

The Season of Grieving

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

T. S. Eliot wrote in "The Waste Land" that April is the cruelest month, and he made a convincing case.

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.*

For me, I think the cruelest month is March.

Our grandmother, Baba Julia, died in the month of March, and years later our father died in the month of March.

Baba Julia's death was the hardest because I was a boy then, and no one in our family had died up to that time.

Relatives of friends died, and sometimes your friends were gone from school for a day and sometimes for more than a day if the dead relative was a grandma or a grandpa who had lived out of town.

We had a kind of nodding acquaintance with death because we were altar boys at Holy Assumption, and the altar boys served at a lot of Masses for the Dead. That could be pretty tough on you because you were standing right there next to the priest when he sprinkled holy water on the casket and wafted clouds of incense over it, and you were practically looking into the faces of the dead person's family who were gathered in the front pews of the church.

The two altar boys who held the holy water and the censer also served the Mass, and then they were facing the

altar and they couldn't see the grieving people in the front pews.

The altar boy who held the crucifix wasn't so lucky. He faced the altar too, but he had to stand at the casket, which was in the aisle between the pews where the family sat and knelt for the Mass.

The crucifix bearer could hear the crying and the sobbing quite clearly. It could be unnerving if you thought about it. So you tried not to think about it. You stared straight ahead and put on a funeral face, and sometimes members of the family would look at the casket, but you stared straight ahead.

Sometimes you would think how you would feel if it was your grandpa or your grandma or your father or your mother in that casket. That was more unnerving to you than anything. You could be in those front pews crying and sobbing for Baba Julia or Grandpa or your father or

your mother in the casket. You put those thoughts out of your mind or you would break down.

I don't remember much about Baba Julia's funeral. My mother had converted to Catholicism when she married my father, but Baba Julia had a Greek Orthodox funeral. I never knew she had any religion because she and grandpa didn't go to church.

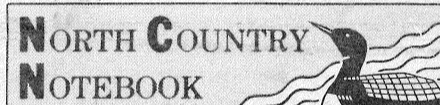
What I remember is that she had black hair, and even though she was born and raised in Romania, she looked like a Native American, especially when she wore her hair in braids. In death, she had a wide white streak in her dark hair that had never been there. No one knew why. They said Baba had a stroke and the stroke did it.

While everyone took Baba out to the cemetery, the Romanian ladies went over to the hall that the family had rented and prepared all the Romanian food. They even set a place for Baba next to Grandpa because that was the custom, and no one sat in her chair.

Grandpa wore a suit, and I had never seen him in a suit before. I also remember Grandpa was crying, and I had never seen him cry before. Uncle George was holding him and hugging him and trying to get Grandpa out of his grief, which was just overwhelming. People were touching him and kissing his wet face like he was their father or brother or grandpa, too.

I had never seen my grandpa and grandma ever kiss or hug each other, although they were always doing that to the grandchildren, and suddenly that morning, for the first time, I realized how much they had loved each other and how much they had gone through together in the Old Country and here.

Uncle George was cradling Grandpa and his eyes were teary too. Then he got Grandpa to have a little wine, and Grandpa was not really a drinker. The wine got Grandpa relaxed, and he got to



talking about Baba Julia and their life together, and he told about the first time they met and how beautiful and how strong she was, and how shy he was. Everyone smiled at that and nodded. People just quieted down, and the women came out of the kitchen to listen, and everyone just stood around Baba Julia's place and listened to Grandpa talking about her. Then the bustle of eating started, and people were laughing again, and they toasted Grandpa and Baba Julia. It was not unlike a wedding breakfast. I think a woman who was serving told me that my grandpa had been lucky to have Baba Julia and I was a lucky boy to have her, too. Then a lot of people were saying that, and I knew they were right.

I wasn't a boy when my father died. I had a wife, and we had children of our own. My father's friends were saying the rosary for him at the Gaffney Funeral Home in Eagle River when there was a commotion, a loud voice at the door.

It was Matt Tadych, my father's lifelong friend who had owned the Pine Gables for years. Matt and my father were like brothers. Old Country Slavs in the new country.

Matt Tadych, also an old man now, almost blind now, leaning on a cross-country ski pole, his silver mane and silver beard transforming him into one of God's own prophets. Matt Tadych, crashing, stumbling his way to the casket, feeling it, his bear paw of a hand exploring, seeking until it found the granite face of his friend.

"Frano, my friend," Matt Tadych bellowed in pain. "They told me you were here."

April is not the cruelest month. It thaws in April. ■