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An Indian Summer Night's Kiss

by Dan Fuchs

Sometimes adults think us kids don't know what they're doing when we actually do know. Take, for example, my parents and how they're keeping me and my little brother Jason far, far away from my grandmother today. She's in the hospital, dying. I know she's dying because I heard my father saying it to the tennis guy in Connecticut as I was walking Jason back to his room at camp to help him pack up his clothes and stuff. We both heard it. "My mother is dying," is what he told the man, and then they went into a big building and didn't come out for a while. Jason and I played ping pong in the rec room until Dad drove up and told us to get in the car.

The drive back was quiet. Jason slept most of the way. Dad didn't talk at all, so I just sat and watched the scenery. Finally, I got up the guts to ask him about Oma, and his answer was, "Oh, she'll be fine, Tommy. Don't you worry about your Oma. She's a tough old bird. Tougher than you and me combined." It's no use asking my father questions sometimes. I don't know if he thinks he's protecting us, or maybe he really thinks that if he says everything is okay enough times, then everything will *be* okay.

It was still light out when we got home. As we pulled into the driveway, the door swung open, and Mom came running down the walkway. At first, I couldn't tell whether she was happy or sad; then, she grabbed Jason and yanked him out of the car into a big, smothering hug. He was hugging her too, but she was squeezing him so hard he had to ask her to stop. We sat down in the living room, and Mom brought us bologna and cheese sandwiches with mayo, Jay's favorite. He ate them up, one after the other, with this huge smile on his face that made me laugh, which then made him laugh, and before you knew it, all of us were laughing and eating sandwiches. I ended up with the hiccups, and Jason almost choked. My mom looked happier than I'd seen her in a long time. But I noticed that Dad was not laughing. He was hiding it, but I was almost sure he was crying. It was weird; it was like he was trying to make his crying seem like laughing. No one else saw it but me. I thought he could tell, too, because

he kind of put his finger up to his lips like he was shushing me, and I wanted to go over and hug him, but I knew I couldn't. Or I wanted to push him and Mom together and make the two of them hug, but I knew they wouldn't. My father was different now, and I wasn't really sure how. Smaller, maybe? It was like that time when we were walking in New York City near his office, and he tripped over the curb and fell. A guy helped me lift him up and said, "Are you alright, sir?" and it was the first time I'd been able to imagine him as an old man. His face gave me the same feeling now.

Visiting hours at Saint Agnes don't start until 11 in the morning. We get there a little early because my father always gets everywhere he goes early. The nurses are nice to us, especially to me and Jay. They flirt with us, asking us if we're married and stuff like that, and then laugh when our faces turn red. Jason rolls his eyes at me. I can tell he wishes he could be anywhere else right now, and so do I. The hospital is cold, and there's that smell that all hospitals seem to have — of body odors battling back and forth with bleach. Sometimes it smells like the bleach is winning, but sometimes the body stink gets up in your nose, and it's hard to get out. It kind of stays with you and follows you through the rest of your day. The sounds are weird, too — all the beeps and bings and blips from the many, many machines all over the place, along with the occasional moan or the family that was just in the waiting room, laughing, talking loudly.

I haven't seen my grandfather in what seems like a long time. He stands up slowly when we walk in. I can tell he's tired by the way his back is bent.

"Well, hello," he says, giving me a hug and asking me how my artistic career is going.

"Uh, fine?" I manage.

"And this one. The escape artist!" Opa smiles at Jason. He looks away, embarrassed until Opa goes to him and holds him close. He whispers something in his ear, and Jason nods. I can't hear exactly what he says, but my guess is it's something about tennis camp and not to worry about leaving early. Or maybe that's just me, using my imagination again. I

already know, just from the way he ate those sandwiches when he got home, that Jay won't be going back to that place.

A lady comes over to where we're sitting and says, "Are these the grandsons?"

I can tell by the way everyone looks at each other that they have all met her before and that she is here to talk to us. She has a big job-smile like my elementary teachers all had. It's a smile that can go away quickly whenever things turn bad. It's different from a regular smile, which can come and go when you're happy or when you're sad. It's like someone taught her this smile for her job. It's a job-smile. She says her name is Miss Jackie.

"Do you know what a Social Worker is?" she asks.

I shake my head, and Jason says he thinks it has something to do with planning parties.

"No, I'm here to help the people who come to the hospital to visit their loved ones, like your grandmother, with how they're feeling. Because sometimes we have lots of feelings when people we love aren't feeling well."

"Or when they're going to die," Jason says.

I elbow him hard in the ribs.

"No, he's right. That's another time people have feelings, isn't it?" She has sat down in front of my brother and me on a chair, and our parents and Opa are standing behind her. The whole thing is way awkward. I can tell my mom wants to smoke a cigarette because she's doing that thing she does where she clicks her fingernails with her thumbnail, but you're not allowed to smoke in here.

"Can we see her?" Jason asks.

"Of course you can," she says. "I just want to go over a couple of special things with you first. Is that okay?"

"Sure," Jason says, and I roll my eyes. The Social Worker lady hasn't noticed, but my mother has, and she gives me one of those "respect-your-elders" looks. Miss Jackie brings out this weird-looking rag doll which I guess is supposed to represent Oma, and she starts sticking all these little tubes and stuff into different parts of it, explaining why each

one is there and how it is helping our grandmother. Like I said before, sometimes adults think we don't know what we already do know. So I sit there and listen politely until Miss Jackie asks us if we have any questions. I shoot Jay a look to make sure he doesn't. I can tell he was about to ask something because his mouth drops open, but then he sees me and stops himself.

"Okay, let's go see your grandma," Miss Jackie smiles, extra bright this time. My mother's nails are clicking as we make our way to Oma's room.

As soon as I see her, I wish I had listened better to Miss Jackie because the lady lying in the hospital bed looks nothing like my Oma. She looks much older than my grandmother; her skin is the wrong color. That part I do remember from Miss Jackie's stuff. It's called jaundice, and it has something to do with your blood and your liver not working right. She said a lot of people in Oma's condition have yellowish skin. But Miss Jackie saying it, even though she does have a very nice smile, doesn't make seeing my grandmother with jaundice any easier. Jason's eyes are big, and he's kind of half-hiding behind Dad.

"It's okay, son," Dad tells him in a voice that sounds small, far away. It doesn't sound like his voice. "Tell her goodbye."

"Bye, Oma," Jason says quietly, almost like he's apologizing.

"Auf wiedersehen," I say to her, in the only German I really know. Oma lets out a sound from her throat like a moan, and her eyes, all cloudy, open and roll around like she's confused.

"Is she alright?" my father asks one of the nurses, who is writing something on a clipboard. "Is she in pain?"

"No, that's just the sound of the air pushing out over her vocal cords. She's not feeling any pain now, sir."

"No pain," I hear my grandfather say. He is staring into Oma's face. I want to know what he's feeling, but I can't tell. My mother takes us out of the room, and we head to the parking lot. My little brother is watching Mom's face, and the three of us hold hands all the way to the car. I know I've just seen my grandmother for the last time.

When I get home, I start to make my way up the stairs to my room.

"Tommy? Hey," she says. Where you going?"

"Nowhere. My room. I feel like being alone. Just for a bit."

She touches my face in a gentle way before letting me go.

"You do know I love you so, right?" she says.

I nod and look up at her until she decides to let me go.

It's early afternoon, and the sun is bright outside my bedroom window. Lying down on my bed, I close my eyes, and a flash of yellow skin appears, frightening me. My mind is suddenly crammed full of images of my grandmother, her skin like old, yellowed paper. I dig around my memories and can find nothing good to replace these pictures with. Those panicked eyes, rolling from one of us to the other, far away and blurred by cataracts. Her fear terrified me. I can't be in here. I have to get outside. I need air. Run, I tell myself. Run.

So I do. I dash into the back yard and slip under the chain link fence into the woods behind our house. I won't be working on my map today. Won't be running around with Karl Hammer or Jason. It's just me, alone, running along the trails we've made back here over the last few years. I jump over fallen trees and dash past startled birds and other animals. Hopping, I make my way from rock to mossy rock, somehow not falling as I cross and re-cross the brook. I run past Wolf Lodge, a group of teenagers calling after me, but I'm running so fast their voices can't catch up to me.

Stopping, I lean back on a white birch, its papery bark making me itch. As soon as my eyes close, my Oma's fearful face is there again. I can't outrun it, so I stop trying to. Instead, I let my body slide down to sitting against the birch tree and start crying big time, with my grandmother's scared and scary face watching me the entire time.

I don't know how much later it is when I finally get home, but my mother hugs me and says, "No changes yet." Her face is puffy, and I notice a black and white photograph on the end table, next to the red ashtray she prefers, piled high with cigarette butts. The ice cubes in her glass sing as she raises it to her lips, her last puff snaking out of both nostrils and into her drink.

I'm drawn to the photo. It is of a beautiful young girl seated, gazing off at someone or something to her right, out of the picture. Her profile is perfect; she reminds me of a queen. Her hair is dark and shiny, pulled back into a bun, and her hands are folded in her lap. Her expression is maybe a little sad. Or just, I don't know, bored?

"Is this…."

"Your grandmother, yes," my mom says. "Wasn't she beautiful?"

"Yes." "I see you in this picture," Mom says, and I guess I can see it. My nose is straight like hers, my eyes hooded. The eyebrows slope downward like mine too. I try to imagine what my grandmother, Marianne Krause, must have been like when she was this age -- a teenager, I'm guessing. Maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, if that. She could never have imagined most of what her life turned out to be, could she? Marriage. Kids. War. Running away. Her kids growing up, moving out, getting good grades at good colleges, then having kids of their own?

I don't think she could have imagined any of this as the pretty girl in the black and white photo. Not to mention the messed up situation she was in now, moaning, or pushing air over her vocal cords, in and out of sleep, waiting, wondering, knowing, most likely. Able to feel the fear in all of our eyes.

This afternoon, as I make my way out to the street to see who's around, a breeze brushes my cheek, and I close my eyes, losing my breath for a moment, as though I've been touched by God, which in a way I have, I suppose. Spring is not far off, and you can feel it in breezes like this one. The sun hangs for a long time, reluctant to slip into darkness, and I watch from the street as it sets behind the Hobbes's house. Then the door opens, and Kylie steps out.

"Hey, Tommy," Kylie calls.

"Hey."

Kylie walks over to where I'm standing, hugging herself as if it's cold. It isn't.

"What're you doing?" she asks.

"Me? Oh, nothing. Just watching the sun go down." I pretend to look past and through her, but she's got my total attention. She has never looked better.

"My mom said your grandma's in the hospital."

"She is, yeah. At St. Agnes," I say, pointing in what I think is the general direction of the hospital. She points in the opposite direction, and we both say, "North!"

We laugh at that, which feels really, really good. It feels really good to laugh.

"Hey, do you want to play ping pong?" she asks.

"Sure," I say. "I'd like that."

Kylie opens the gate, and we enter the backyard. She has two border collies, one of whom starts trying to corral me somewhere as soon as I enter their enclosure.

"It's okay, Brandy," Kylie says, "He's a good guy. A nice guy, right?"

"Um, I guess," I say, blushing most likely.

She smiles that amazing, dimpled smile, then opens the door to the shed.

"My father built this for us. Check it out."

The building is just one room, made unevenly, with a ping pong table in it, barely fitting. "The lights even work," says Kylie as she stands next to the light switch, leaning against the wall, giving me an inviting look. My breath catches in my throat as I walk over to her. I can barely squeeze in between her and the table. I stand there as she looks up at me. She's a few inches shorter than I am. Her eyes are so bright and alive that I almost can't even look at them. I reach my hand slowly up to the light switch and press down. In the dark, I can hear Kylie breathing evenly through her nose. I lean in closer and can feel her standing up on her tiptoes. Her skin smells clean and fresh, and so does her breath. I want to breathe her in as I kiss her. This is my first kiss. Not that thing that happened to me with Carla. This is it. Now I understand. Now I understand why there are so many love songs and why whole wars have been fought in the name of love. So I kiss Kylie Hobbes. And then I kiss her again, deeply and deep into the Indian Summer night, and I can't recall feeling this happy, this safe, or this right ever before.