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# Visiting Relatives

by Cynthia Hohn

It was a half hour ride on fast, bumpy roads and now she felt sick. Isabel told her mother that she knew she shouldn't have come, that she was probably going to throw up on their plastic coated furniture. Her mother slammed the car door and bent down close to Isabel's face, then hissed through clenched teeth and stiff red lips to please behave. The family entered the apartment building. The thick smell of food and people living together surrounded them as they entered the pale green foyer. Isabel began breathing out in short, loud puffs so the smell wouldn't get in her lungs. Her mother turned around slowly and glared at her. Isabel whined that she was really going to throw up and anyway, she should be home studying for the spelling bee. Her mother turned her body sharply back to face the rows of white buttons on the wall. She picked one, pressed it firmly, then released it. Somewhere above them a door opened and an excited babble fell, echoing metallicly, through the stair well. Her mother called up something in a light, cheerful voice and marched on up the stairs. Isabel was the tail end of the parade. Her mother and father were leading the two bouncing blonde heads of her sisters. They were too young to know what they were in for, thought Isabel. The noise of their shoes banged madly against the walls, as they made their way to the third floor. Isabel caught a glimpse of her parents' faces as they turned and began the next flight. They were both frowning. Her mother was saying something about "old Nana Dear", but she could only make out a few words of the discussion.

Isabel couldn't keep breathing out anymore, so she clapped her hand over her nose and mouth and inhaled carefully. The familiar smell of her own hand covered some of the apartment smell, but as she rounded the last landing, her father caught her eye and held it while her mother was being engulfed by the pudgy arms of Aunt Rose. Her father shook his head at her, which was his usual silent way of expressing his disappointment with someone. Then, he let himself be embraced by the bunch of fat, chattering women blocking the doorway. Soon she was going to have to pass through it.

The last of her sisters was sucked lovingly through the entrance, and it was her turn. The three women pulled her into their cluster of reaching arms. It was like being eaten or at least tasted by an octopus. They petted and stroked her hair, pinched her cheeks, kissed her forehead, encircled her wrists with their fingers, frowned, smiled, hugged and cooed at her. Isabel waited. She stood perfectly straight and pretended she was in the nurses' examination room at school.

Soon the arms of the woman ushered her into another room. It was dark, and a faint smell of sickness mingled with the cigar smoke. People sat in the over-stuffed furniture. The chairs and couches had been pushed against the stained wallpaper. A half eaten display of silver bowls of puddings, platters of cold cuts and old pictured china plates lined with fancy Italian pastries was spread across a lace table cloth. The thick wooden legs of the table protruded from beneath the white lace. Isabel was given a plate and two pairs of hands were quickly transporting spoonfuls

of assorted foods onto it. She held the plate straight armed and watched the pile grow. Finally, the plate was loaded to their satisfaction and the hands patted her head, pinched her cheeks, then left her. She continued holding the plate in front of her as she looked for a place to sit. Her mother was sitting primly on a couch between the two well dressed lumps of flesh known as Uncle Wilbur and Aunt Clara. Her mother was wearing her tan skirt and matching vest. It was her every other Sunday outfit. Isabel loved to touch its soft corduroy. She wanted to snuggle into a tiny circle on her lap and sleep until it was time to leave, but she knew by the way her mother was watching her that she wasn't allowed. She scanned the room for her father. He was perched at the edge of the other couch balancing his plate on top of his knees. He took turns nodding back and forth at his plate and at the woman next to him. She kept readjusting her sitting position, pulling her dress down over her knees, and leaning closer, then further away from Isabel's father as she giggled her way through the conversation.

Her little sister, Jennifer, had found a spot in Uncle Henry's lap. He was smoking a cigar and blowing smoke rings for her. She was resting comfortably against his soft, bulging stomach, shrieking happily as she poked her finger through the rings.

Uncle Wilbur began calling something in Isabel's direction. She stared unbelievably at him. His arms were stretched out and his palms, facing upwards, kept opening and closing like a huge baby calling for his mother to pick him up. She tightened her grip on her plate and tried to ignore him. The rest of the room seemed undisturbed by him as they continued their chewing and chattering. Then Isabel's youngest sister pranced past her and into Uncle Wilbur's immense open-armed embrace. His white cotton shirt sleeves enclosed her green-pinafores body like the giant clam she had seen in a Walt Disney movie. Isabel sat down cross-legged where she stood in front of the table. She set the plate on the floor and stared at the food. Her eyes met her mother's. They were narrowed and her lips were pressed tightly against each other again. Isabel stood up immediately. Her mother was pointing at something underneath the table. She put her plate on top of the table and lifted the table cloth to find a small foot stool. She knelt down, pulled it out then looked up at her mother. She was wearing a tense smile as she mouthed the message to Isabel to please sit down. So she did and crossed her arms and stuck her legs straight out. The place for her heel was lumping up strangely on top of her foot since Isabel hadn't bothered to fix the one twisted leg of her tights this morning. She leaned down, tucked it underneath the strap of her patent leather pumps and glanced back at her mother. Her mother was still watching her and mouthing something else now. Eat. Isabel twisted around and slid her plate off the table behind her without standing up. Her mother shook her head and turned to Aunt Clara with a fierce smile. Aunt Clara patted her hand, laughed and resumed talking.

Directly across the room sat the frail, staring body of Nana Dear. Her hair was a transparent veil of white, and the pink of her scalp showed through the shiny curls. Isabel remembered her from her previous visits. They both had the same hair name, which seemed reasonable to Isabel since they were both the oldest in their families. But Nana Dear's brothers and sisters had never seen the Bronx; they had

all died over in Italy. Isabel had never talked with her because Nana Dear couldn't understand English. She used to pinch her cheek, but not in the same rough way as her aunts. Nana Dear pinched them as if she were simply squeezing them to see what Isabel felt like. The touch of the old woman's fingers against her face felt almost comforting, but the sight of her veiny skin was frightening.

Nana Dear seemed to have grown smaller since Isabel had seen her last. She appeared only as big as Isabel herself as she sat sunken, motionless in the paisley chair. The dark, wrinkled gap of her mouth opened and closed as if she were speaking. One hand was limply curved over the arm of the chair. Isabel watched the pale fingers moving in shaky nervous gestures independently of each other.

Isabel poked at the rice ball on her plate until it fell apart and the meat and raisin center was exposed. The tomato sauce in the filling made it look bloody, so she covered it with a lump of ricotta cheese.

The old woman leaned forward in her chair and struggled to straighten herself. Her mouth twitched in exaggerated movements. No one noticed. Her sunken eyes seemed to focus on Isabel. But she couldn't be sure; they were too glazed. The emerald pillow which had propped up her head now slipped behind her back, and she sat in a strange, arched position. Her head had fallen backwards in an odd and obviously uncomfortable angle. The dry, shrunken edges of her mouth moved excitedly, revealing its decaying insides. Isabel stood and walked through the blue-gray layer of smoke hanging in the still air. It swirled around her back as she passed through it. Her father looked up at her, quickly smiled and continued his emphatic nodding. Isabel stood looking down at the face, which was more discolored than she had realized from across the room. There were hundreds of tiny dark veins radiating upwards from the loose skin around her jaw and across her eye lids. Her eyes glowed a brilliant blue and her pale, freckled fingers were stretched out straight and shivering. Her palms were pressed flat against the cloth of the chair. Isabel was amazed at the strength left in Nana Dear's hands. Her mother complained that she already had arthritis in her fingers.

Her sister was still laughing at Uncle Henry's smoke rings, which bothered Isabel. She wanted to touch the slightly transparent skin of Nana Dear's hand, but instead she stood watching the eyes that were focused up at her. Then, the hollows of the woman's cheeks moved upwards, forcing more wrinkles around the glassiness of her staring eyes. The hand fell limp and still. Isabel reached forward and finally touched its pale blueness.

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