

TRUTH
WITH
LIES

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Concrete proof of a cheating Spouse's adulterous ways was once the only means for getting a divorce, that meant a Detective's Polaroid of a husband 'doing it' - and clearly! Not an inexpensive outlay of cash considering the tilted pay-discrimination that existed in those pre-equality days. "Desperate but always hopeful", was what Grandma used to call it.

Then in 1970, amidst the fervor of changing times - a new Divorce Law got introduced which gave couples (read: women) trapped in horrific marriages a safe and respectable way out. The Era of 'Irreconcilable Differences' had officially started, and despite an opposition that showed itself fierce - the line-ups stretched around the block.

Born after this date and it seems unconscionable what Women had to put up with - the violence, the degradation, the lack of dignity the State afforded them, not to mention the soul-crushing loss of their children. "Unforgiveable", my Aunts still snicker on the topic. This Story pre-dates that ground-breaking legislation which changed society forever, and most certainly saved many female lives in the process.

This is the legend of a tight-knit band of brave Sisters from those State-sponsored overtly-chauvinistic days, who became secretly known amongst those that desperately needed them as 'The Shady Ladies'. Still have trouble imagining all those heart-pounding risks they took. The Stories through the tears help.

All Women Are Beautiful – the sign read above the Salon door.

Without fail Grandma Belle's house was always full of life - from the chill of winter... to the humid hot of summer... from another stand-up-and-fight crisis... to loud singing and dancing right here in her living room. My walk through the front foyer always brings a familiar sight of passionate women speaking in all kinds of tongues, always between bites, and always fuelled by the most delicious aroma coming out of every corner, too much most of the time, say my hips. A quick turn into the first room gives me the latest hair designs being worked on... gossiped about... and of course being argued over. "That style would never work on you... never. Who are you kidding?" Seeing a dozen or so gab about the proper length needed for each shape of face... I just need to wait for it... and wait for it. I'm now colliding into a swarm of opinions concerning the always subjective 'shade of color' - the piece-de-la-resistance for any Stylist.

"Hi Aunt Lina", reaching in for a kiss.

"Hello Princess", with her customary squeeze. "Now come and sit my Amorcito", she points.

"Belle's granddaughter always has to look her best", moving-in to assess the state of my tired neglected locks.

I oblige my Aunt. I oblige all my Aunts. Everyone so open and direct in their own charming way; never can I say no, they all mean so well. With some determined brushing my Aunt Lina starts her work. They all give me so much incredible love.

After a few minutes of studying like it's the most important task in the world, after a strategy is developed I'm sure... out comes the scissors; I can't worry... Lina does what she wants... a trim here, there.

Non-stop chatter in the background.

It's like Grandma never left.

"So Miss future-big-shot-lawyer, any cute Mr. future lawyers at your school?"

I blush in silence.

"Ah come on, there must be someone you have your eye on?", trying to prod it out of me in that endearing way of hers, that relentless line of questioning that won't let me rest until something pops-up that shows I'm a living breathing hot-blooded woman who cares about how she walks, talks, and am being pursued by the opposite sex. Nosey. Intrusive. And packing plenty of moxie. These three have been like Surrogates for as long as I can remember.

Applying a few final sprays onto the finished product... taking a deep gaze of pride from her speedy work. "Now you can go say hello to everybody."

"Thanks... love you."

Thick as thieves all of them; I can now move around the house with a painted-on smile aimed back at the many 'Sisters' Grandma had in her long emphatic life.

"Rylee it's so nice to see you."

Hugs... always lots of hugs... there was never any doubt Grandma was the leader of this community of competent women - loving caring women who refused to be silenced by the Paternal rules of the past.

“You look beautiful... and surprisingly fit for a college student”, winks Judge Sonya Smith. Sixteen hour days studying; fit I don’t feel.

“Your Grandma would be so proud.”

Being Belle Cohen’s granddaughter meant interesting interaction with interesting People.

“Rylee, come say hello.”

Grandma was a big personality with a big history; most of which I thought I knew.

“Come in here Rylee.”

I immediately follow that voice into Granddad’s library; I miss that gentle man of endless tales.

“RYLEE.”

Considering the era these women evolved from, the strict rules, the raging misogyny... despite it.

“RYLEE WHERE ARE YOU?”

Their chutzpah was always very palpable to me.

“Hi Aunt Maria.”

And the laughter never stopped.

“Ciao il mio tesoro.”

There were always lots of kisses... along with mammoth maternal hugs.

“Come and sit down...”, holding my hand, “get out of that chair Rosella, I’ve done all I can to make you look beautiful today.”

The room breaks into hysterical laughter. Glasses of wine are everywhere.

“Hey, pour a glass for Rylee would you Perdita?”

Plus many hand-held mirrors being closely stared into.

“Ok relax my amore... just relax”, bringing her tools-of-the-trade up to my face.

I’m in the make-up room now.

“Aha... aha... aha.”

After long stares of appreciation for her artistry.

“Nice... aha... very nice.”

A good and long and very loud while later. “Now go and eat something”, she sends me away with more kisses. “Ok who’s next”, Maria screams into the packed room.

Navigating crowds with piled-high plates... squeezing through hallways that are narrowed by the many gregarious ‘Sisters’ that loved Grandma and want to pay their respects; which is probably the way Grandma would have wanted it. “This is EXACTLY the way I want it”, can picture her saying if she’s looking down.

“Excuse me”, trying to skirt from side to side.

“Rylee? Is that you Rylee?”

“Oh Mrs. Schwartz”, pushing closer, “hello.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“Your Grandmother was a very unique lady... you can see how much she was loved. She will be missed”, my former grade school Principal offers with warm eyes. “How’s Columbia?” A well-respected Educator. “Are you enjoying college life?” Who gladly wrote me a recommendation letter to the Dean himself, a personal friend. “It’s good... challenging but good.” “You were always a source of light for Belle”, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks, that means a lot. It was nice to see you again Mrs. Schwartz”, continuing to move. Barely a few steps past... “RYLEE.”

“RYLEE.”

“RYLEE.”

Rings out from three separate corners of the house... a few steps more and I’m inside the large and very crowded family room – ‘The Arena’, Grandma used to call it.

“Hello Aunt Azia.”

Where her meetings went on forever.

“Come here my Queen Lakshmi”, she pulls me close for a loving hug. Aunt Azia’s been calling me Lakshmi since I was a little girl - The God of Beauty, she taught me. This room was where Grandma always told me to go to bed, right over there by the sofa... which I hated having to do; I loved being in her aura for as long as possible. “Everybody say hello to beautiful Rylee.”

“HELLO RYLEE”, returns in perfect unison.

“Come and sit”, pulling me softly, “I’m going to do your nails”, fussing as she prepares my hands for her unreserved expressions of color, length, and sparkles - can’t forget the sparkles. I keep a constant smile while sitting amongst this vibrancy. “Now keep your hands still.” It is a vibrancy that only many many years of history can provide... a vibrant compulsion for the many subjective tips of all things fashion - very subjective. I start to relax as Aunt Azia works on my hands.

It’s a hum of unrelenting gossip and all of it feels like home.

Wisely set-up in the middle of the kitchen... plates are being skimmed into a giant garbage can that keeps coming without end from every corner of a much quieter house. There are just a handful of us now... and our task is to clean-up this mess.

Shooting out soaking plates from a human assembly line.

I try my best to keep-up... but it’s not easy... whatever is dry enough though... Rita quickly puts away in the proper cupboard while her mouth keeps moving.

“RYLEE... RYLEE... can you come here?”, echoes from above... “OH RYLEE?”

“You better go”, Rita stares... “we’ll be ok.”

Sounding like adventure; I drop my towel and flee.

Speeding up two flights of stairs... I see the door of the attic wide open, it’s a room I think I’ve been in only twice in my life; both times with Grandma. With each step I remember them both - a young girl playing with her doll while she searched through a sea of boxes. “Grandma has to find something very important my sweet, so you stay right there please.”

Being in the same room was always so wonderful wherever it was; wish I could say the same for my own Mom.

“Rylee come here.”

Seeing the three of them huddled around a slew of open boxes.

“Here put this on”, Lina hands me the second I enter.

Instantly they smile... in fact their faces light-up like a switch was just turned on. They stare at my new style with mystery. I’ve had deep belly laughs with all of these ladies; this is happy nostalgia I’ve walked into. “Now don’t you look so cosmopolitan... just like your Grandma did coming into her shop.” The curiosity has me drawn towards the mirror leaning up against the

wall. “You look chic Rylee”, Maria adds.

Turning from side to side... getting the full effect of this sophisticated hat on my look.

“Here try this one”, Azia reaches out with a colorful scarf.

Classic retro; women pay a fortune for this look.

“You look cool.”

“The word is chic”, Maria corrects.

For over thirty years Grandma and these women have laughed and cried so many times... all the while telling the most engaging stories with plenty of exaggeration.

Modelling the next scarf.

Their connection to each other has been based on hope.

And the next.

That unending fuel that keeps focused on the future only... a better future for everyone they love and care for... but especially for their girls, of which thankfully I was one.

“Here Rylee try this.”

I am now firmly plugged into Grandma’s spot.

“Oh Rylee, you must absolutely try this one.”

Alongside three very watchful Mother hens.

“Rylee, you remind me so much of Belle.”

Modelling the latest one.

“You remember the time Belle wore that hat, the snowstorm we had... geez-Louise we were trapped in the store until the next morning”, Maria cries out with laughter. “I lost fifty bucks at rummy thanks to that storm”, Lina adds.

Everyone chuckles.

“I had to tell Tony it was a slow week or he would have flipped.”

These firecrackers could go on for hours.

Dragging another one closer from the large piles that seem to be everywhere.

Opening another one of these dusty boxes that absolutely needs to be looked into, according to my Aunts. “What have we got here?” Some of them are really heavy. “I remember this one.”

These treasures have fuelled loud moments of spirited nostalgia; a final pile of this attic’s hidden memories is now being attacked... Azia reaches in with little restraint.

After a few she doesn’t like... Azia pulls out a 7 x 5 black & white curled-up with age. She looks down at it. Her face changes as she does, like it’s ready to cry. She then blindly releases it to the rest of us, like she has to.

It immediately affects everyone who sees it.

When I finally get it I look deeply at it... with big curiosity.

I then turn it over... and read - *First day on job for Lina*.

A deep hush has overtaken the room.

I look back at the picture – and see them all, Grandma included, hugging for the camera with the most joyful faces.

After a few more minutes of study, I pass it back to Azia, who then silently hands it to Lina - the last stop on the carousel. Her eyes become transfixed after taking it. Maria and Azia send out a quick stare to each other that I happen to catch... then back to Lina’s private moment.

I’m now part of something new.

The octagonal shape of the Church has nothing to do with aesthetics and everything to do with symbolism; walking up to the holy building with Papa, Mama, big brothers Roberto and Miguel, little brother Jesus, big sister Carmen, little sisters Violeta and Valeria, an always beaming Grandma and Grandpa... and me, holding eight-month old Angelica on this bright and sunny summer Sunday morning. In Christianity the number eight represents rebirth and re-creation, with the octagon serving as a visual reminder of the six days it took God to create both heaven and earth... then the one day of rest for the Sabbath, leaving the eighth day when Christians are re-born through baptism. At least that's what the book at the library said. Our Priest only talks about repenting through donations... not stuff like that.

"Hello to the wonderful Herreras."

Grandma and Grandpa loved their Sundays... as did Papa and Mama.

"Now we can start with our service", the ever-smiling Priest goes on ingratiating our family in front of the entrance steps. "Everyone, God is ready for us now."

Self-aggrandizing is an Olympic sport here.

"Please make sure to pass the basket because God is watching."

Plenty of Mexico's small villages have Churches exactly like this one.

"Thank You Padre", Papa kisses the Priest's hand with deep thanks.

Fiercely religious, the Church receives some of the best yields from Papa's crops. Keeping the books for what goes in and out of the family business; I'm the only one who can read and write, everyone else is expected to help out plowing and picking, even slaughtering. For generations the Herrera family has been a mainstay of Armenia, Mexico. A small village of three-thousand people in the Southeast quadrant of Mexico, in the very dry province of Tulancingo, two hundred and fifty miles from the Gulf... give or take a few if you're stopped by Bandits and forced to detour. Only mean looking men in sunglasses come and go from this hard-working town of ambitious, but hardly fruitful farmers of cattle, corn, and spinach.

"Hallelujah Oh Jesus...", our loving camaraderie bounces-off the wood acoustics of a two hundred year old Church... "Hallelujah Hallelujah." Blind to the need of an open-minded Deity; all the Priests I'd ever met in my young life looked at me with big eyes as saliva dripped down the sides of their mouth. "Hallelujah Jesus We Love You." Never said anything to anybody about their perverted stares; women in my village were not raised to have a voice. We were merely chattel for the men to do as they wish... marrying this one off to that wealthy Landowner's Son, or that aging Pharmacist.

"Hallelujah Dear Lord Hallelujah."

Every so often a young beauty from the village would just up and disappear. Can still remember how it felt when that first one, Adriana Mendez, a raven-haired brunette with a well-formed wiggle and luscious curves at fourteen... simply vanished. Knew it from the crying on Sunday, those unending shrieks from a heartbroken Mother scared me half to death. "We must always help our neighbors during times of crisis", the Priest emphasized as the basket went around.

Glued to the picture... like she's staring right through it; Lina's eyes grow big as she delves into a past of great pain. Her eyes start to fill with tears. Not two seconds more, "I'm ashamed to say I thought her beauty was a curse of good fortune", Lina confesses that Adriana's beauty has never left her. "That's why Papa watched his girls like a hawk." Lina has such beautiful blue eyes still. "I'm not embarrassed to say Belle Cohen was a shock to my system. You can't determine what life gives you, but you most certainly can control your reaction to it!" Belle Cohen's in-your-face

words scared Lina half to death, the tears are noticeably welling up. "Like it was yesterday I remember it though, what are you worth! Come on tell me what you think you're worth!" Lina's eyes calmly turn towards the window... she looks like she's seeing something in the reflection.

She takes plenty of time as the rest of us stay respectfully quiet.
Pain has a look.

"Every year my big sister Carmen would escort me to the Fair, she would hold my hand so tight while we skipped along the road, while we skipped along those dusty roads. I was so excited", her voice cracks, "the Fair was the one time of year when we forgot our problems."

Ferris rides. Loud music. Too much candy and soda.

"Can we go on the ride again? Please can we go on the ride again?", I kept asking my beautiful sister. "OK one more time." She was a great big sister. "You go on over there Lina, over there. I'm just going to use the bathroom."

Tears start rolling down Lina's face as she opens up... as her glances shift between us and the dormer window, what she is getting at is surely something that's been hidden deep inside her. My heart's beating faster with each tear.

"I ran to grab my seat on that ride like it was the most important thing in my life."

Her tears flow easily now.

"The crowds were thick that day... real thick... but I found one."

Another deep glance through the glass... she wipes away those flowing tears.

"I waited three hours by the side of that ride for her to come get me. Hallelujah My Lord And Saviour Hallelujah I kept singing, Oh Great Saviour Please Protect Carmen, For God Loves Jesus And Jesus Loves Carmen."

Her face reflects sadness.

"Even though I knew I'd never see her again. I just knew."

It feels like Lina might have changed that day; everyone needed to change before they could meet Grandma.

"It seemed that my excuse it was the neighbor's cat again, or another accident climbing a long flight of steep stairs was over."

Lina's employer Mrs. Kaufman, a truly wonderful older woman despite the astonishing wealth in every nook and cranny of her Upper West Side Manor, had decided, once and for all, that she'd seen enough of those scratches and bruises. "Grab your coat Lina we're going out NOW!"

Lina had no choice but to follow Mrs. Kaufman's determined steps.

"Where are we going?"

"Keep up Lina", she snickered.

Following her for blocks... for blocks and blocks... "My feet were killing me", Lina grimaces.

Finally Mrs. Kaufman and her determined stride turns quickly... and heads underground into the subway.

She stood there like a tree forever.

"A damn tree! She didn't look at me once... not once."

The whistle blows to close the subway door.

"She said nothing the entire time, not one word... it was one of the longest subway rides ever let me tell you."

After grabbing a short cab ride to an even more unfamiliar neighborhood of New York??

“Thanks”, Mrs. Kaufman hands the driver a ten on a six dollar ride.

“Thank you Ma’am”, the driver remarks as he quickly decides to get out and open our door.

This is hardly chivalry; money talks.

“Thank-you again ladies.” We got out of that stuffy cab in front of IRIS’S EYES BEAUTY SALON.

“I followed Mrs. Kaufman going straight for it because her posture expected me to.”

On top of the door a cluster of small bells starts to ring, announcing our presence. “Those bells”, says Azia. We all smirk. “Judith!”, bellows from the rear of a bustling Beauty Parlor. “Belle!”, reverberates as two women race towards each other. Warm hugs and huge smiles; I could feel the great affection these two have for one another.

“Belle, I need you to give the works to my good friend Lina here.”

“That sounds like a plan”, her upbeat tone returns, “a full oil and lube then.”

The three of us break-out laughing, even though I’m clueless as to what this all means... oil & lube?? I just followed Mrs. Kaufman.

“What about you?”, Belle aims at Judith. “I’m good thanks. I’ve got some shopping to do, I’ll be back in two hours”, pointing herself towards the door.

“Better make that three”, Belle says seriously.

Bells ringing as she flees... “It was three hours that would change my life”, Lina keeps gazing out the window. The rest of us are soundless.

For new immigrants of a very-bustling New York of the 60’s, Churches became the place you went in order to introduce yourself to the community. “Call them the internet dating sites of today.” We giggle. “Plenty of the men in the congregation were making it quite clear they were after me... oh did they ever. But it was Hector’s soft eyes and doting ways that had this way of making me feel.”

Shifting between us and the window... like it’s a needed rhythm for extracting this heartfelt story. “Boy was I ever wrong”, Lina asserts with energy that’s been missing these past minutes. “It started a few years after we got married... late nights stumbling in drunk, a salary that never made ends meet, not even close. English classes which he’d decided were a waste of time, and a screaming baby on top of it all. It was a tough life, but I wasn’t complaining - it was better than Armenia.”

When Lina saw her husband get passed over for a promotion at work, again... Hector hit bottom.

“The American Dream is bullshit”, he yelled along with a smack to Lina’s face for not having dinner ready the second he got home. “I’d just arrived home from my job only minutes earlier... the stove needed time to cook for God’s sake”, she thought only on the inside. “I wasn’t raised to talk back to the man of the house, at my age that needs to be taught from scratch.”

Lina’s eyes have become accepting.

“By the end of my wash, color, cut, nails, and a beautiful application of make-up, if I do say so myself”... admiring into the mirror... “I felt like an entirely new person.”

This hive of Sisterhood was like a new world to Lina... you could hear it in her voice.

“Come into my office for a minute dear”, Belle asks politely.

Sitting in this cramped space just the two of us; I didn't know what to expect?? I was so nervous; was this visit only about a spa day??

"First I want to tell you that whatever we talk about here is between you and me only... I swear on the lives of my children about that."

Stunned into silence by such a sobering emphasis; who swears on their children's lives??

"I know your husband is beating you."

Lina's hand reaches up to her cheek as if it just happened.

"We need to talk about him stopping that", Belle Cohen moves closer, and lifts her face so they can be eye to eye, like a Mother would to a child. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

Lina never had this type of conversation with anyone before.

"Surely not someone I've met only a few hours ago", Lina's forehead is creased with worry.

"Most of the women you were talking to out there have been in the same position as you... they thought they had nowhere to turn. Well let me tell you Lina you do have somewhere to turn!

We're all here to help not just you, but any woman out there that's getting smacked around by a coward of a husband."

When the word divorce comes up, Lina almost throws-up right there and then. Luckily Belle has a garbage can close by; probably planned considering all the behaviour she's witnessed.

Lina gave Hector a year before finally walking into Belle's Salon with those awful bruises. "Come here sweetie." Lina's eyes fill as she expresses that hug. "Everything is going to be ok, I

promise... I promise." "Never will I ever forget those hugs." Standing up for myself was so

strange, so scary despite Belle's constant promise that it was all going to be ok. "For the first

time I realized how much fear I'd been raised with." Belle exits her office with me in tow... and

stands abruptly. "OK is everybody ready?", she announces to the room. "Lina you stay here, Mrs.

Lipton and Mrs. Brody are coming in at 3, they want a wash and cut. You going to be ok?"

"I will... please don't hurt Hector." Belle scoffs. "We won't dear... now mind the Salon."

I never slept with Hector again.

Much later that day, over a simple cup of coffee, one of the women of the Salon explains just how they entrap these men into granting us a divorce. "Sometimes a restraining order comes along for the ride", she adds before taking a slow sip from her steaming cup.

Then a bite of her muffin.

Her look changes when she stops chewing. "They hire a woman who goes to the bar where they know your husband is going to be. She drops a button and flirts with him of course, sharing some drinks and ego-building bullshit... oh you're so big and strong", her face is expressive that's for sure. "Then once they feel they've reeled him in enough, they invite the dolt over for a roll-in-hay at some fleabag motel."

Both of us take a pause for a sip; my ears tingle with anticipation.

"Then he's toast", the woman blurts out, breaking-off another piece of her muffin, and chewing. I'm glued; food is out of the question.

"The Shady Lady gets there first and hides under the covers in the dark, except for maybe a romantic candle burning in the corner. Then this ape... er sorry, this mark, this mark will sure as shit come racing in raring to go like a bull in Spain. When he starts to undress... bang!... the door opens and the pictures start clicking, hopefully blinding the bastard from the flashes."

I know it needs to be done... but I can't stop feeling sorry for Hector; my face must have given it away. "You're going to need to work on that one honey", Miss Jane McElroy hits back. "What are you worth Lina?", she reminds with a pointed finger.

Another graduate I'll never forget; it took years to realize that Belle Cohen saved my life that day... and my kids. "What are you worth?", is something I've never stopped repeating over and over in my head, especially on those really hard days. It's what my girls have been raised on.

Eventually Lina pulls away from this one picture of a thousand stories... placing it back in the box, back where it probably sat for decades, along with other painful 7 x 5 memories I'm sure. She wipes away her tears... as we all do.

Maria reaches inside the next closest box of mystery, and pulls out another picture that, again captivates suddenly.

After a few minutes of fixed staring, Maria hands it to a seated Lina on her right.

Lina takes it, looks at it... then moves in for a deeper stare.

Straight-faced after some time, she then hands it to Azia on her right.

Seeing them all quietly reflect... feeling the air build for more cathartic tales. Azia holds the picture out so I can see it. Staring at another 7 x 5 black and white that's seen better days - Azia being hugged by Grandma on one side, Lina on the other, a joking Maria stretching in from behind... beams from all three as Azia holds up a piece of paper pridefully... looking closer... a diploma it looks like.

Azia's diploma from Metro Nail Academy 1968.

It says on the back in Grandma's writing.

Top of her class.

Just below it.

Azia's now lost in thought.

"Poojah you up?"

"No", comes back with a hint of comedy.

Poojah loved to be funny, to laugh... which is incredible considering the chauvinistic abuse brown beauties like her had to put up with. Most of us working on this estate were attractive for sure, young and eye-catching... just like the males of my village needed it to be. Wherever we went the men cat-called us... but Poojah, well my cousin Poojah made men stare for longer than you could ever imagine. Inching closer; it was hypnotic. "Poojah", smiling when I finally get next to her. "What?"

The cabin we slept in had twenty other roommates. Girls like us that were between 12 and 16, girls who were taught to perform various tasks around this sprawling four-hundred acre estate. Massive would be an understatement to describe this much space and power to one family for so long... when the rest of us could barely survive. Their greedy benevolence, if there is such a sane word, is the only thing keeping most of us alive in this agonizingly-poor place; the Lavale village was just twenty kilometers west of the Metropolis of Pune in this blessed, but very-flawed country of India - my birthplace.

“God Bless America”, I remember saying over and over after seeing that every dwelling here in the Bronx had running water, lights, heat, indoor cooking... even mattresses. Yet every day I see people taking all this for granted, which is a real shame. “Smarten up”, I want to yell, “ride an airplane for more than ten hours and see how people really live.”

Me and Poojah slept with only a roll-up bamboo mat on a sand floor, plus a pillow and blanket. Bamboo sticks at the door with a thick chain and lock; Bastards padlocked us in at night, wanting the same number of Slaves at sun-up that they had at sun-down. A breathtaking geography India is... truly... lush forests, mountains, open prairies, long tranquil beaches, snow in the north; it can stir the soul. It's the culture that's the problem; my homeland is a violent Paternal culture. A land teeming with lots of human beings, to say the least, all scurrying around in every direction, not a moment to be alone; running away to disappear into the next town felt not-so-impossible, although hardly unlikely. Especially since they started to burn the ones they caught - ya that's right burn them with acid! Those heartless Bastards! Diabolical having those they punished live with us; seeing it every day does something to your insides. Controlling us with this paralyzing fear; overwhelming was the disfigurement. Like an Elephant thinking his chain is still attached; India of the 50's and 60's was a Man's world... a female-hating Man. “God Bless America I kept dreaming”, Azia's eyes become full of sadness, “I knew I had to get out of here.”

The rest of us are trembling from that acid story.

“Armit can you please read these brochures”, handing them to him while he reclines in his favourite chair. “Azia I'm so tired. You do remember I worked today?”, turning away to watch television. “Yes I know”, pandering him with his favourite snack, “but it would mean a lot if you could read them.” He loves salt & vinegar potato chips. “What's so important in these brochures of yours?”, bringing them up to his face, along with opening a cold beer, his favourite sound. “They're work visas for America”, heading back to prepare a dinner of BBQ chicken and peas, another favourite. “Oh.” “You could get free education for that engineering degree you want... and I can be a domestic.” “What's the catch”, flipping the pages. “We need to stay there for ten years and work. I think it has something to do with paying taxes into the system or something?” “I see.”

Arranged with the eldest son of the family whose estate we worked on... twenty-seven years older, along with six of his wives; the best always go to the most powerful, age has got nothing to do with anything! “I get him on Tuesday”, she once told me, holding back the tears. I haven't seen Poojah in three long years, and knowing I'd probably never see her again... and if I did it would only be from passing her quickly in town. “God only helps those that help themselves”, my sturdy Grandmother would say when we were alone. Poojah was now a trophy wife never to be let out of her husband's sight. My family was too poor for options; I knew I was alone.

Armit Sharma was a good man considering - he may never have raised a hand to me, but he did very much expect me to perform my wifely duties diligently - and even more diligently when he drank. From an educated family, although everything's relative in India, Armit only wanted one wife... for now. I knew he couldn't handle more stress in his life; that was his single biggest

problem - the man couldn't handle stress, that and the fact that most Indian men cannot tolerate hearing anything constructive from their wives. I had a plan though. I took a big chance. I started working on his mind... pounding away on the possibility of leaving this dark abyss; at least it was for us women. Lavale village was hardly living in modern times; I just made America look like heaven... all men want heaven.

Everywhere we went I never let up.

Seeing the streets of big city Pune packed with casually-dressed auto workers sharing the sidewalk with suit and tie bureaucrats, plus peasant farmers in their cow-drawn wagons; once a year we braved the four-hour journey to treat ourselves to some western presents for the family. It was a giant step forward certainly; but I wasn't scared of the big city.

"You can be an Engineer like you always wanted", I went on for almost five years. Morning. Night. Even after fucking me - good thing I'd been married so young and didn't know how selfish and sloppy Armit actually was at that.

Never will I forget that moment. "OK Azia, I've filled out the forms." It was 9:15 on a Tuesday night. "Did you want to drop it at the Post Office when you're in town? I don't have any time this week."

Showering him with hugs and kisses; I barely slept a wink that night.

Going to the post-office three times a week instead of just the once... smiling as I walked... amazing the energy I had with each step.

Trying to fit into those crowded subways every morning and night... then having to cross those busy intersections where people were not looking where they were going... flagging down a taxi when I had some extra money was a lesson in frustration. Yet in this new country of mine I can honestly say this was all done with such civility, unlike India; landing in New York was like being on a different Planet. "Two and a half years and I've yet to see a traffic jam from a tired cow parked in the middle of the road."

We all laugh at Azia's break with seriousness.

In our building, "Hello Azia", I became close friends with a Puerto Rican lady named Ella. "Hi JoJo." Two Chinese sisters named Penny and Winny. "Good evening Roxanne." And an Italian named Anna. The Bronx of that time was like the United Nations - only strictly for the poor.

"Sometimes I could hear the violence, the American Dream was not so dreamy for all of us."

Azia loved every minute of this new life, but could see Armit was having a harder time of it.

"My dream, after all, was merely to get the hell out of India's backward village, where pretty virgins were venerated... and wives were slaves." Getting Armit to sign those papers accomplished that; working for a woman like Janice Burstein was just, "A cherry on top of a cake."

Everyone gets another giggle.

"Isn't that what they say?"

Azia's accent is funny sometimes.

Having three grown-up kids that live in different corners of the country did strike me as odd?? But being Editor-in-Chief of a women's magazine that always needed her on the phone throughout the day... screaming most of it; well that was just plain incomprehensible??

"When she was working from home, which was often, there would be many different meetings with women who did not look, or talk, like any woman I'd ever seen before. Short skirts, skin-

hugging pants flared out at the bottom, colorful blouses... and jewellery everywhere, all of it very stylish and eye-catching, plus big and chunky, not something considered very lady-like back home.”

No bras! And all those different shapes of sunglasses did cause Azia to blush.

“Azia this is Betty.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Azia this is Gloria.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Azia this is Barbara.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

It was a carousel of tea, coffee, biscuits, and on some days sandwiches even.

“Stay Azia... sit”, Janice would insist.

Included in such heady conversation... equal pay, divorce laws... all of them related to women’s rights; Azia was honored, and silent, to be included.

It started with him sitting in front of the television for hours and hours. Then, from out of nowhere, came the after-work nap. An, “I’m not feeling well”, surprised me one morning. Armit never missed a day of work as long as I had known him, putting on his suit and tie, even during those muggy New York summers; those suits seemed like they were Armit!

“OK, everything you need is in the fridge”, kisses, “just warm up what you need.”

He shrugs.

Azia had no idea he was feeling this way... preparing to leave... especially since she woke up every day excited to go to work... the people, the conversation... seeing him there on the sofa in his robe. “Bye honey.” This was not Armit.

After a short walk Azia enters the crowded subway.

“What I loved the most about working for Janice was that each day was so different, especially since back home each day, geez each year was always so mind-numbingly the same.”

Guess that’s the life of a slave.

“We’ll get you away from him, don’t you worry”, overhearing Janice on the phone this one particular morning, “meet me here as soon as you can and we’ll head over together.”

This conversation struck Azia as different??

“I’ll get in touch with The Shady Ladies.”

Because it was the first time she ever heard such a term... The Shady Ladies??

“Just when I started to feel like a true American woman, Armit began to sink deeper into a depression.”

She acknowledges that she should have known that his close-mindedness.

“I’ve left your dinner wrapped up in the fridge for you.”

His Paternal arrogance from back home.

“Just warm it to 350 for thirty minutes.”

Was eventually going to be a problem.

“Janice, what she insisted I call her, needed me to work late... her group was working on the story of an immigrant woman who’d been killed by her husband.”

“Primitive Bastard!”

I remember it well.

“That Bastard will get his”, is how she put it... like she was really going to do something about it. The body may have been dumped in the deserted part of river, but luckily a witness called Police after seeing something suspicious at four in the morning. The life of a woman is not safe even here?, I kept thinking. Although no one would have uttered even a single word about a missing woman back home; murdered wives are rarely recovered because they're rarely reported. “Sick”, Azia shouts like she has never forgotten those days.

It was close to ten-thirty when she got home that night, Azia always closes the door quietly when she gets home that late. The first thing to greet her tired feet after taking off her coat and hanging it slowly... is a mess in both the kitchen and living room. Empty beer cans strewn the floor while staring down at her once proud husband curled up snoring on the couch like a helpless child.

“I let him be, and began to return our house to a place of civility.”

Her hot shower is going to have to wait... bending down to gather-up the garbage... everything is going to have to wait... feeling soreness from a very long day.

An hour later she's wiping down the counter and dreaming about that shower. “Where have you been?”, shouts from behind. “Excuse me?”, turning around to face that oddly degrading tone. “You heard me. I did not marry a woman who stays out until ten o'clock without me.”

“I told you I was working late at Jann....”

The noise of his hand hitting my face felt like it was going to take out every one of my teeth.

Putting my hand to my cheek; Armit stares back with frightening indifference.

He then walks away without a single care. At that second I want to grab the largest knife I can find and cut off his penis.

Instead, I finish cleaning the rest of the kitchen.

And then take a very long, hot, shower.

I slide in next to my snoring husband fully clothed an hour later. Janice's words, “Don't worry we'll get you away from him”, rings in my head non-stop. Good thing my girls were sleeping. It took five more months of this behaviour before, one morning, as I opened her front door, Janice was there waiting for me. Her look was serious as I entered... I really did try my best to be normal; guess she must have seen my caked-on foundation for the last time. “Get your things... we're going out NOW!”

She said nothing the entire way.

Azia chuckles to herself while staring out the window, “I still remember the first time I heard those bells go off.”

Lina and Maria nod their heads.

Later that night Janice carefully went over how I was going to get my girls packed and out of the apartment without Armit knowing.

“It took eighteen long days.”

Azia says she would lay awake with worry each night.

“And I remember each one because I had to feed Armit, sleep with Armit, even open my legs for Armit”, Azia grimaces, “it was like a knife plunging into me”, holding that grimace.

“Be patient Azia, just be patient, don't show your cards...”, Janice kept reminding.

“I knew my girls depended on me.” Azia starts to cry.

On July 24th 1964 at the Tinkerbelle Motel, The Shady Ladies finally had Armit dead to rights.

“The next day I started working at Belle Cohen’s Salon because Janice was really worried.”

“A lot of these abused women go back.”

Four years later Azia worked-up the moxie to take the Nail Technician’s course.

“I’m going to miss you Azia.”

They both cried and cried.

To this day Janice and Azia remain good friends, “I owe Janice everything for introducing me to Belle Cohen and The Shady Ladies.” Azia is really choked up. “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think of Poojah.” Maria moves in, giving Azia a loving hug.

“Oh come on now, enough with all the tears”, Lina barks, “you know Belle never liked tears”, reaching into the box closest to her. I grin because I know Lina’s right; if Grandma was anything she was tough and forthright, not sentimental and weepy... probably why so many of these boxes look like they haven’t been opened in decades. “Aha”, Lina screams, “I remember this one”, extending her arm so we can all see. Not as curled-up as the last two, but still aged for sure.

“I remember that night”, Azia grabs it from Lina’s hand.

Then passes it straight to Maria, seeing the memories play out on her face - Grandma, Lina, Maria... and a few others sporting full-sized grins.

Turning it over it reads... *Opening night West Side Story November 1968.*

A tear rolls down Maria’s face.

“Dove sei Maria? Dove sei Maria?”

I could stare at those beautiful mountains for days.

“Dove sei Maria?”, echoes the air while I get up slowly from my private perch. I take a final stare... and start my way down the slope. “Arrivo Mama Arrivo.”

Through the lush greenery... I jump down, back on the... *jumping off a smaller rock this time...* back on the dusty road that leads back to our village.

I start to skip my way back home.

My home is a very important hub on the way from Salerno to Benevento in the Campania region of southern Italy, fifty kilometers north-east of Naples... although a thousand kilometers would have been the same thing.

When I get this close I always start to run.

Awesome mountains surround my world... they are the most incredible mountains that have winding narrow roads that snake through some really lush deep valleys, yielding some of the best apples and peaches and olives that anybody’s taste-buds could ever enjoy. The colors of both sunsets and sunrises have romanced me to that exact spot; never do I ever forget to bring paper and charcoal, because I could draw for hours up there.

Maybe even days.

“Hello Mama.”

“Maria, I need you-to-a-start the fire. And after that I need you to-a-peel-a-the-potatoes. Then I need you to hang-a-the laundry... and then...”

Avellino of 1962 was far from the progressive lens of Frederick Fellini and Sophia Loren. Sure all of us Italian women were whistled at by men... whether in the big city or dusty village - but that's where the similarities ended. The Church had a hold over most of Italian society... a hypocritical hold of give and take in the big city - but when it came to small villages like mine it was nothing short of an iron-clamp. Talk... just talk to any of the boys of the community and we'd be branded with a reputation for being loose, whores even. And once that Scarlet Letter made its way we'd be deemed unmarriageable... which then brought out every slithering louse trying to take his best shot at getting some free action. The shame these proud Fathers felt from such a reality... some literally locked their daughters up 24/7 until they could find a Suitor, usually from a far-off town where the rumours never made it. Telephones in every house were still years away; if I was going to stay that long. The double standard infuriated me to no end.

Maria starts to tear-up, "I already knew what my future was if I stayed", she reaches for a handkerchief. "Mama please, it's just for one summer."

"No."

"Papa please, it's just for one summer."

"No."

My nagging started in September and, "OK Maria, just one summer", Papa stressed with a determined finger, "then you'll come back and we'll start looking for a husband for you", is how that dinner in April ended. "Of course Papa, thank-you, thank-you", kisses and hugs.

"Thank you so much Mama", more kisses and more hugs.

Four months later I was off to Art School in Naples... and had no intention of ever coming back.

"Bonjourn", the cute guy smiles at me while rushing through campus like a klutz, dropping my pen... this place is huge. "Ciao Bella", another one smiles as he rushes past. At me??

Polite and flattering every one of them; it took a while before I felt comfortable enough to answer back. "Ahem", clearing my nervous throat. "Bouna giornata", a crooked smile offered to the cute guy with the short-hair. Being in Naples was like being on a different Planet... an Italian-speaking Planet of course, but still an altogether different Planet from the one I'd been used to back in Avellino. I know it's weird, but I thought my Dad could still see me.

"OK class, I want you to pick a page from the book... make it random please. You have sixty minutes. Are we all ready?... now go create."

Fixed on my choice of a farmer's field with two dogs running, a father, a mother, a glorious blue sky... I'm concentrating on recreating this detailed masterpiece.

Every minute of my classes were great.

I'm losing all sense of time trying to see the picture... trying to really see it. This class... and this world... was proving to be a real challenge.

RING RING.

"OK class... come on, that means everybody. Drop your brushes please, time's up."

Everyone stops.

Maria lets out a big sigh.

She then gathers her stuff like the rest of the class.

Everyone heads for the exit.

"And don't forget to read chapter 7 through 10 for tomorrow."

The class funnels to fit through the door. “Hey Maria, we’re all meeting down at the Piazza for some dinner, you should come”, Anthony asks only inches from Maria’s face. That kind of stare from the opposite sex unnerved her to no end... Maria was not used to it at all. “Come on... we’re all meeting at 7?” He must have felt her fear. “Remember all work and no play makes Maria a very dull girl.” Anthony’s confidence and charm, his overall way of being, and those sparkling blue eyes did make it impossible for her to say no. “Ok.... sure”
“Great... then I’ll see you later.”

By the first week Maria had gotten used to a lifetime of Guys staring into her eyes - asking her to join them here or there, for lunch, dinner, espresso in the Piazza. “Come to the park Maria, a bunch of us are going to hang out and draw, it’ll be fun”, cute Massimo asked the next day. For the first time in Maria’s life she realized that not all men were, “dangerous”, as Papa had insisted.

Leaving Avellino was proving to be easy, the easiest thing she’d ever done up to that point; it was the going back part that had her so anxious. “What am I going to do?”, she’d murmur into another night of terrible insomnia. “Will you marry me Maria?”, was the only sound that made her believe she could escape her Avellino fate.

Fleeing Anthony’s nervous mouth on that second last day of school; it happened just as she’d hoped. “I will help you escape your family, your village, your small world of small minds and even smaller opportunity”, was all that was heard.

“Yes! Yes!”, screaming from knowing Papa would never make her go back now. Maria kept jumping all over Anthony... *mwa mwa mwa*... Papa had done his job according to his teachings... *mwa mwa mwa*... she was now Anthony Scalia’s responsibility.

“Hallelujah great Lord...”, fanning in the Padre Pio Church of the Bronx, “in heaven who watches over my loved ones.” The organ plays as the crowded congregation sings... Maria had no idea Cities could be so stifling; their first week in New York was a real scorcher. Dressed in their Sunday best, this heat made it the only time Maria ever yearned to be back in Avellino... but only at her secret spot with the cool breeze on her face - that would feel so good right now.

“Nice to see you Mr. and Mrs. Scalia”, the Priest extends his usual kindness.

“Thank you Father”, Maria smiles. “Great service Father”, Anthony adds.

Church meant a lot to the both of them; Maria made a habit of helping out at the charity events, while Anthony just dropped a wad of cash in the donation box. Anthony’s job as Illustrator on Madison Avenue meant good money but terrible hours; getting home while Maria was sound asleep was not out of the ordinary a few times a week. She could smell the liquor when she got up, but chose not to bother him with those typical nagging wife questions; probably her upbringing that made her think that way. Maria’s eyes look like they’re looking back in time... “I didn’t think I was worth anything I guess.” They look like they are seeing something the rest of us can’t.

“No cooking tomorrow, we’re going out for dinner”, busting through the door after a three-day stretch of sleeping on his office couch. My smile must have said it all. Dinner and a show, not to mention the opportunity to wear that great dress my loving husband just bought for me; Anthony had a way of making me feel like a loved woman.

“Damn upbringing!”

It started-out with smudged lipstick on his collar, which was smoothly explained as mere office-play. Months later it graduated to earrings in his pant pocket, two fake nails in his shirt pocket, and if that wasn't enough his shirt reeked of perfume... lots of female perfume. Maria's closest friend Bernadette Beria saw her getting more withdrawn by the week. "What's the matter Maria?" "Nothing." "You sure?" "Yes I'm sure."

I could tell she wasn't convinced, yet my tone made it clear I wasn't ready to talk; good Catholics only air their dirty laundry to Priests.

It took six months more until Maria couldn't take it anymore - her husband was now sleeping at the office five nights a week, and when he finally did decide to sleep at home he seemed totally indifferent about it. That romantic spark she'd become addicted to mysteriously evaporated??

He hadn't made love to Maria in over four months, which seemed impossible considering Anthony's ravenous sex-drive from their first night of marriage. "Yes our first night", Maria grins, "a woman knows." Her face shifts to serious, "Her instincts know."

"You need to confront him... you absolutely need to", Bernadette insisted, "you can't go on like this Maria."

Maria now knows these instincts never lie.

Her subway Partner every morning and afternoon, her fellow Secretary to her right at the Architecture firm... and Church Sister on Sunday, every Sunday; unfortunately a woman's low self-esteem steals those much-needed instincts. What if confronting her husband meant a fight? Or worse a separation? Or even worse a divorce?

"I knew my friend was right, but I was scared, terrified in fact - in my Catholic world divorce is out of the question, no matter how many women a man has on the side."

"But violence... that's where I draw the line", Bernadette reminded over and over, as if an authority on the topic.

"I loved Anthony... boy did I ever love that man", Maria declares.

The stress came in waves she admits.

"He was my first... my one and only, but at twenty-seven I was thinking for myself for the first time, or at least trying to."

Maria seems to be breaking new ground with these honest reflections.

"Good morning Sunshine", Bernadette maintains her positive aura at exactly 7:30 am, at exactly the same spot on the subway platform every working day of the week. "Ya good morning."

Everyone has a breaking point; we never made it into work that day. "You're coming with me and I don't want to talk about it anymore!", Bernadette fires back into a swollen cheek and two blood-shot eyes from another night of crying myself to sleep. I was worn-out. I stopped being good at covering up. My friend was absolutely right to react this way. I didn't love myself one bit. It was the last time Anthony ever hit me.

"If God is almighty and all-knowing then how can he be so unfair? After all we give life for Pete's sake? What are you worth Maria? Never forget that."

I can still hear Belle's sharp tone on that first day she sat with me... loving but sharp, explaining how it was going to be from now on. Reminding me why I had to do this. "You want a future for your kids don't you? Well don't you?"

Sitting in the privacy of her office that day Maria couldn't stop crying, like she was shedding a thousand pounds in tears. Belle kept handing her hanky after hanky. "Always remember, nobody is going to care more about you than you!" Belle made certain Maria understood that,

because three years later she was part of the make-up crew that received accolade after accolade for the work they did on the Broadway smash - West Side Story.

“Opening night was the greatest night of my life”, Maria confesses through the tears.

“Find one in there of Belle”, Azia yells.

“I’m trying for Pete’s sake.”

“Well try harder you old hag.”

Amused by their verbal jabs; these women keep it uncensored that’s for sure.

“Hell’s bells would you just calm down”, Lina fires back with a half grin.

These feisty women are my only family now.

“Move your claw would you Granny.”

They knew my Muse well, my Teacher, the Person who’s responsible for who I am today... my Grandma everything; by the amount of crying going on these past few hours it seems she was their Grandma everything too.

“AHHHH now you’ve hit it”, Azia shouts as a pile of ancient photos falls on the chest.

“Look at this one”, Maria barks.

“My God Belle was a real looker back then”, Lina asserts, “and so was your Great-Grandmother”, passing it over, “look Rylee... see for yourself.”

Cracked and crumpled and yellowed, they look like they haven’t been touched in decades.

Flipping through... “This pic was when Grandma was a young girl.”

Me and Grandma 1929 – it says on the back.

Grandma was eight years old according to my calculations.

“And here’s one of her at twelve standing next to her older sister Iris.”

I never knew she had an older sister named Iris??

Me and Iris in Poshig Park 1933 - it says on the back of this one.

The stunned looks reflecting back verify we’re all on the same page here; nobody knew Grandma had an older sister??

Flipping through more and more... it seems like we’ve hit on a Pandora’s box into Grandma’s past. Reading the backs... and passing them... her past in Poland that is.

After leafing through piles of fuzzy black and whites... I finally reach in and pull out a manila envelope, one that’s no different than the fifty we’ve already opened.

Except for the fact that it’s strangely sealed and addressed to -

Iris Cohen

Buenos Aires, Argentina.

But there’s no address or zip code?? And no stamp?? How was anyone thinking this could be mailed?? The curiosity hits us all. Their collective silence watches me delve into this rising mystery.

I pull out the one paper that’s in there... and tilt down to read it. Quietly at first.

“Hey university girl read it out loud”, Lina orders.

Ahem.

I'm nervous.

November 1934

Hello Iris it is your sister Belle, hope you are ok after your long boat ride to Argentina. Maybe if you have time you can write me and tell me what the weather is like there? The weather here has gotten cold. I can feel winter coming but right now the leaves are just starting to fall from the trees. I love the sound they make under my feet when I'm walking to school. School is going well. I got an A on my math test last week. Papa is helping me do some algebra problems. He says it is good to be ahead for next year.

I hope Zvi likes Buenos Aries. He seems very nice. And he's handsome too.

I am hoping that when I graduate high school in four years I will be able to come see you for the summer. It would be very exciting, especially since I really like boat rides. I hope your new job is going well and that you are making lots of money.

I will try and write you early in the new year.

I miss you Iris,

Love Belle

“Ok so we now know Belle had a sister named Iris, who got involved with a guy name Zvi, and moved to Buenos Aries. How old was Belle then?”, Azia asks.

“Thirteen”, Lina answers.

I can't stop daydreaming about how beautiful... how flawless her skin was, and how piercing her eyes were; I get it now... Iris's Eyes.

Leafing through more pictures from the pile.

Every boy in town probably wanted her to be his wife, Zvi must have been damn sharp to convince great-Grandpa to let Iris go half-way around the world with him, since Grandma did say her Dad was tough. “He expected a lot”, was her description of him.

“She will have a job in the Governor's mansion with twenty other women, and she'll get an education too, it's free over there Morris”, Zvi wrote in another letter I found.

That depth of conniving I could never have uncovered through these pictures alone; but so many more questions keep nagging at me??

Did she marry Zvi once they got to Buenos Aries?

Did she get her education?

Why didn't she write back?

There must have been a way to track her down after the war?

An international agency of some kind?

With more questions than answers, the air has become different – I can feel it, we're on our heels... and it's all from that letter. “Check it good Rylee... there has to be something in there we can piece together”, Lina insists.

Moving my hand down the side of a full box, I grab a huge pile from the bottom. If there are any more clues in here... I'm damn-well going to find it... putting it down on the box next to me.

Filing through - no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

This went on for four full boxes.

“I may have something here ladies.”

Immediately three pairs of eyes stop what they're doing and turn towards the letter in my hand.

“Government of Argentina”, after unfolding it so it's good to read. The first thing that hits me is May 1954... and then *Dear Mr. Morris Cohen*.

I take a deep swallow... and begin to read.

In lieu of your request for the whereabouts of Ms. Iris Cohen, born September 1916 in Lipsk Poland, the Government of Argentina Census Administration Division reports she passed away on June 15th 1936. The cause of death was blunt force trauma to the front cranium. Her status at time of death was single. She had no children. There is no record of any educational degree from any accredited learning institution. She did not work for the Governor in any manner. She was found on the second-floor of a well-known brothel. We have no record of any citizen named Zvi Magder.

I hope this answers some of your questions.

Professionally Yours,

Antonio Arbella

I know this happened a long time ago... well before I was born.

Sitting back hushed like the rest of the room.

Yet for some reason this really shocks me, I'm trying to connect the dots, and I know it's because it provides so much context as to why Grandma was always so adamant about not wasting even one second of your life. “What are your worth Rylee!”, she'd ask at the drop of a hat, “education Rylee, you're ticket is an education”, after locking me in her office until my homework was done - no matter how long it took.

“OK enough with all the weeping”, Azia stands, “I know what Belle would be saying if she heard us waxing sentimental here.” “The sands of the hourglass stop for no one”, Maria and Lina sing in smiling unison. “Exactly.... now shall we ladies. Come on Rylee we're going to play some rummy... make sure not to forget your wallet dear”, Azia instructs with a Machiavellian grin.

“I'll be there in just a minute”, gathering up the mess, trying to put it back in the boxes.

My Aunts saunter off with their questions.

I bend down after each box is filled.

But gambling seems more important to them I guess.

After each one is closed and taped... I then move them off to the side.

Grabbing one of the few remaining piles, something drops at my feet. I lower to have a look even though it's the blank side; I'm the only one here but I swear I feel like I'm being pulled right to it. I turn it over to have a look. A rush of emotion races to my toes. A tear runs down my face.

And then another.

The more I stare... the happier I feel.

These pictures show, and there are at least ten of them... a Grandmother and Granddaughter enjoying the wonders of a trip to Walt Disney World in 1999. As I scroll each one... and see the unmistakable smiles of two people in mad love with each other... I can't stop laughing and crying.

We got our faces painted like Clowns every morning; my smile grows from seeing Grandma Belle's red bulbous nose as she wraps her arms around me. I loved that playful side of her no matter how rare it might have been. I respected her so much.

"Rylee come on."

I loved her so much.

"We're ready for you Rylee."

I did my best to win her trust.

"I'm coming", kissing the picture, "I'm coming."

This is the only context that matters... putting it in my back pocket.

"Coming ladies."

I know exactly how much I'm worth.