

## Letters From My Grandmother

Our family was never very normal. We never quite managed to blend in, to exist without the strong emotions that define us. I think, in a way, it all started with my grandmother. A child from a Jewish-Ukrainian family she saw her house stripped and the family name, town and occupation changed. Floating at the edge of the Nazi era, she narrowly avoided the gas chambers and the camps, but could never quite avoid the anti-Semitism that still fell from the mouths of Ukrainian farmers. She was a cautious, paranoid and deeply lonely child. Her father – the greatest love of her life - in his position of Stalin's best soldier, often forgot about the general existence of his children, preferring to be sent out across the continent to visit yet another camp. The giant library in their home became a sanctuary for my grandmother, and a way to make time fly until her father returned home. The love of books she possessed has been passed down through three generations, making an imprint on every member of our small family tree.

My grandmother's life was a collection of novels. Her husband made it his life's mission to turn their small apartment into a library, filling shelves to the brim until they sagged like a weary old woman leaning on her cane. He loved books, truly and purely. Sometimes, I think, he loved books more than he loved his wife. In this love, more than any other love, they were united.

But my grandmother did not simply read novels, or love them, she lived in them. She was a thousand pages at once: a librarian, a model, an owner of a supply warehouse, a woman on the run from the mafia, a mother of two, a widow. She grew up and aged in the novels, hid skillfully between the covers of a paperback world. She could be seen in the smudged ink. Her heels were as sharp as her tongue, her watercolour pencil makeup always in place. Just like a hero in a book, she seemed perfect. Although her name was not Mary Sue, she became her; lived in the dog-eared pages and the underlined paragraphs; lived in the marks others left in the stories she shared with them.

Her son and daughter knew differently, though. They examined the sentences with a magnifying glass, lost sight of the metaphors and blurred the definitions. They tried to turn a world of imagination into a world of reality. For them, there were no games.

But time passed, as time has the tendency to do. And while my grandmother stuttered uselessly through half-formed words, lying low and silent in fear of the mafia, her husband bought back her life. He took the paper notes they had accumulated so painstakingly, and ensured no matches would set their world ablaze. Once my grandmother was safe, everything changed. After a decade of arguments, and torn out chapters, the pages were spread out on the carpet and my grandfather was spread out on the mortician's table. Cancer did not care about lost opportunities. At that point, they had been divorced for five years. She doesn't talk about him, the words never leave her mouth and they cannot be found etched into the walls; there are glimpses, but they are disguised in puns and jokes, like an introduction to a book that was never written.

The wind picked up. The pages fluttered. My grandmother packed her suitcase and flew through half the sky, pulling her son after her as though they were stuck together, stretching the paper trails through the clouds like a path to another world. She spoke no English. Hadn't worked for forty years. She was afraid.

The stars do not smile on us mortals often, but snicker they do. She found a home under the Southern Cross. After a lifetime spent knocking on the book covers of immigration pamphlets, the cardboard parted. So our name, occupation, town, changed again: on the run from the paper shredders of ignorance and blazing fires of war. My grandma was different now. She sat straighter, as though she was petrified of becoming a sagging bookshelf that nobody ever touches, for fear of it breaking. Even when the weight of a foreign culture was crushing her bones, she smiled placidly and nodded at unfamiliar faces.

After a lifetime of novels, she became a magazine. A Russian bride. A joke, a laugh escaping from a citizen's mouth, a punch line, a newspaper headline. She was destined for a quiet, simple existence reduced from a beautiful story to a love forged by convenience. Her partner has no library.

Although his name is not Marty Stu, he is perfect. He loves her, even though he is unable to appreciate the words and can only see the illustrations; he loves her not for the sentences but for the acts. He knows that novels aren't meant to be summarized into paragraphs and be put away out of sight. Novels are meant to be breathed in, injected into your bloodstream until the stories of their combined lives mix, until the words blur and smudge, until the pages have been read a thousand times. He knows. He tries.

The wonderful thing about books is that they are never quite finished. My grandmother is bilingual, an immigrant, a driver, a garden-planter, a cook, a dog feeder.

"If your life was a novel, would you read it?" She would ask me. She has always had a way with words.

I take off my glasses and exit the email. My hand moves on autopilot as I add the email to a folder named "Grandma", the number by the name reads 249. One day, I think, I will translate these. I will preserve her voice and put it in print so that they can finally understand, finally read the painstakingly lived letters and the confusion, the isolation, the joy, the pure relief. So that somebody else's eyes can ghost over the paragraphs of her life. Novels, after all, are meant to be shared.