

The Good, The Bad, and THE CRAZY

By Dr. Mary Ann Duke, M.D.

Chapter 2

Dear Baba...

Baba was the kind of Grandmother that every little boy or girl should have. She was the perfect Baba. Everyone who knew her loved her. She spoiled her grandchildren absolutely rotten and always was ready with a joke and a huge smile. One of those smiles where her upper gums all showed over her perfect false teeth. Big dimples too, on beautiful wide Czechoslovakian cheekbones, so her whole face lit up when she smiled, and her dark brown eyes twinkled. She glowed with so much goodness, and wore such bright outfits, that you needed sunglasses 24/7 around her.

Three years before Baba died, we were drinking coffee in her cheery, red and white, crochet-laden kitchen, just talking. I could talk to her about anything. Men, sex, being a doctor, having babies, growing flowers, anything. Medka, she called me. That means “little Mary” in Slovak. She was Mary, my Mother was Mary, so I guess I was “little Mary”, even though I’m much taller than either one. I do look like them though, with my brown hair, brown eyes and big smile.

“Medka, come here.”

“What?”

“Come here, Honey, I want to give you something.” Baba was hunched over, bending at the waist but not bending her knees at all, with her flat feet spread wide, furiously digging into some boxes in the bottom of her bedroom closet (a.k.a. “the vault”).

She always bent over funny like that in her garden, too, for hours on end. I never could figure out how she stood up straight again, with no pain and not needing an emergency chiropractic adjustment. Baba was as round as she was tall at 4'9" and always dressed to the nines for church every Sunday, color coordinated from head to toe. Red was her favorite color. If she wore a red polyester dress to church, she accessorized with a red hat, stiletto red pointy pumps (which I don't know how she walked in), a red coat, and topped it all off by carrying a red patent leather purse. Baba even had long cotton white gloves, which she dyed herself in every color Ritz dye had to offer. I never saw her without matching gloves for church.

The finishing touch for Baba's ensemble was matching costume jewelry. Loads of it, fake ruby drop earrings, a crimson broach on her coat, red necklaces, many large, tacky rings (worn over her gloves) and even a fake ruby hat pin. Baba was poor but to her rich. She didn't have hardly any real jewelry but she certainly had tons of costume!

The only real jewelry she had were her beautiful garnets from Czechoslovakia. There were several pairs of gorgeous, dangling clip earrings with at least thirty garnets each, all magnificently hand-crafted in the age of the "flappers", and two necklaces suffused with stones like a princess would wear, along with a huge broach and three fabulous cocktail rings. I loved playing with Baba's jewelry and she knew it. She knew I loved jewelry just as much as she did.

"Baba, what are you doing? What have you got hiding in there now?"

"Just a minute, just a minute, I'll find it. Oh, here it is. Take it. I want you to have it."

It was the old red velvet box I always played with. Inside were all of Baba's precious garnets.

"Oh, Baba, they are so beautiful, but you can't give me all of them!"

"I want you to have them." Her smile was beaming from ear to ear.

"But Baba, you have three other granddaughters."

"I want you to have them. Just take them. I know you'll wear them." Her dark brown eyes were twinkling at me like they always did.

"But Baba..."

"Just take them and enjoy them, Medka."

"Thank you, Baba." I kissed her and hugged her for a long time. "Thank you very much." I felt all warm inside. Baba loved me. Baba loved me very much. I was her favorite. She was the one person in my life that loved me unconditionally, the one person in my life for whom I could do no wrong. I hope and pray to be just like her when I grow old.

Baba would have been so proud of my real jewelry collection. Being able to afford real gems would have meant success to her. It did to me, too, however, I shopped at estate sales instead of Tiffany's and bargain hunted. Baba would have loved both, the jewelry and been gleeful that "You found a great bargain, Medka!" I smile every time I think of her. She was a very rare gem. Wish I still had all of her precious garnets. Damn those thieves.

Later one spring, a few months before she died, Baba came to visit me when the cherry blossoms are blooming, the amazing azalea bushes are peaking, and the Washington, D.C. area is at its best. "Baba?"

“Yes Medka?”

“I’m over thirty now, and if I don’t get married before I’m thirty-five, I’m going to go to Johns Hopkins Hospital’s sperm bank and pick the best medical student’s sperm I can find and have a baby.”

Baba wasn’t shocked. She just clasped her hands together, bowed her head, and shook it a little.

“It’s okay, Baba. I want to be a perfect grandmother to my grandchild some day just like you are to me.”

Baba had to look up and smile at that compliment.

Baba and Popsi were my Mother’s parents. Baba was actually born here in Pennsylvania in 1910 and her sister in 1912, but my great-grandfather was involved in some kind of duel or bar-room brawl up in Canada (some imbibing was involved, I’m sure) and people got hurt including himself. The destitute and scared Maharovich (Baba’s maiden name) family, with the patriarch suffering a knife wound, all high-tailed it back home to the Carpathian Mountains in Czechoslovakia or “Slovakia”, as it is now split from the Czech Republic, when Baba was only two years old. Baba returned to America on a boat to Ellis Island from the “old country” when she was a teenager, an immigrant going back to her birth place to claim her citizenship.

My father’s family is from the same place. Talk about inbreeding! Close breeding like that can be excellent or dangerous. It’s bad because it is easier for the often disastrous, recessive genes to pair up and then be expressed. But inbreeding can be good, one can get a double-strong dose of a desired gene. The British believe in it. I don’t know a pure-bred Brit that doesn’t like to tell you about his “pedigree”, I mean family

tree. Certainly it's worked for all of the great race horses. I sometimes think of myself as a "thoroughbred", albeit "Eastern Bloc". No wonder I've always been a little skittish.

Anyway, I was very happy when I found out my family name on my father's side was anglicized to Duke from Djubyk when they hit Ellis Island. How would anyone have even pronounced it, "Die, byuck"?! Yes, the "Dukes" have come a long way. Most of my family is still in Slovakia, probably still picking potatoes for all I know. Thank God my grandparents left.

In 1928, when Baba was 18, the Russians came in and told her and her younger sister, "If you want to claim your U. S. citizenship, you have to leave now", so they did.

Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania was where Baba's godmother lived, and godparents are important in the Russian Orthodox religion that we were all brought up in. One is supposed to help one's godchild. Well, sure, this distant relative took them in, but she also took over half of their salaries for room and board. Despite that, my Baba still sent money back to help her mother. Baba's father had died young from complications related to the stabbing, and she never saw him again.

"I was very poor, Medka. I wore the same black laced shoes for seven years. I just kept getting them resoled," she confessed to me during one of our wonderfully intimate talks. "And my only pair of shoes often got soaked at work, so my feet were cold and wet for most of the day. I worked in the basement of a hospital laundering pukey, poopy, bloody hospital sheets and ironing doctors' lab coats." She continued telling me about her youth, having seen that I was fascinated with her story.

"One day I was delivering a doctor's lab coats to his room. I knocked and no one answered. I knocked again, but even if he had called out, I didn't know English. I opened

the door and there was the doctor, 'hola hola' ('naked' in Slovak), on top of a young nurse." (A classic scenario and one of the perks of nursing school, if one wishes to partake.)

"Before I could leave," she told me, "he kicked the door so fast and so hard that it caught my right arm, my good arm. I had to iron lefty for months. It hurt so bad but I never saw a doctor for it. We didn't have the money." No x-ray. No pain pills.

"Twenty years later," Baba said, "I had an x-ray of that arm for something else, and the doctor told me that my arm had been broken in two places!"

Baba was strong, very strong, both physically and in spirit. She had to be, just to leave her family and try to make it in America, taking care of her little sister without ever seeing her parents again. Even her parents returned to their homeland, having given up on the so called "good life" in America.

It must have been working in that hospital, seeing the doctors strutting around in her perfectly starched lab coats, giving orders, helping people, saving lives, doing the most important thing anyone can do for another person, that inspired her conviction I should be a doctor.

"Be a doctor. Be a doctor, Medka, and you'll have a good life," she used to say. I heard that from as far back as I can remember. Over and over, "Be a doctor and you'll have a good life. It's a good thing to be a doctor. You'll get respect, and you'll make a good living. You're smart. You can do it. You will have a good life."

What would she say now? What the hell would she say now? Is it still a "good life"? And how did she know that I could even get into medical school? She finished

sixth grade, and my parents finished high school, but no one had ever received a college degree in my family. Who said I could even get in?

Besides, I wanted to get married and have babies. Doesn't every little girl, at least once, think that it would be nice to have a child, even if they never want to be pregnant and go through giving birth? Even if they are gay? Even if they didn't like their mothers? I definitely wanted to get married and have children. I wanted to get married and have babies more than I wanted to be a doctor. Don't most women doctors feel like as I feel? Am I really so different? Do female physicians really want to be doctors and "save lives" more than they want to be a mother? Aren't they torn, if they do have a baby, and want to be a Mommy more than a doctor after the baby is born? Or do female physicians sacrifice being a mother, because it's so grueling and grinding to become a doctor, and the reality of the job is so demanding that they feel deep-down inside, that they wouldn't be able to handle it all? I think that's the answer for most.

Plus, it takes so damned long to become a doctor. Most students are at least twenty-six years old when they finish medical school, and the rest of their twenties and even half of their thirties can be flushed right down the toilet in a three to seven year residency. Add on one or two years for a fellowship to become a real specialist, and at least another five to ten years to get a good practice going, that a female physician can easily be forty by the time she can take a breath and think about having a baby, and now the poor gal's gettin' too old!

I wanted it all. Baba said I could have it all.

Baba said I would get "R.E.S.P.E.C.T." if I became a doctor and have a "GOOD LIFE".

Baba was wrong. Baba was very, very wrong.

I still don't know for sure, though, if she was so very wrong, wish I did.

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ISBN 978-0-615-27016-6