

Short Story IV

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"The Charm"

by Rhoda Elison

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With the agonizing urge to suck on something, I walked into the nearest candy store and stood facing the huge assortment of candy bars, gum, charms, jaw breakers, red hots, life savers, and sour balls. Immediately my eyes fell upon the only sucking candy which I knew I would buy. I hurriedly put the candy in my coat pocket, paid the owner the five cents, and ran out into the biting, wintry day. My hands soon became numb and they soon sought the warmth of my pockets. I surprised myself when I felt the papery, oblong object in my pocket---I had completely forgotten about the candy; I seemed to have lost my desire to "suck on something" as soon as I bought the candy.

I then pictured the "Charms' Coffee Candy" lying in my pocket in the brown and gold cross-striped package---just as it used to lie at the bottom of my grandmother's school bag. The cloth knitting bag with the wooden handles had been converted into a bag for her notebook and grammar book when she had enrolled in the Adult Education Program at our local public school. Always, underneath her books lay a package of the coffee charms.

In the beginning, I could never understand why she liked this candy---it was so bitter! But, I chewed and sucked them because Nona did. It wasn't until just before she died that I finally enjoyed them. It also involved my copying her style of drinking coffee---black without sugar.

I can remember how she would carry her morning coffee into the living room everyday and sit by the window in "her" chair. When I think of Nona now, I always picture her sitting in the huge, soft pink chair with her

*I don't like
sucking candy
but was never
able to*

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short, round legs resting on the hassock. I usually followed her and I'd sit on the floor just behind the hassock looking up into her soft round face. Her hazel eyes told me that she was far away, thinking about other things. I used to like to think that she'd be thinking about her childhood days in Greece. I wondered what Nona looked like when she was a child---it was hard for me to imagine because I only knew her with her long, grey hair pulled back in a bun. Then Nona would turn to me, take the cup and pour some of the hot coffee into the saucer and sip it. I would watch every movement of this ritual and after a while I'd say, "Nona, can I have some?"

She would say, "Alright, but just a little. Don't tell your mother."

I would answer, "I'm a big girl now. I'm gonna be five."

And she would carefully pour some of the dark liquid into the saucer and I would wonderfully sip it. The naked coffee tasted bitter, but drinking it from the saucer just like Nona did made it taste delicious. Sometimes, I would accidentally spill it and Nona would cry out, "Bakalashom!", and quietly get up to clean the mess I made.

Then she would settle back in the chair, and after watching her for a while, I'd say, "Nona, tell me some more stories 'bout when you were a little girl in Greece."

She would shift her weight a little and her eyes got that far away look again. Then she'd look at me and smile. She'd say, "When I was a little girl in Greece, we lived on a little farm and every morning I'd take some boobanatzta, or if it was really cold some hot cut-cut, to the shephard who minded the goats on the mountainside..."

I would listen to every word she said, to every breath she took. My eyes followed her distant gaze to the Greece where Nona and the shephard lived. I had been there before---- with her other stories. She would always begin by describing

*I like
this*

the mountainside upon which her family lived. This was in Janina---a little farm area on the Turkish border. Her morning task would be to take the prepared corn meal, wither in the form of a hot cereal (cut-cut) or in the form of a bread (boobanatzta) to the shephard --- a man with a long, gray beard. As she continued the story, she would explain how the shephard would tell her stories about his childhood. When the stories were repeated, my vision and attachment to Greece deepened.

Now just as I clearly can picture the colors of the coffee candy wrapper in my pocket, I could picture her house, the mountainside, the shephard with his goats, and the warm boobanatzta. I could picture Nona's parents, my great-grandparents, giving her the food to bring to the shephard; but I could never see Nona's face as a child. I would only picture a round, little girl walking with her back to me up the green mountainside. I wondered as a child and I still wonder now about the stories my great-grandparents had told Nona. [Her father was the stern-looking "pasha" whose portrait hung over her bed. The portrait of my sweet and beautiful great-grandmother hung next to his. The man wore a fez and the woman wore Nona's smile.]

As I walked through the brisk and sunny city streets ten years after her death, I could not help but feel Nona's presence. Would I have been walking these streets if Nona had married the matchmaker's choice? Her parents had her marriage all set. But Nona had fallen in love with a boy who worked in the same factory. She defied her parents and refused to marry the one they chose for her. Her spirit would not let her lead a life she did not choose;

and so she and the boy in the factory came to the United States to live. The boy from the factory became my grandfather, ^{when} the first of the nine children born was my father. My father met my mother, and here I am---walking these streets, thinking about her.

...When Grandpa died, I was four years old. We moved in to live with Nona. I clearly saw the room we shared. Every night before bedtime, she would sit in bed reading or doing her homework. In order that I could fall asleep, she would put her old black slip over the lamp to shade the light from my eyes. ...and then I remember how she'd comfort me in my childish despair by saying, "Don't worry---today is here; make the best of it." ...and I remembered the annoyance I felt when she and my father would converse in Greek so I could not understand them ...and how I would love coming home to the Greek pastries she would bake---how sweet was the bakalava! ...how wise she seemed when I'd have a fight with my friends, and she'd say, "It doesn't matter. It's what you think of yourself that counts." ...and the picture of her braiding and combing her hair, then rolling it up into the tiny bun, flashed through my mind. ...and I smelled the wonderful, special smell of her clothing when I'd bury my head into her to hug and kiss her. ...and I never forgave myself when I once made her leave the movie theatre early because my second grade teacher said I had to be asleep every night by 7:30. ...and I could almost taste her soft, cool cheek...

...by this time, I had already unwrapped the package of Coffee Charms. I pulled off the first charm and unwrapped the cellophane paper which kept the charm fresh. It took a minute before the charm dissolved enough for me to

taste it. I rolled the hard candy around in my mouth.
As the last bit of charm completely dissolved in my mouth,
I saw Nona swallow the last drop of coffee from the saucer.

Miss Alison:

I think the recollection of the grandmother has in it some of the best writing you've done this semester. I admire the feeling there, too. But I wish that the circumstance at the beginning of the story-- and on page three (I've put a star in both places) had been more carefully elaborated. I think you might play up the fact that you are now an adult, a young woman, and that it is unusual for you to die for a sweet. I wonder why the urge for the sandy did come over you on that particular day at that particular time. Have you read Swann's Way by Proust? You should, among other reasons to see how he handles this blending of the past with the present.

I think too it would be helpful to know what kind of person you have turned into, and what kind of child you were. Do you resemble your grandmother in character? I raise these questions because I think the story ~~xxxxxxx~~ would be a better one if the human aspects of your friendship with your grandmother were presented in greater depth. Look at Nabokov's autobiography, Invitation of a Memory, a marvelous study in recollection and nostalgia.

R.R.