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Nana's Cookies

Victoria Mazella

For as long as I can remember my Nana has called my brother and I “Cookie”. No one is really sure why she calls us that, but no one dares to argue with her. Considering the life she has lived, she can call me whatever she wants.

We began our conversation by sitting down together in her kitchen. The smell of Sunday Sauce danced through the house. Her home here was a flashback to her home in City Island, probably mid 1970s. Plastic stretched over her leopard print sofas, the fabric of which had never seen fresh air. A mish-mash of avocado-colored rugs covered in yellow geometric shapes reached across tiled floors. Empty, never-used, amber ashtrays in groups of three crowded together on yellowed fabric end tables. The mismatched furnishings were, for the most part, clean and well-maintained; they were just older than I was, and I knew Nana would keep them forever.

My Nana is your typical Italian grandmother: stout and dressed in a black housecoat with matching slippers, her hair done up in pins. I began by asking, “So, Nana, will you tell me about when you were a little girl?”

“Cookie, you’ve heard it before,” Nana replied very matter of factly, placing her hands on her hips.

I asked again, “Please, Nana?” I knew she couldn’t resist her Cookie for much longer. Her love, which had never been easy to come by, was a given when it came to her grandchildren. She always hesitated when talking about her past, but she always gave in.

Even though I have heard most of her stories many times, Nana’s mannerisms remain the same. Whenever Nana tells a story about her life she gets a look in her eyes, a glimmer, almost as if she’s looking for a page in a book. Her gaze is intense and when she figures out what she is going to say to you she folds her slender fingers together and closes her eyes.

“Back when I was little we lived in Sturno, Italy. Nobody had anything. The years during the war, it was very hard to find work. No food for anyone; we’d eat rotten potatoes if we could find them.” As she said this she glanced at some chocolate chip cookies she had laid

out for us on a thick glass plate that was most likely from the 1960s. I knew she was thinking about how fortunate we were to have those and the fact that she had never laid eyes on a cookie until she came to America.

Life in Italy seemed so hard to me, not quaint and picture perfect like on TV. I wanted to know more about the hard times during the war so I asked, “Did you ever get scared?”

“The only time I was ever frightened was when the planes were bombing. The town was filled with smoke and debris. I remember my brother Nicky and I walking from town one afternoon and we saw a man riding a bicycle. A shell hit him and decapitated him, but his body was still on the bicycle, the wheels still turning.”

As I listened to Nana I imagined an innocent man going about his normal business and in a flash his life gone. I gave her a look as if to say “honestly?”

Nana took a deep sigh, and with the wrinkles on her face deep and profound said, “Believe me, it happened.”

I didn’t want her to dwell on such a sad memory. “Well, then, how did you and everyone make it through and come to America?”

Before she answered, Nana searched deep within her memories, frowning her brow. “During the war we had gotten our paperwork together and were approved to go to New York. I remember arriving in Ellis Island and I wondered if everything would work out. Ellis Island was very busy. There was always a commotion. People had not only their lives, but their dreams and hopes packed into their suitcases. I thought we would never make it off that island.” As she told me this she handed me an old, faded photograph of her family. In the picture she was no older than 15 or 16. I couldn’t help but think how similar we looked in the way she held herself, her facial features, and even her hair color. Her eyebrows arched like mine and her hair fell in long dark curls to her shoulders. As I looked up at her I saw she was smiling because she realized the connections I had made. Nana said, “Cookie, I didn’t always have so many wrinkles you know.”

She continued her story, “Living in America was hard. Not only was there a language barrier, there was no money either. I always wanted to be a nurse, but I worked in a ship yard. I filed, I answered

phones, and I did everything to earn a living. I used to work ten-hour shifts, go home, clean, cook, and then leave to work nights at the local laundromat. Sometimes I wouldn't get home until two or three in the morning."

I asked, "Is that how you met Papa, while working in the ship yard?" Nana answered, "Yes." As she replied, small tears appeared in her eyes. I missed Papa as well. It had been almost five years since he had passed from cancer. She lived in solitude and grief every day. Every time someone mentioned Papa, Nana would cry. In her large house that used to be filled with love and pictures of her and Papa, they were now gone. Her walls were barren.

Nana collected herself by brushing invisible dust from her housecoat, dabbing her eyes, and refolding her hands. She continued, "Papa was in the Italian navy and their ship had docked in America and that's when we met. We got married, moved into a house with my father, and then had your dad." My father is an only child so I asked, "Did you ever want any more kids?" Nana answered, "Papa always did; we both came from big families, but I wanted to work. I always feared we would never have money."

It is a well known fact in our family that Nana values money even above her health. This fear of not having any seems to consume her. "Okay, but how about the last 20 years of your life? Papa retired, but you kept working, even though you had so much. You do know money isn't everything." As soon as I said that I wished more than anything I could take it back. She got up, moved into the kitchen and began stirring the sauce, adding basil and salt with great intensity. Nana always became defensive when money was involved. She gave me a dirty look. Her eyes were dark and serious and put fear into me, she said, "What do I always say? Money talks and bullshit walks."

All the sacrifices she had made, now she could afford to buy anything she wanted, but didn't. Her excessive greed had caused pain to those she loved. After she and Papa were settled in America she only let him visit his family in Italy once, claiming it was just too expensive. She drives the same car she had while in New York and never turns on her air conditioner, all in an effort to save money. I knew it was coming; the braggart in her was awakening.

“You know, Cookie, I had nothing and now I have everything. I have money in every bank in this town, and every bank knows me.”

I began thinking to myself that they knew her for all the wrong reasons. Every time I had gone to a bank with her it was a very unpleasant experience. Nana always asked for higher percentages, pens, coffee cups, anything she could get her hands on. She played the sweet old lady card but as soon as you crossed her she spit venom. She was rude on countless occasions to bank tellers and managers. She was counting money once and a bill fell on the floor. The woman tried to help her get it but Nana began shrieking that the lady and the bank were trying to cheat her out of more money. One time she tried haggling for a higher percentage rate on a CD. The woman left the room to consult with her manager and while she was gone Nana stole multiple pens from her cup. I was ashamed and amused all at once.

As I reminisced, Nana went on to say, “Cookie, some day when I die this will all be yours.” She looked at me and, as I have a tendency to do, I was making a face. I had rolled my eyes and she had caught me. “Cookie, are we done here?” I hoped to never inherit her lack of love and compassion for people. I’ve always wanted to help people, even if I wasn’t being repaid for it and that is something she looks down upon. I replied nervously, “Um, I guess so, unless you have anything to add to our interview.”

She shook her head and passed me the plate of cookies. I took one and I wondered if this was my destiny. Everyone always says Nana and I are very much alike in appearance and character. We both are sharp tongued and always figure out a way of getting what we want. As much as I love her, I would never want to be like her. Her greed is all consuming, but it liberates her and gives her power over her poor past. In her world she sees it as if she has everything; she may not have happiness or my grandfather any more but, although she doesn’t always realize it, she will always have her Cookies.