

## Without Junior

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Mrs. Spinelli says I'm babying myself, which I guess I am, but isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing? Mrs. Spinelli says I should be getting up early, which really means early enough to make her coffee before she drags her butt out of bed. Mrs. Spinelli says I should be going out and getting exercise, which really means me going out to Norristown News and getting her copy of the *Inquirer* so she can have it with her java. And Mrs. Spinelli says I'm not supposed to stop at Carm's for a water ice on the way home because she says it's bad for me, which really means that I'm not supposed to talk to Carm because Carm loves to dish.

Like there's even going to be something that Carm's got to spill on Mrs. Spinelli. Like anybody really cares enough to even talk about Mrs. Spinelli. But there I go with my mouth again, and I should know better by now. I guess Mrs. Spinelli and Pops have been real nice to me. Especially Pops. But Pops, he's great to everybody. Even people just passing by will stop and say, "Hey, Pops, how you doin'?" He always smiles and tells them, "Just as fine as can be expected." Maybe he doesn't even know them, but it seems like the whole world knows Mr. Spinelli, and to the whole world he's always just Pops and he's always just as fine as can be expected. A real nice guy. You know what I'm saying?

And Pops, he never asks me for anything. He just lets me be. He's really nice like that, always looking out for me, but not like so I can see him. Like I'll be sitting on the stoop and some gooner'll come by and sound off wise to me like, "Hey, honey, ain't I seen you servin' drinks down at Caesar's or the Taj?" and all of a sudden out of nowhere there's Pops saying, "You talkin' to my daughter in law, Sport?" and the guy'll make himself scarce real fast. And Pops, he'll just go back inside and he won't say anything, or maybe he'll just give me a wink or say something nice like, "Well, you're almost my daughter in law." Not like Mrs. Spinelli, who's always onto me about something, like when I miss a doctor's appointment and she blows her cork.

"You don't care," Mrs. Spinelli will say, looking at me with her face all scrunched up like she's trying to get that same look Pops flashes at those gooners, but on Mrs. Spinelli it just looks like she's gotta pee real bad or something. "You don't care," she'll say if she catches me lighting up a cig or if she sees me having a beer. "You don't care a thing about what happens to him," Mrs. Spinelli will say, which for Mrs. Spinelli really means I'm not supposed to have any fun.

Not Pops. If he says anything, it comes from the heart. Like he'll look me up and down real slow and say, "You know, Daria, you ain't blowing up all big and fat like most women. You still look real fine." Even if it doesn't come out just right, I know Pops means it nice. Like when he brought me this TV, a really nice 28-inch Sony, with stereo sound and everything, for my room. He's got these two gooners from the gravel company hefting it up the stoop and he yells out, "Hey, Daria, could you use something like this?"

And I can't believe my eyes and I say, "Yo, Pops, where'd you get something like this?"

And Pops, he just shrugs and gives me that little wink and says, "Oh, I dunno. It fell offa back of a truck or something." And okay, so I don't know where this Sony comes from, but Pops, he's got these two gooners carrying it up those twisty stairs to my room and the whole time they're setting it up, he's just smiling and saying stuff like, "Don't that look nice?" and "Ain't that swell?" So I don't ask Pops any more about it. And having the Sony in my room means I don't have to sit with Mrs. Spinelli in the living room if I want to watch television, and that's real nice. But that's just the way Pops is.

Pops was the only one who didn't have a cow when Junior and I said we were getting married. Pops, he just clapped his hands together and said, "Ain't that swell?" Not Mrs. Spinelli. Junior told me she wore a path in the sidewalk going back and forth to Saint Anthony's, going to mass, going to confession, and going to pray, but probably mostly just going to talk with all the other old guinea hens about her rotten life. Junior told me that for a while she even stopped eating. But that's just the way she is.

It's because I'm not Italian and I don't live on their side of the river. See, all the Italians have lived on the north side of the river in Norristown ever since anybody can remember, while me and everybody else whose families came from Russia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, or Bulgaria or any of those other "ia" countries live on the south side in Bridgeport. And the two sides of the river, they don't mix it up much. That's just the way it's always been.

So when my folks found out that I got all jammed up with a guy from Norristown, they were just as bad as Mrs. Spinelli, my mom dragging me down to Saint John the Baptist to talk to Father Michael and my dad, who's never had a nice word for me anyway, going out of his way to tell me stories about how

Italians never amount to anything, and the both of them bringing the whole family over for dinners every Sunday, and I mean the whole family, not just my sisters, but Uncle Stephen and Aunt Theresa, Uncle Stan and Aunt Bella, and cousins out the wazoo, all of them sitting around the table going on about the importance of family, like I didn't know it wasn't some big set up my mom and dad had put them up to. And every day, them telling me not even to set foot in Norristown, not even to walk down by the river. And my dad saying he'd give it to me good, which wouldn't be anything new anyway. And my mom grilling me about whether I have to get married. And I don't tell her anything. And maybe she doesn't find out. But one night I come home and there's a bunch of paper bags from the Super Fresh sitting on the stoop with all my clothes in them and nobody's answering the door no matter how long I knock, and when I start yelling for my mom to open up, nobody comes. And all the neighbors, they just ignore it, even Mrs. Svoboda across the street who always throws open her window and starts screeching like an alley cat in heat whenever you even so much as have a conversation out on the sidewalk, so I know they've all agreed, and that I'd better be looking for a new place to hang my hat. And just about then Pops and Junior come tooling up in Pops' old Caddy, and they're joking around like nothing's happened, asking me if I need a lift, and the next thing I know me and the Super Fresh bags are in the back of the Caddy zooming across the bridge headed for the Spinellis' in Norristown. Of course, Mrs. Spinelli wasn't too happy about me moving in. She made them put me up on the third floor that was Junior's Grandma's old room and is more like an attic. At first she didn't even want me coming downstairs, but I think Pops settled her down so pretty soon she was letting me come into the kitchen and sit in the living room, and that's the way it was, and that's the way I thought it would stay, which, of course, isn't the way it went at all.

But that's what's so funny about the way things always turn out. Whatever you expect, no matter if you start thinking about the absolute worst thing in the world or you're dreaming about a really happy ending, none of that'll happen because it's always the things you don't think about that end up happening. That's the way it was with me and Junior to start out with, and me and the Spinellis later on. I never expected any of that stuff to happen. It's not like I wanted to get jammed up with Junior, but I guess I just wasn't thinking about it. And there it is. But it wasn't so bad, I guess, because me and Junior really were in love.

Even before I really knew him, Junior was always a sweetie. He used to always call me if I'd be passing him on the sidewalk down by Carm's where he'd be hanging. "Hey, Daria," he'd say. "You're sure looking fine today." And that was okay because Junior, he was no low rent Guido. He'd buy me a water ice, and we'd sit and talk. And he always acted right, not grabbing at me, treat-

ing me with respect, asking me about what I was doing, about my family and junk, so I could tell he was really interested in me. And Junior, he had a lot going for him, not just his looks either. He was smart. He could have gone to college if he'd wanted. But he just wanted to work at the gravel company with Pops. He always said he was just waiting for an opening, and in the meantime, he'd just try to stay in shape. He was in such great shape, too. In high school, Junior lettered in football and basketball and wrestling and track. They let him play two sports in winter just because he was so good. I mean, all you had to do was see Junior run and you could tell.

Running, Junior barely touched the ground, slipping by so fast and light, taking these big leaps, looking like he'd just bounce off his next step and keep going, flying up into the air like in a dream or something. And he'd always be grinning, as if it was nothing at all, this big, kid smile, all innocent and sweet, like those paintings of baby angels. I used to love to watch him, especially playing basketball, him wearing just shorts and a tee shirt. He had this black hair, all straight, but not limp, still with lots of body. It would drop down over his forehead while he was dribbling the ball and, real casual like, he'd just take his free hand and brush it away and he'd give that smile, like he knew you were watching him and the smile was just for you, and then he'd just lift up into the air like there were strings attached to him and float for the longest time. And when he'd let go the ball, he'd never miss, making it all look so easy. I loved to watch him play ball. Not wrestling, though. There was no running there. There was no place to run to. I hated seeing him out there on the mat, all sweaty, pale from dieting so he could make weight, wrapped around some other guy tighter and closer even than he'd wrap around me. The two of them would strain and grunt, and there'd be these long waits where it looked like nothing was happening, except Junior told me that's when everything happened, and then all of a sudden, they'd start grabbing, trying to flip each other over, and you'd hear the squealy sound of their sweaty skin on the mat, and Junior'd have this look on his face like it hurt real bad inside, like when you've got cramps or something, making me wonder why someone would like something that hurt so much. But I never asked Junior why he wrestled because he liked it so much that if I asked him, he might get really pissed at me. Besides, I never really thought about it that much because all guys love sports.

So there's something else I never thought about, the way Junior loved sports, and that probably had as much to do as anything with how things turned out, because if Junior hadn't loved sports so much, he never even would have been there in the park in the first place and nothing would have happened. But even if I'd thought about sports, I probably never would have thought about why he always had to go over to the north side every afternoon

to play. I know you're probably thinking a person'd have to be off his nut to even be on the north side of Norristown without riding inside an armored car or something, but Junior said that the brothers on the north side were the best players and that pick-up games really kept him sharp. He said he loved the action over there. See, it didn't matter to Junior that those guys were black. That's just the way Junior was. I guess that's another one of those things I didn't think about, that Junior just loved everybody, whoever they were, and so he trusted them. And that had a lot to do with how things turned out, because if he hadn't loved everybody so much, and trusted them, he never would've been over there. It was pretty obvious he loved me, too, if you know what I mean. But I guess I was pretty wasted at the time, so I wasn't thinking too good, and I guess Junior was trusting that I was, and that's what got us into our jam, too. But not thinking was pretty much a full-time thing sometimes for Junior. I mean, he did love to goof. Not that it jammed him up, though, because he was young and in such great shape that it really didn't get to him. He could come home for dinner at six or seven all messed up, and he'd just give Mrs. Spinelli one of those big, slurpy kisses on the neck and say, "Aw, Ma, who loves you more than me?" and she'd just like melt down right there in the kitchen and forget all about how she'd been bitching at me all afternoon about where he was and how worried she was. Even if he'd just sort of sit there all through dinner like he was ready to nod, as soon as I'd done the dishes, she'd be telling me go to the Super Fresh to get all this stuff so she could make sauce for Junior the next night. That's just the way Junior was, loving everybody so much that they just had to love him back. That's why I know it must've been an accident, because nobody would've done anything to Junior on purpose.

Junior's friend Ricky tells me that Pops drives to the north side every night now. Everybody knows about it, Ricky says, that Pops just cruises real slow around the park, driving his Caddy around the block again and again and again with the windows down, and if anybody even comes close to the curb, Ricky says, Pops'll pull over in case they want to talk to him, but nobody ever does, Ricky says, because they're not about to talk to some scary old Guido in a Caddy, but I don't get Pops as scary. He's always wearing a big smile when he comes walking up the street at night and sees me. "Hey Daria," he'll always yell. "How you doin'?"

"As fine as can be expected," I'll tell him, and he likes that because it's like I'm saying what he always says and it's like a joke between us, not like it is with Mrs. Spinelli, who's always acting like a cop or something these days. She's started walking with me to the pre-natal clinic at Sacred Heart Hospital just because she thinks I'll try and blow off the classes if she's not there. Like she had to go to any classes before she had Junior? "This is going to be different," Mrs. Spinelli says. "He's going to have everything." He? Like Mrs.

Spinelli's already got it figured that it's going to be a boy? She wishes. Like everything else, Mrs. Spinelli doesn't know anything, even if she thinks she does, like when she caught me having a beer and went totally ballistic, like a single beer is going to make a difference, but she goes on this incredible tear, screaming about how bad it is and how booze and drugs are messing up kids, and pretty soon she's crying and sobbing, and shaking all over, and she looks up at me and says it again, "You don't care. You don't care a thing about what happens to him."

She's just getting nuttier all the time. I mean, she got out all Junior's baby clothes, like I couldn't believe she'd even kept them, and she put them in the drawers in Junior's room. She says that I won't need to buy any because they'll be just perfect. She tells me how well they fit Junior when he was a baby, going on and on about how he was such a beautiful baby and how she's going to take such good care of her new baby. Her baby? And she's all the time pulling even more baby junk out of the basement. She made Pops get rid of Junior's bed and haul up this old wooden baby bed, the kind with the bars on the sides, and set it where Junior's bed used to be. So, the baby's going to sleep in Junior's room while I'm in the attic? Yeah, Mrs. Spinelli says, because he'll get all my germs or something, and it's not even like I have anything. It's like she doesn't want me to get near my own baby. So Junior's room just keeps getting freakier. All Junior's old stuff is still hanging on the walls and everything, but with all this baby junk in the drawers and closet.

Mrs. Spinelli is already telling me that Junior went to pre-school at Saint Anthony's and that's where the baby's got to go because of how perfect Junior was when he was a baby. I'm not going to get into it with her, but it's not like that Junior was perfect, I mean, he was no saint, okay? For instance, if he was so perfect like Mrs. Spinelli says, why wasn't he going to Boys Catholic? Because they threw his butt out of there in the seventh grade, that's why. And I don't want to see my baby getting beat up by the sisters like Junior always said he was. Not that going to public school is any bargain because I went there and still the only job I could get was clerking at the Day 'n Night which pays hardly anything at all and is why I still had to stay with the Spinellis in the first place but then I had to quit anyway when my feet started swelling up so much from standing up all the time.

I guess staying here isn't so bad as long as I've got Pops sticking up for me, telling her she should lay off. Now that it's summer, I sit out on the stoop at night and wait for Pops to come back from the north side. It's cooler than upstairs in Grandma's old room, so I'll sit there and pick at the paint that's peeling off the rail coming up the steps or toss pebbles into the storm drain at the curb, waiting for him to come up the walk and he'll always yell, "Hey Daria, how you doin'?"

"As fine as can be expected," I'll tell him, and he'll come and tell me how great I still look and stroke my belly and tell me how great it feels that there's life cooking up inside me. Some nights we'll just sit there on the stoop together, me and Pops, me with my back up against his knees and him with his hands resting on my belly, sometimes moving them up and down, real soft and gentle, and I'll look at the stars, even though you can't really see too many because of the street lights. But when it gets real still, I can almost pretend I see stars gleaming up there, millions of them, and I try to imagine that heaven's up there, the way they used to tell us it was, and that Junior's up there. And sometimes Pops'll tell me about what it was like when he was a kid, how his parents leaned on him to finish high school so he wouldn't have to work with his dad at the gravel company, but Pops says that's all he ever really wanted to do. "You can't tell nobody what to do when they're that age," Pops says. So Pops ended up at the gravel company, and he says Junior would've done the same thing, and Pops says that it's too bad because Junior could've done better. "He was a smart kid," Pops'll say. "With what he was doing, he might've turned out to have a head for business, too." Which I don't get because it didn't look to me like Junior was doing anything, but Pops'll just pat my belly and hum a tune, usually something by the Chairman of the Board. That's what he calls Frank Sinatra. And he'll sing a few bars of "High Hopes" or "September of My Years" and tell me that nobody sings like the Chairman, nobody. And we'll just sit there together and I'll lay my head back against his knees and close my eyes while he hums and takes his big hands and strokes me real gentle, and I just let my mind wander and pretend that it's Junior who's holding me and that they're his hands stroking me like that in the hot, damp summer night.

Oh, I tried going back to see my folks, maybe patch things up and ditch Mrs. Spinelli, but you can guess how that went. It being Monday morning, everybody's garbage was lined up on the curb, and the stoops of the rowhouses were all still white because everybody had scrubbed them on Sunday and, they hadn't had a chance to get sooty yet. I guess my Mom wasn't expecting me because she actually opened the door until she saw who it was. "Hi Ma," I said, trying to be real casual, as if nothing had happened or anything.

She was already closing the door, but left a little crack open, and looked me up and down. "I guess nobody's got any questions anymore about why you were getting married," she said, and she slammed the door.

I didn't even get a chance to tell her about Junior. And it's not like I'm a big crier, but I started getting all tight in my chest. I really didn't want to start bawling right there on the stoop, but since I've been pregnant, I cry a lot and never know why. Next thing I know, I'm sitting on the steps jerking up and down and snorting with the tears pouring out, and I don't know if it's because my mom and dad threw me out, or on account of Junior dying like he did,

which sometimes sounds to me like something you'd hear about on TV except that this happened to me so it was a lot more real, but I just couldn't stop crying. I remember hearing it echo off the walls on the other side of the street and that just made me cry some more, and I was so all alone there. Mrs. Svoboda didn't even open a window to yell at me. I was feeling pretty sick. The baby was moving around and I remember thinking to myself that this just wasn't the way I thought things would turn out, which of course is the way they always do.

Like the day the police came to the Spinellis. I remember we were keeping dinner for Junior and I sure wasn't expecting any cop to come to the door, so of course that's when this cop comes to the door and asks if he can talk to Pops, and he and Pops go out on the stoop, and I didn't think there was anything too weird about that because people are always coming around to talk to Pops, but Pops comes back inside and tells Mrs. Spinelli to go upstairs, which he never does, and then he says to me, "Daria, we gotta talk," and I knew right then that something I hadn't thought about was going to happen.

Pops took me real gentle by the arm and sort of guided me into the living room. I remember he sat me down on the sofa right so I was looking at the picture of the Blessed Virgin on the wall. "A real bad thing has happened, Daria," he said. He sat down next to me, real slow. I remember he wouldn't look me in the eyes, but kept staring away, out the front window to the street. "A real bad thing has happened to Junior," he said.

I still miss Junior a lot, almost all the time. I don't really have anybody to do stuff or hang with because most of the time, I used to hang and do stuff with Junior. Before I was pregnant, we'd hang at Carm's and he'd buy me water ices and take all his phone calls from his friends there because he said Mrs. Spinelli always got steamed if he tied up the phone at home. Sometimes he'd get us a couple of quarts of beer, and we might do a blunt and wander down to the river where we could make out, but usually by about four he'd have to go to the north side, and he'd take off, and I'd usually go to work at the Day 'n Night because I never did get put on any day shifts. But that was okay because that way I could hang with Junior. I always tried not to get too wasted so I could still go to work, and Junior, he was in such good shape, he could just handle it or else do a little flake, which he always seemed to have, and that would snap him right back up.

Without Junior and especially since I quit my job, mostly all I have to do is listen to Mrs. Spinelli yell at me about how I don't care and how wonderful Junior was and how I'm dishonoring him by going out of the house and how I shouldn't even talk to some guy on the street and how I'm wrecking my baby's life. And the hotter it gets this summer, the more her voice just drives me crazy. It's so hot I can hardly stand it up there in Grandma's room. There's



air conditioners in the windows on the first and second floor, but none of that gets upstairs. So some nights, if it's really hot, I'll sneak down to Junior's room, pull the little mattress out of the baby bed and put it on the floor and sleep on that just because it's cooler and because being in there makes me think of Junior. When I first moved in and I wasn't so pregnant and I was still horny all the time, I'd creep down to fool around, always real late, after I was sure the Spinellis had gone to bed. I guess Junior wasn't as hot for me as before, but I could play with him and make him get real big and then he'd usually want me.

And because it's so hot and because Mrs. Spinelli is driving me so crazy, I just go down and hang at Carm's. Carm, she's got a theory. First, she says, all men just think with their dicks. And second, most women deserve what they get. Carm says women never see what's going on for one reason, on account of they really don't want to. "Just like you with that Junior Spinelli," she says.

And I say, "Like there was something going on with Junior?" and Carm just rolls her eyes, pats my belly, scoops me up a free water ice. So I tell her my theory, about how things never work out the way you think they will. And then I wonder if that means you might as well not think about stuff at all. ♦