

## TEMPUS FUGIT

*Melissa Pheterson*

In 1941 my grandfather's mother opened a letter informing her son of his duty to serve in World War II. She crumpled on the floor and died of grief.

Last Sunday, my mother, who lives in the town next to mine, returned from a grueling weekend of caring for my daughter—cooking dinner, coaxing her to eat, bathing her, sustaining her kicks of protest over the slathering of lotion—only to collapse into bed at twilight with her iPad and find on Facebook a picture of Paige taken with her other grandmother, both forcibly yet prettily posed at a restaurant.

“Facebook is a crock of...soup!” she texted me before weeping into the night, or so I deduced from her splotchy face at the airport the next morning. We were on the way to visit my grandparents.

“If your in-laws were nicer,” she muttered, re-counting the sandwiches she’d made for Paige to consume in-flight, “I would cook for them. *So you wouldn’t have to set foot in a chain restaurant.*”

My grandparents never bothered to change the previous owners’ Tacky Eighties aesthetic, whose centerpiece was a Formica bar with etched glass waiter carrying a tray of glowing absinthe martinis. My grandfather Jacob used to call him “Harry,” summoning him with a whistle. Now Harry lords it over him; you can just see his tuxedoed silhouette from the den, where my grandpa dozes in his recliner or reads the same paragraph over and over; my grandmother recently bought him a large-print version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, trusting her talk shows.

I lean over and kiss his sandpaper cheek. He smacks his lips through fitful sleep, his hunched frame in a blue terry tracksuit like a deposed Mafia kingpin. The veins in his crossed arms have distended into blistered channels, as though rubbed raw. Thick gobs of crusted squamous cells have erupted on his bald head; to me, the scab that spills from his forehead to his eyebrows has the outlines of a beautiful tulip. The worn recliner and the wheelchair are his sole options; leisure has become prison. Last week his doctor

said to Mitzi: “Enjoy him.” This guaranteed that my grandmother would not, for the unspoken words taunt her—and our—eardrums: ... *while you can*.

My mother nurses her pain in Grandma Mitzi’s bed, which still reeks of the cigarettes my grandfather used to buy her in bulk. Paige is fighting a sudden virus whose cause is under debate. Mitzi adjusts Paige’s waistband to make sure her toddler yoga pants give her system ample room to work. At any moment one of us will fling back the covers and jump up to switch the laundry thrashing in the machine, running several dry cycles to banish any risk of dampness. Repose makes our nerves sputter, like a pedal floored in a parked car. My father is downstairs, having purposeful downtime in the condo Jacuzzi. I hope that he’s aesthetically pleased—that daughters or granddaughters, not the residents they’re visiting, are on display.

Accusation and reassurance collide mid-air as Paige’s coughs send ripples through the afghan. My mother believes she’s to blame. Just yesterday she crowed to Mitzi how Paige has been healthy for so long; how grandmotherly devotion and hot soup shielded her from the bugs circulating at preschool; how my mother cleverly booked seats in Row 13 of the airplane because we’d likely have it all to ourselves, spared the germs of all those misguided

superstitious souls. Of course these boasts have summoned the Evil Eye, and my mother cannot forgive herself.

Or perhaps Paige is out of sorts because she fell out of bed in our hotel last night. I did not want to use the resort crib, sensing my mother's reservations about it festering with invisible germs, and that we could not pack or carry Lysol on the plane. Instead, David took Paige into bed with us, ignoring my parents' anxious pleas to take her in theirs. He was still furious with my father for embracing the beefy TSA agent and sobbing, "thank you for keeping my treasure safe." I knew my father didn't mean me; not anymore. It would make a great Facebook vignette. Or not. I already wince at the rampant subliminal chorus of sneers and disdain, silent cicada jeers screeching beneath the "Likes."

At any rate, Paige—already a night owl, inheriting the sleeping habits of David ascribed by my mother to poor parenting—thrashed her way to the side of the bed around midnight and announced her fall with a gut-scraping thump. David threw off the covers, stabbed her half-closed eyes with the pin of light encased in his smartphone, and bellowed: "Paige? What's your name? When's your birthday? Count to thirty!" My daughter grunted, refusing to

wake. David flipped on the lights and asked her if she wanted some ice cream.

“Okay,” she said, rubbing her eyes.

I felt my belly begin to ache.

Room service took thirty minutes to arrive, compensating for the delay with extra scoops. As she continued to hack through golden threads of mucus, David plied her with nonpareils from the minibar. I remained seized in waves of panic, bowels churning, praying that she hadn’t gotten a concussion. A patch of rug burn scarred her cheek. I wanted to run to my parents and unload the problem; and yet, I rather liked the respite we had from them. Usually, the Photoshop crop tool is the only way to keep them out of the picture.

Paige ate her ice cream, counted to thirty, and collapsed into a scatrhythm rest, snorts and hiccups overlaying the whirring huff of the A/C. At twilight she threw up and her soft skin grew hot.

“Too much chocolate,” I said.

“Too much anxiety,” David said. “You’re making her sicker with your nerves. Am I wrong?”

I heaved up a mock sigh, exhaling the smoke of my anger. “I know. I guess I’m just *too* empathetic.”

Paige pounded her fists against my shoulder. “Stop. STOP!”

“Who are you mad at?” David asked her. “Mommy or Daddy?”

He offered to keep her by his side for the day, but my mother did not like this idea.

“It’s my father’s birthday,” she said, frown lines cleaving her chin.

“She’s not sick,” said my own father, the doctor, and my worries fell away. “She’s just adjusting to travel. That’s all.”

So Paige is now in bed with me, my mother, and my mother’s mother, a living and breathing old wife with tales a plenty, either from family lore or *Dr. Oz*, who has deemed Paige’s illness a mere disturbance of equilibrium, too much icy food consumed too late. Even in a tropical climate, attention must be paid. My grandfather has a cold, not to mention squamous cell carcinoma. We have just traveled. It’s best nothing refrigerated enter our systems. Mitzi even had Paige’s apple juice waiting on the counter when we arrived. When I saw the cup, I nearly cried. How could David—who critiqued his cousin for the triteness of his eulogy at their grandmother’s funeral—possibly understand?

“Karen, don’t be crazy,” says Mitzi to my mother. She is chewing on Nicorette gum with jarringly red lips, tarted up for the benefit of the men-folk. “It was nothing you said that brought the Evil Eye. It was that David *schtupped* her in the middle of the night.”

“Whoa. Double-entendre alert,” I say. “Remember when Grandpa asked your girl at the salon how much she charges for a blow job?”

“Oh, yes.” She coughs out a laugh. “See? He was always confused.”

“Always,” agrees my mother. *Everything is fine; he’s not declining at all.*

Now there is another woman, and not just for hairdressing. Rosina speaks only Haitian but has the muscles to lift my grandfather from recliner to wheelchair, gives him a decent shower, and has access to her husband’s Facebook on her phone. Therefore, her husband and I are now “Friends.” Mitzi doesn’t like to pester Rosina, but sometimes when Rosina has finished texting or watching *Real Housewives*, my grandmother asks to see my news feed—after which she calls my mother to ask: “Why is Paige in short sleeves when there’s snow outside?” “Why is she getting crumbs on the couch?” It adds a new layer of angst to my presence there. I want to lay claim to a mystique, a sultry intrigue that peels back like a strip tease, but I post too much backstory. I have no circles of friends that surround me like the rings of a

tree. They all crouch in a silent watch fraught with secret mockery, and if I dress Paige in an outfit that says “I Drink Till I Pass Out,” I have no way of knowing if it’s funny, dorky, or just in poor taste. If I post good tidings, there’s the fear I might invoke the Evil Eye, and yet—if I gripe about my day, I’ll offend everyone I’ve seen. Each piece of myself fractures in the public eye, exposing white lies and risking mockery. Besides, I have no reason to seek advice and validation; my parents have all the answers and resources I could ever need. David might say this sardonically, but I cling to their authority with desperation. My grandfather always said: “Better off still.” Better to deny access to the on-lookers; better to join my mother in reading posts aloud and snickering, passing judgment from an ivory tower.

### §

In the drawer of the guest room, nestled between my old Victoria’s Secret nightgowns, I find my grandfather’s discharge papers from the Army. The white type struck against the black carbon page imparts a bureaucratic, hatchet-job tedium. “Occupation: Shecker.” “Education: 3 Yrs HS.” For his service he drove a laundry truck in Burma, which probably endeared him to my grandmother. Laundry is in our blood.

With my phone I take a picture of the discharge papers. “Burma to Brooklyn to Boca,” I mutter, captioning in my mind, extending my hand like a zombie so I can pick up a signal. Kitty-corner to the uproarious cocktail waiter, the cherry grandmother clock chimes. Its metal face reads “Tempus Fugit” in ornate lettering. I had moped in front of that clock so many times, airless and sticky days when time seemed to bear weights rather than wings. A few feet from its base, Paige’s pink suitcase leans on the mirrored wall, an elaborate spray of flowers circling a blank space that normally bears a name. In the dizzying throw of reflection, the omission intensifies.

“Put a fake name,” David had counseled my mother, spraying pretzel crumbs. “That way, we’ll know who the perverts are when they shout it ineffectually.”

“Maybe Fakename,” I said. “FaKeNaMeh!”

My mother squirmed in her desk chair.

“I have to put a name that sounds like she’s black?”

When David had gone, I reminded my mother how David’s neuroses were airtight proof. He was becoming more like us, renouncing his family’s wanton ways. After all, hadn’t my grandparents always called each other “Jay” and “Helen” at the mall? Their intimacy is still airtight. The thrill of

deception binds us together. My grandmother keeps making excuses to avoid seeing her few friends who aren't yet dead. And when I found myself bereft of a date for my brother's wedding, Mitzi called escort services to find me a "medical student" for the night. "But it's all women," she sighed to me. "And *zaftig* ones at that. Big bosoms."

How grateful I was to marry. And yet because of David's scruples, my poor grandfather is forced to call Paige "little girl." I know seeing her name on the suitcase would have jogged the memory that agitates, like a mixed-forecast map, underneath his scalp.

I had wasted his clarity—above and below the scalp—on stoner ex-boyfriends who brought me to Florida in the swelter of June and August, the better not to waste money on me. My grandfather had driven us in his Lexus, which he referred to as "Lexus Harriet," pointing out the various highlights of their retirement compound: clubhouse, gymnasium, tennis courts. "This is real suburbia," he always said, pronouncing it "*so-boi-bia*." On my next trip down, alone, he'd ask me, "How's your fiancé?"; and if I burst into tears, he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his Dockers and stared at his loafers.

I had memorized the tour by the time my (real) fiancé flew down to meet the family. By then Grandpa was losing his touch with Lexus Harriet.

Driving my grandma home from the beauty parlor, he drifted into the wrong lane during a thunderstorm and nearly killed a young black woman. Of course, my grandparents' term for the near-victim was one my husband couldn't abide, even though my brother loves to throw it around. My brother wants to be a crusty old racist Jewish man as much as I want to be a nagging old neurotic Jewish woman: the hippest, youngest "old wife" out there, spewing admonitions with style and with vengeance. The kind of mother who would dress her newborn in fleece pajamas, despite the summer heat, without Mitzi having to issue the orders first.

### §

Failing to find a signal, I sneak into the den and kneel down in front of the recliner, prop my elbow on the cracked leather, and lace my fingers through my grandfather's. He opens his rheumy hazel eyes and smiles a toothless baby grin. He has swallowed his fake teeth one time too often for my grandmother to arrange another trip to the dentist. His hand seems to float against mine, and his breath arrives with great effort.

"I won a volunteer award at Paige's school," I tell him, nuzzling the salt stubble of his cheek.

"Yeah?" he gasps. "How much money they give you? A nickel?"

“A penny for my thoughts,” I say, delighted at hearing the laughter dribble through his wheeze.

Suddenly I see Rosina’s reflection streaking through the mirrored walls, frizzy orange bun and turquoise sundress chasing the wheelchair she’s pushing. “Okay, Yak, we go to dinner,” she says. “But first, we change you, okay?”

He smacks his lips, trying to cobble a joke in his mind that will salvage his dignity. I hold my breath. Finally, feebly, it wafts into the air.

“Change me,” he says, “like into a different person?”

She digs her hands under my grandfather’s broad, slumped shoulders. Her nails have sparkly peach rays bursting from a single gold rhinestone.

“One, two, four,” they recite together. His chuckle stabs my heart. Only my grandmother calls him Yank, and Rosina can’t even get the term of endearment right.

I retreat to the wraparound deck, staring down at the banyans with their mad thicket of roots, as though frozen mid-whip in a gale. The ficus trees still look like haikus, pared down to trunk and branch, even though it’s been years since the last hurricane hit.

When David and I bought our house, I insisted on a ranch so my grandparents wouldn’t have to climb stairs. I had succeeded in getting pregnant in

the fall so my grandparents could fly up north in the summertime. I refused to believe they could no longer travel. As a housewarming and baby gift, they sent me a check for a washer and dryer. It was okay for me to use communal Whirlpools, but a new generation was here: a girl who had to ride the course of our neuroses, soaring up past caution, through hyperbole, and finally crashing into parody.

## §

“I’m going to post Grandpa’s papers on Facebook,” I announce to the ladies in bed. “I’m going to say that he never finished high school but he’s the smartest man I know.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” says my mother. “He’s ashamed that he didn’t graduate.”

“But it was to serve his country.” A hot itch of irritation grabs my skin. *He’ll never remember that he didn’t graduate. He doesn’t even know my daughter’s name. She’s Blank Paige.*

“He doesn’t want anyone to know,” says Mitzi.

I take another drag on the cigar of my temper.

“My tennis coach is cute,” I say, finally. “He goes out of his way to avoid me. The day after every lesson, I get emails that someone is searching my

public records. Too much of a coincidence.” I twist my ring, a diamond that had belonged to my great-grandmother, whose last words expressed fear that I might be cold in the slutty dress I had worn to the hospital.

I excuse myself, leave the room, and throw my phone at the base of the clock. It needs a different Latin inscription. Something to express time bobbing and slipping in sprays of gastric juice and knotted nerves, failing to launch. It’s time for my grandfather’s birthday dinner.

### §

My grandparents are forty minutes late. Rosina has doubtless gotten lost in Suburbia. Perhaps she has dark intentions. My brother Matt—a younger version of my grandfather, with abundant curly hair and a broad nose—checks his Movado watch and eyes his twin boys warily. They are five years old, blonde like his wife, and prone to punching each other in the head. My father alternates between making them laugh and reading the newspaper, folded like a handkerchief to save table space.

“I keep telling you,” Matt says now. “That Haitian is a retarded mute.”

“She’s very strong,” my mother murmurs.

Paige slides down from her chair and begins to crawl under the table, taking swipes at people’s legs.

“There’s a doggie here!” I say.

My stab at diffusing tension produces only withering looks above the table, and screeches below. “No dogs! Scared of dogs!”

“Why can’t you discipline her?” David snaps. Shame floods me; then a steely rage descends like a sluice, backwashing the flood into my heart.

“Paige is hungry,” my mother says, shooting out of her chair like a bottle rocket. “That’s all. I’ll order her some spaghetti.”

“You’re going to accost the waiter for *spaghetti*?” scoffs Matt. “And your grandsons who have actual manners have to sit here and watch?” But she has already gotten up—a mom on a mission, steadfast, devoted, and worrying faster and better than I, sitting there like a retarded mute.

“That’s it,” says David, throwing down his napkin. “I’m taking Paige on the next flight home.”

I know it’s just bluster, meaningless words; but for weeks, he will frame this all-expenses-paid vacation as a harrowing sacrifice on his part, a credit upon which he will draw daily to browbeat me into deference on Paige’s diet and bedtime. How I missed my grandfather’s epigrams. *Does Macy’s tell Gimbels? Two wrongs don’t make a right. Or a left.*

Paige's face is filthy with tomatoes by the time Rosina parks my grandfather at the table, his chambray button-down neatly pressed. At least she can iron.

"Hey! Who are you?" he asks through trembling lips. *Please let him be joking.*

"What are you, a wise guy?" I ask, pangs splitting my gut.

"Birthday boy's here!" says Mitzi, lipstick refreshed, gold pantsuit already crinkled. She wields her cane like a conductor, whipping up harmony, abruptly swinging it toward the Haitian waiter approaching our table. "The baby shouldn't have ice in her water," she says. Matt snorts.

The waiter dodges the cane easily. "Happy birthday, Mr. Fuchs," he sings. My grandfather used to leave tips for the whole wait staff in teacups that he would hand them with feigned nonchalance, claiming they were dirty. Now his eyes dart back and forth around the table. He is already pining for his recliner. "This'll cost me a nickel," he says to the napkin. "That'll cost me a dime," he says to the fork.

My nephews, still immaculate, get to pose with my grandfather for posterity and Facebook glory. Paige's face and dress, at this point, are beyond Photoshop repair.

“I hope you don’t mind I got her spaghetti. She was so hungry,” says my mother.

“She was barking like a dog until she scared herself,” says my brother.

“Well, we’re not dog people,” says my mother.

“You mustn’t give her a fear of dogs,” scolds my grandmother, watching Rosina cut my grandfather’s monkfish. “It’s too late for us, but there’s still hope for her.”

“She’s allergic to her other grandmother’s dog.” My mother’s voice breaks. “She gets a rash. I hate seeing Facebook photos of her rolling around on the dog. I can *feel* her skin getting irritated.”

“Maybe *your* irritation is contagious,” I blurt out, glancing at David. But he and my father are staring with disgust at the tongue my grandmother has ordered, sticking flatly onto the plate with grainy mustard smeared on its frank pink sprawl.

A chocolate cake with a pale, skinny wax candle appears in front of my grandfather. He chews his lip.

“Blow it out!” we cry, and his throat strains to make wind.

“Hooray!” we all chorus as the flame dies.

He eats quietly, eyes swishing to and fro, then folds his hands in his lap.

Rosina dabs his chin. I sidle up to his other side.

“Maybe a little cake they could bring me?” he murmurs.

“Grandpa!” I mash my nose into his face. “Look at your plate. Full of crumbs. That’s your candle.”

He rewards me with a sheepish half-smile as I draw back. “Can’t fool you, can I?”

“And, see.” I thrust my phone in the air. “Here’s a picture of you eating cake. I posted—I put it on the computer.”

“A picture? Oh, no! That’s gonna cost me a dime!”

The phone lights up, startling him. The avatar of Rosina’s husband has already Liked my photo. Over my grandfather’s scalp of volcanic cancer, my eyes meet hers. She winks.

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