

“The 70-Year Itch”

By: Andy Wasif

The ticking of the miniature grandfather clock centered on the mantel seemed to grow louder, each pass from the pendulum a hatchet to the silence of the living room, which itself spoke loudly as a docent, guiding us through a family’s history. The clock, a wedding present from Aunt Mabel, purchased in 1940 during a train trip to Chicago and kept on her own mantel before passing it along. The azure-colored chair with the black trim, a 1960s-era beauty, still in good shape, virtually untouched, seemed out of place set aside from the more modern Macy’s sofa with black cushions you could get lost in that framed the white lacquered coffee table peppered with aging *Readers Digest* magazines.

Hanging on the walls and displayed next to the clock, this exhibition’s depth was captured by discount store frames highlighting the family through the decades -- that trip to Paris where he proposed; the formal bride and groom pose at the Spring Valley Country Club; a portrait of her holding a rosy-faced newborn; their eldest in his Little League baseball uniform; a portrait of the entire nuclear family, now totaling four, from Sears with a backdrop of green, brown, and yellow, defined by polyester pants and pointed collars; and finally, one similar, this in high definition, showing an aged couple with their expanded family -- three generations

of Mitchells, the couple from the start flashing a smile in direct opposition to the pair that now sits across the room at the dining room table.

The present versions of themselves, Hy and Sylvia, now in their 70s, stare at each other with passion. That is, a passionate distaste. Hy's forehead creases angrily driving his eyes downward, his breath escaping through his deviated septum steadily with a slight wheeze between every third tock of the clock as he sits hunched over his dinner plate.

Equally, Sylvia's mouth clenched, her back molars locked in a struggle for supremacy. Her head angled away, she glares through the corners of her wrinkled eyes, suspicious and skeptical of his very existence.

Finally, after an inordinate amount of time when even the cooling meal in front of them felt uncomfortable, Hy speaks.

"Hag," he says, with purpose, as if he'd prepared just the right word for the occasion.

"Bastard," Sylvia counters as a tennis pro would effortlessly volley from inside the service boxes.

And again, they fall prey to the clock's syncopated rhythm, the tea vapor visibly dissipating into the atmosphere.

And then. . .

"I know what you're doing to me," Hy says in a "*J'accuse!*" moment.

Unswayed, “Sylvia replies, “What am I doing to you? I made you a nice meal with potatoes, brisket, green beans...” Each food a pointed indictment of his tone.

Hy interrupts, “Nuts!”

She rolls her eyes at his paranoia -- those gray-blue eyes with specs of brown that he used to write poetry about, albeit bad poetry. “There are no nuts!”

Gaining confidence, Hy says, “There are nuts! Pine nuts, walnuts...”

Sylvia nods. Ah, so this is how we’re gonna play it, she thinks. “So what if there are?”

“You know it wreaks havoc with my colitis.”

“You don’t. . . have. . . colitis,” she says for the umpteenth time. If she didn’t know any better, she’d swear smoke was coming from her molars.

“I don’t need a doctor to tell me what I have,” Hy claims for the umpteenth-plus-one time, clenching his fist. He’s sure her constant argumentative state is the cause of his arthritis. “My father had it, my brother had it, I have it.”

Sylvia doesn’t dare continue. What’s the point? She reaffixes her gaze at him, as if they’d invented a surgery that replaced her retina with disintegration lasers. And Hy focuses all his energy on her, boring a hole in her with his mind.

Sylvia breaks the silence this time. “Sonuvabitch.”

“Shrew.”

Sylvia leans in, launching her offensive. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing either.”

Hy's eyes grow wide and innocent. Oh, really? My hands are nowhere near the cookie jar, he thinks. Her claims are but baseless speculation. "I'm doing nothing."

"Flirting with your tai chi instructor is nothing?" Sylvia's eyes narrow.

"What flirting? She helps me to touch my toes."

"Does she have to stand so close?"

"It's the nature of the beast."

Sylvia throws her hands up in the air. "50 years, I've never known what that means."

"It means just what it says," Hy says, a favorite response of his and distant relation to his trite parenting phrase "Because I said so."

"Well, that doesn't help."

Hy's stomach begins to churn, like large vats of cream at a Dreyer's factory.

"You're giving me indigestion."

A little giddy at the thought, Sylvia snaps, "You deserve indigestion."

Hy sits up sharply and says, "And you deserve--" His mind races to come upon any witty and pointed rejoinder for several beats before losing interest with a disinterested wave of his hand. "Meh!"

They reposition themselves in silence, shorter in duration this time as Sylvia senses her husband wearing down.

"Gasbag!"

“Hygenially-challenged fussbucket!” Hy says, surprising even himself with such a gem. He sits back proudly and crosses his arms.

The woman he had for many years sweetly called “Syl” flicks a snap over her head. “You’ve got nothing to complain about in the wife department,” she says.

This plays right into Hy’s hands. He reaches past his faded argyle vest and into the breast pocket of his one-size too large department store shirt. “I’ll show you nothing to complain about... I’ve got a list.” And with that, he pulls out a piece of paper, folded into credit card size, fraying around the edges. Clearly, it’s been his companion for a while.

The reveal doesn’t seem to surprise Sylvia who waits in anticipation of Hy’s grand production as he retrieves his bifocals from his vest pocket and tries to flick them open with the flick of a wrist. They don’t budge. After four attempts, he grabs one earpiece and opens them manually. Sylvia lets out a heavy, impatient sigh. “Yeah, put your cheaters on.” Hy ignores her comment, instead focusing on the matter at hand.

“Number One,” he says, pausing for suspense, “-- the first fifteen years. . . Number Two – Paris.”

Sylvia shakes her head, almost feeling sorry for him. “Still with the Paris!”

“I should have left you at the Eiffel Tower.”

“I should have jumped.” Sylvia one-ups him again.

Hy puts his list aside and leans against the table, his sleeve catching a bit of mashed potatoes, “You think you got it so bad?”

“You bet your trick knee, I do. I got a list!” And with that she reaches down her housecoat to pull out a note card from deep in her bosom.

Hy throws his head back and lets out a guffaw, the sudden movement causing a sharp crick, a sensation radiates through his neck. He grabs it, hoping Sylvia doesn't see. “This should be rich,” he says.

She takes the bifocals from around her neck and puts them on. From the front of the card, she reads, “Number One – You never listen to me!”

Hy's taken aback by this. “Never listen to you?! I hear you in my sleep!!”

Undeterred, Sylvia flips the card over, “Number Two – Paris.”

“You stole “Paris” from me!”

Sylvia says, “I should have never gotten in your car.”

“I should have kept on driving.” He feels his sweater start to irritate his skin as his temperature rises. He and his wife of fifty years settle back into their default positions, nostrils flaring, until the intermission ends quickly, Sylvia now just toying with the timing to catch Hy off-guard.

“Loser.”

“Witch.”

“Faggot!”

Hy gasps. “That was one time!” he says, hurt that she would dredge up the drunken collegiate costume party when he asked out a fair-skinned football player in a cheerleader’s outfit, a mistake he has regretted twice -- the night of the party, and the time he told her about it.

Having him on the ropes, Sylvia indicts him. “You promised me a house...”

He looks around at their comfortable surroundings. “What, are we living in a box?”

Sylvia continues, “...on a hill, a house on a hill.”

Hy squares up his body to the table. “Oh, I see. You want a hill? I’ll give you a hill.” He picks up his fork and slices the tines through the pile of mashed potatoes, now cold among the green beans and brisket in front of him. He scoops some of the potato onto the fork. He always loved that Sylvia makes it with lumps, but never more than he does at this moment as the starchy side dish doesn’t run through the fork. He turns the fork back to him like it’s a miniature Jai Alai basket and without any pretense, spikes the food right into her water glass.

Sylvia cowers for a moment, but her fear quickly returns to anger, with double the intensity, twice the fury. “How dare you?! She picks up the glass of mashed potato water, her fingers gripping it so tightly her age spots seem to whiten, and she flicks the glass so the water sails out toward him, though wide left of his head.

He whips his head around to see it land harmlessly on the carpet behind him, sinking into the microfibers. Now seething as well, he turns back to her.

“I’m glad you did that!” Hy pushes his chair back, its legs sputtering along the Persian rug beneath the dining room set. He stands, steadies himself, and then lifts a leg toward 30 degrees as if to take a step before placing it back down in front of him. Then he makes a controlled swipe forward with his left arm, and bringing that back, he swipes forward identically with his right arm, as if swimming in molasses in a Tai Chi movement called, “Working the Pulley.” Then both arms over head before releasing them to his sides. Hy finally begins to feel comfortable after six weeks of practice.

“I’ve wanted to do this for fifty years.”

“If you want a fight, you’ve got it, buster.” Sylvia tries to extricate herself from the table, but has trouble, her knee banging into the table leg as her chair catches on the rug she now regrets purchasing. She continues to struggle as Hy repeats his taolu across the table.

“Prepare to get the beating of your life.”

“I’m gonna tear you apart,” she says, still struggling. After a moment of trying to figure out why her chair won’t move, she looks up at him. “Help me up.”

Hy puts his tai chi behind him and shuffles over to her. He lifts the corner of the table, just enough for the rug to give way and for Sylvia’s leg to gain its freedom. He leans over her. She puts her arms around his neck and he grabs around her back. “On three, we’re gonna stand. One, two. . .” and on “three,” he shifts his weight back as Sylvia springs up, her foot catching on the table leg which

sends her stumbling into his arms. When she regains her balance, she looks up to see Hy's eyes a nose away from hers. They stare at each other, their hot breath crashing against each other's mouths like waves at the base of a stately lighthouse, stirring the memories of a thousand caring moments forged over five decades of love.

Sylvia smiles. "You know what this reminds me of?" a warm tone of pumpkin spice awash in autumn colors that has always had the ability to melt Hy's heart.

Hy nods and tilts his head to kiss her ever so gently on her lips. "Paris."