

Grandma's Hairy Upper Lip

Jason Zabel

Grandma's hairy upper lip is something she complains about. She groans when she looks into her tiny handheld mirror and she says that time has taken her for a ride down a dirt road. She's not beautiful like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, she says, or sexy like Marilyn Monroe perched atop a birthday cake. I don't know why my grandmother wants to be sexy or beautiful; she is old and is constantly preparing for death. She says things like, "Well, not much more than a year left now," and, "Godammit, old folks like me aren't meant for a place like this." When she talks her lips move like hairy caterpillars; "I can't wait until everyone is burning in the company of Satan!" she'll say with a smoker's cackle.

I have to cover my ears and eyes when I see her lips moving. She sits in the rocking La-Z-Boy forcing her body forward and back. She keeps her eyes connected with Judge Judy's eyes, or Judge Hatchett's, and every once in a while she screeches at the judicial misfortunes of others.

My mother will check on her when she leaves her studio to pee, and she will say, "Are you comfortable? Do you need food? What is it that you are watching?" and she will close the door. Then the music will strike up from her studio again and it will be another four hours before I see her and her clay covered face.

"Your mother is such a dirty woman, Ben," my grandmother says. "Between her and your sister, I'm not sure who the dirtier whore of a woman is." When I first asked my grandmother what a whore was she laughed and said that I knew nothing but whores. "I'll tell you when you meet a normal woman," she said with a puff of smoke.

I admired my grandmother for her smoking ability. She told me that she learned from the French how to smoke, and that this was the only thing I should learn from the French. She rolled her own cigarettes and she forever had strands of tobacco clung to her lip, stuck just below her hairs.

“And that boyfriend of your sister’s!” my grandmother says. “She’s lucky he’s been shipped off to be killed!”

“How do you know he will be killed?” I ask her.

“Because he is nothing but bad bones surrounded by bad blood,” she says. When I look at Emily’s boyfriend I can’t see his bad blood or his bad bones, so I ask her how she knows. But she has dozed off with her lit cigarette leaning against her wool sweater. I pick it up with the bright tip pointed away from my fingers and I crumple it down into the ashtray like I’m a giant crushing a building.

Last night I listened to her speak on the phone at 8:34 p.m. She spoke to the man whom mother calls her late-life beau. First they spoke about plain sex, then about mouth sex, and how Grandma wishes she didn’t have hair above her lip like a walrus. The man said he didn’t care. But she said she wanted to be attractive to him rather than just another eighty-year-old walrus woman. The man said they would meet, and five minutes later my grandmother slammed the front door without saying goodbye to anyone in the house. She took her purse, her coat, and my mother’s car. The hallway smelled of fifty-year-old perfume, so my mother assumed she was hankering for another’s touch. “That woman,” Mother whispered to herself.

This morning, with the car steaming up the driveway, my mother storms out the door.

“Where have you been with my car?” my mother demands.

“I’ve been living. You don’t even know what it’s like.”

They come in the house. My grandmother stands up straight with a fur scarf I have never seen before, the price tag flipping back and forth like an excited tail. She sucks on a cigarette and won’t look Mother in the eye. She tramples over me on the way to her recliner. Her fluorescent red lipstick is gone and her mascara is smeared just above her cheeks, as if she had been caught in the rain.

“Complete bullshit!” my mother says to me. I stand there eating a Pop-Tart and staring at the floor, wearing only my blue and red checkered boxers.

“That woman thinks she controls everyone’s life but her own.” My mother always said Grandma thought she was better than everyone else because her parents died when she was young. Grandma thought this made her more experienced with what the world could offer.

“What the hell?” my sister says as she steps into the kitchen. Her hair is piled on top of her head and kept down with a bright blue hairband. “Can I not fucking sleep in one morning in this house?” She wears a big yellow shirt that looks like a poncho when I blur my eyes. Her boyfriend left a week ago to die. My sister has been angry ever since.

“What the hell!” I say to my mother in agreement, even though I was already awake and looking at my telephone journal when the screaming began. I was updating last night’s entry about Grandma’s whoring. It’s entry #462, and is exactly three and one half pages long in dialogue with two pages of my comments.

It has been one year and two months that I’ve been keeping my telephone journal now. Once my mother found the journal and began reading

it. She told me that it was good, original work, and she asked me if I was going to tell anyone about her affair. I told her that my journal was my business and my study and that some day I might publish it or offer it as a historical document. She frowned at this, patted my head like a father might, and left my room.

I first got the idea for the journal after watching an episode of Judge Judy with my grandma. The plaintiff recorded her boyfriend every time he was on the phone and was able to find out that he had been cheating on her with her sister. Judge Judy grew large eyes and flaring nostrils at this discovery, and she told the man that more idiots would be caught if everyone had mates as clever as his. I have been tracking all telephone conversations in and out of my house ever since.

The only person who would ever catch me was my sister. My grandmother was too old to hear the clicking of my receiver picking up and my mother didn't mind my listening. I had to be quick if I wanted to listen to my sister. I would snatch up the phone at the exact same time as her. Her conversations were always the same, and there weren't too many words to record. It was mostly me writing the word *crying* in parenthesis.

Conversation # 322, Emily and Brad

E: I can't believe how soon you're leaving. (Crying)

B: I'm sorry . . .

E: This—this just fucking sucks. (Crying, nose sniffing)

B: I know. (Silence)

E: I don't know what I'm going to do. (Quiet sob followed by loud, fluid nose blowing) I need you.

B: It's not like I won't be back. Just two years.

E: (Sobbing) You're going to miss so much.

My sister would then cry until he would say that he had to eat dinner, play baseball, or go to work. Then I walk by her room for my conversation follow-up entry and I mark her reactions. Inside her room I hear sniffing or crying, sometimes silence.

“Can I come in?” I might say.

“What do you want?”

“I need paper for school,” I tell her. She would open the door and throw out a handful of loose leaf paper, college ruled, and I would get a glimpse of her bright red, swollen eyes. In my entry, I verify that all physical features suggest that Emily is extremely upset. A review of my telephone journal tells me that Emily is extremely upset five out of every six calls.

Today I am going to school with Emily. My grandmother says that she drives like a rabid monkey with half a bottle of Jack Daniel’s in her. She swerves across lanes and she honks at slow-moving cars to the tune of her favorite songs. Her car sounds as if it is going to explode when accelerating, but she pushes the gas pedal down until she knows she is just barely able to avoid a disaster. We drive past her boyfriend’s house and she tells me how he’s probably already dead like Grandma says. She lights a cigarette, crinkles her face, and then puts it out without even getting a quarter of the way through.

“Grandma wouldn’t like that,” I say.

“Like what?” she says.

“You didn’t even get halfway through.”

“Do you want me to die of cancer?”

“It’s just not very French,” I say.

We drive the long way to school, past the mall and the library. We listen to eighties girl punk while my sister's bright blue hoop earrings swing as we come to stops. Just past the scent of her extinguished cigarette, I smell her Satsuma perfume and realize that I don't even know what a Satsuma is. I imagine it to be an orange-like fruit only grown behind waterfalls somewhere in Asia. She drops me off at school and tells me to take candy from strangers and to make friends with everyone I see, especially older men with dark sunglasses and unkempt beards. "Only if they have candy," I tell her.

Later she picks me up and drives me home, now faster than before. Inside my head I hear myself squealing and whimpering when we hit bumps that send us flying. Her car squeaks when she turns and I cover my eyes with my hands until I know we've reached our driveway. Inside Grandma is watching her courtroom drama and Mom is in the studio. The phone rings and I run to my room and wait until I hear my sister pick up. I get out my notebook. It's her friend Beth on the other end, the girl my grandma moans about.

Conversation # 465 Emily and Beth

B: Well, what are you going to do?

E: How the hell should I know?

B: How long has it been?

E: Two months.

B: See what the doctor says. (Pause) Did Brad write a letter back?

B: He hasn't written back yet.

E: What do other people do?

B: They figure things out.

E: It's just something that's going to happen. I decided that.

(Pause)

B: Think about it more.

E: (Crying) There's nothing to think about. You'll go with me tomorrow for sure?

B: I can go after school. How long will it take? I'll have a lot of homework.

E: I don't know how long the doctor will take. . . . (Pause) I will call you after school.

B: All right.

Then the phone clicks and I run to Emily's room. I press my ear to the door. My heart feels as if it has fins and is trying to paddle to my right hand. I can't hear a thing until the handle turns and I fall forward into her stomach, then down onto my hands. Emily looks at me long enough for me to focus on her cherry face and then she steps over me on her way to the bathroom.

We gather around the kitchen table as if we haven't already eaten dinner. I bring a small notebook for doodles and observations. My mother sits at the head of the table, her face and hands clean. Tonight I can see the white of her nails and the green of her eyes. I can tell where her lips curve and connect. My grandmother sits slouched with a fresh cigarette that lets lazy chains of smoke slide to the ceiling. My father is out of town for business, making capital from capital. My sister sits straight up with her hair and eyes down.

"What do you expect from a family of whores?" my grandmother asks.

"This isn't about blaming Emily," my mother says.

“Of course it is. The fact is that she’s ruined her life. Her baby’s father is as good as dead; she hasn’t an education, skills, or money. She’s ruined.”

“Brad is not dead,” my mother insists.

“Well, there’s no use in thinking he’s alive,” Grandma says. Her eyes have gotten small and mouse-like. Ashes float to the ground when she talks.

“We are going to support Emily in whatever she decides to do.”

“Get rid of it,” says Grandma. “It’s not worth it.”

“That’s not fair to say. It’s her decision,” says Mother. Emily’s head falls to the table with a quiet bump.

“Stop talking about it like that,” Emily says to the table. “Both of you.” And then there is silence like one hears only in the morning before people begin to drive to work or cut their grass. “There is no debate.”

My sister looks stern and old, like a clearheaded version of my mother. The television in the other room rings with game show prizes and people vying for a chance at a million dollars. Emily stares at the reflection of herself in the window and refuses to look anyone else in the face. The kitchen smells of burnt apple pie and blown-out candles. My grandmother puts out her cigarette and flips through a magazine without looking at anything on the pages. I jot down notes and draw a picture of my mother looking cranky and sharp. My sister sits still. My mother sits quietly. My grandma flips pages.

Conversation # 502, Emily and Brad

E: Hello?

B: Hey.

E: I was wondering when you would be able to call.

B: Well, finally, yeah. What's going on?

E: (Crying) I told everyone. (Crying)

B: Well, what, what did they say? (Pause)

E: They think I have a decision to make. (Sobs)

B: It's not like I'm even there to help you decide.

E: What? (Sniffles)

B: I don't know—we just need to think.

E: Okay. (Pause)

B: Will you just be happy?

E: Yeah.

B: Just think of things that make you happy. (Pause) You can be
happy.

E: I know that I can be happy. (Pause)

B: Well, that's good—as long as you have that. (Pause) How is
everything—you know, aside from that?

E: Everything is fine.

B: See, everything else is okay at least.

E: Yeah—well, (Pause), what is that noise? (Sniffing) Ben! Get
off the phone! Can I not talk for one min—

Four months later I rush to the phone and dial 911 and scream that the baby is coming and it isn't supposed to. They tell me to be calm, to find the mother and to tell her that they are going to send help to us. I run to the bedroom where my mom lays on the floor next to my sister, both of them screaming and panting. My mom looks at me without asking, *when will they be here?* but I say, "They will be here soon."

My grandma walks back and forth in the hallway. She yells things like, “It just gets worse and worse,” while big bursts of smoke come out of the cigarette stuck to her lip. She looks like an old fashioned locomotive. Her big pink slippers match her bright pink robe and her date sits in the living room asking me what he can do. I tell him that help is on the way and that he can leave, but he insists with his big silver eyebrows that he stay until help has arrived. So he sits on the couch with his lean legs spread apart and arched like a spider’s.

In the room I hear some screaming and some whelping. My mother says things like, “This will be a beautiful experience,” and then my sister screams and grabs hold of her bed as if she is holding on to monkey bars. My mother asks her, “Is this what you expected it would be like?” She looks as if she is crying with a smile instead of a frown.

The telephone rings. It is my father, on business in Texas. He says that he hopes everything goes well and that if the baby would have come as planned he would have been there to see it. He talks with my grandmother about how things are going to be different with a child’s goo-gooing and gaw-gawing in the house. In the background my father can hear my sister’s screaming and he tells my grandmother that she should go and comfort her and do motherly things.

“People are different now,” she says into the receiver. “She doesn’t want me there and I don’t want to be there.” They finish their conversation to the sound of sirens. A sigh comes from my mother who cries as if she is a siren herself. The men slide into our house as if they have arrived for meatloaf dinner. They lift my spastic sister onto a wheelchair and begin making their way to the door, taking a tour around the house before exiting.

My mother and I run for the car, opening the doors fast and yelling for my grandmother to hurry up. She says goodbye to her late-life beau and walks to the car. My mother bites her nails on one hand and drives with the other. She tells me she is excited and that lots of babies come this early. Now my mother looks like my sister rather than my sister looking like her. Her earrings swing like Emily's, and the car jerks forward and back as if she has lost all concept of gradually increasing and decreasing speed.

We pull up to the hospital and run to the doors without waiting for Grandmother. I trip on a bright yellow curb with the word *CAUTION* written over it in bold black font. I put my feet back in place and begin pushing at the doors that say *PULL*. Inside we notice nothing but the woman at the front desk. She's a white blur wearing a blue sweater and she directs us to my sister.

Upstairs we wait while we hear screaming like no other kind of screaming. It's that pushing scream where everyone else is silent and holding their breath until the screaming stops, only to begin again on repeat. My mother goes inside the room while I wait outside with my fingers and legs crossed. I have my telephone journal in my backpack in the car, and I think about the conversations that will occur over the next few months. They will say things like, *How big is she?* and, *What a thrill it must be.* My father might call more often or be away less on business. My grandma might call her friends to brag of the new life. Eventually, Emily will move out and be a mother just like our mother, and the baby's father will be away just like our father.

My grandmother sits next to me and begins complaining about the color of the hospital walls. She thinks the halls are unorganized and the staff is helpless. She still wears her pink slippers and robe, and she still looks

as if she's smoking a cigarette, even though someone made her squish it at the door.

There is screaming from the room and a long mellow pause.

My mother comes out with her hand on her mouth, her fingers catching the tears descending from her eyes. Her hair is all over and her eyes are open wide as if she's just smelled the cologne of her dead father.

"The baby is dead," says my mother. She clasps her mouth extra tight. "She's dead and little."

My grandma folds her legs and puts her face in her hands. I sit still with my fingers crossed; they now look white and permanently fixed. My mother sits and cries like I've seen her do before, her soft moan eventually brings her back into the room where my sister lays exhausted, white-faced and misled. Tears fall from my face and I can't do anything to stop them. I don't even try.

I hear more crying. This is the type that sounds like the crier is choking because it's hard to breathe. I hear conversations between doctors and nurses. They sound like they are down the hall but I see them just across the room. A nurse in yellow looks at me with a smile but glances away when she sees my eyes. The lower half of her face changes from a half-moon to a twisted line.

Now my grandmother is pacing like she did before the baby came. Three men sit across the room with baby magazines resting on their laps. Their heads turn from Grandma when she moves in their direction.

"Think of it," my grandmother says quietly. Her hands are at her hips. She looks at me like she wants to say something important. With her eyes squinted and wrinkly, she says that good things are only granted to people who really need them. She looks at the wall and tells me that she's

going outside for a cigarette. She says I should tell my mother she will be back later to take care of them. I stop crying but now my face feels dry and heavy. I sit outside until they take the dead baby away.

My mother looks shocked to see me when I walk into the room where my sister lays. Mother straightens out her slumped back and dabs at her eyes. Her chair is crooked and angled toward my sister. My mother's hands hold tight to wispy pieces of torn up toilet paper that have black stains from her mascara. My sister is illuminated from the fluorescent light above her. She looks more yellow than anyone I've ever seen. My mother invites me to her lap, making me feel younger than I really am. She holds around my waist with her hands clasped in front of me. She leans on my back. I feel her tears through my shirt; when they first fall they are warm, but it doesn't take long before they cool.

My sister has stopped crying loudly because her voice has run out. She breathes noisy, thick breaths. A female nurse sits on the other side of the bed patting her hand. A man with a pitch black suit comes in to ask questions that no one wants to answer. He says that he understands it's a difficult time. When he stops talking I grab my sister's bony hand and tell her it's cold. She nods her head once and looks blankly at her feet. Her eyes open wide even though she looks at nothing. My mother sits back. "Everything will be okay," she says. The man with the black suit nods his head.