

# Brasalina

a short story by POE BALLANTINE

— for Mary Rogalski

For years we lived in San Diego among the blue gum trees above Missile Boulevard in the sprawling Castle Apartments, which were packed with crazed and troubled tenants, most of whom were this way, my mother insisted, because they were poor. They lit their curtains on fire, tossed wine bottles into the oleander bushes, and died from rheumatic fever or Asiatic flu. About once a month someone from the Castle Apartments would appear on the news: a cross-eyed kid would fall off a balcony, or a bearded man in a dirty T-shirt would get arrested because he was wanted in Utah. Once, Bernard Chiles, the boy downstairs, climbed on top of a five-gallon Sparkletts water bottle to steal cookies out of the cupboard, and he slipped and fell, and the bottle broke and cut him open waist to throat like a fish. His older sister Dixie would make him pull up his shirt and show me his scars.

I have only faint recollections of my father from this period, the late 1950s. He was always at work or school or bowling. My memories of my mother, however, are abundant: Look how young and pretty she is, with her bobbed brown hair, her glasses with ruby glints on the rims, and her smell, like a freshly opened box of Wheaties. Here is a picture of her setting aside the raw onions from my hamburger to spell “coo-coo” on my napkin. Here she is bringing a banana into my room after I have smarted off to her and she has sent me to bed without any supper. I fancy I can smell the ocean as we stand together out on the terrace and she tells me how my father is going to night school to earn his chemistry degree so he can get us out of these crazy apartments.

My parents bowled on Sundays at the Bowl-O-Rama across the street. They belonged to a league and were usually gone for what seemed like four or five hours. Bernard’s sister Dixie often came to watch me while my parents were away. A dumpy, green-eyed high-school dropout, Dixie kept the TV on and pressed herself against the underside of the kitchen table until her eyes rolled back in her head and she gave out a shiver and a moan. My mother spoke mistrustfully of Dixie, and more than once I heard her say something about “that girl getting her plumbing fixed by the maintenance man.” But Dixie was fun because she was restless and had no fear of sugary treats.

I was seven years old and had just started summer vacation when I learned that my brand-new grandmother from New York City was coming to stay with us for a week or two,

“to meet her new family.” Brasalina, a half-black, half-Indian Brazilian woman of twenty-one, had just married my grandfather, my father’s father, who was eighty-three and too ill to come with her on this visit. Her impending stay, even if it meant free baby-sitting for a while, was the subject of grave late-night discussions at the kitchen table. My mother, only a few years older than her new mother-in-law, seemed to take Brasalina’s visit as some kind of insult, and the conversations, to which I was privy on those warm summer nights when all the doors and windows stayed open, would go something like this:

“She’s so young,” my mother would say, her voice heavy with misgiving. “Can we trust her to baby-sit?”

“Dixie’s sixteen and headed for a home for unwed mothers.”

“Yes, but this woman’s from another *country*. She doesn’t even speak English.”

“She speaks English, dear. Remember, the Old Rascal *married* her. Give him some credit.”

“Where does he find them all?”

“More power to the Old Devil, I say” was my father’s reply. He had many other names for my grandfather, all preceded by “the Old” and spoken with restrained but unmistakable pride.

“The Old Scoundrel doesn’t have that much longer,” he would say, as if to comfort my mother. “He’s not well.”

“You’ve been saying that for three wives now.”

At last Brasalina arrived from New York City. I was eager to meet this controversial new grandmother. She was “quite a looker,” my father had confided to me; a dancer, he’d added, and a great cook, too. But nothing he’d said prepared me for seeing my grandmother descend from the plane and walk across the tarmac. Her hips writhed as if she were sustaining the orbit of an invisible hula hoop. Her breasts rose and fell in an amazing tide. She wore a yellow sun hat with a crocheted pineapple on the side, and each way she turned she melted everything in sight with her smile. She looked like a woman out of a Harry Belafonte song. I glanced at my father, whose jaw hung slack. My mother drove an elbow into his ribs. “Hello, Brasalina,” she said with a vinegary smile. “It’s so wonderful to meet you at last.”

On the trip home from the airport, Brasalina sat in the



back seat with me and replied to every question with a drawn-out, singsong “wood.”

“How are you, Brasalina?”

“I’m wood.”

My gramps was wood, and New York City was wood. I had never been to the East Coast before and imagined a singing Pinocchio forest. Asked how she liked America, she declared that it was wood, and she “like much,” but it was “too fass, like crazy chicken people.” She seemed unflappable, with that brassy smile and the constant clashing of her lashes. Whenever my parents weren’t looking, she would caress the top of my head and give me a wink and a real smile that made me feel as if I were floating on a magical island.

There was something about Brasalina, it seemed. She was “not entirely forthcoming,” I heard my mother say while Brasalina took a moment to freshen up. “And if that smile on her face had any more glass on it, I would spray it with Windex,” she added. That evening, after a roast-pork-and-boiled-broccoli dinner, my father had a few words with Brasalina in the kitchen, my mother standing nearby, arms crossed, as satisfied as I would see her for the next few days. “He’s eighty-three, Brasalina,” I heard my father say. “How long does a man

live? How long would you *hope* that he live?”

Because there were no extra bedrooms in our apartment, my grandmother and I slept together in the same bed. Alone with me in my room, she punctuated our conversation with various *oohs* and *ohhs* and frequent rebellious explosions of head-tossing laughter. She had a fragrance like a pumpkin cupcake and a figure like an African statue I’d seen at the museum of art in Balboa Park. Around my parents, she was stilted and formal, with an overexerted smile, but the moment we were alone, I might have been her long-lost little brother. “I got a wood apse, Binky,” she said, slapping her taut flank with a laugh as she looked over her shoulder into the bedroom mirror. “A women have wood meat, some day you like. Too bad you not a little older, huh? I have nine jeers when I meet my first boy.”

I could not help but stare at the soles of her feet and her palms, pink as roses. There were no black people in the Castle Apartments. She had sharp, up-swooping breasts that made train whistles go off in my head. We giggled most of the night, and when we finally fell asleep after a scolding from my mother, Brasalina held me like a doll, her arms tight around my waist.

In the morning, after refusing both Kellogg’s cornflakes

and Bisquick pancakes, Brasalina gave my father a ride to the post office, where he sorted letters all day, so she could have the car to take me to the zoo. My mother caught the bus downtown, where she was a waitress at the Steingarten Restaurant, across from the U.S. Grant Hotel.

Brasalina was a poor driver and proud of it. We had a lot of fun squealing tires, running stop signs, and driving over curbs. She dented the bumper, knocked off three of the hubcaps, and nearly ran full speed straight over a very surprised cat. "I'm kill that bug-eye pussy," she declared, with a vengeful glance in the rearview mirror. I could not remember any of my other grandmothers, but this one had to take the cake.

Down along the banks of the San Diego River, we parked off in the weeds and built a fire. Grumbling about pancakes, my grandmother Brasalina dangled her arms in the lazy brown water. All at once there was a great thrashing, and up her hands came holding a big hickory-colored rock with kicking feet — a turtle, I was delighted to discover. I coaxed its head out, as instructed, by poking a stick inside the bony collar. The turtle seized the stick, and we played tug of war for a few seconds. I wanted to name him Ben, but my new grandma whopped his head off with a pocketknife. The neck clattered back with a pathetic *splat*.

She flipped the carcass on its back and opened the shell from the underside, delicately sawing and prying. It was such a soft, sleepy creature inside, headless in its wrinkled pajamas. Carefully she slit the gray-green corpse open from the anus and set aside the steaming innards. "We have eight kind of meat in a how-you-say turtle," she said. "He tender, I'm tinkering. Jung, like you. What part you like?"

While the meat roasted on sticks, she produced a bottle of port wine from her wicker basket and poured me a glass. "Beesqueek hotcakes — *ptui*. Is tender, no?"

At the zoo later that morning we made quite a pair, our bellies full of turtle meat and shoplifted cream puffs and port wine. Though the sky was overcast, Brasalina wore her floppy yellow pineapple sun hat. My shoes were splattered with turtle blood, which was turning purple and seemed to attract ants. I was a little reckless from the port. We squawked at the monkeys and pinched our noses at the smelly elephants. The lions were all asleep, the tigers were hiding, and the hippos were farting like my father in the bathtub.

Then came the rhino, which stood motionless and alone in a cramped cage of iron bars. He was a dismal, dull old beast, head lowered as if pondering the dust, and I was wondering how Brasalina would filet him and roast him over a fire when he suddenly turned his hindquarters to us and began to hose down the crowd with urine. *Boy, is this rhinoceros in trouble*, I thought.

People were screaming and fleeing in every direction. I managed to scamper out of the line of fire just in time, but when I looked back, Brasalina was pinned by the tremendous stream. She shifted left, then right, clutching the brim of her hat with both hands, but the rhino held his mark. I have heard it said that rhinos have poor vision, but I believe this one had been practicing on a target painted on the wall.

"Son-of-a-beechie mens," Brasalina hissed, dripping and shivering from the rhino pee. "They always trying to pips on you."

There were no showers at the zoo to get Brasalina cleaned up, so we drove down to Imperial Beach, where she threw down a blanket, took off all her clothes, and dashed off into the sea. The sun broke through the clouds, and the waves lifted up as if to say hello. I had seen my mother naked once, and also a little girl of about three, but never anything as glorious as my shapely Brazilian grandmother.

That night when we returned home, my parents were sitting puffy-eyed at the table. My mother sprang from her chair. "Where have you been?" she cried.

Brasalina's mood was bright again, and she lied about a flat tire.

"What happened to your clothes?" my mother demanded.

"The rhymo," Brasalina answered with a scowl. "He ruing them."

My mother came to kneel at my side, sniffing at my neck. "Has the boy been *smoking*?"

"The only time to smoke is when you are jung," she replied haughtily. "When you get old, you cough, like him there, what's-his-name."

"I'm twenty-five," my father said.

Brasalina waved impatiently at the air.

My mother glared and led me toward the bath.

In bed that night my grandmother explained to me the brevity of life. "They tink a woman is bad because she live. You too jung to understand. You wanna smoke, Binky? Go open that window."

*(end of excerpt)*