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Little ≠ weak

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Personal Essay #2

Dr. Swope

22 October 2007

Little ≠ Weak

“It’s about Little Grandma; she’s gone.”

As I hung up the phone, Dad’s words were still trailing in my ears. I sat down on the couch, the house completely empty, and let the tears cascade, and with them the memories...

Little Grandma, sitting there in her large armchair, the one with the flowery print on a sort of white material. The armchair was of the usual kind, but compared to Grandma’s little body, it was enormous. Grandma’s armchair took up residence in the family room, right by the old, brown piano. She always wore socks, no matter what time of the year. My head resting in her lap, the remainder of my self on the floor, for I had surpassed her in size by age 12.

Grandma stroking my head and face with her rough yet gentle hands. Her simple yet reassuring touch relaxed me; her hands brought me peace. There was just something about those hands.

Little Grandma’s hands understood the meaning of work; they may as well have invented the concept. Her hands had lived through World War II in Poland and Germany. Hands that, from youth to young adulthood, had helped cultivate a farm. Fingernails with dirt under them perpetually, fingers and knuckles weathered from the outside elements.

Red and chapped from a lifetime of ungloved cleaning, from hard scrubbing and chemicals, Little Grandma's hands cleaned *everywhere*: in her occupation as a cleaning lady in the big brick building belonging to the Northern Indiana Public Service Company; as a wife and mother for the house; and as a grandma visiting our always lively Iowa home.

In my younger years, when Grandma was still able to stand for longer periods of time, I would find her in the cramped and often stuffy kitchen, preparing the family feasts or even little snacks for the grandkids. Her body would slowly moving from the stove, to the sink, to the countertop area, but her hands would constantly stir, taste, cut, fold, mix, boil, bake, and fry nonstop until the food was ready. The steamy, cooked pierogies, the boiled and baked concoction of cabbage and meat that made up golumpki, and the spicy and pungent kielbasa or sausage...It wasn't just the tangible ingredients, but the fact that Grandma's hands had made this meal for us. Honestly, we could have eaten dirt for Thanksgiving, or screws and bolts for Christmas and Easter, and as long as Grandma's hands had prepared it, it would have been the best meal ever.

Grandma's favorite food was coffee. Her hands would grasp a coffee mug with the utmost care while she consumed the cup of warmth. She held the mug with sacredness, as if the murky liquid were the wine from communion at church, as if the mug was the golden communion chalice.

But Grandma's hands looked big when she tried to shuffle and distribute the many pills and medications she had to take. She would hold the confetti of red, white, and yellow circles,

carefully making sure her hands stayed on track to their destination from the countertop to her mouth. In her eighties, and towards the last few years of her life, her hands were bent, frail, arthritic, thin and veiny, much like the twisted branches of the lone old tree that took up residence in front of the house. Yet these hands were never idle; they always found something to do, someone to help.

Grandma's hands again appeared large when they grasped the beads of her rosary, praying to the Virgin Mary, invoking help and guidance not only for herself, but her family and friends as well. The rhythmic, methodic way her hands would thoughtfully move along the string of beads, pausing at the proper moment for just the right amount of time before moving on. And yet each silent incantation of "Our Father", "Hail Mary", and "Glory Be" seemed to be said more reverently than the one before. Grandma didn't need a tutorial—her hands, and her heart, successfully directed her straight and true, without issue.

I remembered seeing photos of Grandma holding me as a newborn. We were both little, but Grandma's hands held me firmly, her arms protecting me, showing the world who possessed the strength. Her hands supported many lives, including mine, in multiple ways. Her profound love, strength, and faith got me through her death and continue to help me endure any of life's challenges.

Interesting how such hands that had been through so much destruction, hard work, damage, and hardships, could be so gentle, loving, comforting, and empowering.