



LEE ANN MCGUIRE

home for the heart attack

a short story by JESSICA ANYA BLAU

My father, whom everyone calls Buzzy, and Alejandro, my brother's Cuban boyfriend, are sitting at my parents' kitchen table eating gefilte fish with horseradish. My sister Anna is doing a crossword puzzle — her fourth one today. It is midnight. My mother, a lifelong smoker, is in the hospital, having suffered a "massive" heart attack. No one knows if she will live. We spent the day in her hospital room, watching her vomit, mopping up the blood that spurted from her nose, and breath-

ing in the pissy smell from her leaking catheter bag and the sour odor of death mixed with medicine. My father brushed her teeth, and my brother Emery rubbed scented lotion into her hands and feet, but the stink still remained, as if the air had been stained.

The gefilte fish is the fifth course of the birthday dinner I have prepared for Buzzy. The first course was quesadillas: two flour tortillas with slices of Monterey Jack cheese stacked

between them, fried in a pan with butter, then topped with cilantro and salsa. I used the wrong pan, though, and the cheese melted out the sides and burned. Four tortillas were lost in the process. That left only enough for each person to have one quesadilla. My brother and his boyfriend eat a lot. They would have had three each.

The second course was frozen tofu corn dogs: "Remove from package and microwave for two minutes." Emery specifically requested them after the quesadillas were gone. Buzzy fetched the mustard from the refrigerator. The corn dogs were a hit.

The third course was salad. Anna and I had bought a bag of greens at the store earlier that day: "Triple-washed for your convenience. Just open and serve." I dumped the contents into a wooden bowl and brought out a glass jar of Italian dressing. Everyone served themselves salad, using their hands to dish out portions.

The fourth course was pickles. "Chill before serving. Refrigerate after opening." Anna opened the jar and passed it around the table.

And the fifth course was gefilte fish.

We are in Santa Barbara, where the days are so sunny you'd swear a nuclear reactor has just exploded. My brother, my sister, and I grew up here, but we no longer live near our parents. We have each flown in from the East Coast, where we were still wearing weatherproof boots and scarves. Between us, my sister and I have left behind two husbands and five kids, all of whom we passionately love, but none of whom we currently miss.

I have brought a pedicure kit with me, because the last time I was in Santa Barbara my father warned me that women were getting hepatitis from pedicure instruments, even at the most exclusive salons. I will take the pedicure kit to a salon and pay a Russian woman (who was most likely an engineer or a physicist in her own country) to use it on my feet. She will laugh at my fear and say something in her own language to the other overly educated Russian women, slumped over other American women's feet. This will not bother me, because everything that happens these next few days will be overshadowed by my mother's heart attack. The pedicure itself, of course, is not important compared to the heart attack, but I insist on scheduling an appointment anyway. I cannot wear open-toed sandals without getting a pedicure, and I cannot walk around Santa Barbara in closed-toed shoes.

Alejandro doesn't love the gefilte fish, but he finishes the jar with Buzzy, perhaps in an act of solidarity. Coyotes howl outside. We all freeze, like pointing dogs, and listen. Earlier today a bobcat ran in front of the car I was driving. It dashed out of the brush and silently bounced, like Tigger in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, from one side of the road to the other.

My parents live in a Spanish-style stucco house on a stretch of mountain acres that abuts a national forest. From their land you can see the ocean spreading all the way down to Los Angeles, a hundred miles away. My mother loves it up here, where the wind blows stronger and the sun is more fierce than in the town tucked at the base of the mountain.

The house even has a name: Casa de las Ananás — House of the Pineapples.

When I am home at Casa de las Ananás, where paintings are hung three-high on the walls and there's a fireplace in each bedroom, I have a vague feeling of being lost: not lost like when you're trying to find a specific piazza in Rome, but lost like when you're a kid in the supermarket and you mistake the woman in front of you for your mother, who has disappeared down another aisle. In this house, the possibility of disaster or death always looms over me. Through the years, I have compiled and refined a list of the ten most likely ways to die at Casa de las Ananás:

1. **Death by mountain lion:** A pony down the road was eaten by one last year, and when I was eleven years old, a small boy hiking with his mother in the forest surrounding Casa de las Ananás was snatched and killed by one. Lion droppings are a frequent sight during hikes.
2. **Death by rattlesnake:** Ten years ago my mother deliberately ran over one in the car. She saved the carcass as a souvenir. Buzzy almost stepped on one about three months ago. Mom screamed, and Buzzy jumped back and shooed it away with his walking stick. It rattled at him, but didn't bite.
3. **Death by falling:** Buzzy did fall once. He was hiking with my six-year-old daughter when he slipped on some moss and tumbled over a precipice. Brushy chaparral bushes growing out from fissures in the side of the cliff broke his fall, and he landed on a small sandstone ledge, rather than plummeting to the stone bottom a couple of stories below.
4. **Death by drowning:** The stream is usually shallow, with big, jutting rocks like stepping stones, but occasionally, after a season of rains, it becomes surprisingly deep and rapid with a noisy, foaming waterfall. Two years ago a dead bear was found in it, apparently drowned.
5. **Death by bear:** If one drowned, then there must be others.
6. **Death by earthquake:** When I was a teenager, I was lying naked with my boyfriend in a cave carved out of a massive rock wall. I asked, "What do you think would happen if there were an earthquake right now?" He said, "This cave would collapse, and we'd be crushed to death." A moment later the ground was shaking. My boyfriend scrambled out of the cave, abandoning me to my fate. The cave didn't collapse, but the ledge we'd been sitting on a few minutes before broke off and smashed to the ground a hundred feet below.
7. **Death by bullet:** There's very little crime in Santa Barbara, but there is a rifle club in the nearby national forest. If one were to hike to the far end of my parents' property, and someone from the rifle club were to wander away from the target areas, it is

conceivable that one could be hit by a stray bullet.

8. **Death by fire:** Months go by in Santa Barbara with no rain, and in the summer the hot Santa Ana winds blow through town like spirits on a rampage. In the last three decades, there have been three devastating fires in the vicinity of Casa de las Ananás. My parents keep two mountain bikes in the garage, in case the road to the house is closed by fire.
9. **Death by falling rock:** There are three yellow, diamond-shaped signs on the serpentine, cliff-edged road up to the house, all with two simple words: FALLING ROCK. Often, a boulder the size of a Volkswagen will appear overnight. No one's been hit by one yet, but I can't imagine it will never happen.
10. **Death by sailing over a cliff in a car:** Buzzy is famous for looking at everything but the road as he zooms down the mountain. When I imagine Buzzy driving my mother to the hospital, I think that, at that moment, her chances of dying from a car wreck were probably equal to her chances of dying from the heart attack.

In fact, death by heart attack has never even been on the list.

The morning of the heart attack, when Buzzy was driving my mother to the hospital, she choked out a single sentence: "If you tell the kids, I'll kill you." Had she died that night, those would have been her last words. Buzzy put off calling us for a day, but finally he broke down and sheepishly phoned: "You know, I promised your mother I wouldn't tell you, but, well, she had a heart attack, and . . ."

When my siblings and I arrived late that night, she was too anesthetized to know we were there. Today, Day Three, she is alert enough to speak, and she's pissed.

"I told your father not to tell you," she says. She speaks uncharacteristically slow and slurs her words, as if her lips were numb.

"He couldn't *not* tell us," I say.

"I'm fine," she says. "Go home."

"Mom," I say, "you had a *massive* heart attack."

"Says who?"

"Says everyone!" Anna shouts. "They thought you were going to die."

"Well, if that's dying," Mom mumbles, "dying's not so bad."

No one tells her that she's still in critical condition.

The doctor comes in and confirms our story. "Your husband saved your life," he says. "Twenty minutes later and you would have died."

"If he saved my life, what do I need you for?" Her eyes are closed as she speaks, as if she doesn't have the energy to look and talk at the same time.

"It was a joint effort," the doctor says.

"Thank you," she says, and I swear she rolls her eyes under her closed lids.

Mom is sixty-two years old, but at this moment she looks eighty-two. Her face is as gray as her hair, and her eyes are puffy flesh doughnuts. She has melted somehow.

"How do I look?" she asks. It is late afternoon, Day Four, and she has finally forgiven us for flocking to her side in this time of crisis.

"Like you just woke up from a nap," Emery says. He is quieter than the rest of us and doesn't shift or fidget in his chair.

"You look beautiful," Buzzy says. Buzzy used to worry that Mom was so beautiful she would be "kidnapped by Arabs." I've never understood the Arab part. Would they find her more beautiful than, say, the Turks?

"I think you look awful," I say. "You don't look like yourself."

"She doesn't look awful," Anna says. "She looks like she just woke up."

"Give me a mirror," Mom says.

"No way," I say. "It would be too depressing."

Mom gives a breathy, weak laugh, and the nurse — there is always one in the room — looks at me askance.

We have brought the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the three books that were sitting on Mom's bedside table at home, but Mom cannot hold her head up or keep her eyes open long enough to read. Somehow it doesn't feel right to read any of these aloud. Plus, it would require a strength of concentration that none of us currently possesses. So Anna goes to the store and returns with the *National Enquirer* and the *Star*. We pass the tabloids around, reading out headlines and the captions under pictures.

"Hillary hired a private detective to follow Bill," Anna says, "and found that he has been having affairs with a string of women."

"Good thing Bill Clinton never met you," Buzzy says to Mom. "He would have been all over you."

My mother is too weak to open her eyes at the moment, but she rolls them anyway. They look like marbles under folds of ashy tissue paper.

(end of excerpt)