

Sex Med

We were at dinner, and had just finished the main course: scallops. My grandmother, Omi, was on her second glass of wine, and I'd only just poured my first.

I told her I was writing an article about the stigma around girls carrying condoms.

"I am three generations older than you," she responded, "so we are very different. In my day, we didn't start a relationship in bed, we started with romance." I'd heard this line before, usually followed by some comment about my current (or, even more usually, an ex) girlfriend. Her tone was different though, less damning, more wistful.

"Actually, I was very avant-garde for my time," she continued, a hint of pride in her voice, looking down at an untouched salad as she reminisced. "When I was in school I was dating this gentleman for about a year. He was six years older than me, and I was very taken with this *man*. But, you see, nobody did anything in those days. We read poems next to each other, we were very romantic. I loved him and he of course loved me" (her voice left no room for commas around the phrase, 'of course', which was merely a turn of phrase, a narrative obligation; I should already have presumed that he loved her—of course).

"We were together for a year like that, with nothing except a kiss, maybe. But in the end he seduced me. He deflowered me." I beamed my biggest smile. "And I didn't really know what was going on. Back then—you won't believe it—I didn't know I could get

pregnant. I didn't know the facts of life. Afterwards, he told me how to protect myself, about the risks. I was seventeen and I didn't know. Of course, people in my year knew something, little things here and there. But he, he was a medical student in his final year.”

Omi was still focusing hard, making sure she was telling the story right, perhaps struggling ever-so-slightly with the details. Her elbows were firmly on the table, either side of her plate, while she fiddled with a salad fork. Her eyes were elsewhere, looking at her life back in 1931—a place I couldn't picture, a culture I'd have to work hard to imagine—and she was obviously enjoying herself.

“Of course, I didn't get pregnant. But I was the only girl in my class who had done that. I was the only one in my year who was adventurous. Apart from Mai. She was adventurous too. It was the two of us. Nobody else in our graduation class had done the same.”

“Did anybody find out about the two of you?” I asked.

“No, it wasn't something we talked about in those days. Of course, Mai and I talked—we used each other as an excuse. She lived on what you'd call ‘the wrong side of the tracks,’ and she didn't have a phone. So I'd tell my parents I was going to Mai's house. Of course, my father got suspicious, and so he sent the chauffeur to pick me up, and when he got there Mai's parents said ‘No, we haven't seen her.’”

Omi started eating again. “What did your father say when he found out you weren't at

Mai's house?" I asked. "I said I was with Mai, of course," she told me through a mouthful of greens.

What a story. A seventeen year old who didn't know where babies came from with a twenty three year old medical student who didn't tell her until after they'd had sex. My grandmother using the fact that half the town didn't have wired in phones as an excuse to sneak out for an illicit affair while her best friend and fellow conspirator was using the reverse excuse to do the same.

But best of all was the pride in Omi's voice as she retold the story. She was a trend-setter, or "avant-garde," as she put it. Careful to remind me a couple of times that they'd been together a whole year before anything had happened, she wanted me to remember that this was no one-night stand, that the decision had not been taken lightly. Also, that he had *seduced* her—this was how it was done in those days.

"In the end," Omi eventually continued, "I went to university and I wanted to break up with him. He was heartbroken, of course." She smiled. I did too, that this time she had left a pause for that verbal comma. "But I wanted to finish all this, I wanted a fresh start. So I left him."