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Abstract

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Yeast

by Louis Gallo

The telephone, my father used to say, pitches its tent in death's camp. In our family anyway. So when my mother called the other day with news that Tina Roveri had died of a yeast infection, I was not surprised. My family serves as an obituarial conduit: we spread the news, we keep tabs, we solemnly attend wakes and funerals. Well, that other person I am did, but the I-who-I-am-now has vowed recently to avoid anything funereal.

"Who died?" I asked Mom cautiously when she called.

"There you go," she groaned. "You remember Tina."

I really did not, though of course I vaguely remember the Roveris. They had a lime green Buick with chrome-edged holes punched into each bulbous fender. My cousin George and I would sometimes sneak over and stuff dead leaves into those holes for the singular reason that holes ached to be stuffed. We knew nothing of death then, had no idea that every hole is a potential tomb. Death always comes later, after the fact.

"She lived right across from us on Columbus Street," my mother sighs. "Sure you remember."

It is a high treachery in my family not to remember every person who has crossed our paths. Since we left Columbus Street when I was eight, I don't recall much. Well... there's a lie. I remember everything, even more than my mother, who, despite her grim tidings, always manages to find a magnolia or two amid wreckage at hand. My mother is a saint. In this sense, I feel rapport with former president Nixon whose mother was also a saint. But I don't remember Tina Roveri. She has slipped from the old gray matter like the penny I once dropped from the Empire State Building.

"Donnie and Betty's older sister," my mother goes on, "she helped you up when you fell off your bike. Oh, you should have heard yourself shriek. I like to died when I saw the bike on top of you."

“When was this, Ma,” I asked, “1901? I remember Donnie and Betty. We played together sometimes. We didn’t like them much. They were serious creeps. Donnie used to fart all the time and blame it on his sister.”

Mom becomes very silent when vexed then lets you have it. “You and Ruthie adored those children. You ought to be ashamed. I hear Donnie’s an alcoholic now.”

Ashamed? If she only knew how ashamed I am, but not because of Tina Roveri. I didn’t know Tina. My mind drifts to a recent Boeing crash. CNN flashed a photo across the screen of an entire family who got wiped out. Then they cut to a still of their now empty house. Neighbors described the family as enthusiastic, happy churchgoers and community leaders, all the pluses. I am cynical beyond measure, laden with remorse, spiritually defeated, a sore thumb and general detriment to the community. It should have been me on that plane—only I don’t fly, precisely because they go down and because it is unnatural to board a tube that will glide thirty thousand feet above ground, held aloft by some arcane tentacle called a vacuum. There is much to be said for nature after all, even if it always breaks your heart. My recent traffic with nature limits itself to a miniature herb garden I planted on my balcony for medicinal purposes. How I love to sniff the sweet basil and rosemary. How could such potent, stern aromas not cure everything?

“Marcus? Marcus?” I hear my mother dimly.

“I’m here,” I mumble.

“Did you drift off again, Marcus? Really, you’ve got to do something about that drifting. Why don’t you see a doctor?”

“I don’t see doctors,” I say. “You don’t either. In this family we don’t see doctors, remember?”

“A lot of good it did Tina Roveri.”

“She didn’t see a doctor?” My ears perk, hairs bristle on my wrists. My family has always believed that doctors are immersed in disease and will have no trouble spotting one the minute you set foot in their office. We use my Uncle Edwin as proof. Edwin never saw a doctor in his life until the day he found another oozing pustule

under his arm. The pustules had come and gone for years, but this time he decided to consult a physician he'd read about in the Times-Picayune. The physician proclaimed that all disorders of mind and body could be cured with apple cider vinegar. To make a long story short, Uncle Edwin checked in and died a month later, pickled in vinegar.

My mother babbles on about yeast.

"People don't die of it," I remind her.

"If they wait too long they do," she says with as much threat as she can muster.

"I read somewhere that bee pollen cures yeast."

"She must have been scared. Scared people wait, like your grandmother. She had that breast tumor for nearly twenty years and didn't say a word about it. That's what killed her."

"Twenty years," I sort of laugh.

"You remember Tina, come on."

"I swear, Ma, I don't. Or maybe I do. Didn't she wear wide dresses with all the tree designs?" A sudden flash from remote childhood jolts my brain: what was lost and buried erupts from layer upon layer of psychic debris like a thousand-year-old seed suddenly bursting through the lava to bloom.

"Palmettos!" My mother is delighted. "She wasn't that much older than you and Ruthie, but at that age even a year counts. God, I can't believe we're so old now. We used to be younger than everybody. Now look... gives you the heebie jeebies."

I find myself paying close attention to the phases of the moon these days. I don't feel quite right unless it's full. Otherwise the sky seems vacant and sad and not a little hostile. When did I begin to seek signs in the stars and planets, (not that I believe the gibberish you read in the newspaper)? The other day my horoscope advised Virgos to scrutinize their investments and consolidate debts. So I took out a loan. I pay one dollar less a month now on the debts but overall owe for ten more years.

"Well, honey," she says, "it's getting late and I'm tired. Come see

me soon?"

My mother has only recently become tired. I don't like it one bit. She has that old person's fuzzy, gurgled voice and says her leg hurts. Go to a doctor. She has never recovered from Dad's premature death, nor have any of us, especially Ruthie, who claims he favored her. This favoring business has major implications in my family. The favored one struts about as if awash in an imperial glow. Our grandmother favored me. I strutted about in an imperial glow. But those who bestowed the favoritism are now dead. My sister and I don't glow anymore. Ruthie and I inherited terror from our father. Our mother is somewhat immune and still enters the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, sends birthday cards to all the latest generation newborns (she even knows their names) and visits a few ancient relatives clinging to life in geriatric wards. Despite her leg.

Another earthquake in Armenia has just killed eight hundred people. An eleven-year-old serial killer was sentenced to death by lethal injection. Fourteen children perished in the Boeing crash. A new virus that devours human flesh at the rate of one square inch per hour has surfaced in Pennsylvania. A half moon bleats in the sky. The IRS has decided to investigate my casualty loss claims. How can I prove the shrubs were worth eight thousand dollars? Check prices, I'm tempted to suggest, call Michigan Bulbs. It was our Midwest ice storms that did them in, two ice storms a week apart.



The entire Midwest, where I lived for four years, frozen under a massive sheet of the stuff. Ice has become a symbol of evil to me. I can no longer bear cold drinks. I sip Coke straight from the can but only at room temperature. Tina Roveri waited too long. Yeast flourishes in warm, moist cul-de-sacs of the body. Who can go on what with Arctic storms and tropical microbes determined to level the City of Man?

I thought about my cousin Walter, distraught because he had been fired for parsimony.

“That’s what they told me,” he had choked, “parsimony. I was too parsimonious. I’m probably the first human being in history to be fired for parsimony. I need the money. What am I going to do? Cecile needs an operation.”

It was probably heartless to urge Walter to grow herbs, but what can one say? I, too, would have fired him for parsimony.

One can only do so much. A month ago I gave my mother a pathetic freezer bag full of dried spearmint leaves.

