



Ok, so this is offensive thing #8. I used to go to my nana’s house. I didn’t really like her all that much, but I really loved her chicken soup. I also liked napping in her room. It smelled warm, yellow—like being buried in a tub of popcorn. And not just ANY popcorn, the good kind, none of that anti-LDL crap.

I liked pretending the weird, dark-haired man on her wall was my dead grandpa, which he was, technically, only now I might have pretended he was someone else, a certain singer—I’ll give you a hint: Janis Joplin’s secret lover man. Ok, one more: a certain hotel. A famous one. With lots of drugs (and sex).

We played chess. We had to do this with our eyes, him being immobile and all:

Grandpa Leonard, was I named for you?

(Sweet silence)

Grandpa Leonard, why is Nana mean?

Be quiet, Leonora, I’m focused.

He treated me like an adult, plus he kicked my butt—at chess. This only made me love him more.

He had these eyes. They looked at me, really looked at me. They said, *hey*, or maybe just, *hello*. I loved their solemnity. Their blackness. According to my annoying teacher Ms. Shapiro, no one REALLY has black eyes. They’re either brown or dark brown. She happened to mention this when I was showing my friend Sasha. She was like, my eyes are blue-grey and so amazing, and I said, well mine are black, and Ms. Shapiro said: actually, that’s not true. They’re brown. But she never met Grandpa Cohen. That’s my name for him. He said, take these black eyes and SHOVE it, Ms. Shapiro.

He taught me chess. He couldn’t do it with his hands, the whole immobile thing, and all. He’d say stuff like, ok, so I’m moving in on your bishop. He’d stare hard at the dresser. This meant: You’re toast.

Other facts:

1. He wore a blazer. Each time I went, they’d be different. This was a subtle thing; you’d have to really look.
2. His hands were the only ugly thing about him. They were paws, like a boxer’s. They made me nervous, but in a good way. They rested neatly in his lap, but I felt, no, I knew—they’d pounce at any time. At what, who knew? The dresser? The lamp? I was arrested by their tiny, coarse dark hairs, the same color as his eyes. I drowned in them, in both. It made me feel Confused.
3. He’d always leave the top button of his shirt undone. A hair escaped, sometimes more. This added to the Confused Thing.
4. I wanted him to give me singing advice, but that was a no-zone, meaning that he didn’t like to brag. I’d say Janis, or Chelsea Hotel and he’d say, shut it.
5. He never called me sweetheart or hon, or worse, my favorite grandkid. He called me “Little Girl.” But it sounded like he meant the opposite, “adult,” or maybe “not little girl.”

Him: be nice to your nana, Little Girl. She’s pretty bad, but she needs you.

Or:

I’m moving that lamp there with my eyes, Little Girl.

Or simply:

Loose silence, meaning he was focused.

Then Mom called. Lee?? Lee??! Lee???!!!

Grandpa Cohen grimaced. He’d give me this look like: mothers?? He’d cover his ears, or try to. I’d walk over and do it for him. His ears were warm. He had very nice ones. Tiny, like little shells.

He said, promise you’ll be nicer to Sylvia. She’s a pain but she (probably) means well.

He had a way of saying ()’s so you could hear them. It was like a wink, soft and sly. I imagined putting it in my pocket, carrying it with me, like the yellow light from that room. I still think of it. I shut my eyes and think (), or yellow light, or Chelsea Hotel. I imagine him holding me with his paws, like a kitten, licking me.

Leonora Desai’s writing has appeared or is forthcoming in River Styx, Passages North, Black Warrior Review, The Cincinnati Review, Mid-American Review, and Columbia Journal, where she was chosen as a finalist by Ottessa Moshfegh. Her work has been selected for The Best Small Fictions 2019, the Wigleaf Top 50, and Best Microfiction 2019 and 2020. In 2018, she won third place in River Styx’s microfiction contest, and was a runner-up/finalist in Quarter After Eight’s Robert J. DeMott Short Prose Contest, judged by Stuart Dybek, and Crazyhorse’s Crazyshorts! contest. She lives in Brooklyn.