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Empty Manicotti Shells

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Nonfiction

EMPTY MANICOTTI SHELLS

JULIA SCHULTZ

Eggs, flour, salt. The three ingredients to make the perfect manicotti shell. Manicotti was the trade mark of our Sicilian Christmas celebrations. I'm four and I know I'll be making manicotti one day. My grandmother smiled at me while she filled the stainless-steel ladle just to the brim and slowly released its contents onto the hot griddle. She dumps the mix out and uses the smoothed bottom to evenly distribute the batter. Ten seconds then flip.

If the shells are smooth, the batter is good. If the shells are shriveled, the batter is bad.

She picks the crêpe up with her hands, having lost all sense of heat in her pointer finger and thumb. She stacks it onto the wide red dinner plate. Seventy-five smooth shells later she covers the still warm crêpes with Costco brand plastic wrap and brings them outside to rest on our glass patio table. It's always cold enough for an outside fridge at Christmas time.

My grandmother completes this picture.



Ricotta cheese, cubed mozzarella, eggs, oregano, salt. Five ingredients to make the

best manicotti filling. We lay out sheets of wax paper to cover the counter. My grandma, my mom, and I all begin to lay out the crêpes across the wax paper. I'm twelve and I hover over the counter trying to perfectly roll each crêpe without spilling the contents. Each rolled crêpe is placed crease down into the pan coated with my Aunt's homemade tomato sauce. Only my aunt can ladle the sauce and dish out the crêpe filling.

Manicotti shells are nothing without the filling.

We fill each pan and cover it with tin foil and usher the pans outside to my grandpa's glass patio table. Manicotti comes once a year and only on Christmas.

My grandmother is fading from this picture.



Pale white lights, long hallways, yellow tables. The perfect ingredients to make any holiday feel like a funeral. My family sits around the woman we call grandmother. I'm seventeen and I sit helpless in a sticky armed table chair. My grandpa feeds her cranberries on a white plastic spoon. Her legs are bound with braces supporting her lifeless limbs.

Her once smooth hands are shriveled. Her mind filled with nothing.

The outside shell of a human can appear intact, but a mind remains hollow. Her black eyes stare back at us. Our words are returned with shrieks and tears, and if you're lucky you'll get a smile. This comes every day, not just for Christmas.

My grandmother isn't in this picture.