At My Grandma’s Table

for Grandma Jayne

“Always use your hands,” she says as she parts flour, forming a well into which she cracks an egg. Her hands, veined and wrinkled, fold flour over milk and egg forming dough, freckled with yolk. “Don’t knead too much,” she insists, “You want it to be light, not tough.” She scrapes the dough from between her fingers with a knife then divides it into two parts. One half she drops into a bowl and covers with a damp towel “to keep it moist.” The other half she sets on the butcher-block table already dusted with flour.

“Your turn, muscles,” she says, handing me a rolling pin. This is my least favorite step—the repetitive rolling and flipping, the wooden pin banging against the butcher-block table, my struggle to roll the dough evenly—but my grandma, probably sensing this, praises me often for my strength, my attention to detail, my knack for getting that dough perfectly thin. It should be nearly translucent, she reminds me, but thick enough that it wouldn’t tear later when stuffed, folded, and pinched. So I do what I’m told; I roll the dough in sections as she fills a pot with water and lights the stove. With each roll, the dough flattens; I flip it like a pancake and roll again. “Perfect, like always,” she says when I’m done.

After years of using juice glasses dipped in flour to cut her dough whenever she visited my family, this time she remembered to bring her own circle cookie cutter, about four inches in diameter, the perfect size for the folding and stuffing. She presses the cutter into the dough, wiggles it a bit to ensure that it cuts all the way through, picks up the cutter, and presses it again until the whole section is divided into four-inch circles. We peel the scrap away and add it to the bowl nearby. She carries a pot of sauerkraut mixed with bits of bacon from the stove to the table and leaves me to stuff the pierogi. This too is tedious. Each time it takes a while to get the exact amount of stuffing: sometimes I stuff them too full and have a hard time pinching them shut; other times I don’t stuff them enough, which will surely disappoint whoever happens to grab it from the plate later that evening. But eventually I do get it, and I fold the dough into a half moon and pinch the ends shut. “Make sure they’re pinched well. Pay close attention to the corners,” she reminds me, “or they’ll open when they boil.”
Working in fours, I hand her the folded pierogi, and she drops them into the boiling water. The pierogi sink to the bottom of the pot for a few minutes then rise to the top where they bob around like buoys. That’s how we know they’re done. My grandma, never wanting me to get too close to a lit stove (even though by now I am 21 years old and know the potential danger of an open flame), scoops them out with a slotted spoon. I stand nearby, ready to rub the hot pierogi in generous amounts of butter then set them in a glass dish to cool. Although there’s nothing inherently difficult about this process, it’s “putzy,” as my mom would say.

Although I grew up eating my grandma’s pierogi, I had no interest in learning to make them until I spent nine months as a student in Central Europe. The first four months I lived in Krakow, Poland; then I traveled north and west for another month before settling in Szeged, Hungary for the final four months. When I came home, I was obsessed with Polish culture, which I had always known—although not really. My grandma grew up making pierogi, spending long days in the kitchen with her mother—my great grandmother who I never met—Jozefa. They would roll out the dough, Jozefa demonstrating the steps in Polish while handing down bits of wisdom like: “Use your hands” and “Always use Farmer’s Cheese. Nothing else will do,” which my grandma followed dogmatically like a good Catholic.

Growing up, whenever my grandma visited my family in Wisconsin, she’d devote several days to cooking: pierogi¹, golabki², and chrusciki³. She’d labor in the kitchen from six in the morning to eight at night, but she never asked for help, and we never offered. We wanted to eat them but wanted little part in actually making them. Yet when my grandma was cooking, the whole family tended to hover around the kitchen hoping she’d sneak us a botched pierogi or ask us to taste-test a cookie. My dad would turn on her favorite music: Frank Sinatra; my brother and I would take turns telling stories or sneaking tastes of dough and running to our bedrooms to eat it quickly without being caught; my parents would dance across the kitchen; we’d play card games at the kitchen table; even the dog would hover around my grandma’s feet, hoping for scraps to drop to the floor, which they

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¹ Polish dumplings.
² Cabbage stuffed with meat and rice.
³ Otherwise known as angel wings; sugar cookies dusted with powdered sugar.
frequently did, and not always accidentally. All the while my grandma tended to the stove, rolled dough, boiled, fried, and baked. Exhausted with sore feet, I’m sure, although she never complained.

And she never seemed to mind. Making the pierogi connected her to something that I couldn’t quite grasp at the time. She’d tell me stories about my mom as a child—that carrot-haired girl waiting to be picked up from school, knee socks bunched around ankles, lunch box hanging open; she’d tell me about my grandpa’s days as a Cub Scout leader and of all the patches he and my uncle earned together; she’d describe her mother, who came to America alone at 15 and was treated like a servant by her aunt, who on her way to America in steerage opened a bag lunch, found a banana and, not knowing what it was, threw it overboard; she’d tell me I would have loved Jozefa, that Jozefa would have loved me. Although I listened, these stories seemed like little more than a beloved grandmother’s ramblings toward the end of her life, that desperate attempt to hold onto something for just a while longer.

But then I went to Krakow. I like to tell myself now that I went because deep down I wanted to know more about my grandma and her family, who I had never met but who my grandma insisted I’d have loved. But if I’m truly honest, I went because I was desperate to get out of Wisconsin for a while and wanted to go somewhere, anywhere. Plus, it was cheaper to study in Poland and Hungary than in France, Germany, or Spain and, better yet, I didn’t have to know Polish and Hungarian in order to participate. Although I enjoyed answering, “Why Poland?” with a hearty, “Why not?!” I imagined that I would be spending nine months in gray, concrete-and-snow-covered cities. The land of meat and potatoes—a nightmare for a vegetarian of six years. Although I had grown up with a strong Polish grandmother who shared so eagerly the traditions she learned in her Wyandotte Polish neighborhood, I knew very little about where I was going and what culture I’d be tumbling into.

Wandering Krakow’s cobblestoned streets for the first time, I found myself on Karmelicka with a friend, both of us tripping over cracked cobblestones, distracted by babushkas peddling vegetables and fruit in a tongue heavy in sh, ch, zh: sounds that sounded the exact same to an American’s ear but were distinguishable for a Pole. It sounds like they’re trying to get the taste of something off of their tongues, my friend whispered. Just
as we began to worry that we had gotten lost among flower stands, the Rynek Glowny\(^4\) opened to us: pigeons chasing bread crumbs past tourists gawking at Baltic amber in the Sukkienice; plump babushkas guarding carts stuffed with smoked cheese and kielbasa; incense drifting through the cracks in St. Mary’s Basilica, mingling with smoke from sausage and cigarettes, catching in the damp Krakow air. I felt immediately like I had stumbled into a place, a touchstone, a home I had never been to but had somehow always known.

After about a month in Krakow, I finally talked to my grandma on the phone. It was Thanksgiving and I was homesick. I recited some of the Polish words and phrases I had learned—\textit{na zdrowie}, \textit{pivo}, \textit{zapiekanka}, \textit{kocham cie}—to which she responded excitedly, recalling some of the phrases whose sounds she thought she had forgotten years earlier when her own touchstones died starting with her father and followed by her mother, her brothers—Walter, Ted, and Stubby—and, finally, her sister—Andzia. She laughed when I told her about my first attempt at buying vegetables at a market (while trying to buy carrots (because carrots didn’t have to be cooked) the man behind the table handed me potatoes (which did have to be cooked), and, flustered and insecure, I bought the potatoes though I knew I would ultimately give them to someone with more prowess in the kitchen); she seemed proud when I told her how sturdy the Poles were, how \textit{Polish} they are despite the fact that the map had been cut and spliced so many times. Poland was, I told her, although she probably already knew, part of Germany, Prussia, East Prussia, Russia, Austria, and Hungary; and at other times, Poland didn’t exist at all on maps, once for over one hundred years. But although politics and borders shifted, ethnicity didn’t, and the Poles seemed to cling to that with a quiet pride.

But my grandma was most excited to hear about the food. I told her about the pierogi I had been eating—\textit{They’re so inexpensive! You can get a dozen fresh pierogi for a buck!}—not only cheese and sauerkraut but also potato, blueberry, and peach. “Did you \textit{know} pierogi can be a dessert?” I asked. “I’d never add fruit to my pierogi,” she insisted. “Did you \textit{know} you can make other toppings? Sour cream is just for the sweet pierogi; there are specific toppings for the savory!” I told her. “I prefer the sour cream,” she insisted again,

\(^4\) The largest medieval town square in Europe that houses the Sukkiennice or Cloth Hall in the center.
dismissing the possibilities for revision in her kitchen, but I sensed she was quietly carving space for the revisions I might make someday.

I told her I’d have to learn to make them when I came home, and she promised to teach me. Then I spent the rest of my time in Central Europe eating as many pierogi as possible; abandoning my vegetarianism (at a pig slaughter in the back of a dormitory, no less, although that’s another story); listening to klezmer music in crowded restaurants; learning to notice subtleties in the many varieties of vodka; attempting to wrap my tongue around those foreign sounds; and, when the language grew too complicated, learning to trust the kindness of strangers who I couldn’t actually speak to or understand. But throughout those nine months I thought about my grandma, about how big her life—her history—was, about how far I was from really knowing her, and about lucky I was to have realized that then.

Nine months later I returned from Europe. I spent that first summer back in Wisconsin listening to Maria Peszek sing “Moje Miasto” on repeat; saying “Na zdrowie,” whenever someone sneezed; and writing a klezmer-inspired waltz on the piano. I missed Krakow, the language, the decrepit buildings that housed jazz clubs, art museums, and the United Colors of Benetton. I spent hours organizing my stacks of photos and clippings into four photo albums that I then forced anyone who happened to stop by to look through. My grandma was my most patient audience. She listened for hours while I told her stories about sleeping on the steps outside of a train station in Budapest, getting lost in Prague, swinging outside of a castle in Ljubljana, and falling in love in Krakow. And then she taught me to make pierogi.

Initially I wanted to learn because I was desperate to do anything that would carry me back to that city. I hoped the smell of sauerkraut and beef pierogi frying on the stove would bring me a bit closer, would allow me to hold tight to this place that I loved. And it worked. But standing in front of the stove next to my grandma, boiling and frying, carrying plates of pierogi to my family seated at the table, struggling to keep up with their demand, I begin to feel connected to something more than the city. It’s this, I think, this is what makes my grandma so willing to make pierogi each time she visits despite the tired feet, the back ache, the fingers chapped from washing dishes. She’s feeding her family, taking care of the people she loves, listening to them moan when taking their first bite, nourishing them.
It reminds me of what I so admired about the Polish people: their ability to hang on to hope, to keep their Polish traditions alive no matter who’s ruling their country at the time. I look into my grandma’s bright blue eyes. We smile. And I imagine my grandma next to her mother in their Wyandotte kitchen, and my great grandma next to her mother in their Warsaw kitchen. All of these women, connected by a few ingredients written on a yellowing piece of paper.

I already know I will adapt her recipe. Instead of mixing ingredients on the butcher-block table, I'll use a glass bowl. And because I don’t like the feeling of sticky dough between my fingers, I'll use a wooden spoon. Most importantly, I’ll make blueberry, peach and cheery pierogi. Although my grandma insists she follows the recipe just as her mother taught her, I can’t help but wonder how she, too, revised it, bit by bit, adapting it for her own kitchen. But for each of us the heart of the thing, the reason why we make pierogi, remains the same: we want to feed the ones we love. My heart stirs, although I don’t yet know why.

I can’t know this yet, but a year later, my grandma will forget that she ever knew how to make pierogi. She will visit my family and will feel overwhelmed when standing next to the flour-dusted butcher-block table. Instead of taking charge, she’ll sit at the kitchen table with my brother while my mom and I make the pierogi alone. She won’t offer to help, but she’ll enjoy eating when we’re done. She’ll repeat, “Where’d you learn how to make this?” And two years after that my mom and I will bring pierogi to the nursing home when we visit my grandma in Ohio. By then my grandma will have forgotten her husband, her mother, and she’ll think my mom is her maid. When we share a plate of pierogi with her, my grandma, not having forgotten her manners, will act grateful, but she won’t recognize the food. When she bites into the sauerkraut pierogi she’ll wrinkle her brow and whisper, “I don’t like this.” Then she’ll eat a spoonful of sour cream and say, “Mmm! This is good!” My mom and I will be surprised, then we’ll laugh a little, letting her go.

But when I get home I’ll remove the pierogi from the freezer when two friends come over for dinner. I’ll stand in front of the stove in my tiny kitchen on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Milwaukee, and I’ll fry the pierogi, struggling to keep up with their demand. Standing in front of the stove, I’ll listen to them talk about relationships and work,
and I’ll think about my grandma curled up in her small hospital bed, my grandma who has all but disappeared. I’ll carry another plate of pierogi to the table.