

## GREEK MACARONI

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My last beer was landlocked in the back of the fridge. I don't know why people bring casseroles when someone dies. Just looking at the avocado and orange-colored pans covered with aluminum foil made my stomach lurch. Who could eat lasagna and Greek macaroni after their husband got smeared across Lakeview Road by a hit-and-run driver? In such times, you'd think sympathetic folks would donate hard liquor and barbiturates. But no, I had to drive myself to Pete's Bait Shop and sneak out with a case of Coors hoping nobody from PTA or church saw me.

At the Jenn-Air behind me, Grandma Georgia slapped a spoon into her sweet-smelling spaghetti sauce. "You've drunk enough," she muttered.

I snapped the silver tab on the can, then slurped the beer as I leaned against the fridge door to close it. Before me, the kitchen tilted: gleaming black granite, glistening white laminate, bleached oak floor recently polished to a sheen by Grandma Georgia and her mop contraption.

Just like it was her kitchen again, she bent forward in her wheelchair and stirred the sauce as she spoke. "Tallulah, I overheard you on the phone with Dick's lawyer."

My gut churned, but I kept my expression calm.

She swung her wheelchair around and poked her dripping red spoon toward me. "After Georgette passed away, Dick showed me his life insurance policies for poor Sally and Sam. He said if he died too, those policies would provide for them." Her voice rose. "What do you mean there's no insurance? I can't believe he'd leave Sally and Sam penniless, not to mention, you and the twins. What in the world happened?"

I took another slug, and studied the can. I had a feeling she knew exactly what had happened.

"Tallulah Mae, look at me!" Disgust creased her face.

Sickness rose in my belly. In one gulp, I chugged the rest of the Coors.

Tomato sauce splatted the floor, which was still shinier than in the five years I had been cleaning it. Grandma Georgia's chair whirred as she rolled toward me. "Sweet Jesus," she cried, "Didn't you pay the policy premiums?"

I barely made it to the white double-sink before all the beers I had drunk that day hurled out of me.

I met Dick when I was topless dancing my way through grad school, getting my masters in psychology. I worked in a smoky, dark, red-velvet joint called Ziegfield's Folly six miles east of campus.

At Ziegfield's, I made about a third of my money in dance tips, a third waitressing between sets with my clothes on, and the rest from the 'drinks' men bought me so I'd sit and listen to them. The drinks didn't cost me anything; the bartender gave me soda water, and I'd drop in a lime slice and charge for a vodka tonic. Some guys bought me drink after drink, just so I'd keep listening. I had my regulars who came every week. "Tallulah therapy," the bartender called it. If the night was slow, or if a guy had a good story, or if -- which almost never happened -- I felt sorry for a guy, I listened for free.

The first night I saw Dick was a slow night. Tall, lanky, no beer belly, he wore a navy suit that looked too big and slumped in his chair at a table beside the stage. The Stones sang, "You Always Get What You Need" as a hefty blonde girl whose stage name was Tushie shook her bulbous boobs and pink tee-strapped buns to the rhythm of the strobe lights.

He already had two empty shot glasses on the table when I shouted what was he drinking. "A Bud and a tequila," he muttered. He looked away from the stage and stared up at me. "And whatever you want."

When I returned, I sat on the plastic edge of the chair next to his. I never wanted to get too comfortable, or look like I was. He tossed the tequila, followed it with the beer, then seemed to notice me. He had a weary smile. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

I drank half my soda water so he'd know his time was half up, and countered, "What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?"

He leaned toward me and waved his arm. "Same as all the rest of these poor S.O.B.s. Trying to forget my wife." His gaze lowered. "'Cept there's one big difference between my wife and theirs."

Lots of guys tried to convince me their wife, or girlfriend, was the worst bitch walking the face of the earth. I slurped the last of my soda and straightened my shoulders. Rising, I asked, "And what's so different about yours?"

He looked up at me and his eyes darkened. For a second, I thought he wouldn't answer. Then, "She killed herself two years ago today."

I slid back down onto that plastic chair. And I listened.

The last time I saw Dick alive, I smelled the coffee he set on my bedside table, and squinted at the strips of rosy sky that glowed between the blinds. My side of the bed sank as he sat and leaned over me. His warm lips brushed my cheek. "Here's your coffee, sweetheart," he whispered. "I checked on Madison and Matt. They're still asleep." The bed squeaked when he stood. "I'm just going to run four miles, up Lakeview. Be back soon."

A tinny sound of music started as he put on his earphones. I heard his tennis shoes squeak down the hall, fall silent outside Sam's bedroom, and then again outside Sally's as he looked in on his sleeping older children. I visualized him smiling as he walked through our elegant white living room with its creamy new Italian leather sofas. I heard the front door close, then drifted back to sleep.

The buzz of the doorbell woke me. Seven o'clock. He must have decided to run farther. Must have locked himself out. I padded down the hall in my negligee. Sam and Sally would miss their bus, I'd have to drive them. Dick was going to be late for work. I shook myself awake. "Honey--" I said as I opened the door.

Two tan-uniformed Stone County deputies stood on the brick porch. I slammed the door.

Trembling, I ran to get my robe. In the twins' bedroom, Madison started to cry. I raced back to the entry and swung the door wide. "What?" I said, my heart pounding.

They looked stunned. "Mrs. Turner?" the taller deputy said.

"Yes."

They glanced at each other, and I imagined what they saw, me, barely covered by my pink silk shortie robe, already loosened at the waist, bare legs, red hair flying all around. In the background, I heard both twins howling.

"What?" I said. The twins were getting closer. "What?" The expressions on the cops' faces scared me. The shorter one fidgeted with his hands. Carmine smears edged the cuffs of his sleeves. "Wait," I said.

"Mommy, Mommy! Bad dream, bad dream," Madison wailed as she ran up and grabbed my knee. Matt was right behind, yelling for her to stop, but when he saw the deputies, he shouted, "Po-leece, Mommy, Po-leece," and yanked the corner of my robe as he pointed.

"Yes, I know, Matt." I lifted Madison into my arms. I looked at the short deputy's face, and with the sinking feeling of my life draining away, I knew why they were here. How many times had I told Dick it was dangerous to run with his EarPods in, dangerous that he couldn't hear cars?

I grasped at a straw. I begged, "What hospital is he in?"

The tall one looked over my shoulder, and I knew Sam and Sally were behind me. He shook his head. "He's not."

Sam reached his big teen-aged hands around me. "Come with me, Madison," he said. "Come, Matt. Come on, Sally. I'm going to fix Cap'n Crunch for breakfast." He pulled Madison from my arms. I looked up. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Take care of things, Mom."

Suffused with grief and disbelief, I slumped against the wall of the entry and closed my eyes, unable to stop the horror movie fast-forwarding through my brain -- how I had been so sure Dick and I would live to an old age together, how healthy Dick had been, how I had known Dick would not die, how I had purchased the new living room sofas instead of paying Dick's life insurance premiums.

One good thing you can say about barfing, it sure has a way of stopping conversation. There wasn't a peep from Grandma Georgia as I stumbled out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom, just the growl of the garbage disposal.

I lowered the blinds to darken the room, and flopped face down on the bed. I smelled Dick's salty scent on his feather pillow. He was buried, and as I sniffed, I knew his earthly essence would soon be gone.

When I was young, I thought my belief in God might one day return when I attained some older, magically wise age, like twenty-one, or thirty. The morning Dick was killed, after the deputies left, after Grandma Georgia

arrived, I cried to Jehovah, Yahweh, holy spirit, Jesus, Mary, mother of god, begging them enter my waiting, vacant heart. I begged for childish belief, for the hope of heaven, for the hope of seeing Dick again, of finding more than the swirling black hole of infinite cold space.

But now I knew hope was beyond me, as far beyond as it had been when I was five and screamed for God to save me from the devil's fingers, and there was no god, only the promise of hell.

Much later, my bedroom door swished open. I felt large warm hands, Sam shaking me. "Mom, get up, get up. Please. Get out of bed." In his voice I heard a much younger boy's terror, fear that harkened to another time, another dark bedroom, another mother.

The blinds clickety-clicked as he raised them, and the room lightened with afternoon sun.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magda Elenescu is a cultural historian working on the intersection of gender, art, and religion in the ancient world. Her exploration of this has taken her around the world. She has authored or contributed to books and academic journal articles—and also published some short stories and poetry in a previous life.