

I Think I Just Said the Women Wear the Pants

Around the holidays, I become particularly proud of the women in my family. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that this is when I see them most often, but there you have it.

My mother's mother is what I call a first-and-a-half generation immigrant, her sisters having been born in what was then Czechoslovakia, she in the States. She now lives in a Cleveland suburb so thoroughly saturated with Slovaks that I am unsurprised by any looks of confusion I receive when explaining my heritage: of course no one knows what a "Slovak" is; they *only* exist in the greater Cleveland area. At any rate, the population of the eastern suburbs being comprised mostly of my relatives and Czecho-Slovak families we know, holiday get-togethers are large and warm affairs. They have gotten smaller over the years, what with the younger generations' growing rate of college education and need to spread in general, but the most important parts have not changed.

What I love most about these days is the time right after dinner. The children run off to play ping-pong in the basement, the men turn on the game, but the women move to the head of the table—where my grandmother sits—and talk.

I couldn't tell you what they say, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that here is the place I learned about womanhood. None of my grandmother's generation went to college, none of them have perfect grammar, and they are the kind of women unconcerned with aging, but the image of these *women*, these modern women, lounging in their slacks with their arms thrown over the backs of their chairs, are the women I see in my mind when I hear the word. Maybe it's because they're hardy, being eastern European and all, and a little rough; maybe it's because I know they've been through what they're protecting me from (depending on their ages, a war, the depression, or living conditions in Slovakia), I don't know.

What defines "empowerment"? Is it the appearance of strength? Is it the evolution from corsets to bras (or no bras, as the case may be with some of my relatives)? As I get older, I think more about this. I didn't always care about issues of sex and gender as I do now, so of course I didn't think about it as much, but now I want to talk to my family about it. They won't; they seem to take affront to it. I wonder if my family truly has gone past the battle of the sexes, if it's a non-issue. Is such a thing possible? We pride ourselves in practicality—or I happen to glorify what I see as practicality—in our family, so it seems likely to me.

Still, it seems strange to me that so many other women I know have had oppressive mothers: where do these kinds of mothers come from? How do their daughters get past it? I can't help but wonder what every other woman's relationship with her mother is like.