

## Grandma's House on the Hill

“So, your grandmother called me screaming in the middle of the night.”

Caroline often missed calls, but that was just fine with her. No one really ever needed to reach her that urgently, and she loathed to talk on the phone when she wasn't in the exact right mood. Getting annoyed on the phone, that's how Caroline lost friends. In this moment, she really wished she had missed her mother's call inviting her to a drink. *Come meet your mother for a drink*, she had said. Caroline should have known her mom, Jean, had something on her mind by the way she spoke in third person.

“Jesus, Mom, I just got here. Can we ease into the family hysterics a little bit?” Caroline said as she pulled her sweater tighter around herself to keep out the cold air of the overly air-conditioned, dimly lit bar.

“Oh yes, of course, dear. The bartender is just the cutest, you should ask him to make you something shaken, if you know what I mean.” Jean tried to crack a wink at Caroline, but the other eye twitched a little too much. “But don't get anything with a lemon. They have the bowl of slices just sitting out collecting germs. I read a whole article about the germs accumulating on food like that. You just wouldn't believe...”

Once Caroline had settled back down in her seat, she could finally take a good look at her mother. Her fingernails were short and bare, unlike the usual flamboyant red lacquered nails, and her skin looked a little thinner, as if the membrane of her face was straining to contain the drooping weight of her flesh.

“Are you hungry at all, sweetie? I heard this place has great *tapas*,” Jean asked, pronouncing “tapas” in an accent that was not quite Spanish but definitely not her typical Tennessee twang. As she looked over the little laminated menu, Jean absentmindedly reached across the table to taste her daughter's wine, while Caroline evaluated her mother and tried to suss out what exactly she was after. Was her eye still twitching?

“No, Mom, I'm okay. I've got a pile of cold pizza calling my name at the house. And you've kinda got me on the edge of my seat about Grandma.” When Caroline said Grandma, Jean's eye twitched, for sure this time. Caroline wondered why her mother was so intent on having this conversation tonight, in person, when she clearly needed some rest. And she found herself once again wishing she had let her mother's call go to voicemail, so she could be at home, curled up in silence.

A few years before, Caroline had moved back to her hometown. She'd tried her luck in bigger cities, but the apartments she could afford always had roaches and the friends she made never stuck. She'd had a cat, Rorschach, who ate the roaches and kept her company, but then he slipped off an icy fire escape and broke his leg. Caroline had to put him down, so she quit her job and moved home where the winters were warmer. *Oh but you're still so young*, Jean had said when Caroline had called and asked to move home. *Think of all the people you could meet out there, maybe even a special person...or you could get another cat!* But her persuading was to no avail. When Jean finally put her foot down and said she couldn't move home, Caroline moved into her grandmother's house.

It was a big blue house on a hill. It smelled like cloves and decades. Many, many decades. Caroline immediately felt her bones begin to thaw in that old house, under her grandmother's soft gaze and lax approach to life. Days passed slowly, and Caroline got another cat. Schrodinger. The three of them would pass long silent days together, bathed in sunlight and awash in the background noise of Wheel of Fortune. Eating wheaties and peering out from their house on a hill. Caroline was never cold now, except for when she had to see her mother.

"Well, like I was saying, your grandmother called me screaming. Well, not exactly screaming, just all panicky. You know how she can get," Jean paused and looked down into her drink. She stared down her eyes out of focus for a long moment before suddenly realizing it was empty and signaling to the bartender for another round.

"Mom."

"Yes, okay so she called me all confused. And I tried to calm her down, I really did, but she would not relax. She said she needed to be home, needed to get away. I know the doctors say a little confusion at this age is normal, but I just don't know..."

Caroline remembered when her grandmother first began to lose her tether to reality, when she blinked out in front of the fridge or chided the talking heads on the evening news for interrupting her. At first, the episodes freaked her out, and she would shake her grandmother in a breathless panic, but gradually Caroline found she could adjust to anything, as long as it was gentle and slow and warm. Recently, the episodes were getting worse—longer and more grueling. Grandma often woke Caroline up in the middle of the night, crying or confused, but Caroline never told anyone this. If Grandma couldn't live at home anymore, then Caroline wouldn't be able to either.

Jean continued, looking at her daughter pleadingly, "She seemed *really* not okay, Caroline. Talking about a stranger in the house, not knowing where she is. Haven't you noticed anything like this?"

Caroline could hear the desperation, the terror, in her mother's voice, but she couldn't tell her what she wanted to hear. An flashback of her life in the city, freezing nights punctuated by overcrowded and uncomfortable days. Caroline couldn't make this easier for Jean, so she didn't even try. "Oh, God, Mom you're actually being so dramatic. Grandma's just on some new meds to help her sleep and they give her these weird dreams and it takes her a sec to wake up from them. But really, she's fine. Ease up a little," Caroline lied.

"Are you sure? Because she didn't mention—"

"Yes, I'm obviously sure. I live with her, remember? Because you wouldn't help me out, or maybe you don't remember. Too busy with hot yoga or golden years dating sites, or whatever you do all day." Caroline downed her drink and reached to put her sweater on. "I actually have to go now. I told Grandma I would be home soon, and I don't want to worry her, especially if she seems so confused all the time," Caroline said the final part in a mocking tone, so Jean would know Caroline thought the accusation was ridiculous. Grandma was fine, she was just fine, and she could stay home with Caroline and Schrodinger.

On her way out of the door, Caroline heard her mom call out, *oh sweetie don't go so soon...*



Back at the house on the hill, Caroline felt her muscles relax. She pushed aside some piles of used tissues and miscellaneous rubbish and eased into a large, heavily broken-in chair. With Schrodinger on her lap, she finally felt warm. Her mother was being dramatic, she thought. There really was no need to disrupt all of this. Maybe she was just regretting turning Caroline away.

As she fell asleep, memories of her mother's twitching eye and sagging skin danced behind her eyelids until she drifted off into the embrace of an aged home and cat-warmed lap.



Sometime late in the night, she awoke to screaming. Blood-curdling, guttural, getting closer to Caroline's nest on the couch. The grating scream from vocal cords worn thin by decades of life radiated from her grandmother's room on the floor above Caroline. It seemed to pursue her, to seek her out, to threaten her and the cozy life she had carved out for herself. Suddenly, Caroline bolted out of her seat and rushed upstairs to her grandmother's bedroom.

The walls were once white but years of wear, exacerbated by the decade when Grandma dated a man who liked to smoke in bed, had yellowed them to the color of baby snot. The curtains, drenched in dust, were dense and heavy but still failed to block out the full moonlight from the night beyond. The bed was plump but lumpy, and only comfortable for Grandma, who had devoted a lifetime to imprinting her body's contours into the mattress. She was there now, pressed into her individualized divot, somehow both limp and tense, like a corpse at a funeral viewing. The room was entirely still except for Schrodinger sitting on Grandma's stomach, softly kneading the aged organs within, and seeming to push the screams out of her throat. Her mouth and eyes were open, and both seemed to be screaming for help, pleading with Caroline without really recognizing her.

Caroline watched for a moment, counting the liver splotches around her grandmother's gaping mouth, but when her screams began to dry up and she began to come to a little, Caroline lunged to retrieve the phone before she could phone Jean. Caroline imagined her mother sleeping peacefully, then receiving the call and hearing the guttural screams from her own mother. She imagined Jean crying, too, and calling Caroline in a panic. Or even worse, rushing over to the house on the hill and ruining everything. Caroline imagined packing her bags to leave the house on the hill, looking for a job and an apartment that would inevitably be too cold. She pictured Rorschach lying on the icy pavement, then she imagined Schrodinger collapsing, too. She couldn't leave this house. She wouldn't.

So, Caroline sat all night, gripping her grandmother's phone and watching her screams till they fizzled into moans. Low, haunting moans. Eventually, Schrodinger tired of kneading the screaming woman's stomach and came to brush against Caroline's bare ankles. She looked away from her grandmother's terror-struck face and down at her cat's meticulous strut.

Caroline smiled.