name on it. On any given visit, even if I were there for only an hour, the resident of the dog house somehow was evicted and another family member moved in. My dad would move Anita into the doghouse, Billy would move Eddie into the doghouse, Denise would move Jeannie into the doghouse and so on. But never did I see Nani’s doggie in the doghouse. I imagine that her dog collected dust and stayed exactly where it was perched since the day it was purchased. She did nothing that was deemed doghouse-worthy.

My sister Gretchen called my grandmother “one of the gentlest souls on this planet.” And she was. She was kind and compassionate and always on your side. She wouldn’t even need to hear the whole story. She just knew you did the right thing, that you tried your hardest, that you were deserving. She was easy. You could sit next to her and read. You could sit together and watch television. You could sit on the boat with her and just let the sun kiss you. You could sit on the beach and daydream. That is all to say that you could *live* with her. There were no expectations or plans or schedules. Being together was enough. Living alongside her was easy.

But her life before my generation arrived was not easy. It was unrelenting in its tragedy – having lost two sons and her husband between the time she was 42 and 48 years old. It echoed the life of Job: “the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away.” I came into this world after she suffered these brutal losses – I met Nani when she was 50. It was clear to me at a very young age that her children and her grandchildren (and her great-grandchild) were the most important things to her. And each year, it seemed to my innocent perspective as a kid, when more Gottwald babies were coming into the world, she beamed brighter.

As her oldest grandchild, I was so perplexed by her tireless love and her endless capacity for patience. I grew resentful with having to make room for my four younger siblings (nevermind my ten cousins). Christmas was a spectacle. The living room could barely fit people inside of it because of all the presents that sprawled from the Christmas Tree along the rug like roots along a forest floor. The love and generosity that she instilled in her children is, at times, overwhelming - their gift-giving and holiday celebrations just one testament to that.

My aunts and uncles are always curious about their nieces' and nephews' lives – their endeavors and pursuits. Nani knitted the generations together by keeping them close.

As a kid, I always thought Nani's house was big. Later I realized that it had nothing to do with its physical size but it was the vibrancy of our family gatherings. Not everyone could fit in one room. You'd choose between the living room, the dining room or the kitchen. Depending on what conversation (or which sports game or which dance performance) you wanted to participate in, you would settle yourself into that room. If it got boring, you'd move to the next. It was like a living museum with galleries of different installations. Nani created a home that no one ever wanted to leave. And actually, she created two homes – one was in New Hampshire at Prescott's Park where we all piled into another "BIG" place.

It's amazing to me, now, to think about it – 3 bedrooms (one was Nani's), four pullout couches and one bathroom. And all of us (aunts, uncles, cousins – I've counted several times in my mind and I average about 12 people were there on any given night during my childhood summers) would pile in there. Nani wanted us to be with her.

On summer nights when we had hotdogs and beans, she was light-hearted and goofy with my brothers, Tommy and Danny, as she sang:

"Beans, beans, they're good for your heart.

The more you eat 'em, the more you fart.

The more you fart, the better you feel.

So let's eat beans at every meal."

And she would laugh along with them. Or after dinner when she would open up the freezer and say, "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!" Nani had an inner child who was playful and easy-going. She appreciated simple things and wanted us to, as well. When her family members endured pain of any kind,

her compassion was infinite. But she also wanted to eliminate it. Exterminate it. Whatever she could do to get rid of the pain.

When I suffered excruciating migraines as a 13 year old, she sat me down at the kitchen table to drink black coffee and eat a chocolate donut. I was completely mystified as to why she would torture me like that. And she didn't say much more than, "make sure you drink it all." Within 20 minutes, I was pain-free. She knew how to help rid other people's pain.

When I was 16, I was sitting across from her at the dining room table in Roslindale. There were a couple different conversations happening but I noticed that Nani had a far-off look in her eyes. I could tell that she was not listening. But she was looking right at me. Almost through me. And then, without any prompting, she said, "Erin, you look so much like my Tommy." It was the first moment that I realized that every one of us reminded her of another one of us. We were all hers. We were always on her mind.

My grandmother held so many people in her heart – the living and the dead – that even those of us that did not meet our grandfather, George, or our uncles Georgie and Tommy felt like we all were connected. It's not hard for me to imagine that the three of them are just on the other side of this wall looking at us, saying "Finally! We get her to ourselves."

We celebrate Nani's life, cherish her memory and *are* her legacy. She was our biggest fan, our playmate, our quiet companion and our matriarch.

Erin Gottwald

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