At Schwartz's

by Zofia Barisas

I'm taking my mother for lunch to Schwartz's smoked meat diner now known as *La Delicatessen Hébraique*. My father used to take me there after delivering cheeses and butter that my mother had made when I was around twelve years old. My brother didn't come. I don't remember if I was invited but I came.

Sometimes I pretended to fall asleep, on the drive there, with my head on his thigh. I prepared myself for it, prepared myself for him to push me away, put my head on his thigh, felt the heat of it, waited. He drove on. It was just him and me. The awkwardness and the pleasure.

Sometimes he splurged on a steak and fries instead of the smoked meat on rye. I could hear the steak sizzle on the grill nearby and smell the beef aroma and the spices. We had nothing to say to one another. I would have liked him to know what to say. He was all grown up and I was still new. Sometimes he made a corny joke and smiled. The gold in his tooth glowed like sunshine. He was the most important man in my life.

We were strangers to one another, related only by blood. His blood pounded in my veins, loud, loud, on drums of rawhide and hollowed birch-wood from a land I'd never seen that would be forever home. A sea of ice lapped at windswept golden dunes. Knights in armor rode out of ancient myths. Their horses' hooves hammered my blood into eternal quest. Like shreds that fled past my memory from a past before this life and then were gone leaving a trace of loss.

The taste of steak, the juiciness of it, the rude waiters, the people thrown together at the same tables, the line going out the door into the slush of winter, the smoked-up windows, the shouts from waiters to cooks, the smells of food and wet winter coats, and there across from me sat my father with his big hairy hands on the table. It was just him and me.

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