

THE RUSTLING OF LEAVES

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We sat Shivah for my father, a seven-day period of Jewish mourning. It used to be that the family would sit on little stools, rending their sackcloth and rubbing ashes all over themselves. I don't think it's written anywhere in the Torah to do that so I wonder who set the trend. Nowadays, the Rabbi comes to the home, as Rabbi Mann came to ours, leads the mourners in the Mourner's Kaddish (a blessing) every night, and friends and family arrive to schmooze about the dead person, and eat. The eating is very important.

I walked into the house three days before to another barrage of raised voices between my parents. The anger swirled around the air like the ivy on our brick walls outside. I almost turned back around. It was money again.

"A brand new TV! We don't need a new TV. Why did you buy such a thing without speaking with me about it first?" my mother said.

"Why should I speak with you?" my father said." It's my money. I don't need to get permission to spend my own money!" His voice echoed throughout the house.

"Your money? It's our money. Who do you think takes care of the children? Who takes care of your home?"

My father snorted as though she had just said something unbearably stupid. "You're taking food and education out of the mouths of your own children, Bernie."

My mother was the queen of mixed metaphors.

“Goddammit, Fran!” I cringed at the violence in my dad’s voice. My stomach felt like it was a wet rag twisting, being wrung out. “You’re a noodge, you know that? No wonder I’m never home! It’s your own fault.”

Her fault? How could it be only her fault? He didn’t come home, he didn’t provide enough money so she had to clothe us from her household money, and it was her fault? Under those circumstances, nagging seemed rational to me. I hated my father so much at these moments. I hated him for making everything her fault, for denigrating her, acting as though she was stupid and incompetent when Fran was anything but. But my mother believed it. Apparently no one had loved her after her mother died. No one had told her how bright and capable she really was. I’d only seen photos of Aaron, my grandfather, but he looked to me like a hard, unyielding chauvinist. Thick, blacker than black, wavy hair that he never lost but only turned beautiful white. Much like hers. Black eyes that no smile ever reached out from. It could have been the style of photography at that time but I don’t think so. A superb tailor, she bragged to me. Funny, she was proud of him. But we always love our fathers, don’t we? Partly it was the era, the way women were treated by men. Her father was a first generation immigrant from Russia, as was my dad’s. She had learned not to love herself at a very early age. She loved Bernie, despite his treatment. Or maybe because of it.

I loved my father; he was so handsome, funny, and full of life. He always called me his princess. I loved being near him, and stroking his smooth tan face, the golden hairs on his arms. Charming, everyone thought he was charming. Bernie Davis, they’d say, he’s such a nice man, so charming and funny, so smart, such a gentleman.

I loved him. I hated him. I hated him for not loving my mother, which translated into his not loving us. I despised him for spending most of his time elsewhere. For spending as little time with us, whether he was working or socializing, as he could get by without people at the Temple

and the Jewish Community Center noticing he was a bad father. He worked so hard. He made a lot of money. So where was it? My mother fought for every cent he spent on us. That's why she was at Filenes Basement that day.

"I paid for my own college myself. The boys should learn to work hard. It builds character." He slammed the newspaper down on the table and his coffee cup wobbled, spilling the creamy brown liquid. "Why do you always resent it when I get something for myself?"

My father left the dining room and moved into the Sun Room. The furniture seemed to shake as he walked. "You don't like it, you know I can always leave." There was silence.

I walked into the Sun Room to see the focus of this battle. It was a monstrosity, housed in wood. I liked TV as much as the next teen but what was wrong with our old TV?

My mother started to cry. I never saw him cry.

He told her she had her big house in Merrymount like she wanted, so get off his back.

My father sat heavily on the oversized orange naugahide chair. I was so angry, I couldn't control myself, didn't want to control myself.

"You're the most selfish human being on the face of the earth. You had to have a new TV?" My father placed his hands on his big stomach. He looked up at me surprised. I'd jumped up from the couch and stood over him. "I hate you. You always make Mom cry. You're always so stingy. She sacrifices everything for us."

He looked so hurt I nearly backed down. But this last battle over the TV had pushed me to the edge and over.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said, "And I'd watch my mouth, little girl."

"You're a horrible father. I just wish you were dead. We'd all be better off if you were dead." With that, I flew out of the room wailing, up the stairs into my attic bedroom with the poster of James Dean on the ceiling.

Two days later, he drove me to Nahant to attend an overnight Young Judea meeting of the Regional Board. I was New England Region secretary. The meeting was at the home of another officer. In the car, there was a terrible silence hanging like poison gas in the air. I wouldn't even look at Bern. He tried to talk but I wouldn't answer his conversational bids. He took out a pack of Juicy Fruit gum, my favorite, and offered me a stick. I was dying to accept it but I shook my head and turned away to face the window. Finally, when we were nearing my host's home, my dad said, "Julie, please speak to me. I'm sorry for the other day. You know I love you."

I thought, *I love you too, Daddy*. Remaining stony and silent, I jumped out of the car and ran into the house without looking back.

The next morning, my brother, Buzz, and Bob Stevens, my Dad's best friend, came to pick me up in Bob's white caddy. On the phone, Ma told me Daddy had had a heart attack but was fine. If Daddy had just had a heart attack, why was Bob Stevens here? Why didn't Buzz come alone?

"What is it you're not telling me?" I asked them. They said nothing.

It wasn't until I walked in the house and saw my mother sitting in the breakfast nook with Auntie Sylvia and Auntie Yetta, crying, that I knew the truth.

"Your father had a heart attack, Julie," my mother said. "He's dead."

I stood there facing her as she sat with her sisters. She didn't even get up to put her arms around me.

"No, Ma. That can't be true," I told her. "I just saw him the other day and he was fine."

"She doesn't believe me," my mother said to her sisters.

"She's just in shock," Yetta said.

"It's true, Julie," Sylvia said, "Bernie's gone."

Gone? Then it came to me. *I'd killed him. Oh, what have I done, what have I done? Why didn't I answer him?* I remembered the last words I'd said to him.

My mother turned back to my Aunts Yetta and Sylvia who tried to comfort her the way one tries to hold a tsunami back with one's hands. Nothing helped. My brother Buzz put his arm around me and led me upstairs to his bedroom where we cried together in each other's arms. Michael walked in and seemed to want to join us but I didn't know how to reach out to him. He and I had always had a difficult relationship; we'd fought regularly since I was small. Mike came over and hugged me quickly. He was crying but I could tell he was trying not to. He kept surreptitiously wiping his nose on the sleeve of his blue work shirt.

"It's my fault that he's dead," I said.

"Don't be stupid, Jewel," Buzz said. "He had a heart attack. No one could have saved him."

"No," I said, "It was my fault." And that's all I would say.

My dad died alone in the hospital. The doctor couldn't find my mom for hours. She was shopping in Filenes Basement. When he did find her, it was too late. Bernie, my dad, drove himself to the hospital in his '66 light green Olds while having a heart attack. According to my mother, he waited for hours in the hospital waiting room before a doctor saw him. I find that hard to believe now but I did then. The thought of it made me feel desperate, like I could have saved him if I'd been there. I was seventeen at the time, the beginning of my senior year in high school.

"Mommy," I cried, in the black limousine on the way to the funeral parlor, "Mommy, please, why did this happen? Won't he ever come back?"

I don't know what I wanted her to say, but I was desperate for some words of comfort.

"Stop crying, Julie. Stop it," she said. "Don't cry or you'll make me cry."

She was completely wrapped in the cocoon of her own grief and couldn't see out.

I barely ate anything that week. I stayed out of school for Shiva and stuck close to my mother, longing for solace, which she was unable to give. I sat in my room alone, looking out the window for hours, thinking how cruel that sparkling blue autumn sky was.

My brothers, Buzz and Mike, and I, seemed to feel responsible for my mother's inability to cope with this loss; we felt a sense of heavy obligation to shore her up.

"Hey, Ma," I said as she walked from the kitchen into the dining room putting clean dishes in the cupboard, "It's Halloween this weekend. We should get some candy for the kids."

"Are you crazy? Your father just died. And you want to celebrate?" she said.

"I just thought if we did something for someone else, it might cheer us up."

"Charity begins at home," she said, and walked back into the kitchen. My brothers and I just stared at each other.

"Gee, why'd Dad have to go and die and spoil our Halloween fun," Mike said, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, shut up, Mike," I said. "No one's happy. I just wanted to think about something else for a second."

"Yeah, well, Ma's busy right now thinking about how she's gonna get the three of us through college now without any income."

Buzz snorted. "Fran just doesn't want to accept that Dad left us without any savings at all and only a little life insurance. Doesn't surprise me."

Mike threw him a dirty look.

"What?" I asked Buzz. "Why doesn't it surprise you?"

"Nothing," Buzz said.

There was silence. We breathed.

"Now that Dad's gone, it's our job to take care of her," Mike said.

Of course, it should have been the other way around. She should have comforted us. We should have been able to lean on Fran. She was the parent. But her resources for helping anyone including herself were lacking. For the next few days, I watched my brothers go from room to room crying, from the bedroom to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the living room, from the living room to the knotty-pine basement, crying. I stayed in my room and cried. I wanted to help, to talk with them about it, and I needed their help but I was afraid they'd reject me. My brothers found the best way to deal with this emotional DMZ was to escape, to return to college after four days. Why not? There was no comfort at home.

"I wish you wouldn't go so soon," I told them as they both packed up their cars as quickly as they could. I left unsaid that now I'd be all alone.

"Yeah, well, we can't miss anymore classes," Buzzy said.

"You don't want us to flunk out, do you? That wouldn't make Dad happy, would it?" Mike said.

"No," I shook my head. But then nothing would make Dad happy anymore.

They both gave me brief hugs and climbed into their cars. Buzzy checked his hair in the rear view mirror with a comb from his back pocket, like Ed "Kooky" Burns from *77Sunset Strip*.

"You'll be fine. You have all your friends, and you have Mom," said Mike.

Yeah, I thought, I have Mom. As they drove off, both their faces relaxed, reflecting relief in their escape. I stood at the bottom of the stairs near the garage for a long time even after

they'd disappeared. I had nowhere to go. So I stayed there in the empty echoing house, in which my mother was present but not available.

Later that week, I still kept thinking maybe it wasn't true; maybe Dad was just on a sales trip and would be back anytime now. On an autumn day as sharp as cut crystal, I had watched them lower his plain pine coffin into the neatly cut opening in the earth and yet the finality of it seemed impossible. I felt my throat close off. The tears wouldn't be far off. I thought about Buzz and Mike and wondered what they had dealt with upon their return to school. What were they feeling right now? Were they lonely and sad? Did they cry at college as they had in their attic bedroom at home? Were there people at school to comfort them? We'd all found it so hard to comfort each other.

I was so angry with my father for leaving us. For years, he ate and smoked and worried. We'd all begged him to take better care of himself. And what about us? We were so unprepared for his unexpected disappearing act, had so little solid infrastructure. And he left us with Fran, a mother with shifting sands for a personality. She expected us to make up for Dad's absence. It made me sick at heart to think how alone all four of us were, stranded and alone. Not even a dime for a phone call. No resources.

"Your father left us with nothing," my mother wailed as I came downstairs the next morning and sat at the breakfast nook. She meant money. She was right. My father left us with nothing but not just financially. What had my father left me? He was a salesman. So he left me words. Their power. Just by speaking them, I was able to kill him. I believed for years that it was my words that had caused his death. I thought about all the words we'd said to each other in our family. Careening missiles. Bombs. Exploding shrapnel. Words are that powerful. They may not kill but they can do some real harm. They can also heal, and in the telling of this resides the healing.

And yet...and yet, I long to see him again, to throw my arms around him wildly, tell him I love him. That I did, I do, forgive him. And more importantly, I forgive myself.

Years later, as I sit on a bench at the Ballroom, watching the dancers float and bob, Peter, the man I love, leans in close to me. I breathe him in. I love his tan, firm skin, and the silky hair on his arms. He leans over and offers me gum from a seemingly bottomless packet, and I accept it gratefully.

“Yes,” I say happily, “I would love a piece.” I never ever refuse his offers of gum.

Every year, the Yizkor prayer for the Departed that I say on Yom Kippur whispers to me of my father, “In the rustling of leaves and the beauty of autumn, we remember them.” I remember him.