

Zero to Egg to Love

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I met Roger Federer at a house party hosted by my eighty-five-year-old grandmother. A homegoing party, she called it, under the great sweetgum tree my little sister and I would climb each fall, leaves the color of crushed red pepper hanging from its limbs like love letters. We used to collect the red-orange leaves, hand them out as autumn valentines to the women in the family. I remember once trying to give my grandfather a leaf, a purpled cranberry thing, but he shook his head. “Already got mine,” he said, pointing to my grandmother through the garden window above the kitchen sink, her face concentrating on some cakey pan out of view until she felt us, and looked up. “Right there, see?”

I’d arrived late and underdressed by Marion’s standards. Sneakers and a black T-shirt. My jeans had a deep hole worn in the left knee, the stringy shreds of fabric crisscrossing my unshaven skin. A once-white sweatshirt tied around my waist.

“There she is,” my grandmother said when she saw me, over the din created by the crowd of lightly lined, fine-haired people sprinkled around her, laughing as she excused herself, a glass that appeared to contain her signature, a vodka gimlet, clasped in her hand. She rose to her shaky legs and held me to her—her head fitting snugly under my chin like a child’s. “You’re late,” she whispered. “But he’s here, he’s really here.”

I turned, and there he was—standing across the grass, examining the bark of an old elm, a paper plate filled with something geometric in his palm, talking to an elderly man in a beret.

Before this, I had thought of my grandmother’s interest in Roger as a sort of senile fondness. An attachment akin to a celebrity crush. Maybe she experienced the similar kind of eye-twitchy behavior I could admit to when I came across a photograph of the un-aging *Clueless* actor on the internet—the one with the wavy, down-on-his-luck hair. The difference between us had materialized when Roger moved beyond the television and phone screens that held him at bay and walked into my grandmother’s real, assisted-living-bound life. Her affection was like a candle lit up, something in the air sweetly changed.

The care facility had caught her eye by advertising a tennis tournament for geriatric potentials. On the cardstock, his hair appeared a little curly and pushed back, rich and dark. “In all his

glory,” my grandmother said, admiring his face as if it belonged to a former boyfriend from a distant life, a someone who had gotten away. Beside his photo—clearly taken a handful of years ago—the flyer claimed that Roger was making the rounds for elderly tennis converts and would be attending this year’s Golden Orchards tournament before heading east for the U.S. Open in September. The tournament matches had concluded the day before, and somehow, she’d convinced him to come to the house she’d called home her entire adult life, until next week, when she would leave.

After it had started to rain, a staccato-like smattering, I found Roger inside standing before the piano. It was lined with family portraits and bookended by photos of my grandfather: one when he was young, twenty-something, a mechanic in the Korean War—the same picture I knew to reside in the locket around my grandmother’s neck—and another a few weeks before his death, a blueish hole in his throat and a hand on his shoulder, his temple leaning against her forearm. Roger threw down a few cubes of cheese and spun, blushing a bit as he tried to swallow discreetly. “Very good cheese,” he said, by way of introduction.

“It’s manchego,” my grandmother said, coming up behind me, a slight purr in her voice.

I couldn’t comprehend a world in which she was trying to make a cheese plate from the Jewel-Osco sexy, so I offered my hand, displacing the tension. “I’m Louise, the granddaughter. I’m twenty-eight.”

It had become a habit of mine during this time in my life to tell strangers my age up front, as I recently got work in a restaurant and had a younger-looking face. People often thought I was barely twenty. The look on customers’ faces when I corrected them—*no, I actually don’t go to the local college, I graduated years ago*—was one I sickly relished beholding. While I had once felt embarrassed by the way they covered their blatant displeasure and awkward *well, you’ve still got time to figure it out* claps, I now accepted all of these glossing-overs with an open smile, an *oh, you too*.

“How old are you, Fed?” I asked, wanting to appear unfussed by his new presence in our lives.

“Thirty-nine,” he said, taking my hand, giving it a quick squeeze. I noticed he’d crumpled the paper plate in his other hand. Was he nervous? Or was it simply a reflex of being one of—if not the greatest—male tennis players in history, albeit one who seemed on his way out?

While my grandmother called him a beautiful underdog, I couldn’t help but notice the gray in his hair. I knew he’d come

close, a few performances that echoed the champion he once was, but the image in my head remained a painful one—the wilting orchid of a man whose tears after a five-set loss a year or two ago broke my grandmother’s already desperate heart.

Marion held up her hands now and flashed a five and then an eight, fifty-eight. Roger laughed, and I watched as she straightened up, her posture no longer slumped, soggy. “All this talk of age makes me thirsty,” she said. “Can I get you anything, Rog?”

“Let me,” I said, telling him which beers I’d brought, what they were like.

In the kitchen, I made my grandmother’s gimlet, balancing my and Roger’s beers in my unoccupied palm. When I rounded the corner from the hallway, a jolt to the ribs. Roger’s head knelt toward hers, their faces oddly close and perpendicular, as if they were co-conspirators. Morning-show hosts who spend all their late and early hours together, commiserating and laughing until senseless. Like they really knew one another. She stepped back then and jokingly showed him her forehand swing. Her hips swiveled as if they’d always been part of her body.

I wordlessly delivered their drinks and tried to make myself invisible. To be a past version of myself, seven years old, hiding on the patch of carpet behind my grandfather’s polyester recliner—someone who could see the way my grandmother must have held herself before loss, in the light of another’s gaze. I looked around, briefly startled that I couldn’t locate her cane, before dropping the thought, turning back to the theater of them together.

The night softened around the edges the more I drank, the more people slowly funneled out. My grandmother waved goodbye from the porch to the last stragglers, plying them with trinkets she was planning on giving up in the move: a collection of ceramic woodland animals, those decorative colonial-looking Dickens houses Marlena and I once used to play Town.

In her bedroom I folded down the top sheet, her floral comforter. “This comes with me,” she yawned, stepping out of her beaded skirt, as she held my arm for balance. She motioned to everything in the room—like she wanted to take everything my grandfather had ever touched or looked at while he was next to her into her new life. The oval mirror and warmly lit lamps, the cherry wood dresser carved into an hourglass. I didn’t know if that was possible, or already planned, perhaps just a wish, some lingering hope that he’d walk in the door and everything might stay. From the doorway, a knock, and Roger appeared. I hadn’t known he was still here.

“I think I’ll say goodnight,” he said.

“Goodnight, Roger,” my grandmother said, like she knew he hadn’t gone.

“Goodnight, Marion.”

Once she was asleep, I followed him to the kitchen. He was pouring a drink—a clear liquid in a short glass, no ice. I stared at the glass, then back at Roger, trying to place the feeling I had. “What is it?” I asked, sitting down across from him. Loosely, I understood I wanted to know the identity of the drink, but I wanted more than that, too—the *it* of my question seemed as expansive as a country, a place I’d once dreamed of and was now hovering over, no longer certain of its existence.

Roger slid the tumbler toward me. It smelled sweet, ripe. Behind him, my grandmother’s old box television set buzzed in the corner, a baseball game blurring silently through the staticky picture. Roger lifted his hand in a *well, go on* gesture. “It’s good, Lou,” he said. “Promise.”

His saying that, being there, it almost made me forget I was sad. That my body had been permeated by sadness since March, when the man I thought I’d date until I died, left. I’d been having trouble finding a place to put it down: the final time we’d had sex was too beautiful—the clinging to, the holding on, the digging in. His body in mine, mine in his. If we’d just fucked, maybe I wouldn’t be like this. But we hadn’t. It was the last time I’d felt alive. He was the last person who’d made it so.

Roger laid a hand over his heart firmly as if to steady my own. “To your grandmother,” he said. I looked deeply into his face, the bushy brows and laugh lines around his mouth. He had a glint in his eye that felt familiar then, tender as a barkeep’s—like someone I knew well, but only during the blue hours of evening. He poured himself a glass. I lifted my own. We drank.

The sweet smell tasted even sweeter on my lips. “Pear?” I said, and he smiled.



I awoke one of those hours after midnight, before the sun, in my own bed. The moon shone solidly from my open window—a golden glow that sleepily reminded me of my grandmother’s manchego. After the nightcap, I’d taken the train into the city from her house—a short, lonely ride. Through the wall, I could hear my sister and her girlfriend, Karoline, getting ready for bed after their late shift at the bar. The opening and closing of dresser drawers, the sink dripping on, off. The shushing, twinkly laughter.

I’d been living with them for a few months, since leaving New York, and had come to wait for their bedtime noises the way I

imagined others greeted birdcall in the morning. It was my day off from the restaurant, a neighborhood Dutch pannenkoeken huis, so I got up in the dark and went to the kettle to brew the coffee. I'd been unable to sleep. For all the peace I'd felt sitting at the table with Roger, once I got home, the feeling snapped. I kept trying to find the right words to describe his company, the connection he seemed to make with people he'd only just met—supernatural or enchanting maybe.

Though Marion had seemed smitten with him at the onset of the party, by nightfall it'd changed, deepened into something more than starry-eyed. Besides, he was married—a father to two sets of twins, for Christ's sake, a pair of girls and boys each. Maybe he seemed like a son to her then, or a long-lost younger brother. No, a friend she'd had in childhood, one who moved away and was now back in another's toned body. I sat with my coffee until it was gone and then made another pot, some toast. By nine, Marlena and Karoline were up—they seemed to only require a few hours. "What happened to you last night?" Marlena asked, swiping the kettle for another refill.

Karoline sat down and petted my head. "We worried. We thought you were coming by." Karoline had light, straw-like hair, like corn silk harvested early, nearly white. It was cut short and blunt—which is about the opposite of how I found Karoline's personality. She was warm, touchy. Always buying us eggs and lemons; she loved to juggle, and we'd clap and shout for late-night buzzy performances that ended with ricotta crepes, one or two busted shells on the wood floor. My grandmother was initially distrustful of her due to the striking facial resemblance she bore to a Federer foe's wife, but after I explained her roots were indeed not Serbian, but Polish, Marion let it go.

"I wanted to," I said, "but I stopped by Marion's going-away party and things sort of got out of hand."

"How out of hand," Marlena said. "Like weeping in Grandpa's chair or throwing all the frozen chicken cutlets in the yard?"

Karoline's eyebrows perked. "What does she have against chicken?"

"What doesn't she have against chicken," Marlena countered, before turning to me. "Really, how bad?"

I rambled a bit—not bad, not bad, just unusual—before telling them everything. The guest list, the drinks, Roger and his cheese plate. The goodnight and everything that came before. I decidedly left out how Roger made me feel, the bridge between rosy and hopeless, a kind of teal contentedness, so temporary was the reprieve. Instead I focused on how alive Marion became, how nearly healthy, younger-seeming.

Marlena topped off her coffee with almond milk and honey, something she'd adopted from Karoline. They looked at each other, before Karoline said something about an appointment with a hemline and a textbook, the front door closing soft and fast. Marlena took the spoon out of my cold cup, stirred her honey. "So, when did he call?"

"What?"

"Okay. You then."

"Marlena, I didn't. We haven't—the last time we spoke was—"

"Yesterday?"

"No, spring. May, I think."

Marlena finished her coffee in a gulp. She squinted, unblinking, as if her looking long and narrowly enough at the coffee stains around my mouth would suffice in detecting the truth. "I do actually have to go get my books for the semester, too," she said slowly, nodding at the door. "Wanna come? I won't ask about him and you can tell me more about Grams."

I shook my head. "It's okay, go ahead."

Once Marlena threw on a scarf and some real shoes, she leaned down and kissed the top of my head, like I was the younger one in need of reassurance, and with a "Bye, bub," she was gone. I piled our empty mugs and toast plates in the sink. I washed and washed, listening to the neighborhood out the window. The cars and city buses. An airplane overhead and the squirrels shaking the phone lines with their tiny, clutching toes, the *cht cht cht* sound they made when they encountered a close call.

If he did phone, would I even know how to answer?



A week of brutal late summer passed. In the alley behind the restaurant, the air smelled thick with it: bacon grease and rotting fruit, peaches, the hot, hot Midwestern malaise that fell upon the city before the air turned crisp and honeyed.

I was taking my ten o'clock break before the lunch crowd came, watching the crows peck and squawk over all the discarded loaves of crusty French bread from the sandwich shop next door, when Roger opened the back door, a big, black trash bag gripped in his hand. He gracefully deposited it into the rusty dumpster to our left—the birds dispersing like scolded children into the gray sky. Roger dusted his palms together, *all in a hard day's work* like, then leaned against the brick beside me, as if we were two old buddies passing cigarettes. "I once bused, you know, as a boy. Beginner gig. I wanted to be a flavorist."

"What?"