

MOTHER'S LOVE

With an hour remaining before committing adultery, Rebecca cleaned her kitchen. She dumped her mother's plate of unfinished food into the trash, scrubbed the lasagna pan and rearranged her spice rack, tossing the ginger purchased ten years ago to combat morning sickness, while keeping the unused Lawry's salt her father had liked. All the while, she debated whether to wear a sleeveless tank top or sheer floral button-down. Did she want Guy's hands running down her bare arms or unbuttoning her shirt? She rummaged through the produce bin in the refrigerator and fingered a bruised tomato.

"What got into you?" her mother asked.

Her mother, last seen wearing jeans splattered with tomato sauce and taking the twins upstairs to bed, now smelled like roses and had changed into that dress. Rebecca didn't expect her to wear black after three years. But the dress was a lurid red with a low-cut front.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Out on a date."

There needed to be a different word in English describing the act of widowed or divorced senior citizens of the opposite sex meeting one another socially. Her mother started talking about someone named Harry who lived in Potomac, but Rebecca tuned out the rest. Now she would have to tell Guy she couldn't meet him tonight in the Giant parking lot. He would be disappointed; maybe even think she was lying. But her husband was away, it was too late to find a babysitter and her mother was now going out. On. A. Date. She frowned and threw a cucumber coated with fungus into the garbage.

"...and he said we could open something from his wine collection which sounded tempting," her mother said.

"What happened to the egg man?"

"You mean Yuri? There hasn't been any Yuri for weeks."

Now that she thought about it, it had been awhile since her mother had talked about Yuri. Once, her mother couldn't stop gushing about this man who had worked in the Russian Embassy. Or was it the Georgian Embassy? One night during a family dinner, her mother described how Yuri owned a genuine Faberge egg, even though Rebecca had asked her not to talk about her dating life in front of the girls. Mollie, the more inquisitive of the twins, asked several questions about these decorative eggs and had later been motivated to look up more details online which in turn prompted more questions about Tsarist Russia. Steve, unhelpfully, remarked that her mother's dating life had become a history lesson.

"I'm off soon," her mother said. "You weren't planning to go out tonight, were you?"

“As a matter of fact, I wanted to drive to Margie’s house to pick up a yoga mat she’s lending me. Now I guess I can’t go.”

Her mother, who had been powdering her nose, looked down chastened.

“Margie lives in Potomac, right? I’m going there, I can get the yoga mat.”

“I also wanted to talk with her about my job search. Never mind. Just go do wherever it is that you were planning to go. Just be careful, okay?”

Her mother looked amused. “What do you think can be happen to me?”

When Rebecca saw Guy’s car parked in the gym’s garage the next morning, she breathed out in relief. He had accepted her excuses last night with a sad face emoji followed by lengthy sexting about her new lacy underwear. But she wasn’t sure he would even show up today. All those many years ago when she was single, she had learned that there was a limit to how long a man would wait for a woman who didn’t put out.

The gym was filled with gorgeous women lifting weights, climbing electrical stairs that went nowhere and shimmying like chorus-line wannabes. As a newly unemployed editor, Rebecca was learning all the many ways a non-working mother could fill the hours before the children came home from school.

Guy was walking on one of the treadmills staring straight into space as if it held all the answers. The first time they talked, he said that walking in silence helped clear his head. That and his accent made him different. He was good-looking but had an overbite – foreigners always had the worst teeth – which made him approachable. His shading suggested exoticism and a warm climate, she initially thought he was Indian. When he said he was Israeli she was suddenly transported back 25 years to a teen trip there during which she and her best friend, Nina, had drooled over all the gorgeous male soldiers. To her delight, she learned that Guy had been one of those soldiers and now couldn’t run because of an injury from jumping out of an airplane “somewhere over Lebanon,” a much sexier excuse than Steve’s bad knees

Guy’s need for a meditative walk apparently didn’t prevent him from talking to her. He quickly established himself as a question asker like all the writers with whom she had once worked and missed terribly. He asked her about her career, her education, where he could buy a decent cucumber, and whether he was being overbilled for his cell phone plan. Rebecca was able to get in a few questions of her own and learned that he was at the beginning of a three-year assignment at a biotech company. He referred once to a wife and a child but didn’t elaborate. After asking about her own domestic situation, he dropped that topic with one exception: he was fascinated to learn that her widowed and retired mother, who was 69 and in excellent health, had moved into her home about a year ago for financial reasons. She had taken over the only spare room: the guest room located next to the master bedroom.

“So, now you are back to living with mommy. This is very unusual in America, I think. But in Israel, it is not so unusual. I talk to my parents every day and every Friday we have a family dinner.”

“Every single Friday night?”

“Yes, and all holidays, of course. We are always with family.”

She rarely saw Steve’s mother, a divorced retiree from California who flitted from cruise to cruise or his father who lived with his much younger wife in San Diego. When her father was alive, she had seen her parents often since they lived nearby, but there had never been any expectations of a weekly family dinner. The first night her widowed mother moved in she had intended to eat dinner alone in the kitchen, which Rebecca had thought wasn’t a bad idea. But Steve had said she wasn’t the hired help and should join them.

After several consecutive days of chatting, it was understood that Guy, who usually arrived first at the gym, would stake out two adjacent empty treadmills, get on one and drape his Technion sweatshirt on the other. She began to see her gym routines as the day’s highlight especially as her job search went nowhere. After two weeks, their chatting turned so naturally flirtatious that it was like one of those documentaries about birds’ mating rites. Guy commented that the electric blue of her shirt flattered her beautiful eyes. She told him he was in better shape than most men she knew.

Then they exchanged phone numbers so that Rebecca could send him the number of her family doctor; before long they were messaging intermittently. One evening, while Rebecca and Steve were reading quietly in bed -- although she was replaying in her mind the speech in which her boss had laid her off -- she received a text from Guy: *What are you doing? And most importantly, what are you wearing?* As if her fingers were moving of their own volition, she replied, “sitting in bed and wearing black panties,” just as Steve yawned and said he was going to sleep.

So, she entered the world of sexting, which was every bit as unbridled, unedited, irrational, thrilling and addictive as she had heard. The sexting got her through the job rejections and that awful time from 4-6:30 PM, which she once recalled hearing was called the arsenic hour, when the girls were high-strung, Steve was still at work and her mother was volunteering in the library.

But when Guy had suggested they meet outside the gym, she had always come up with an excuse. Then Steve announced that he was going to spend three weeks teaching at an investment conference in Florida and it seemed like a sign.

Today, when she climbed on the treadmill Guy launched into one of their favorite conversation topics where he described a situation requiring cultural deciphering. Today, he was asking whether a colleague’s offer to “to have drinks sometime’ was genuine or phony American politeness.

She thought about the number of times mothers with whom she had been chatting at a kids' birthday party had said, "let's do coffee, sometime," when it was understood they never would. Or when Nina, who had taken that other road and become a motherless and unmarried celebrity photojournalist living in Manhattan, had promised to contact Rebecca when she came to Washington to shoot the inaugural, but had failed to do so.

"It's not genuine."

"Why did he say it then?"

"He was being polite."

"Why is it polite to say, 'we should have drinks,' if he doesn't want to have drinks? Wouldn't it be more polite not to say anything?"

"Sometimes people mean what they say, just not most of the time."

"We Israelis always say what we mean."

Rebecca's brain suddenly flashed with a long-dormant memory: She and Nina were on the Tel Aviv beach and a middle-aged woman said something to her in Hebrew. After she kept repeating in English that she didn't understand, a good-looking man zipping himself into a surfer suit blurted out "She said you're too fat to wear a two-piece bathing suit."

She dropped her voice. "You know, I really did want to come last night. But my mother was going out and I couldn't get a babysitter last minute."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good, I mean it's the truth, I'm not just being polite."

He just nodded and started talking about Manhattan, which wasn't apropos of anything. That's what it was like talking to Guy, his mind was always flitting among topics. After confirming that she had gone to university in Manhattan, he asked her about the Upper East neighborhood. What subway lines were near there? Did she know of any good restaurants there? Was the Starbucks coffee there more expensive than in other locations?

"What's all the interest in Manhattan?"

"My company has an apartment there. I have to be there for two weeks for some meetings."

He paused and she waited for him to continue, aware that he was about to say something very important, that she both wanted him to say and not to say.

"I'll be alone on this trip to New York. I'll have meetings during the day..."

Again, he paused and she waited, the sound of the treadmill sounding louder than usual as if someone had cranked up the volume.

“But I’ll be free at night and now I’m pretty sure no one will be inviting me for dinner and even if they do, they won’t be serious about it. So, I thought, if you want, you could come with me.”

“To Manhattan?”

“You’re not working, right? So, you have time.”

“I’m not working but I have the twins.” She slowed down the speed of the treadmill, fearing it was moving faster than her thoughts. It was one thing to meet him in the Giant parking lot, but to go to New York was something else.

“You can’t leave your children for a few days?”

Sophie and Molly, her angels. She couldn’t leave them, certainly not while Steve was away. Sophie had a piano recital next week and Molly had an appointment with a speech therapist. No, no, she couldn’t desert them. But if she left town for a few days, she wouldn’t be deserting them. Would she? Her mother was retired with plenty of free time and lived with her. She was their babysitter, but also their grandmother, which made everything easier, but also sometimes more complicated.

“I guess my mother can take care of the girls for a few days.”

“You’ll come to New York, then?”

After lunch that day, she took her laptop and went to sit with her mother in the sunroom. Now that she was in the house during the day, she had tried to put some distance between them. But she hated sitting alone in the office she and Steve shared. She was used to working in a noisy open workspace with the sound of ringing phones, tapping of computer keys and animated conversation. She was used to reporters coming over to complain that their calls weren’t being returned by overpaid press secretaries or that *The Atlantic Monthly* had stolen their idea for a piece about the new feminism.

The sunroom, which overlooked the house’s small garden, was her mother’s favorite in the house. There had also been a sunroom in her parent’s house, which was filled with plants and exuded the odor of damp soil. The two plants in Rebecca’s sunroom that had once been dying, thanks to hers and Steve’s lack of attention, were now thriving under her mother’s care. Her mother turned the newspaper pages, while Rebecca tried to write some cover letters for new jobs. But she was thinking about the Greenwich Village restaurant where she used to eat Sunday brunch. She couldn’t remember the restaurant’s name, but it was decorated with white wall tiles normally used in a bathroom and smelled of burnt toast. The menu was the size of a phone book

and the floor was always filthy. During college, she and her friends always went there on Sunday mornings with whomever they had slept on Saturday and the thick Sunday *New York Times*. At some tables, the newspaper laid untouched as the couples conversed over their bagels and lox, while at other tables the various *NYT* sections were passed silently between the couple. Most of the men she'd gone with there had wanted to read the newspaper. Steve, a graduate student in economics when she met him, could spend an hour silently reading the business section. She wanted to take Guy to that restaurant because she knew he would never look at the newspaper.

“Are you listening to me, Becky?”

Her mother's presence startled her, as it sometimes did. She was used to her mother living in her childhood house. After her father's death and the discovery that she was broke, her mother had been forced to sell the house. Every few months Steve had to go pick the old mail from there because it was too painful a task for either her or her mother.

“Did you say something?” she asked.

“I was saying that despite all his boasting and bragging about the wine collection –”

The dating again. Perhaps it had been a mistake to sit here.

“Mom, I'm trying to write some cover letters.”

“...., he just had some bottles from weird countries like Hungary, Georgia and Israel.”

“Israel?”

“He had a bottle of wine from there. I've never heard of Israeli wine except for that horribly sweet wine we were all forced to drink as kids so I didn't encourage him to open that one. He opened a Malbec which I wouldn't call an impressive wine.”

“Remember that time Dad told off that snooty waiter in the Italian restaurant when he tried to sell us that overpriced bottle of wine? He really let him have it.”

“Your father told off a lot of people he shouldn't have.”

“He deserved it; he was trying to scam us.”

Her mother said nothing and turned the newspaper pages.

“You're not remembering it right,” Rebecca persisted. “That waiter was trying to sell us a bottle of wine we didn't want.”

“That's not how I remember it.”

“Dad is dead so we can’t ask him, can we?” She regretted the words after they came out, but they hung there in the sun-dappled room. She stared into the garden where some sparrows were alighting onto the lawn. If only she was the kind of person who could believe that this was her father reincarnated.

“Why are you so cranky?”

“I’ve been unemployed for two months in case you haven’t noticed. I lost a job I loved and which I’ll probably never get again.”

“You’ll find something and even if you don’t you and Steve will be okay.”

Her mother loved Steve for, if nothing else, his fiscal acumen. Rebecca’s father had a longtime talent for losing money, most recently investing in a Las Vegas real estate project that had turned out to be fraudulent.

“I’m thinking about going to New York next week,” she said.

“You were just talking about being unemployed and now you want to take a trip?”

“It’s New York and it would just be for three, maybe four days. I want to see Nina; I haven’t seen her for a while.”

And as she said it, Rebecca realized she could look up Nina, who she last saw about five years ago although they had once been the kind of friends who talked daily. She wanted to see Nina’s reaction when she said that her mother was now living with her. As teenagers, they had complained non-stop about their mothers.

“I thought I needed a break before making the big push to find a job.”

That’s what her father would have advised her. Have some fun, he was always telling her. You work so hard. Life is short. “Carpe Diem,” he would boom.

Her mother stood up suddenly. She pulled back the potted Snake Plant so it was no longer fully exposed to the sun. Then she sat back down.

“I would need you, of course, to take care of the girls while I’m gone,” Rebecca said.

“That’s no problem.”

“Remember, Steve isn’t coming back for another ten days so you’d be alone with them and wouldn’t be able to go out at night.”

“I have no one to go out with anyway.”

“What about Miriam or Barbara?”

The Golden Girls, as they dubbed themselves, were once so rowdy they were thrown out of happy hour at a Mexican restaurant. Her mother had posted on Facebook a photo of a young, blond hostess, her face contorted in anger, escorting out the door three giggly older women who looked completely plastered. Her mother had written the words “Party Pooper” under the caption.

“Miriam reconnected with her high school boyfriend and Barbara has fallen in love with a 90-year-old multimillionaire.”

“Then you think I should do it, go to New York?”

The birds flew off now, streaking against the sky.

“If that’s what you want.”

Guy had proven to be a planner. He bought tickets for two for a Broadway musical, the MOMA and even a nighttime Circle Line cruise, as if the purpose of the New York trip was sightseeing. She didn’t know how such liaisons worked exactly, but she had assumed they were going to be discrete. But Guy told her she was overreacting. If she saw someone she knew, she could say he was her Israeli cousin or a work colleague. He promised that he would not ravage her in public. He used that word “ravage,” which she had taught him a few weeks ago during one of their sexting sessions. Then he said he would calculate her cost of all the tickets.

The day before her trip, her mother told her that Harry, the pretentious wine collector, had invited her out for dinner at a nice restaurant that night.

“I’m not sure I should go, since you have an early train tomorrow,” her mother said.

“Have a good time.”

She was proud of herself for saying nothing when her mother went out wearing the tear drop necklace, she had helped her father pick out as her mother’s 60th birthday present. She let the girls make cupcakes, although it made a huge mess of the kitchen, and put her phone aside to watch an animated film with them about a group of mismatched animals on a deserted island. They all gorged on cupcakes and she let them into her bed so they could all read a story together, the smell of chocolate mingling with the fruity scent of their shampoo. When they put their arms around her to kiss her good night, she felt her throat catch as if she would gag.

In her bedroom, she packed a bag with some newly purchased lingerie she was going to wear on a train since Guy had suggested they have sex in the train’s bathroom. Then she sat on her marital bed and faked interest as Steve talked on the telephone about the prime interest rate and the London bond market. Finally, she stopped him.

“I’m going to Manhattan for a few days tomorrow, to see Nina. My mother will take care of the kids. It’s all planned.”

She felt her heart pounding and her mouth go dry. She was prepared to tell him more details. She would tell him about everything she was going to do, except for the most important detail.

“Sure, have fun.” Steve yawned. “I’m going to sleep, I’m exhausted.”

She laid in bed and tried to fall asleep but her mind buzzed and her pulse raced. She thought about moving to Israel to marry Guy and envisioned the girls having to fly alone to visit their father and how Sophie would have to pull back Molly’s hair when she threw up as she always did on flights. She thought about ending up with a job as an editor at the Colorectal Association or Association of Underwriters. And she thought about her mother moving out after getting remarried and her having to wear a nice dress and act as if she was happy for her.

Then she thought about the last time she saw her father. He had met her by the magazine and they had eaten lunch at a nearby sandwich place. She was distracted because the owners were already talking about the need to make layoffs. He had told her how proud he was of her achievements and that her birth was one of the best days of his life. Only after she returned to work did she consider whether he might have a fatal illness. She was so troubled that she couldn’t concentrate on her editing until she called her mother who had said that he was just an old man who loved his daughter.

But a few days later while she was editing a cover story about alcoholism in the native American community, her mother called to say her father had been in a serious car accident and been pronounced dead on the spot. After going out to buy some toilet paper, he had been hit head on by a confused 90-year-old female driver who had been unscathed. At first, Rebecca blamed her mother, who was always going to the bathroom, for creating the shortage of toilet paper. Then she blamed the other driver. With the help of one of the magazine’s reporters, she tracked down the name of the driver’s daughter in California. She intended to inform her that she would be taking the entire family to court for civil damages, even though she knew she didn’t have a case. But she dropped the idea when the distraught woman on the other line said she had long begged her mother, to no avail, to go into a nursing home or get a full-time nurse.

Rebecca had fallen asleep when she was awakened by the sound of the front door security system. It was 3 AM. She found her mother sitting on the stripped wing-backed chair, the only piece of furniture in the living room that had originally been hers. The chair was too big for the room, but Rebecca had wanted it here. She had sat in that chair and played with her Barbies, studied vocabulary words for the SAT and planned the seating arrangement for her wedding.

“It must have been a great date.”

“It was okay.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He’s a nice enough man, but he’s not for me.”

“But you were gone hours.”

“He’s not for me.”

Her mother kicked off her high heels and rubbed her feet. Her dress crumpled around her, exposing her lacy scaly blue veins and sagging paunch. Her eye make-up was smudged, and her face looked shockingly old, shorn of the usual skillful attempts she made to hide the lines and blemishes. She blew her nose in an undignified honk. When she took away the tissue, her eyeliner and mascara were running so she looked like a pathetic racoon. Rebecca sat on the chair’s ottoman.

“Why are you so upset?”

“I miss him.”

It had been awhile since Rebecca had heard her mother speak about her father. She knew he had been a difficult man -- stubborn, self-absorbed and irresponsible – but she was a daddy’s girl.

“Oh, Mom. I miss him, too.”

“I was talking about Yuri. I miss Yuri.”

“Yuri?”

Who cared about Yuri and his ridiculous Faberge egg? Who was Yuri to make an appearance at 3 AM in her living room?

“I fell for him.”

“Why would you fall for someone like that?”

She had never met him and had just seen the photos of a heavysset man with the polished bald head which resembled the egg that was his prize possession.

“Oh Becky, you’re a woman, you know. Sometimes there’s no good reason. You just do. I’ve been suffering so much without him, haven’t you noticed?”

Her mother now slept in the room next to hers, she saw her throughout the day and she ate dinner with her almost every day. Yet she had missed some essential mood shift. Now she remembered seeing that her mother’s eyes were red, she had just assumed it was an eye infection, and that at the end of meals her mother’s plate was always filled with food.

“If you want to be with Yuri go be with him,” she said.

“The problem is that he doesn’t want to be with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yes, he was quite explicit about that. He said he didn’t find me attractive.”

“What an asshole.”

That made her mother laugh, which made her laugh. And then they fell towards one another into a long hug, something they hadn’t done in years. They both hugged the girls all the time, but never one another.

“Mom,” she said into her mother’s hair which smelled like a garden. “I have to tell you about this trip to New York. I’m not going there to see Nina. Nina blew me off years ago.”

“I know why you’re going.”

Rebecca drew her hands away so she could look into her mother’s eyes which were still red. “How could you know?”

“I wasn’t sure, but I suspected, from little things. Now you’re confirming my suspicions.”

“You probably think that I’m doing something terrible. You love Steve, I know, because he’s the kind of guy who would never bankrupt his family.”

“I also love Steve because he’s a good man to you, the girls and even to me. He’s helped me through this Yuri break-up.”

“Steve? How?”

“By letting me talk about it which was what I needed.”

They sat there in silence for what seemed like a long time. It was very late, but she didn’t look at the clock. She needed to get to sleep if she was going to meet Guy at 7 AM in Union Station, but she remained seated breathing in her mother’s scent. In her mind, she could already see the Acela as it left Union Station without her, slowly at first and then picking up speed in its northern ascent.

“Tell me what happened with Yuri,” she said.