

Grandma's Hands by Marie Blauvelt

"If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people." *Thich Nhat Hanh*

I have only a few photographs of my grandmother. She was camera shy, and anyway, not often available to pose. She was usually in the kitchen, or in the garden, or in the laundry room, or walking miles from market to market with her string bags, always busy, always working, always doing. She never fussed about her appearance, even though she was attractive and had beautiful skin, large hazel eyes and wavy grey hair spilling out of whatever pins she tried to contain it with. On her tiny shoulders and five-foot-two frame, she wore sensible garments and sturdy, comfortable shoes. Her eyeglasses were either balanced at the end of her nose, perched on top of her head, or dangling from a chain around her neck-- though this never kept her from asking us, "Dove sono i miei occhiali?"

She spoke as often as possible to me in Italian, taking care to correct dialect I had picked up in listening to relatives and wincing when I spoke dialect to her in reply. She never quite learned the language of her adopted country. Or, more precisely, she never felt confident enough to speak the language aloud, and was ashamed of her thick accent, although she understood and read English well. But spoken language didn't matter much to my grandmother anyway, since she had a more powerful means of expression. And in that expression, she was fluent. Her hands held her language, and in those hands seemed to live the gifts of the angels.

I don't need photographs to conjure images of my grandmother's hands. They were a tangle of contrasts--rough palms with veiny, soft skin; strong, muscular fingers, capable of a graceful, light touch; unpolished and unadorned, save for a gold wedding band, but elegant--contrasts that were as complicated as her own nationality. She called herself "a woman without a country," unable to live in Italy after raising a family here, yet never quite comfortable with American customs and culture.

Luckily, her hands spoke their own language, and carried in them a treasury of knowledge from her simple, rural childhood. Her hands could snap the neck of a chicken, pluck its feathers, cleaver it to pieces, then make a dish worthy of the

most genteel diner. They could scrub clothes against a washboard with caustic soaps, then stitch delicate silk designs on those cleaned garments. They could even repair broken china by rubbing a cut clove of garlic over the broken edges, patiently holding the pieces together for a long time. It seemed her hands knew how to do it all.

Her talent in the kitchen was probably what most of the family remembers. There was simply nothing she didn't know how to cook, and cook better than anyone else. Here, her hands showed the depth of her range. From shaping delicate tortellini dough to cracking hot chestnuts with her bare "asbestos" palms, Grandma's hands turned out decades of sublime food, from simple suppers to five-course holiday feasts. Her hands had the strength to lift heavy pots of scalding water, yet were delicate enough to pick the bones out of a fragile fish, leaving the flesh intact. She produced her delicacies in conditions most modern cooks would shudder at: dark, cramped kitchens with a few simple tools and utensils, many of them ancient or in deplorable condition. She didn't seem to mind. Her hands were her tools, and there wasn't much they couldn't compensate for. When I am puzzling over a technique, or trying to identify the missing ingredient in a dish, or working a ball of dough until it is just the right texture, I like to think Grandma's hands are guiding me. She taught me that not everything needs to be said with words.

Besides nourishing us through food, Grandma's hands possessed healing powers that are hard to describe, but I felt them. When I burned for days with high fevers, Grandma's hands would briskly rub my shivering body with alcohol. Her hands were never cold or clammy, but instead warm and dry, solid and reassuring. Her steady touch communicated her belief that these rubdowns would heal me, despite the discomfort. . . and eventually, the fever would come down. For some fevers, she would make me drink hot liquids, and be wrapped head to toe in layers of wool to "sweat the fever." It felt awful, but eventually the fever would break. She always moved briskly, directed by an inner certainty that these measures would work. Because I trusted her, I could relax and let them. She taught me how much we heal each other.

When she wasn't feeding us, or thinking about feeding us, or cleaning something, or helping us overcome illness, my grandmother turned to her needlework, and here was my strongest connection to her. Her mastery, as usual, ran deep. Of necessity, her stitching was usually confined to practical matters: curtains, drapes, slipcovers. Darning sock heels and hemming pants. Taking in a sweater or repairing burst seams. There was never any hesitation about how to tackle a

project, as if she'd lived a thousand years and had already seen and done it all before. I would watch her squinting, hunched over the work, believing that at some point all women must have known how to do these things. She inspired me to pick up yarns and threads and needles and hooks, and begin to teach myself the simpler needle arts. My hands will probably never know as much as hers forgot, but I feel an affinity to her in this realm. Her needlework taught me patience, and getting things right, and not being too lazy to rip out and redo something in pursuit of a finished object that would please me.

I realize now, happily, that Grandma managed to reserve some of her stitching time to simply creating beautiful objects. She crocheted lace, created cutwork, embroidered designs onto tapestries and pillows, embellished table linens with silk threads--and their only purpose was to give her pleasure. I have since learned that people, even in dire circumstances, will yearn to make something beautiful, if they are given any chance, and it reassures me. My grandmother's hands tapped into that human desire to create, and the process was as pleasurable as the end product was beautiful. When I framed her filet lace scenes, and she slyly asked me the cost of the framing, she pretended to be horrified, scolding me because the cotton only cost her \$2 from the sale bin, and I was "pazza" to spend so much money on frames. I'm not sure she ever knew the value of what she created, but I'd like to think it pleased her that I was preserving it so future generations of our family could appreciate it. What astounds me now, in hindsight, is that I never saw my grandmother work from paper patterns or instructions of any kind. All those designs and patterns, those beautiful scenes and textures and color combinations, sprang from the imagination of this practical woman, and found their expression through the gifts of her hands. I hope that some of those gifts will flow through mine, and leave a little corner of the world more beautiful for it. It would honor my grandmother well.