Our Memories

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She tells me now that I dream too much. With a roll of her eyes she wonders out loud why I picked Turkey to study abroad when I could have picked London or some other place. Some other boring place of course, because to her, in order for me to accomplish my dream of being a lawyer I have to turn into this boring, serious person that studies in London. I want to play my part in striving for a just world and civil rights but I don’t think I have to be stuffy and bland in order to do it. The world is a pretty interesting place, after all, and it needs interesting people to keep up with it. I roll my eyes, too.

Our summers were filled with laughter, picking blackberries and plums, and shopping in Oahu. I told her, in the serious tone of a twelve-year-old who knew exactly what she wanted in the world, “one day I’m going to marry Michael Douglas and we’re going to have our honeymoon here.” It has all dwindled down to this.

I wonder about the girl my mother once was. In her early pictures, as a ballerina, she was by far always the most beautiful girl in the room and she still is. The dark hair, stunning eyes, and the elegant smile of a 1940’s movies star she seemed to have perfected by the tender age of five. While all the other girls smiled shyly or put on a fake smile for the camera, she captivated you; she could have been in a dark corner of a room full of ballerinas and she was still the center of the picture. My grandma says that you could just look at her and know she was going to go places because she had so much heart. And she did.

My grandma and I both smile sadly as I interject in her story, “But you know what the Chinese curse is: have an interesting and eventful life.”

Again, I’ve ruined the moment with clumsy words I didn’t need to say. Really, we both know the ending and the middle and the moral of the story. We both know we shouldn’t be talking about my mother when she is not here to defend herself but we do it anyway. Every time we cook my grandma remi-
nisses about her wild daughter.

I have one of those moments where I try to visualize myself external from my body and I see myself as I must look in this moment. In sweats and a tank top, cooking with my grandma on a Friday night when I should be out with my friends doing the glamorous things I imagine my mother must have done when she was twenty-two. Maybe she would be out in some glitzy Bucharest club, holding a glass of bubbly pink champagne as she threw her head back laughing, silky curls spilling down her back as some gorgeous dark-haired Romanian threw words and charm as rich as chocolate her way. My mother would sashay past him in a stunning red sequined dress, looking back over her shoulder and batting her long lashes one last time before disappearing into the crowd, unaffected.

My grandma said that in dentistry school my mother was brilliant, at the top of her class. Romania was a communist country at the time and students didn’t really get to pick their majors. It just happened that her teachers saw potential in her to be a dentist. But still she had time to live her life. She colored her dark hair a deep red and cut it shoulder length. Then she curled it in huge tendrils. Her nails were bright red and two beautiful rings never left those baby-smooth fingers. My mother’s thick eyebrows were shaped into the finest, most delicate eyebrows I’ve ever seen. She said an Indian lady used to do that for her with a special type of string.

When I was younger, like twelve or thirteen, my mother felt comfortable around me. She told me all her dreams and stories and as we sat on the porch of our old house in Beacon Hill early in the morning; it was her ritual and I made it mine too. She smoked her cigarette—nails still painted a beautiful burgundy—and sipped her coffee. I loved her because she always let me have a little coffee in the morning and I felt like a grown lady sitting there trying to hold the cup with one hand and take small sips without slurping. My mother never held her coffee cup with two hands and you would never, ever hear a thing as she sipped.

“Shhh. Don’t let your grandmother hear us—you know how she is.” A tiny smile would form on her lips and she would move closer to me as she told me the story of how she met my father at the University of Bucharest.

He was a foreign student from Senegal studying engineering—something to do with rocks and ditches and the earth. One day they were both
walking to the dining hall when my father stopped her because she seemed fa-
miliar to him. He asked her if she had ever been in France because she looked
just like a girl he used to know in Paris. My mother blushed and said no and
then they had breakfast together. She recalls being in awe of his style and all
the beautiful French clothes he wore. He had been there awhile and spoke
Romanian very well. He knew how to say just the right thing at just the right
time and would bother her incessantly, determined to get into her heart.

“His words were like honey and he wouldn’t leave me alone. I hated
him.” Eventually, that hate started to dissipate and he took her to the Black
Sea on the weekends where she recalls with a deep laugh, “These gypsy ladies
would follow us around saying, ‘Massage! La good, good massage!’ They
wouldn’t leave me alone until I lay down and let them give me a massage and
then he would always pay for it. They thought we were tourists.”

My mother would go and take mud baths with the tourists and my
father would buy her all sorts of chocolates and exotic drinks.

“Our Romanian students were so poor. There was so much around us
but we couldn’t buy a thing. President Ceau escu loved letting students from
other countries come in and they had all the money and bought all the nice
things,” she recalled.

At the dorms my father would buy her fresh bread and rotisserie chick-
en—her favorite—and in the winter they would go up to the mountains, ride
the huge cable car to the top and just walk around in the snow. She said that
the air was so fresh; it gave her health and made her feel alive. She really loved
my father by this time and she didn’t care what my grandmother thought. The
world, including my grandmother, was not ready for their inter-racial rela-
tionship but my mother never recalled asking their permission. In her pictures,
my mother was a truly gorgeous socialite dressed in the clothes my father
bought for her that all the other girls would kill for. And she knew people
talked about her but she didn’t care. Eventually my father asked her to marry
him and all the gossips were invited, too. She was so happy and it was going
to be a celebration for everyone to remember! But my mother was wild way
before she ever came to the city.

When she was sixteen she stole away a married man twice her age and
he was the love of her life—the one that turned all her pretty smiles into tears
and crushed her spirit with his promises of “someday” that never came true. My mother made sure to tell his wife before my grandmother moved her away to Bucharest.

“She thought I didn’t know. I knew my daughter very well,” my tiny grandma says with a little tremor in her voice. But she keeps her eyes low and her little hands keep rolling the meat neatly into the pickled cabbage leaves we will eventually turn into *sarmale*. I want to stop rolling the meat and sit down, maybe drink a Cherry Coke but my grandma knows this before I get the chance to escape.

“If you want to find a good husband you have to learn how to cook; but don’t eat so much. And take all that make-up off your face and let it breathe—there’s nothing worse than a girl with a blemished face,” she says without ever looking up from her cooking.

When no one was at home, I’ve stalked my mother’s albums quite a few times. She was so different before. My mother has always amazed me because now she seems so cold but still has the world at her finger tips. For a person with so little spirit, she gets so much done and with so little words. Her poise, confidence, and calm frenzy me more than I can ever admit. Next to her I feel like a clumsy rock, someone whose words are too many—she gets her point through in just a few.

In her pictures with my grandfather she stood really close to him and her smile was so bright. Dressed in her little schoolgirl uniform she looked like the proudest girl in the world to be standing next to that handsome dark-haired man in his business suit. But I can see the rigidity in his stance. She clung to his arm and sought to mold her body with his but he remained stiff, like he just wanted the picture to be over with. He left my grandmother when my mother was seven and never saw either of them again.

“For a fat lady that already had two little children,” my grandma says, never talking her eyes off the *sarmale*.

So much drama, I think to myself.