

## **Live, Love and Break the China**

*Michelle Karis*

As far back as I can remember, I've hated china. I made sure to tell everyone when I was getting married, "Don't give me any china as a present!"

There were two sets of china in my grandmother's (Yaya's) house: hers and my Aunt Toula's (given to her by her Uncle George for her wedding). *They were only for visitors*. I vaguely remember as a young child at Easter and Christmas, Yaya's china being used. I never saw my aunt's china being used. I had thought I hated Toula's china, but in retrospect I really hadn't had a good look at it. It lived in the kitchen cupboard, on the top shelf, covered in plastic.

I went to university in Kingston and visited my grandmother and aunt about once a week. Nobody served me a meal on either Yaya's or Toula's china. After university, I would visit maybe once every 5 years, but I wasn't a visitor then either. I got to use the old chipped dishes from my grandfather's old *Superior* Restaurant. I vowed that when I got older I would not be saving any dishes just for the visitors.

Now, I realize that all this was a compliment. I was family, not a visitor, but at that time I just thought I wasn't special enough. How odd, to save the best dishes for the least important people in your life?

My Yaya had gotten it all wrong.

My Yaya died nine years ago. My aunt died last week.

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My mother asks me on the phone whether I want anything from the house and I can't think of anything. She mentions the china and I say "No way. I don't like china". Nobody else in the family wants anything other than the family photos, so anything worthwhile is going to charity.

I decide to go to Kingston for the funeral and to help my parents out. Also, I feel I have to say goodbye to all those fond and not-so-fond memories I have of Kingston.

When I arrive in Kingston for the funeral I decide to stay at the house. My parents have been working hard to clear the house, and do those things that need to be done when someone dies. When they leave for the inn, I wander around the house and get to the kitchen. I think I might as well have a look at those dishes. I get on a chair. Boy, it feels good to tear that yellowed plastic film off of them.

I pick up a plate. It is blue – a turquoise blue with dots of yellow. My favourite colors!

No! I like it!

I lovingly and sheepishly place the 12 place settings on the counter. These dishes that have never been used in my lifetime... I decide I will take them home and use them and love them. I can feel Uncle George and Toula smiling at me.

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My aunt was a very miserable woman throughout the last half of her life. Isn't it interesting how miserable can mean unhappy and unkind all at the same time?

She lived alone and didn't have any children or even friends at the end.

The saddest part is that she was surrounded by people who wanted and were willing to help: Amazing neighbours who looked out for her; family who would travel to see her, clean her house, sought help for her, did what they could and wanted a loving relationship with her. Did she really want the life that she had or was she stuck in quicksand not able to get out? What lessons can I get from her life? I can choose another path. I can be generous, appreciative, and kind. More importantly, if I get stuck in quicksand, I can remember to open my eyes, see all those people in front of me, and let them in. My teenage children thought how sad it would be if nobody cried at her funeral. I was lying awake at night wondering what kind words could be said about this woman.

Nothing was coming up. "Well, who could you invite who would say some kind words?" I decided to just let it go... and then it dawned on me. I knew who.

I spoke at her funeral and this is what I said:

"I am going to speak on behalf of someone that I knew very well and that is Toula's 8-year-old niece. If Toula's 8-year-old niece had found out that she had died she would be very sad. She thought Toula was one of the best aunts in the world. Toula would take her with her to visit her friends, to the hairdresser, to her father's restaurant.

And if that 8-year-old niece had been here today she would say, "Thank you very much, Aunt Toula, for making me feel so special. I love you very much."

Now, I am a 50-year-old woman, but that 8-year-old niece was me.

Everyone in this world deserves to have someone cry at their funeral.

A week later back in Halifax I invited the family over for dinner on Father's Day. We christened the china. Everyone including me was surprised at how the table looked. Turquoise dishes on a white table. Beautiful.

Every time I use the dishes I feel special. It saddens me to think that my Yaya and my aunt could have felt special too, whenever they wanted to. Two days ago, I broke one of the dishes putting it into the dishwasher (yes, I am putting them in the dishwasher...). I grieved for a few seconds, and then I thought, "You served your purpose. You brought joy into peoples' lives. You went out with a bang." Sounds like a good life to me.

*Michelle Karis lives in Halifax with a husband, three children and 11.8 place settings of beautiful china.*