



Anna Hrbáčová Go feed the hens

My family often celebrates. We like to meet, eat and drink together. I grew up with this habit and there were times when I hated it, but now I'm glad we all meet at the same table from time to time. There are a lot of interesting, often humorous moments. For example, my grandma, who walks on crutches, always announces when she wants to go to the bathroom. She's not ashamed to talk about it, at all. Most of the time, she makes it so-so on time, as she can't move very fast, which is funny and sad at the same time. Gastronomic experiences are key part of the whole thing, because in the end, it's all about eating. It depends on who cooks and bakes, but, in our family, everyone is great at it. Delicious food, lots of homemade food served on the table which can be a problem. Sometime it's just too much at once and often it happens to me that I end up being totally surfeited and feel like there was a stone inside my belly. I have a weakness for pies, these small rounded, typically Czech ones. Especially those ones with plum jam or poppy filling. I take one and I don't know when to stop. Then I feel sick. I say to myself that I'll be more careful next time and rather say no to them. But it always turns out the same way. I can't resist.

Grandma often boils potato peels for the hens. It makes a stench that I got used to, as she's been doing it as long as I can remember. When it cools down, she adds more left-

overs from cooking and from the kitchen, mixes everything with her hand and hands it to me in a greasy pot with the words: Go feed the hens. The hens must have good hearing. I just open the gate and they're immediately converging. On the way to the hens, it often happens that I step on their droppings. Grandma bakes well. It always tastes somehow special. She has an old oven and the basic ingredients: home-made eggs and apples. Her specialty is apple strudel. I often watch her peel apples precisely with her old fingers. How she shells nuts. I smell these scents blend together. Then she sends me for eggs to smear the strudel, and I step on the chicken droppings along the way. I don't really mind, as soon as I don't fall or break some of the eggs.

I often find myself intently watching my grandma during various activities. There's not much she can do on her own anymore. I watch her body, which no longer stands without support. It's getting worse. I observe where the centre of gravity of her body is. I watch her careful and slow movements. Often a little clumsy or incomplete. I believe that every step is a tribulation for her. She often sits down to do something. Then only her hands work. Time and pains have taken their toll. The individual joints of the fingers are deformed, slightly crushed. Those joints seem to have too little space to breathe, to function properly. They are swollen and exhausted.

I would like to depict my grandma's legs in a painting. I know them very well from the the knees to the toes. Her knees look like huge donuts, soaked with water like sponge, waterlogged...Soft and sensitive. Her calves have symmetrical, blunt curves. From light skin tones they change their colour to orange, brown, and purple. From the middle of the calf, it narrows significantly to the ankle. From the ankle, the foot then inflates, expands and swells, growing swollen in all directions. Fear of touching them, great sensitivity, they're so stiff. Thin skin, almost see-through. Heat, inflammation, yet her feet are as cold as ice. Whenever I see her with shoes on, summer sandals, some parts are overflowing with such force that they often deform the shoe itself. I fully understand why it is such an arduous process for my grandma to put her shoes on. I often help her with that.

Once every six months my grandma and her sister are sent to the nearby spa, where we of course have to visit them. They are an inseparable couple, but staying together in a relatively small space gets on their brains a bit over time. Since they both walk on crutches, they still have to put them somewhere, and if they put them down badly, crutches will fall. That sound is so annoying. And it happens often – Annoying sound and a lot of swearwords. Grandma always swears when it happens to her. Sometimes I laugh about it.

But I always help her pick them up. Family members are coming to visit them and often bring some homemade food, something sweet, some alcohol. But they have to hide it, because they aren't allowed to have alcohol in the room. Everyone brings something. We have a large family and their small room is becoming a pantry. They have full cupboards and nightstands of various sweet treats, salty sticks and leftovers of bread and other pastry they got for breakfast or snack. The room is overheated and they watch TV together. When we come to visit them with my parents, the first ten minutes they just keep offering us everything they have available to eat and drink. It doesn't matter if you have chocolate, then beer, and finally a sandwich with an egg and mayonnaise together with coffee.

I always find some chocolate in my grandma's pantry. I'm usually very picky, but when I'm at my grandma's and become irresistibly tempted, I drop all my beliefs about quality and start the hunt for chocolate. If I don't find any in the pantry, I go to look in the closet. This is where my grandma has stored expensive glasses, liqueurs, chocolates and other sweets, which she usually receives from someone as a gift. I found something. Rum pralines, peppermint chocolate and a box of truffles. I don't hesitate to open the box, where there is a choice of flavours. I have a few pieces quickly to

drive away the greatest craving. Then I'll have some more and suddenly it's half of the box gone. That is the moment when I realize that they're not good at all. Their poor quality makes them disgusting. I end up having spoiled taste and the icing on the cake is when I look at the expiration date and find out that the box of chocolates was supposed to have been eaten a year ago.

Every time my grandma tells me to take something out of the fridge, I know exactly what awaits me. First, a mixed stench hits me in the face. I call it a refrigerator stench. Grandma is an expert on the worst possible storage of food. The lowest possible level of hygiene. The individual smells get mixed and some pieces are already rotting in the fridge. Sometimes she puts something greasy in there, so it spreads grease all around, or maybe she puts something in there with a greasy hand, so it greases the packaging. Then I want to take something out of it and I grab the handle from the fridge: I already have a greasy hand, which I want to wipe, but the cloth she has in the kitchen is also crumpled and greasy, so if I use it it's perhaps even worse. I want to wash my hands, I go to the bathroom, but the soap container is empty. I want to have coffee, so I reach for a box of milk and it is greasy and I take a cup from the shelf and it is not properly washed. Grandma has a dishwasher that she refuses to use.

I decided to visit my grandma. I arrived, but grandma wasn't there. When I called her, she told me that she was with her friend at a nearby cemetery and that they would both be back soon. It was slowly getting dark so I decided to go and pick some apples from the garden and check if there are any fresh eggs. There were three. When they came back, I made coffee, as we all needed something warm. Grandma told me to grab a box of chocolates from the drawer in the kitchen. It was seafood pralines, her favourite. Soon, almost all of the pralines were gone. Grandma then reached for the umpteenth piece and when she picked it up, it split in half at the joint where it was glued during production. My sight sharpened something inside the half that remained in the box. There was a little white caterpillar wriggling. Grandma already had the other half in her mouth and I almost burst out laughing when I told her that there was a caterpillar in the candy. She was convinced that I was wrong and commanded me to hand her the glasses. She then was sure that it was really there and suddenly both grandma and her friend understood the situation. Instead of throwing it all out, they then carefully examined each candy and kept eating. I looked at the expiration date. The packaging was supposed to have been eaten more than a year ago.

The flowers are in a vase, half-dead, the water is yellowish and has a sour smell. Sometimes I can detect this odor from a distance, when the water in the vase has been standing for a long time, but now I had to come closer with my nose to notice it. Flower blossoms hang on the tired stems, the ends of petals are brownish, twisted. They look like bowed old people, heavily heading to the ground. Their devotion is clear – as if they had bowed for the last time before death itself. Falling down quietly, one petal after another. When there is too much clutter around the vase, my grandma sends me to pour out the water, throw the flowers into the field and wash the vase thoroughly, especially the green-yellow slime that has formed inside at the water level. And now I can pick other ones in the garden. This time my grandma sent me for roses.

There is a cherry tree in grandma's garden. It's old, located in the lower part and from its crown one has a beautiful view of the landscape. As a child, the tree seemed huge to me, it was the biggest tree in the garden and, climbing it was an acrobatic stunt for me. Climb up to the very crown, settle down, wipe my hands scratched and dirty from its rough dark bark. Observe. Feel the airflow much stronger than on the ground a few feet below. Blooming, full of cherry fruits, only leafy, bare. I don't like cherries at all, but I fell

in love with this tree. I felt safe there and free at the same time. It felt like I belonged there, like I was one of those leaves rustling in the breeze. When I wanted to dive into these moments again, I climbed it also later, as a bigger girl. It wasn't that complicated anymore. The view from the crown itself wasn't so monumental anymore. I wish I could climb higher. I haven't climbed that tree for a long time. My hands are still variously injured and cracked from turpentine, constant hand washing, soap, thinners...chemicals. Maybe they would rather get dirty and injured with the bark of a tree, picking rotten fruit and working in the garden. Soil behind the nails and pieces of dry leaves in my hair. Red cheeks and cold toes.

I remember when I was a small girl and wanted to go to the toilet, at my grandma's, during nights I slept there. The bedroom was quite far from the toilet, and moreover, the toilet was separated from the bedroom by a long hallway with a cold stone floor. I had to cross the hallway quickly in the dark and then light up as quickly as possible to drive away the bugs. It used to be really chilly there, especially in the winter months. I was always so afraid to go to the toilet that I put it off until it was really urgent. Then I hurried down through the freezing corridor, sat down, did the need, and then ran back to the warm bed. To safety.

I really like to sit in the lower part of my grandma's garden. There is a beautiful view of the surrounding fields and forest. I often sit there, enjoying: I watch the blades of grass curl, the leaves of trees rustle, the clouds float in the sky and the sun change its intensity. Sometimes an insect or a bird flies past me, or an ant stings me in a part of my body. A little interruption from my daydreaming.

My great-grandma's house, which is abandoned since she died, has always been a great mystery for me. A lot of people lived there, and they certainly died there as well. I could feel it as I walked through that house as a little girl. Empty and musty, deserted, but well-preserved rooms. A layer of dust and cobwebs brought me a strangely frightening satisfaction. A dark pantry full of jars with jam and compotes smelled so pleasant. Prayer beads and crucifixes in various places throughout the house seemed to me like warning signs. I was scared of the attic and the cellar. Both were dark, I could feel the dry air of the attic, and the damp and cold air of the cellar only when the door was open by chance. I would never dare open them myself. And to this day, I have never been neither in the cellar nor in the attic. I grew up, but the feeling is the same when I come back. The last living creature on the property was a dog. I don't even know how old he was. He ate leftovers all his life, but I think he was happy.

My great-grandma's husband died in the war, and she married his brother. She had done a lot in her life, she worked hard with her own hands. She toiled in a cowshed and once stabbed her shin with a pitchfork at work. I don't know exactly how it happened, but since then she had a healing wound that is still wet and often had to be bandaged. I often watched my grandma bandage her mother's wound. I could even smell it from a few meters distance. The stench of rotting meat. A wet, soggy, ulcerated and glistening wound. Sometimes I decided to look at it more closely. It's a bit like seeing a cat or a frog having been run over on the road and yearning to see it.

I remember very well how grandma took care of grandpa in the last years of his life. I remember the smell of insulin injections, when grandma took them out of the fridge, or how grandpa jumped slightly each time the needle penetrated his skin. I remember his morning routine – pouring lots of differently pills of various shapes and hardness out of the medicine box. He spent his days and nights either in bed, in his armchair in the living room watching TV, or when the weather was nice, he struggled to walk to the porch above the stairs, which was glazed and he could see through what's going on in the courtyard and in the garden.

He was able to sit there for hours. Sometimes he tried to get up, but he didn't have enough strength, so he kept sitting. As I played with my cousin in the yard, I saw his sad eyes behind the dusty glass, saw how hard his chest lifted as he gasped for air. He ended up on devices in hospital. The tubing drained urine from his body and cleaned his blood. He was breathing loudly and heavily, for days, months. We went to visit every week until he breathed out for the last time.

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