

**Little Mother**  
by Melissa Kuipers

Tante Ab must have fished my broccoli stems out of the compost bin. “Why did you throw these away?” she asks gently as she points them at me like one might shake a newspaper at a puppy.

I’ve also been instructed to never let water used to boil vegetables drain into the sink, but instead to pour it into her growing ice cube in the reclaimed value size margarine container in the freezer. “This is very nutritious for broth,” she tells me.

On the counter sits a bag of moldy buns. Tante Ab is saving them for the birds, but I don’t think even they will want them. This process of learning to cohabitate as two single women two generations apart is a strange one. I am not looking for a stand-in mother in this new town where I’m beginning my teaching career. I just need a cheap place to live. I watch her friends filter through her open home, sit down for tea and share their troubles. In the evenings she brings stews to people in her church who have had babies or surgeries.

The house is tidy, with little corners of meaningful clutter—cooking magazines, piles of yarn for knitting winter hats to donate, a giant hardcover book compiled by someone from her church, full of black and white pictures, about the post-World War II Dutch migration to southern Ontario. She pulls it out when my Oma comes to visit, flips through the glossy pages with the three of us on the couch. “There’s one of us on the steps of our father’s house in the Netherlands.” Two serious girls stand holding hands in dark dresses with lace pointy hats, like

an elementary school theatrical production of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Oma points to young Tante Ab. “‘Little Mother,’ we used to call her when we were children. She took care of us all.” Surviving three different mothers, Albertja (Ab for short) took the stable role of matriarch in the family at just four years old, when my great-grandmother died after delivering her third child, my Oma. She is not little now—even in her late 70s, Tante Ab stands several inches taller than my 5’6”. Her neck is always bowed a little, deferential and unpretentious, in the way many tall women hunch.

Tante Ab was the first woman in her church to sing in the choir for the duration of her pregnancy, sewing her own billowy robe to accommodate her controversial belly. “I thought it *ridiculous* that women were supposed to hide away their pregnancies.” She is somehow both unassuming and shameless.

“Tell me,” she says one day, “if you notice a hair growing out of my chin. It’s better I know about it and pluck it than walk around with everyone noticing and not saying anything.”

One night I get up to pee. I don’t turn on the light as the nightlight is sufficient. I hear a door open in the hallway and, to avoid startling my elderly housemate, call, “Tante Ab, I’m in here.” She stumbles into the bathroom completely naked, and says, “Oh!” She hobbles in a few complete circles in front of me, a clumsy dance of foggy night brain, all the while saying, “Oh! Oh! Oh!” before stumbling back out.

The next day I stay huddled in my room until she knocks on my door. I feel like a teenager whose mother wants to have “the talk.”

“So I guess you’ve learned that I sleep naked,” she says in her slow voice. I nod without making eye contact. “Well, I guess we’re all the same under our clothes anyway,” she says.

As soon as Tante Ab leaves, I rush to the phone to call Mom. “My saving grace was that I didn’t turn on the lights.”

“Well, I’m not surprised,” Mom says. “She used to swing on the rope and jump naked into the lake by their house—even when your dad and his cousins were around!” Mom’s Victorian upbringing is still slightly scandalized by this European indiscretion.

“Do you know she calls me every month? To see how I’m recovering from cancer. Because she’s been through it.” She tells me Tante Ab also calls my aunt, her nephew’s widow. “She also knows what it’s like to lose a spouse.”

Tante Ab tells me one day in the light of the kitchen about her infant son who she found one day after a nap still and lifeless in the crib. Fifty years have passed but she still cries when she talks about him. “I wonder still if God was protecting him from something worse.” I don’t draw comfort from a God like that, who has the power to steal life and leaves aching loss in order to avoid more pain. But maybe I would if I knew loss the way she has.

When I move out, she takes me harshly by the shoulders and says, “Make sure you visit still!” And pulls me in for a tight hug. I promise I will.

I intend to. But teaching is busy, and it takes over half a year of meaning to return her calls, and a visit from my mother, to finally make it over for coffee one Saturday afternoon. When we arrive Tante Ab is out in the garden tending to

the tulip bulbs. We talk out in the surprising April sun, and she continues to dab with a hanky at her neck, where her thyroid used to be.

I sweat in the sun and the guilt of taking so long to visit. How is one to take care of all the people in her life? I wonder. And yet she always seems to be able to.

I move to a new city. Tante Ab still calls every few months, leaving slow, thoughtful messages punctuated by her Dutch accent. “I just wanted to hear how you’re doing,” she says. “Call me back.” And I do, sometimes. My mother’s cancer overtakes her, and I see Tante Ab at the visitation and funeral. Even through my grief, I still feel guilt at seeing her, but she greets me with an unconditional smile. There is something weighty, warm and aching about being hugged during loss by another person who has experienced loss, and even though you know they have lost so much more than you—mother, step-mothers, baby brother, country, child, husband, health—still they will not undermine your pain.

I start to collect onion skins, carrot tops, celery leaves, broccoli stems in a recycled yogurt container in the freezer. I make nutritious broth, then cabbage stew. The smell of it spreads through the house.