

Love Song for No Regrets

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I was twenty-five and living with my sixty-eight year old Aunt Marian following a break up when we learned that her breast cancer was back. Tragic as the news was, I was grateful for the timing. She didn't have children, and I was her namesake after all. I went by May May, after my middle name, to avoid confusion. She was not far along into her chemo treatments when her hair, which had grown back soft like a chick's feathers, started to fall out.

Every day of that year I lived with her began the same way. We started talking from our neighboring rooms before we were even out of bed. Our conversations, that ranged from anything from our dreams, an interview on NPR, the best flavor in the sampler pie at Costco, or which dog had peed in the hallway this time, would travel down the stairs to the kitchen and continue over breakfast. She was a retired schoolteacher working one day a week in an antique store, and I was an after-school nanny. We spent nearly all of our copious free time together going to thrift stores, reading from adjacent couches, listening to Edith Piaf, and watching anything that starred Idris Elba.

One of these mornings she said in a bright voice, "Hey, would you mind buzzing my hair off?" And then with a chuckle, "It's a little depressing to see it fall in my cornflakes, if you know what I mean."

Her boyfriend Pat had cut it off when it had fallen out nine years before, but he told her he didn't have the nerve to do it again. I knew what he meant. My stomach had flipped when she asked me. I put it off until the next day. I didn't know if I had the nerve either.

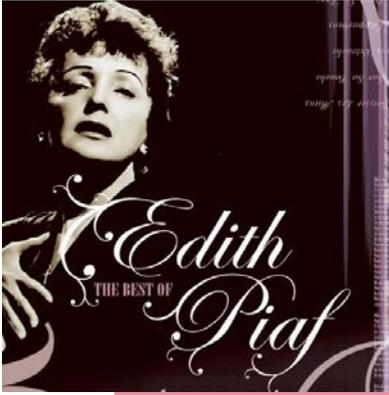
I had always known Aunt Marian as an independent person with an iron clad sense of humor. She had traveled to places like Mexico, hung up beaded curtains in the doorways of her house, and there was not a square inch of wall space without art on it, a lot of it her of own making. She was fearless and wholly herself.

It was only a few weeks earlier, when she was on her way to the doctor visit where she would learn that the cancer was back, that she turned in the doorway and said to me, "May May, I'm scared." I had never heard her say anything like that before, and nothing in such a small voice.

The morning after she first asked me to shave her head, we took our coffee, mine black and hers with lots of cream, out onto the back deck that we had fixed up earlier in the summer. We were always threatening to sit out there to appreciate the sloping backyard, giant mimosa tree, and the muscadine vines that grew on the lattice roof, but that was the first day we actually did. I brought out my speaker and put on Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien," our favorite song of hers, and started shaving with Uncle Pat's electric razor.

It felt wrong at first. It was uncomfortable, surreal. But just a few bars into the song and we were warbling along in our garbled French. Her curls peeled off into the wind like loose petals.

I buzzed the sides of her head first so she had a blonde, curly mohawk. I made her go to the mirror to see it before I shaved off the rest. When she returned, I could tell by her wide eyes and loose grin that she was surprised at how much fun she was having.



Edith Piaf

"Non, je ne regrette rien"

The Best of Edith Piaf

06/1991

Capitol Records

She sat back down and we continued.

Women in our family develop necks with an unfortunate sag like a turkey's gobbler when they age. Mine has the potential to droop that way too, so at the chorus I pushed my head back, pinched the skin on my neck, and shook it so my voice mimicked Edith's vibrato. Marian laughed, deep from the belly.

The sun was bright, our coffee was strong and dotted with wisps of golden hair, and Edith was telling us not to regret anything. How much I would have regretted saying no to my aunt's request, to not making her laugh. This morning, this song, was ours. And from then on I would always think of Edith's declaration as a love song for the way Aunt Marian taught me to live.