The Shut-In

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On weekends, we would go to the Granada theater at ten in the morning and stay till five at night. Grandma would go into the lounge of the ladies room and sit in a chair, happy chewing her gum or reading the "Enquirer." And I would sit through three or four showings of the same movie all day coming out during the intermissions to talk to Grandma and buy lunch, or watch the shape each new crowd took in the seats of the darkening theater. Once, I was sitting through my sixth viewing of "The Sound of Music" when, during a crucial moment in the film, a woman with clacking metal curlers in her hair, said to her friend, "Now the boy won't give the girl's father the gun, and will shoot him instead, not realizing what he's done, of course.

And of course she was wrong. But I didn't care, I was only seven or eight, and the last time I tried to set someone straight about a plot, she had threatened to call the usher and have me thrown out. So I just sat there, trying not to hear her, making smacking noises with my shoes on the sticky floor. When the credits were over, I would always rouse Grandma from her reading, and we'd walk out of the theater, go home, eat, and go to sleep.

Sometimes, during the week, I'd wake up late at night or just before it was morning, and the house would be completely quiet. I'd become frightened and lie very still, listening for a sound of breathing, wondering if it was possible for Grandma's heart to have stopped during the night without my hearing it. I'd creep out of bed and stand in her doorway trying to determine whether or not she was still alive. Seeing nothing I'd walk closer and stand directly over her bed squinting in the darkness. Seeing nothing still, I would turn on the light.

"What do you want from my poor life?" she'd say confused and irritated, blinking in the light.

But I would have no ready answer, and would return to bed. Reassuringly, Grandma's snores would return, and my thoughts would empty into sleep.

In the morning I would awaken to the clinking of Grandma washing dishes. When they were dried she'd hand squeeze me orange juice and cook Cream of Wheat. Even though nobody ever stopped by, every morning after breakfast, Grandma would proudly clean and dust the old house, arranging and re-arranging knick-knacks, then putting them all back in the same place, as if she were expecting important visitors. We'd watch the Donahue Show till around noon, then Grandma would be done cleaning and we'd take the bus to Bridgeman's, a local coffee shop she favored.

Grandma would start off by ordering whole wheat toast to eat with a peeled, hard-boiled egg she carried in her purse, and a pot of hot water to dilute her coffee with.

"Oh and miss, is your lettuce fresh today?"

"Yes ma'am. Today and everyday."
"Now don't bring me my salad unless the lettuce is green and crisp and real fresh," she'd say, kneading the air between her fingers.

"I'd speak up. "Uh, I'd like a hot fudge sundae please, no cherry."

"Your teeth. Too much of that dreck isn't good for you, it'll wreck your teeth."

"With whip cream?"

"Your uncle Jack, Jack lost all his teeth, even his adult ones. Now he has false teeth that he keeps in a glass at night."

"No whip cream."

"When your Aunt Sarah gets mad at Jack, she hides his teeth, and he can't even talk or eat. No miss, give the boy an order of whole wheat toast and a nice glass of milk."

"Alrighty, thanks."

"Be a good boy now and make sure and drink your milk. You know we never had milk when I was a kid."

We'd finish eating, and a couple of her sad eyed hair-netted friends would drift into the booth.

"It's such a madhouse with all the Meshuginahs out there," she'd say tapping her hand against the window facing the street. "A week ago, a young man came up to Sonia Edelman's house saying he was from the gas company and that he had to check their pipes for a leak. So what do you think happens? (It shouldn't happen to mine enemies.) He just gives her husband a zotz on the head, ties them up, and runs off with all the jewelry. I tell ya', it's not like it used to be. You just can't trust people anymore. And the shame of it is these kids nowadays just aren't careful. They don't realize yet, the world is so big," she'd say, while the old ladies regarded me piteously through their drawn sad eyes. Grandma would go on to compare ailments, and retell exaggerated stories about her children until one of the women would mumble something about having to fix dinner.

Before paying the check, Grandma would re-add the items to make sure she wasn't being cheated (sometimes she even argued over the figures with the waitress.) She'd leave a quarter on the table then we'd walk to the Red Owl. Grandma would always buy the same things every day, milk and English muffins often taking half an hour to pick them out. I'd watch her from my seat on the metal ledges by the window where the giant bags of dried dog food are always kept. She'd be reaching deep into her wicker purse, paying out the bill in nickels and pennies as the cashier waited impatiently. Then we'd take a cab home.

After dinner, I often sat at the dining room window till it got dark out, watching the great grey waves of Lake Superior as they rolled forever undisturbed, never changing their course to the shoreline.

That was the daily pattern we followed, Grandma always clung tightly to the schedule, as if its following was her reason to exist. I kept looking for opportunities to do something outside of the routine, Grandma just didn't seem to notice. I kept waiting for something exciting to happen, like a neighborhood house fire, or a tornado, but nothing ever did.
I was lying on my stomach on the living room floor, curling little strands of shag carpeting around my fingers and watching Johnny Carson. Grandma was on the couch starting to doze off. There was the usual night sound noise of crickets, echoes of dogs barking down the street, and the murmur of occasional cars passing, all kinds of mixing together to create a hollow drone. My eyelids started to flicker. I began to drift off into a world of dingy luncheonettes and wilted shopping bag ladies. Then something sharp pulled me back. A car door slammed followed by the sound of tires accelerating against asphalt, then fading away. I looked over to the couch. Grandma was still asleep, breathing deeply. I crawled over to the drapes, moved them aside, and looked through the window.

Down for about two blocks, I followed the symmetrical line of street-lamps with my eyes. I could see someone walking out from underneath the bridge, just a silhouetted figure. As it stepped up the sidewalk, I gradually began to make out the shape of a young woman. About a block from the house I could see her pretty well, she was tall with streaked-yellow blond hair. The light from the iridescent globes above glittered across her vinyl shoulder-bag. Her high heels slapped hurriedly against the pavement bouncing click noises off the sides of houses into the night.

I watched her, waited for her to walk past our house and turn off someplace into the darkness, but she turned around and walked up into our driveway. I could feel my heart pounding in my ears. I let the curtain corner drop back into place, turned off the T.V. and laid on the floor knowing no one could really have any business at my Grandmother's late at night. There was a rapping. I got up and carefully opened the door till it caught on the chainlock.

"Yes?" I said unsurely. Outside was the lady. I could see her well by the light from our lawn lamp. She stood with a lacquer nailed hand against her hip. She wore smooth jeans with bright denim stitchings, and a gauzy, light blouse that was rumpled, and torn at the shoulder. Her eyes were a liquid shade of clear blue. I watched the light shimmer across the glossed folds of her lips.

"I'm really sorry if I disturbed you or anything," she said. She arched her head forward and scanned the doorway, "Is your mother or anybody around?"

"No," I said, eyes staring into hers, "I'm the only one home."

"Oh," she said rubbing her hands across her shoulder, "I ran into a little trouble," she nodded towards the bridge, "back there with my boy-friend, and I was wondering since I'm stranded, if I could please use your phone to call for a ride home?"

The chainlock felt cold and colly in my hands. I remembered Grandma's sentiments to strangers.

"I'm sorry but I can't let you in."

"Well do you think you could call me a cab?" she said, her voice came out in white mists on the cold air.
"I guess so," I said, closed the door, walked into the kitchen and fumbled with the phone. The voice that crackled "Yellow Cab" on the other end of the line sounded small and far away.

I opened the door a crack, said, "He's on the way," and closed it again. I moved the drape aside and looked through the window. She stood on our front steps and lit a cigarette. I watched her blow smoke through her nostrils, and flick ashes into our flower bed.

The yellow cab pulled into our driveway, she yelled a "Thank you" to the house, and I watched the glowing red tip of her cigarette disappear into the darkness of the cab. The driver turned the ignition and backed out. The taxi faded into the blackness where the streetlights ended. I laid on the couch next to Grandma. I watched her chest rise in even deep breaths so much like great undisturbed waves, and listened to her muffled snores reassuring me of how easy it was going to be, once I became old.

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