

Promises Land

By Becky Schoener

© Copyright 2024

All Rights Reserved

They fled the countryside. The bombs falling as they ran. There was not enough food. Not yet a famine, but they fled. A family. She, just a young girl. Even to this day, after more than forty years in this country, she barely speaks the language. In her stumbling, heavily accented English she tells me how she cooks dumplings.

“Deeam o fwy.”

Frwy. Fwry. Fwy.

Fry.

“Steam or fry.”

Waon side.

Deeam

Oar fwy.

“One side.”

“Steam.”

“Or fry.”

Holding up one finger, as if in thought or to make a erudite statement. She points toward the ceiling with her work worn and gnarled index finger, then gently pats the air.

Jus bwaun.

She flips the dumpling.

Aad waahdr.

“Just brown, add water.”

She flips the dumpling over again. Holds up the one index finger again.

It is, as I picture it, a rich brown on one side now.

Her hands flutter as the steam rises.

I can almost smell the pungent aroma.

My grandmother would cut thick slices of Hebrew National salami, smear it with mustard and slap it on a piece of pre-sliced Jewish rye.

Then stuff it slyly, illicitly into her mouth.

She presented a frightening image, her glasses caused her glaucomic eyes to bulge and stare terrifyingly large. Her over-large, miss-fitted white dentures would shift. They would come off and on, in and out, as she chewed at her snack. At times food or teeth would slip out and she would shove them back in.

She opened Amherst Chinese in the early seventies, working all day, nights too. The seating was informal, people would share tables. Strangers sitting with each other, chatting, ordering and trying large dishes of previously untried dishes or re-ordering favorites. Talking loudly, glasses and dishes chinking, voices blending.

They stood outside in long lines waiting for a seat. An experience, a scene of rich and abundant novelty to the university and college crowd, packed night after night with students, professors and anyone in the hip, sophisticated way who longed for the delicious and succulent flavors, spices and good, abundant food.

At the end of the meal her husband tallied the check with an abacus.

Sometimes customers left having made new friendships. But always departing well-fed, stuffed and satisfied, very satiated.

Every night, after the restaurant closed, she stayed late, stirring sauces, making dumplings, preparing for the next day.

In 1985 they expanded, tripling the original size by buying the building next door and knocking down walls.

Then, later they redecorated, made it fancier, elegant, letting in the light with big modern windows, increasing the capacity and formalizing the seating with new tables and chairs. Appealing to a more formal diner, they followed the trends, becoming sophisticated instead of funky. Pink, pastel table clothes, black veneer furniture. Carefully folded napkins. Framed Chinese art hung on the freshly painted pink walls.

“Miks”.

Myxs. Missx. Miks.

Mix.

“Mix.”

“Carrot. Onion. Spinicsh. Good.”

She stirs the air with her hand, tempting me, making my mouth water with delicious descriptions.

She explains how to cook greens with a sauce. Americans, she says, generally don’t mix vegetables, but it is good, she says, to combine things.

Blending together mushrooms, leafy greens, mung beans, green beans, snow peas, garlic, spring onions, fresh cilantro.

The flavors blend and complement one another, imaginary steam fills the room.

“Steam. No too long. Jus little.”

She is very particular, she explains, about cooking time, only enough so that the broccoli stem is not overcooked and mushy.

She holds out her index finger again, but showing it to me as if it were the broccoli stem.

“No too much.”

She holds her finger parallel to the floor, pinching it firmly with her other hand, squeezing it and indenting her skin.

“Stem.” I say.

“No soff,” she warns. “No cook too much,” she advises, sternly.

I nod in agreement.

“Crispy, crunchy,” I suggest.

She smiles, pleased that she is understood and nods her head in relieved agreement.

“Mop flao.”

Flah. Flaa. Floah.

Floor.

“Mop floor.”

“Mop shix rooms.”

Shicks. Sicks. Shitks.

Six.

“Mop six rooms.”

She was hardly many years older than the number of rooms she mopped.

“I mop floor. Clean vegeables. Feed chicken,” she told me.

She explains that their house in China, her childhood home, was one level. “Like Japanese,” she said, explaining the design. There was an entrance, and then steps up. Here they would leave their shoes, put on slippers. Thinking back to childhood, she counts off the number of rooms with her right hand.

She would mop the floor of each room every day. She explains the beds. They rest on the floor, a kind of futon. She would make the bed of each room every day.

“My mother weak. I help. He, shee, he no strong. He buy eggs, put light, he watch.”

“Your mother raised chickens?” I asked. She nods, raises her finger in the air.

“Hatched the eggs?” I asked.

She nodded, smiling.

“Take small par of garden. Make fence. Cheap. At night he, shee, sit, late. I see. He watch eggs. Very late. Watch. Chickens. Eggs. Cheap.” She said.

She smiled wide at her recollections of mother’s frugality and ingenuity. Together we understand that these are her strengths also, that she too is this way, as she recalls with satisfaction and pleasure her mother’s success hatching the eggs. And then cleverly raising the hens to lay the eggs.

Like her mother whose providence led her to incubate eggs, and then raise chickens to have the eggs, she herself is also very enterprising.

“Now, he, shee have egg.”

They lived very carefully, after the Revolution.

They were closely watched. During the rise of the Maoist regime, during communism, her family was labeled different and had to be careful. People were careful. If you had relatives in America, in Taiwan, they might kill you. She seems to indicate there were public hangings, I am not sure because of the language barriers. She gestures with a hand motion, squeezing her wrist tightly with her other hand. I nod. But then, her hand reaches up to her throat. I grimace. Our eyes meet. I know there were hangings then.

They made their way to Taiwan, as soon as possible knowing there would never be a return.

But her family left without her younger sister, who lived deep in the mountains with her uncle and could not be brought to them. When her sister was three, she was

adopted by her aunt and uncle who could have no children of their own. But this must be kept secret, she told me.

Forty five years later, she was successful in bringing her sister and father to America, together for the first time. Likely the earnings from the restaurant are used toward bringing people to the U.S.

“My father very glad. Very happy. He not want to leave my sister. But not know what to do. Can do nothing. He very sad. Glad to see her.”

Her eyes are not the same as Grandma Ida’s.

But when she gestures and talks about the dumplings, or about the restaurant, about her childhood, I am reminded of Grandma Ida.

Her eyes get the same glazed look.

They become blank and unseeing as she remembers.

She looks far off, into a different world.

“No too much,” she tells me.

We are discussing the preparation of dumplings again.

She has carefully explained to me the precise amount of filling for the perfect dumpling.

I have learned that too much filling will ruin a good dumpling by overwhelming the mouth. Excess filing cancels out the delicate texture and subtle flavor of the special dough. To Americans the elastic and neutral dumpling dough seems flavorless, rubbery. But I am learning that it’s unique texture and seeming bland flavor are considered a delicacy.

She has patted and stroked the air, then measured the size carefully. Then showing me, she delicately strokes the imaginary dough and then cups her upturned hand as if she were holding just a little more than a tablespoon of succulent filling.

“Like pocket.” She tells me, and stuffs the juicy filling into her “pretend” dumpling and pats the edges together.

She has made thousands of them.

She could make them in her sleep.

She makes them out of thin air.

Ida had a young nephew Herbie. Somehow, Herbie’s father, Ida’s brother had made it rich somehow. I can’t remember the exact details of it all. But I do recall that she herself was never well off. My parents were not enamored with the legends of family wealth or fortunes, but more connected to the artist side of the family. I never heard the details. I did not get the full story. But I did know that cousin Herbie, as he was called had a lot of money. Herbie had a mansion and lived a wild and flamboyantly decadent life. His father had gotten his money during the depression, I knew that much, and Ida’s husband Harry had lost his garment business during the depression, which made Herbie’s fortune all the more significant. Ida was never was rich, but she was gifted with a mysteriously successful mind for investments. In fact, she had managed Herbie’s investments and made a lot of money for him. His wealth increased under her clever advise. She managed and invested her own money too, what there was, as well as investments she had in my father’s name too, both modest in size but she was very smart and increased her own capital as well as a little for my father and significantly more on

Herbie's behalf. I find it absolutely intriguing because to my knowledge she was not all that literate, yet of the large family she came from, she was not only astute, but she was not just savvy but uncannily lucky. I never heard of Grandma Ida's investments going bad.

When she first came here, arriving in the US, they had no money. Her husband was a student at the state university. He received financial aid and a tiny stipend. While he was going to school, she managed the household. She learned to stretch their small budget in many ways, but she also applied her mother's skills. She began by making things. Ingeniously she invented and created clever economies that maximized all that was available. In this way she was able to feed and clothe herself, her husband and their two young boys.

She asked a university professor for permission to use a portion of his yard to have a small garden. She planted and tended her garden carefully. The vegetables she grew were delicious and made a significant addition.

"Go to shop. See, pork. On sale." She points with her finger, that finger yet again, to her eye.

"Cheap. On sale. No one buy. I buy." She gestured, doling out the money with her hands.

"Pork cheap. Cut, chop, cut, chop, cut. Pork, little bit pork. Cut, stir fry. Mix with vegetables."

Ida lived in a house that she and Grandpa Harry shared with “Cousin Marion”, their spinster niece. I am unable to connect the family dots to explain Marion’s precise connection. But the arrangement had the superficial appearance of my grandparents’ living with Marion as a favor. As I grew older I was able to discern the subtleties of the arrangement. On a simple level it appeared as if my grandparents were the ones receiving a favor from Marion. The house had at one time belonged to Marion’s parents. When Marion’s parents had died, she had not wanted live alone, as the story was told, so Ida and Harry had moved in with her. I felt like it was an odd arrangement. I found it confusing and it was hard to say whose house it really was. At first glance it was Marion’s house in that it was not really Ida and Harry’s house. Yet I found out that they had paid Marion a large lump sum to live there. In fact they might have owned the deed. There was a subtle feeling of carefully managed sensibilities in the arrangement.

As I have matured and learned more of the world I have drawn my own final conclusions. Knowing my Grandma Ida’s role in coming forward to rescue the failing fortunes of her family members I have decided on this version of the story: I believe that when Marion’ parents died either there was not enough money on Marion’s end to buy the house or she lacked the monthly income to pay the mortgage. Another angle could be that her parent’s died leaving some financial unresolved business that made it impossible to keep the house. Either way I believe that Grandma Ida, with Grandpa Harry in tow, came forward with a plan to save Marion and keep her living in her parents home.

This version aligns with my new understanding of Ida as the silent but dominant partner, holding the keys to a worthwhile and advantageous financial deal. While she

deserved all of the credit of keeping an old well established property brick in a good neighborhood in the family.

She stirs the wok. The diced pork bits add flavor and nutrition to the vegetables she has grown and harvested from her own garden, cleverly planted on land she does not even own.

She tells me how she had sewed her own clothes, and her children's clothes.

"Buy fabric. Cheap."

"Make simple shirt." She takes the edge of fabric of the shirt that she is wearing and folds it.

"Jus simple..." She folds the edge of her own shirt. And she points to the folded fabric.

"Seam." I say.

Their house, Marion, Ida and Harry's, was in Shaker Heights, Cleveland. It sat on a street called a circle, row after row of handsome, elegant, Elizabethan and Tudor style houses with half timbers, stucco and brick, built in the 1920s by the two Van Sweringen brothers, railroad moguls, lined up on a curved street. With shrubs to be trimmed, cars to be washed and dinners to be cooked.

It had a cement driveway. As a young kid , while there visiting, I would play outside in the yard and driveway. I was intrigued by the cement driveway. It had a damp, old smell that mixed with the smell of over-fertilized suburban lawns and the smell of the brown oil-based paint that covered the wood trim of the house. Near the side door was a

round metal lid built into the edge of the driveway. The metal lid was painted the same exact brown color. The lid had a special handle and when it was lifted it revealed a neat canister-like space that went about a foot and a half down below the level of the driveway cement. The canister was always empty, but I enjoyed lifting and shutting the lid by the device of an ingenious foot pedal. I could not get enough of lifting and lowering the lid in an infinitely repeating sequence. I would look in each time I passed by, unable to resist pressing the pedal with my foot. I checked compulsively as if I was waiting for, or expecting a present to be left there, or a piece of mail to be placed in it. I had no idea what its use was or purpose, but I expected that something would be found there. I think it was many years later that I learned these receptacles were for delivering milk in glass bottles. Milk, of course, was no longer delivered.

People now, drive their car to supermarkets or convenience stores and pick up a gallon in a clear plastic jug.

Her father, she told me, was a scientist. They had lived in the country. Before the war. In the winter when there were no fresh vegetables, they had only the cabbages they cleverly preserved and stored.

“Cut.”

“Leave in field” She gestures: one finger, one day; two finger, two days.

“Sun dwy.”

“Bwing in seller.”

“Buwee.”

Drwy. Dwry. Dwy.

Dry.

“Sun dry.”

“Bring in cellar.”

“Bury”

She digs in the air, as if it were the dirt, demonstrating with her hand for me.

She tells how sprouts were made in a stream near her house. Woven baskets were used to hold the seeds. The fresh spring water flows to rinse and soak the seeds.

After her garden is established she then begins making her own tofu. She has no recipe to follow. She taps her head, to show me where the recipe comes from.

“Only remember.”

She only remembers from seeing it made from her childhood.

I try to remember Grandma Ida’s voice, but I cannot. I try to remember the things she said and I cannot. I can see her blank staring, whitish gray eyes, but I cannot hear her voice.

She grew up in the country in a little village. She recalls for me times they did not go outside, during, perhaps a Malaria epidemic. She squats down with her hands held under her chin, like a smiling squirrel.

“We not go outside. Look out windows.”

She also told a story about her mother.

“She go to market. Big ...” She gestures with her hands. She rises and walks with a gesture to her arm, as if carrying something big.

“Basket,” I say.

“She go. She walk. She see dog.” She points to her eyes. She opens her eyes big and wide in mock terror. The dog, is imitated. It is sick, swaying. she opens her eyes wide to display fear.

“Rabies.” I say. She nods.

The rabid dog comes towards her mother. She demonstrates how her mother squats down low, to hide behind her large basket. The rabid dog approaches. The dog bites the basket.

She explains that the sick dog “juss bite” basket thus sparing her mother’s life. And we laugh together at her mother’s cleverness.

She also tells of a young woman she recalls.

“He jus marry... Shee..”

This young woman was bitten by the rabid dog, shortly after her marriage. She was locked into a room and left to die.

“She also wanna bite.” And she makes a knashing with her teeth. This time we laugh uncomfortably.

Grandma Ida and Grandpa Harry spoke Yiddish. I’m sure that I heard them, but I cannot recall their voices. Tiny snippets of memory, of sound, of their speech, at times haunts me, and disappears. But I cannot recall their stories, or their voices.

I sincerely wish I could. I think I was too young at the time of those visits.

Sometimes, just as I awaken, I hear a little. When I hear others speak in Yiddish, it is not the same as those imagined voices of my grandparents.

I myself know only a handful of odd Yiddish words. Common bits that sprinkle the Jewish chat of a girl who grew up in NYC. These words, their lyrical sound, are stuck in my memory. They make the German language sound like the lost lullaby of my childhood.

Her son, twenty years later, attended the same university as her husband. He studied for an engineering degree. But he never submitted his thesis, and never received his degree. The professor had treated him poorly, took advantage of him and was disrespectful of his ideas. He delayed and delayed issuing her son's degree, because he used him to teach the undergraduate classes and do all the work.

Her son wrote two theses, put them in a box and went to California to take a job.

The professor had also come from China, and would use his Chinese undergraduate students like slaves, keeping them working, as his prisoners, until he was ready after too many years to issue them their degree.

Marion had the "master" bedroom. Two twin beds covered with cheerful pink quilts adorned with red cherries, and *very* pretty pink wallpaper to match. The windows had frilly white ruffled curtains. Her bedroom was the 1930's teenager girl's dream come true. But Marion was not fourteen, she was fifty five. She was not a pretty woman, by any means. In fact she reminded me of an ape. Her mouth and chin were like that of an

orangutan's. She had broad shoulders and muscular arms. She belonged to an ice skating club and went to an indoor rink one week night a week, and sometimes on the weekend. She also swam laps at the YMCA a few times a week. In the 60s and early 70s a "woman" had no business having muscular arms like Marion's. She worked at the AAA, carried a TWA back and forth to work and she spoke in a low voice and laughed in loud deep way.

She seemed like she was happy but as a kid, in all honesty, I did not like her. From my perspective now I believe I would have greatly appreciated her. She was a busy, robust and self-satisfied woman, but also she was very unique in that she was single but also self-confident. From my perspective as a kid, the pieces didn't fit for me. I can imagine that having my family invade her home and her life was not easy.

He was a brilliant and exceptionally smart child. He would do his homework with the television on. Even as he studied, he could listen and understand the TV.

"She.. he.. she.. read. TV on. I don't like. I think, no good. But, he read. Then laugh. He hear TV. He laugh. He read."

While he did his school work, he did not look away from his book. He sits studiously with a straight face, puzzling out a question, or problem in the book. Suddenly, without looking up, he bursts into laughter, then automatically continues with his homework. He has his eyes on his homework, but his ear listens to the show. He can engage in the two activities, with no detrimental result. She is a mother who cleverly allows such a boy his way. He is astounding in his intelligence.

“Very smart. Good grades. All A. He go to college, only thirteen. I not like. Not good. I think, he young, he too young.”

“But is OK. He go. Is OK.”

Ida had no jewelry and no expensive tastes. She gave me, as a gift, her one jewel, her engagement ring. She had the ring reconfigured by a jeweler so that it could hang as a pendant from a chain. The center area had three diamonds in a row with small emeralds and diamonds set in a filigree platinum support. It was attractive, and not particularly feminine. I liked it and wore it proudly. Many years later I parted with it, in anger at my parents. Rebelling against my parents, I placed it in an auction. I got a couple hundred for it.

She knows many American tunes. The Missionaries in Taiwan taught them to sing songs, hymns in English. European music was being taught in the schools, and she recognizes now themes from symphonies, and some unexpected Irish tunes. I tell her about the silly children’s rhyme that goes with Wagner’s “Here Comes the Bride.”

“Here comes the bride, all dressed in white, stepped on a turtle, and down came her girdle!” I sing it for her. She laughs and exclaims that the Chinese children have a song for that too, but about the grooms under wear, she says.

Grandma Ida was not religious, and did not attend Synagogue as an adult, not ever, as far as I recall. We two were often argumentative. We did not really get along. She slapped me hard across the face once. And maybe more than that. I told no one. I was not very often hit as a child, and never on the face. She had candy everywhere when we visited. It may have been a normal thing, or only for our visits, as part of her elaborate ruse to win my love. She was determined to win me over. I wasn't used to candy and so I was seduced by it. I became drunk on it. She kept it out in dishes everywhere in the house. She bought Easter candy. Cheap, medium grade candy. Big squishy chocolate covered marshmallow eggs. Yellow "peeps". Sticky, sickly sweet, cheap candy.

She speaks often of her two grandchildren. They are two girls, eleven and nine.

Slowly I learn their story. They have lived in this country for a year and a half now. They came with their mother from Singapore.

They all live together in her house while a new house is being built for them.

She explained to me how she tried to get U.S. citizenship for her niece. Her voice shakes with rage. They make an appointment with a well-known lawyer in Philadelphia. He has already helped many others. They take the long ride on the train. All the way there in one day.

But when they finally arrive at his office, they are late. The train was late. There was nothing that they could do to get there sooner. The lawyer's secretary explains that he is out at lunch, but will be back in an hour. They sit and await his return in the hot, stuffy waiting room.

Finally when he arrives he allows them to be seen, he makes a time from his busy schedule to see them.

During the interview he repeatedly assures them that he can do it. He names an incredible sum. Yet also, throughout the interview he repeatedly asks the niece if she can give a good massage.

“I want a massage.” he tells her repeatedly.

“I give massage.” her aunt responds each time with white rage.

Her voice shakes as she recalls the long, fruitless return on the train, arriving home late that night.

Every single week of my life, since I was six, until her death, my Grandma Ida sent me a \$1.00 bill each week in a card with a little note of hello. Her hand writing was loopy and free. It occurs to me now that her poor eyesight might have made these notes a challenge to write. At one point she upped the amount to \$2.00 week. This was my allowance, therefore my parents never had to pay me one.

She always wore a dress. I never saw her in a nightgown or bathrobe. Her dresses were loose and in that 1930's style with a belt. She wore hose and garters, and a girdle. She wore special, black leather orthopedic lace up high heeled shoes.

We visited once a year, early summer. We would stay for a week or so. It never failed, she served beef's tongue, displayed to my horror on a platter, at least once for dinner. Naturally, I was made to eat “a small piece.” It made me gag. I could feel the rough texture of the cow's tongue, the bumps of it against my own tongue as I ate.

She brings in the cassette tape. I put it in the machine and play it. Beautiful, rich solo cello music fills the room. It is her daughter in law, the mother of the granddaughters, who plays. She is married to the other son, not the genius son, but the other one. She tells me of how she cherished this tape.

“I listen. I not afraid.” She says. She rubs the heart region of her chest with her hand.

“I listen. I alone. I not feel alone. I not afraid.” The tape is greasy and old. Ten, maybe fifteen years old.

“Long time ago,” she tells me.

“I make.”

When her son’s girlfriend was going to college in the United States, she came to visit. This girlfriend was staying in America, attending the Curtis Institute, playing, studying cello. She played the cello for her, made this recording. The son’s girlfriend thoughtfully played his mother’s favorites. They are Chinese compositions.

“Dis won, call flour. Chazmin. Shaxmn. Jhaaxon.”

“This one, flower. Jasmine.” It is a tune about the Jasmine flower. It is beautiful.

Each year when we visited grandpa Harry and Grandma Ida, and of course, Marion, Ida provided a paid shopping spree to Higbee’s or the May Company Department stores at the big mall out in the suburbs. My mother would take me, and I

could buy whatever I wanted up to an unknown maximum amount. Ida did not go with us. But when I returned I would show her all my choice purchases.

She also provided the check for \$1000 for my first piano. I had taken piano lessons without owning a piano and this presented a dilemma since I was required to practice daily. I needed my own piano, so when my parents did nothing, she stepped in. I received money for my college tuition from her. She applied her investments skills in saving and investing for me as well. In these ways, Grandma Ida's generosity and monetary gifts supplied significant experiences of great importance to me. Yet her actual presence as a person went missing. I never felt as if I really knew her at all. Just those blank, flat grey eyes and the moist, tight lipped mouth. We did not know each other. We had never connected.

When the son's college sweetheart returned home to Singapore she became a cellist in the Singapore Orchestra. But once back in China, she was very lonely. She deeply regretted the boyfriend she had left behind. Although they'd lost touch, the young couple did not forget each other.

Bereft of her happy, free thinking American friends and their easy going lifestyle, she quickly got swallowed up in the old ways. Back in the traditional more rigid society, the young woman, both sweet and gentle in nature, was vulnerable. She fell prey to the machinations of her ambitious mother. Dealing with her sadness and loss, under pressure while trying to live independently and negotiating China's high inflation, she was easily

manipulated. She got coaxed into an auspicious match. Her mother talked her into a marriage to a wealthy Taiwanese businessman.

While married to the businessman, living in Singapore, she had two daughters. This is China where the girls did not count. Her husband is disappointed, he wanted a son. He is mean to her and to the two daughters. He only wants a son. Her mother is also mean to her and disappointed that no son was born. He does not love the daughters, or his wife. They divorce, he pays a fee to each daughter, and he never sees his children again.

In the meantime, her son, who has never forgotten her and had never married travels to Singapore on business. Her son is now running the bean sprout business that she and her husband started. His father, Tso-Cheng Chang, had fulfilled their shared dream of one day owning a farm in the fertile river valley to which they had come as impoverished refugees. He earned a doctorate in plant science from the state university, where they opened and ran successfully that town's first Chinese restaurant.

Once a year the son must travel to China for the bean sprout seeds. The best in the world come from China. Women sit and sort bean sprout seeds by hand for pennies. Only in China can you get human labor so cheap and so menial.

“Iss OK.”

He looks her up, and they meet again. She is his only love. They meet again. Found her.

Ida had no pastimes. No interests. I do not remember seeing her read. She did pick up crocheting and for a time we had numerous crochet blankets throughout our house.

She used a very large needle. The blankets were looped in large, loose swinging stitched hoops, like her hand writing. It all seems so obvious now, that she could not see. That she did not read because she could not see. The crocheting was some horrible discovery making her do something “useful..” My parents, and therefore me, hated the blankets, because she used cheap acrylic yarn, also but we accepted and used them out of silent respect for her.

She moved through her life like someone waiting patiently, politely for it to end. As if there had been a shock that left her speechless and bereft. She did not imbibe alcohol. Nor can I recall that she went anywhere, certainly not to Temple. Although maybe she did, and I just had no idea. Grandpa Harry had a Buick that he would carefully, carefully back out of the garage and creep down the old cement driveway and pick Ida up at the side door. The Buick was spotless, meticulous. There was a “boy” who came to do the lawn, and who washed the Buick. Yes, yes of course there was. He trimmed the hedges, and he washed the car.

They were strong Democrats, through and through. There were lively discussions about politics with all the adults joining in to say their part. And then, Ida would speak up too. But what did she say? How was her view indicative of what was in her heart?

And as he carefully backed the Buick down the drive, to her, Ida would be waiting. She would have her pocketbook in her hands like she was holding a ticket for a Trans-Atlantic ship. Standing, waiting, like the only thing that would wake her up would be if a golem jumped out of that old in-the-ground milk canister-thing, and jumping right up her skirt to nip her hard on the ass. Maybe then she would have come to life.

She never seemed alive.

“Don’t worry.” She tells that she said this to her grandchildren, because they feel bad.

Her son runs her bean sprout business now. She had six wells drilled. Only four out of the six were usable. Bean sprouts need good water. The water makes them taste good. Their sprouts sell all over the East. Down to New York, Maryland.

They have done well, with the restaurant, the farm, and now the bean sprout business. They are successful. She has a large new home. She can take trips and relax. She has been all over the world, if you name a country, she has been there. She goes on package group tours, sits on those group buses. She tells me that she is always willing to try the different foods of the countries that she visits.

“Iss OK. I twy.”

Trwy. Twry. Twy.

Try.

“We’re afraid you’ve inherited your Grandma Ida’s genes.” My parents would periodically warn me. They were paranoid that I would end up fat like she was. They put me on diets even as young kid. When I see the pictures of how I looked, when they said I was fat, I wasn’t. I was fine.

“You look like your father’s side of the family.” They mournfully declared.

I never thought that I looked at all like Ida. I did not have Clark Kent style utility glasses, nor large watery eyes. But we had a picture on our wall that was taken of Ida as a young lady. The photograph showed a beautiful young woman in her mid or early twenties, rich, healthy skin, lovely hair, and genuine beauty. As I matured and grew into a young woman, I began to see a resemblance. I was not afraid to look in the mirror and see my face like this lovely young woman with a beautiful complexion, rosy cheeks, and a calm smile. If I was responsible for carrying her genes into the world, so be it, I was proud and glad. If my only link to my distant, withdrawn grandmother was a tendency toward plumpness and this radiant, healthy skin, I was proud. I treasured the tiniest connection to my Grandma Ida.

Her husband was sponsored by a professor. There was no other way to come over. Just the fee alone to get the documents to come was nearly three thousand dollars. they had no money. He studied agriculture. In one of this nation's most fertile river valleys he was able to take up his life's dream and run a farm. Land was a valuable to lease cheaply. Farming was another industry, especially in the East, whose system was crumbling. So he took advantage of the opportunity. Eventually he was able to buy out the old Polish farmers who had worked the land. It was either sell to him, or to a developer. They were waiting.

The real estate agents were like vultures to the kill when the farmlands sold.

I feel that my deepest familial connection lies with this mysterious Grandmother whom I never really knew. As a young woman before I was born, she was just as lost to me, as was the old version in girdle, nylon hose, black leather orthopedic shoes and housewife dresses. Her silent, tight mouth and the eyes, oh those eyes, as if they were peering through a crack or hole in a prison and into my life. Boring a hole in my soul. Two holes, one for each sightless eye. Looking to me to break the silence. To set her free. Dear, dear Ida.

Flwy. Fwly. Fwy.

Fly.

In the late sixties and early seventies the railroads began to end their passenger service. They wanted to phase it out because it was unprofitable. The government provided no assistance to the railroads, but at the same time regulations forbade them from “taking a train off”, that is, prevented them removing it from schedule. Instead, to work around this, the railroads started changing schedules to discourage passengers. They made it difficult and unpleasant to use the trains they wanted to eliminate by requiring passengers to change trains and wait on platforms in the middle of the night.

I remember when we rode the New York Central, taking the overnight sleeper car from New York City to Cleveland. We had to get up in the middle of the night and stand

on the platform, waiting for the next train. I stood bewildered, half asleep in my pajamas, shivering in the night.

The U.S. government never subsidized the railroads. The airlines and highways became hugely subsidized in the sixties, seventies and thereafter. Massive highway systems were built, airports expanded and improved on vast government sponsored subsidies. The nation relinquished rail travel and replaced it with car and plane.

By the time I was nine we couldn't make the trip by train anymore, so we began to drive to Ohio, staying one night each way at those highway motor lodges, one exactly like the next.

I now know now that Ida was a diabetic, and probably not well managed for her entire life. As she grew older, she became increasingly ill. In 1975 when she was extremely sick the modern white robed and efficient doctors decided that they would save her life. First they amputated her leg. Then they began talking of rehabilitation and retraining. They proposed great drastic sweeping changes that would teach an 86 year old woman whose heart beat so quietly to live with just one leg. She would learn to cook, shower and shop as never before. Their modern ideas and stiff upper lip stoicism and determination clashed with Ida's old world silence.

My father, Ida's son, and I drove out together.

We found her lying nearly unconscious, except for the loud occasional groaning, in a hospital bed.

Her remaining foot was engaged in constant, ceaseless movement. Her foot's motion had a strangely playful appearance. With each wiggle, every slight ankle rotation the crisp white starched hospital sheets crackled and crunched in dry, loud noise. That foot slid to and fro beneath the clean sheets, left and right , up, down, in an endless horizontal dance.

She tells me a joke. She smiles as she tells me the story. A waiter, she says, who worked at her restaurant "no speak English very well." When a customer placed their order they proclaims in loud, clear ringing tones:

"Tell the cook I want the meat well done!"

Her eyes sparkle at the coming jest.

The Chinese speaking waiter must convey the request to the cook, but, she says, he does not want to because when the English is translated to Chinese translation the meaning has changed from cooked through, as in not pink or undercooked but to cooked properly or correctly.

"Well done iss not, good... iss, bloot." She points to the veins in her hand.

"No too much."

"Bloot, blood." She tries to tell me what the word is in Chinese.

"Rare," I said and she nodded vigorously.

She said that when the waiter passed the message on to the cook, she tells me, he was badly offended. He wanted to run out and yell at the customer, she said. He was furious and threatened to quit over the insult. She laughed hard at this.

We laughed together at the silly misunderstanding.

When they bought the river farmland, it was from an old Polish woman. Her son had predeceased her, her husband, long gone. She wanted to sell it to someone who would farm it, not develop it into endless lots with copycat vinyl sided colonial houses.

“Iss O.K., we farm.” She assured the woman.

It was the old woman’s habit to walk the land each day. With the sale almost finalized, she asked, could she return each day to walk the land?

“Shure. Iss O.K.”

They could have developed along that road, even after giving her their word, they would have made a fortune putting in a long stretch of houses, making money, and still have been able to grow crops by keeping the back acres for their farm, but they do not.

I sat next to her, on the edge of her hospital bed, or at different times, in a chair, and I spoke to her. Unlike the times before this, she heard me. She opened like a spring blossom in sunshine.

We became united. We were a unit. Tight. Entwined. I was like the gardener coming with a watering can or a hose, after a long drought, feeding her roots as she soaked up the love she so desperately needed.

I spent each and every day there.

During the week long visit she had a miraculous recovery that surprised even the stern, undelighted doctors.

Life bloomed and shone in her face while I sat and rained my hope and love down upon her.

She began to sit up in bed, then she took a trip, and then another in the wheel chair.

I pushed her down the hall.

We chatted.

I soothed. She was soothed.

The doctors began promising big things. Out and into a nursing home in a week. After a week at the nursing home, an old age apartment.

She would perform and accomplish according to their plan.

This event followed by that improvement.

We were all eagerly and willingly led along the doctors' garden path of hope and promise, rehab and new life skills.

She was up and about, pushing herself in her wheel chair.

Another day, she had taken a shower with the nurse's help.

Her hair was done at the Hospital's hair salon.

She looked fresh and bright.

Younger.

Healthier.

Her skin looked good, her eyes were bright like a young girl's. Ready and eager to go forward. More ready and eager than I'd ever seen her. She would go forward with their plans for her.

She was happy.

I was happy.

We drove home at the end of the week. I missed her. I was sorry to go. She died one week later. They said she gave up. They said she didn't have the will. After we left she withdrew. She had stopped eating. Her decline was rapid, instantaneous.

The news of Grandma Ida's death came within days of when we had reached home.

She had gone down hill with unbelievable speed.

No saying why or how.

I was a teenager and naturally, I felt a deep sense of guilt.

I was shocked and extremely sad.

My heart ached for her.

I could not imagine how that bright, happy woman in her new perm could have fallen off the ledge of life so fast.

People like to talk about moving on. "That was then and this is now," I hear them say, I am told this often. Surely this is, in part, true. Possibly even good, sound advice.

And yes, I have moved on from hard times, and in my own right I am courageous too, in many ways.

I have succeeded in my life. I am happy. But like the survivor, the immigrant who has made it to American shores, once I got here, those memories of the place left behind, they chase me still.

Some days I am chased, like them, wherever I go.

But I tell you this, as well, as I live and breathe, I am a survivor. I am clever and bold in this. My skill and determination will keep me going.

I will fight to the last moment of time.

I survive the last ultimate fight.

I waste no chance, no opportunity.

I am ready, at all times to fight. I go forth. I charge through.

I am alive.

I am a survivor.

Some days I wake up as if from a strange dream, a nightmare.

In it I also am running, fleeing from the bombs as they drop from the air.

I run, I am a refugee from the modern times that take a woman who is 86 and claim she can live with one leg. A woman who was never fully alive with both. They will lecture and proclaim about the modern spirit of determination.

Give her something to ease the pain and let her die in peace, I say.

Rest in peace dear soul, sweet dear Ida, the girl, the young woman with the pretty smile, the peaches and cream skin who smiles at me from the photograph.

Where did that proud, noble young woman go?

I carry in my heart her unlived dreams.

I do not withdraw my hopes from life, I do not close my soul or shut down my dreams when others try to dim my brightness.

In your honor Ida, and yes, in mine, I live with courage and strength because woman are strong and beautiful.

And we deserve to live a good life. To not hide behind a mask of blank misery.

We were meant to thrive whether to stroll along in quiet solitude or realize impossible and grandiose schemes.

We are a presence to be remembered and revered.

~