

First Home

By Kaja Weeks

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I was the last of four children, the one born as my refugee parents settled in America after years on the run in Europe, in forced labor and in displaced persons camps after World War II. They had fled Estonia, their birth country on the Baltic Sea, with their young children in tow as Russian destruction battalions advanced. By the time they arrived in the new world, my father's raging temper was rivaled only by his fear that some enemy was "coming" – the war mentality continued. Shades were continuously drawn, our telephone was not acknowledged (he installed a silencing device), and our outings were orchestrated to confuse "foes". Our little neighbor, Marie Yovanovitch, escaped his suspicion, and so in the early years she was one of the few outsiders actually allowed to see the inside of our house.

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Today, I've driven for hours and see my childhood friend Marie's old house. I can't yet make myself round the corner to get to our old house, two lots away. With my car in idle at the curb of Marshall Drive I have a full-frontal view of their white frame house. I'm staring, caught – a big-eyed bug in a sticky, old spider web. Anxious as I am

about continuing, I can't banish overflowing thoughts of how Marie's home was no restful place either. I'm picturing her mother cracking open the back door and screaming out into the neighborhood, "Maaa-rie, you-goddamned-son-of-a-bitch-get-the-hell-in-here-and-empty-that-damned-dishwasher!" Marie was likely to get her head smashed with a spatula or baseball bat, whichever was closer, when she finally went in.

I look at the detached one-car garage next to the house, though I don't recall any car in it. It was always crammed full of mechanic's junk and other items so disparate that my eyes and brain could only make gradual sense of them. When we were teenagers, the garage was a place where we could squirrel ourselves away from adults – her crazy mother, my crazy father. Marie also thought this was a good place to secretly smoke butts of her father's filterless Camels, scattered on the floor and heel-crushed. "No thanks to the butts," I always responded.

But when we were just kids there *had* been something I wanted in that garage. You wouldn't think that Marie's little pink and white kitchen set and pretend food could be so fanatically desirable. "Why," she demanded, "do you keep pretending to take out hot dogs from the refrigerator and eating hot dogs and hot dogs and hot dogs?" Even Marie, with all her five-year old wisdom, could tell there was something wrong with my play actions. To her it was as if I had not only become no-good as her playmate, but had also lost my mind in some unimaginable way. Marie didn't know that I was doing it with real hot dogs at home and, truly, I was slowly losing my young mind.

It was a life-or-death-sneaking-of-cold-ones and torturously forcing as many hot dogs as I could down my throat. Sometimes it happened when Crazy Grandmother Yovanovitch (Marie's name, not mine) was babysitting me and I was supposed to be napping. The old woman sat in a straight back chair in front of drapes separating the living room from the narrow hallway that led from my bedroom. She was gleeful about turning me in for offenses that resulted in beatings later. I risked my skin all the times I tiptoed past her and into the kitchen, my stealthy five-year old hands pulling open the refrigerator door and teasing out two or three franks from their plastic encasing. Careful, secret, like wartime. It was the only quick fix that could appease profound turmoil and it continued for years.

When we were alone in my house Marie often foraged through our refrigerator. Leaning against the small reddish-pink vinyl counter in a bossy-hands-on-hips pose, she declared, "Remember, you *have* to tell me about the fish or I will scream!" This demand meant that she should be forewarned about the presence of a whole fish, for example, with its head and gleaming eyes intact, or a shiny, black-skinned eel. "Okay," I agreed, but I still heard a lot of her screams, for I could not possibly keep up with the plethora of unusual fish or other food from my parent's old country that entered our house – jiggling gelatinous meat forms or black barley sausage. "What is *that*?" Marie said, pointing dramatically at a big bowl of sweet and pungent beet salad. Though I did not perceive these foods as alien, Marie never accepted them. However, in years that stretched from before-childhood-memory through high school, she did become a friend intimately familiar with customs and phrases in our rare Finno-Ugric language; she

knew her way around architectural niches in the attic and emotional fissures in the air; and eventually, like me, she learned to tiptoe when my father was around. She had caught enough whiffs of the relentless dangers he posed, though never directly witnessing them at the hot-dog-madness level that I endured privately.

Oddly, neither did my mother ever question, reprimand, or even acknowledge my maniacal hot dog eating. She *must* have noticed, mustn't she? Pay no mind, though; for each such thieving act brought me ironclad relief and, truly, had I been stopped I believe I would have died. Fortunately, my mother also prepared delicious foods that I loved as a child and could savor more normally. The small kitchen filled with savory aroma that was comforting in the midst of constant fear. I nibbled on *pirukad* (meat, egg and rice filled pastries) or spooned whipped cranberry semolina pudding into my mouth, enjoying its warm pink sweetness topped with milk. These I recall to this day with a peculiar longing for home – comprised of dread yet accompanied by aching desire.

My mother's artistic intuition as a cook originated from her own childhood home where organic, straight-from-the garden greens combined with her mother's youthful training as a chef in St. Petersburg. Among my mother's sublime creations was a way of both braising and steaming so that gently spiced meat – veal or lamb – when nudged off its bone would dissolve on your tongue. The after effect of carrots and bay leaves, cardamom, salt and peppercorns lingered and brought primitive satiety. She often made this and other delicious foods on Wednesdays or Thursdays, which were my

father's night work shifts and therefore we could rest assured he wouldn't return until one or two a.m.

These were fleeting, peaceful interludes from his violence. She cooked with abandon, the kitchen door stayed open to the evening air and the television, often forbidden otherwise, played non-stop old movies. I spread out three-dimensional school projects on the living room floor and she viewed my handiwork, offering yarn or buttons or a smiling nod. We laughed at Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like it Hot* or looked wide-eyed at 1940's spy mysteries while indulging together in All-American potato chips and onion dip.

One Thursday night, with impunity, I took advantage of my mother's good nature. My older sister, out of the house by now, had left a bike – a heavy-wheeled Schwinn that I privately named "Black," drawn from the Black Stallion book series I adored. Without a word of departure, I rolled away, high on its seat, speeding toward more and more freedom through swaths of cool, fresh air. I rode miles to friends' houses on the other side of town and didn't return until long after dark. "Where have you been?" my mother asked, flinging open the front door the moment I neared the path to the house. Her eyes were moist. "Hmpfh," I mumbled sullenly and let long hair hide my own eyes. And yet her rebuke, though stern, was restrained, and during her worry, she had readied a delicate snack for me. On her mismatched set of china, which she loved nonetheless, there was warm sliced boiled egg with a little cache of mayonnaise next to slivered, dill-topped cucumbers doused with vinegar and sugar. "Sit," she coaxed, and I did. Her fresh bread lay cut open on a wooden board, the aroma

of baked yeast dough filling the small kitchen. A vintage pot brimmed with hot water. She had set out a china cup, with tea bag and lemon slice edging the saucer while I had been truant.

Now, I am still sitting in front of Marie's house, flooded with memories of this kindness and its contrast to my father's volcanic violence. I lean forward and, like a rooting piglet, curl myself over the steering wheel. Snorts pierce my dry cries. My father pervaded so much of our time and space in the place I am about to revisit. His roars, smashing of dishes complete with food flying off, his firestorms of arms and hands striking wildly made up days and nights from which I tried to disappear. It was also how I learned to reach for easy food. Yes, massive amounts would hurt but then it would make everything blessedly white inside. It's hard to stay present even now in the car with all the bile that rises from these recollections. I lash out at myself and ask, am I not capable – after all these decades – of looking at underlying circumstances?

Once, recently, I came close to doing so. I wrote a scathing poem about my father and his gift for hurling the most inventive insults and curses, and then in a moment of retreat I offered up a line that his life had been "wickedness and hunger from knee to knee." I know he didn't have it easy. I found gnarled notations in old genealogy records supplementing stories I'd heard that conveyed the tragic life of his grandmother.

Assaulted as a young servant woman and expecting a child, she had been banished to live in a barn on the remote edge of a manor estate. She became known as "the witch". Likely, she descended into insanity. His mother was the one born to this outcast-under-the-eaves at a time when a free Estonia wasn't even a dream, when peasants were still

indentured and never owned the land they tilled. One of the few things my father ever admitted about his childhood was that he was constantly famished, and sometimes the old women at a nearby prayer house gave him a potato. Villages in the poor region where his people came from are not even on a map anymore.

No more. I need to breathe in my mother. I catch her apparition in the backyard of our small Cape Cod, where she created a verdant landscape, one like her own mother's yard of lilacs, herbs, and vegetables. That garden had sustained their hearts and welfare. That loving home with its coastal breezes in southwestern Estonia remained standing, but I am keenly aware of my mother's grief in having left it forever. My mind is bursting with memories of time and place from before my birth. I have to will myself to move on from the space in front of Marie's house, I must release the brake, press the accelerator before I drown in hallucinations.

I arrive – 923 Marshall Drive. The front birch is gone. My mother's gardens, cultivated over fifty years with vegetable scraps, egg shells, shredded newspapers; hoed until the earth was dark and crumbled in her hands – gone. The driveway and the sound that used to instantly churn my stomach each time my father's advancing car tires crushed the gravel; the white wood front door I so feared to open – gone.

The whole house is gone. Demolished, down through its foundation. Quickly done after we sold the house to pay for my mother's continued care. But the big new house erected in its place may as well be invisible. Old images, sounds, smells and thickening breath permeate me. Vertigo takes hold. Not even Marie witnessed the worst of his deeds. "God," I whisper out loud, "no one will ever know what happened

here.” Walls, floor and beams – only they really overheard and saw – and they are gone.

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There is a verse set to an Estonian folk melody about a child’s village home, *Meil Aiaäärne Tänavas* – The Road Bordering our Yard that I paraphrase here:

*The girl runs knee-deep in grassy morning dew
Grandpapa’s hand brings her in to sleep at night.
The child longs to peer over the fence
and Grandpapa says to her,
Child, wait, that time will come too quickly.
Later, reminiscing, she says,
Time came over land and sea.
To my eyes much was explained.
It was not half as dear as on my village road.*

Maddeningly, though the poet, Lydia Koidula, wrote under pseudonym because in mid-19th c writing was not deemed proper for a woman, after her death the poem was set to music and survived as a treasured song. I know its plaintive text and tune by heart, having sung it countless times as a young performer of that traditional music. In the hush that returns to me as I commune with my mother and her *aiaäärne tänav* – her garden side road – I remain curled in the car on Marshall Drive. I recall that in Estonia my mother was born down the road from where the poet had been born more than half a century earlier. I sense that my mother lived this kind of sweet, not perfect, but kindly childhood home life, and my heart breaks over that which time, land and sea showed her. But I am also comforted that she held the seeds of what was dear.

The words and tune of the song slip unbidden from my lips as I allow dusk to envelope me and the missing house of my childhood. I long to commune with a “dear place.” But there are no such walls and floor and beams. I will pluck dearness from the spirit of a mother who held her own.

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About the Author



Kaja Weeks is a poet, essayist and classically trained singer. As the daughter of WW II refugees, she often contemplates identity through the lens of inter-generational history. Her works have been published in The Sugar House Review, Ars Medica: A Journal of Medicine, The Arts and Humanities, Under the Gum Tree, and elsewhere. “Voices,” a poem inspired by Estonia’s renowned Song Festival, was published by Estonian World, a global online magazine. Her essay, “A Girl’s Singing Nirvana, My Mother’s Voice” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize (The Potomac Review, 2015).

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