

## THE FINAL CONVERSATION

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Bored with whatever TV show my brother Jason and I are watching, I head to the kitchen to poke through the fridge. I find my nana sitting in the semi-darkness, alone. When she sees me, it takes a moment for her to come back from her far-away thoughts and register that it is me. Once she does, she gives me that familiar smile.

“Hey, honey, pull up a stool and chat for a moment.”

“O.K., nana,” I say, as I slide onto a stool across from her.

“So, what have you been up to?” she asks me. It’s finally my turn to have her all to myself, and yet, I don’t know where to begin; this is an unexpected gift.

“Nothing. Just working a lot.” I say, shrugging my shoulders.

“Oh yea? You still at that TGI Fridays?”

“Yep, still there, like, practically every day.”

“Honey, don’t work so much. You’re too young. You know, you always remind me of your father (only this comes out as *ya faaatha*. Heavy on that Massachusetts accent that always cracks me up). He always worked too hard. Now you.”

I drop my eyes and play with the rubber band I’ve just pulled from my hair. It’s a rare occasion when my nana says anything remotely negative about my father; he has always made her so proud.

“It’s ok, nana, I like it. The money’s good and the people there are nice. Well . . . most of them.”

She studies me. She does this a lot. The kitchen clock ticks off the passing seconds, seeming to grow louder with each one. It competes with the sounds coming from the TV. I adjust myself on the seat and beam a smile at her.

“What else, honey? You got a special boy?”

I love this question. It’s what we discuss best.

“Well, even though he’s at the Academy, I still totally love Kevin. But, there’s this one guy at work and he’s so cute, nana, only he was Jason’s number one competition for pole vault back in high school. You remember Scott? And then there’s this other boy there too, only he’s not as cute, but he’s a big flirt and we make fun of each other all the time.” I’m really on a roll now, and we’ve both leaned into the counter that separates us. As we do so, she moves into the sole light that’s on over the counter and I notice the odd shape her body makes beneath her housecoat. She has removed her bra, and with it, the soft, false breast that replaced the cancerous one. Horribly self-conscious about her missing breast, she is rarely seen like this, or as she says “without my boob.” I don’t let this realization cross my face.

“Oh, honey, the Academy boy! Just like *ya faaatha*. You keep on him. He’ll be yours.”

“I don’t know, nana. . .”

“Trust me, honey. Your looks, your brains, those legs—I once had legs like that. How can he resist?”

She's better than any best friend at building my self esteem, even if she is ridiculously biased and obviously blind. I reach out for her and we hold hands across the counter. Her fingertips are still stained yellow from years of smoking, but the skin is so soft. Odd, since she is the toughest woman I know.

"Whatever, nana!"

"No, I'm serious." She sighs. "Oh, to be young like you again. You know what I would do?"

I lean so close to her that the edge of the counter bites into my stomach.

"I'd go dancing every night. I'd raise hell like they haven't ever seen. . ."

Her eyes slide away from mine and I want so desperately to see what it is she is focused on. I notice the TV again and silently thank God that Jason has remained in the other room, not interrupting my time with her.

"It's getting late, honey, I better get to bed." She eases herself off the stool and comes around to stand by me. "Sarah. Look at me. (*How can I look away?*) Listen to me. (*I will hang on your every word*). This life. It goes by too fast. You need to live it. Eat what you want. Drink what you want. Smoke what you want. Do whatever the hell you want, o.k.?"

"O.K., nana."

"No, don't just say 'ok,' think about it, kiddo. This is your life."

I stand up and not so much hug her, as try to become a part of her. I want to always be this close. She kisses me and I squeeze harder. I must let her go. I watch her, slow but steady, walk to the stairs. I know she will look back one last time before climbing them, and then she will disappear into the darkness.

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