



I Drink Her Tea

Ilene Dube

My grandmother left this world just as quietly as she lived in it. She left me the Royal Doulton tea set that she never used. I realize now that she dressed like a gypsy not because she was a sartorial renegade but because her clothes were hand-me-downs.

[image info](#)

IN A YELLOWED PHOTOGRAPH WITH CYRILLIC LETTERS, MY grandmother, age seventeen, has skin as smooth as porcelain. The photo was made just before she left the motherland. Her long silky hair is tied with a scarf, and she wears a Bohemian-style dress with satin stripes and tassels, full at the waist, draping down to lace-up boots. I had that photo in my room as a teenager, an inspiration for how to look. By then she only wore granny glasses and granny frocks, but I liked to wonder about the wild bohemian renegade she may once have been.

My grandmother drank black tea out of a glass. She came to this country with a brother and a sister and they worked to raise the money that would eventually bring their parents and remaining siblings, including a baby.

As a child, whenever I drew my grandmother's face, she came out looking like a cat, her mouth shaped like a wide upside-down "Y." I wonder what she thought of her parents, having another baby while she was working to pay for their transport.

By the time I knew her, my grandmother lived in an apartment building on Avenue P in which the arches of the doorways and windows came to a triangle, just like her mouth. My mother grew up in this apartment and my grandmother continued to exhibit her childhood creations: a ceramic pumpkin with a doorway and the little people who lived inside. My grandmother, who must have spoken thickly accented English—I can no longer hear her voice—would call this ceramic fantasy Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater. Or was it The Little Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe?

At one point my grandfather, mother, aunt, uncle, and cousin all lived in my grandmother's shoe. A coat rack, a bureau, and other antiques were hand-me-downs from the little baby my grandmother's parents brought to this country—"so adorable," the baby, Sonia, went on to marry a furrier and live in an opulent house.

My grandmother lost her eyesight embroidering bowls of fruit made up of tiny little stitches on tablecloths she gifted to family members on special occasions. The adorable baby sister critiqued the stitches.

On special weekends I'd sleep on an antique settee covered with embroidered linens and lace. I loved when my grandmother cooked kreplach, her specialty of fried dough and cheese in butter, and if she was too tired to make it I'd climb up to her icebox and search for a stash wrapped in waxed paper that she was saving for the holidays.

On the weekends when I didn't stay with her, my grandmother would sleep over at our house. There were Italian families living on our street. At dusk you'd smell the garlic and onions sautéing in pots for the thick

red gravy. They also cooked doughy things with cheese, but put their dumplings in the red gravy instead of melted butter. Once when my grandmother was visiting, and I was dreaming of eating the dumplings next door, she ate fish and choked on a bone. She nearly died, and for years I was terrified of eating fish.

Our street was fully developed except for one lot with grass growing wild behind a chain link fence. We called it the woods, but soon an Italian family in the construction business came and built a brick house. It stood out, box-like, on our street of Victorians and Dutch Colonials.

In the backyard, paved with flagstones, they built an enormous brick oven. We played imaginary games on it, steering it through space. The younger of the two brothers was our playmate. From the sliding glass door we could see inside the house to a bar, and on a shelf on top of the bar was a little mechanical man. When you wound him up he poured a drink. I wanted to see him in action. The little boy told me he'd show me but first I had to pull down my pants. I was five and he was four. Later, when I went home and told my grandmother about the fantastic deal I had struck, she spanked me; this was not what she had come to America for.

She was happy when I started playing with girls. Alina had wavy red hair and lived in a turreted Victorian where we would play hide and seek in all the nooks and crannies—a back stairway from the kitchen, a butler's pantry. There were stained glass windows that illuminated the space in a holy, cathedral-like way. Alina's mother had studied culinary arts and cooked from the Gourmet cookbooks, though I didn't like her quenelle as much as my grandmother's kreplach or the Italians' ravioli.

Alina and I were gypsy wannabes, dressed in our grandmothers' Persian lamb coats—hers

gray, mine black—long skirts and antique ski boots we found in the attic. Through Alina I met boys. There were the Sturnholper twins. Their parents collected abstract art and had several wooden phalluses on the lawn. They, too, had a magnificent old house, but theirs was decorated with 1950s modernist furniture and leather—what you'd find in psychiatrist offices. In fact both their parents were psychiatrists. This house offered even more nooks and crannies and we had greater incentive to hide because those Sturnholper twins were horny teenagers. They would play tricks on us, pretending to be one another. One would come on to me, stealing a kiss, then the other would find me hiding and try to pick up where the first had left off while the other brother was doing the same to Alina. Even though we weren't romantic about the Sturnholpers, they were fun friends—and smart. Both went to M.I.T.; one became a pediatrician and the other a psychiatrist. I know this because I googled them after reading about a gift their parents made to the Brooklyn Museum where the mother had been a board member. What wouldn't show up on Google is if they're still groping girls in the dark.

The Sturnholpers were friends with Howard Dubois, with whom Alina was madly in love. With a rich chocolate-colored complexion and handsomer even than Sidney Poitier, who was then starring in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Howard Dubois was the valedictorian of our high school. It was rumored that his parents were CIA agents.

Alina brought Howard Dubois to my house after school. We had a little rolling machine we had bought at a head shop in the Village, and Alina had something to roll in it. We had practiced with pipe tobacco and were good at getting the little joints to hold together. We

used some of my grandmother's tablecloths to build a tent over the dining room table, pretending to be in the Arab desert as we munched on afterschool snacks of pretzels and brownies. We took some of the embroidered white linen napkins and made keffiyahs on our heads, held on by our headbands. Being in the desert made us thirsty, so I went to get us some apple juice, and Alina, emboldened by the weed, put her lips to those of Howard Dubois. It was at that moment that my grandmother walked in. Not what she had come to America for! she raged in some English/Russian/Yiddish patois.

When Howard Dubois's CIA parents were off on one of their missions, we went to his house to help him paint a room. The Sturnholpers were there as well, and someone passed around psilocybin. We climbed ladders, rolling paint on the walls and ceiling, and all around us was beautiful white. "We're in heaven," I said. "We're in heaven." I kept repeating it, as if just saying it made it real.

Alina was laughing in a way that squeaked. "You're a freak," she said, and at that moment I knew I had arrived.

Howard Dubois went to Amherst. I googled him and found he's become an English professor at Yale, and there's a YouTube video of him talking about his treatment for mitral valve prolapse. He still has the same distinguished way of speaking, walking, and dressing. There's a headline about him donating 1.5 million to an academic appointment, but the link is broken.

My grandmother left this world just as quietly as she lived in it. She left me the Royal Doulton tea set that she never used. I realize now that she dressed like a gypsy not because she was a sartorial renegade but because her clothes were hand-me-downs. And yet she held herself tall, wearing the garments as a model might,

so that her daughter would someday become a fashion designer who could afford to buy her a Royal Doulton tea set for Mother's Day.

Now I am the age my grandmother was when she choked on the bone. I dreamt about going to a party in a house with the Persian carpets from Alina's house. The windows are covered with Battenberg lace, the color we painted Howard Dubois's parents' walls. It felt like home, and there was my grandmother's table, handed down from the adorable baby, covered with an embroidered tablecloth. I could hear the voice of my great aunt, complaining about a missed stitch. I could have covered it with the Royal Doulton tea pot, but instead I poured myself a cup of the tannin-colored liquid and drank it. The cup had acquired chips and cracks over the years of use, but the Russian tea was still good, if strong.

I was wearing a silk blouse my mother had designed, using my grandmother's scarf that she brought from Russia but never took out of its box, wrapped in tissue paper. It was a bit frayed, but fitting for an artist who made sculpture from found objects.

For a house gift I brought one of my assemblages and the host hung it immediately in the front hall. It had a repurposed mechanical toy that, when you wound it up, tipped its hat and dropped his drawers. One of the guests, who didn't know I was the artist, said what a shame it was that the toy was screwed to the sculpture, that it might otherwise fetch a good price at auction.

I went outside for some air and a walk. I passed my grandmother, sitting on a park bench and drinking tea from a glass. She said she had always preferred her tea from a glass. She was on her way home; would I like to join her? There'd be lots of kreplach. ❖