

Grandzilla

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for
Lovely Leonie

Prologue

Berlin, 1945

His hands shook so much he could barely keep ahold of the goddamn rifle. Survived strafing by the Luftwaffe, driving truck on the Red Ball Express, just to fall apart pulling guard duty in Berlin.

Give me the Jerries any day. Least then the enemy was wearing a different nation's uniform.

James “Chubs” Martin shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. Fear was also fueling a constant need to pee. Antoinette was pregnant. He was a dead man.

The second she walked into the club you was a dead man, Jack.

It wasn't so much the look of her – though she was fine, all right – but the way she moved to his music. She got what he was trying to say. Climbed right up inside the notes falling out his clarinet.

Opening night, she came in with a girlfriend. Both WACs, both sergeants (meaning they outranked him) and both white. Any fool would have read the Verboten! sign stamped on her forehead and executed a crisp about-face. Especially since

Fritzzy's little joint was overflowing with good-time frauleins so very eager to please. Yes, so damn eager to please.

He went out back to smoke a cigarette between sets and admire the way the ruined walls of the city interacted with the stars. Like they was glittery shards of window glass, blown sky-high by the bombs that flattened Berlin. She came through the door quiet-like and stood by his side. No wisecracking, no pretending she needed a light. Just turned her head up and looked at the heavens, too.

After a while she took his hand and stroked his fingers. "Wanted to feel where the magic comes from," she whispered.

She drank whiskey on the rocks. Just one, sipping it the whole night, and from then on he made sure Fritzzy had it ready when she turned up at 7.55 p.m. Five minutes before his band took the floor.

His heart opened when she was there to hear him. A beam of love shot from his chest to meet halfway the one she was sending in return. A musician in her own right, his Nettie. She played his soul.

Part One

2015

One

Cotilla “Tillie” Barnard tossed a book from her dead husband’s bookshelves into one of the two plastic bins at her feet, a selection process as no-nonsense as her personality. At seventy-five, the years had aged but not thickened her, and she was dressed as if at any minute she might nip out to chair a board meeting.

“Tessa hates me,” she said.

“No more than I did at fifteen,” her daughter Syd answered. Sore from her spin class, she lounged in her father’s battered easy chair.

“She’s *supposed* to hate you. You’re her mother.”

“Worse. With me she’s indifferent.”

A photo fell out of a book mid-flight – a black-and-white snapshot printed on thick paper, like it meant something. Tillie picked it up and gave it to Syd.

“Que milagro, Mom. You and Dad together smiling.” Syd tucked the photo into her bra. “I don’t guard this you’ll throw it out with the rest of his things.”

“Sentimental has never been my middle name.”

“No effing kidding.”

Tillie fanned herself with a battered paperback copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. “If I do let Tessa stay for the summer, and that’s an ‘if’ the size of Nebraska, I’m putting her to work. Fifteen’s plenty old enough, and Betta-Mart’s hiring for the summer.”

“Geez, Mom. Dad’s only been gone a week.”

“Keeping busy. Best thing for grief.”

“So that’s what this is?” Syd swept her arm wide to indicate the room, the late Ed Barnard’s study already partially denuded – rectangles on the wall where artwork hung, the desk pushed into the hall, its contents dumped into a black trash bag.

“The painters could come on Friday or not for another six months. Best in the business. Plus, I’m hosting a brunch here. I have to hustle.”

“Of course you do. Cease your labors and the empire just might crumble.”

“It might.” She gave Syd’s foot a swat. Syd managed to tease her without getting under her skin. Rare gift.

“We’re closing Freshwater Canyon end of the month. When the deal goes through, you and Tess are set.”

Syd twisted the amethyst and emerald ring on her right ring finger, a gift from her mother when she turned twenty-one.

“Thanks to you, we already have enough for seven lifetimes.”

Tillie dug her chin into her chest like a ram preparing to charge. A gesture her business associates feared and a sign for Syd that she’d gone too far.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to get between you and your money.”

“Maybe if you’d grown up –”

“On the skint side of the tracks. I’ve heard your back story.”

Tillie swiped at some dust on the bookshelf she’d just cleared.

“Then you’ll know why I’m saying Tessa ought to work at Betta-Mart. That girl needs to learn the value of a dollar.”

Tillie loved her only grandchild, but wasn’t convinced she liked her. Ed had spoiled her, and Syd, more interested in an academic career than motherhood, let him. It meant Tessa had always preferred Ed, a truth that galled Tillie. He’d never amounted to much and wasn’t worth the adoration Tessa lavished on him. If work filled Tessa’s days, they could sidestep the awkwardness his death created: the truth they couldn’t abide each other.

“How about work with meaning? Or volunteering?” Syd asked. “Like with plants. You know how botany’s her thing.”

Tillie stiffened her spine. “You’re the one running away from home next week. Not my fault your childcare plan fell apart at the last minute. Betta-Mart or no deal. That’s my offer, Sydney Ann. Take it or leave it.”

Losing nearly three months in Chile on research leave wasn’t a sacrifice Syd was willing to make.

She swung her legs off the arm of the chair and sat up. “Okay, you win.”

Tillie took down another book off the shelves. The pages came loose from the book’s spine and flapped to the ground. She read the title on the cover that remained in her hand: *Mao’s Little Red Book*. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

Two

Tessa

My grandmother's name is Cotilla. She makes me call her Grandma. To her face. Behind her back it's Cotilla Grandzilla – Grandzilla for short. We don't get along. She hates everything I've ever loved.

Grandpa's a different story. I adore him. He's dead. Lou Gehrig's disease made him go all Stephen Hawking. Scrunched him up into a lopsided wad of bones and waxy yellow skin.

Every day I came over to hang out. I read to him from our favorite books: Native Trees of the American West, Flora and Fauna of the Great Plains, Illustrated Wildflowers. He couldn't speak. He said enough with his eyes. They never, ever stopped laughing.

He died without me early on a Sunday morning. Weekdays Ma dropped me off on her way to work. Saturdays on the way to spin class. Sundays, she stayed in bed to fuck her boyfriend, Blaine.

Grandpa sent Bob Marley to tell me: "Don't worry about a thing. Cuz every little thing gonna be all right." Weaker and weaker: "Cuz every little thing . . ."

Uncle Jimmy stole him from the funeral home. Ran right in and threw him over his shoulder when nobody was looking. Took him

up to the lake. Laid him out in his canoe on a makeshift funeral pyre. Would have gotten away with it if he'd remembered to bring some matches.

*I still hang out with Grandpa sometimes, though not so much because I'm stuck with the monster for the summer, and she's made me get a job [*gagging*]. The cemetery's not so nice in the heat of the day, but it's peaceful. No Grandzilla stomping around in the background. Sighing her toxic sighs.*

Three

While he read his speech, Ganesh Rajanayagam's great worry was that his new trousers made him look like a dweeb. His mother always bought them a size too large so he could grow into them. Grow he did, but up like a beanpole, not out like his father's tomatoes on the patio. The only belt on offer was a hand-me-down from his fat big brother with an extra hole punched in it. Cinching it tight enough made the tongue loll like the curve of a highway exit ramp.

In the front row, his parents hung on his every word. The rest of the small crowd? Not so much. More pressing matters concerned Harton's civic leaders, like would Tillie Barnard be serving the good champagne at brunch or an inferior grade? Tillie herself stood at the back, one eye monitoring the caterers laying out a spread on her dining room table, the other on Ganesh speeding through his last paragraph: "What then is patriotism? It is freedom. What then is freedom? It is responsibility. What then is responsibility? It is the sacred duty that we as citizens owe our nation. Let us then shoulder this responsibility and go

forward hand in hand. Thank you.”

The audience’s response would have registered no higher than indifferent on an applause meter if not for his parents’ contribution, aided by Rick Bergen, Betta-Mart’s associate director of public relations. A former high school tight end, Rick had never really left the playing field. Each day marked a fresh chance to move the ball closer to the goal posts, though the damage he’d suffered from blows to the head sometimes caused him to lose sight of which way to run.

He sprung from his seat to join Ganesh. “Totally awesome.” He pointed to a woman in the second row. “Right, Janine? Awesome. Aaaawesome.”

Not waiting for an answer, he pressed on. “First, big ups to Mrs. Barnard for hosting us. New chairman – *chairwoman* – of the Betta-Mart Charitable Foundation.”

Rick gave Tillie a thumbs-up. Heads turned, those curious about the champagne more so than the others.

“Second, for anybody who doesn’t know me, I’m Rick Bergen, Betta-Mart PR. And third, the most important reason we’re here: to award Ganache top prize in the Betta-Mart Foundation’s Harton Junior High American Freedom Speech Competition. Whoo-hoo, Ganache!”

He gave the boy a rough squeeze. Ganesh compressed like a foam mattress fallen upon by a sumo wrestler. After air returned to his lungs he sputtered, “It’s Ganesh. My name is Ganesh.”

Rick’s brow furrowed. “Ganesh. Yeah. That’s what I –
“Ganache. You called me Ganache.”

“You sure did, Rick,” Janine-from-the-second-row confirmed.

“Ganache, like the chocolate sauce.”

Ganesh’s parents exchanged bemused looks. Tillie smirked.

Rick held his hands up in surrender. “Totally my bad.”

Ganesh stood taller and took a step away from Rick. “Lord Ganesh, god of success and destroyer of obstacles. God of education, wisdom and wealth. Born as a boy but beheaded by Shiva who gave him the head of an elephant –”

Rick cut him off with another industrial-strength squeeze.

“We get it. Now, where was I?”

“Puffing Betta-Mart,” Janine heckled.

Rick plowed on, ignoring her. “Ah yes, Ganesh is just the kind of young man Betta-Mart wants to encourage today so he can become a leader of tomorrow.”

He pulled an envelope from his sportcoat pocket. “In recognition of his achievement, I’m honored to award him a twenty-five-dollar Betta-Mart gift certificate! Okay, let’s hear it for Ganesh!”

The cabbie lifted the blue cloth suitcase out of the trunk, extended the handle, and offered it to his passenger, Dawn Farber, a frail old woman with cropped silver hair wearing a simple blue dress. After he drove off, Dawn turned her attention to the McMansion across the street. That it took her breath away could be attributed more to the aggrieved state of her lungs than architectural coherence. Nothing matched, everything competed: the brick façade, the Corinthian columns, the balconies, dormers, and archways all press-ganged into the service of an aesthetic scrambled as an egg.

Late model cars littered the circular drive. On the other side of the bay window, people wafted to and fro juggling champagne flutes and canapés stacked on fine china lunch plates.

“Mein Gott, Tillie. What a pile.”

She trekked over the road with her hand holding tight to the suitcase’s handle. The man on the front steps attending to his smartphone gave no notice; she slipped past him through the open door.

Inside, none of the guests noticed her except for Ganesh’s parents who nodded and smiled as she passed. At the drinks table, she poured herself water from a pitcher flavored with lemon slices. As she sipped, she decided where next to wander, choosing the garden beyond the French doors in the living room. On her way, she passed Ganesh slumped against a wall picking blueberries out of a muffin. Just as she exited, Tillie appeared from around the corner.

“Come with me,” she commanded Ganesh, motioning to her office across the hall.

Ganesh hesitated. One hand held blueberries, the other his half-eaten muffin, leaving no hands free to hitch up his baggy pants. He crammed the muffin into his mouth and the blueberries into his pocket.

Tillie settled herself behind her desk and pointed to the chair opposite it. On the walls hung photos, citations and awards depicting her business and civic accomplishments stretching back four decades. The latest showed her and the governor cutting the ribbon to officially open the new shopping mall.

“You’re an outstanding speaker, Ganesh.”

Ganesh swallowed an improperly chewed muffin fragment. It stuck in his throat, resisting the slide to his stomach.

“I was lucky to win,” he sputtered.

“Not that crap. Patriotism? Sacred duty? Pssssh.”

“But you don’t win if you don’t use those kind of words,” Ganesh insisted.

Tillie planted her elbows on the old-fashioned ink blotter she kept on the desktop. “Do you know what fascism is?”

His silence led her to believe the answer was no.

“Never mind. When you spoke about Lord Ganesha. It came from your heart.”

“Of course. I am his namesake.”

“Not *of course*. You have a gift.”

Ganesh pressed his heels into the carpet. *What a crazy lady.*

“Let’s make this concrete. Give me the gift certificate.”

Ganesh balked, suddenly remembering which pocket he’d put it in.

Tillie flapped her fingers. “Give me.”

He dug the envelope out and laid it on the blotter. Seven mashed blueberries clung to it like barnacles.

The fancy clock on the wall ticked off fifteen seconds of noisy judgment. Ganesh spoke just to drown it out.

“I hate blueberries.”

“I can see that.”

Tillie pinched the corner of the envelope between the nails of her left thumb and forefinger. Concurrently, she rummaged in her desk drawer with her right hand feeling all the way back into the corners.

“Feeding this to the shredder is no longer an option so – ah, got it!”

She held up a cigarette lighter, flicked the spark wheel, and set fire to the paper. The blueberries sizzled with the enthusiasm of a fajita, and Ganesh leapt out of his chair.

“What the fuck!”

The reflection of the fire danced in Tillie’s blue eyes. She held on even as heat from the flame threatened her fingertips.

“There are two paths in life, Ganesh. One leads to a store full of carcinogenic plastic crap from China run by people who don’t pronounce your name right. The other . . .”

At the last moment, she dropped the envelope into the metal wastebasket under her desk.

“. . . where *you* make it go.”

Ganesh blinked back tears. “I’m saving up for skateboarding lessons. My parents can’t pay.”

“And how many more soul-destroying speech contests will you have to win before you can afford them?”

Tillie opened her check book and wrote him a check for two hundred and fifty dollars.

“Never, ever forget this: passion’s worth a hell of a lot more than twenty-five bucks.”