

Little Golden Books

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I used to complain so much about going to Mammaw's house. I don't exactly remember why. Maybe it was the long drive over there, or the way her house was full of old stuff that I wasn't supposed to touch. Maybe it was the way it smelled. Like old vintage perfume. To a six-year-old, anything other than candy or a happy meal smells bad. I didn't know it then, but I'd come to appreciate and savor the smell of Mammaw's old vintage perfume.

There wasn't much to her small apartment. It was in Byram, only one bedroom and bathroom. It had a galley kitchen with mix-matched appliances. A black fridge, a white oven, a stainless-steel sink. It was the perfect size for an eighty-five-year-old woman, but it was pretty cramped for the large family dinners she loved to cook. Her most famous dish was what she called "Mrs. Helen's Chicken." It was very simple, and yet even so, everyone loved it. The way the smell of the gravy engulfed the entire apartment when it was baking over the chicken in the oven made your mouth water from the first moment you stepped in her front door.

Getting me to go to Mammaw's house was the problem. Once I was there, I never wanted to leave. Every time we would go over, maybe once or twice a week, she would be sitting in her Lay-Z-Boy recliner, Comcast remote at her side, watching the cooking channel on her box TV. We would walk in, and she would say, "Well, there you are! Come over here and give me a neck hug." That phrase; 'neck hug.' It always bugged me for some reason, and I would always try to correct her. Looking back on it now, I can see that she knew that it bugged me, and she did it on purpose. After our hug, my mom would hug her as well and sit down to talk with her about her day. Me, I would go over the couch adjacent to Mammaw's chair, and climb behind it. The couch was catty-cornered to the wall, with just enough space for a basket of stuffed animals and little girl to sit behind it. I would often tune out the conversations my mom would have with Mammaw. I wish I hadn't, thinking back.

When they were done talking, Mammaw would call me out from behind the couch and tell me to go pick out a book. She almost had the complete collection of the Little Golden Books. My favorite was the Poky Little Puppy. Once I picked my book I would sit up on Mammaw's lap, and she would read the book to me. She read me the Poky Little Puppy countless times, but if you asked me, I wouldn't remember what it was about. What I do remember is her voice. As old as she was, she still knew how to make a book interesting. She would make voices for different characters. I also remember her hands. They were riddled with arthritis, almost completely locked in a claw. Even though her knuckles were the size of nickels, she would lick her fingers to turn the pages every once in a while. I thought it was gross every time she did that.

Memory is a weird thing. We don't get to pick and choose what we remember, especially when we're children. It's rare that we remember the good things from childhood. For most people, the first memories that come to mind when you ask them about their childhood are the bad ones. The ones that hurt. The ones we want to block out, but can't. For me, that memory with Mammaw was in the March of 2009. A few days earlier, my mom had just told me she was pregnant with my baby sister. I was so excited. I had always wanted a younger sibling, and I was finally going to be a big sister. My mom and I were headed to Mammaw's apartment to tell her the good news. She would be a great-grandmother for the fourth time over. When we got there, I knocked on the door and heard my Uncle Danny yell "come in!" I opened the front door, and went to give Mammaw the biggest 'neck hug' she'd ever received. Her face lit up when she saw me. My mom walked in the door behind me, and I saw the light drain from Mammaw's eyes.

"Why, who are you?"

My mom was taken aback. I looked over at her, confused. "Mammaw, it's me," she told her. It had gotten worse since the last time we saw her. I could see it in my mom's eyes. Uncle Danny wheeled himself towards Mammaw. He was paralyzed from the waist down, so he was almost always on eye-level with her. "Mom, this is Shannon. Cheryl's daughter."

I looked at Mammaw. I could tell she was searching her memory for the name 'Shannon.' After a few seconds it came to her, and her face lit up yet again. My mom smiled at her, and excused herself to the bathroom. I don't remember anything else about that trip. I don't even remember if we told her that my mom was pregnant. It would never really matter anyway, Mammaw wouldn't live long enough to meet her youngest great-grandchild.

She died when I was seven. You know that saying, "you never know what you have until it's gone?" In the days after Mammaw's death, those words had never rung more true. A seven-year-old should never feel regret. Not in the way that I did. I was so distraught, I couldn't bring myself to even go to her funeral. I don't regret that decision, as heartless as it sounds. I'm glad my last memory of her isn't of her cold body lying in a casket. Having to share my memory of my Mammaw with people I didn't know. My last memory of her was happy. Of her smiling.

That's what made the biggest impact on me. Her joy. Wherever she went, she was happy. She always had a smile on her face. She always saw the good in people, even when they didn't see the good in themselves. She could always find a bright side to any situation. She strived to make other people happy. Cooking all those large family dinners in her tiny dining room proved that. Even when she was losing her memory to Alzheimer's, her smile was the one thing that reminded us that she was still there, even when she wasn't.