

Lara Tenenbaum
Creative Writing
Short Story

Chicken Casserole

The casserole was chicken. Ruth always raved about my chicken casserole. It was the only dish I made that she didn't refer to as "bird food". I made it like usual but this time I added cut up onions. Ruth didn't like onions. She said they overwhelmed all the other flavors. I never told her, but I sometimes associated Ruth with the onions she disliked so much. Always monopolizing conversations and constantly having to be the center of attention. Well, this time, I added onions and she didn't get a say in the matter. To contrast my onion filled casserole I had asked our cousin Mary to bake her famous oatmeal raisin cookies, one of Ruth's favorite deserts.

I'm allergic to raisins. When we were little, Ruth tricked me into eating an oatmeal raisin cookie. She told me it was chocolate chip; a flavor she knew I couldn't resist. My face swelled up to 10 times its normal size and mama had to rush me to the emergency room where they gave me a shot; I cried. When I got home Ruth had baked me *real* chocolate chip cookies. She was like that; quick to play a prank or make fun of me, but always making up for it when it really counted. So today, I made sure Mary had baked oatmeal raisin cookies and I made sure to stay far away from them. I had bought white roses and placed bundles of them around the hall. Other than the flowers, the decorations were minimal. Any decorations at all seemed odd really. Ruth was never one to like embellishments; she called it "fluff".

Even when she and Mike were still married and lived in their beautiful Victorian home in San Francisco, she never decorated for the holidays. I had visited them once over Christmas break. I took two weeks off from my very time consuming job at CrossingCulture; a travel agency specializing in trips to remote locations. Our clients consisted mainly of rich white people who were too scared to visit these places without some sort of American safety net. I spent my days planning tours and making hotel reservations for other people and daydreaming about the day when I could afford to plan my own trip to some distant country. But for the time being, San Francisco would have to suffice. It was the longest break I had taken since being offered the job 3 years prior. I worked 6 days a week and my one day off was spent paying bills, painting my nails and watching bad reality TV.

So needless to say, this trip was a big deal for me. I had arrived at her and Mike's house wearing way too many layers, quickly revealing the fact that I was an out-of-towner. Ruth hadn't shied away from telling me how ridiculous I looked immediately after breaking free from our initial embrace. She had never been one to sugar coat things. She believed saying anything other than exactly what she was thinking was as bad as lying. Since I was the queen of sugar coating what I really thought, we were always butting heads.

It was December 20th when I arrived in San Francisco, and the streets were buzzing with anticipation of the holidays. As my taxi pulled up, I immediately knew which home belonged to my sister because it was the only house that looked like Ebenezer Scrooge had decorated. It was sandwiched between a row of other similarly styled houses, all of which were decked out in lights, blow-up Santa's and

festive wreaths. In contrast, Ruth and Mike's house displayed no sign of lights, no mechanical reindeer; the house didn't even have a tree. In fact, I was surprised to find someone, probably Mike, had purchased a very generic welcome mat and placed it at the front stoop. It was light brown and painted on it was a blue bird sitting on a branch. True to its name, it was actually the most welcoming part of the house. That trip to San Francisco had ended in such dramatics that I had never been able to ask Ruth, what it was about a blow-up Santa, or even a decorative painting or two, that was so offensive to her.

But I decided, today of all days, there needn't be any "fluff". One by one her friends began to arrive. Ruth and I were sisters, but even in our adult lives we didn't share the same friends. Ruth's friends, as of lately, seemed to consist of elderly men with bad toupees, and women wearing too much makeup in failed attempts to conceal their age. But boy did she have a lot of them. She had always been more popular than me. I tended to have a few very close friends, whereas Ruth preferred to have a million acquaintances. I always believed my method was better.

I felt like I had stronger connections to my five close friends than she ever could with her one hundred plus companions. Of course, being my sugar coating self, I never felt obliged to tell her how I felt. She, on the other hand, freely asserted her opinion about my small number of friends, which she believed translated to lack of social skills, any chance she got. But in spite our differences and as cliché as it may seem, she was always my best friend, and I was hers. We always took care of each other and counted on the fact that we would have each other's back. Or that was how it was supposed to be, anyways.

Ruth arrived in a large, black car with tinted windows. It's unnecessary size and its excessive shininess made it less than traditional. It wasn't exactly traditional in that it was so large and the rims were exceedingly shiny. That was like her though; always showing up in style, always drawing as many people's attention as she could, especially on a day like today. She entered the room and was quickly brought to the front with the help of two younger men, only one of whom I recognized as our second cousin Louise's son, Markus. I was the first to speak.

My hands were sweaty as I walked to the front of the room. All the distraction of the day that I had been relying on crumbled away. I had always been terrified of public speaking; I could never seem to convey my thoughts in front of a group of people as eloquently as they sounded in my head or when I spoke them to a small group of people. Ruth always said my fear had hindered me from achieving more in life. Maybe she was right; even at 75 I hadn't overcome my fear of public speaking and I had never really achieved much in life.

I reached the front of the room and stood next to my sister. The sheet of paper I had read over a million times was shaking in my sweat soaked grip. All the letters on the page began to melt together into a pile of incomprehensible gibberish and my head was buzzing. I could feel fifty or so pupils boring into my own lowered eyelids. I looked down at my words.

My gaze was drawn to movement at the back of the room and I looked up for a welcomed distraction. Mike had just snuck in and decided on a row close to the door. He was late as usual. He could never be bothered with timeliness, even today. As he settled into his seat, our eyes met. He was wearing a large coat and a

scarf, which he was struggling to break free from. His bald head gleamed in the light, unlike the many other men in the room who seemed to be hiding their advancing age under fake hair.

The last time I had seen Mike, Ruth had been throwing large appliances at his head and screaming at us both. It was quite a dramatic scene, especially for me, someone who rarely found herself surrounded by such excitement. This wasn't the good kind of excitement though. This was the excitement I watched take place on my bad reality shows. This was Sami and Ronny from Jersey Shore. This was an episode of the Bad Girls Club. Only this time, I was one of them. Not in a million years would I have guessed that I would be caught home wrecking, and certainly not wrecking my own sister's modestly decorated home.

It obviously hadn't been my intention that Christmas. I had been lonely, sure; with my last date taking place sometime in mid-April. But that wasn't so unusual for me, and I was certainly used to spending the holidays alone. I hadn't had a serious boyfriend since my mid-twenties and I had just hit 32 that winter. It's not as though I needed a man to make me happy, and I certainly never needed *someone else's* man, but something about Mike really struck me. He was intriguing, always talking about some fascinating new story he had read or explaining his latest project. And his eyes; his eyes and that gaze of his. I guess I was easily impressed back then. But I never even considered that my intrigue was anything more than just that; intrigue.

There were many memories my old age had stolen away from me; family trips to the coast were now foggy and fragmented. My first kiss may as well have taken place in another lifetime. But that night stuck in my head as though it was

glued there. I could still remember every smell, every sound, and every sweet, depraved touch. If I closed my eyes I could still feel his fingertips on my arm, and then my face, then my breasts and finally, my entire body was tingling from those fingertips of his. Before that night, I had never thought of him in that way...at least, I hadn't let myself. My brain has always worked like that. Denying things it has to so intensely that only my deepest subconscious knows they're there.

I had been watching "A Christmas Story". It was late and Ruth was asleep. Mike, it seemed, had always stayed up late in his study working on things that my small brain couldn't even begin to compute. It must have been about 1am. All the other houses had unplugged their lights and deflated Santa's were now lying in piles of red and white along rooftops. Since Ruth failed to find enjoyment in this "fluff", the family room I sat in remained filled with its usual dim lighting. I heard him enter the room and my head turned. He looked tired. We greeted each other and he asked if I minded if he watched with me. I responded that he could and relinquished half the couch, wrapping myself around the big cozy arm, putting a good 12 inches of distance between us.

Now, today, there were more than 12 *feet* between us, but the intensity of his gaze was just as strong, even from a distance. Even though his face had wrinkled and his hair had almost completely thinned, the brightness of his eyes hadn't seemed to dim. The gaze we shared when our sight crossed paths; that was what captivated me so many years ago, and what sickened me now. I stood there, disgusting, guilty, weak; my strong, beautiful sister lying dead next to me in the cherry oak coffin I had chosen for her.

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After we buried her, I sat in a park adjacent to the church and stared at my feet. Mud from the cemetery stained my once tan shoes. It was below freezing and the cold quickly found its way through my heavy coat. I could hear children playing, and cars rushing by in the distance, speeding to get home in time for dinner. But my gaze remained stuck to my shoes. Mike had made a quick exit after the funeral and hadn't bothered to come to the burial. It was just as well, I had no desire to talk to him, or hear from him or be forced to look into that sickening gaze. All I could think about was how I wished I had left the onions out of the chicken casserole.

As I sat, eyes glued to mud stains, I felt alone.

