

Of the Tribal Elders

It happens every March. I do try to postpone it until the end of the month, but it always happens. I know the drill.

On one of those chilly March mornings, you will wake up the way soldiers wake up, with fear in your mouth and your heart pounding like a fist against a locked door.

March has imprinted you with its mournful chemistry in the same way young salmon are imprinted with the waters in which they begin their long journeys, the journeys that must, because of the Great Law, end in death.

The Old Man, my father, died in March. Baba Jula, my grandmother, died in March. They are not the only ones who died in March, but they are the ones who knew you and loved you, even as you knew them and loved them. It was as a young child knows and loves the Tribal Elders.

The others who died in March are at a remove from you, and you are at a remove from them, so you can only grieve for them in a dry-eyed, academic, at-a-remove kind of way. Are we expected to grieve for the strangers in the obituary columns of the daily papers? Can we?

If we do, we do not grieve for them in the same way we grieve for immediate family, like the Old Man and Baba Jula. Never mind. The people in the obituary columns have someone to grieve for them and remember them especially keenly when the months in which they died roll around again.

Unless the ones in the obituary columns outlived everyone in their circle of family and friends and there's no one left to mourn them or grieve for them. I don't know if that's sad or not. Maybe some people choose to hang on because they don't want to be a burden to anyone in that way.

Then again, there are people who choose not to hang on because they also do not want to be a burden to anyone. Baba Jula was my mother's mother, and Baba was the only grandmother we had growing up in South Milwaukee. My father's mother was alive, but back in Yugoslavia. She lived and died there and we never met her.

In a way, that grandma died to us before Baba Jula did. Grandma

North Country Notebook



by George Vukelich

Vukelich was alive there in the Old Country, and she was our blood grandma as much as Baba Jula was here in the New Country. The difference was that Grandma Vukelich was alive, but in another place, another reality. You think about that and it could be true of Baba Jula too now — and of all the people in the obituary pages — alive, but, in another place, another reality.

Baba Jula died a very long time ago.

My sister and I were still in high school and we had arrived there without losing anyone in the family to death. Baba Jula was the first one, and that was very hard because Baba Jula was like a mother to me.

When I was a little boy, I stayed for a time with Baba and Tata in their little house with the big garden. I learned to speak Romanian, helped Baba feed the chickens and watched her do embroidery the way Romanian women did it in the Old Country. I remember, too, how she could kill chickens and dress them better than Schulz the butcher, whose chickens were cut good but not as good as Baba's.

Tata said he never met anyone who was so fast and clean with a knife. I often held my breath when the knife in Baba's hand was just flying, and I feared that she would cut herself and bleed, but she never did. Even when she grew old and you really worried for her, Baba never once cut herself.

I never saw her fillet fish, because in those olden days, no one filleted fish in South Milwaukee — nor anywhere else in Wisconsin, either. You cleaned and scaled the fish — bullheads you skinned with a pliers — cut off the heads and tails, scooped

out the entrails and fried up the fish with the skins on and the bones in.

If Baba Jula had lived to see the arrival of filleting, she would have mastered it by the second fish. She would have become the best fillet knife in the family because she had the hands of a surgeon and the eyes of an osprey.

You have to have the good hands and the good eyes, because you can't do embroidery or needlepoint if you have clumsy hands and clumsy eyes. And doing a good-looking, absolutely boneless fillet is no small thing. Baba would have been good.

I remember touching Baba's folded hands in the casket and being shocked at how cold, how like stones they were. They were dead as birds: mute, heavy, the lilting flight and the delicate singing gone from them forever.

I don't think anyone's death has affected me as much as Baba's. Part of it, certainly, was that I had never seen a dead human being before — or touched a dead human.

But Tata had seen many dead people during his long life and Baba's death just devastated him. Tata cried like a baby over Baba, and that devastated all of us because we had never seen Tata cry before. I think seeing him cry made us realize, for the first time, that we had never really understood how these two old people could love each other so much.

After all, they never really showed "love" in the way Americans think you show love. I never ever saw Baba and Tata hug, kiss or even pat each other. Of course, they were always hugging, kissing and patting you, both of them.

You knew that they both loved you to pieces but it never occurred to dumb, young you, that they could love each other.

So, it happens every month of March. This ritual. This anniversary. This predictability, like the geese coming north.

I hang out with the Old Man's fishing gear downstairs. I hang out with Baba's embroidered linens upstairs. I do that a lot in March.

Then, when April comes, I go walking in the budding woods. Just walking, watching around and waiting — for both of them.