

The Moustache

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At the last minute Annie couldn't go. She was invaded by one of those twenty-four-hour flu bugs that sent her to bed with a fever, moaning about the fact that she'd also have to break her date with Handsome Harry Arnold that night. We call him Handsome Harry because he's actually handsome, but he's also a nice guy, cool, and he doesn't treat me like Annie's kid brother – which I am – but like a regular person. Anyway, I had to go to Lawnrest alone that afternoon. But first of all I had to stand inspection. My mother lined me up against the wall. She stood there like a one-man firing squad, which is kind of funny because she's not like a man at all, she's very feminine, and we have this great relationship—I mean, I feel as if she really likes me. I realize that sounds strange, but I know guys whose mothers love them and cook special stuff for them and worry about them and all but there's something missing in their relationship.

Anyway. She frowned and started the routine.

“That hair,” she said. Then admitted: “Well, at least you combed it.”

I sighed. I have discovered that it's better to sigh than argue.

“And that moustache,” She shook her head. “I still say a seventeen-year-old has no business wearing a moustache.”

“It's an experiment,” I said. “I just wanted to see if I could grow one.” To tell the truth, I had proved my point about being able to grow a decent moustache, but I also had learned to like it.

“It's costing you money, Mike,” she said.

“I know, I know.”

The money was a reference to the movies. The Downtown Cinema has a special Friday night offer—half-price admission for high school couples seventeen or younger. But the woman in the box office took one look at my moustache and charged me full price. Even when I showed her my driver's license. She charged full admission for Cindy's ticket, too, which left me practically broke and unable to take Cindy out for a hamburger with the crowd afterward. That didn't help matters, because Cindy has been getting impatient recently about things like the fact that I don't own my own car and have to concentrate on my studies if I want to win that college scholarship, for instance. Cindy wasn't exactly crazy about the moustache, either.

Now it was my mother's turn to sigh.

“Look,” I said, to cheer her up. “I’m thinking about shaving it off.” Even though I wasn’t. Another discovery: You can build a way of life on postponement.

“Your grandmother probably won’t even recognize you,” she said. And I saw the shadow fall across her face.

Let me tell you what the visit to Lawnrest was all about. My grandmother is seventy-three years old. She is a resident—which is supposed to be a better word than *patient*—at the Lawnrest Nursing Home. She used to make the greatest turkey dressing in the world and was a nut about baseball and could even quote batting averages, for crying out loud. She always rooted for the losers. She was in love with the Mets until they started to win. Now she has arteriosclerosis, which the dictionary says is “a chronic disease characterized by abnormal thickening and hardening of the arterial walls.” In other words, she can no longer live at home anymore, or even with us. Her memory has betrayed her, as well as her body. She used to wander off and sometimes didn’t recognize people. My mother visits her all the time, driving the thirty miles to Lawnrest almost every day. Because Annie was home for a semester break from college, we had decided to make a special Saturday visit. Now Annie was in bed, groaning theatrically—she’s a drama major—but I told my mother I’d go anyway. I hadn’t seen my grandmother since she’d been admitted to Lawnrest. Besides, the place is located on the Southwest Turnpike, which meant I could barrel along in my father’s new Le Mans. My ambition was to see the speedometer hit seventy-five. Ordinarily, I used the old station wagon, which can barely stagger up to fifty.

Frankly, I wasn’t too crazy about visiting a nursing home. They reminded me of hospitals, and hospitals turn me off. I mean, the smell of ether makes me nauseous, and I feel faint at the sight of blood. And as I approached Lawnrest—which is a terrible, cemetery kind of name, to begin with—I was sorry I hadn’t avoided the trip. Then I felt guilty about it. I’m loaded with guilt complexes. Like driving like a madman after promising my father to be careful. Like sitting in the parking lot, looking at the nursing home with dread and thinking how I’d rather be with Cindy. Then I thought of all the Christmas and birthday gifts my grandmother had given me and I got out of the car, guilty as usual.

Inside, I was surprised by the lack of hospital smell, although there was another odor or maybe the absence of an odor. The air was antiseptic, sterile. As if there was no atmosphere at all or I’d caught a cold suddenly and couldn’t taste or smell.

A nurse at the reception desk gave me directions—my grandmother was in East Three. I made my way down the tiled corridor and was glad to see that the walls were painted with cheerful colors like yellow and pink. A wheelchair suddenly shot around a corner, self-propelled by an old man, white-haired and toothless, who cackled merrily as he barely missed me. I jumped aside—here I was, almost getting wiped out by a two-mile-an-hour wheelchair after doing seventy-five on the pike. As I walked through the corridor seeking East Three, I couldn’t help glancing into the rooms, and it was like some kind of wax museum—all these figures in various stances and attitudes, sitting in beds or chairs,

standing at windows, as if they were frozen forever in these postures. To tell the truth, I began to hurry because I was getting depressed. Finally, I saw a beautiful girl approaching, dressed in white, a nurse or an attendant, and I was so happy to see someone young, someone walking and acting normally, that I gave her a wide smile and a big hello and I must have looked like a kind of nut. Anyway, she looked right through me as if I were a window, which is about par for the course whenever I meet beautiful girls.

I finally found the room and saw my grandmother in bed. My grandmother looks like Ethel Barrymore. I never knew who Ethel Barrymore was until I saw a terrific movie, *None but the Lonely Heart*, on TV, starring Ethel Barrymore and Cary Grant. Both my grandmother and Ethel Barrymore have these great craggy faces like the side of a mountain and wonderful voices like syrup being poured. Slowly. She was propped up in bed, pillows puffed behind her. Her hair had been combed out and fell upon her shoulders. For some reason, this flowing hair gave her an almost girlish appearance, despite its whiteness.

She saw me and smiled. Her eyes lit up and her eyebrows arched and she reached out her hands to me in greeting. “Mike, Mike,” she said. And I breathed a sigh of relief. This was one of her good days. My mother had warned me that she might not know who I was at first.

I took her hands in mine. They were fragile. I could actually feel her bones, and it seemed as if they would break if I pressed too hard. Her skin was smooth, almost slippery, as if the years had worn away all the roughness the way the wind wears away the surfaces of stones.

“Mike, Mike, I didn’t think you’d come,” she said, so happy, and she was still Ethel Barrymore, that voice like a caress. “I’ve been waiting all this time.” Before I could reply, she looked away, out the window. “See the birds? I’ve been watching them at the feeder. I love to see them come. Even the blue jays. The blue jays are like hawks—they take the food that the small birds should have. But the small birds, the chickadees, watch the blue jays and at least learn where the feeder is.”

She lapsed into silence, and I looked out the window. There was no feeder. No birds. There was only the parking lot and the sun glinting on car windshields.

She turned to me again, eyes bright – radiant really – or was it a medicine brightness? “Ah, Mike. You look so grand, so grand. Is that a new coat?”

“Not really,” I said. I’d been wearing my Uncle Jerry’s old army-fatigue jacket for months, practically living in it, my mother said. But she insisted that I wear my raincoat for the visit. It was about a year old but looked new because I didn’t wear it much. Nobody was wearing raincoats lately.

“You always loved clothes, didn’t you, Mike?” she said.

I was beginning to feel uneasy because she regarded me with such intensity. Her bright eyes pierced through me. I wondered—are old people in places like this so lonesome, so abandoned that they go wild when someone visits? Or was she so happy because she was suddenly lucid and everything was sharp and clear? My mother had described those moments when my grandmother suddenly emerged from the fog that so often obscured her mind. I didn't know the answers, but it felt kind of spooky, getting such an emotional welcome from her.

“I remember the time you bought the new coat—the Chesterfield,” she said, looking away again, as if watching the birds that weren't there. “That lovely coat with the velvet collar. Black, it was. Stylish. Remember that, Mike? It was hard times, but you could never resist the glitter.”

I was about to protest—I had never heard of a Chesterfield, for crying out loud. But I stopped. Be patient with her, my mother had said. Humor her. Be gentle.

We were interrupted by an attendant who pushed a wheeled cart into the room. “Time for juices, dear,” the woman said. She was the standard forty- or fifty-year-old woman: glasses, nothing hair, plump cheeks. Her manner was cheerful but a businesslike kind of cheerfulness. I'd hate to be called “dear” by someone getting paid to do it. “Orange or grape or cranberry, dear? Cranberry is good for the bones, you know.”

My grandmother ignored the interruption. She didn't even bother to answer, having turned away at the woman's arrival, as if angry about her appearance.

The woman looked at me and winked. A conspiratorial kind of wink. It was kind of horrible. I didn't think people winked like that anymore. In fact, I hadn't seen a wink in years.

“She doesn't care much for juices,” the woman said, talking to me as if my grandmother weren't even there. “But she loves her coffee. With lots of cream and two lumps of sugar. But this is juice time, not coffee time.” Addressing my grandmother again, she said, “Orange or grape or cranberry, dear?”

“Tell her I want no juices, Mike,” my grandmother commanded regally, her eyes still watching invisible birds.

The woman smiled, patience like a label on her face. “That's all right, dear. I'll just leave some cranberry for you. Drink it at your leisure. It's good for the bones.”

She wheeled herself out of the room. My grandmother was still absorbed in the view. Somewhere a toilet flushed. A wheelchair passed the doorway—probably that same old driver fleeing a hit-run accident. A television set exploded with sound somewhere, soap-opera voices filling the air. You can always tell soap-opera voices.

I turned back to find my grandmother staring at me. Her hands cupped her face, her index fingers curled around her cheeks like parenthesis marks.

“But you know, Mike, looking back, I think you were right,” she said, continuing our conversation as if there had been no interruption. “You always said, ‘It’s the things of the spirit that count, Meg.’ The spirit! And so you bought the baby-grand piano—a baby grand in the middle of the Depression. A knock came on the door and it was the deliveryman. It took five of them to get it into the house.” She leaned back, closing her eyes. “How I loved that piano, Mike. I was never that fine a player, but you loved to sit there in the parlor, on Sunday evenings, Ellie on your lap, listening to me play and sing.” She hummed a bit, a fragment of melody I didn’t recognize. Then she drifted into silence. Maybe she’d fallen asleep. My mother’s name is Ellen, but everyone always calls her Ellie. “Take my hand, Mike,” my grandmother said suddenly. Then I remembered—my grandfather’s name was Michael. I had been named for him.

“Ah, Mike,” she said, pressing my hands with all her feeble strength. “I thought I’d lost you forever. And here you are, back with me again. . . .”

Her expression scared me. I don’t mean scared as if I were in danger but scared because of what could happen to her when she realized the mistake she had made. My mother always said I favored her side of the family. Thinking back to the pictures in the old family albums, I recalled my grandfather as tall and thin. Like me. But the resemblance ended there. He was thirty-five when he died, almost forty years ago. And he wore a moustache. I brought my hand to my face. I also wore a moustache now, of course.

“I sit here these days, Mike,” she said, her voice a lullaby, her hand still holding mine, “and I drift and dream. The days are fuzzy sometimes, merging together. Sometimes it’s like I’m not here at all but somewhere else altogether. And I always think of you. Those years we had. Not enough years, Mike, not enough . . .”

Her voice was so sad, so mournful, that I made sounds of sympathy, not words exactly but the kind of soothings that mothers murmur to their children when they awaken from bad dreams.

“And I think of that terrible night, Mike, that terrible night. Have you ever really forgiven me for that night?”

“Listen . . .” I began. I wanted to say: “Nana, this is Mike your grandson, not Mike your husband.”

“Sh . . . sh . . .” she whispered, placing a finger as long and cold as a candle against my lips. “Don’t say anything. I’ve waited so long for this moment. To be here. With you. I wondered what I would say if suddenly you walked in that door like other people have done. I’ve thought and thought about it. And I finally made up my mind—I’d ask you to forgive me. I was too proud to ask before.” Her fingers tried to mask her face. “But I’m not proud anymore, Mike.” That great voice quivered and then grew strong again. “I hate

you to see me this way—you always said I was beautiful. I didn't believe it. The Charity Ball when we led the grand march and you said I was the most beautiful girl there . . .”

“Nana,” I said. I couldn't keep up the pretense any longer, adding one more burden to my load of guilt, leading her on this way, playing a pathetic game of make-believe with an old woman clinging to memories. She didn't seem to hear me.

“But that other night, Mike. The terrible one. The terrible accusations I made. Even Ellie woke up and began to cry. I went to her and rocked her in my arms and you came into the room and said I was wrong. You were whispering, an awful whisper, not wanting to upset little Ellie but wanting to make me see the truth. And I didn't answer you, Mike. I was too proud. I've even forgotten the name of the girl. I sit here, wondering now—was it Laura or Evelyn? I can't remember. Later, I learned that you were telling the truth all the time, Mike. That I'd been wrong . . .” Her eyes were brighter than ever as she looked at me now, but tear-bright, the tears gathering. “It was never the same after that night, was it, Mike? The glitter was gone. From you. From us. And then the accident . . . and I never had the chance to ask you to forgive me. . . .”

My grandmother. My poor, poor grandmother. Old people aren't supposed to have those kinds of memories. You see their pictures in the family albums and that's what they are: pictures. They're not supposed to come to life. You drive out in your father's Le Mans doing seventy-five on the pike and all you're doing is visiting an old lady in a nursing home. A duty call. And then you find out that she's a person. She's *somebody*. She's my grandmother, all right, but she's also herself. Like my own mother and father. They exist outside of their relationship to me. I was scared again. I wanted to get out of there.

“Mike, Mike,” my grandmother said. “Say it, Mike.”

I felt as if my cheeks would crack if I uttered a word.

“Say you forgive me, Mike. I've waited all these years. . . .”

I was surprised at how strong her fingers were.

“Say *'I forgive you, Meg.'*”

I said it. My voice sounded funny, as if I were talking in a huge tunnel. “I forgive you, Meg.”

Her eyes studied me. Her hands pressed mine. For the first time in my life, I saw love at work. Not movie love. Not Cindy's sparkling eyes when I tell her that we're going to the beach on a Sunday afternoon. But love like something alive and tender, asking nothing in return. She raised her face, and I knew what she wanted me to do. I bent and brushed my lips against her cheek. Her flesh was like a leaf in autumn, crisp and dry.

She closed her eyes and I stood up. The sun wasn't glinting on the cars any longer. Somebody had turned on another television set, and the voices were the show-off voices of the panel shows. At the same time you could still hear the soap-opera dialogue on the other television set.

I waited awhile. She seemed to be sleeping, her breathing serene and regular. I buttoned my raincoat. Suddenly she opened her eyes again and looked at me. Her eyes were still bright, but they merely stared at me without recognition or curiosity: Empty eyes. I smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. She made a kind of moaning sound and turned away on the bed, pulling the blankets around her.

I counted to twenty-five and then to fifty and did it all over again. I cleared my throat and coughed tentatively. She didn't move; she didn't respond. I wanted to say, "Nana, it's me." But I didn't. I thought of saying, "Meg, it's me." But I couldn't.

Finally I left. Just like that. I didn't say goodbye or anything. I stalked through the corridors, looking neither to the right nor the left, not caring whether that wild old man with the wheelchair ran me down or not.

On the Southwest Turnpike I did seventy-five—no, eighty—most of the way. I turned the radio up as loud as it could go. Rock music—anything to fill the air. When I got home, my mother was vacuuming the living-room rug. She shut off the cleaner, and the silence was deafening. "Well, how was your grandmother?" she asked.

I told her she was fine. I told her a lot of things. How great Nana looked and how she seemed happy and had called me Mike. I wanted to ask her—hey, Mom, you and Dad really love each other, don't you? I mean—there's nothing to forgive between you, is there? But I didn't.

Instead I went upstairs and took out the electric razor Annie had given me for Christmas and shaved off my moustache.