

home

by

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I can only see the top of my daughter's head from where I sit. She is cuddled up to her furry orange pillow, her hair pulled into a wobbly knot.

"I heard you talking to Alena," I say.

"Yes." She tosses on the narrow couch.

"How is she? What's she doing?" I carefully word my questions. short, and to the point, or there will be no point. I am learning that less is better, but it's hard.

"She's great."

"Is she teaching?"

"She just got married."

"Really? We went to her wedding just three years ago, Bea."

"Oh, no. That ended, about a year ago."

“Who did she marry this time?”

“Natalie.”

“What?”

“Yeah. In Paris.” She turns around to look at me, the knot flopping to the other side of her head. She smiles.

If she had said, Mom, there’s a spaceship in the backyard, or the gas company just cut our bill in half, it would have been less surprising. My daughter and I had gone to Alena’s first wedding in North Carolina. Not all that long after their high school graduation. The wedding was on a lake, the bride and groom stood under an arch of red and yellow dahlias, the gulls flew overhead, serenading. It was really lovely. Not so lovely—I remember now—the groom threw up the morning of his wedding day. But so what? Isn’t that normal? Aren’t most people either sick, hung over, disgusted, aghast, frightened, amazed, and a whole bunch of other stomach-turning ills at such an upheaval of a lifetime? Transitory ills. The mental situation is not so evident, and how would we know about that? At least for her part, Alena seemed to be calm through the whole thing.

“Alena is coming back this weekend, Ma, and she’s bringing Natalie. Can they come and stay with us?”

Well, I am admittedly what you would call an old fart. I love Alena, but this Natalie business? What is that all about? Alena was a cheerleader with my daughter, homecoming

princess on that float and all, an A student at Merrimac High school, the belle of the ball. And now she's gay? Is that what you call her? I always thought she was gay. Happy, and fullfilled, so to speak. What do I know. I'm an old fart.

Alena and Natalie are standing in our driveway. They are beautiful. Alena's dark curls frame a heart-shaped face; Natalie's hair, flaming red, fluffs around a serious expression. *Should I go or should I stay*, it says. *I'm not sure why I decided to come here*. She is from some vine-yard in Massachusetts, but she hardly looks like the farmer's daughter; our Alena hails from Cold Springs, Florida, the heart of drag racing, citrus fields and the occasional cattle ranch nearby. Typical Florida chile, our Alena.

Now this. Alena is back in Cold Springs where it's hot and humid, stagnant as a bug moving through Vaseline. I go with it. I don't know what Susan (Alena's mother) has to say about all this, and I'm not going to ask. I'll get to that later. Susan will want to talk about it.

"Bea, I'm gonna need a little help on this one," I say.

"Oh, Ma."

Bea dashes past me, slams the flimsy vinyl door, and clunks down the wooden steps, all legs and arms screaming with glee for all its worth. I'm standing in the window of our living room looking out at this scene.

My toes curl into the shag rug. Yes, it is like the ship from Mars has landed. Why don't I admit it. I have no idea what to say or do. But, what the fuck? It is not about me. It's about the girls, damnit. And I am so glad to see Alena again. She doesn't look a day over 18. What can she be now? Five years since high school? But who's counting? They're still young as May buds.

"Mama Cakes," Alena yells, waving. They call me that, most likely because of the birthday cakes, which I shape into the first letter of each child's name. Sometimes it's a challenge for which I must go back to the ABC's. Write the letter out. Figure where to do the cutting, and the frosting, then the sprinkles and the squiggles....My name is Smithwell, which is a fancy English name that came from folks who weren't so fancy. I am not high falootin, that's certifiable. I am about as grounded as an errant tree toad. About as clueless as a bird that builds her nest over the front door.

Alena is sweet and smiley as ever, standing out there next to what must be a rented car, grey and nondescript, so un-Alena-like. Bea is hopping around, barefoot, her face a regular lit-up pumpkin, if I ever saw one. (My daughter has a round youthful face and it will stay that way, while I get old, and she will always be young and bright and light my way...)

I hug Alena, and I am eyeing Natalie, while reaching an arm in her direction. She doesn't move, but a tentative smile plays around her lips.

Alena says, "This is Natalie." I take her slender fingers in my knobby ones. She has a long white neck. I hug her around the shoulders. She is a stiff little bird, feathers like wax sculpture. But she is still smiling, shyly.

I step back. "What is this? Paris, and all! Aren't we the jet hoppers?"

"Setters, Ma. Jet setters," says Bea.

"Well, ok. Jet setters. What have you. We have a lot of catching up to do. Come on in, girls. I just made some ice tea."

Alena says, "Mama! Ice tea? Let's celebrate! I brought champagne!" She turns, her skirt flutters like petals around her.

Up in the kitchen, standing on the old linoleum that suddenly looks wretched next to this splendid French-i-fied young thing, she produces an odd-shaped bottle, beading and cold. I have never seen a bottle like that, all beautiful green glistening curves like an exotic bursting fruit. The label is gold with flourishing script. I don't know if we should take a picture of it or open it. We are going to open it. And drink from it.

"I don't think I have the proper glasses." I murmur.

"That's ok." Alena has a large bag with two C's entwined on it. She produces four glasses, tall slender things, like Natalie, which are wrapped in plastic and tissue. She carefully unwraps them and lines them up on the oil cloth imprinted with bunches of cherries. It looks quite festive, I'm thinking. I sprinkle a bag of Jays potato chips into a

yellow ceramic bowl, get out the ranch dip, and put the snacks in the middle of the table. I remember Alena loves potato chips with that dip.

“You remembered,” she says.

I remember a lot, I say, while thinking that sometimes I wish I could remember it all, bring it back, for just a moment. But what difference would it make? Everything is so upside down and changing. Next you know, Bea will be off on some crazy adventure. She wants to go to Costa Rica and work in a clinic with her 160,000-dollar nursing degree.

I look around this table. I am old, and that’s OK.

The four of us sit, and sip and crunch and smile. The late afternoon sun slants in, and the cat leaps from the bookcase that serves as storage for pots, pans, cans and cookbooks. The ice box is white, the stove is black. I love this kitchen because it has seen a lot of life, like today.

The three beauties (and me) clink glasses .

“So, tell me,” I say. The bubbles fill the crevices in my head, and suddenly I am lifted above every bill stashed in the bottom of the bookcase, every weevil and dust bunny hiding in the corners.

“I was at a café in Paris, just seated at this little marble- topped table, drinking the last of my cafe au lait. The sun positively lighting up Montmartre....”

“Oh, come on,” says Bea. But you can tell she’s thrilled. Her eyes are dancing out of her head.

“No, really. And there she was. I thought she was French, but then she walked up on me, reading the international newspaper, in English, and says, so, what are you here for? I’m here for, I guess, to have coffee with you, I say. So, she sits down, and we talk for, I don’t know, hours and hours. In Paris. Can you believe it? And here we are.” Alena is breathless. Goodness! I am thinking there must be a lot more to the story, but Alena seems to have boiled it down nicely. She drank, she met, she wed.

I reach for Alena’s hand. Natalie is holding the other one, on her lap. Bea gives me a look, like, wow, Ma.

“You both look so happy,” I say. “But what happened?” I have to ask, although I suppose I shouldn’t. I’m picturing her tall, silent dark-haired former husband. Lumbering, is what I would call him. But he was sweet. He just wasn’t the right one, I guess.

“What happened?” Alena repeats my question, and this, for some reason, brings out an unreadable expression. I feel the generational differences, the separation, yet the long fast tie to her. I want to know. I love Alena, but I really love Bea, and now I will love Natalie, who is sitting so upright she can’t be comfortable. Is she a dancer? A practitioner of rigorous, painful exercise to attain her goals? A starver, a sacrificer? She looks so stoic. She is staring at Alena, and so am I.

“I struggled with it, especially in high school. And later. You know, wanting to fit in because that’s what you do. I chased them and chased them, the boys, I mean, but I never got it. They didn’t get it. I felt like I was not getting anywhere, and now I’m not like that. I’m home.”

I came down into the kitchen next morning. Natalie was standing at the coffee pot, studying it, the disparate parts spread on the counter.

“Oh, honey, let me get that,” I say.

She jumps, her heels leaving the ground. I feel bad, scaring her, I guess. She might scamper off, but then she just sort of folds in like some flowers do at a certain time of the day. She backs away from the counter. “You are so nice to have us in your...” She stops.. “home.”

“Well, it’s my pleasure, to be sure. Now you just sit and I’m going to get this coffee going, and some scrambled eggs. You ever have them with cream cheese melted in? That used to be Alena’s favorite. Bea, too. That girl will sleep forever...And Alena, too. Is she coming down soon?” I busy myself, eager to fill in the spaces, aware of stumbling into awkwardness on my part, not hers. Thing is, lucky for me and not so much for some people, I never have any trouble finding words and running on at the mouth. Sometimes, I just forget to stop.

I look out the kitchen window over the sink. The hibiscus and palms glisten after the late rain, the egret is prancing up from the canal, lifting his long legs slowly and carefully. It would be nice to sit on the patio. I turn to ask Natalie if she'd like coffee outside, but she is gone. *Now what? Was it something I said?*

I go after the eggs, butter, jam, cream cheese, piling it all on the counter, ready to make a breakfast mess. It seems this always needs too many pots, pans and what-not for such a simple basic beginning to the day. But such things are necessary for comfort, for a start to the day, any day, that may turn out to be not so comforting.

The pool of beaten eggs whirls around the glob of cream cheese in the frying pan. I stir with a wooden spoon, and I wonder about that whole business of comforting.

Alena bursts into the kitchen and grabs me around the shoulders, the gluey eggs forgotten.

"What is it? Why, you look like you haven't slept a bit. Was the bed so hard, the room too hot? What?"

Alena's curls look electrified, her eyes puffy and red. She catches her breath in a hiccup, or sob. I can't tell what, but it isn't good whatever it is.

"My mother doesn't want us to come over. She says she doesn't ever want to see me again. And especially not with that 'other person,' as she calls Natalie."

“Oh, now. Alena. Here, sit down.” At my age, I am used to drama, but I am never used to hurt. I bring a cup of coffee to her and put it in her hands, the warming between us lingering. I wonder where Natalie is, but I don’t ask. That will come up soon enough.

I look at this girl who now has the faintest lines around her eyes, the hint of them around her mouth. She was just 12, in pajamas, at Bea’s birthday slumber party, pizza and cake everywhere, all of them jumping in the canal the next morning and running through my house in clouds of carefree laughter. And, now what? Love is causing the problem?

“I don’t think there is a problem,” I say, half to myself, half out loud.

“But there is.”

“Really? Whose problem is it, really?”

“My mother’s. I guess.”

“I’d say so.”

“Well, I do love her.”

“Who?”

“My mother. And I do love Natalie.”

“And they love you.”

“Yes. But can one love make another go away?”

“No.”

“What’ll I tell my mother?”

“Nothing.” I’m not so sure about that, but at this point, I could give a fig about Susan. “For now.”

This conversation feels odd. To be talking about love. I guess I’ve been doing it and taking it for granted for so long, like walking and breathing, I don’t even think about it.

“Fuck it all, Alena. Just live your life.”

Alena laughs. A hand shoots to her mouth. “I can’t believe you just said that, Mama.”

“Well, I did. It’s your life. You live it. God knows, I don’t know if you and Natalie can make each other happy. Only you and Natalie know that. No one else does.”

I’m leaning over my cup of coffee, my head turned intently on Alena. I don’t see Bea standing in the doorway. Then, I do. Right away, I shut my mouth and regret opening it. “An empty barrel makes the most noise,” my Irish grandmother used to say. “Open up and tell ‘ol’ ya know.” But then Bea is draping herself over my shoulders, planting a kiss on top of my head.

“Keep talking, Ma. Just keep on talking.”

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