

Adam Giles

## Opa

I sit in the passenger seat as my mom drives our grey Pontiac Sunbird down Mississauga Road. We pass the 401 and Mississauga Road turns into Erin Mills Parkway. We pass Millcreek Drive and Battleford Road. We approach Britannia and my grandparents' townhouse. I squint in the sunlight and raise my hand to shield my eyes. My mom drives through the intersection of Erin Mills Parkway and Britannia. She pulls her hand from the steering wheel. She waves out her window.

I look over at my mom. "What was that?"

My mom turns and faces me. "Just waving to Opa in the window."

I look at Oma and Opa's front window, but the sun's glare reflects off the glass, and forces my eyes into a squint until I look away.

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Mom and Dad sat my brother Ron and me in the back seat of our grey station wagon and we drove to Kitchener. Dad, in the driver's seat, reached his arm behind his seat and squeezed my knee. I laughed and tried to pry his giant fingers loose, but his hand didn't come off until he released and grabbed Ron's knee.

We arrived at Oma and Opa's small house. Its green eaves troughs and green window frames lined brown bricks. We walked in through the side door.

Oma and Opa's kitchen remained the same: the yellow refrigerator, the white stove, the big wooden oval table and the smell of German sausages and sauerkraut.

In the hallway, the living room hid behind a giant brown curtain, while one staircase led to the basement and one upstairs.

"Never go upstairs. There are strangers up there. They pay Oma and Opa money to live upstairs," Opa said in his German accent.

In the basement, banners of the German soccer team and pictures of ships plastered Opa's bar. One of the pictures looked like the ship on Opa's arm—blue with lots of sails. Opa was in the navy. He was a chef and he had to feed everyone on the ship.

Opa used to have a restaurant in Huntsville and he said everyone came for his homemade donuts. He said his donuts were famous. Sometimes Opa made his donuts when we came over. I liked his donuts, but I didn't always like when he made dinner. I didn't like when he made sausages and sauerkraut, liver and onions or cottage roll.

Opa wore thick glasses with black frames on his round face. Opa had a big belly. He always made lots of food and put lots on my plate. Especially spinach. Opa always put lots of spinach on my plate. I sat next to Dad at the big kitchen table and tugged his shirt until he looked at me. I whispered in Dad's ear, "I don't want to eat this."

When Opa saw me whisper to Dad he said, "What's the matter? Eat your food. You have to eat your spinach so you'll be big and strong like Popeye."

I looked at Dad and Dad said, "Just try to eat a little more." I looked back at my plate and swirled my fork around in my food.

"Eat your food! There are starving children in China that would love to have that food," Opa said, raising his voice and pointing his fork at my plate.

When Opa left the kitchen, Oma took my plate and scraped everything I didn't eat into the garbage can.

After dinner, Ron and I watched Mom, Dad, Oma and Opa play cards. They played a game called 'Dammit,' but my brother and I were only allowed to call it 'Darn it.' We left the table to watch TV. Nothing

good was ever on at Oma and Opa's. They never got *Today's Special*, *Polka Dot Door* or *Sesame Street*. We turned the dial on the front of the TV forwards and backwards. We went through all the channels but we only found things that Mom and Dad watched like the news or old police shows. We went back and forth through the channels and stopped on commercials we recognized. I pushed the power button and we went back to the kitchen table to watch Mom, Dad, Oma and Opa play cards. Opa turned to me and said, "So, do you have a girlfriend yet?"

I looked at Dad. Dad smiled. I looked at Opa. "When I was your age, I had lots of girlfriends," Opa said.

Oma smacked Opa's arm and said, "Heinz. Leave him alone." Opa smiled and pulled me onto his lap. He passed me his glass of beer and I sipped from it. Opa laughed. Mom said, "Dad, don't let him drink that."

When we visited Oma and Opa at Christmas, Opa opened the big curtain that closed off the living room and we sat around the Christmas tree. Oma and Opa made my brother and me each a Christmas plate of gingerbread cookies, weird-looking white puffy cookies, walnuts, tangerines and a chocolate bar with German words and pictures of hazelnuts on the front. We ate the chocolate bars.

Opa said he knew Santa Claus. He said he always knew when Santa was coming. Opa patted his big belly and said, "When Santa needs to get big every year, who do you think he comes to for Christmas dinner?"

One Christmas, when Oma and Opa came to our old house on Martins Pine Crescent, Opa said Santa was coming soon, so Ron and I should go upstairs and look for him out the window. Dad took us upstairs and we looked for Santa's sleigh in the sky. We saw a red blinking light far away. Dad said it was Rudolph's nose, but the light never moved.

"Quick! Come downstairs! It's Santa Claus!" Opa called.

We rushed down and saw presents everywhere under the Christmas tree. Opa looked out the back door and said, "You just missed him. Look! He went out that way."

Ron and I rushed over and looked in the backyard. Opa turned the back light on and pointed to footprints in the snow beside the balcony. "It's Santa's footprints. He came through the back door because there's no chimney," Opa said.

Ron and I looked at the footprints in the snow and we looked at the sky. Opa's snow-covered shoes sat beside the doormat on the balcony.

We opened presents around the tree. Opa always made Ron and me things for Christmas. One year, Opa made us an airport out of wood for our toy airplanes and one year Opa made us a big train set with trees and houses alongside the tracks. Opa built the balcony in our backyard and he built our cottage up north. Mom said Opa was good with his hands. Mom said Opa could fix anything.

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In 1990, Oma and Opa bought a condominium in St. Petersburg, Florida. They stayed there for the winters and came to stay with us at our new house on Kempton Park Drive from June to August.

In June, during my last month of grade seven, I came home from school every day and found Oma and Opa watching TV.

"What did you learn in school today?" Opa asked me.

I looked at Opa. "I don't know."

"Where's your girlfriend?" he asked.

"I don't have one."

"When I was your age I had lots of girlfriends," he said.

Oma shook her head and said, "Opa is only kidding. Don't listen to him."

On weekend afternoons Mom and Dad played cards with Oma and Opa and every night Opa and Mom made dinner. When the summer heat combined with the heat in the kitchen, beads of sweat formed on Opa's forehead and Opa pulled his thick, black-framed glasses off his

round face and dabbed his handkerchief on the bridge of his nose. Opa wore his white, sleeveless undershirt over his big belly. When dinner was ready, we sat at the kitchen table.

“Why didn’t you put any spinach on your plate?” Opa asked me.

I looked at Opa. “I don’t like spinach.”

“You won’t get big and strong like Popeye if you don’t eat your spinach,” he said, flexing his arm. I looked at the sails and masts of the blue ship on his thick forearm.

Opa stabbed his fork into the chicken in the middle of the table, shook it around and said, “Is he dead yet?” He turned to me. “I don’t think he’s dead yet.”

Every night after dinner we went for a walk. One time we brought a soccer ball. When we got to the park at the end of our street, Opa ran onto the soccer field with the ball and stood between the goal posts. “You get a loonie for every goal you score,” he said.

Ron and I rushed onto the field and took turns kicking the ball at Opa. Opa blocked the ball with his shins and his big hands. After we each scored a goal, Opa grabbed the ball and waved us over to continue our walk.

One time we walked down the black asphalt path that led to the rusted bridge that crossed the creek and entered the forest near our house. We crossed the bridge and walked the path through the forest’s rustling leaves until we reached Badminton Drive. On the sidewalk, Opa and I walked behind Mom and Oma.

“You’re not going back to Florida soon, are you?” I asked Opa.

Opa said, “I’ll tell you what. We’ll stay on one condition.”

“What?”

Opa ran ahead of me and shouted, “You have to race me to Oma!”

I ran as fast as I could. I passed Opa. I passed Mom and Oma. I stopped and Opa caught up to me. He slowed down, put his hands on his big belly and breathed heavily. “Okay, we’ll stay a while longer.”

When we got home, Uncle Bob called. Oma and Opa talked to him, then Mom talked to him. After Opa left the room, Mom told Uncle Bob that Opa had a few more doctor’s appointments in

Mississauga and in Kitchener. “The tumour is growing back, so he has to go for more radiation therapy,” Mom said to Uncle Bob.

Oma and Opa sat in the family room and watched a movie. Ron and I heard the TV while we played Nintendo and Sega in Ron’s room upstairs. At eleven o’clock, Ron and I went downstairs to say goodnight to Mom, Dad, Oma and Opa. Opa flicked the TV to Channel 8 for the news. Lloyd Robertson talked about the Gulf War. Ron and I said goodnight and went back upstairs.

After I finished grade eight and Ron finished grade six, Mom and Dad drove us to Oma and Opa’s in Florida. We stopped at Norfolk, Virginia and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. It poured rain the day we arrived at Oma and Opa’s place. They had all the same stuff in their condominium in Florida that they had had in their house in Kitchener—the bar, pictures of ships, the smell of German sausages and sauerkraut and the German soccer team banners, including a new one that read *Germany: 1990 World Cup Champions*.

Opa showed us the tennis courts and the swimming pool where he and Oma went every night. Nothing good was ever on TV at Oma and Opa’s condominium—no *Perfect Strangers*, no *Family Matters* and no *Married with Children*. Mom and Oma watched soap operas and Ron and I sat on the couch and played our Gameboys.

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After five years in Florida, Oma and Opa moved back to Mississauga. They bought an apartment on Derry Road at the end of Glen Erin Drive. “Opa doesn’t have the energy to drive to and from Florida every year. And his doctors and his medical coverage are in Ontario,” Mom said.

Oma and Opa dropped by our house every morning to pick up yesterday’s newspaper. Oma and Opa arrived before I left for my 11:00 a.m. psychology class at the University of Toronto at Mississauga. Opa asked, “So, how’s your girlfriend?”

“Which one?” I said.

Opa smiled.

A few years later, Oma and Opa bought a townhouse on Erin Mills Parkway near Britannia Road. Mom and Oma and Opa shopped at Square One once a week and came home with German rye bread, German pumpernickel bread, knackwurst, bratwurst, liverwurst and milk from the German store. Oma and Opa came over at Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter for big meals at our living room table—the only times we ever used the living room. Opa stabbed his fork into the turkey and said, “I don’t think he’s dead yet.”

Opa turned to Ron and asked, “Why don’t you have any spinach on your plate?”

Ron looked at Opa. “I don’t like it.”

“You need to eat your spinach.”

Ron looked at Opa. “Adam didn’t take any spinach.”

“Adam doesn’t need any spinach. You need to grow big like Adam,” Opa said.

Opa continued his radiation therapy. His big belly got smaller and smaller. Now he walked with a cane. Soon he used a walker. He still drove to our house every day for yesterday’s newspaper. Opa drove because Oma never learned how to drive. Oma came into the house while Opa waited in their burgundy minivan. My mom slipped on her shoes and coat and went out to say hi to Opa and to hug him. I slid my shoes on and went outside. Opa, sunken into the driver’s seat, said, “How is school?”

“Good,” I said, hugging him. His long-sleeved shirt hung from his body.

In February 1999, the hospital sent a nurse to Oma and Opa’s house every day to give Opa a handful of pills and an IV for morphine. A few weeks later, Opa moved into Credit Valley Hospital. My mom told me Opa needed IV medication more than once a day. The doctors gave Opa a remote so he could push a button and give himself more morphine.

Oma stayed with Opa all day every day. Oma helped him out of bed and walked him to the washroom. She got him water, she got him food and she sat beside him for hours.

“You need to go home and get some sleep,” my mom told Oma.

“Are you kidding me? I’m fine,” Oma said in her German accent.

Oma had a heart attack at home. An ambulance brought her to Credit Valley Hospital. She stayed one floor above Opa. Opa, slumped in his wheelchair, sat next to Oma every day. When Oma got better, she returned to her seat beside Opa’s bed.

One day, my mom told me that while nurses were moving Opa from one bed to another, Opa turned his head and broke his neck.

I visited Opa with my mom. We walked into Opa’s room and I looked at him. He wore a neck brace. Opa’s thick, black-framed glasses lay folded on the table beside his bed, exposing his small, round eyes. Dark red bruises circled his eyes on his pale white face, creased with wrinkles. A white blanket stretched flat across Opa’s stomach.

I looked at Opa. “Hi.”

“Why don’t you sit down next to him?” my mom said, tilting her head toward the chair beside Opa’s bed.

I walked over and sat in the chair. I looked at Opa. “How are you feeling?”

Opa gazed at me, smiled and mouthed, “Good.”

Opa’s skinny arm stuck out from under the blanket and I stared at his shrunken ship tattoo. The ship’s sails, masts and cables squished together between wrinkles on Opa’s arm.

Opa coughed and cleared his throat. “Wipe those tears off your face,” he said in a scratchy whisper.

I looked down at the floor and dabbed my sleeve into the corners of my eyes. I looked back at Opa. His eyes gazed past me. He faced me, but his eyes stared off to the side and he creased his eyebrow, squinted and struggled to focus. His eyes returned to mine.

“I’m not afraid of dying,” Opa said.

I looked at Opa. Pain stabbed my throat as I swallowed.

“I’ve had a good life. I had two good children and they’ve had good children. You’ll have good children, too.” Opa coughed.

I dabbed my eyes and swallowed more saliva. Opa pushed the button on his morphine remote. Mom and I sat with Opa for half an hour. Mom told Opa we were going home. “See you tomorrow, Dad,” she said as she hugged Opa.

I stood up from the chair, bent over and reached around Opa to hug him. I stood up straight and Opa lifted his arm out from beside him. IV tubes dangled as he raised his arm from the bed and pointed to the floor.

“I’ll give you a call from down there,” Opa said.

I smiled.

“Dad. You’re not going down there.... Everyone goes up,” my mom said.

My mom and I left the hospital.

The next day, Good Friday, I walked downstairs. “Morning,” I said to my mom, as she tied her shoelaces at the front door.

“Opa died today,” she said.

His funeral was on Easter Monday. A black and white picture of Opa, surrounded by colourful flowers, sat on his casket.

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My mom pulls her hand back into the car and places it on the steering wheel. “I always wave to Opa in the window when I drive by,” she says.

Erin Mills Town Centre’s clock tower peeks above treetops and buildings in the distance. I look at the road. We pass the open field where I played soccer in grade nine and ten. We pass Erin Centre Boulevard and the Blockbuster Video plaza. My mom signals and slides into the left turn lane and turns onto Eglinton Avenue. We pass Credit Valley Hospital. Its smokestack billows grey smoke. An ambulance waits at the hospital exit traffic lights. The white lane lines rush by. My mom, with her hands at ten and two on the wheel, looks straight ahead.