

History Through a Picture

12-20-2001

I see her walk past me, in her own little world, heading toward our living room. She makes me appreciate my youth, my time as a kid. My family calls her Yiayia. It means “Grandmother” in Greek. Sometimes I look at her and I shake my head, or shrug my shoulders and think about how wacky she is. Other times her illness is just too real for me to do that.

Once, before she started losing her marbles, she gave me a picture of herself at 18. She was in a knee-length dress and dressy shoes, an outfit that most women wore every day back then. She looked so young, so pretty. Her dark hair was piled on her head, and she was sitting, almost in a sidesaddle way, on a blanket at the beach. She leans nonchalantly on one arm, and her dainty little pocket-book rests in the sand nearby. And she looks so beautiful. I first saw the picture when I was thirteen, and at the time, my mom told me that I had her eyes, and that if she still looked like that, then she could have been mistaken for my sister. I don’t understand that - how could she have been so beautiful and capable and why can’t we all be like that forever? Her eyes looked so happy in that picture, and I really have the same eyes, big, brown and almond-shaped. They look like lizard eyes when I’m smiling or feeling sneaky. My Yiayia’s eyes are so vacant sometimes. I know that is cliché, but I can’t think of a better word for it. Vacant. Sometimes I look for some flicker of her old personality, and it’s like looking into the eyes of a china doll, only more fragile.

She does so many crazy things. She has thought that she was struck by lightning. She has thought that the china in her wardrobe closet has exploded. She says the same things at the same time, in the same place, in the same way, EVERY DAY. So sometimes I laugh and I roll my eyes when she leaves the room after saying something totally insane. I tell myself that I need a laugh; that it’s okay; that otherwise I’ll just cry about it and I’ll go insane too. But inside, I crack and shatter and scream and ready myself. I lock myself in a room, throw myself on my parents’ bed, and clutch my hands to my chest, mentally envisioning myself cracking open my ribcage and relieving myself of the tightness that expands within me. I can’t breathe, and I curse myself, because she was once like me. She cried when she was in love. She went out and did crazy things with her friends. She went to school. She took care of her big family. She did so many things that I have done, that I am doing. She dropped out of school in tenth grade so she could work to send her smart older brother, Theodore, to Harvard. He was the only one in her family to go to college, I think. So she worked in the mills of Massachusetts. My Yiayia was a mill-girl at fifteen or sixteen years old. Thusly, she worked and helped send her brother to college. He went and then he enlisted in the military to serve his country in World War II. He got shot down. My Yiayia and his wife caught tuberculosis. My Yiayia spent a year in a TB quarantine hospital. She survived. Her sister-in-law did not, and when she

died, my Yiayia took her baby in. In her early twenties, she raised her brother Theodore's baby for him and his wife. My Yiayia was the capable woman.

She once was beautiful and young and strong, working in the mills, going out with her friends, giggling while she thought about going out with the guy who would later become her husband and my grandfather, my Papou, Andy. She's so different now. So old. So tired. So empty. Where is the Yiayia who took care of me as a child? Where is the Yiayia who bustled around the kitchen, cooking stifado and pita and lamb and all sorts of Greek food?

If I could write songs, I would sing. I'd sing my anguish that I discover daily when I see her shuffle past me on her way to the living room. I'd sing how she sits in her rocking chair and rocks and rocks and rocks and sings "Nani, nani, nani" to my baby brother. He'll never know her like I did. I'd sing the way she speaks nonsense sometimes and other times just speaks her memories. I'd sing the way I catch myself hating the fact that she's here, in my house, and how I wish sometimes that she were in her own house - how it would be less stressful - and how it would be less hurtful to my family. I'd sing how she IS my family. I'd sing how only God knows that I'm not able to speak these things, only God knows that I'm only able to write them down, and that it is all I can do to sit and sort out my thoughts.



How can I sort out anger? How can I sort out confusion? Only my God knows. Oh, I'm not willing, I'm not willing. I'm not willing to try. I want to wallow; I want to suffer in this, because it hurts me. It tears me from the inside out, shredding my heart to see something so disgusting happen to someone within my home. Where is my grandmother's dignity? My school professors talk frankly about dementia. They smile gently and give me sentimentalities about it, they tell me to give my faith to my Yiayia. Don't they know that I try? Don't they know that I'm already shredded inside, waiting for her to come to know my Jesus? Don't they know that she doesn't understand? They tell me to read the Bible to her - don't they know that she can't even use a fork the right way any-

more? Do they know that sometimes she picks up her knife and argues with me when I tell her that she can't eat off of a butter knife? I want to take everyone by the necks and shake them until they see that this tears me up from within. I want to shake them until they know that SHE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND.

situation sinks in and all is quiet. Then it's gone. At this point, the owner of the spilled cup will be visibly distressed over their lack of liquids, and being that they are also too lazy, they will solicit the help of the original cup-filler. You must then get up, brush away incessant, inane questions like, "Can you make it?", "Want me to move?", "Is the baby sleeping?", and "Can I have cheese on this?" and you must bravely stalk your way to the kitchen sink to fill up the darn cup. The cup is filled and returned to its eager owner, who will drink it down noisily and smack his lips. Sit down. Eat. Drink (water). And be merry, for someone will soon need their cup filled again. Again you will be asked to repeat the cup-filling routine.

But lo, rejoice!

Soon the food will be gone, and people will have left the table. You will now have the intense satisfaction of taking all the empty glasses and putting them in the dishwasher. Now you may relax. You have officially "filled up the cups" for dinner, and your job is done. Just beware of the humming. "Two pills?"

Hey, by the way, thanks for putting up with all of us, Mommy.

Happy Mothers' Day 2002.

Tissues

07-25-2003

Today, I came home from work and sat eating my pizza at the dining room table. I was hungry. Terribly hungry. I ate five pieces, and they were large. Sal's Pizza, if you must know, and they don't skimp (nineteen inch large pizzas)! Midway through slice number five, Yiayia came shuffling into the dining room, and I asked, as I always ask when she's up and around, "Yia, what're you doing? Do you need something?" She shuffled over to me, leaned over close to my face where I sat, and spoke in low tones. She handed me one of those little packages of tissues that are all wrapped in plastic so that you can stick them in your pocket or your purse or whatever. She put them in my hand and closed both her hands over mine, the tissues still in it. She said, "I wanted to give these to you. I thought you could use them in your travels."

