

## Mayonnaise

short story by Allison Fine

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America: the sweet old apple gone bad. No longer the small town sitting on the front porch beer drinking; peeling paint, flowered wallpaper, wrought iron porches and sagging steps; the children playing, careering out into the woods unsupervised; no radio or television except the baseball game. Red Barber, Ernie Harwell announcing the best of the Tigers after spring training, but none of us knew anything about all that because next door Mrs. Dine gave us free oatmeal cookies and Kool-aid. She was partially deaf so we had to shout “Mrs. Dine! Mrs. Dine! Can we have some cookies?” and she would come to the screened door, a large woman with a shapeless housedress, laughing at nothing, at children, (she had none we were told), and we stood there brazen as can be, children of children of the depression, the Disney generation; everything handed to us in the great succulent fruit bowl of America post World War II; offered up as a sacrificial gift by our immigrant parents who spent their time working for business, doing business, glad handing each other in business and pleasure, investing in stock and playing golf.

The burnished old sweet apple gone bad, Ashley, the granddaughter of Blanche and sister to Brook, has no hope on this glorious awful day where warnings of mosquitoes with West Nile Disease sail out from the radio streamed on her lap top. Her mother, Eleanor Wolf, (Wolf because of her husband, Alan Wolf, who left her for Patty Shamukesh some time ago), hates her life and sees nothing but doom as her daughter listens to the number of foreclosures in Tucson where they now live because Eleanor

wanted to find herself in the desert and found Charlie instead, who strokes her ass the way she wants. It is not a small ass and she hated to give it up for Charlie—there was something luscious about holding onto her vagina as if it were a gift of gladness she would give to the right man, but the right man never came and Charlie was good enough. Not quite good enough exactly, but almost seasoned and ready for baking. She surely can't save it for Alan Wolf to come back forever! And anyway, he's had a mild stroke and she doesn't want him anymore. He's become damaged goods, and Patty Shamukesh is stuck being his nurse. Eleanor wondered if some women weren't fashioned for that kind of duty, certainly not her.

“Twenty-seven out of one hundred houses are foreclosing in Tucson,” Ashley hears, sitting in the living room on the red leather couch from Italy, (and Eleanor, smoking secretly in the kitchen), they both simultaneously feel the heavy hand of doom descending on earth, but Ashley feels it more acutely as a diatribe against her generation. Nothing ever will happen to them, she muses, except maybe worse and worse. Her thin, intelligent looking hands (she remarks to herself how smart her hands made her look), reach into the fruit bowl for a banana. Peeling the banana, listening to the radio, cicadas sounding out into the air with the lovingness of history and sadness and hot moments of the summer that drift into her mind like cloudy flashes: “how does that make you feel?” the words enter her mind and she drifts on and around and through a season of visual and spatial images. Every so often a simple memory comes gliding in but she cannot snatch it—where it is from or what era, what significance, what time period? Sometimes she realizes her memories are not even her own, but the pastiches of things other people told her: stories from the Aunts and Uncles, her parents, her grandparents, the television—

what was her own? The moment of feeling, of memory, belonging to other people—she could not even claim ownership to her memory! It was her mother’s fault, she decided.

Eleanor has become broader over the years. Her rail-thin body (although she always had wide “child bearing” hips), has taken on heat and energy, gravitas, gives off an odor of strength and gym and water and a whiff of regret clinging to her like fine musk. She walks into the dining room where Ashley sits eating her banana, listening to the radio; the insect sounds of summer and air conditioning kicking out their plaintive songs of cold air and sadness against the hot desert summer.

“Are you going to sit here all day?”

“I suppose so. There’s no future anyway—might as well just sit and sit and sit.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, *by that*, that all we have is the moment.”

“Oh, how Zen of you.”

Her mother’s sarcasm hits her like whiplash. Why is she sarcastic with an idealistic fifteen year old who just wants to express her jaded optimism amidst the serial disappointed, disillusioned failure of despair; the crash of reality?

“Well, I have nothing else to do.”

“Nothing begets boredom and boredom begets terribly idle, awful moments that lead to depression. You need to get up, get out and do something.”

“It’s too hot.”

“I have so many memories of hot summers. Idle ones. I broke my arm one summer falling off a horse at your Uncle Phil’s farm in Grand Traverse Bay. So I had to

go to the hospital in Traverse City and get patched up and Grandma Blanche made me come home and sit in the den watching the ceiling fan for the rest of the summer.”

“Is that all you did?”

“No. I read *A Farewell to Arms* and wanted to be Catherine Barkley. I loved her British reserve, her courage, her toughness and most of all her beauty. And the fact that Lt. Fredrick Henry loved her, and I thought Henry was Hemingway (which he probably was) so that meant Hemingway loved her and I loved Hemingway so—“

“So you wanted to fuck Hemingway.”

“I wouldn’t have put it that crassly, but now that you mention it—I was only fifteen—we were virgins then,” Eleanor says pointedly.

“Holding onto your virginity is not what it used to be,” Ashley states dispassionately. “No one cares.”

“I care.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“About my *virtue*?” Ashley says this as if spitting on the word *virtue*.

“About your—forget it. I’m going out biking with Charlie.”

Ashley sees Eleanor as a disrespected woman leading the idle life. Eleanor doesn’t have to work. Alan Wolf made marvelous investments in the 90’s and they are paying off now, even in an unstable marketplace. Alan understands the balance between investment and liquidity, but just to make sure things are secure, Alan owns a Pasta Factory conglomerate all over the southwest: Tucson, Scottsdale, Sedona, Santa Fe, Alamogordo, Albuquerque; and he has no problems with illegal immigrants because they

are the mainstay of his work force. Plus Alan Wolf paid and continues to pay enormous child support and house payments to Eleanor since the divorce because he feels guilty that he can no longer stand to be with her. Eleanor cannot not really hold a conversation with Ashley because she isn't smart enough to do it—which has nothing to do with Alan, except Alan certainly has the intelligence to shut Ashley up, and because of his voracious reading can certainly put Ashley in her place with confuting facts when necessary and when they come together, but of late, he is having health problems so they don't come together much. As it stands, Ashley doesn't really miss her father and her mother drives her crazy. Perhaps it is my destiny to break from the parental unit, she thinks, unplug from *the root chakra politics*... (this gleaned from a recent reading of Carolyn Myss's first book, *Energy Anatomy*). This line of thought leads her to feel incredibly wise, wiser than her parents of course, and as one who is embarking upon the spiritual journey which will offer her succulent fruits of wonder, not to mention adulating disciples, NPR interviews with Bob Edwards, book deals and world tours, as well as humanitarian advocacies that will take her to Bangladesh and the Sudan and China. China brings into focus, in the large interior imagination of the small life of Ashley Wolf, incredible moments of sexual bliss with Chinese warlords who deliciously force her into unwilling submission with gifts of flowers, tea and exotic fruits, which she cannot name.

Ashley has so much more vigor in the brain department, Eleanor thinks. My daughter—who has a steel-trap mind like her father, who reads voraciously, like her father, who hates me, like her father—(at this point Eleanor lights another forbidden cigarette), this kid, (thought with emphasis on the word *kid*), once said she wanted to be a doctor! This really makes Eleanor angry—as if she couldn't have been something too,

which she could have, only she didn't want to! (Ashley does want to be a Doctor, she does, but in a languorous sort of way). Ashley thinks about things, thinks things through, (at least this is what Eleanor tells herself) but most of all, Ashley is young and beautiful and can't stand her mother anymore. But that is only what Eleanor thinks. Ashley thinks thinking is a bore—she prefers to listen to life as a kind of metaphor for love and love as a kind of metaphor for everything else: voodoo, boogaboo, music, jazz, the dangerous rumors of the undertow of life, the subtext, the amorphous blob of stuff that has no insurance policy or smartness—the accumulation of twigs that float down the river of being—that is Ashley's world. But just for the summer. Once fall comes she'll drive herself back from infinity to the predetermined world of study; plod ahead into the corridor of competition. Once fall comes. But when will it come?

“What makes a girl have class?” Ashley shouts as her mother takes her purse and keys to make a beeline for the door. The question stops her going out.

“Class can't be defined, honey.”

“Is it money?”

“No—it can be money, but money doesn't make a person classy. Think about Paris Hilton, for God's sake, she's just a badly dressed ho with a trust fund. There are so many rich stupid fucks who haven't got a clue--Donald Trump or something like that. With his hair. Do you think he has class?”

“No.”

“Well—there you are.”

“I'm talking about girls. Women.”

“Something in the eyes, the arms, the butt—I mean, the way they carry themselves—I don’t know. A certain reticence maybe, although not always. I mean, Susan Sontag had class but she sure wasn’t reticent. Molly Ivins had class and she was a loud Texan.”

“I don’t even know who those people are.” Eleanor hates the generation gap—it’s so awful. You can’t talk about anything.

“Don’t you read?” she asks her daughter, but Ashley does read—those comics they call graphic art or something, and some books but not the classics, not the ones we read in high school and even junior high—how it has changed! These children don’t talk about *Moby Dick*, or *Don Quixote*! We used to have long discussions about Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and debate whether Locke was passé or not! All of us embraced the Rousseauian world-view, although we also gravitated toward the Nietzschean existential approach. We must have been very, very brave and smart, or just stupid kids who read too much. It boggles the mind—although, as I think of it, the disparity between our generation and Eleanor’s age band is not nearly as noticeable as the rift between Eleanor and Ashley’s, although maybe that’s just the trick of time—I always think we had it better. Which is why everyone hates old people. Instead of seeing us as historians, storytelling keepers of the past, they just get bored with our tales that always begin with “In my day...”. Yet, it’s so true; our childhoods were so very different. When Eleanor was a child there was Suzuki and Montessori and Dance lessons and Soccer and Girl Scouts—all this supervised activity designed to keep their minds and motors running; but we had unsupervised play in our summers and our winters and our springs and our falls—ice skating before and after school and after dinner, playing in the woods in the snow,

jumping into leaves, piles and piles of leaves, making up games and secret notes and whole story lines and plays and movies, naming trees and climbing them, picking flowers out of gardens and leaving them on people's doorsteps, writing notes and –I can't go on in this vein or I will dwell in the past and that is what makes us old. And anyway, that was such a long time ago. Here is Ashley alone, unsupervised, wondering if she should go up the street to see the two lesbian girls who are her favorite neighbors—Jean and Jill, the alliterative name girls.

“I'm going to Jean and Jill's house for dinner. But I may go to grandma and papa's. Haven't decided.”

“Do that. Either one. I'll be back later—after dark. We're eating out.”

“So class is indefinable—a certain way of thinking, a look in the eyes, right?”

“Yes. I have to go.”

“Do I have class?” Ashley looks again to her mother, who this time is completely determined to escape out the door. “Yes, you have it!” she shouts back as she gets into the 2006 silver Honda Civic Alan bought her just before he left, and backs out of the drive as fast as she can. It bothers her to think about this because she knows it to be true, because she knows that Ashley has the kind of class that she, Eleanor, always wanted but couldn't quite grasp, because deep down she was (and is) a tomboy and can tomboys have class? Eleanor lights another cigarette and ponders this as she turns onto Speedway to pick Charlie up from Bentley's where he meets with his buddies regularly and calls it work. Well, Amelia Earhart—Billy Jean King--they might be the exception to break all the rules, she thinks. But Eleanor always knew her hips were too wide and she had the kind of easy brotherly sisterly grin that made men into friends, all but Alan Wolf, who

wouldn't accept that. He made her into a lover, and then he made her into a furnace of tumble-dried emotions that had no outlet.

Off she goes, leaving Ashley to contemplate the name change that has come to her in a dream and has been on her mind for over a week, because she knows that with a name like Ashley nothing of breathtaking emotional import will ever happen to her, so she discovers the name: *Sage Cubano*. It carries a kind of ethnic ring, and even though Ashley knows her mother was raised Jewish and her grandmother and her great grandmother she, herself, slept accompanied by the sound of woman's cries in the night—(her mother's perhaps?),—and the Jewels of Zen drifted in and out of her oatmeal as a baby. On special occasions, perhaps, even a strawberry or two would drop into her world at unexpected moments, but that would usually come from Grandma Blanche.

*That bitch*, she thinks, (of her mother no less), feeling anger at Eleanor and Alan for depriving her of the beautiful opportunity to rebel against a Patriarchal religion, (*they were too noninterventionalist!* she thinks) a religion that she could have sunk her teeth into and ripped apart and then gone off into an existential spree of rebellious nihilism! A religion that offers up no kind of ethical standard by which to live, but instead, gives up laws and laws and more laws, to be interpreted only by Talmudic scholars, but Ashley cannot be concerned about the details of something she never had. Being Jewish is a cultural thing or a brooch she wears, something to impress boys with. But she also misses the glorious moments of ritual holidays that Blanche and Maurice forced upon them until Eleanor, the witch, said that enough was enough, she wasn't going to make Passover and clean out the cupboards and boil eggs and make Matza balls anymore. Of course, if Ashley thought about it more deeply, she might see this as the only kind of rebellion

Eleanor ever made, but all she can do now is remember vaguely the family gatherings when they were young, the large dining table extended for cousins she hardly knew, Aunts and Uncles now dead: Passover, Shabbat, Succoth, Purim—but as years go by in Ashley's young life of only fifteen years, the images have faded, faded, like old movies no one quite remembers anymore except for the emotional content. And some movies (talked of, which Ashley can recall but has never seen): Groucho Marks singing *Lydia O Lydia* or the Marx brothers tumbling out of a berth on a train. This is not memory, this is second-hand memory, other people's memory, and she resents it. She wants her own. But her own memories are cynical, hard and filled with angst and bitterness and young people hurting themselves and each other, teen movies like *Heathers* or *Drop Dead Gorgeous*. What happened to humor? It has taken on such a nasty quality. Even in my day that sort of cynicism was missing—we looked at old reels of Charlie Chaplin or Harold Arlen and certainly *Easy Rider* could never be made now because it actually had a quality of disappointed hope. There is no disappointment now because there is no hope. But that is our days. Ashley's days are to unfold with so much missing that out of a parched past pasted together like paper mache a young person could make the mistake of thinking that he or she cannot ever lie again in the childhood bed of confusion, hope, dreams, aspirations, touching the ends and the beginnings of time and space.

To be a *grown up* with all that implies, before one is really grown up! This is the sadness that makes Ashley listen to her prolonged body stretched out on the floor of her house, the tile floor cold and good against her hot skin, imagining that the name *Sage Cubano* will change her life. And perhaps it will.

A filthy-throated girl, Ashley fancies, caught up in the pathetic mission for love—something archetypal with mythic proportions. A brief and wondrous life in one who never considered the problems of global warming or lack of health insurance—it didn't matter because the headlong quest for the race from birth to death is so compelling! Volatile—historically passionate! *Ora Fanta*, (another name floats through her mind, this subtle, facile and wonderfully plastic mind, which is engaged in a purely mental attempt to feel bittersweet. But how can one understand *bittersweet* when life has not been lived long enough to understand the bitter or the sweet?)

Ashley goes on with her story. *Ora Fanta* is beautiful and olive-complexioned; (but the spicy jive of life has not even touched the hem of the curtains Ashley's mother chose for her bedroom), however, never mind that because the imagination is such a wondrous thing. *Ora Fanta*, the alter ego Ashley finds herself inventing, is to be the protected child of an Argentinean coffee plantation owner, but unknown to her father she has been having sex with her step brother, (her father's son from a previous wife who has died of consumption) Mario Casuso. Mario! Mario! Ashley can see Mario's strong tanned arms and feel his—wait. Isn't Mario Casuso an Italian name? Ashley hates to confess that without titles and names her stories fall completely apart. She just cannot sustain a story without the superficial artifice intact and imposed upon the amorphous imaginary expedition. She is, in fact embarked upon the pursuit of God through love, although she has no way of knowing this, or that she has, unwittingly, become a student of Dionysus. Somehow she slides into the entire historical cult of the unquenchable thirst for God through animal sacrifice, sexual abduction and the distribution of meat, for her ancient cultish imagination seasons the flavor of story with clans who hunt and gather

and sacrifice goats at the alter to the Gods for the things they want. The meat of life is love, as Ashley so wisely understands. But as to real meat, well, leave the meat out— Ashley has declared herself a vegetarian since age eight, but Dionysus's father was Zeus and was she not a daughter of Zeus? So she feels she is this: a storyteller in the services of Zeus and passionate free will. Without boundaries! How ecstatic, how exotic! She falls headlong into the dream as her big toe brushes a wandering ant away from negotiating cracks in the tile she has been lying on. In that case the name *Sage Cubano* does not carry the level of import she strives for. She has to nourish this new drive that comes over her—the drive to devour and passionately animate everything that stands in front of her but what stands in front of her? Tucson is nothing but a dusty dirty old town with low self-esteem, she reasons and how can this town contain a nymph seeking the primordial gods in the midst of such a creative drought?

Yet, yet—she has to confess that there is one person who knows her, understands her, can see through the long-legged awkward undeveloped grace into the soul on fire; her grandmother. And of course that is me. But I hesitate to interrupt the story at this point. *Sage Cubano, Ora Fanta*, dear Ashley must make the move through the hot coals of her one day in Tucson, in the middle of summer when everyone else leaves and goes north or further west or sometimes back east. Few wish to negotiate the hot pavement, desultory, disconnected languid days of Tucson in July or August—even with the monsoons—(those brief minutes or so of rain that cool things off and bring hoards of bugs and mosquitoes buzzing around). Then it is back to the air conditioned house, the air conditioned car, the air conditioned movie theatre, the air conditioned bookstore, the air conditioned hotel on 14<sup>th</sup> and Scott where I sell season tickets to the Arizona Theatre

Company this summer because Maurice has left me to spend the rest of the summer in bed re-reading all of Tolstoy. He simply has to understand himself from the perspective of someone else in another time and place, and even television will not bring him out of the room. I am so sick and tired of serving him up his meals in that bed, a mess of once-beautiful covers that has now taken on the smell and feel of a carcass rotting. I can't stand it. I have to make him go into the bathroom so I can pull off the sheets to wash them. But enough about me. I am not that old, this summer of Ashley's fifteenth year, as grandmothers go: sixty-two winters and summers and I still feel younger than I thought I would at this age. Brooke has been dead already thirty years. That we lost that child I will never understand. The elder child cannot make up for the death of the baby. Poor Eleanor. She knows that-- I suppose always understood it anyway-- in that visceral part of understanding we all have, especially children. Forty, and she still knows that Brooke was my favorite and there I was abandoned by the death and left with this other child who had always been preparation for the second.

Ashley calls me often in the afternoons. I always invite her to come over and sit and I listen to her stories while Maurice reads in the bedroom. (I am convinced he has decided to read himself to death, but only as a joke because death is not something we are allowed to think about). My only grandchild and I kibbutz in the kitchen at the table looking out the window at the little lemon tree Maurice brags about. What good are lemons? I asked him when we moved into the house, but he laughed and said, to make lemonade Blanche, whaddy think?

I can feel the budding of Ashley from childhood and that awful year of transition, age fifteen, into womanhood but hers' won't be mine, and certainly won't be her

mother's, thank God. Ashley has her own drum, upholding the universe with its sweeping ants or stars. The death of lying forever wide-awake like Maurice will not be her destiny. Ashley will never be anything but magnificent, and certainly a storyteller of some kind, like me. If she should somehow wander into the world of the insignificant or something that does not reverberate with the pulse of the crackling traffic of—of—her own creative impulses, then I fear for Ashley. I fear for us all in that case, because I think her temper is prodigious and she will turn on everything, on everyone, she will turn on herself if that happens. She is not built for an ordinary life.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” (God, the blessed Tolstoy wanders from Maurice's hands and eyes into my mind in spite of all I do to shout it out with my own thinking). Well, I admit I love Tolstoy anyway and he was damn right, wasn't he? If Ashley somehow ever finds herself involved with the trivial, like her mother, the insignificant, like her mother, the escapist tendencies of the modern world, all those dreams and dreams pouring out of the glass like water going down the drain, like her mother—then—well I've already said what could happen.

Now I must rack my memory, (speaking of dreams), did Eleanor ever have that kind of fanciful vision of her future? I know Brooke did; dear Brooke, only the good die young, right? But maybe not. I struggle with this issue. Maurice gave up the struggle years ago. He simply hates death and will not consider it as a topic for conversation, although he reads about it all the time doesn't he? But was *Anna Karenina* about death? I think not, more the affirmation of life. The gleam of light affects us all, but most are jealous of it and therefore ignore it, and some out of hatred and venomous stupidity actually dive into the dark as a kind of revenge against the light; perhaps not Brooke. She

never did that and no, not Eleanor either. Eleanor chose to simply make herself silly; a laughing cunt who marries a prick and then sops up the money and drives around like a certain kind of woman. (I knew that kind as a child--Dr. Maynard's wife--but I can't think of that now) Drives around in a convertible with the top down even in the rain. I love her. All right. I do. As silly as she is. Or perhaps she is one of those embarrassed by the light, and certainly, Ashley is the light. Eleanor is one of those popular people in the popular crowd always bragging about who she knows and how the first (and last, I might add) short story she ever wrote got into the New Yorker when she was twenty-one and Brooke had already been dead ten years and how she rejoiced! How dare she? I thought and still do. I couldn't celebrate Eleanor's success, but then she went on that whirlwind European whatever expedition. Her father, the *putz*, footed the bill and she came back and met Alan at some party and got drunk on wine and his California connections and how he knew Warren Beatty and who else I don't know, and they got married in Palo Alto and I wore that low cut silver starry dress that Maurice bought me in Santa Fe and made all the other women jealous because I was forty then and I looked damn good and my boobs weren't sagging and my skin hadn't wrinkled. I was the same age as she is now. Well, forty is just not that old, but neither is sixty-two, and Maurice is eighty and even though he's kind of a curmudgeonly roach lurking in the corners lately, he still goes to the gym every day, although the workouts get shorter and shorter as the days get longer; but still he goes.

I hate popular people.

It is popularity and Alan that ruined Eleanor, although as I see it, she was itching to be ruined. She glorified in her fall; she never wrote a damn thing after she married

him. They had Ashley, and then he refused to have any more children. He taught English at U. C. Santa Cruz and fucked every god damn long legged California girl he could get his hands on; faculty as well, the desperate ones, the desperate housewives of academia. They weren't from Orange County, either, they were from— where were they from? Oh who cares, for God's sake; that's Alan's problem. Mine is that he is still Ashley's father and I hate him for it.

Was it worth so much to give up a promising life as a writer for that asshole who gave you nothing and left you for some Indian princess with a mole on the right side of her cheek? But you got the money right? The convertible and the house and then you sold the house in Santa Cruz and went to Tucson of all places! And here Maurice and I came because he was getting too old to be more than a mile from his only living child and he didn't want to deal with traffic anymore or winters and snow and cold and it did get cold in Michigan so here we are—his retirement and my what? My elder status as a grandmother, giving myself the indulgence I owed myself so many years before. What kind of children would Brooke have made I wonder? She wouldn't have quit writing; she would have stuck it out until she won the Pulitzer Prize! But at ten—how could we know what Brooke would be? She was cheerful, loved to play outside and swim, was my little buddy, went to movies with me and laughed and cried, adored me because I was young then and I was her mother and I could laugh and play differently from other mothers. Does she think of me the way I think of her? Do the dead even have thoughts? I hate the way death has a way of creeping back into the conversation, no matter how firmly I try to shut the door on it.

Brooke had a way about her and a very sassy little body with a little protruding stomach that she stuck out with pride and power. The blue eyes fringed with dark, dark lashes. We lived in Lansing, Michigan then because Maurice had taken over his Uncle's auto parts business (this happened because his career as a professor was kaput and he wanted nothing more to do with the *golden handcuffs*). He sold the auto parts and built the car dealership—my wonderful, intelligent PhD Literature husband becoming a car dealer! It was more than I could bear. He fell in love with money like the rest of his family. I was, by then, entrenched in *Hadassah* and *Sisterhood* meetings until I finally, I think I was thirty-five (only thirty-five! It felt so old then) told Maurice, you know, this is just not me, and I took a class in Yoga and started my studies in Eastern Religion and finally went back to Michigan State and got a Masters in Eastern Religion and Philosophy. What can you do with that? Maurice shouted at me, what sort of job? Teaching? I didn't want to teach. He wore those awful yellow golf pants and a bright poppy colored shirt those days—as if he were dying to attract bumblebees to him—as if he needed pollinating or something—but I was no longer the caterpillar he married. I had to go through that transformation to butterfly but he was just afraid I would leave him because women were leaving their husbands right, left and center as soon as they found a way to make money. But that surely was not me, not by a long shot. I loved Brooke and Eleanor too much and I loved my freedom and Maurice gave me freedom. Once a week (or so) he turned to me, touching me in such a way that I felt that old tremble. He could still rock my world. Not any more. Since the prostate stuff and the medication he's on for blood pressure and diabetes, his erections are very hard to come by. His pride won't allow him to take anything for erectile dysfunction.

I'm eighty! he shouts at me. Sex is supposed to wane at this stage! There are other things in life. At eighty all I can expect is his arm accidentally brushing against my breasts every once in a while. At least I have them both, because my friend Jenn only has one now. But that day in the yellow pants and poppy colored shirt, two years (but how could we know) away from Brooke being gone from us forever, he wanted me to account for my time, my studies, the money it took for me to go to school. I was unable to do it. I could not account for learning how to just be in life.

Brooke was only eleven when she died.

Eleanor hid away inside of Brooke's closet and refused to come out. I left her there. I had my own grief to contend with. I couldn't handle hers. Maurice went to the car lot, because men have their work. I had nothing. My work was my children.

"Grandma!" Brooke's voice--? Oh no, it's Ashley calling me at the screen door at the back of our condo on River Road. The lemon tree winks at me as I open the sliding door.

"I'm making you your favorite—eggs and bacon."

"Good. I'm hungry."

"Doesn't your mother ever feed you?"

"You feed me." Ashley hugs me hard then slips out of my arms like a sliver and walks over to the table where the bowl of fruit is. Bananas, apples, pears, grapes—she grabs a hunk of grapes and pops three into her tiny little mouth.

"Where's Papa?"

"Reading as usual."

"Bedroom?"

I nod. Off she goes to caress her grandfather into the semblance of life.

“In some places people come and broker for a wife,” I tell her as she comes back into my yellow kitchen (yellow the color of grapefruit) helping herself to a small tomato sitting on the stove.

“Tomatoes are good by themselves.”

“So these men, Koreans, come into the living rooms of poor Vietnamese people and make offers for sweet young Vietnamese girls who are way underage and often the girls end up in sweat shops or in prostitution. And, sometimes local governments are footing the bill for the Brokers, and sometimes the Brokers sell the girls into Brothels where they become imprisoned in these houses for years!”

“Am I going to be brokered, grandma? Did someone broker you to grandpa?”

“Hell no, my dear. Grandpa had to compete for me. I was dating four guys. But he was the best. We met in Ann Arbor. Before I even finished school.”

“Good. So why this lecture?”

“I just heard it on NPR.”

“Oh.”

Ashley, what a good girl, I think, she’s just playing with all this existential ennui, drops the egg and bacon plate into a sink of soapy water. I slide into the basin of total reverie-- that memory that you just hate and love, memories of the pines dotting our yard in Michigan, the birch tree with the Indian carvings moving higher and higher up the tree as the tree reached farther into the sky, the snow dusting the ground filling me with intense joy on the day of winter’s first snow, the excitement of knowing the season was coming: Christmas, Chanukah, all of it never quite ever being the gorgeous energy that

anticipation gave it, but still, the red Christmas tree decorations, green, ever, ever green not the yellow, deep red and saguaro of the desert but—another memory crashes in-- Maurice sleeping on the porch of our first house on Custer Road in the Eastside of Lansing, (a really bad neighborhood), because he said it made him stronger, this kind of enforced hardship (even in Winter and it was colder than hell out there on that porch!) but he had been an Eagle Scout, he insisted and I came to realize that this unfortunately informed his approach to life.

“He slept on the porch when we first got married.”

“Who? Grandpa?”

“Yeah.”

“So this is what happens when you get old—just going on and on about the past?”

“Oh come on, I’m not that old. I’m sharing stories.”

“You were grandpa’s second wife?”

“His first died. I was twenty-three—he was forty-one.”

“Yikes. He was an old man!”

“He’s still an old man.”

“I love him. But all he does is read.”

“There could be worse things to do.”

While this goes on I am talking and talking and thinking and thinking and remembering. And while my mouth is moving and the stories are coming out to Ashley, who seems to be sitting intently on the kitchen chair, looking at the red and blue table cloth, there is something else going on in my mind simultaneously which has nothing to do with I am saying. This something else, other images; thoughts and memories, is

underscored in my mind with the Bill Evans trio playing “My Foolish Heart,” the version recorded March 19, 1955. I wasn’t there, because I was only ten, but my father gave me the album, so Bill underscores my thoughts as they reel by inside of my head; the internal film of memory, so much more inviting than any film can ever be, of course, because I can control it, can’t I? Although, I must admit repetitive musical patterns will themselves upon my thoughts and I have a hell of a time getting rid of them. Bill Evans isn’t a bad one, but sometimes I hear theme songs from sitcoms I watched as a child and that can be excessively annoying. I don’t want to hear the bothersome music from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* for several hours, it aggravates me and often forces a migraine.

Ashley pulls me out of this mental riff with her questions.

“Grandma,” she says, “I have decided to have a new name. I think a new name is a new life and will attract new things to me.”

“Yes, but a new name is just a name, you know, a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Shakespeare.”

“Oh,” she says, diffidence dripping off her like sweat.

“The essence of a thing is the thing itself, not what you call it. I mean—you need to do more reading, you know that? Don’t you guys study Shakespeare? You should read Noam Chomsky—he’s a linguist. Our standards of credibility and intelligibility are up for questioning, Ashley. We should never take anything at face value.”

“But how does that have anything to do with the essence of a thing and the name?”

“I’m not sure,” I tell her, really thinking: I don’t want to get into this-- it’s too complex-- there are too many threads-- I’d have to go and grab Chomsky’s *On Nature and Language* from the bookcase and she won’t understand it anyway (because of her generation who knows?)-- or just something else. I read this stuff in my thirties while raising kids so what’s the problem here?

“I have a name for you, a name that has *kahones* and some kind of a focused mission to it. This person was a real person-- kind of a *mishpocha* to me and my family.”

“What’s *mistpolka*?”

“*Mish-poch-ah*,” I re-pronounce it for her syllable by syllable. “Extended family. You know, more than kith but less than kin.” At this point I get the glazed look from Ashley. Learning is incremental.

“Anyway, her name is what we’re after: Evgemiga Schwarz! Now that’s a name! That’s a sound you can get your teeth around, your gut around whatever. It’s a name that could burn down a village, a name that has weight, mass, load, credence, sufferance in a sense because who wouldn’t suffer with a name like that? And yet it’s like dough--heavy dough you’re rolling out for pie or something. At least the kind of dough I end up with for my pies.”

“You never make pies.”

“That’s my point.”

“So what’s the connection between pies and Evgemiga?”

“See—you got the name already!”

“I’ll never use it. It’s ugly. And I’m not.”

“No you’re not, but don’t go around telling everybody.”

“I don’t. I just know it.”

“There was a time when Americans were absolutely beautiful. Our whole nation was made up of beautiful men and women, beautiful boys—boys that had a certain lack of sophistication but they made up for it with hope and aspiration and sweetness and a kind of charm—a clumsy charm that was so captivating. People saw them as heroes. We could save them. We don’t save people now—they all hate us.”

“And what has this got to do with my new name?”

“I don’t know dear, it just does to my mind because the name of America once had something dazzling attached to it—people knew it meant courage and commitment and compassion and the Statue of Liberty..”

“God, grandma--you are so out to lunch. It hasn’t meant any of those things for a long time. At least not since I’ve been born. I mean it!” she says this emphatically when she sees my alarmed face. “You know what America stands for? You know what we began this country with? Slavery and Genocide—we slaughtered all the indigenous populations, or as many as we could, the rest we enslaved on reservations, and because the Indians wouldn’t work for nothing we brought beautiful blacks from Africa over here to support our greed for plantations and profit. You know some people think the Africans we brought over were submissive, but that’s really because we made them into a society of helpless dependents. We---“

“I know all this Ashley,” I interrupt her, “and I believe it.”

“So what is this America you’re talking about?”

“Where did you learn all this?”

“We’re reading Howard Zinn in class.”

“That’s wonderful. That’s admirable. Desirable. I want you to know the truth. But there is another truth too, you know.”

“What’s that? Your hopeless idealism--your dream of the beautiful American boy? Yeah, you know, now we got ugly fat boys beat boxing, and wearing their pants down their asses talking a storm of crap all about bling-bling, all about money. Well what’s changed? My friend says America is “of the money, by the money, for the money.”

“Whose your friend?”

“Things have changed, grandma.”

“I’m not that old, you know, as grandmothers go—I mean you are fifteen—I was only forty-six when you were born! I remember the Viet Nam war and how disillusioned we were with our country. I am not a believer in patriotism or love of country when you’re country is wrong. I am simply talking about the fact that—some time in the past we thought our people had possibility and that our place in the world could be beautiful, that the experiment would work somehow, that it was worth something. Really, my parents fought for this. They believed it. I’ve inherited that hope, even though after Nixon I never quite believed in either.”

“Forty-six? That seems pretty old to me.”

I reach over to the top of the bookcase because there are the piles of photo albums, all neatly arranged by year and dated on the spines, and I am thinking of Maurice in 1967 when I was only twenty-two and he was already a PhD in his forties with quite a promising career if it hadn’t been cut short when Swarthmore fired him for having an affair with a brilliant poetry student. That was the end of his academic career—he never

went back even though I pleaded. He took over the family business—he had to because his father died and his brother needed the help. I can't hold this one mistake against him. I mean, not the mistake of becoming a car dealer, but the mistake of having an affair with an amazing poet. She was dark-haired and wild and brilliant and she nearly killed herself over him, but something saved her even though she jumped from the roof of her dorm and broke her leg and two ribs. He told me all of it, in tears, (I suppose they were crocodile tears of a sort), although maybe he really felt something. I'll never know. I could never match her beauty or her brilliance but I've got a funny side and he liked that, (he likes that) plus I am stable I'll never jump off the roof for anyone. Not even for myself. Maurice, I consider is, or was, one of those boys who was too young for World War II (he was born in 1928 and just a boy of twelve when we sent our boys over) and too old for Viet Nam, but still thinking of soldiering as a kind of noble paradise or sacrificial energy for one's God and country. Though we all know the Jewish God is different from the Christian God, yet no one would ever have the *chutzpa* to admit it. So there we were protesting the war in Viet Nam and yet Maurice would talk to some of the young students he was teaching, some of the more idealistic conservative ones, well they were the poorer ones, let's be honest. The war was fought by the working class of our nation as all wars have been, although when you get into those Generals they're pretty damn brilliant men even if they are totally misguided.

Maurice said to me, that is, to this young man, it was his last year at Swarthmore, I was just finishing my BA in English, we had a little apartment, a two-flat, in town, and this young man came over to our house often for dinner because his parents lived in Sioux City and they had no money to send him and he was always broke and hungry, but

as Maurice told me, a dazzling student nonetheless, “So why do you want to go to war, son?” He asked this young man--I forget his name-- I think it was Steven-something, and Steven replied, “Sir, I am willing to fight and die if necessary to serve God and my country and I do not fear the Viet Cong or anyone for that matter because I am fighting for Democracy.” And I remember so vividly Maurice’s smile (underneath the beard) a very sweet smile with a hint of condescension, although it may have been the bittersweet smile age confers on youth, and he said, “Well, my son, do you know what Democracy is?” And Steven looked all wide-eyed and innocent with very big blue eyes and said “Democracy is freedom to me, sir. Freedom is Chinook weather, a damn cold time with snow up to four feet, freedom is moving quiet down the field to the game with your rifle half-cocked and a smile on your face cuz you know you’re bringing home something for your family that will be something beautiful to eat just before the big storm comes they been predicting on the radio. Or maybe it’s the television. And the tree is gonna be up early this year cuz your big sister is going to start her freshman year at Pocatello, Idaho State and your mother wants her to see all the decorations before she leaves back from Thanksgiving, but it ain’t even Thanksgiving yet. Thanksgiving, Sir is all about Democracy.”

“Why, Thanksgiving is about how we slaughtered the Indians, son,” Maurice tells him and the young boy’s face falls down by degrees until there is almost nothing left of it. “Oh why kill his hope like that!” I scream to Maurice but he isn’t listening and Steven has become my bright boy, my wonderful hope, my salvation. I can almost see the unfolding of his whole life in front of all of us, but of course that was not to be. He was

killed in action in Viet Nam in 1969. He wrote us a postcard about how beautiful the sunset was over the China Sea. That came after he had already died.

I tell none of this to Ashley as I pull down the album marked “1971.”

“I never had any overarching **thing** that drove my life, “ I tell her as I open the album randomly and find myself on a page with a mix mash of photos from when I was fifteen standing in our back yard underneath the crab apple tree endeavoring to appear ethereal and bohemian and jaded simultaneously and succeeding at none of them. Just a young budding Jewish girl of fifteen being snapped by her doting father, and another photo of me in the costume of a early 20<sup>th</sup> century tart for the part of Goldie, the prostitute with the heart of gold for *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, my debut performance at the Unity Theatre in Camden Town, London where I’d gone, ostensibly for acting training, but had two children and a rock band instead, to another photo of me and Maurice sitting on top of the Volkswagen van just after we’d got engaged. We named the van Richard for some inexplicable reason, and there we were: me with my fashionable tan corduroy jeans, cowboy boots, my long dark-blond curly hair and big wide smile flashing out from the photograph as if to say: life is young and promising! There is possibility in the rites of passage! Marriage and babies and whatnot lay ahead. It did not seem daunting at all, but in fact, it all seemed like such a lark. There was no agenda! Not that we needed an agenda in those days. No one talked of agendas. We had Richard, we had our dog, the Siberian husky Kasha Zubellina (after the food and some other made up name) and we had each other, my arms circled tight around Maurice’s then-skinny waist; he smiling, through his beard, and the fall sun (it was October in upstate New York) had that certain deep yellow, glowing slant pushing through the golden leaves and russet,

orange and drenched grape-colored purple that could be understood without words, out into the distance of that day in Swarthmore. If you could see the colors! (The photo was black and white), but Ashley did not fasten her eyes on that photo or any of the others either, but was looking at the bookcase with the Modern Library collection of Faulkner and Steinbeck and Hemingway and just recently added Phillip Roth.

“Where’s Saul Bellow?”

“In the bedroom. That’s grandpa’s favorite so he keeps him close.”

“But he’s reading Tolstoy.”

“Yes. Right now he’s reading Tolstoy. So—do you want to see these pictures or what?”

“Not now, grandma. Can I help you make lunch?”

“You just ate breakfast and you’ve been snacking since you got here.”

She opens the fridge to survey the filled contents and breathes a long breath of contentment. I can feel her body give way and relax. Her shoulders, usually hunched up and tight, come down, her face, normally masked with a mixture of discontent, hostility and sarcasm, becomes the face of a fifteen year old filled with the wonder of discovery.

My refrigerator could probably win awards somewhere for something—it has all the elements a human being needs to survive and navigate through the treacherous waters of life, although what those elements are I cannot define nor will I. It would be almost sacreligious if I were religious. I check myself to make sure I haven’t discovered some new consciousness like quite a few of my misguided friends. The consciousness of a refrigerator is the Gas Pressure, but checking the gas pressure of a domestic refrigerator is not exactly foremost on my mind or the mind of any other owner of such a critical item

in American life, but of course one assumes that the gas pressure is a foregone conclusion and therefore part and parcel of the survival of the species. It is not the mechanics of the device that holds the food that interests me, but the technicalities of the food itself contained therein. Pickled tomatoes, corned beef wrapped tightly in paper from the deli and then into a sealed plastic bag, cheeses—many kinds: cheddar, (grocery store variety), Havarti, Camembert de Normandy, Langres, Mimolette, Goat cheese, stilton—(none of those are inside of my fridge but there is the wish that they are)—however, I do have the grocery store version of various common cheeses, two loaves of bread, one *Challah* from the Jewish Bakery Feigel's on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, skimmed milk, half and half (non dairy) a bin full of lettuce (Boston bib and Romaine) green and yellow peppers, cucumbers, (fresh from Sunflower organic farmer's market)—

“Grandma!” Ashley interrupts the award winning thoughts of food inside my refrigerator—“how about egg salad?”

“How about it?” her grandfather says as he wanders into the open refrigerator, patting me on the butt on his way across the kitchen floor to Ashley's bent head where he plants a large big-lipped smack of a kiss. She loves him beyond measure, but then who could not--this decisive quick-thinking snapping turtle of an Aries man, always bragging about how his biggest decisions in life were made in a hurry. At eighty he's still manic, funny, happy, hurried and energized. Even prostate cancer only slowed him down for a minute, he says, but of course I know better—it was more like a year and half but whose counting? It's only been in this past torpid summer, when he has closeted himself into the room with Tolstoy that I have noticed the whole mechanism slowing down. It's as if in the process of tuning his Stradivarius violin, three strings broke.

“Nietzsche's words, 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*,' we can discover meaning in life through suffering,” Maurice says from the vegetable bin as if the bin itself proclaimed the words.

“What brought that on?” I ask, “Is this Tolstoy’s influence?”

“Don’t blame Leo,” he tells me, “the Russians understood things the right way around.”

“Are we Russian Grandpa?”

“Yes, my little Russian Jewish Arizona desert princess,” he tells her and in spite of her generation’s hatred of maudlin emotion and the mere mention of mortality in any context, Ashley beams. “And we are all going to die, some sooner than later, right dear?” He looks at me. I am not responding because I fear death and I am also not responsive to suggestions of mortality. In addition, I am wondering why a man who never allowed a discussion of death in any context, including the death of his daughter, has suddenly become philosophical about it out of nowhere.

“I thought you never discussed death,” I tell him.

“Now is the time,” he replies. “It’s no big deal, right Ashley?” Ashley tries to smile, as if this is a joke but she’s not sure if it’s funny or not. “What happens to the nothingness when the brain ceases to function and there are no more occurrences? If nothing occurs is there still an awareness of something or of the nothing that is occurring, or does nothing mean the blank, black hole I imagine it to be?” He speaks to the vegetable bin, the air and the back of Ashley’s pants.

“I will not indulge your existential vacuum,” I tell Maurice, while Ashley puts a half-dozen eggs into a pot of water on the stove, “and neither should you, Ashley,” I add to the back of her pants.

“I don’t even know what you two are talking about,” she says, “and anyway, I’m hungry and I want to make egg salad. Do you have the special Kosher Mayo I like, Grandpa?”

“Of course we do.” Maurice pulls the jar of Rakusen’s Rabbi-blessed mayonnaise from the door of the fridge and slams the door shut with a long *whishing* sound. “I like that sound—it has a finality to it,” he says and leaves the kitchen.

“Back to Leo,” I tell Ashley while Maurice shouts from the bathroom—“Pickled herring!”

“Do we have?” Ashley asks. Of course, I tell her, thinking ‘pickled tomatoes’ at the same time. Marvelous how the synaptic thought processes work with so much going on simultaneously that we are completely unaware of, but what we are aware of is only a tiny fraction of consciousness. Then where does all that energy, that electricity, that thinking, understanding, comprehending awareness go? What do we do with it? I realize I am asking the same question, (in my own way) that Maurice just asked. What happens when the nothingness take over? What is awareness without a body? *When a body meets a body, coming through the rye..*”

“Grandma—“

I realize I am singing.

“That’s from *Catcher in the Rye*. Did you read that in school? It’s my all time favorite book.”

“Yes we read it. But he didn’t write that song. Didn’t Robert Burns write it?”

“You’re smart, you know that?” I love her and I kiss her and I celebrate her! She lets me for a second.

“How did Grandpa get you to marry him?” Ashley is spreading slices of oat bran bread onto the counter slapping a generous *glop* of mayonnaise on each slice. “Do you have onions?”

“I have everything.”

She reaches into the fridge again and pulls out a series of neatly sealed and labeled bags containing tomatoes, green onions, cucumber slices and yellow bell peppers quartered. “So how?” a slice of bell pepper hangs like a chad from her mouth.

“Maurice begged me and begged me to marry him and then he tried, with disastrous results, to sing Copeland’s version of Emily Dickinson’s “Going to Heaven” and that was it. He had me. It was the worst rendition of an impossible song I’d ever heard—I mean, **opera singers** do this, not guys like Maurice.”

“Maurice is smart.”

“Of course he’s smart, but a singer he’s not.”

“He sang you into marriage,” she chides me.

“True. Is that enough mayonnaise or what?”

“I like it. It’s good. Mayo is the glue that binds everything.”

“I thought that was love,” I tell her as I slap two pieces of bread together with some sliced turkey, cheddar cheese and onion in the middle and knock on Maurice’s door. There is no answer. Perhaps he has finally fallen into the rabbit hole of Tolstoy he’s been trying to tumble into all month, or perhaps, a turkey and mayo sandwich with

pickled herring on the side will be just the ticket to bring him back. Or send him out there for good. I don't know which, and as Ashley boils the eggs and makes the egg salad, I am pondering about the glue of mayonnaise and consider that, perhaps, she's right. How long will I have to wait outside his door? Should I simply just barge in and ignore his ignoring me? These questions have plagued me during the duration of my marriage to this dragon, but the dragon's lair is eerily silent as I stand outside the door, plate and sandwich in one hand, the other hand empty and waiting for the future.

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The End