

Glass Houses

"Make the towel damp." Geena's mouth shifted to the other side of her face, she patted her hair, a perfect pyramid of frizz. "Let's say this works by just ironing- no damp towel. Ya see if the towel is damp, then my hair will get damp and soon enough it'll frizz up again." Coral was not in the mood, "Do you want your hair straight or not?" She spit on the iron like a pro, "Well?" Geena dampened the towel. She stooped over the ironing board and spread her thick, coarse, black, frizzy hair on the shiny gray cover. The gray cover felt like sandpaper on her cheek. Coral placed the damp towel over a portion of Geena's hair. "Pssssss." Geena could feel the heat from the nose of the iron, a thin layer of steam away from her scalp. The moist puffs made it all the hotter, "Stop! It's this kind of humid weather that makes my hair frizzy." Coral was losing patience, "Just let's do it. You'll see," she pressed the steam button. "Pssssss."

Coral Miller had straight strawberry hair that went into a perfect pageboy. Either she was born with that page boy or it just grew out of her head straight, and then gravity took over. The neat solid roll of hair framed her face. And that face! Eyes, nose, mouth- pure symmetry. Coral had the kind of eyes that make boys' pupils dilate. The Millers had money too, and a big glass house. A tree even grew through Coral's bedroom. Geena saw the Millers' house every day on the school bus route. She was impressed with all the glass even though she'd heard that people with glass houses shouldn't throw stones. It scared her to think of spending a night there not because someone might throw stones, but because people could see in; not like Geena's house, a small, modest home, built by her father, the stone work a product of generations of Italian freemasons. Geena wished that all their multi-paned windows could be knocked out and replaced with big, clear muntinless windows and a tree

would grow in the middle of her bedroom. Geena knew the inside of the Millers' house must be the neatest, coolest, most modern house in the world, and she couldn't wait to go and see it. "Wow!" Geena looked at her reflection in the dining room mirror. "My hair is straight! Straight." Coral circled Geena, "Yeah, yeah, perfect. Now we can have lunch at my house." Geena couldn't believe how quickly having straight hair opened doors.

Clouds were rolling in faster than Geena and Coral could move their feet. Geena kept touching her shoulder. Her hair was still there, which meant it was still straight. Like an autistic child, Geena's fingers kept repeating their little twitchy movements back to her shoulders, afraid the rain would force her hair into thick frizz up to her ears. Coral broke ahead, running. "Move it! We'll be late for lunch." Geena ran in a cautious gait, holding her head stiff as an ironing board. "Late? Do they know I'm coming?" Coral waved Geena to hurry. Huge drops of rain spit at the blacktop, and the blacktop hissed back steam. Geena zigzagged trying to avoid the hair-frizzing vapors.

White bread. Crusts cut off. Mayonnaise, thinly spread. Cucumbers, skinned, sliced thin, but able to hold their fork-corrugated edges. A sprinkling of salt, pepper and a drop of lemon. watercress, and a slice of orange, placed on the side of the plate. Geena, awed that anyone could think of putting cucumbers between bread, gingerly picked up her sandwich, her fingers so dark against the white bread. "Is that a tan I see already, not even June 21st!" Dr. Miller smiled. His teeth were porcelain white. Coral looked at her mother. Mrs. Miller smiled so quickly that Geena didn't have a chance to see her teeth. She suspected that they were perfect. No stains on this family's choppers. Geena wondered if Dr. Miller cleaned and drilled his own teeth.

"Would you girls like some potato chips?" Dr. Miller winced at his wife's suggestion, his eyes narrowing slightly, "Greasy." Coral looked at Mrs. Miller again, this time a little more concern crept into her green eyes. "My dad doesn't like grease." Geena loved grease, especially if it came in the form of a potato chip, but she declined. Dr. Miller chewed each bite, over and over, his jaw bone flexing each time. Dr. Miller could be an actor he certainly had the jaw movement down. Geena had admired Kirk Douglas who could command her full attention in any scene with the slight pulse of his jaw bones. She always wondered if he chewed gum to get that effect. Whatever it was, it was neat. Dr. Miller watched Geena very closely as she ate. "So, how long have you been living in Valley Forge?" Geena made sure to swallow before opening her mouth, even though she could see what was once a delicate sandwich, pulverized into a white mush with a green tinge in Dr. Miller's mouth. "We moved in a few months ago." "Mmmhmpf," he swallowed. "From where did you move?" Coral's back was erect. She was sitting on the edge of her seat. Two perfectly corrugated cucumbers fell from between her crustless slices of bread slapping the plate. "Don't play with your food, Coral." Mrs. Miller smiled again, long enough for Geena to study her teeth, and they were white, perfectly even. Odd, they looked just like Dr. Miller's teeth. Geena was mesmerized by Mrs. Miller's perfectness, just like Barbara Eden- a genie popped out of a bottle.

Geena was always interested in other people's teeth. It was the first thing she looked at when meeting someone. Her own teeth overlapped and on the left side, her eye tooth was almost obscured by her front tooth, giving her a crooked smile. By looking at other people's teeth, Geena could imagine what kind of teeth she might select for her own. No chance of Geena getting braces, "You teeth is you teeth," her father would say. "Is not right to change

the teeth.” Geena wanted to change her teeth, and her father’s bad English, and her dark brown eyes for perhaps some green ones, or blue, but then she'd have to change her hair color to blonde, or red, and then she would be excommunicated from church and home. Even if she did change the color of her hair, what would she do with her eyebrows? or for that matter her dark olive skin?

Mrs. Miller felt Geena's stare, laughed and covered her mouth, "Oh dear, do I have cucumber stuck in my teeth?" Geena looked down at her plate, wanting to kick herself for staring so long. Geesh, she thought, how rude! Dr. Miller leaned over to his wife, "Smile dear," and she smiled, just like that. Her upper lip popped up making a little wet sound. Dr. Miller squinted, "Nooo. Open." Mrs. Miller giggled, "Oh Andrew!" Dr. Miller held her chin, "Open," he inspected, "nothing there," and Mrs. Miller gently moved Dr. Miller’s hand from her chin.

Geena felt as if she should explain herself, but Dr. Miller, a man who was used to inspection of everything, repeated his question to Geena, "From where did you move?" Geena was excited but nervous to talk about herself, "Well, Malvern, until my parents found a lot they could... on which they could build." Coral smiled at her Dad, "Her Dad built their house, new, like ours, except it doesn't have so much glass." Dr. Miller tilted his head, thinking for a second as if he were trying to envision a house without glass, "No glass, at all?" Geena felt hot. She tried to swallow her bread but it was caught on the roof of her mouth. Her tongue tugged at the stubborn white bread. She thought they must stamp little white hosts for holy communion out of Wonder Bread because she spent the time from receiving communion to the time she found her way back to her pew trying to peel the wafer from the

roof of her mouth instead of praying. Perhaps the priests ironed the bread. "We have some glass...well, a lot, but it's separated by muntins." Dr. Miller cocked his head the other way, surprised. Geena felt a twinge of gas, "The pieces of wood that separate the glass, you know?" Geena looked out of their huge muntinless windows, "I guess you don't." Dr. Miller straightened his head, "Oh I know. I just wondered how a little girl would know such a thing." Geena blushed, feeling as if she'd said something suggestive. The gas was searching for a way out. Had she said something greasy? "What you are saying," said Dr. Miller, "is that you have colonial type windows." Geena leaned on her elbow to let the gas settle into a pocket under her left rib. She smiled and nodded, her mouth full. Dr. Miller noted the elbow. Coral caught Geena's attention and corrected her elbow-on-the-table error. "So, from where did your parents come?" Geena decided Dr. Miller must be a little hard of hearing, maybe that's why his jaw twitched. It seemed Kirk's twitched the most when he was listening in a scene. Perhaps Kirk was hard of hearing, too. Geena spoke louder, "Malvern." Coral, Mrs. Miller, and Dr. Miller all looked at each other. Dr. Miller scratched his neck. How could he make himself clearer? Her last name, Chetty, told him nothing. He would have to ask flat out, "Where were your parents born?" Dr. Miller smiled exposing his straight, white, uppers. Geena swallowed hard, "Sardinia." All the tightness and tension disappeared from Dr. Miller's face, just like that, in an instant. Dr. Miller was satisfied, "That's what I would have guessed." He ate another cucumber sandwich. Geena burped, "Excuse me." Coral looked from her father to her mother and back again to her father, "In China burping is an acknowledgment of good food. It's polite, in fact..." Dr. Miller, with missile-like accuracy, corrected Coral, "This is America, not China. We don't burp in America." Geena

shifted in her chair, "My Mom grows burpless cucumbers in the garden." Dr. Miller thought he heard a slight tone of criticism. "Certainly spaghetti sauce and meatballs can upset the stomach." Geena laughed, "Never! It's my favorite. Do you have a favorite?" Dr. Miller was sure that this was a trick question; that Geena was trying to catch him at his own game, "Steak and burgers, broiled, no grease, no sauce, no honey or seeds, a nice slice of cheese on my steak, American cheese, but nothing else to obscure the taste of meat. Potatoes; no egg in them. A crisp salad, no dressing." Geena couldn't imagine salad without dressing, "May I be excused for a second?" Coral leapt up. "I'll show you the bathroom." Dr. Miller's jaw twitched double time, "Coral, finish your lunch and we can talk. Geena, of course you may be excused. The bathroom is down the hall, the first left after you enter the hall on the right." Geena got up slowly and carefully, praying that she could control her angry pocket of gas.

Geena stood in the hall, perplexed. Had Dr. Miller said take a right or a left or both? She opened the door on her right and entered total darkness, as if she had fallen down Alice's rabbit hole. Groping the wall for a light, Geena froze. The room smelled of wool and burnt tea. Geena held her breath and listened. She was sure that she heard breathing. Scared, she turned to leave. "Amog, is you?" Geena whipped around and saw the shape of a woman, propped by pillows in a bed. For a moment Geena didn't know where she was, right from left, hall from room, and so she groped her way to the door and walked right into a bed. A light flicked on and Geena stepped back. "Come closer," the woman smiled, and motioned to Geena. Geena hesitated, and the woman smiled again, a big friendly toothless smile. Geena was sure this woman must be a boarder like the old women who lived in Rosa Capabianco's Italian boarding house down the Jersey shore. "I'm sorry for bothering you, but I was

looking for the bathroom.” The old woman took Geena’s hand. It felt like the bones of a bird. “I thought you were Amog,” the old lady whispered. Geena shook her head, “No, I’m Geena. Who’s Amog?” The old woman laughed and then suddenly became so sad. She squeezed Geena’s hand, “Is Coral. Don’t tell that I use Hebrew name. I forget.” Geena didn’t understand and wanted to ask the old woman who she was and what was Hebrew and what kind of a name was Amog, and thought maybe the old lady was crazy, but she had to go to the bathroom quick for fear of further embarrassing herself. “Which way is the bathroom?” The old lady leaned forward, “Is in front door.” Geena, her stomach in a knot, was so confused that she gave the old lady a kiss and ran to the door. “Don’t say you come here. Don’t tell nobody, or Akiva will be mad.” Geena was about to ask who Akiva was, and the light clicked off.

Geena had so much gas bottled up she longed to lie down on the hot tarred road stretching her stomach so that the gas would shift up, down, sideways, or out. Coral was skipping along the road. She was bursting, "Guess what? My dad said you can stay the night, he said it was okay." Geena was miserable with gas. She felt tired and beat up, and was sure that the whole day had been a bad dream, that she had truly gone down the rabbit hole to a place where there was no glass, no air, where only the sadness of secrets lived. She had waited forever to be asked to stay overnight at anyone's house. No one had asked. Now the most popular, best hair, wealthiest, coolest girl, Coral Miller, was asking and Geena just wanted to lie down and stretch her stomach. "That's nice." Coral stopped skipping, "Nice? Nice? Do you have any idea how scared I was? How much I wanted my Dad to like you? We're gonna have a blast tonight because of me. My dad said it's okay." Geena slowed her pace down,

"What's okay?" Coral skipped along, and the words sailed out of her mouth as easily as she skipped, "You're not a greasy Italian, so you can stay over." At this point Geena didn't have enough pride to be hurt, or enough trust to let the hurt be seen, or she just plain had too much gas, but she couldn't understand what had just happened. Geena could find no words, only a tiny flash of a moment where she stood outside of herself and saw her fist flying forward smashing Coral's perfect nose, making it forever wide when she finally blurted out, "I don't want to stay over." Coral's face twisted and tears flowed. She screamed at Geena, "Why, why? Nobody ever wants to stay at my house. Why won't you stay the night? Do you hate me like everyone else? Who told you? Did someone tell you about us? I wish I was somebody else, anybody else, anything but what I am!"

Geena plopped down on the side of the road, doubled over in pain and shock. Nothing made sense to her. Perhaps it was because she ironed her hair, "I kissed the old lady boarder in your house!" Coral froze, "What?" Geena had never seen Coral's eyes so wide open, so filled with guilt. Coral plopped down next to Geena confessing, "She's my grandmother, my Bubbie." Geena tried hard to understand, "Like my Naunaun?" Coral shook her head yes. "But why didn't she eat with us?" Geena asked. Coral shrugged and then cried, "She's not right, not well in her head, my dad doesn't want anyone to know, about her, about what the Germans did; about us. You won't tell anyone will you?" Geena didn't know what she would tell because none of what Coral was saying made sense.

Thunder rolled in the distance. Coral stood up and started to walk toward her house. Geena called after her, "Wait!" Coral turned and continued walking backwards shouting, "If you don't like me anymore, I understand," and Geena yelled back, "I like you Coral."

You're my friend. I just don't- I don't know, I just don't like that your Bubbe is all alone."

Coral stopped walking in reverse, "But you like me?" Geena started to cry, "I really like you Coral, but I'm all confused and I want to go home. Come with me. My Mom will feed us leftover meatballs, and afterwards, maybe we could sneak down to your grandma, and visit."

Coral grinned.

The sky broke open and poured sheets of rain that cleaned fresh the pocked tar road a new black and the hot dusted leaves a bright green. Geena's hair curled and mushroomed into a massive pyramid. Coral took Geena's hand, and they ran screaming and laughing hungry for meatball sandwiches.