

Hot or Cold, Babushka?

Up. The rusty swing chains scratched the thin skin of my fingers as I gripped them with my entire might and leaned all the way back, feet up and eyes closed. Babushka Bronya said that maybe if I leaned back far enough, I would know what it felt like to fly like a bird. The wind rippled through my hair and dried my eyes.

Down. I leaned forward and kicked my feet back, rusty chains now scratching my palms. My hair swarmed my face, poking my eyes and invading my open mouth. “Higher! Higher!” I yelled to Babushka as I reached the peak of my backward swing. I looked back to see Babushka furrow her dark brows in concentration yet maintain her always gentle smile. She pushed my little butt forward on the swing with all the force in her body.

Bensonhurst park in Brooklyn was my favorite place to go with Babushka after she picked me up from pre-school every day. Babushka never left the house without her rose eye shadow and cherry red lipstick. Today, she was wearing her black pencil skirt, bright purple flower-embroidered blouse, designer bracelet, and diamond-studded wristwatch to the park. Deda Eric always told me that back when they lived in the Soviet Union, Babushka was the prettiest girl in all of Khmelnytskyi, and everyone knew it. Just a few weeks ago, Babushka finally retired from her nursing career forever, a celebration of 42 years in scrubs, more than half of which were spent in Khmelnytskyi Hospital.

When I was finally satisfied with the altitude of my swings, Babushka picked me up off the swing and led me home. I liked holding Babushka’s soft, veiny hands. I never wanted her to let go. Once we arrived home, Babushka whipped up her signature chicken and veggie Bulyon in just minutes and called me to the table, where my bowl of soup sat on the patterned tablecloth. The savory smell of chicken breast and cooked carrots pervaded my nostrils.

I leaned in close to eat my spoonful of broth and an ocean of steam kissed my face. In the corner of my eye, I could see Babushka scouring through the pots and pans. The clinks and clangs perturbed my ears. “Now where did I put that silly...” Babushka trailed off as she opened the creaky closet door. Distracted by my mouthful of tangy chicken broth, I tried not to mind the ruckus that she was suddenly making, but after another ten minutes of Babushka’s gentle clamor, I began to trail her with my eyes. Lifting cup after cup, kitchen towel after kitchen towel, Babushka made her way around the room and increasingly furrowed her brow.

“Babushka, what are you looking for?”

“My telephone! I just can’t remember where I put it!”

“Hmm, did you check the office?”

Just as Babushka opened her mouth to answer, she pulled the refrigerator open and gasped. “Oh my gosh! Can you believe this?” she exclaimed with wide eyes. There sat her Motorola, right next to the butter on the top shelf. “Silly me! I’m getting old!” she giggled.

Four years later and 42 miles across the New York–New Jersey border, it was Wednesday, my new favorite day of the week. Not only had bus driver Bob just given me a Snickers bar and a “Happy Hump Day kiddo, see you tomorrow!” as I bounced off the bus, but this was also the day Mama was at work, so Babushka and Deda would drive me to figure skating practice.

Babushka opened the front door for me with that gentle smile, the one where her lips part just a little and the crease lines next to her mouth get just a little deeper. Her hair was still brown like I last remembered it, but Mama told me last night that she actually had gray hair under the brown. Her 2006 Burberry perfume invaded my nostrils as her warm embrace enveloped my

entire 3-foot 90-pound body and she left her sticky red lipstick on my cheek. I never wanted her to let go. “Hi, my sunshine. How is your second week of school going?” she purred.

“Babushka! Babushka! Guess what we did in math today!”

“Times tables again?”

“Yes Babushka, and when Ms. Mark asked me what twelve times twelve is, I got it right! It’s 144! Are you proud of me?”

“Always, my sweet girl. Come on now. Go get dressed and eat.”

I always listened to Babushka. I quickly ran upstairs, changed, and came back down for my quick snack. I pulled the fridge open as Deda hoisted my bag into the garage and yelled, “We’re late again. Come on, my angel, you don’t want to disappoint your coach.” My leggings were pressed against my calves, that familiar thrice-a-week comfort of tight cotton. I pulled the plastic container of pierogi out of the fridge and promptly set them down on the counter, tugging the utensil cabinet open and feeling the pressure of sharp forks on my skin as I fumbled to pick one up. Babushka sat at the adjacent kitchen table with her legs crossed. She wore tan pants and a blouse now. She stared intently at me.

“How is your second week of school going, my sunshine?” she gently questioned.

I furrowed my brow. “Babushka, remember? I told you that I got Ms. Mark’s question right!”

“Oh, that’s great, my smart angel.”

I stabbed one pieróg and shoved it in my mouth. Between hastened breaths and chews, I asked, “Babushka, do you remember how I like to eat my pierogi?” Just a minute ago, she was smiling at me with kind eyes, but now, she stared at me expressionless. “Hot or cold, Babushka? Do you remember?” I pried. She shrugged and looked into the distance, as if I weren’t there at

all. The past few weeks, Babushka was losing more and more focus. My pierogi were cold and rigid, just how I liked them.

Only moments later, as if she had never left the conversation, she snapped back, “Well, I don’t remember. You’ve never told me. Do you like them hot?”

“No babushka, I like them cold,” I said. I told her every Wednesday. I wanted to know if the phone call I overheard between Mama and Babushka’s neurologist a month ago was true. I refused to believe it was true. But it was.

Yesterday afternoon, I drove to Brooklyn by myself. I forget one less turn every time I do it, and this time I made it all the way with only two wrong turns.

I greeted Babushka and Deda at the door. The copper doorbell was hot and sticky, a result of the sun’s potent rays just moments ago before the sun had set. “My angel, my sunshine, my world, my sweet girl, my princess!” Deda cried as he approached me with open arms and puckered lips.

“Hi, Deda, hi, hi,” I exclaimed over the soft sounds of Deda’s cheek kisses. Babushka’s messy tuft of gray hair bobbed up and down as she slowly trailed behind Deda to the door. She limped to me on her varicose vein leg.

“Babushka!!! My beautiful Babushka!” I hugged her tiny frame firmly. Babushka reminded me of a little tortoise. She stood low to the ground with her back hunched over. I felt like she might crumble if I hugged her too tightly.

I released Babushka from my embrace and laid a kiss on her cheek. I inhaled her soapy smell, or maybe it was the smell of baby powder. She did that gentle smile just for a moment. I could almost cry from that smile. The skin under her eyes and the jowls of her cheeks drooped

more than last time. Deda sat her down slowly in the porch chair. She shivered as a light breeze blew past and the sun started setting.

“Bronya, do you remember who this is?” Deda asked her. She looked right and left but not at me. Deda could never bare to see Babushka in confusion. His heart was too kind to let her struggle. Seconds later, he gave away the answer. “Bronya, this is our granddaughter, our one and only granddaughter, our favorite girl.” She nodded.

“Babushka, it’s me! Phoebe! You’re my Babushka and I’m your granddaughter,” I elaborated. She nodded again, this time regaining enough focus to look at me. She smiled. I swallowed to clear the lump in my throat and held back tears, forcing a smile in return.

“Seeing you is like our medicine,” Deda sighed, tears in his eyes. “I would give you anything and everything in the world, my princess. You are our everything. And everything that is ours is yours. You know Babushka and I love you so much. Don’t we, Babushka?” Babushka nodded and smiled with her mouth but not her eyes. Her eyes were empty. “My sweet wife. I cry every day. I love you.”

Deda told me that it took him two hours to find Babushka’s top dentures the other day. Somehow, she had put them in the sewing kit on the top closet shelf in the hallway. We giggled together. The only way to cope with the pain is to smile and laugh. I thank God every day that Babushka cannot comprehend what is happening to her, and I pray every day for some sort of miracle.

Mama texted me to come home; it was getting late. Deda kissed my cheeks one hundred times and hugged me until I couldn’t breathe. I turned to Babushka and wrapped my arms around her. I could feel the gentle pressure of her arms around my back. I cried on her shoulder. I don’t want to let go.