

Cream by the Tablespoon

You might say that I've always been kind of a timid person, but that's not really true. I can be bad too, just in little doses. Like, I never stole a whole candy bar from Mr. Luchey's when I was a child, but once I did palm a single piece of loose bubble gum from the penny candy jar on his counter. Or how I know it's not good for me, but every once in a while I will put a whole tablespoon of regular cream in my coffee, and real sugar, too. Dr. Wilson would probably have a fit about my cholesterol, but I don't care. Calories and heart health be damned! I'm a rebel in my coffee mug if nowhere else.

I guess that's why me making out with the produce boy in Gandel's Grocery was as much a surprise to me as everyone else. I really should have known better. Ronny is almost the same age as my grandson Jason, for God's sake! They even played football together for a year. Our Jason and Ronny went in opposite directions: Jason off to college learning to program computers, and Ronny straight from graduation to groceries. Ronny always was a handsome boy, but something about his eyes did give the impression that his elevator stopped just short of the penthouse suite. Not enough to have a diagnosis or take special classes or anything. Just enough to make stacking fruit the right career path for him.

But when I caught him smiling at me over that half-finished pyramid of honey crisps, and saw how his cheeks went red, something in me just snapped. Whatever it was, it woke up wide awake and hungry. I love my husband, I really do, but something broke in me and the next thing I know I have poor Ronny by the hand and I'm pulling him through the STAFF ONLY door next to the refrigerated vegetables. The Gandel's store room was dark and a little musty smelling. There was a janitor's cart next to a pallet full of canned string beans. I had the presence of mind to grab the 'Wet Floor' sign

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from it and set it in front of the bathroom door before pulling him in. I don't know what got into me.

"Miss Jason's Grandma"- I swear to God that's what he called me- "I don't know if we oughta do this." By then I had him backed up against the sink with his green apron pulled over his head.

"I know, right?" I answered as I tugged at the collar of his maroon Gandel's polo.

God help me, I don't know what got into me. Maybe I went crazy for a second. Like I said, I love Harold. I swear I do. Even though he farts in his sleep, and no matter what he eats, every morning when he wakes up his breath smells like blue cheese. Everyone has their lot in life right, and I supposed that this is mine. Harold is a good man. He's been a good father to Earl and Myrah, and he has always treated me well. I don't think he's ever had any girlfriends, and if he did, he's done well to keep it hidden for these forty-two years.

I'm sorry that I hurt him. Hurt might not be the right word. Shamed. Embarrassed may be more like it. That's the first thing he said to me, looking at his cell phone over his breakfast. His face went red and he dropped the smeared bagel that he always had for breakfast on Thursdays. The bitten-out semicircle caught on the edge of his plate, and the imperfect wheel wobbled straight off the table onto the floor. For all I know it's still there. "Sylvia! How could you embarrass me like this?" he groaned. He sounded like a kicked dog, and I felt like one.

I knew what he was talking about as soon as I saw his face. I tried to explain. But the more I talked, the paler he got. Soon we just sat there silent, and hot-faced, and the distance across our kitchen table may as well have been a million miles. He didn't say

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another word before he got dressed and left. He forgot to take a shower. I tried to remind him, but he just slammed the door and I haven't seen him since. I can't say I blame him, with what I did. All the paparazzi and reporters and everything don't help any.

Damn that nosey busy-body Edith! Always with the pictures of her perfect little flower garden and sending text pictures of her grandchildren's report cards. Like anyone gives a damn about her kid's kids' handwriting and arithmetic grades! I should have known she would be at the Gandel's, watching me pull Ronny into the back room. She would be the one to have her cell phone camera rolling when we came back out. But putting it on the internet like that was just trashy, even for her.

I always thought you had to do something special to make something go 'viral'. Maybe a button you pushed on your phone, or something in the settings on Facebook or that other one with all the dance videos on it. Or at least, have a talent worth watching to make people like it. I don't know. All I know is that not an hour after Harold left, and I'm sitting there at the table halfway between crying and throwing up, the phone started to ring. And ring. And ring, Jesus Christ, it rang so much I thought it would break.

First the boldest of our nosy neighbors called. Everybody was like 'Sylvia, is it real? How could you?' And I don't know, I honest -to-God don't know. It wasn't none of their business anyway.

But trying to explain it to Myrah? Just terrible. I tried to tell her, just like I tried to tell Harold. I hadn't had anybody look at me like that in a long time, the way Ronny

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looked at me over that pile of apples. Harold doesn't look at me like that anymore. Mostly we watch television.

You know, you wake up one morning and it really hits you that you've already seen more days than you are ever going to again. Time moves in funny spurts. Sometimes it's slow and trots along, and then other times you blink your eyes and you realize that you're galloping to the finish and the start line is way, way behind you. And what have you done? Where did you go? What did you do besides kill the flowers in your garden every year before they bloom, raise a couple kids, and drink your coffee in a way you don't even like because your doctor told you to? How do you explain what that does to you? Myrah took it about as well as Harold did.

Then the first reporter called. I was in such a state I didn't even know half of what he was talking about. Something about X millions of views. Somebody put the video to music and started something called a 'dance challenge'. I think they said it's called the Granny Sneak, or something. Jason calls me for the first time in six months all the way from California. He thinks it's the funniest thing. His friends think I'm a 'boss' whatever that means now. I don't think it's the same as it was when I was his age. He said I have to generate more 'content' to 'up my followers'.

Then the photographers! First it was just Trudie Cambell from the Gatesville Courier taking pictures out in my yard just like she does at the football games every Friday. Then more of them, camped out on the lawn like I was Elizabeth Taylor or somebody! I go to get the mail, and there are three or four of them, yelling questions at me and asking me about my Harold. I don't like them very much.

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My God, the phone! More calls. This one from a television show wanting me to go on there! That one from a rapper, Li'l something or other, who says he wants to put me in his music video! For Christ sakes, what am I supposed to say to that? Jason called again from college and says he wants to be my social media manager. Something about branding and 'moving merch'. I love that kid, but don't understand him at all.

I really wish Harold was here because, if nothing else he really does have a business mind about these kinds of things. He's always logical and kind of lays things out one at a time in front of us. Orderly, you could say. Everything from picking the house we bought to naming our kids to always wearing the same shirts for each day of the week. I'm just embarrassed by all of this, I just want him to make sense of this mess I made and then to make it all go away. But he isn't talking to me. Myrah says that since I kissed that boy he's been staying with her. "Daddy doesn't want to talk right now," she says every time I call. Can you blame him? He's mad at me. So is Myrah. Even Mr. Gandel. He had to fire poor Ronny because of all the ladies that started coming by the store to flirt with him. According to the news last night they had to start locking the doors to the storeroom! The only one happy in all this is Ronny. Who knew he had a thing for mature women?

The airline ticket came in the mail two days ago. The Late Hours Show wants to fly me out to Los Angeles to interview me. Me! On live T.V.! For this? I think they want me to do that stupid dance with them. I am disgusted. I'm disgusted at all of this, at Edith and her nosey cellphone, and most of all with myself. I just feel so sorry for Harold, I really do.

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But I do wonder.

I've never been on a plane before. Every vacation Harold always drove. Down to Florida or up to Niagara Falls. All those hours shut up in that car looking at the yellow lines go by, waiting for the radio stations to change. Just once, I really want to sit up there and sail over the clouds. It's not like he doesn't have the money. Harold squeezes a penny tighter than he used to squeeze me. I want to look down on the cornfields in Iowa, or crayon-blue sea or the cities so far below that they look like little toy sets. Is that too much to ask? How many more vacations will I have? If I don't go now, when will I? I've never been to California. And the hotel they reserved for me sounds really nice. I could go, I really could. And when I'm on T.V. I can tell Harold, and Myrah and everybody else in the world that I'm sorry. Maybe a little crazy, but especially sorry.

I don't know if it's my coffee, or the excitement of it all, but I can't sit still. The coffee is extra strong this morning. A kick that sent a shiver up my spine and has my hands all jittery. It's the best cup I've had in a long time. Two creams, and a whole tablespoon of sugar.

My fingers still shake while I try calling Harold one last time. This time it goes straight to his voicemail. Knowing Harold, he probably forgot to charge his phone. He always does that. For the hundredth time, I try to explain everything, all of it, until I remember that he's not really there and it's just the tape machine recording me. My hands shake so much I have to try twice to hang up.

They don't stop shaking until I hear the car honk from the driveway. I stand up and tug at the overpacked bag with both hands. The weight of the suitcase handle feels good. My hands straining in concert to drag the bag out to the yellow cab calms them,

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distracting them from the wrecked nerves that won't leave them in peace. The driver politely gets out and offers to carry it for me. I tell him no, thank you. Instead, when he cranks the car and backs from the driveway into the road, I ask him to get me to the airport as fast as he can before I have time to change my mind.