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But Gods Eat Grapes

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# *But Gods Eat Grapes*

A Novel

Amy Beam

## *D*isclaimers...

Nattie's sole life purpose was to maintain her natural born perfection.

She told me this every day.

So what did that leave me?

Well, as soon as I acquired the brains to do so, I strove to avoid Nattie. There was just one tiny miniscule glitch. No sane person could avoid the epitome of perfection when perfection was what everyone strove to attain, and, thanks to my Grandpa Barton, perfection was possible in the year 2022.

Nattie had turned twenty-three the year my Grandpa Barton created his pills. She was undeservedly gorgeous before the drugs, but once those chalky hormones hit her bloodstream, guys dropped dead when she walked past.

They simply forgot to breath.

Pretty high standards when your mom is Vana White.

Even worse is when she knows it.

Plus, Grandpa's pill meant Nattie would never age, or rather, she *would* age, but she would never *look* like she was aging. None of us would. As long as people kept swallowing this pill with their morning juice, they would never have the wrinkles or age spots or gray hair. Yes, balding, too, became obsolete.

Even sixty years since 2022, Nattie was still the tall blue eyed blonde the world worshiped. Biologically eighty two, but forever twenty-one, she had beguiled the world: Skyline billboards, Internet homepages, TV commercials, that same butterscotch hair, iron blue eyes, satin skin and tantalizing smile.

How could I avoid *that*? Even when I left the house my mother was always *there*.

Standing in my bathroom now, hours before the sunrise, the 3 am orb is casting its vain attempt at sunlight. A blue haze dances in the dark and I glance through the mirror, reflecting.

I remembered. There *was* a time when I *had* ablated Nattie's presence. I simply gave my mother reason to choose avoiding *me*, for, only through avoiding me could she then maintain her ever-perfect reputation.

I smiled. How I had angered Nattie so, for I had always come with the one disclaimer:  
I was born with yellow skin...

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**Table of Contents****Part One**

Chapter 1: The Promise.....	6
Chapter 2: Barton Breakthrough.....	14
Chapter 3: Goddesses.....	18
Chapter 4: Morning Light.....	29
Chapter 5: College.....	35
Chapter 6: Chemistry.....	43
Chapter 7: Booty Calls.....	48
Chapter 8: Truth or Dare.....	54
Chapter 9: Dying Arts.....	65
Chapter 10: All Hollow's Eve.....	72
Chapter 11: Pretenses.....	81

**Part Two**

Chapter 12: Time.....	94
Chapter 13: Promises.....	110
Chapter 14: Saulesse.....	119
Chapter 15: Truce and Lies.....	124

**Part Three**

Chapter 16: Sunbursts.....	130
Chapter 17: Months.....	136
Chapter 18: Treading, dreading.....	153
Chapter 19: Cult-ure.....	158
Chapter 20: Mirrors.....	165
Chapter 21: 2091.....	169

# Chapter One

## *The Promise*

"Docs called it jaundice," Grandpa teased me affectionately." The White Coats told your mother and I to sit you down right there in front of our bay window," he continued, "Let you soak up the rays on that yellow skin of yours. That's how you got so much sunshine in you."

Leave it to my Grandpa to turn something as disgusting as a baby's over spewing bile into my character trait.

Grandpa was a tall, lean, freckly-faced kid. He always grinned from ear to ear and his skin gleamed with life. He had deep green eyes and light sandy hair. My grandmother, on the other hand, worked to maintain her fresh appearance. She had larger bones, like I did. We both carried dark features, the russet long hair and auburn skin, not ivory like Grandpa or Nattie's. Grandma and I were often mistaken for each other, while Nattie hardly seemed to belong to our little family at all. Nattie was the prodigy child, even when *I* was the eight year old.

But that was okay because at eight years old I determined that I *was* Nattie, *practically* an adult myself. I looked up to her desperately, though keeping my eyes on her 5'8" frame kept me constantly tripping over my own two feet.

I can remember my eight-year-old days, though, now in my retrospective old age, my life runs more like a memory creek, flowing here and trickling there. I can only look upstream while I continue to float down. I can't go back and change regrets, but, looking upstream now, I see my eight-year-old memory clearly.

We were in Grandpa's garden. Nattie was about to leave for her weekend activities and I *was only a child*, so I couldn't tag along.

"Stop teasing me, Grandpa," I smiled, "That story's not true."

“It is!” His eyes twinkled. “You were born with a yellow personality, Abby-Doll, just like your skin.”

I rolled my eyes. I was too old for his nickname, even if I secretly liked when Grandpa used it, like I was still his special girl.

Next to me, Nattie rolled her eyes too. “Can we please stop with the chit-chat? I really have to be going.”

“Oh! Of course, of course,” Grandpa nodded, placing his large hand against my shoulder blades. Together, we stepped out of Nattie’s way. “May I ask where you’re headed tonight Nats?”

Nattie shot him a glare and Grandpa shrugged. “I’m still your father, hon.”

“You’re old-fashioned, that’s what you are.”

“And you’re too old to still act so young and foolish.”

“S’your doing,” Nattie sang, carefree, waving her goodbye to me as she danced beyond the garden gates.

“I know,” Grandpa mumbled, watching her disappear, “I was chastising myself.”

I felt small and inadequate as I, too, watched Nattie leave me again. She was so beautiful. I didn’t know where she was headed tonight, but if it was someplace tropical, I hoped she’d bring me back a lei like the last time. Someday, I’d go party with her like she had promised me.

Someday I’d be older and beautiful like her too, which reminded me...

“Grandpa!” I exclaimed. “Nattie let me use her make-up tonight. Don’t I look pretty Gramps?”

But the attention I thought I’d receive, instantly fizzled. I’ll never forget the look in Grandpa’s eyes when he turned toward me at that moment. They were so sad. So...apologetic.

“You don’t need make-up ever, *ever*, to be pretty. You already light up the room every time you walk in. You radiate naturally from within Abby-Doll, like the sun. You understand?”

I frowned. “Yes, Grandpa.” I paused, “but is the sun *pretty*, Grandpa?”

Now, he sighed and knelt down to meet my young eyes. He looked at me for a long time. I tried to count the freckles sprinkling his nose, but he crinkled it and I lost focus. For one moment, he even looked *old*.

I guess I asked the wrong question. Grandpa was never serious.

“Will you promise me something Abigail Barton?”

My eyes grew very wide.

“I’ve created a culture for you Abby, so different from the one I grew up in.”

I nodded. “I know Grandpa. You created *BioAge: ‘An Ageless Society’*”

But he shook his head again. “Yes, Abby, I did create *BioAge*, and the pill made us very rich. It changed the world, but *BioAge* is just a pill, Doll. Always remember that. We don’t need *BioAge* no matter what ads tell you we do, no matter if Nattie tells you you do or what you even see me do.” He sighed, “Sometimes I think I’ve created a Frankenstein instead of a miracle.”

The old man was quiet for a moment.

“Just promise me, Abby. Promise me you won’t ever lose your sunshine, even if it’s difficult to keep shining in the society I’ve set upon you.”

I didn’t understand him, but I waited until he met my eyes again. I was smart enough to sense that he was sharing something profound, though I couldn’t quite grasp the reason for seriousness.

Our world was wonderful! Everyone was bright and youthful and fresh. Today, like every other Saturday, Grandpa Barton and I would go swimming with the college crowd and then dancing at his booming Garden Party. The whole block would come to play and laugh. That was life, every day and every weekend. The days before *Bioage* sounded boring and bleak, at least, the way Nattie described them. Why would anyone ever want to age without the lifetime fun *BioAge* guaranteed them?

I resolved to acquiesce.

“Grandpa,” I said matter-of-factly, “You just told me I was born yellow. I promise to keep my shine. Besides, I can’t lose something I was born with. It’s engrained.”

He studied me for a long moment and then, suddenly, let out a hearty, bellowing laugh. It echoed throughout his garden, bouncing off the daffodils and sunflowers, and making them dance in the breeze.

“Where’d you learn to talk so intelligently, kiddo?” he chuckled, tousling my hair, “I didn’t know Nattie was that smart.”

I beamed. My young Grandpa was back. “She’s not. I learn everything from you.”

He chuckled again. Grandpa was the most genuine, kind-hearted person I knew, handsome and playful. My greatest friend. Of course I’d do anything he asked. He had changed the world, after all.



If only someone had told me that the promise I just made would take a lifetime for me to learn how to keep. The promise would change my life, but at eight years old, I was naïve to knowing. Good old childhood innocence.

“Do you think we can hit the swimming pool before tonight’s party, Grandpa?” I asked hopefully.

His young eyes sparkled. “I think we could arrange that,” he chuckled. “I want to try that back flip with the half twist off the high dive.” Then he lowered his voice, “but don’t tell Grandma. She thinks I’ll kill myself yet.”

I giggled. “Don’t worry Grandpa. You’ll look like any of the rest of those college dudes.”

He winked and popped a blue pill in his mouth. “Let’s go show them up, Abby-Doll.”

We were in the pool within the hour.

“Ok Grandpa,” I said, dripping wet in my yellow bathing suit and bare feet, anticipating my next dive.

The public pool was packed today: Girls, guys, children...the collective tanned, smooth skin and blonde hair, bathing in the sunshine.

“It’s your turn to go first.”

“Oh, it’s my turn, now, is it?” he boomed.

“Yes. Rememmmber? I did the pencil dive, and you *tried* it, but you weren’t very good. Now, you pick our next dive.”

“Mine wasn’t good?!” He laughed.

I rolled my eyes. “Grandpa you splashed the lifeguard sitting clear across the pool. You weren’t supposed to make a splash.”

He pretended to pout. “Well what’s the fun in that?”

“Fine. You do a dive *with* splash then. It’s *your* turn!” I pushed his lean backside towards the diving board steps where the rest of the line had already walked the plank.

“Ok Abby, the summersault with the half twists then,” and he climbed onto the long blue board, bouncing a few times at the plank’s end. He turned around and winked.

“This one’s for you Abby-doll!” he shouted.

I swear the whole pool turned to watch. I ducked behind the steps hoping no one had seen my association with this estranged man.

I heard the board spring and wobble. He must have jumped.

Then the splash. I peered between the steps just in time to see Grandpa smack the water, stomach first.

“Ooohhh,” the spectators groaned.

I tried to hide my laughter when he popped back up, caressing his abdomen.

He saw me giggling.

Pointing to me where I was still hiding between the board and the steps, he smiled wide and full. “Your turn!” he shouted.

I stepped upon the diving board, deciding to stick to my classic, perfect pencil drop dive. I couldn’t speak for Grandpa, but I certainly didn’t want the whole pool laughing at *me*. Sometimes it was just best to be conventional.

Grandpa was waiting for me when I climbed out of the pool. “Ok, kiddo,” he said, “time to cart home to Grandma.”

This was both my favorite and least favorite part of each weekend. On the one hand, I loved working in the garden with Grandpa each Saturday evening, prepping the flower petals and turning on the billions of tiny lights for their weekly social debut.

I, personally, brought Grandpa’s garden to life. Those were his words exactly. We’d finish tweaking the marble fountains, the angels pouring life from stone watering cans, trimming the four-foot hedges, sweeping the cobblestone paths, and primping his delicate rose blossoms. Then, I’d start the generator. From the solar energy absorbed throughout the day, the thousand twinkling lights opened their bright eyes and transformed the acre yard into a magical Gatsby fantasy. Grandpa’s garden popped with petunias, sunflowers, and daffodils like fireworks against the night sky. Just the smell, itself, was stunning. His garden surpassed the peacock’s parading tail feather.

“Good job Abby!” Grandpa exclaimed. “Now we make sure our leading lady is ready and then, we welcome our guests!”

And therein laid the other hand, holding my least favorite part of the party. Saturday preparations meant I’d also encounter Grandma, and, her...I wasn’t sure I could endure.

Grandma Barton was not cruel or ugly. In fact, she, herself, became a Victoria Secret’s model after Grandpa founded *BioAge*. It was something expected, after all, for the Barton’s to be perfect. That was our role in the world now.

Grandma was just...an obscurity to me. She only directly acknowledged me once in all the times I could remember, and even then, the conversation had been odd. I knew she was smart, and her and Grandpa loved each other deeply, but, for some reason, every time she looked at me, I felt her disappointment or remorse or something. I could never make Grandma laugh. I didn't quite understand her.

Tonight, she was busy placing small umbrellas in cut-up pineapple, sweeping her hand gracefully over the kitchen counter contents.

"Tell Abby," she said to Grandpa, "That the wine glasses are in the right shelf. They can be chilled and placed on the patio tray, and do tell her to be careful this time."

Of course, I already knew this. I had accomplished my chore ten minutes earlier, in fact. I received the same task every week.

"Good choice on the pineapple tonight Jackie." Grandpa snuck a piece from aside his wife, and she slapped his hand.

"Would you just go outside and get ready?" she huffed.

"Right right. C'mon Abs. I want to show you the music I have planned for tonight."

I followed Grandpa to the patio, where he touched a small screen alongside the glass door. A picture of four men in bright Hawaiian shirts appeared on the monitor.

"The Beach Boys," Grandpa smiled widely.

I crinkled my nose. "Grandpa, they *do* match your wardrobe, except that, well, they're *old*."

I chose my adjectives carefully. My friends and I loved laughing at olden day anomalies and these "Beach Boys" had some *classic* gray heads.

"Oldies but goodies," Grandpa sniggered excitedly, turning on the touchpad. The boys' harmonies changed his garden's mood. Suddenly my twinkling lights began to dance in place of their previously sophisticated sparkle. Then, he even set out the beer.

Within an hour's time, the garden was bustling with neighbors. Grandpa liked his parties light and intimate: A time to celebrate the summer weather, a nearby neighbor's birthday, a new robin's nest, or just a simply gorgeous garbage day.

"Give me the evening, and I'll find a reason to celebrate it," Grandpa Barton proclaimed.

I watched a young couple sitting along the edge of a stone fountain. The girl was swinging her arms in a wide circle, her cheeks flushed with the intensity of her tale. The man next to her had a deep hearty laugh.

Old Mr. and Mrs. Keegle. The man, Kole Keegle, was Grandpa's roommate from their college years.

Grandpa's voice rang. "I'll bet you a hundred that Greg Yuller can't play out the season. With that attitude? He'll be thinking he was dead before his knee really does go out."

Beside him, Mrs. Keegle laughed. Another man, Wesley, wheezed silently.

I was always the only child at the party, but, after all, I didn't really consider myself a *child* anymore. I *did* turn eight last week! I decided to practice my new sophisticated skills, holding my chin tall like Nattie did and my hair loose. I practiced strutting down the cobblestone, my walk smooth and sultry. I needed a black dress, I thought, a little martini one, not this yellow strappy thing. I was older than sundresses now.

I saw Grandma Barton politely serve Kole's wife the strawberry cake.

Maybe she would like a glass of wine to go with it? I picked up the glass tray from a table next to me. Here was my opportunity! I would just suavely carry over these crystal glasses and bottle of fine wine, offering all my elegance and grace.

Oh, bless an eight year old's imagination. I should've learned from my mistakes long ago, but a child's naive innocence is often as stubborn as an adult's arrogance.

It happened in slow motion. I had taken three steps in my invisible high heels when I felt the wine glasses begin their slide. Then, to my horror, they kept sliding. They slid all the way across the metallic plate until the tray became unusually heavy along one side. My hand started to wobble. The next thing I knew, the bottom of my golden sundress was spotted with red wine and glass shards lay glittering at my feet.

Maybe no one heard the crash?

But, alas, I couldn't even hope for that. The men were up and running.

"You okay, little one?" Wesley asked reaching down and gently picking the glass off my shoes.

I stared at him glumly.

"Oh she's so ungraceful," Grandma chided, "I try and try to train her, but she is hopeless."

“Now Grandma,” Grandpa laughed and tousled my hair. *I wished he’d stop that.* “Abby can’t be perfect. She just added a splash of red to that dress of hers.”

My cheeks flushed to match, and everyone laughed.

At least I had avoided Nattie’s chastise this time. Last week I had tripped outside Palstein’s Fine Diner. Nattie gave me the silent treatment the entire ride home.

Now, to my relief, Kole seized this opportunity to steal my spotlight.

“Well, as long as we’re all gathered round,” he exclaimed, stealing me a quick wink. “It’s time for a toast to our ever humble and giving host.”

Grandpa rolled his eyes as Kole took on a curious look. “You know what Grandpa?” Kole asked, swinging an arm around his friend. “We haven’t told the Barton Breakthrough story in a long time.”

My ears perked. I loved hearing Kole’s “Barton Breakthrough” tale, and no matter how much I wanted to drown my sorrows in the nearest fountain, I mustered the courage to stay and listen with the other neighbors gathered around.

It was Grandpa’s turn to morph red. “Please, Kole. We don’t need to tell this story today.”

“Yes. Yes. I think we do. What? Too old for the tale?” He jabbed Grandpa playfully in the ribs.

I smiled and sat down as Kole began the saga.

## Chapter Two:

### *Barton Breakthrough*

“Now,” Kole began, “Keep in mind that Barton, here, has always been a smart man, but he is also just plain dumb-lucky,” he shot Grandpa a smile before continuing, “and just plain dumb enough to act upon his smarts and luck when any normal person would settle for accepting life as it comes. So y’all just keep that in mind. But, as you know, when this man turned sixty he bought a dog named Otis.”

“Best damn dog I ever had,” Grandpa smiled.

“Hey, Barton, am I telling the story or are you?”

Grandpa held up his hand, “Proceed.”

“Well, Otis was just as much an idiot as old Gramps too,” Kole continued, “That retriever used to get so excited he’d run all over the house, smacking into doors and such. Must be why and you and the dog got along so well, Barton.”

“We were a ripe old pair.”

Grandma, “hmmph’d,” in the background. I had almost forgotten she was present.

“Anyway,” Kole continued, as the rest of the guests listened, amused by their cheap entertainment, “when Barton bought the pup from the shelter, Otis was already a year old and had the reddest, thickest fur I’ve ever seen on a golden retriever. Honestly, he could’ve been 2020’s ‘Best in Show.’ He was one good-looking dog.

Grandpa took over then, animatedly, “But within that first year, Otis’s hair had turned white! I mean stark, too-much-chalk-on-the-pool-cue white.”

Kole grinned and put his arm around his old friend. “Barton here was so depressed, and Mrs. Barton, the spitfire that she is, what did you say to your husband, Mam?”

Grandma spoke up, “I told him that dogs are supposed to resemble their owners. It’s a fact of life. Otis just had a lot of catchin’ up to do to look as old as Barton did, but the dog wasn’t wasting no time to do it in.’

A low rumble progressed throughout the party crowd. “Yeah,” Kole agreed, “Barton did have some great white hair at fifty.”

“But, Barton wouldn’t have the aging complex rip apart his dog too, so, again the dumb, lucky genius that he was,” he flashed Grandpa an unreturned smile, “Barton gathered all these vitamins and Chemistry flasks...he was always great at Chemistry, top of his class...and he worked in his garage day and night.”

Kole’s voice suddenly turned a heavier, steady tone. He had captivated his audience. “And here’s where the man’s real genius entered, and I’m dead serious here. When Barton turned fifty-one, he devised an anti-aging pill...” He paused for a moment to let the information seep in. Then he threw in a smile, “and the genius actually fed one of these pills to his dog.”

Grandpa smiled now. “I only hoped I hadn’t inadvertently poisoned Otis as well.”

“I bet against the dog,” Grandma interceded.

“But Mrs. Barton, you were wrong,” Kole continued animatedly, “After one pill, Otis’s hair returned full and red. It was unbelievable. Where he once was gray, he now glowed red. Otis was a yapping prodigy. Ha! Then, in an even greater bout of genius...”

“I took one of my pills myself!” Grandpa finished with a smile.

“Can you believe that?”

“Again, I bet on his death.” Grandma clarified and Grandpa laughed heartedly.

Kole shook his head. “Can’t say I didn’t have my doubts too. Sorry old man. But anyway, on May 24<sup>th</sup>, I remember it. Barton, you were, what? Fifty-one? And two weeks after taking that pill, your white hair grew in thick and blonde again. And your wrinkles!” Kole turned toward his audience, “Man! Barton had these wrinkles around the corners of his eyes and after that pill, they just laid flat and smooth! I’ll tell you, I certainly didn’t recognize him. When I went for a walk with Barton that week, it looked like I was walking with my grandson.” Kole paused and shook his head. “His pill *worked*. It restored Barton’s youthful appearance. If I keep taking the pill,’ he told me, ‘I’ll look twenty forever.”

He let the sentence linger. Then, a toothy smile played across his face.

“So Kole put me to the real trial,” Grandpa prompted.

Kole nodded, “I told him that we needed to test this pill, this so called *BioAge*, you know, just to make sure it wasn’t our eyes that were going all screwy on us.”

“After all, we were both official bifocal consumers then.”

“Naturally, I sent Barton into that famous bar next to the Madison campus—the one on State Street with the fancy little tiki lights out front and the big Miller sign in the window. I told him to order a beer, any beer, and we’ll put his pill to the test.”

“I walked into that bar...”

“...with his head high, his full new set of hair, his smooth skin and rimmed glasses, dressed in one of his favorite Hawaiian shirts, mind you, that always makes him look like a real dork...”

“...and I ordered an Anheuser Bush.”

“And the bartender *carded* him,” Kole finished their interplay.

“He carded *me*, a fifty-one year old grandpa like he was carding a college kid.”

“That’s when I knew Barton had changed the very way we’ll think for the rest of our lives,” Kole said, thoughtfully now, “the day Gramps got carded for beer.”

“The government endorsed his drug right away too,” Grandma suddenly added for the crowd’s benefit. “I knew we’d struck our fame and fortune then.”

“Well of course you would,” Kole frowned, “they knew if people looked young forever they’d work forever too. And people bought it. Now it’s like the whole nation’s all twenty-year olds, except for us old folk who look young but still can’t get out of bed in the morning. We crack like a stick in the fire. It’s a funny thing getting old but not looking it. Abby, I bet you don’t even remember a time when we all had gray hair, do you?”

I jumped at the sound of my name. I had to think about his question. I had certainly seen pictures of Grandpa with gray hair, but I had only been three when *BioAge* was patented.

No, I don’t think I had ever actually felt a row of wrinkles or plucked a gray strand of hair.

Kole saved me. “You see what you’ve done to our children?” he teased Grandpa, as he patted me on the back, “You’ve got them more confused than your late dog, may he rest in peace. I thought our grandchildren were supposed to explain the world to us, not the other way around.”

“Don’t worry,” I piped up, “I still keep track of Grandpa’s glasses for him.”



The audience broke into another bout of laughter, but Grandma's eyes kept me from joining in. She was shooting me a warning, and I wasn't sure why.

"Oh Barton," Kole cried, "We are surpassed by our youth. We may still look like college students, but we can't fool the young ones."

"That's the truth," Grandpa agreed, "Abby's too bright for our foolishness."

## Chapter Three:

### *Goddesses*

Grandpa Barton passed away only three days after that garden party. It was a shock to everyone and the whole world stopped and mourned their loss. That Friday funeral was the one and only time I ever saw Nattie cry. They were graceful, crystal tears that never smudged her mascara of course, but, still, there *was* emotion trickling from her eyes. I, on the other hand, struggled to accept Grandpa's death.

I was told he had suffered a heart attack while he slept on Tuesday night. He hadn't felt a thing—just took his last breath and flew up to heaven. I'm not really sure if that's the true story or not, but even twelve years later, I liked to think that's how he went. In some ways, and as morbid as it sounds, I think his death would've been easier to accept if I was just present when Grandpa's heart stopped, because, at the time, his heart attack was just too hard to believe.

His death was like the difference between seeing an atomic bomb explode and simply accepting that it had exploded a half a world away. Each experience led to two very different perceptions of the same bomb. Likewise, hearing the heart had stopped verses seeing it stop oddly separated me from believing Grandpa had suffered such an old man's disease.

Grandpa Barton was a superhero. A college scholar. Not old. Not weak. He looked like any of the rest of us. He didn't have a cane or a limp or a hearing aid. I even saw girls checking him out when we had gone swimming that last day. (Don't tell Grandma.) Then, suddenly he was gone and I was left alone, an eight-year-old surrounded by a sea of dark dresses and ties. His absent hugs sent me into a strange numbness.

The press didn't help the situation, either. For the next month, Nattie and Grandma and I were carting off to New York or England. I spent my summer shuffling between camera

equipment and big black microphones while our family was featured on CNN Tonight and World Weekly.

“2027’s ‘Man of the Year’ was gone.”

However, even in the midst of the mayhem, I remember the memorial. I had weeded the garden personally and took care to cut pineapple for hor’dourves. Nattie insisted the stuffed shrimp and feta wraps were the more sophisticated choice, but I persisted in serving my “inferior” fruit. I knew *my* treat would’ve been Grandpa’s ingested choice. I even tried playing *the Beach Boys* at the event, but that battle, I didn’t win. Nattie cancelled the request before I could hit the buttons on the speakers.

Grandpa’s garden flowers stood bright and tall for the occasion. Every once in a while their colors exploded amidst the black crowd. I smiled each time I saw the colors, imagining Grandpa’s laugh when I’d tell him what I was watching. He always was amused with my thoughts. He said I saw things no one else could see. It’s what made me a natural beauty.

The garden was crowded at the memorial. Guests had come from across the world to pay their respects to the great Barton legend. They made the grand garden shrink so small that I was lucky to see any color amongst the black at all. His memorial was more Nattie’s flirtatious fanfare. She ogled the celebrities and catered to the U.S. President, offering him big purple grapes on a silver platter as he entered the garden to partake in the sorrows. Violin melodies swept through the garden lights rendering their classy sparkles.

I dropped the wine again too. The *Merlot* label shattered into a billion pieces and all I could do was stand there and look at all the glass shimmering against the brick path, casting the setting sunlight in a thousand different directions. Neither Nattie nor Grandma Barton saw me though thankfully. I took off my scarf and swept the shards carefully into this makeshift pouch. One by one each sparkle disappeared as I laid the glass in the black cloth until all the evidence was gone, and, this time my own dark dress soaked up the splattered wine stains well. Even Nattie wouldn’t be able to uncover my crime.

All the while the crowd kept buzzing above my little bent over frame.

I escaped the funeral’s bustle once that day, meandering inside the Barton’s expansive home to look at Grandpa’s old pictures. There was a display set up in the entryway. In one picture, Grandpa was eight, himself, fishing with his own grandfather in the great Mississippi. In

another, he was graduating *Summa cum laude* in Chemistry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in another, he was marrying Grandma. She looked happy.

I ran my fingers over the glossy display tracing the timeline laid in front of me. Grandpa's hair slowly thinned and grayed with the pictures and I noticed his skin crinkle around his eyes. Quickly, I skipped to the pictures after *BioAge* where he was running a smooth hand through his blonde sandy hair again, when his freckles outnumbered the wrinkles along his boyish face. Grandpa stood with his awards, his dog, and his dashing looks, the way I always knew him: young and handsome. He was blowing out the candles on his fifty-sixth birthday cake.

I wondered how many other people in the world had scrapbooks of themselves aging and then de-aging too. Because of *BioAge*, there were probably quite a few.

I grabbed one picture that day for my own commemorative. Grandpa is fifty-one. His scraggly graying hair is unkempt and he's sporting flannel pajamas and a five o'clock shadow. He had just woken. Grandma caught him in this blackmailing pose obviously in the days before the Barton's sought their utter perfection.

He was every bit imperfect in this photograph and *old*, but something about his smile captured my attention. I think it was his dimples. He sported such a wide, genuine grin, which I had never seen him give any reporter or journalist.

I plucked the picture from the board and stuck it in my little clutch purse. Then, I picked a single yellow daffodil from the bouquet resting next to me and tucked the flower into one of my dark strappy shoes. Finally, I joined the hazy crowd in the garden once again.

I smiled now, thinking back on my naive innocence. I was such a child in those days, thinking I could enlighten the atmosphere by wearing a flower in my shoe. *Such imagination.*

I'm not even sure where that photograph is anymore. I should've left it for Grandma. She probably would have liked to have it, though I wouldn't have asked her even if I could now. She croaked just three months after Grandpa did.

My stomach kicked. Today Nattie and I were returning to Grandpa's garden for the first time since his funeral, this time for a more festive festivity than the last black tie affair.

Today was my twentieth birthday.

Nattie had invited all the latest celebrities. She carted off to Vegas last weekend to invite the guest list. Her calendar had been counting down the days for this party since last June when I had turned nineteen....No, scratch that. She had been counting down since the day I was born.

9 hours and 13 minutes now and it would all be over for me, given that I could escape around three A.M.

Not that I disliked a party. Nattie had introduced me to the partying world, just like she promised, the day I turned sixteen and, then again and legally this time, the day I turned eighteen. Every weekend we went to Hawaii or Mexico or Vegas or Italy. I loved the dancing and the music and the lights. At twenty I'd kissed more guys than the Hershey Kiss machine had kissed its conveyer belt, but I hadn't kissed close to the number Nattie had. Nattie was the knockout blonde. For many of my teenage years, I resented her Barbie doll genes that I somehow missed inheriting, but now, I gave up competing with her and just learned to dwell in my silent envy. This way at least we could be cordial. I had even managed to control my wine spilling tendencies so Nattie didn't have to make her apologies for me quite so much. Of course, the more I drank, the more my coordination reverted back to its eight-year-old days.

Yes, since Grandpa left, Nattie became my world and with her came the parties. I couldn't imagine my world without them now. What had life been like as a *child*? Boring, I answered myself.

So, if I enjoyed my lifestyle, why was I counting down the minutes until tonight's party would *end*?

Because tonight I'd finally begin taking *BioAge*. At twenty I could keep my youthful look forever. Midnight marked the hour I would swallow my first pill...but there would *only* be a hundred pairs of eyes watching, which, therein laid the pressure: Only me and the spotlight on my *natural-born grace*.

God help me if I choked.

"What are you wearing tonight Abs?" Nattie asked, joining me in our outsized dressing room. She flipped her long blonde curls over her shoulder as she fastened a string of pearls around her neck.

"I'm thinking about the black halter," I replied, watching Nattie quietly. *Silent envy*, I reminded myself. *Just keep silent*.

"Yes, that one fits you well."

I looked at Nattie in the mirror. “Is this what you’re wearing?”

Stupid question. Nattie was a goddess. She was dressed in a black skinny gown that draped over her sculpted, smooth shoulders. Her long, caramel hair swept into a loose ponytail, cascading over her exposed neckline. The blue contacts she had applied that morning made her eyes spark from under their sultry lashes. I was almost scared to look her in the eye for fear of being put under her unarticulated spell.

Of course that’s what she was wearing.

“You think it’s not dressy enough?” she asked, suddenly worried.

“No!” I said, too quickly. “You look great Nats. You always do.”

“And so will you,” she nodded smugly. “*BioAge* will help you look your best.”

“Thanks for the confidence booster,” I replied sarcastically.

“Hey, you’ve made fashion leaps and bounds already. Look at you now-the little black dress? A very chic and sophisticated choice. I’m impressed. It’s really a step up from your tattered sun dresses you used to wear. Yes, you’ll bring home a handsome one tonight Abs.”

By one, she meant guy. She had a rating system: One through ten. Ten was prince charming and *she* always took home a ten each night.

And Me? Well, not quite a *ten*...but that was only by Nattie’s standards. Just like silent envy rule number one, I decided my lower standards were fine since I’d never shatter Nattie’s glass ceiling anyway. Lower standards could keep me, if not proud, then at least sane.

But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t try.

“I think I’ll curl my hair,” I announced.

She took the curling iron from my hand and began curling mine herself. “I want to see you leave with a dark handsome tonight,” Nattie decided, “Make him at least an eight. We have to be the most stunning, remember. Barton’s are perfection. It’s our duty and our right. We make sure there’s no competition.”

The words lingered in the silence.

“Nattie?” I frowned then, watching my reflection in the mirror, “Do you remember when we went to Disney Land?”

“Which time?”

“The first time. When we picnicked with the Princesses.”

“Yes. I remember. You were six.”

“Yes.” I was silent for a moment. “Nattie, you told me every princess has her prince. Do you still believe that?”

“You mean, is there some guy out there meant for you for the rest of your life?”

She’d always had a way of just asking the truth.

Nattie frowned. “I don’t know. A lot of people still seem to find “the one”, but then again, I don’t think people need to rely on that one person anymore. We’re young looking forever so we don’t need that same secure dedication as people did back when Disney first made their fairytales.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well people needed the security of that ‘person to grow old with.’ That, even as they aged, someone would still love their saggy skin and gray hair.” She shuddered. “Good thing we don’t need that anymore.”

Then Nattie frowned and asked, “Why? Don’t you like our parties?”

“Of course I do! I just...I just wonder sometimes.”

Nattie simply shook her head, turning me to curl the hair she missed. “You wonder too much.”

“Well, what about you?” I asked, “You’ve been partying with a whole bunch of different guys for...awhile,” I said carefully, “Don’t you ever think you might want to stay with one of them for longer than a night?”

In the mirror, I watched Nattie cringe. “Abs do *you* ever want to stay with one of *your dates* the next morning?”

It was my turn to cringe. This was a touchy subject for me and Nattie. She knew I *never* did.

“Well, there you go,” she said, watching my reaction. “But you do still have to learn some social etiquette, dear, on that front.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not that lecture today Nattie please.”

She shrugged. “Fine. But to answer your first question,” she continued, “Maybe princesses do all need their one prince, but do I look like a princess to you?”

I looked at Nattie again. The bright lipstick. Sultry eyelashes. Black skinny dress. Red stilettos. No, she was more of a temptress.

“Exactly,” Nattie said pretentiously, reading my expression again, “I’m a goddess.”

She put the curling iron down. “Now go get dressed, Abs. It’s time for your debut.”

Despite my little black dress, I still felt like the princess as I entered the garden through the old stone trellis that night. I waltzed down an aisle of white daisies and dimly lit icicle lights. Nattie had outdone herself. I reminded myself to thank her party planners later.

People clapped when Nattie and I floated down the strip, though I couldn’t make out anyone’s faces. They were all wearing black, again creating the classy air.

The aisle seemed to last forever in my moment of sole fame. I even forgot Nattie was beside me. For a second, I was the sole goddess and I dazzled the crowd alone.

Then the dream ended and the hip hop grew loud.

“Congratulations!” Nattie yelled atop the throbbing music. “You didn’t trip.”

Everyone seemed to come at me at once.

“Happy Birthday.”

“Congratulations!”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Grandpa Barton would be proud.”

Their voices blended as one though I strained to hear each appraisal. The music was so loud.

Despite the qualm of people I still managed to take in my surroundings. Grandpa’s garden had been well kept up, considering the twelve years since I’d last been here. New flowers were probably planted this year, but the gardeners had taken great care to plant each crop in Grandpa’s designated plot, and his fountains and cobblestone paths continued accenting the quarter acre lot. The exact center of the garden was cleared away to make room for our grassy stage where the music played and a large number of guests were dancing under a lighted canopy. In the distance, if I squinted just right, I could see Grandma and Grandpa’s dark porch with their little wooden swing and glass sliding doors. I wondered if it still led into the same expansive room.

I shuddered, thinking how many people would call me Grandma Barton tonight simply by mistake.

“Abby!” A loud clear voice rang through the darkness.

I spun quickly. “Carter!” I screamed back, hugging my best friend. “And Ariella!” I added.



My two closest friends were my life. I had met them during my freshman year of college last September. We would be sharing an apartment this fall again.

“Happy Birthday!” Carter sang. She was the crazy, out-going partier every group relied on to entertain. Carter wasn’t afraid of anyone or any risk. She was a tall, sporty brunette with deep brown eyes and chocolate skin. My other friend, Ariella, was quiet and collective. She had the longest red locks I’d ever seen and smooth Irish skin. Ariella was the only person I knew who could whisper in a bar and still be heard.

“Happy Birthday,” she added now.

I smiled. “You guys are going to love the party,” I said. “Nattie has a guest list like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Yeah, I heard she even booked the Backstreet Boys,” Ariella nodded.

“Oh my god. They’re back again?!” Carter scoffed. “They’re such old phogies. Nattie probably just invited them for herself.”

“How old are they anyway?”

“Who cares,” Nattie said, coming behind us and joining our group. She passed three tropical drinks around. “The blonde one is hot.”

“Careful Nattie. You’re dating yourself,” I smiled incredulously.

“No! Nick was my *first* crush. I was only seven.”

“He’s still a geezer if he can’t sing,” Carter rolled her eyes, “And I don’t care how good you look, no one can sing at ninety.”

I listened to the music thump through me. “He is outdated,” I agreed.

“So when’s the grand march?” Carter changed the subject.

“Midnight,” Nattie replied matter-of-factly. “Right before Abby will take her shot.”

I shuddered visibly.

“You won’t choke,” Ariella reassured me.

“And if you do, I know the Heimlich.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh great,” Ariella suddenly whispered, “Here come our *escorts* Abby.”

“Be nice guys. They’re my cousins. And you only have to dance with them once.”

“Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” Carter sang, taking a long sip of her drink as the two men approached.

“Dumb Tweedles,” Nattie nodded her agreement.

Four drinks and three hours later, I wasn't feeling quite so nervous about choking during my midnight hour.

Carter, Ariella, Nattie and I were among the dancers now. The thumping beat never ceased for even a moment and I felt loose and carefree. I had long since lost my friends amongst the throng on the dance floor. The friendly, free-for-all hour was upon us.

I was giving my best tantalizing teasers to a rather tall and dark guy. He smelled like a dusky cigar and his muscles wrapped tightly around my little waist.

Then, it happened. I felt my heel slip before I heard the snap. A painful spasm shot through my ankle and I realized I was on the floor.

“Are you okay?”

“I think she broke her ankle.”

“Can you stand?”

The voices blurred a mumbled mixture. I felt dizzy.

Nattie's onerous voice rang though. “She's fine. Fine. Get up Abigail. C'mon. Get up.”

Nattie's firm grasp tightened around my arm as she pulled me to my feet.

Black dots swirled and I tried not to gasp as I altered the weight to test my bad ankle.

This is why I avoided the parties where Nattie expect my perfection. I warned you. I came with disclaimers.

It took me a moment to realize the music had stopped and the clock was striking midnight.

Everyone was staring. At me. Most looked helpless and alarmed. Nattie's eyes were lethal.

I sighed, as disappointed in myself as Nattie was with me. The irony was so perfect. I was the epitome of Nattie's imperfection.

But, of course, she, like always, made up for my blunder. Suddenly, her melodic laughter rang through the silence and led the crowd in gracious applause.

My cheeks burned.

“Well, I suppose the time has come,” Nattie sang and the crowd only seemed to gather closer...like one collective black cloud of cattle.

“Seeing as how Abby has already made her crowd-stopping display,” She waited for her audience to laugh.

They did.

“I suppose it is time to bring forth her court and mark the reason for these festivities.”

I watched as Carter and Andy and Ariella and Miles marched forth through a split in the crowd.

How did I miss my own entrance? I thought. Then the pain shot through my ankle and I remembered.

Carter laughed drunkenly as she approached, handing me a small shot glass filled with a deep sapphire liquid.

My eyes swam.

I heard the crowd gasp as Nattie reclaimed center stage and, from behind her slender back, revealed a small rattling bottle. When she spoke, all the guests turned in hypnotic mesmerization. There had never been a woman more beautiful or youthful.

I tried to regain my composure. This was the moment.

“Hello again everyone,” she addressed the crowd, “First, I’d just like to say thank you for coming to celebrate with Abby and I tonight. Twenty marks a very special age in our society. Tonight, new twenty year olds across the world will meet Barton’s breakthrough pill. They will join our perfectly beautiful society my father created, where we can be energetic and youthful until the day God takes us. Tonight, Abby gets that honor. Please help me in congratulating her on acquiring our beauty and grace.”

I hobbled closer to Nattie in the center of the stage. With a flourish, Nattie presented me a blue rattling container wrapped in a large red bow.

My stomach lurched. *Don’t choke. Don’t choke. Don’t choke.* I willed myself. *Beauty and Grace.*

I swallowed pills every morning with breakfast. It was no big deal...Now, there were only a hundred pairs of eyes watching.

*Because we are the spotlight Abs,* I could hear Nattie answering.

However, as I unwrapped the container and dumped the pill into my outstretched hand, my insides tickled.

This pill was so tiny, so symmetrical, and so blue. This was it. This was the foundation of my existence, the party of my lifetime, bigger than graduation or my wedding day. This was my connection left to Grandpa Barton.

“Hurry and swallow dear, before you look any older,” Nattie said into the microphone.

I numbly noticed the laughter.

I held up the pill as if toasting to God and leaned toward the microphone. “For Grandpa Barton,” I smiled and with a deep breath, popped the bean into my mouth and swallowed.

Huh, I frowned. The pill had an unexpected consistency. Almost chalky. Somehow I had thought an eternally youthful appearance would taste...fruitier.

But fireworks were popping now and the crowd was clapping. Sulfur smoke burned my nostrils and the booming fireworks resonated against my heart. Vaguely, I recalled facing the mass and curtsying as carefully as I could muster.

The group of eyes laughed again.

“Welcome to the world,” Nattie smiled.

I relaxed. The worst was over. I didn't choke...and now, I belonged. I belonged to the billions in the *BioAge* generation, no longer a child. A wave of elation trickled through me. I turned toward Nattie and winked. “Now we can really start this party.”

Nattie's eyes flashed wildly. Lifting a graceful arm, she toasted me with a shot of her own. “C'mon Abs! Let's make some memories!”

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