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A short story by Zianna Milito

For Mom



I often revisit my earliest memory of snow. A white expanse kept out of reach by a sliding glass door was branded into my memory no later than two years into my existence. I already had on my yellow galoshes, which I put on by myself as my toddler body sat on the ground, using all the force in my legs to push my foot past the narrow of the boot above the heel. Leaning on the glass from within the warmth of my Nana's Iowa house, I gazed wide-eyed at the fresh, clean snow contained within the small fence-lined backyard, wondering how I would manage as it was well past my knee height. I watched the handprint of condensation appear then vanish each time I moved my right hand to a different spot.

I could have stood there all day. I had never seen this solid white mass before, but still trusted it in the unbound innocence I used to know. The glass panel slowly slid open as a comforting voice asked if I was ready. I held onto a hand that engulfed mine (probably my mother's but the memory is hazy), marching through the cold fluff that gave way more easily than I had expected. I stood in the center of the rectangle backyard – the size of which would probably astound me if I saw it today – elated in the midst of something both strange and exciting. Seeing Freckles run toward me, I was impressed that she seemed unfazed by the snow, kicking up white dust as her four legs worked their way through. I looked up at my mom, studying the way she patted an imperfect snowball and then showed me, encouraging me to try my own. I bent down to gather my own scoop but jumped back up out of surprise at the warm tongue that lapped my cheek.

I don't remember much of my Nana's house in Iowa. It was my Tata's too, but my family, like most I know, attributed ownership of the house to the woman in charge. Nana's hair was a silver bob that swayed with every move of her petite frame. Her eyeglasses were horizontal ovals and the majority of her wardrobe was made of clothing she had sewn herself. Most of my memory of Nana's house has been shaped by pictures I've seen, apart from that magical first experience with snow. The house was mostly brown inside; a warm brown, with knit blankets on leather chairs and unfamiliar

yet comforting pictures all around. It was the exact house in which you'd expect to find my Nana, in snowy Iowa.

Tata spoke sparingly, but his presence was always enough. His round belly stayed anchored by the same brown belt and I could always hear the loose change and keys jingle in his slack pockets with each step. His mustache was still all black but he had already lost some of his hair. He owned a restaurant in Iowa, called The Red Lion. The upstairs was brown but the downstairs was red. The chairs were made of brown wood and round brass studs lined the circular red velvet seat. They were always lined against the wall in stacks on top of the crimson carpet. This room led into the kitchen, my favorite area. He would sit me up on the cold metal counter to play with the calculator he used to add up the numbers of the day. It was beige with thick, clunky keys and would print whatever he typed as he went. He always finished his calculations before he let me start clicking away, making sure to move all paperwork out of my reach. He was always at the restaurant and it remains in my memory as one of my own favorite places to be.

It now no longer exists. There was a kitchen fire under new owners in 2001. Nana and Tata had moved away by then.



I catch a glimpse of Freckles hiding under the iron-framed pull out bed in my living room. I lower myself to all fours to mimic a dog's way of playing. She bolts out from under the mattress, through my Tata's legs and into the kitchen. My Nana has her hands on her hips in the doorway, and she tisks and laughs at the dog's easy excitement.

Nana, Tata, and Freckles were staying with us as my parents helped them look for a new house in Los Angeles. Baby number three was on the way and I would soon begin Kindergarten. Both Nana and my mom decided that it was time to make the move.

They ended up settling into a modest property in North Hollywood where the backyard was bigger than the house. It was perfect for my Nana's love of gardening, something I expect she wouldn't have been able to spend much time doing in snowy Iowa.

She and my Tata worked together to create a wonderland of greenery. When they bought the house, the furthest back portion of the backyard was dry and dead, litter interspersed within the weeds and dead leaves. They planted an avocado tree, and the soil now gives fruit to cucumbers, peppers, and pumpkins, depending on the season.

My four-year-old handprints are still cemented in the walkway my Tata paved. There are random divots where my sisters and I picked off the fish pebbles that decorate the borders of each concrete square. We would spend hours in the backyard, making potions out of flower petals, dirt, and soap, and playing our regular make-believe game that we three were orphans and it was my duty as eldest to work as a cashier to support my sisters. I've always harbored a desire to be older; I had my first boyfriend at seven years old, a relationship that only ever existed in that backyard. He lived on the other side of the vine-covered back fence.



I turn over, shaking the iron-framed pull out bed. My sisters and I are sharing the mattress, each wearing the matching nightgowns my Nana made for us out of a heavy, pearl-white rayon fabric. (As a pre-teen, it is my duty to pretend I hated matching with my younger sisters, but I secretly enjoy the reminder of my lingering girlhood innocence.) My portion of the bed has been reduced from $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{6}$, so I sit up in acceptance of the morning. We are in the living room so I have a straight view to the one bathroom of my Nana and Tata's house. I now only know Freckles as the miniature porcelain replica that sits next to a basket filled with toys for the new dogs. Lola is standing in front of the bathroom door sniffing the floor. She looks up and makes eye contact with me. Understanding I'm awake, her brown-spotted white ears flick back and she charges onto the bed. The two other chihuahuas follow.

I had heard Tata very early in the morning, his jingling steps waking me a bit. He worked at a newspaper factory and was back home before we even woke up. Every time we slept over, Tata

returned with a box of fresh donuts that would patiently sit on the dining room table until we awoke.

Zofia and Luna moan in pretend annoyance at Lola and ChaCha's rambunctious wake-up call. ChaCha nestles under the covers next to me and Lola bounces between them, vacillating on her decision of whose ears to lick. We all know what's waiting for us. Zofia sits up on her elbows and Luna's eyes grow wide. Donuts.

Nana probably heard us talking from her sewing station in Tata's office. She walks out and greets us smiling in her accented voice. Her "Good mooorning muchachitas," carries all the promises of the breakfast ahead. We practically inhale our donuts – chocolate glazed for me – as Nana makes huevos con tortillas y chorizo, my favorite.

Tata saunters out of his office, "Hi muchachitas." We rearrange our settings at the table to clear the seat that's reserved for him. Nana sets his black coffee in front of him and he takes a peek inside the empty donut box.

"Oh, somebody gave you a box of empty donuts!" he observes in his mistranslated English. We grin and giggle, Nana included, as she brings him the donut she saved on a midnight blue Fiesta-ware plate.

I look around. Nana moved the glass case where she keeps her China and trinkets. Now it's in the corner closest to the front door. I imagine that in our house, anything behind a door is in prime smashing location. But Nana and Tata are so mild-tempered that they would never make a move miscalculated or forceful enough to break anything.

On the other side of the front door is a pair of framed senior portraits. They're double exposures and have a frosted look to them, steadfast in their allegiance to the 1980's. One of them is of my mom at age 18, 1986. The other is of her brother, Edgar. He must have been 18 as well, although I don't know what year he graduated high school. I never knew him.

My Nana has pictures of Edgar all around the house,

though not in an excessive or depressing way. There's the senior portrait on the wall, and his wedding portrait next to a picture of my mom dancing with my Tata at her own wedding. In the bedroom there's a black and white baby portrait, framed collage of him as a toddler dressed in pastels, and a close up picture of him, in color, in his 20's. It's probably one of the last that was ever taken.

My sisters and I would often lay on the bed, comparing who has more pictures on display. I'm tied for first with my two older cousins, Edgar's daughters. I assume that by the time my sisters were born, my Nana was so involved in helping to raise them that there was no need for many pictures. I never addressed the pictures of Edgar when my Nana was around, although they were interspersed between all the other ones we were talking about. It was always Zofia or Luna who asked who the baby boy was, and I would answer in a hushed tone. But Nana would chime in, sharing exactly how old he was or an anecdote about the day the picture was taken. As I matured I realized that Nana wanted to talk about him, but I was still forever fearful of seeing her break down. The only time I ever remotely heard Nana cry was through the phone when she called my mom to tell her Freckles died. I feared the day I would witness that in real life.



Two Christmases ago I was home for winter break. My parents, sisters, and I were at Nana and Tata's to make tamales, a regular holiday tradition. Nana stood in the doorway of the kitchen at the head of the table, apron fastened and spatula in hand. My mom was telling a story about Edgar and Nana had rushed in to contribute. She took over the narration and I watched the memory dance behind her sparkling brown eyes as she recalled. Tears started to form and then fell down her face as she told the story, still smiling and laughing between every other word. My mom started crying too, but my dad got up to embrace my Nana. I had never seen so much emotion so processed and accepted from anyone. My Tata kept his eyes on his tamal and stayed silent apart from one sniffle. My sisters and I looked at each other fro-

and rubbed her arm. I watched her dry her eyes and we all went back to making our tamales. I watched my Tata for any type of reaction, but his focus never faltered.

I thought about Iowa, and how the snow became embedded into their being. Serene and white, it was untouched by any hardships they had ever known. I was astounded that my Nana remained warm and radiant despite her heartache and the cold of Iowa. It taught them the evanescence of life.

In that moment, with tears dripping over my Nana's smile, I couldn't help but imagine that if we were in Iowa it would be snowing outside.