



Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

No Bananas

Pearl Adelberg, standing in her kitchen in a pink chenille robe stained with tea and shod in slippers with cutouts for her bunions, gives herself a *klop* on the head. Runny-nosed, runny-eyed, coughing, she can't get over how a plume of smoke is pouring out of her microwave just from one lousy sweet potato. And the stink. *Feh*. The plastic dome she placed over it melted into

the smoking, black potato. The directions that said “twelve minutes” must have been for the Mother of All Sweet Potatoes. Pearl doesn’t even like sweet potatoes. She likes Idahos. So why did she even cook a sweet potato? To be healthy so the Grim Reaper would have to come back another time like the exterminator had to on Thursday when she didn’t hear him ring the doorbell.

Smoke. It stays around like the threat of her daughter, Anna, taking her to a nursing home. Pearl waves a dish towel. The smoke swirls like ghosts doing the hora. Her apartment must smell like the crematorium she arranged for herself when fate deals her final knockdown. *Sunrise Cremations*—an oxymoron if there ever was one. She’s got to air out the place before some nosy parker calls the super and he calls Anna. This can be the end of Pearl’s living on her own like a person. In a Home she’d be fed stewed prunes and get asked, “Pearl, did you have a BM today?” Pearl begins to tremble like Mr. Farkas in 6A who drank himself into the DTs. She’s got to get this *farshtinkener* smoke out, and fast. Adrenaline pumps through her clotty bloodstream, giving her the strength to force open her stuck kitchen window with her arthritic hands and arms that have lost their sinew. *Nu*. Who expects sinew of an eighty-five-year-old with lungs like deflating balloons and a heart that beats like a stutterer?

*Oy*. Any minute, Anna can pop over for one of her so-called “visits.” An inspection, really. She thinks of Anna studying her with her laser-surgery eyes. Maybe if they had that operation when Anna was in her twenties, she could have chucked those Coke-bottle glasses and landed a man. Then she wouldn’t be looking to persecute her mother. Maybe Anna can even get a man now at sixty-nine. After all, Pearl had married her third and only loyal husband, Albert, when she was seventy. But Anna wears black all the time and dyes her hair—what else?—black. Pearl *plotzes* to see how Anna pulls her hair straight back in an elastic, spinster-style. But does she listen to Pearl? Modernize a little, put color on her cheeks? No. Instead of following Pearl’s advice, each time Anna comes over Pearl can hear her mental checklist of the symptoms of Alzheimer’s. *Aggression: Check*. (But that’s just because she knows Anna wants to lock her up and throw away the key.) *Agitation: Check*. (Who wouldn’t be agitated when you put something down for a moment and it disappears? Like her

dentures. Where the hell are they?)

She'll just have to tell Anna, "It's not like I drifted over to the microwave without knowing why or what it was for."

"Pearl," Anna will say, "don't you see that there's a clearly labeled place to press on the front panel that says 'potato'?"

And Pearl will tell her, "That's just what I pressed." Pearl can lie through her teeth when she can find them. "You can't put me in a nursing home because my potato button didn't work," she'll insist.

"What about getting an aide?" Anna will suggest in her know-it-all college-professor voice. She'll never retire—her daughter, the doctor. Physics, no less. In Pearl's day, a physic was what you took to move your bowels. That joke never went over big with Anna.

The first time Anna brought up aides, Pearl thought she meant HIV. "I haven't had sex since Albert died," Pearl confessed. That made Pearl think of how Albert suffered so at the end with his bone cancer that he begged Pearl to smother him with the pillow, and Pearl burst into tears. Then Anna really insisted that her mother was ready for the hoosegow.

Pearl remembers women she knew before they were forced to use aides. They were fancy ladies who used to trot around in the highest of heels, gussied up, spritzed with Chanel No. 5, shopping bags from Bonwit Teller and B. Altman like bracelets on their wrists. Now they schlep along with walkers, faces blank from no one to talk to. God forbid their aides should say a word to them instead of jabbering into their phones in every language of the world like worshippers at the Tower of Babble. Even if Pearl had an aide who would get off her phone for eight seconds, what could she say to her?

"I'm not just your typical old lady. I used to sing and crack jokes on the Borscht Belt. At Kutcher's, I was on stage with Butch Hacker... Oh, you might know him as Buddy Hackett...and at Grossinger's, I did a bit with that dreamy Eddy Cantor. Such dark eyes he had, such thick, black, brilliantine hair. You know Cantor." Between coughs, Pearl breaks into, "Yes, we have no bananas. We have-a no bananas today."

And then, as if just thinking of Anna can bring her here to spy on her mother at the worst of times, *bibbidi-bobbidi-boo*, she's right in the kitchen.

“What did you do this time, Pearl?” Anna says.

God forbid, Pearl thinks, just once Anna should call her “Mother” instead of “Pearl.”

“Pearl, why is the place filled with smoke?”

“Just a hot potato,” Pearl explains. “You want I should pass it to you?”

Pearl puts on big oven mitts, pulls out the potato with the melting microwave hat, dumps both in the sink, and drowns the mess in water. She thinks she hears it hiss, or is that Anna hissing? When you live so alone, you don’t know whether you’re talking inside your head or out your mouth. Why hadn’t she done this with the potato before Anna showed up instead of letting the smoke get everywhere? She doesn’t have to be a mind reader to know what Anna is thinking. *Slow response to an emergency: Check.*

Now she feels Anna assessing her in places that shouldn’t be open to assessing. Pearl looks down. Her bathrobe is untied and she has nothing on underneath. Anna is looking at her *tsitskehs* that went south with the snow birds and never returned, her knish with its few straggles of gray hair, and the ropy scar that runs down her middle where Anna was torn from her when Pearl was only sixteen. Who has a baby these days at sixteen, besides the Amish, or the child brides of elderly Mormons, or the indigent? Does Anna ever think how hard it must have been to be a single mother at sixteen? No. The heartless girl must be thinking, *Inability to dress oneself: Check.*

Anna takes her cell phone from her bag. Pearl figures that she has Elder Care on speed dial. With the same adrenaline that helped Pearl open the kitchen window, she grabs for Anna’s phone and jams it to her chest, pressing it there with both hands.

Anna glares at her, lips bunched just like when she was a little girl and Pearl visited her at her grandmother’s house. It hits Pearl like another *klop* in the head. “Anna, do you want to put me in a Home because I couldn’t raise you myself when you were little?”

“Don’t start with that again, Pearl.”

“You don’t know how evil your grandmother was to me,” Pearl says.

“Don’t you dare say one bad word about Grandma Millie,” Anna says, her voice breaking. “She was the only mother I ever knew.”

“This is just what you always say,” Pearl tells her. “You blame me for everything without knowing the truth behind it. Well, let me tell you, your grandmother didn’t ever want me to visit. I used to have to beg to see you.”

“She didn’t want the neighbors to start *tsk-tsking* about you all over again,” Anna says. “That only would have made it harder on me, the bastard child.”

“You always tell me, ‘Pearl, you already told me that a hundred times.’ Now I get to tell the same to you. Anna, you have to stop repeating yourself, or old age will bite you on the *tuchas* too. Now it’s some big honor to get knocked up without a ring on your finger. Feldshuh’s unmarried daughter in 2E had a baby last year by test tube, no less, and they threw a big baby shower for her.”

Pearl feels poison darts coming from Anna’s eyes.

“Okay, okay,” Pearl says, “it was different back when you were born, but how do you keep a child from her mother for the sake of those yentas?”

*Only a bastard would do that*, Pearl wants to say, but her cheek begins to sting as if her mother rose up from hell to give her one more *patsh in dem punim* that used to make Pearl’s head whip to the side.

“I’m glad Grandma wouldn’t let you visit me more often,” Anna pipes up. “You danced around, throwing your hips, shaking your bosom, and singing. And those jokes you told! ‘My husband always holds my hand, because if he doesn’t, he knows I’ll go shopping. *Ya dah dah dah dah dah.*’ And ‘What are three words a woman never wants to hear when she’s making love? Honey, I’m home!’ *Ya dah dee dah.* ‘A doctor gave a man six months to live, but he couldn’t pay his bill, so the doctor gave him six more months.’ *Ya dah...*”

Pearl bounces on her bone spur heels. “Oh, Anna, you remember,” she says, laughing. “You remember all my jokes.”

“What kind of jokes are those to tell a little girl?” Anna asks, her chin jutting out. “I hated all jokes after that. I still do. You never even asked me how I was. You never asked me if I had a friend. Or if I liked my teacher.”

“I was just trying to make you happy,” Pearl says like she told Anna a ton of times before. “How should I know what to ask you? All your grandmother said to me when I was a little girl was

‘Shut that mouth or I’ll shut it for you.’ And Grandpa Sydney was out playing cards with his lodge brothers every night.”

She has never told Anna that her father was Morris the dentist, Grandpa Sydney’s lodge brother. Morris treated the family for free, but from Pearl he took quite a tip. He dropped dead right in his office when he heard Pearl was pregnant. But she never told. She knew her mother would blame her. At least Anna has his science brains. Too bad she has his looks too.

“I don’t blame Grandpa Sydney for staying at the lodge,” Pearl goes on. “Your grandmother never stopped nagging him when he was home about one thing or another. Especially about me. If he even so much as ruffled my hair, she carried on as if he was fooling around with another woman. The only question Grandpa Sydney was allowed to ask me that didn’t make my mother go berserk was, ‘When are you going to bed already?’ This is conversation? Every day I prayed to God that I could figure out how to keep you with me, but there wasn’t all that daycare back then like you have now.” She worries that mentioning daycare to her childless daughter is like giving Anna a dig, but Pearl must barrel on before the smoke in the kitchen gets into her head and thickens there.

“Lots of women had to leave their kids with their mothers to work,” she goes on. “Look at that artist with the false eyelashes and the silk *shmate* on her head. What’s her face? Uh, Louise Neveloff. No, Neveloff’s was the stationary store in town that had to close down like all the other little stores whose names I knew.” What an effort it is for Pearl to talk. Her throat is raspy and her chest hurts from pressing Anna’s cell phone against it.

Anna points at her watch. “*Tuh*. I can’t stay here all day, Pearl.”

Pearl sees how disgusted Anna is with her. It hurts like a knife in the *kishkes*.

“How about Sophie Tucker?” Pearl says. “She left her son with her family.” *Oy*, a bad example. Sophie Tucker’s son become a gambler, an *oysvorf*. Tears leak down Pearl’s cheeks. “Anna, if I had left you with your grandma but got famous like Sophie Tucker, would you say, ‘That’s Pearl, my mother, the last of the Red Hot Mamas?’ Would you be proud of me then?”

“Me, me, me, that’s all you ever say,” Anna says, like an echo of every conversation they have.

Pearl presses her lips together so she won't cry. Without her dentures, her lips sink all the way in. How will she ever make her daughter love her? "Here, Anna, here's your phone," Pearl says, and tries to hand it over to show good faith.

Anna doesn't reach for it. Pearl blinks hard. Where did Anna go? Pearl looks at her hand that she was holding the phone with. Her palm is all red, her fingers stiff. But she's holding nothing. Nothing. Anna isn't here. Anna came yesterday, or was it the day before? Or last week? *Delusional: Check.*

Pearl plunks down into the kitchen chair and puts her forehead right on the enamel table. This table is the only thing she took from her mother's house—a speckled, robin's egg blue. Anna, her Anna, without a nest. Anna. An orphan in mourning, her Anna.

Pearl pushes herself up from the table and walks over to the phone on her wall. She dials the only number that she can remember anymore. The number she gives the police when they find her outside, lost, wandering, crying. The number she gave to the firemen when she put a chicken on the stove to cook and forgot the pot. The number her super calls whenever she leaves the water running in the tub or the sink and goes for a walk.

It's Anna's voice, but not Anna. It's that... whatchamacallit? As she listens to Anna's long message, she plans what she's going to say. "Anna, I just called to tell you that you can put me in a Home. You can lock me away in a broom closet. You can give me aides. Anything to make it easier on you. Just tell me one thing, *bubeleh*, my darling Anna, how are you?"

Now there's that beep. Pearl knows she's supposed to leave a message. She gives herself a *klop* on the head. *Oy...* what the hell was she going to say?

---

*Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's poetry, short stories, and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in publications such as Mudfish, Westview, The Iowa Review, The Doctor TJ Eckleberg Review, Stone Path Review, and the Santa Fe Literary Review. Her novel, Miriam The Medium (Simon & Schuster, 2004), was nominated for the Harold U. Ribelow Award, and her poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. She currently teaches writing at UCLA Extension.*