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EATING CRAP AT NANA'S HOUSE

She expressed the love she had for me and my sisters by feeding us the things she loved herself

by Elise Seyfried | Saturday, March 03, 2018

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many differences between them, and even as a little girl, I recognized that they were ill-matched. But I took it as just a fact of life; it wasn't until years later that I felt sorry for Nana, sorry that she could not ever bring herself to leave the man who enjoyed calling her "BFLOW" (Big Fat Lazy Old Woman).

Pop always declared he would not eat cheese and made a huge deal out of it. Therefore, for the entirety of their marriage, Nana challenged herself to sneak cheese into almost everything he ate, from mashed potatoes to scrambled eggs. She got a secret charge out of watching him wolf down chicken salad with tiny cubes of Velveeta and banana pudding with cream cheese, even as he was loudly proclaiming his refusal to even taste that particular dairy product. The Stealth Cheese Project was Nana's small revenge for the years of marital misery inflicted on her by my grandfather.

Cheesy shenanigans aside, Nana hated to cook. When we, her beloved granddaughters, stayed for dinner at their apartment, Nana would try her best to prepare something edible for us. As the smoke billowed behind her, she would emerge from her kitchenette with a platter of charred gray meat tied with twine (the challenge was to differentiate the roast whatever-it-was from the string), plop some mushy canned carrots (with cheese!) on plates and announce that dinner was served. We would saw away at the entrée, managing to chew a few dry mouthfuls before declaring that we were "done."

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Of course, we weren't that hungry anyway, not after snack time. Nana lived just a few blocks from our Manhattan Catholic elementary school and would pick us up once or twice a week. As soon as we got off the elevator, we would ask if we were having Ring Dings or Devil Dogs that day. Nana was as big a fan of those preservative-laden prepackaged delights as we were, so soon there were just chocolate crumbs and cellophane wrappers left from our after-school indulgence. The beverages of choice were Hawaiian Punch (which came in Red and Yellow) and Hi-C. My teeth still hurt from the memory of all that sugar.

One year, after we had moved south, we were up visiting our grandparents in New York. During our stay, I got the flu. I couldn't keep anything down for days and Nana was extremely worried that I would waste away. She was constantly in the bedroom, trying to tempt me with her take on invalid food. Chicken broth and saltines and ginger ale in little sips? Not for Nana! As soon as I showed any signs of appetite, in came a tray with cream of chicken soup, a huge maveronne u

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end, it was a heart attack that got her, when I was 13 years old. Pop, the bane of her existence, managed to outlive her by a year and a half.

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I often wonder if my weird relationship with diet in the years that followed stemmed in part from watching Nana's literal death by chocolate. I resented the Yodels that took her away from me. As a teenager, I seesawed between going on starvation regimens of water and hard-boiled eggs, and learning to cook complicated dishes with only the freshest ingredients. To this day, I shun prepackaged anything and don't eat snacks. To this day, I think about food too much and wrestle with its too-prominent place in my life.

But, now that I'm 61, I think of Nana tenderly. She coped with her difficult life as best she could, in a time when striking out on her own would not have been supported by her church. She expressed the love she had for me and my sisters by feeding us the things she loved herself. And if she died too early, I no longer blame the food or her.

So, this morning, I turn the toaster up high, in fond memory of my Nana. And, as I scrape the burned bread, I see her scraping too, making the best of a bad situation. I spread on marmalade as she did and taste the bittersweetness. I can't look back on delicious times in my grandmother's kitchen, but I can recall the happiness she gave me and her love on every plate.

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