A Rebecca Doesn’t Hold Her Breath

Nora Wendl*
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“Let’s sit in smoking. I want to have a cigarette.”

We are steered toward the farthest and foggiest part of the restaurant. Syrup hangs in the air, making breathing thick and surfaces tacky. I seat myself on one side of the yellow booth, and he swipes an ashtray from another one, placing it on the table directly in front of me with a hollow bang.

“Please. Have your cigarette.”

He rolls his eyes because having a cigarette means that I strike a match and let the blooming flame catch fire to the paper. That I watch the ash grow and the smoke unfurl as the cigarette re-incarnates into a lazy blue tornado that circles, circles above us and drifts away. That I don’t inhale.

I keep my one hand pushed all the way to the edge of the table because I don’t want to smell like I’ve had a cigarette.

This man I’m sitting across from, this born-again non-smoker, his starving eyes watch this cigarette go to waste. I close the menu, decided already on “What He’s Having” when his phone rings. He holds up the phone so that I can see the identity of the caller, Girlfriend, flash in a black banner across the neon screen. I take one first, long drag from the cigarette and blow the blue in his direction.

“Hey. Give me one.”

My grandmother gave up smoking after her mastectomy. My grandfather did, too, except when Grandma went to the grocery store and he stayed behind to watch me. I remember sitting with him in the living room, spellbound by the long roads of smoke rising from the ashtray he kept under the couch. Once she walked back into the house after being gone for a few minutes, having forgotten her list. There we were, caught. She took one long look at Grandpa, waving his hand to scatter the smoke, and me sitting wide-eyed in the over-stuffed armchair. I pointed under the couch, and Grandpa shook his head. She pushed him aside and felt around. When she pulled out the ashtray, she flung it at him.

She cried in the bathroom for most of the afternoon, and Grandpa and I had to use the neighbor’s bathroom if we needed to go. I sat with my back pressed against the bathroom door, and wrote notes on yellow memo-pad paper. Don’t cry. I love you. Grandpa’s sorry.

Thanks, honey, thank you. But she didn’t unlock the door until dark.

I spent that afternoon staring at the walls of the hallway just outside the bathroom. They were cluttered with photographs of her and my grandfather and all of their children. The collection cycled and changed as the family did. When Bill and Susan divorced, Bill was taken down for awhile. When Bill and Evelyn
married, Bill came back with Evelyn at his side, but further down on the wall than John, who’s only been married once and used to study in a seminary school.

The black and white ones were of people I didn’t know. Grandma and Grandpa when they were young. Some were taken with such a slow exposure that a waving hand turned to a fleshless blur, or a running child into a ghost.

There is one at the top that I could not see until I was taller. The black and white tones are old and printed on cheap paper so that the color ranges from murky white to almost black. My grandfather’s back in a dark, tailored jacket grounds the scene, my grandmother floating in the sky above him. Her elbows anchor her to a small, round table. Her smile is wide and sure, her skin an all-over halo.

My grandfather must have turned to see where her smile was going, because the cameraman only catches his profile. The side of his face is long and muscular in a way that faces aren’t anymore, ending in a strong jaw with a small beard. His hair is combed back almost scientifically, and looks a little wet.

A black, structured hat rests on the table between them. They are both wearing jackets.

All I know for sure about the photograph is that the two of them once sat at a table, wearing jackets and drinking coffee.

What I’ve imagined is that the shine in my grandmother’s eye is a drop of rain caught on her lash. That they were on their way to an expensive restaurant, whose owner owed my grandfather a favor for some carpentry. That he was taking her there when a breeze picked up and she brought the collar of her camel coat over her ears, and they started to run for cover, for the cafe. That she shrieked and laughed and that they ran through what was becoming mud, that he put his hat over her hair as his own started to soak. That he pulled the door open and led her in ahead of him.

Her legs are crossed, and she is turned in the chair so that one of her small, black shoes is held delicately over a floor streaked with mud. The people in the background, the dark blurs in coveralls at the ends of these mud trails, hold beer bottles aloft to the photographer. They have just come in from nearby fields. They are the people that belong to this cafe.

Between the two of them are cups of coffee, perfect white half-rounds full of black. The whitest and blackest parts of the picture, besides hair and teeth. Her fingers play on the rim of hers.

In the town where I live, there is one good place to get coffee. I go with a friend when his girlfriend is at work. We share a newspaper, stretching out in the corner on the leather couch, deciding we deserve a lot of space. Sometimes we go to another place, a place with dark atmosphere, yellow candles and bad coffee, where the cups are filled and re-filled wordlessly.
Today is a day for atmosphere. He turns off his phone and *Girlfriend* blips away. Leaning across the table, he says he doesn’t like what he can read in my face lately. I look defeated, apparently. He refers to something he picked up from a book written by a debunked sociologist. The sociologist calls his biggest find the “Fuck It Theory.” It applies to people who are homeless, who sleep curled up in balls on the sidewalk at night and panhandle for change during the day. Apparently, these people get to a point when they don’t care, they don’t feel anything at all. They just want to die. They say “fuck it.”

He tells me that my face says “fuck it.”

“*A lot of people get this way,*” I say, “it’s not so uncommon. I have a friend who calls it ‘The Ugh.’ He fights it with spinach. He claims that the more spinach he eats, the better he feels. Maybe I should try that.”

“That’s just what he thinks. You can’t keep depression away with vegetables. Remember that thing you told me about the tigers and the schizo?”

In a psychology class I had to take once, we studied a case in which a schizophrenic man walked into his doctor’s office snapping his fingers to no discernible beat.

“I don’t need to see you anymore,” says the schizophrenic. “What are you doing?” his shrink wants to know. “Keeping the tigers away”, the man tells him.

“That doesn’t keep tigers away,” says the shrink.

I snap my fingers in his face. “You see any tigers around here?”

“You need help.”

There’s something else about that photograph. The faces. My grandmother’s face is so full of life that I expect it to burn the paper away in the shape of her head. My grandfather is so handsome that he’s unrecognizable as the wrinkled man I’ve always known. I wonder where these genes went, how the handsome features my family carried two generations ago became diluted into the potato-faced present. How stories I heard about the good character and virtuous acts of my grandparents and their siblings led to philandering uncles and second-cousin suicides.

These are things you want to know when you grow up. So, when Bill and Susan separated, I asked my mother why. She told me Bill forgot to stop dating. That he was seeing some other woman. Some Rebecca.

Starters, my mother had explained to me, we’re a family of starters, not finishers. These are stories you don’t get over the dinner table. Stories of women that didn’t make the hallway outside Grandma’s bathroom.

I try to imagine what a Rebecca looks like. A Rebecca is cheap-looking, with brassy hair and dry, cracking lipstick. A Rebecca twirls her hair around a long fingernail when she talks, and blows bubble-gummy kisses as she drives
away in her red Camaro. Nothing gets a Rebecca down. She’s not tied to anything. She flits around, has her flings, and she’s off to the next one. A Rebecca never gets “The Ugh.”

When I finally did go talk to someone about “The Ugh,” his big piece of advice was that if I were to finish something I’d started, I would feel a lot better. That completion of a project dissolves depression.

“Couldn’t I just eat spinach? I have a friend that says spinach makes him feel better.”

“Start. Then finish.”

Fine. So I sat down to finish a story that I had started. In order to do this, I had to tack an ending on it that was completely wrong. But if I didn’t tack that on, it wouldn’t be ‘finished.’ It read the way it had felt, like pinning a cardboard tail on the image of a donkey. I brought it to him the next time we met.

“Look. I finished something I started.”

I tossed him five untitled, stapler-bound pages.

“Oh, a writer. Well.” He called me a “writer” the way anybody’s mother calls them a “painter” when they hand over a piece of loose-leaf paper stained with watercolors and orange juice.

Later that afternoon, I met my friend for lunch. He was free for the day because Girlfriend had to work until five. We arrived at the entrance of the restaurant at the same time, and as he leaned forward to kiss me, I turned my head so that his mouth ended up in my hair. He laughed, pulled the door open, and gently pushed me ahead of him into the curry smells and clattering sounds.

I picked up a couple plastic tri-part menus and headed toward a two-person table near the window, the only place with any light. I put the menus down on the table and my coat on one of the chairs.

“Hey. Over here.”

I looked up. My friend had put his coat down at a booth in the dark alcove of the one-room restaurant. He tight-lipped a smile and patted the tabletop.

I walked over to the alcove and sat down across from him, carefully laying the menus on the table. When I opened mine and tried to read it, I realized how dark this part of the room really was.

“You look like you feel much better today. Did talking to that guy help?” he asked.

He watched me try to read the menu. He didn’t need to read his because he knew exactly what he was going to order. Wherever we eat, it’s “The Usual” and “What He’s Having.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, “I learned that it’s important to finish what you
start."

Pad Thai Nooddel, Curry Chickens, Spring Rolles Appetitzers. Everything in the menu was spelled wrong, as though written in a language between English and phonetic Taiwanese.

“Mmm.” He smiled and nodded at me the way you smile and nod at people who tell you they snap their fingers to keep tigers away. My hands trembled over the plastic menu as I set it down. He reached for one of them, but I went for my purse. I wanted to have a cigarette.

The lighter failed over and over, and he handed me one that he had in his pocket.

Girlfriend smokes, he told me, and laughed.

I stared at the plastic lighter in the air between us.

If someone took a photograph of this moment and years later studied all of its faded colors, there would be nothing to read in it. Only an image of the two of us. The Taiwanese man who doesn’t seem to speak any language at all, mute as a monster, mopping the already clean floor in the background. And the hands of the tiny, tiny woman that appears out of thin air to sweep away our menus and take our orders.

Click. Flash.

Thank you sir, thank you ma’am.

We’re never going to be my grandparents.