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With Candied Crust

I am spending the Christmas holidays at my Grandpa's house in Windsor, Ontario. The yellow house with its tall pine trees and peeling brown front porch has not changed much since my grandmother passed away fifteen years ago. The heavy door with its knocker is the entrance to another time: the olive-green kitchen stove, the dark almost-wood of the cabinets. Grandma died suddenly in Europe, marching in a rally with other ladies who had served in the War. It is like she just never came home. Grandpa even wears the same blue wool socks, now threadbare.

We have fallen into a routine, Grandpa and I. We get up for our breakfast of coffee and oatmeal. Instant oatmeal, microwaved in too-large bowls and eaten with milk and brown sugar. Coffee, brewed in Grandpa's faded two-cup coffee maker, with a tea towel under one side to correct the tilt. We each use our paper napkin for most of the week, re-folding it and tucking it away for the next meal.

We read the Windsor Star and then venture out for a walk around the block. The school across the street still bears its separate girls' and boys' entrances, and the old houses are heavy with icicles. We round the corner of Vimy and Ypres: Windsor is a great rememberer of wars. The air is crisp and fresh as Grandpa tells me about the neighbours. Who is still around, who is new to the oak-lined street, who has moved away. The old lady who once

smuggled us peanut-butter cups over the backyard fence has passed away in a nursing home. We shuffle along at the speed of Grandpa's arthritis. It's icy cold this December.

I am in the habit now, after our walk, of looking through Grandma's recipe box. Yellowing index cards for Christmas pudding and lemon squares, recipes clipped from newspapers and magazines. Recipes from my mother, from my grandmother's mother. I pay extra attention to the spattered dirty ones, worn and stained from use. I am looking for the shortbread recipe. Our favourite Christmas treat, my sister and I would nibble our shortbread still frozen, huddled in the kitchen with Grandma while our mother wasn't watching. Tiny round discs of cookie with a thumb-print in the middle, frozen between layers of parchment in old cookie tins. Velvet smooth and buttery.

What I have found instead is a copy of my Grandma's apple pie recipe. It's one of those desserts that is so good it makes people stop talking. Even when you are full to the brim with turkey supper, there is room for this pie, warm from the oven, a bubbly mass of soft apples and crumble topping. My mother always called it "Deep-Dish Apple Pie." It is the pie of my childhood, eaten just as easily for breakfast the next day with a cup of cold milk.

I recognize the recipe by its ingredients, because the name on Grandma's index card is unfamiliar: "Apple Pie with Candied Crust," she calls it. I want to ask my grandpa about this recipe. If he remembers it. Eating it, making it. But I hesitate, because talk of my grandmother often leaves him misty-eyed and emotional.

Grandpa was always a hard man. Angry and cruel. A man hardened by life. Hardened by the Great Depression and by the War. By Dieppe. By Normandy. But since my grandmother's death he has become tender. Crying at all greetings and farewells, at small things. At first we thought he was grieving, but after fifteen years, I see the truth. He has repented, a man hardened by life and now softened by death. A man who has realized too late what he has lost. Haunted by regret.

You can hear my grandmother's voice in this house. She is still here, singing to the old radio above the fridge as she makes us soft-boiled eggs and western sandwiches. She and Grandpa yell to each other between rooms, never quite hearing the other, like a loud game of Chinese telephone. She always said that your hearing is the first to go. And now here she is again on a faded index card in an old wooden recipe box.

I ask him anyway. He frowns for a moment and looks down at his coffee.

But then he shrugs, and takes a sip. He *does* remember - sometimes she made the pie with oatmeal and sometimes without, he offers. He looks thoughtful, but there are no tears. I don't miss a beat. I pepper him with questions about Christmas pudding, light and dark, and the recipe for turkey stuffing. The baked ham with pineapple sauce. The lemon squares. Tea biscuits. Butterscotch cookies. Chocolate fudge.

And we talk. In the dusty yellow house, in the kitchen with its dark almost-wood cabinets and its olive-green stove, we talk about Grandma for the first time.