

Why You Can't Say Anything to Aunt Luba

Danielle Popovski

Hofstra University

She took a long drag of a stale off-brand cigarette and blew it directly into my asthmatic face. As I coughed away the ashy cloud, I wholeheartedly regretted not getting a story from my Grandmother instead.

Getting her to agree to tell me this grand story wasn't as hard as I predicted; I only had to ask my grandma to get her sister to do something for her grandkid. Foolishly, I thought that meant she'd try to be civil. I was wrong. We were two cigarettes in and had only talked about how much of a loser cousin so-and-so was, who just had a failed marriage, and the latest thing that people my generation 'don't know anything' about. I listened patiently and kept my mouth shut: I had been instructed to. As she lit her third cigarette and I finished my regret, I decided it was time to say something to Great Aunt Luba.

"Why is it that I've been told not to speak back to you, more than anyone else, my whole life?" I was trying not to sound slightly upset, but I'm not sure I succeeded. She was shocked for one second before she narrowed her eyes and cleared her throat.

"Because you, your father, your grandparents, all your cousins, everyone in this entire family owes me for everything they have in this country." She was in-between a loud, stern voice and down-talking me.

"I don't understand; No one ever explained how." I was tired and defeated. Luba was not: she looked at me as though I had told her that I didn't know who she was. In a way, that's exactly what I had told her. She put out the cigarette and took a deep breath. Her entire energy changed almost instantly. She put her hands together and leaned them on her lap, and with translation help from my flabbergasted grandmother, she told me why she was so respected.

She told me how when she was a sixteen-year-old year in then communist Yugoslavia, she promised the love of her life they would escape and then find one another again to get married in Times Square in exactly one year. In the dead of the same night, she made a break for the mountains with nothing but the clothes on her back, a small amount of survival supplies, and what little money belonged to her: a total of twenty dollars. The communist soldiers tried to catch her, but she just managed to hide from them and sneak past the checkpoints. Her fiancé wasn't so lucky: they dragged him to prison for attempting to run. On foot, she climbed the mountain and walked to France, where she begged help from the Church. They managed to get someone to sponsor her to immigrate to America and she became a citizen after a few months. She spent her whole first year sending money back to her family and sponsoring every single one of them to come to America. All of them: a sixteen-year-old Luba worked all hours of the day to

pay for her entire family, my entire family, to come to the land of opportunity and freedom. She said every single word with a mixture of pride and something I couldn't immediately place.

"Weren't you afraid?" I just couldn't understand how anyone could have the courage to leave behind their entire life, and risk death. I expected her to quip back that she'd 'pulled up her bootstraps' or retain her usual cocky behavior. Instead she shakily reached out to hold my grandma's hand and took a deep breath in.

"I was terrified," She was speaking softly for the first time, but her eyes were seeing another time. "I was just a girl, and I didn't know if my sweetheart was alive or not." I shifted uncomfortably in my chair.

"How did you keep going?" My grandma gently squeezed Luba's hand, but Luba was now looking me in the eye.

"I didn't have a choice; I promised I'd meet him in Times Square, and I couldn't leave my family there." I was silent as my grandma was checking on her in Macedonian, specifically so that it would be a private conversation. I cleared my throat.

"That's very romantic; you must have been very much in love."

She looked at me and smiled. She told me all about how they had met and fallen in love, how they'd dream about a better life in America together, how he begged her to marry him and run away together, and how she told him that they would be married when they were finally free. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue as she spoke about seeing him, alive and well, in Times Square exactly one year after they had promised to meet there. She was smiling and sighing like a young daydreamer when she told me about the wedding dress she had made, and the first time she watched him hold their first baby. She hugged my grandma when she told me about the first dinner she had made, for both her sister and her husband, in her 'American Dream' home.

She wasn't the same woman who had blown smoke in my face; she was a sixteen-year-old girl in love, who wanted the beautiful life she had dreamed of for herself, her family, and her beloved. I was amazed; she had been willing to die to live freely, and to live as a workhorse in order to free the people that she loved. I told her that I couldn't even imagine being that brave, and that much in love with anyone, even myself. I congratulated her on being a bigger rebel than anyone else in our family. I meant it as a compliment. She was quiet when I said that, and she put down my grandma's hand. She pushed her chair out and came over to me. Resting her hand on my shoulders, she looked almost into my soul.

"I did that so that my children, my family, my sisters, their children, and you would never have to: you could love and live your lives without having to be brave."

I had no more words, so I nodded and hugged her. We passed the tissue box around as she softly and sweetly asked about how I've been since the last time I saw her. We all swapped daily stories and had some small cheesecakes my grandma made for the Church potluck. I had

wanted the last one, but when Luba took it right off my plate with a funny smile at me, I didn't say anything.