

Naomi

The decrepit, historic Victorian house sits on a corner in the forgotten town of East Millstone, New Jersey. The once vibrant blue paint has faded to a dull gray after two hundred years of winter and summer. The symmetric bricks have slowly fallen, now resting in jagged rows. Parts of the grass on the sprawling estate are cut, while the rest resembles a forgotten field. Some tree branches overhang the walk way, preventing the rare visitor from making the journey. The beautiful wraparound porch that decorates the front of the house is now filled with empty boxes, kitty litter, and broken children's toys.

The inside of the mansion is far worse. The once white floor has turned a dirty brown with black spots. The overwhelming smell of cat urine masks any candles' futile attempt. A blanket has been draped over a wooden desk in one corner of the kitchen, failing to hide the mountain of maps and travel guides from wasted dreams. A narrow pathway, just large enough to fit a walker and obese woman, leads into the next two rooms of the first floor – the basement and top two floors forever off limits. A hidden staircase off the kitchen and dining room is cluttered with new clothing, never worn, rendering the stairs useless.

This dilapidated house of a hoarder has been a work in progress for nearly fifty years: the masterpiece of Naomi Shimalla, my grandmother.

“When you were about two years old and I was pregnant with Cori, we lived in East Millstone, across the street from Naomi,” my mom begins. “I had to ask her numerous times to not let you touch any of her dirty outside cats because I was afraid they would have diseases or something, which wouldn't be good for the baby or you. Of course, Naomi didn't listen, but I didn't find out until after Cori was born – when I saw pictures of you with the cats. When

Naomi would watch you, she'd tell you not to say anything about petting the cats. I was furious."

Half a basket of garlic bread, clam chowder with crackers, and a mammoth plate of cheese ravioli covered in a thick blanket of sauce, but she's not done.

The waitress comes to clear the dinner plates; everyone is stuffed from the heavy Italian meal. After noticing that my sister, Cori, barely touched her side of potatoes, Naomi grumbles, "You're not going to eat that? Give it to me. You can't throw that away."

The waitress comes back and asks if anyone wants dessert. We all decline. The thought of eating anything else is almost nauseating.

"I'll have a coffee - black - and a slice of cheesecake."

Everyone turns to stare at her.

She digs around in her small, ready-to-burst bag and pulls out the signature insulin shot. She struggles at attempting to remember everything she's eaten. Shaking her head and hoping for the best, she cranks the dial up drastically before giving herself another shot. Rather than changing her eating habits, simply giving herself an insulin shot after each meal is apparently easier - regardless of her permanent reservation at the local hospital.

"At our wedding, my mother literally brought a giant bag full of zip lock bags," my dad explains. "When the food was being cleared off the tables at the end of the reception, she started shoveling food into these plastic bags. It was embarrassing to say the least. She took more cake home than we did."

It's Christmas again: colorful wrapping paper is strewn across the living room, being trampled by our two puppies. My dad turns to us from behind the video camera and says, "Okay, time to open the presents from Nanny," as he stops the recording to prevent Naomi from ever seeing our reactions to her gifts.

We hesitantly open the presents, desperately wishing for something different this time around, but already knowing what's inside due to the soft texture. Once again, our wishes aren't heard. A collective sigh as well as a stifled laugh coming from my dad ring out once the presents are opened. Naomi strikes again.

We toss the unwanted clothing aside, just as we have every other year, and just as we will continue to do. The clothes will be placed in a closet with the rest of Naomi's presents, forgotten until the next neighborhood garage sale.

"We had just gotten engaged, and I was at Naomi's house for the weekend, visiting your dad," my mom explains. "She literally said, 'Jen, Fred was a nice boy before he met you.' She said that to me! Right after we got engaged!"

Summer 2000 We're all standing in the cramped kitchen of our house in Augusta. Coloring books and large novelty tree branch crayons litter the ground. For some reason, my five year old attitude was starting to annoy Cori, who was only three at the time. As Cori's temper ran, she slapped me, immediately realizing and regretting what she did. Naomi didn't miss a beat; she picked up the closest (and largest) wooden crayon and hit Cori on the head. My mom rushed to a distraught Cori and demanded, "What the hell did you just do? How dare you touch my children, let alone hit them! I'm their mother, and that's my responsibility!"

I stood there with Cori and our one year old brother Nick. We were supposed to go with Naomi to a nearby amusement park; however, after the shocking incident, we were all begging not to.

Naomi's response was to mock us: "Oh, I want to stay with my momma. Wah, wah, wah."

Jen glared at her mother-in-law. Fred stared at his mother. And we looked up through giant, water-stained eyes at our personal bully, our grandmother.

Present My dad calls Nick, Cori, and I into the kitchen. He's standing near the phone. We can all hear a dial tone already, dreading the sentence that we all know is coming: "It's time for the weekly call to Nanny. Who wants to go first?"