

Mason Jar Earnings

Caitlin Johnson

The little girl and the old woman left the ivy- and stucco-coated house at precisely eight o'clock every morning, and tottered down the street. The actual heads of the house had left earlier in the groggy pre-coffee hours and would not return until the sun was close to sleep. The woman and the child were left to their own devices every day, yet they maintained a rigid schedule. As they slowly made their way down Porter Street they stopped at every leaf and street corner until they reached the park. Bypassing the playground still devoid of children, they would first head to the very western edge of town. Tucked into the side of a sheer hillside sat a tiny graveyard. The wrought iron gate had long ago been pulled out to allow a rider lawnmower, and crabgrass sprang up next to the broken headstones. The markers stuck out like the loose teeth of the hill, faded and covered in lichen. Huddled on the right side of the plot against what used to be a fence were three pristine white stones, and it was here that the woman and child stopped.

Ingrid got down on her knees and took a toothbrush out of her pocket. She went over the face of each headstone slowly, taking care to work inside the carved names. While she did this, her granddaughter pulled any weeds that may have decided to grow near the memorial, but soon tired of it and wandered among the other stones.

“Katja, come back here,” Ingrid said in a heavy accent. “We pray, then we go home for first food.”

“What are we having for breakfast today?” Katja asked as she walked back to the edge of the cemetery. There wasn't an answer; the old woman just held Katja's hand and they both closed their eyes in prayer. The recitation hung in the air, the foreign words stayed inside the family plot, believing it an embassy in an otherwise foreign world. As they stood, the sun broke over the trees up high in the bluffs covering the two in spattered gold, and Ingrid turned back towards Porter Street bringing Katja along behind her.

When they arrived back at their home Ingrid went to the kitchen while Katja skipped to their shared room and put the nickel they found on the walk home in a mason jar under her grandmother's bed. She picked up her pink blanket from her bed and went to the kitchen for breakfast.

“Katja, blankets for sleeping,” Ingrid scolded. “You not sleeping

now, go put it away.”

“I just want to hold it,” Katja said. “It might miss me if I leave it on my bed.”

“You carry with you and the trolls will know you love it. They will take it and never give it back. The trolls take everything you love.” Ingrid stared out the window over the sink, momentarily forgetting about waffles and coffee. Katja hid the blanket under her bed and came back still wide-eyed.

Grandmother and granddaughter spent most of their time together. They wandered the parks, and Ingrid taught Katja all the pieces of her past--showing her pictures of Ingrid’s beautiful Norway, teaching Katja how to read recipes in a foreign language as they made *kringla*, telling her the fables that she learned growing up. Ingrid was eager for an audience after so many years without anyone to care. Her husband wanted to be American, her children wanted to be American, Ingrid wanted to go home.

Their most exciting trip every week was to the grocery store. The small town grocery didn’t have anything exotic, but Norwegian cuisine is not fancy. Since neither could drive to the grocery store on the edge of town, they were dependent on Ingrid’s daughter and Katja’s mother, Anna. They cruised the florescent aisles with opinions on all sides.

“Mommy, can I have this?” Katja begged as she held a box of Trix high over her head.

“No Katie, they aren’t healthy,” Anna said as she kept walking.

“I have no Trix when I grow up,” Ingrid said. “Oats make you strong, Katja.”

Anna stopped. “Mother, stop calling her Katja. Her name is Katherine. You can call her Katherine or Katie, but not Katja. I have explained this to you before.”

“Mommy I like being called Katja. It makes me feel Norwegian like *Bestemor*.”

“Katie, you are not Norwegian. You are American, and you should be thankful for that. Here you will be able to make lots of money and own a house. Did your grandma tell you she came here because your grandpa loved it so much? America gave him a job after the war. If your grandpa had stayed in Norway, he’d have been a poor fisherman all his life.”

“He would have been happier in Norway, and so would I,” Ingrid said as she put a box of rolled oats in the cart and walked towards the produce section in search of rutabagas. At the end of the aisle, she stopped to pick up a grimy dime and tucked it into her pocket.

Later that night after the oldest and the youngest were asleep in their beds, Anna sat in the den with a glass of merlot while her husband finished off the bottle. The TV threw shadows on the walls, but the volume was at a whisper.

“Mark, I know we’ve kind of discussed this before, but how do you think Mother would handle a nursing home?”

“I don’t know, you think it’s time to put your mom in one?”

“It’s just a thought. She is getting older. Her last heart attack was minor and we were there so it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. But what happens if she has a major one and it’s just her and Katie?”

“Katie and your mom will be pretty upset. Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Well, I don’t want to come home to her on the floor and Katie burning the house down. Besides, wouldn’t it be nice for Katie to have some friends? It’s cheaper for Mother to watch her instead of daycare, but she won’t let Katie play with other kids. She thinks they’re dirty little beasts.”

“She’s your mom, it’s up to you,” Mark said as he turned the volume up on the TV.

Ingrid and Katja continued their daily routine while Anna tried to work up the nerve to tell her mother about her idea. They walked to the cemetery every day, and Ingrid continued to tell the little girl stories and memories while Katja asked questions.

“*Bestemor*, why don’t you like it here?”

“It not I don’t *like*,” Ingrid said. “It that I love my country. I love the mountains and the fjords. The market and the flowers. I miss all that. I miss my family.”

“I’m your family and I’m here.”

“Yes you are, but in my country I have sisters, nieces and cousins. I have not seen them in long time. I don’t know if they remember me.”

“Then why would you go back?”

“Because Norway is home, it is where I belong. I should not have left. I was girl and in love. I brought my children to strange place because of your *bestefar*, even though they did not want to come. They knew bad things would happen. I tried to like America. I did. But when my babies died, I stopped. America did not like me.”

“What happened to your babies, *Bestemor*?”

“Consumption,” Ingrid said. “I had no mother or *tante* to ask for help, doctors give medicine but nothing work. All three my babies died

because I left my home and my family.” Katja held Ingrid’s hand and was silent the rest of the way home.

The day Katja went to the emergency room, Anna finally told her mother about her plans. Ingrid had fallen asleep on the davenport, and Katja shattered a glass trying to get juice herself. As the doctor extracted the shards from Katja’s hand, Anna stood outside the room and told her mother everything was in place. She would be moving to the Lutheran Home at the end of next week. A daycare up the street would watch Katja until next fall when she would go to kindergarten. Ingrid took all this in without a fight. She spoke in mutters and grunts for days but, never protested the decision. She silently packed her things and, when the day came, unpacked them in her new room. The staff called Anna every day, telling her that she ate and slept well, didn’t socialize with other guests, and had a penchant for looking for change in the seat cushions. But Anna was more concerned with her child, who was coming home with warnings from daycare for being uncontrollable. One Monday, only two weeks after Ingrid’s incarceration, Anna got an urgent call at work.

“Mrs. Erikson, your mother has left our facilities, and we have not been able to locate her.”

“You lost my mother? What kind of place do you people run? She just disappeared?”

“She was last seen at breakfast, but then went to her room as usual. During the craft hour she must have slipped by. Is there anywhere she would go?”

“The only place she knows is our neighborhood, but that’s several miles away.”

When Anna got home the front door was unlocked, and Ingrid was in her old bed. As Anna started to chide her, she noticed Ingrid wasn’t responding. The paramedics could do nothing, and the coroner suspected a massive heart attack, though an autopsy would be necessary.

There was no will and hardly anything worth calling an estate. Just some clothing and old cookbooks and a note Ingrid had written right before she left the Lutheran Home. When the staff gave the envelope to Anna she opened it hoping for answers, but found scribbles. She sat down in a chair and put her head in her hands, leaving the note on the table beside her. Katja got up from the bed and walked to the table trailing her pink blanket and one of Ingrid’s kerchiefs.

“Can I have this?” Katja asked as she traced the lines on the paper

with her finger.

The next day was Saturday, and as her parents worked from their separate home offices Katja took the note from Ingrid out again. She followed the scribbles around the house and the yard, digging up the doodles one jar at a time. Each was filled with coins and dollars saved for decades. She looked them over then buried them again. She wanted to open them now, but *Bestemor* wanted her to wait until she was older. She would need them to see her country.

Caitlin Johnson enjoys baking cookies, dodging squirrels/students on her bicycle, taking photographs, and writing stories when bored and procrastinating. She spends all her money on tattoos and travel and upon graduation will try to become a professional gypsy.