



Source: Glenn Kessler, 'US to invite several Arab nations to peace talks', *Washington Post online*, 24/09/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [celebrations](#), [disenchantment](#), [husband/wife](#)

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Because she died so long ago, we all owned a piece of her. Mine was a photograph in a nine carat frame, that smiled at me from the hallway throughout my childhood. Henry's was an ugly snapshot of her in a fifties-print dress, standing on a too-green lawn, next to some garden furniture. Rosa's was a fur coat that Rosa brought along, and modelled by the edge of the marquee to a small audience she pretended to be embarrassed were watching.

After everyone had had a glass of Champagne and moved unenthusiastically between buffet tables, a short man with creased skin like filo pastry tapped a fork on the side of his glass.

'A toast,' he said, 'to Jolana Agneta Polvak.' It seemed safer that way and I thought he was going to leave it, but then he opened his mouth and rolled a wet tongue across his lips. 'Who was also known as Jolana Wilson!' he added with relish and spittle, 'And Jolana Damek! And —' dramatic pause, 'Jolana Fitzsimmons!'

My father signalled to the waiters to fill the awkward silence with more drinks all round.

When I was a child, I used to scrape the hair away from my face and look for my grandmother. Her face was wide and smooth, with dark sepia pools for eyes and dark sepia triangles under her cheekbones. Mine was all blotchiness and chapped lips and biro stains, but if I squinted hard enough and if the light was fading, Jolana and I were identical.

What a civilised way to commemorate polygamy, I thought, crushing the edges of a crepe tablecloth between my fingers. I thought of finding some people that didn't speak English, so I could linger among them like an enigmatic and exotic stranger. I thought of showing them my photograph and watching them as they found the resemblance. I thought of putting to shame Henry's snapshot and Rosa's fur coat and whatever other useless trinkets people had brought along.

My father was already two drinks ahead and going outside for a cigarette. I pushed a smoked salmon roll across my plate and smiled with closed lips at Hana.

'I used to admire her you know,' she giggled. Pin prick eyes. Straw for hair. Cast from a completely different gene pool.

'My mother never spoke about her in the house, so I used to make up stories.' Hana drained her glass like she was drinking courage. 'About how she travelled across Europe, and how she fell in love. Did you know she met both our grandfathers in the same year?'

Because she died so long ago, we all owned her memory. And, the theory went, nobody minded anymore. Nobody minded that she cheated, that she lied, that she mothered four children without telling them about the others. That her long 'visits home' were pregnancies with other families. That her birth certificate said she was ten years older than she had let anyone in England know.

I found my father leaning on a metal pole with one trouser leg rolled up and a bottle of Champagne in his hand. I stood a few yards away with one foot turned outwards, and tried to look like Jolana.

'You don't look anything like her.'

'Neither does anyone else.'

'Rosa does.'

I watched Rosa strut up and down her catwalk.

'It's just a silhouette, Dad. It's not an actual resemblance.'

The trouble was, everyone here was so technicolour. We didn't have the smooth sepia fade of my grandmother's skin, or the serpentine curves of her stockinged calves. We were pink and grubby and getting heat rash, and the only skin and bones we had in common were decomposing in that graveyard in Slovakia.

The man with filo pastry on his face had filo pastry fingers as well, and they were opening and closing around a small flame.

'See! See! See!'

I moved in closer because it looked like he might be about to cut some cake. Hana was nodding seriously at his stupid movements, and the light was casting deep triangles around her eyes. The man saw me and beckoned me over. He spoke in strongly accented English.

'You see. This is Jolana.' He took his hand from the flame. 'No!' He shouted, 'This is Jolana!' He cupped his fingers round the candle and his hands glowed with an even, orange light.

'She was light. She was weak. She was magnificent.'

He was nodding so hard I had to nod back at him.

'But the idea of Jolana—the not quite looking at her —' he laughed a throaty, unpleasant laugh, 'that is much better than Jolana herself.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Mary Paterson.*