

## I Never Went into Oma's Basement by u/shhImhiding

TW: Gore, implied cannibalism

This happened to me about 10 years ago. I thought it was all done and over with back then, just a nightmare. But there was a recent development and the jars are gone and now I don't know what to do. It's all a mess.

Let me start from the beginning. I think that's the easiest way to get it all straight.

My Oma was a wonderful, loving, generous woman. She was stout and thick, as Oma's should be. She had white hair in a tight perm, and wide glasses. I remember her hands being rough and thick. I got some of her jewelry after she passed and her ring didn't even fit on my thumb.

I remember a lot of wonderful family dinners at her house for all holidays and birthdays. She was such a wonderful cook. So many different styles of potatoes and vegetables, and her sauerkraut! All made from scratch. Personally, I preferred the sauerkraut with the kielbasa instead of the pork. She always cooked the pork in the brine from the sauerkraut and I couldn't stomach it. I'm sure it was pork, but sometimes I have nightmares that it wasn't.

Oma always had a Hershey's dark chocolate kiss in her purse to give to me at church on Sunday. She was well known for all the time she spent knitting mittens for needy kids at Christmas time.

I tell you all this to try to convey how intrinsically good she was and why I don't think she had anything to do with what I saw. I know she didn't in the end.

'Oma' is the German word for Grandma. In this case, she's my great-grandma, my dad's mom's mom. Oma, Opa, and their three children, including my grandma, came over to Michigan from Germany during World War II, when many other Germans were immigrating. They built a farmhouse in the country, surrounded by cornfields.

As a child, my cousins and I would spend many hours running through those corn fields, playing hide and seek. You had to be careful close to harvest time, because you could get clobbered by an ear in the face. My sister got a black eye that way.

Those were fun times...until Elijah.

Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself again.

I didn't know Opa, or my grandma's siblings. Opa died the year before I was born, allegedly of a car accident. Manny, the son, died of cholera back in the 90s. And Edith, the youngest, died of scarlet fever shortly after they arrived in the states. These were the stories I was told.

I'm not sure if they're true anymore.

There's a barn on the property, allegedly used for raising animals. A cow, horse, pig, and geese. As long as I remember, it was just full of wood with rusty nails and walnuts hidden by squirrels.

And there was a cat once. Kitty Kitty was the name. The story I was told was that it accidentally drank antifreeze.

From a young age, my cousins and I were told to stay out of the basement. This wasn't that suspicious. After all, the property had once been a working farm, and there were several other places we weren't allowed to go. My Grandpa especially was a stickler for safety. I remember getting yelled at once for going behind the barn to retrieve a toy my sister had thrown back there. Grandpa was terribly worried about the piles of rusty scrap metal that were swarmed with wasp nests. Then there was a burn barrel by the walnut tree. Ancient oil drum that Oma used instead of a trash service, completely rusted away with large, jagged holes where the fires had licked the metal away over decades.

I think it was my dad that told us not to go into the basement. I don't remember if he ever gave a reason, but I'm pretty sure it was just 'we don't go in the basement.'

Which honestly, was fine to me. The basement was right at the back of the house, where we would come in. You'd enter the mud room, and then the back kitchen door. To your right was a step to the kitchen, but in front of you, yawning like a perilous portal to the unknown, was the basement. There was no door, just a steep cement staircase down into the blackness. No windows to illuminate the bottom, and the stairwell was in such a way that it gobbled up all the light before the end. The walls were a sickly teal, like they had once been baby blue, but tinged an ill yellow over time. Spiders hung out in the ceiling corners, white spindly things that somehow were grosser than the black and brown garden varieties.

Belatedly I realized that Oma's washing machine and dryer were hooked up on the main floor, to a room off of the kitchen, and they had always been there. I think that's where the breaker box was too, so I don't really know what the basement had.

Or, I didn't, I should say.

I never liked being in that area. That landing just before the basement. I usually opted to wait outside the door and let everyone pass, then when it was clear, I'd jump from the doorway to the kitchen step.

There was one time, I was maybe six, where my sister dared me to go into the basement. I didn't want to, so she took my Barbie and told me she'd only give it back if I went down the steps and touched the floor at the bottom. Back then, I loved my Barbies, so I bravely made the trip for her safe return.

It's funny how some memories fade over time, but something can trigger them to come back to be as vivid as the day they happened. I didn't think of this moment until I started writing this all down.

The stairs were a hazard. The steps were narrow and steep, so you had to go down sideways, holding onto the iron hand rail. The rail had been painted once, and was now chipped, and the remaining paint was so sharp I got a cut on my palm.

The farther down I went, the darker the walls got. Not just with shadow, but with little black dots of mold. All blotchy and discolored.

And then the smell. A bitter, sour, pungent smell that made your eyes water. Now as an adult, I know it as vinegar. You'll be disappointed to know that I wasn't looking into the basement, but rather at the stairs the whole time, to not trip and die.

When I was halfway down, I heard someone storming across the kitchen to stand at the doorway. My dad. He was a very patient man, slow to anger. But that look he gave me was enough to know I had messed up terribly.

"Get your butt up here," he said in his low, even tone.

Immediately, I started crying and scrambled up the steps, slipping once and hitting my shin on the steps. He grabbed me once I was at the top and gave my arm a stern shake.

"We don't go in the basement."

I nodded that yes, I knew, and that I was sorry, and blubbered about how my sister took my doll and wouldn't give it back unless I went into the basement.

I'm sure my sister doesn't remember the swat with the wooden spoon she got for that. She was always getting in trouble, or getting me in trouble in those days. Oh, and I did get my Barbie back, if you were wondering.

As children were prone to do, we got in trouble doing a lot of stupid stuff at Oma's house. I think that's why they had so many restricted areas, because we had no common sense.

You really shouldn't wander into corn fields after the corn is taller than you. Not just for the ears, but the leaves are really sharp and you can get cut. Husk cuts were part of the fun though. We used to say it hadn't been a successful family gathering if you weren't bruised and bleeding. If only we had known that wasn't the worst that could happen.

In August, around age 10, was when everything changed. I don't remember why we were at Oma's. Probably a birthday or something. But it was hot and the mosquitos were relentless. We trudged through the corn, covered in sweat and blood and bugs, miserable, but also having fun in our own sadistic way.

Then the bell rang. A big iron bell outside Oma's house to call us back in for dinner. It rang and rang, parents hollering for us to get our asses back to the house.

We emerged and lined up, ready to get cleaned up with the hose. It was my sister and I, the two girls, and then the five boys.

Wait, no, only four boys. One was missing. Elijah.

He was somewhere in the middle in age, and a real smart ass. The kind of kid that would sit outside the pool with one foot in during Marco Polo. You know the kind.

Naturally, his absence was met with an eye roll. His brothers started shouting for him, "come on out Elijah! The game's over!"

Eventually, after we were all cleaned up and everyone got tired of waiting for him, we sat down and ate. He never showed up for the meal.

Every 15 minutes or so, my aunt would go and ring the bell again. Maybe he was hiding somewhere and he just couldn't hear?

When it started to get close to sunset, the adults started to panic. There was no reason for him to be missing for this long, and it would be even more difficult to find him in the dark.

So we all looked. The game of hide and seek wasn't fun anymore. And my other cousins made it apparent to Elijah by screaming, "this isn't funny anymore! You win, just come out!"

Rule breaker that he was, we worried that maybe he wasn't hiding in the corn. Maybe he was in the barn. Maybe he climbed a rafter and got stuck and he'd needed help the whole time.

We scoured the farm, looking through what felt like everywhere for him. The police came, and brought as many men as they could spare and combed through the corn. I remember sitting

on the cement steps by the front door, exhausted, and watching the dozens of flashlights flicker through the field, accompanied by the cacophony of crunching stalks.

They never found him. They searched for days. Several farmers came out and helped remove the corn all together but it didn't do any good.

Things never felt the same after that. We still gathered at Oma's, but now the corn field was off limits. There was a rope swing on the walnut tree, and we all took turns swinging on it, but even that wasn't very fun. The branch would creak when the swing started to go too high and we would slow it down so that we wouldn't be the next dead grandchild.

It sounds barbaric like that, that's just how it was.

Oma passed away when I was 14. It was Christmas time, so we were gathered as a family again. This time, at my Grandma's instead. She just died of old age. She had to have been in her 90's.

At her funeral, I remember looking over her casket, and when no one was looking, I touched her hand. It's the only time I've touched a dead body. I don't know if it's because she was so old, but her skin felt like a leather couch cushion. Cold, kinda waxy.

I'm getting off topic again, sorry.

Since it was winter, there was no graveside service. An unfortunate coincidence I'd later learn.

Oma's house was still too full of memories to be sold. My aunt still hoped that one day we'd find Elijah. So we rented it out. The tenants never lasted long. Maybe a few months at a time.

Then, when I went away to college, my grandma's health fell into decline. They decided to sell. We'd all pitch in and bring the house up to date for selling. Paint, repairs, replace the faucets.

And wouldn't you know it, I was tasked with the basement.

Of course, I was an adult now, so it was no big deal. Oma hadn't used the room in six years. It would probably be filthy, but nothing for me to mess up.

As I stood at that landing, looking down into that cold darkness, I had the same sense of dread that I did when I was a child. It was just a basement, right? Nothing to worry about.

I took my first few steps down, bolstered with the mantra 'you can finally see the basement!' But as the bottom got closer, and the light refused to give anything away, I lost my streak of bravery.

That bitter vinegar smell hit my nose like a punch and I coughed. My eyes watered and I pulled the collar of my shirt up over my nose. It was just as vile as it had been back then.

I would have to get a fan if I was going to be here long.

Then, I was at the bottom. I was in the basement. The place I was never allowed to go. The place that was dangerous for children. And I didn't know what the danger was.

I glanced back at the walls near the stairs. No sign of a switch. It had to be a pull chain. Somewhere in the blackness, it was just a tiny thing, dangling.

My phone! I had my phone! Relieved, I pulled out my lifeline and turned on the flashlight. Jars.

The entire basement was full of jars. Jars and two large galvanized basins.

I sighed. No monsters. No killer clowns. No torture devices. Just a canning room. Of course, it was a farm! And Oma just didn't want us klutzes to knock into her jars of whatever.

Mystery solved, I quickly found the pull chain and turned the light on.

The bulb was old, casting a sickly yellow through the room. The walls and floor were made of cement, all painted that dated teal color.

The galvanized tubs were full of water, no, not water, vinegar. The source of the smell. There appeared to be no drains, so they had just sat, putting off their fumes and absorbing whatever funk was in the room.

I worried about those basins for too long. Wondering how to empty them and get them out. In the meantime, I grabbed an armful of jars and started taking them up and out to the garbage.

Unfortunately, the dates on the jars let me know that even the most recent were about 5 years too old. The first wall was full of jams and tomato paste. I can't even really remember how it went carrying them all up. All that is kind of a blur.

Then on the next wall, was her sauerkraut. If you've never had it or heard about it, it's just pickled cabbage. When you cook it, that's when you add the meat.

So imagine my surprise when, after unearthing the second layer, I discovered jars with meat swimming in between the strands of cabbage. When I noticed, I almost dropped the jar in disgust. Surely, this had to be so old, something went wrong with the seal, or something got in the batch or—

Was that fur?

I was thankful for the gloves I was wearing as I severely did not want to touch whatever it was. But, as I started carrying it upstairs, I could see that the seal was unbroken, so whatever was in there was in there from the beginning.

I set it inside the dumpster, and then went back for more.

Again, the whole inside layer was like this. Cabbage and mystery meat, preserved for years and years. The dates just kept going back. 1990, 1980, 1970...

And then, it clicked. As I held a jar from 1992, I saw it. I saw it and I wish I hadn't. Not in my wildest fears had this crossed my mind. I had imagined monsters and terrible, horrible things. Things that couldn't be real or ever happen.

What I never expected was a finger.

An adult man's finger. Maybe the index. Preserved but bloated in brine. I looked over the jar again, seeing the date, and then another label, just underneath it.

'Manny'.

Wasn't that...my great uncle's name?

Frantic, I tore away the jars from the first layer, not nearly being careful enough. More jars, more meat, more and more of a horrible story unraveling.

A whole hand, a foot. Some organs. Then another set. This one dated 1994, the year before I was born. And it was labeled 'Helmut'.

That was my Opa's name.

Another set, smaller fingers, much more decayed, in much older jars. '1953 Edith'.

And once I got past those, I saw another set. This one in much more modern jars. I knew what I was going to see before I looked. I just knew it. The dread in my gut and the voice in my head that screamed 'go go go'.

Still, I had to know.

'2007 Elijah.'

I didn't know what to do. How could I explain this? How did I tell my family?!

Well, unfortunately, I didn't. I couldn't. I couldn't bear to taint everyone's idea of our sweet old Oma with this news.

But why did *I* have to be the one to find this?

I knew from my many trips upstairs that most of the family had left, done for the day. If I was quiet, I could...what exactly? Where does one take something like this?

I decided to bury the jars. My family deserved a proper burial, and not whatever macabre experiment this was. So I started gathering the jars, taking them up in armfuls and taking them behind the barn.

It was at this point that I made another gruesome discovery. There was still another set after Elijah's, I just hadn't noticed.

'2015 Selma'

That was my Oma's name.

Sure enough, I recognized her thick fingers in one of the jars.

I examined the handwriting on the labels, noting that they matched, but I didn't recognize it. It wasn't Oma's or my Grandma's, thankfully.

But then, who?

A part of me wanted answers. But mostly, I just wanted to pretend like this never happened.

Behind Oma's set, there was a little door built into the shelving.

God, I didn't want to open it. I really really didn't want to. But what if there was more in there and the new owner found it? No, it had to be me. I had to do this horrible job.

I reached for the handle, noticing my hand was shaking violently. It hit me then that I was sobbing, but trying desperately to stay silent, lest the remaining family hear me and come to investigate.

I grabbed hold of the handle, and pulled; an evil creak echoing in the dank room.

More jars. Big jars. Laying on their sides to fit in the small space.

The labels were still there, telling me who was inside.

Words cannot describe how awful the heads looked. I recognized Elijah, but only barely. The skin was blotchy blue-green and bloated like an allergic reaction. Those were the more recent jars. But the older ones, especially Edith... gaunt, decayed, rotting...the vinegar had slowed the decomposition, but hadn't stopped it.

I felt cold. Numb. Like I was sitting in a jar myself. It was so messed up. So bizarre and wrong. I was ill, nauseous, completely violated.

I just wanted to get the job done.

I buried everything behind the barn. I made separate graves for them and tried to give them a proper burial. I know now, that wasn't enough. But at the time, it had to be.



So then, I buried the experience. I went back to school in the fall, and acted like nothing happened. The house was sold. The family put a new roof on, and they always keep firewood stacked neatly against the barn. I put it out of my mind.

Until recently.

I was making a visit to my parents house while my aunt and uncle were visiting. I wasn't even a part of the conversation. I just heard my mom say, "oh, you know the new owners of Oma's house? They're going to put a pool in behind the barn and renovate the barn into a pool house!"

Pool. Pool means hole. Hole means digging. The jars. Buried behind that barn!

I didn't let my panic show at the time, but I definitely felt it that night, driving that long forgotten road down to Oma's house. Middle of the night, when the world was as dark as the basement. 3 am. No one needed to see what dark deed I was up to.

So now, here I am. Pouring my heart out to the internet. Because I went to the spot I knew I buried them, and the jars were gone. I spent hours digging up that sod. I combed the ground, no matter how painful it became, how much my arms ached. I couldn't find them. They were gone. Just gone!

And I don't know where.