

Diamond Days

Cherie Gilmore longs for the simple days of cake and a cuppa on the porch with her neighbour.

When I was young, our neighbour's errant corgi – a massive snob – went missing. The whole street gathered to look for it, and according to family legend, as we searched for the stupid thing, an elderly woman seemed to be having trouble walking, so I reached out and took her hand. That was how I met Stacy.

After that, I would visit her house down the road often. She would give me cake, cordial and a listening ear. I can still summon the smell of must in her house, and catch a whiff of the strong-smelling liquor she enjoyed on occasion. I can see the lace doilies and the silver Jesus on a cross on her wall. I would one day learn that she was Lithuanian, although, at the time, I just enjoyed how my name rolled off her tongue with clipped Eastern European vowels: "Cher-ie." Her perfectly curled white-grey hair framed a face mottled with sunspots. She'd once been married, but I didn't ask about that.

Stacy's backyard was a veritable Eden: large stone pebbles led from the door to a cluttered lawn with a menagerie down the back. There was a huge walk-in aviary full of tropical parrots and rainbow lorikeets, a stone fishpond awash with catfish with their comically large mouths, and overgrown vines and exotic plants as far as the eye could see. I once chased a stray rooster around her front yard, circling the topiary, trying to catch it. It was the only time I remember seeing her laugh. She wiped tears from her eyes with her sleeve.

One day, Stacy remarried, and Mum and I were invited to the wedding in a neighbourhood hall, me in my shiny Sunday school shoes and Stacy in her nicest pearl necklace. She smiled all day. But the marriage didn't last. He was "not a nice man" it turned out.

As I grew into a teenager, I became the bad Samaritan, crossing the road on my walk home from school so I wouldn't have to say hello. "Cher-ie, why you no visit me anymore?" she asked sadly. I would explain that I was in high school now and had all these new

friends and a part-time job. Life was very demanding. She would continue to sit on her porch, day in and day out, watching the street, nursing her whisky.

The years rolled on, and one day Mum told me Stacy was in an aged-care home and didn't have much time left; I should go and see her. I'd stopped visiting years earlier. Apparently, Stacy had succumbed to dementia. And still, I didn't visit. It had been too long. My guilt had calcified into something immovable. She died in 2015, and outside of a handful of the nursing staff, Mum and I were the only other people at her funeral.

I learned that Stacy had escaped Lithuania during the Soviet occupation in 1944. She'd met and married her husband in a prison camp, and they fled to Australia with just the clothes on their back. He'd died in the early 90s, and she'd lived alone, apart from that brief and unfortunate marriage.

At her funeral, after the formalities, the minister announced they would play her favourite song. I waited for a Lithuanian folk song or a Catholic hymn, but instead, 'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts' jingled from the CD player. I imagined her laughing, wiping tears from her eyes as they lowered her into the ground. *I'm sorry*, I wanted to say. *I'm sorry I grew up and left you sitting on that porch alone.*

As a child with much older siblings, few people gave me the generosity of their time like Stacy did. When I grew up and things changed, I didn't return that generosity. Two years later, on my 30th birthday, Mum gave me Stacy's diamond ring. "She would have wanted you to have it," she said, and I squirmed with guilt.

Stacy reminds me that in a world raging with war and pain, the simple kindness of a cuppa and cake can restore our humanity. We'd sit together on the porch and watch the world go by. Two people from opposite ends of the world, occupying vastly different plots of time, finding themselves as neighbours. I now know that this is worth more than diamonds. ■

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