

## First Memories



Long after he died, my grandfather lived in a haunted space between my mother and me. From the time that I was very small, she told me too often I could not, would not, return the love that he gave me. when he was alive. I felt like a small heartless stone.

I learned about love when my parents ended their marriage for the first time. I was 3 when my mother and I took refuge with her parents in their small apartment above a hardware store in downtown Montreal.

My first memory of love is my grandfather's long hugs. My Zaida was a stout man. He gathered me into soft folds and crevices and into his fragrance of warm wool. He worked as a presser in a clothing factory. He enjoyed his hand rolled cigarettes, his strong tea with lemon and a cube of sugar, poured carefully and slurped from a saucer. After work, he also took an occasional schnapps. I could breathe in his smile as he held me to him, sitting on the front balcony, overlooking noisy Park Avenue. He would hum to me, his quiet tune melting into the

sounds of passing streetcars. We sat peacefully, watching the street go by. We passed many summer evenings and weekend afternoons together in this way.

My parents reunited and we moved into a sad and somber house.

My first memory of unbearable loss is the morning I woke up to the sound of quiet weeping and silent, stoic faces. The family had gathered. My mother explained to me something that I could not understand. The previous night, my grandfather had a heart attack, His heart stopped and he left us. He would never return.

Early one morning, months after my grandfather's death, I lay sick in bed. For an instant I looked up to the doorway of my room to see Zaida dancing down the hall, humming, passing the door of my bedroom, with his loving and familiar smile fleeting by. He had come back. It wasn't until much later in my life that I came to understand that this would be our last visit.

I suffered this loss with no comfort. My mother's grief was brooding, dark and stoic. She could not offer me solace from that place, She could not recognize that we were each suffering my grandfather's forever absence. When I spoke of him, as a child speaks of a love and death she would say again that his love for me was infinite and mine for him so limited. I had failed him in life and then, endlessly in death.

This wove a caul for me, one that caused me to bring sorrow to the possibilities of love. This haunted me well into my adult years. I was convinced again and again that I was incapable of loving. I didn't trust my own heart.

Even now when I experience fear, great uncertainty, still I crawl back into Zaida's lap. There are no words, just scents and embrace. I can hear his voice with others, the tones, the melodies of conversations around me. There I find safety and comfort.

As I grow closer to the age he was when he held me, I have come to understand that I was capable of loving him as a 3 year old loves a nurturing adult. Quietly. Gently, beyond words. His love is woven into my life, with pleasures and loss.