

STORIES FROM A SHIVAH

“If he wasn’t underground, Herbie never would have put up with it.”

“What a load of crap.”

“He went on— and— on— and— on.”

“Say it—“

“Forever.”

“What was he trying to prove?”

“More to the point. Who the hell was he?”

“The rabbi? Lorraine got him. What a number he did on Herb.” They were Jews who didn’t observe, but Jews nonetheless. A roll of Joe’s eyes, understood by Herb’s other brothers, silently pointing to Lorraine. Strawberry-blond when she was younger, blue-eyed Lorraine, with a face that conjured up Catholic school-girl uniforms and voluminous white Communion dresses and hidden crucifixes all over the house, discreetly put out of sight at her husband’s shivah, at least one day, preferably three; for the most religious, seven whole days (three days for weeping; four days of eulogy. Seven whole days morning and night for saying the mourner’s prayer). This crowd? An evening at most.

The rabbi and priest departed mercifully at nearly the same time, releasing the mourners from strained decorum. The crowd thinned out. The townspeople, who had never been to a shivah before, followed in their path, relieved to be out of the house at this unfamiliar ritual after paying their respects. What did this have to do with Herbie? The Pied Piper of their children who led them in skating maneuvers in winter on the

frozen pond; summers, even now, hiking for twenty miles or more into the countryside just for the sheer joy of it.

Only the relatives were left. This was when the secrets crept out, Annie observed. The men loosened their pants and belched; the women took off their heels and wiggled their misshapen toes, stuffed for years into those tortuous shoes. The fond remembrances grew darker the more they drank. Annie had seen it before. After the thud of the shovel and the dirt from Israel, the prayers, which today, she had to admit, seemed to go on interminably, and finally, thankfully, the burial, while the dead unknowingly traveled on to another world, oblivious of the preening of those who were left behind, their memories fading as the details of their lives tumbled into eternity. When they were alive such a moment never seemed possible. Flashes of scenes from her favorite uncle's life seared her eyes from the land of the living.

Although she had never called him uncle, he could always make her laugh.

At her wedding it was the only time she had not been amused. He got hold of one of her mother's old bras, a double D cup, cut it in half, put one on top of his head as a skullcap and pranced around the wedding hall with a broom.

"Stop it!" Annie cried, nearly in tears. "Robert's parents are serious people. *Pious* people. Why do you always have to ruin everything with your corny jokes!"

Herbie looked at her in stunned silence. She suddenly saw him as an aging jester who had squandered his talents. An empty soul. Looking back, she knew that after that nothing had ever been the same again between them.

In hindsight now, she thought, it was not so terrible. Everyone had laughed except Robert's parents who cringed and never mentioned it. Every summer of his four years at Harvard, Herbie had worked as a *tumbler* in training at the hotels in the Catskills. *A*

tummel. A lot of noise, but little accomplished. That described her mother's family. A crazy tumult of Russians with their passions and grudges, their drinking and cigars and Borscht Belt jokes. Herbie danced with the wealthy widows, flirted with their daughters, livened up the bingo and whipped up a frenzy of practical jokes when they were dozing around the pool with funny hats and horns that made shameful noises.

He had worked with the best. They had all gone on to fame, but Herbie had remained behind. He graduated from college during the end of the Depression, and when the war started, he spent the duration of it in Italy, sending them large boxes of gifts and a picture of an Italian girl he was thinking of marrying when it was over. At the last minute he had backed out, returned to the States, and taken whatever job he could get. He drifted for a while, given to flights of dreamy wanderlust. Then he regressed to the Catskills for a time, and afterwards a government job with no future, a fish out of water with all those somber bureaucrats. Not a job for a smart Harvard graduate.

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All this was recounted by Irving, one of the four remaining brothers. Annie had never known them very well, nor had they cared to know her or Sheila. Their black ribbons, ripped as a sign of mourning, looked out of place with their drinks and cigars.

The room was thick with smoke, oblivious to the Surgeon General's warnings. Her mother took out a compact, looked in the mirror, checked her teeth for lipstick traces, swiveled a new tube out and painted a brighter color. Then she drew out a cigarette from a slim, stylish case. She had flown in from Florida, tanned and healthy, a move she had made after Annie's father died. Sheila had been gone a long time by then and Annie herself was already on her own. Her mother went over to the bar to pour

herself a drink. She looked at Annie first, a ploy calculated to excuse herself. “What are you going to do? Cry the whole time?”

Within hours, Annie saw her mother sinking back into that other life with her family. Six children. Now the youngest gone. Her favorite brother. It was Herbie who had tried to cheer Annie up at Sheilah’s funeral. “Hey, Annie fannie, what’s with this gloom and doom? Wanna bet I can make you laugh? Your sister wouldn’t like you to be so sad.” He was right about that, Annie knew.

Where was he now, when she needed him? Lorraine had retreated to the bedroom to escape these clowns. The room was filled with the detritus of Herbie’s life, as if he would come bursting in the door and ask what they were all doing here. His eyeglass case was on a table, his leftist leaning newspaper folded in half next to it, as if he had just put it down. A pair of worn slippers he liked to wear around the house waited patiently for him to come back, while his favorite chair sat unoccupied, facing a blank TV screen.

Annie had flown in from northern California, still chilly in early summer. Lorraine hadn’t known she was coming. When she opened the door, Herbie’s wife collapsed into her arms.

“Annie,” she said. “What a surprise.”

Lorraine’s blond hair had gone to a muddy grey. Her skin was still luminous, though, but pale, with sallow undertones, as if she hadn’t slept, her hips arthritic. She had stopped teaching the tango a long time ago. Lorraine and Herbie met at a dance. Herbie was the Master of Ceremonies. Lorraine was the dance instructor. They lived in a backwoods country town in Massachusetts in a house that had belonged to Lorraine’s parents. After all these years, nothing had changed. It was just the way it was in Annie’s

childhood when she had visited them, traveling from the Midwest to this other world.

The

old-fashioned chairs and setee, the tiny parlor tables and fussy teacups that had belonged to Lorraine's French grandmother in the back provinces of Quebec. African violets perched on an ancient armoire.

Now in the dimming light she took Annie outside, like the scene of a crime viewed again, the vegetable garden they had labored over suddenly abandoned, Herbie's tools laid hastily against the side of the house. With the overflow of vegetables, Lorraine canned for the winter.

"Canned! Joe shouted," as though it was a landscape from another biosphere. Only the *goyim* did that. Earlier he had peered through the lattice window to see where his brother had expired, as though he had never heard of such a thing. "A vegetable garden! What do you know?" The window was open just enough so that his voice carried into the cobalt blue of the sky.

Lorraine's skin was flushed, visible even in the dimming light. Now she explained to Annie, "We were just working on the squash. That's when he fell over and was gone." The story already sounded rehearsed to Annie when Lorraine added, in the silence, "He didn't suffer, Annie."

She reached for Lorraine's hand and took it in her own as Lorraine began to cry. "I probably won't be seeing any of your family again." Annie nodded. It was probably true. Not only did Lorraine put up preserves for the winter, but to the family's chagrin, she filled her bread box with white bread and never missed Sunday Mass. Worst of all, her own brother, Tim, the anti-Semite, had worn a red jacket and a plaid bow tie to the

ceremony, already unleashing dialogue rattling around in Annie's brain of treachery that would be circulating for years to come.

"That SOB, I bet he did it on purpose. Hell, it was his own sister who was married to him."

"He gave Herbie a run for his money."

"I hear he called him Jew boy when they first started going out."

They had all changed their names to escape to the other side. Herbie had traveled from Haime to Hershel to Herb and then Herbie. But what was the good of it? Their faces spoke of centuries in an ancient land. Lorraine had even toyed with the idea of converting to make the family happy and then found out that it wouldn't mean a damn thing. Not that she could have ever gone through with it. She was tolerated and knew it. That was the best you could say. She would always be "that woman," the *shikseh* who had snared their Herbie.

"Not the sharpest knife in the drawer," Annie's mother had said after the wedding. "The priest had to give her permission to marry him..." Annie could still hear those words of years ago imprinted on her mind.

Tears welled in her eyes when her mother said that. It hurt because Herbie loved Lorraine. It was Lorraine who would teach Annie to embroider towels for her trousseau and turn a fine hem when she came there summers from the Midwest, how to plant turnips and carrots, how to dance the fox trot and the waltz as she swept Annie around the room, teaching her to count to the beat, execute turns, and dip her head back without getting dizzy.

In a haze of reminiscences and resentments, the brothers picked at the food in

Lorraine's house: watercress sandwiches from that same white bread in fancy shapes without crusts, or ham and cheese. Their glances said it all: an abomination that had nothing to do with religion. They were tall men, over six feet tall, Russian giants, who had been slender and athletic in their youth. Herbie had stayed that way. Unlike his brothers. They reminded Annie of the other side instead of Jews, as though *they* were the Cossacks riding straight out of Babel's *Red Calvary*, fierce, hard drinking fighters. Herbie had not only been a pure spirit, but also the brightest, with a quick retort and fast-fire jokes. Annie missed him already. He was the only one of her mother's family that she had truly known, the one who cared about her. He was the one she had loved.

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In that exile, halfway across the country where Annie's family lived, a no man's land, he was also the only one who had visited them and had cared to know his sister's two girls, filling up the house with the same jokes that had smoothed his way through the rest of his life.

In her mother's photograph album, you could already see it, little Haime, Hershele, Herbie at the Atlantic seashore on top of a pyramid formed out of his brother's bodies. Herbie was the youngest with a mischievous monkey look already. An orphan boy who would have a quip for everything to hide his pain.

Annie had not known him in that other life. It was before she had been born. The *tumbler* bit she had only gleaned through a few photographs and her mother's stories. But that was true of her own birth, too. As an infant, her mother had taken the girls to a warmer climate when Sheila's weak lungs took a turn for the worse. Herbie

came to help them out. He walked Annie every night to soothe her colic, although at the time she had not known it, crooning songs, she realized now, that must have come from those Catskill summers.

It was Herbie who kept reminding Annie when she was older, “ After I’m gone don’t forget I walked the floors with you, I sang to you at 3 in the morning. He called her Annabelle, her childhood name. She tried to picture this as he caught a tune on the air and belted it out to prove it to her. As a child she could not imagine a time when he would not be around.

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Herbie always appeared out of nowhere. He had never had a home of his own. It simply wasn’t done then. He slept on the sofa at one brother’s or another, or at the homes of friends. He learned how to be a guest, a raconteur, to earn his keep. There was always somewhere for him to stay. He had lived with Annie’s mother on and off through the years. They never knew when he would turn up on their doorstep, duffle bag in tow. He hitchhiked across the country. He caught trains. He always had a funny story to tell as he came in the door. This was in the years after the war, but before he got married. He was their entertainment. When their father was out on the road selling, Herbie settled in and became a fixture in their lives. He never called or wrote. Instead, he appeared with stuffed animals, paper flowers that blossomed when Annie sprinkled them with water, and birthday candles that they couldn’t blow out, making Annie and Sheila howl with pleasure. He juggled balls, taught them card tricks, and made coins disappear. In the winter he took them sledding and to skate on winter ponds. The house

felt different. It shivered with excitement and mishaps and adventure. Neighborhood children hung around just to see him. There was always something happening, even if it was only searching for Herbie's false teeth, invariably thrown out by mistake when they weren't soaking in a glass of water, a standing joke over the years. A row of scorched matchsticks lined the counter every time he used the toilet and the odor of Bryl hair cream, Old Spice and Noxzema drifted through the vents. Sometimes Annie would open the jar and inhale the vivid scent of eucalyptus that intoxicated her. Herbie's hairbrush sat on the counter for the few strands of hair that were still left, along with his army Dopp kit. Like the rest of his brothers, he had gone bald early, making him look older than his age. To their delight, he taught them to make their own toothpaste out of baking soda and homemade soap that he took on the road. Sheila and Annie had never known anyone like him.

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Whenever he came, Herbie brought something new to the stale air of the house, an electric current of excitement. Annie felt it. So did her mother. She fixed herself up, laughed more, sat at the kitchen table talking for hours, sipping wine from a slender stemmed glass. Her hair, pinned up in a bun unless she was going out, fell loosely down to her shoulders when Herbie was around, as though she was the only guest at a perpetual party. Racing forms littered the table if the horses were running and when they came back with winnings they celebrated by popping a cork of champagne that Sheila and Annie were allowed to sip.

Yet far into the night after they went to bed, Annie would wake up to the ebb and flow of their voices. "Who do they think they are?" Herbie asked this in a tone that was

unfamiliar and disturbing. Annie had heard enough murmurs to know what he meant. He wanted to marry a woman named Lorraine, but the family was against it because of her religion. That was why Herbie had come, Annie found out later. To think it over.

“I love her,” Herbie said. “Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“It’s not enough,” Annie heard her mother answer before sleep overtook her. “You think it is now, but it’s not. You’ll just have to trust me on that. It’ll never work.”

It was hard to think of her mother and Herbie as brother and sister. They didn’t look alike, for one thing. When he was younger Herbie’s hair was so black it reminded Annie of an onyx ring her mother wore on her little finger. His long nose shadowed a face that always sprouted a dark growth no matter how often he shaved. Annie’s mother was very pale, with smooth skin that reflected the light, as though she had been born during the White Nights of St. Petersburg. Her hazel-flecked eyes speckled with gold reminded Annie of a beautiful Russian Matryoshka doll.

“What was he like then?” Annie often asked.

“Herbie?” Her mother appeared to still be gazing at that long-ago life of her childhood that Annie could never imagine.

“He was the youngest so everyone made a fuss about him, but when our mother died, he was lost. Sometimes I think he tried to make a place for himself by becoming the family clown.”

Annie could never imagine her mother’s life with her brothers above a poultry store with the stench and racket of chickens being slaughtered every day, leaving her with a succession of stepmothers. Earlier, when her mother was alive, her father had peddled trinkets to farm wives, in a way not that different than Annie’s father who traveled the Midwestern prairies with his wares and was rarely home.

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In the winter Herbie slept in Annie's room in one of the twin beds, but when it was warm, he pitched a tent in the backyard and got up early in the morning as soon as the birds began stirring. He told her that he and his brothers had slept four to a bed and taken turns on the sofa. Only her mother had enjoyed the luxury of a bed to herself. In summer he had gone to the park to sleep, escaping the crowded, sweltering apartment. It was an age when you could still do that.

On the hottest nights, Herbie strung up a hammock on the highest bough of the oak tree to catch a faint breeze. Annie worried that in the morning she would find that he had flown away, or else that he had fallen down and broken his head, like a child in a nursery rhyme. Life heightened and became an ongoing drama. On those mornings, still in her pajamas, Annie joined him. It was like being at camp. Using a small Coleman stove, he made her scrambled eggs and cinnamon toast, and they sat on stools eating from tin plates with makeshift utensils. The empty summer days filled up with possibilities.

They left early before the sun came up, hiking through woods and fields of flowers. Herbie thought nothing of walking to the next town, or the town after that, thirty or forty miles simply to see what was there, as though he was still in the army, shoulders thrown back, with strides spaced so far apart Annie had trouble keeping up with him. There was a lot more to Herbie than jokes. Annie saw qualities that no one else did. He knew things. He'd been around. He knew languages: Italian, of course, but also French and German and Spanish, Latin and Greek. He juggled facts the way he juggled balls and sang outrageous limericks to amuse them as they made their way into the countryside:

A wonderful bird is the pelican,
His mouth can hold more than his belican,
He can take in his beak
Enough food for a week—

And here Herbie paused, creating a moment of suspense before uttering the finale, “I’m damned if I know how the helican.” He laughed at his own joke. “Hey, Annie, I bet you never heard that one before.”

He brought a whistle for emergencies. He taught Annie to use a compass and then quizzed her so that she would never get lost. He pointed to a nearby hill. “What would you do first? Think, Annie. What if you couldn’t find your way out of here?”

“I’m not sure.”

“See that hill. Climb it. Listen for other people. Look at the terrain and decide what’s the best way to proceed.”

“What if it’s dark?”

“ Then you look at the stars. Find Polaris in the north sky.”

Annie thought about that. She wondered if she would ever be lost in the wilderness, even though sometimes she felt a little lost inside. Herbie taught her what to do if rocks fell or if lightning struck, how to build shelter and to make a fire without matches.

He was a city child who had learned these techniques in the army. It was about survival, he said. And somehow, Annie knew, even then, that Herbie, even though he never said so, had made up his mind that he was going to be one of the ones who would make it any way he could. Jokes were one way to survive; wits were another.

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The war had changed him. Friends he had known for years had not survived. On that last visit it was clear that he was anxious to get on with his life. He wanted to settle down now, he told Annie. The war had interrupted everything, but it had showed him what really mattered, too. “You do a lot of thinking in a foxhole,” he said, taking a cigarette out of his pocket flap and striking a match against his shoe. “My friend got hit, but there I was without a scratch. He didn’t make it, but I’m still here. And what am I going to do with it? There are things no one is ever going to tell you, Annie, except maybe your Uncle Herbie. You have to find out those deep, dark secrets by yourself.”

“So what are you going to do?” Annie asked.

“Here’s what,” Herbie said. Picture this, Annie,” he said, setting the scene. The girl he liked, correct that, he said, the girl he *loved* was ten years younger. That might be a bit of a problem, too. She was a dancer. She’d even been in some Broadway shows that went on tour around the country, playing small towns that didn’t have a proper theater. But she’d come back home because she didn’t like the life, the constant traveling, the seedy hotels and late hours. “I want a future, Annie. I never even thought about it before. I don’t want to spend my life sleeping on other people’s couches. “ Annie followed the smoke rings disappearing into the air as Herbie said, “That time in the war helped me make up my mind. I know what I want out of life.”

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Still, the uncertainty of what would happen caused him to brood. More than once, Annie found him with his head in his hands, his eyes red and hollow. When he looked up, he didn't say anything for a few moments until she sat down beside him. "Lorraine and I are on opposite sides of the fence, Annie. What is the sense of religion if it keeps people apart who truly love each other?"

Annie didn't know how to answer that question any more than she knew what to do if she were lost in the wilderness. This was a wilderness of another kind, a Herbie she had not known before, although her mother had laughed and said, "Don't worry, he'll get over it."

As the summer wore on, Herbie's face became darker, the jokes fewer and further apart, and then stopped. "I know one thing. I don't want to live without her," he said one day. As soon as he told her that, Annie thought it was like opening a nut to look inside. Sometimes you didn't want to see what was there. He took out a photograph. Lorraine looked like a girl in a shampoo ad. Her hair spun like goldenrod around her face and her eyes shone a fragile blue.

"Don't tell, but I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"When is that?" Annie asked, bewildered by this woman she didn't know who had taken her place.

Herbie pulled a small box out of his pocket and opened it to reveal a miniature diamond that reminded Annie of a tiny shining star. She tried to imagine Lorraine's face when Herbie asked her, that spun gold spilling over her incandescent eyes as she saw it for the first time. What was it like to be so loved?

"Soon. I'll let you know."

But before that happened, Sheila was sick again, and then suddenly she was in the hospital. Everything came to a stop. Herbie stayed all day and slept on the floor at night next to her bed so their mother could get some rest. He pulled his best tricks out of a hat to ease her pain. He brought the nurses chocolates and wooed them with flattery to thaw the rules. He bought Sheila a puppy, a cocker spaniel the color of honey, and sneaked it into her room to cheer her up, borrowing a clown suit to play the buffoon to entertain her, looking like the old Herbie again. “Smile,” Herbie said, as though Sheila’s sad face could be changed overnight, another rabbit he would pull out of his hat. But after a week or two Sheila began to sit up and eat, and for the first time, she smiled back and Annie knew that she would be all right. It was Herbie who had kept her alive that summer. It was only now that Annie realized how much she had taken Herbie for granted. Why hadn’t she ever told him before it was too late what he had meant to her?

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Scenes floated on the iceberg of memory before they sank. The years disappeared into the grave. At first it was a shock, and then she knew the pain would subside in time. That was the way it had been when Annie’s father died.

Her mother’s mascara was streaked. She had taken too much to drink. Suddenly she looked tired and old. She leaned over and whispered, “Do you know what he did?”

“Who?”

“*You* know.”

And then before Annie could reply, she said, “I’ll never forgive him.”

Her face looked ravaged now. Annie felt her heart quicken when she realized that her mother meant Herbie. “Not even now?” she asked, as her mother launched into a story Annie was sure she didn’t want to hear

But her mother was determined to have it out. “...When Sheila was so bad that time, Herbie ran off one night with the nurse and left me with a sick child and an infant. Can you imagine how I felt in the morning when I found out the two of them were gone? To think that they were in cahoots all along, sleeping together right under my nose. “ She waited a beat and asked, as though there could only be one answer, “What do you think of your favorite uncle now?”

Annie wondered what her mother hoped to gain by this? Did she want a final accounting of all the mistakes Herbie had made in his lifetime that could never be rectified? Of course, Annie had known nothing about this perfidious act. It saddened and surprised her, a youthful Herbie running off with a woman, leaving them to their fate. It was not the Herbie she had known or cared to know. She tried to picture the secret plans, the escape under cover of blackness, finally chalking it up to youthful exuberance and passion. But why had her mother kept it hidden all these years, only speaking about it now?

“That was a long time ago,” Annie said at last, recognizing in that moment of release the sorrow that had lain heavily on her mother’s heart, the need to reveal all the pieces of her brother’s life with his death, suddenly aware that there would never be another chance to make it right.

“As far as I’m concerned it might as well have been yesterday.”

There was no answer Annie could give that would have been sufficient. She could have said: *he kept Sheila alive. He slept on the floor. He made her laugh. He was the light of my childhood in all that sorrow*, but she didn't.

What good would it do? Maybe the guilt of that long-ago transgression had stayed with him. This was her mother's brother, the one she was supposed to have loved the best. Now he would never know, or maybe he *had* known all along. She was still angry and that anger wasn't going to go away until her mother died, too. Annie thought about the dark secrets that only emerged at times like this, the unspoken resentments carried for a lifetime. Perhaps that was why Herbie had stayed the last time when Sheila was sick. To make up for abandoning them so many years before.

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The conflagration in the room grew louder. The memorial candle the rabbi lit threw an eerie glow over the mourners, as if they were the ghosts who were visiting from the dead. For a moment it appeared as though Herbie's Jewish soul had risen from the flames and winked at her as though to let Annie know that his death would turn out to be just another one of his jokes. Then the illusion passed, the flame flickered uncertainly and flared again.

Annie walked down the hallway and went straight to Lorraine and Herbie's room and pushed open the door. Lorraine was sitting on a rumpled bedspread. Herbie's clothes were still on the chair and his side of the bed looked as forlorn as Lorraine's naked face. The children had never materialized, but they had been the happiest couple Annie had ever known.

“They won’t be coming again.” Lorraine said, without looking up. She was holding her rosary beads, meditating on the first mystery. Suddenly they fell from her hands like the sound of glass crashing to the floor, and she began to weep again.

“You can’t let them upset you.”

Annie bent down and picked them up and continued where Lorraine had left off. She couldn’t bring Herbie back, but she could do this. It was one of the things that Lorraine had taught her years ago, just in case. Just in case— what? But Lorraine had never told her that. Annie understood now. You never knew when something you learned would come in handy and save your life, or someone else’s. That was what Herbie had taught her.

Life was a mystery. People were complex. Only when it was gone could you see the shape of it, or what their lives had meant to you.

Now everything would go on without Herbie. In a few years he would be forgotten. People might stop for a few minutes to remember, but that’s all they would give him. Herbie would never know. He was on his way to a place from which no one had returned, the way he had walked to those towns, simply to discover what was there, or else for the sheer joy of it.

THE END