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Greatgrandpa
by Darryl Benjamin

The drive to Brooklyn from Long Island was so boring. By the time we arrived, I was in a mood. The apartment stank of old chairs and sour matzah ball soup. A stupid picture hung above the couch in the living room. It was in oils, a rectangular monstrosity, displaying a sprawling dark-haired naked woman – probably in her early twenties – on a purple velvet couch. I imagined I was on top of her with the hard-on of the century.

Greatgrandpa was no taller than me. He was probably over a hundred, maybe two. I never asked, but he appeared to be on the edge of disintegration. This bald midget of a man who was mother's grandfather sat on the plastic couch and read his Yiddish paper. He held a black magnifying glass the size of a skillet, coated with greasy fingerprints. Probably from the matzah ball soup.

"Grandpa," I asked him, there was no sense in calling him "great" grandpa because I might remind him of his advanced age, "how come you keep your furniture in plastic?"

"Keeps it like new," he replied.

It bugged me. Weren't we worthy enough to sit on it? Were they expecting royalty?

Once a month my mother insisted we pay a "courtesy visit." "It'll cheer them up," she said, although they never looked especially depressed. In fact, since dad left I think it did her more good than them.

Greatgrandpa's habit that annoyed me most was the way he constantly nodded his head. Mother said he couldn't help it, some kind of old age tremor, but I knew he was a fake. No one could be so goddamned agreeable.

Ding dong. I got up to answer the door. A young man in a double-breasted brown suit with wide lapels said, "your dad in?"

Greatgrandpa didn't stir from the couch. Deaf to the world.

"Just a minute," I said.

I hurried over to Greatgrandpa and waved my hands until I had his attention. "Some guy wants to sell you a Hoover."

"What? Some guy what?"

"There's a salesman at the door," I shouted, "he wants to sell you a Hoover."

"Herbert Hoover?"

"Greatgrandpa," I said, leaning close to his ear, "a goddamned vacuum cleaner salesman."

Understanding dawned. "I don't need a vacuum cleaner!" he spat out, and continued reading. I heard him mutter, "Schmuck," under his breath. Greatgrandpa was always calling everyone a schmuck.

I told the guy no, closed the door, and returned to the living room.

Greatgrandpa must've noticed me staring. He looked up conversationally and said, "The niggers are taking over the neighborhood."

My little sister, Cynthia, who was eating a cookie, launched out of her chair like a rocket and dropped her half-eaten goodie.

Greatgrandpa observed the spectacle through watery eyes. "What? What's the matter?" he coughed.

"Listen, Greatgrandpa," I said, standing up, almost shouting, "We don't call 'em 'niggers' anymore."

He looked at his shoes, still nodding, then looked up, confused. "Well what *do* you call 'em?" He paused to consider. "Coloreds. That's right, coloreds."

Cynthia began to wail. "He smushed my cookie!" She pointed at me angrily.

Greatgrandma shuffled in. She was a head shorter than Greatgrandpa. I positively *towered* over her. "What's going on here?" she asked in a voice worn flatter than a tire. "Mosie! What happened? Why is Cynthia crying?"

"Damned if I know," he shrugged and glanced at me. "Why if I was younger, I'd paddle your fanny!" he threatened, shaking a child-sized fist. "*Shmuck.*" I had no idea why he was so angry with me.

Cynthia cranked up the siren. Greatgrandma looked distressed. She flashed Greatgrandpa a reproving look. *Her* hearing was fine. “Come,” she said, and grabbed Cynthia’s hand. “I’ll give you another,” and led her into the kitchen where she and mother had been drinking tea.

Greatgrandpa returned to reading the paper as if nothing had happened.

I wandered into the bedroom. Wedding pictures sat on a tall, highly polished mahogany dresser. The frames were so tarnished they looked black. I examined a few oval portraits of a forlorn group of strangers. God knows who they were. Probably croaked last century.

Two chairs were propped by the window, overlooking the noisy city. I plunked down on one of the chairs and gazed out the window, drifting.

What a fucking waste of time. I woke myself up and strode into the living room. Facing Greatgrandpa, I stared at the picture above his head. “Did you know her?” I asked. Greatgrandpa continued nodding.

“Greatgrandpa,” I said, poking him in the shoulder. “Didja know her?” I pointed exaggeratedly at the woman in the picture.

He followed my eyes. “Sure, sure I knew her. She was my mother,” he said, “she performed in Vaudeville. Her name was Jenny. Short for Jennifer.”

“Wow,” I said and looked at her with renewed interest. “You mean your mom was a dancer?”

“Pretty, eh?” he muttered. “She was a good-looker, all right.”

“Whatever happened to her?” I asked.

“What?”

“Whatever happened to her?”

“She died at 26.” Greatgrandpa shrugged, gathered up the paper and resumed nodding and reading in one motion.

Cynthia skipped into the room with cookie crumbs plastered to her face. “Ha ha,” she said, “I had cookies and you dint.”

“So what?”

“So I had lotsa cookies and you dint.”

“Big deal. Take a hike.”

“I don’t wanna take a hike,” she said testily.

“Greatgrandpa, tell her to take a hike,” I said softly.

Cynthia looked at him. “He dint hear you.”

“*Did so.*”

“Did not.”

I sat down and let out a sigh. “You know something, Cynthia, you’re a pain in the ass. A royal pain in the ass.”

“So are you. You’re a loyal pain in the ass, too.” Her brown eyes blazed defiantly. She was pretty, I guess, with dark brown hair, but stubborn as hell.

“Why don’t you go outside and play in traffic,” I suggested, gave her the hairy eyeball and went into the kitchen. The kitchen was about the size of a closet. Mother sat at a three foot by three foot round white Formica table set with doilies and cups of Lipton tea. Squat tea glasses, like restaurant water glasses, except with a metal band and handle, stood next to a white bowl stacked high with sugar cubes. With mother to my left and Greatgrandmother across from me, I sat down and scraped the chair noisily against the linoleum. I wanted to see how much noise I could make. A pile of chocolate chip cookies sat in a plate.

I moved the plate in front of me and methodically began to swallow cookies without bothering to chew them. Greatgrandma smiled at me. Mother stared menacingly. “Want some milk?” Greatgrandma came to the rescue as I choked on the cookies.

She futzed behind the fridge door for about an hour before she lugged out the milk. The container had a picture of Elsie-the-Cow on it, the same picture on Elmer’s glue. My asshole older brother told me that the milk was made out of glue. What a dork. After a long sip I cleared my throat. “Greatgrandma,” I said loudly, “how come Greatgrandpa has a picture of a naked lady in the living room?”

“Shut-up!” mother said and pinched my elbow. I hated when she did that. Always pinching my elbow or poking me in the ribs.

“What? What did he say?” Greatgrandma fluttered.

“How come there’s a naked lady in a picture in the living room?” I repeated. There was no way I was buying that story about her being Greatgranpa’s mother. First time I ever heard about it. Mother reached over to put the old smack on me.

“Oh! Oh, that,” Greatgrandma interrupted, brushing mother’s hand away. Greatgrandma sucked in her cheeks more than I believed possible. “That was Moses’ mother, god bless her soul,” she began. “Right off the boat from Hungary. She was a firecracker, all right. We saw Jenny once at a show. Boy could she dance!” she grinned. “Jenny jumped on a car and hiked her skirt way up and dance like a gypsy.” She paused, trying to remember. “He painted that from an old photo when he was 30.”

“Really?” I asked, amazed that Greatgrandpa had been so artistic.

“Whatever happened to her?”

Greatgrandma considered. “Died unexpectedly. I think it was one of those flu epidemics. Oh well, everyone’s got to go. Everyone except us. We’re next.”

“Don’t say that,” Mother interjected.

Greatgrandma shrugged. “Sooner or later,” she mumbled. “I’m ready.”

“Now look what you’ve done,” Mom said. “You’ve upset your Greatgrandma.”

“I’m not upset,” Greatgrandma said, picking up the plate and offering me another cookie.

“She’s not upset,” I said.

“So who’s upset?” mother asked.

No one answered. I devoured another cookie.

“Don’t,” mother said. “You’ll spoil your appetite.”

“So what? There’s nothing else to do.”

“Why don’t you keep your Greatgrandpa company?”

“Why should I? He just sits and reads his goddamn newspaper.”

“Don’t swear.”

“I’m bored,” I complained.

“We heard. Do you want me to dance for you?” Mother asked. I could tell she was getting pretty fed up with me.

“You wouldn’t.”

Mother shrugged and sipped her tea.

“Go ahead, dance,” I challenged. Boy, could I be a pain in the ass. Only thing was, I kinda enjoyed it.

Mother put down the tea and narrowed her eyes. “Ok, I will.” She stood up and resolutely pushed her chair under the table. “I cha-cha’d a lot when I went to Cuba,” she said thoughtfully. Then she began to cha-cha, slowly at first, gathering speed.

I rolled my eyes, kind of relieved she had temporarily forgotten to be mad. “Yeah right. Like you went to Cuba.”

“I did,” mother said, “on my honeymoon with your father,” she said sadly.

Greatgrandma looked puzzled. “What are you doing, Dolly?”

“Dancing! The cha-cha. Join me.” Mother brightened and grabbed Greatgrandma’s hand. Kind of roughly, I thought.

“No, no, I haven’t danced for ages.”

“So what?” mother said, and swung Greatgrandma in front of her. “You remember. One step forward, two step back, cha-cha-cha,” Greatgrandma shuffled along. It looked as if she was about to collapse. They danced, mother concentrating, Greatgrandma watching her feet.

Greatgrandpa appeared in the doorway. “What’s going on here?”

“Mosie, she’s making me dance.”

“I’ll put on some music.”

I followed him out to the living room. Now things were getting interesting. He had a huge rectangular oak-carved radio about the size and depth of a dresser, probably dating back to the thirties or forties. I liked it because it could pick up the police band. Sometimes you heard Brooklyn cops chasing robbers and calling in accidents and crap. But Greatgrandpa rarely switched it on and never let us touch it. Besides, it took about two hours to warm up.

He opened up the cabinet and revealed an ancient turntable. “Wow,” I said. “Does that thing work?”

Greatgrandpa ignored me. He was busy rifling through his collection of 78s. “Here we go,” he said at last, “Benny Goodman.” He rotated a dial and the turntable began to spin. It was way faster than the 33s I was used to. Grandpa fit the record on the spindle and lowered the arm. The tinny sound of Goodman’s slinky clarinet burst from the speakers. Greatgrandpa beamed. “Now that’s nice,” he said. “Anna,” he said, “You hear?”

*Four or five times
There is delight. . .
But if I die,
I’m gonna try,
Kiss her and then. . .
Kiss her again*

“I hear!” Anna puffed from the kitchen. She entered the living room. “I haven’t heard that music in years,” she said. Mother followed her in from the kitchen. “Let’s dance,” mother said. The three of them joined hands, like they were going to do a Bar-Mitzvah style Hora. Instead, they dropped their hands in unison and did a hodgepodge of strange Latin steps, none of them speaking, concentrating on their feet.

The record came to an abrupt end and began playing noisily against the label. I lifted the arm and put it back in its cradle. Greatgrandpa collapsed onto the couch, “Whoo,” he said.

“Do it again! Do it again!” Cynthia cried.

“Oh no,” Greatgrandma said, “I couldn’t!” and sat down.

Together, they sat on the couch, breathing hard, as Jenny looked down from her picture, smiling.

Mother looked at them, her eyes widening. “Kids,” she announced. “Time to go.”

Greatgrandpa’s head was gently swaying up and down as we left. I guess he wasn’t faking after all. It was time to go. Thank god. I was *so* bored.