

Chapter 7. The Matriarch



As a ship has its captain, we had our Muz. I'm not sure where the name "Muz" originated. I was told that it was some corruption of a word invented by my older brother when he was young and cute. But whatever the origin, the name stuck and my brother and I referred to my maternal grandmother as Muz or Muzzie throughout her life. We still do.



There is an old expression (obviously out of date in today's society) which said, "A man's home is his castle." That sentiment was probably never true unless the home was really a castle and the man happened to be a real king -- and then I'm not so sure. I can certainly verify, however, that our home was my grandmother's castle, territory, domain, or whatever state or territory you might wish to fix upon it. She controlled everything that came into or went out of her house and, of course, everything within.

Some might have described Muzzie as "lace curtain Irish". My mother once explained to me that the term was applied to the Irish poor who kept up a more prosperous image by hanging lace curtains on the front windows. There might be nothing else in the house but the front window curtains would be made of lace. I also learned, from small fragments of our family's history that, when Muzzie was young, our family was fairly prosperous. Apparently she liked prosperity better than the lack of it because she lived her life in a way that gave the appearance of prosperity even though the reality of our situation dictated that we were decidedly not.

One would have thought that a lifestyle change might occur when my grandfather died during World War II. Yet, my grandmother's lifestyle

never wavered. My mother remarked one time that Muzzie never spoke of getting a job or curtailing her genteel lifestyle in order to make ends meet. She would have none of it. My mother became the wage earner while my uncle, brother, and I did the chores according to our respective capabilities -- and life went on as before. The explanation for this course of action is fairly simple. My grandmother's profession was her home, and that included those that occupied it. What's more, she considered it an essential profession, just as important as that of the primary wage earner.

Muzzie's house was nicely furnished and well kept and the routines of daily living were firmly established. We had, of course, the usual Monday wash days and other house cleaning regimens throughout the week. We all took part in these activities and the responsibilities grew as we did. These chores made up so much of my life, even through college, that they deserve their own stage and will be dealt with later.

We had both a dining room and a breakfast nook. The breakfast nook was big enough for the whole family to sit down at mealtime -- and sit down we did. Food was expensive and, during the War, some of it was scarce. Muz controlled the kitchen and the flow of food with an iron hand. She planned and cooked the meals and even portioned out the food. Most of the time bowls were not put on the table for each to take helpings as they wished. You were served a plate with your portion of the meal and that was it -- not bad for dieting. On some occasions, there would be a little of the meal left in one or more of her pans. If there were enough left to make another meal, or a portion of a meal, it would be saved. Extra potatoes, for example, would show up on another day as fried potato patties. In the event there was just not enough to save or the nature of the food did not lend itself well to saving, the extra portions would be served at Muzzie's discretion. At such times, she would bring the pan to the table while scraping what was left to one side. Then she would peer down the table and dole out variable sized helpings to those who wanted them. My mother and uncle were considered first then my brother and lastly me. Arguments related to portion sizes were futile -- it

was the will of the queen.

I know this sounds cruel by today's established rules of child rearing but snacking at night was usually not permitted. I would often go to bed with visions of peanut butter sandwiches dancing in my head and would sometimes succumb to the temptation to raid the kitchen. It was not something for the timid to initiate. After I was in bed, Muz and my mother would sit in the living room and read the newspaper or listen to the radio. After slipping out of bed and sneaking a peek down the hall, I would begin my journey. The route to the kitchen, from my bedroom crossed my mother's bedroom, the central hall, the dining room, and breakfast nook. The most difficult part of the trip was negotiating the central hall and dining room -- the perigee of the journey as far as the living room was concerned. Adding to the difficulty was the old oak flooring that had a penchant for creaking -- stealth was essential. Quietly leaving my bedroom I would creep through the darkness toward the dim light at the end of the hall that marked the door to the dining room. When I reached the beginning of the hall it was necessary to switch to tiptoe stealth to avoid the creaking oak floorboards. It was like stepping through a minefield. You never could be certain when a creak would go off making discovery and a march back to bed imminent. I don't know if it was variation in humidity or just blind luck but there were definitely good nights and bad nights. On a good night I would avoid all the creaks, silently craft and devour a sandwich in the darkness, rinse the knife, and slip, unseen and unheard, back into bed. It was essential that no incriminating evidence be left at the food scene. Discovery of things out of place in the morning would bring retribution in the form of a firm, but brief, tongue lashing by Muz. Those were best avoided; she had a way of making you remember them. On the nights the boards creaked, I would hear, "Michael, is that you? Go back to bed." I was usually back in bed before she finished speaking. Muz seldom got off the sofa during these skirmishes unless she knew for certain that I had made it to the kitchen. When that happened I was always apprehended red-handed -- caught in the still of the night in the bright glare of the kitchen lights with a jar of peanut butter at the ready.

It was embarrassing. If my sandwich was already made I was sometimes allowed to finish it while being lectured on the price of food and the need to save. It was, I think, the price I had to pay for my extra sandwich.

Mom was usually quiet during my ordeal and backed Muzzie's sermons with a nod. Afterward, she would tuck me back into bed and kiss me good night as I drifted off to sleep.