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"Charles must have eaten five pieces of potato pudding that night," says Aunt Selina. She sets down her teacup carefully, for her hand has begun to shake.

"They were friends after that—good friends," gasps Aunt Selina. I set down my cup with a dangerous *ping* and mop my eyes with a napkin. "But it almost—killed him."

Thus tried, found guilty, punished, and raised up was Charles MacIntyre. I must ask Selina if he, nearly sacrificed on an altar of love, ever ate potato pudding again.

SITTING *SHIVA*

I don't remember the funeral, but I was there. I was thirteen, and I watched as my mother's mother, the *bubbe,* was buried. Buried: the box that held her body was set in a hollow dug for that box, and her remains covered with earth. We never said "laid to rest," or resignedly, "It was her time." My mother was angry, she felt cheated, and the hole torn in her heart so many years ago still is a fragile mend.

In the spring of 1969, my mother ran for the northbound train. In Toronto, beside the sudden hospital bed, my mother cradled her mother's hand, powerless, trying to will a failing heart to hold the gentle spirit. My mother felt the final breath. With fear and panic she saw the beautiful skin of her mother's face settle, saw the perfect straight nose grow sharp as life's bloom fell away, an image that haunted my mother's bad dreams for a year.

The weeping phone call we dreaded came into our ringing night, and everything took its course: our hasty packing without Mother to tell us how, the key-turning, the hurtling drive from Detroit into space with my father at the wheel and children bracing themselves at highway speeds in a time before seat belts.

I don't remember the funeral, but another memory appears: another Toronto funeral, three years before. Then, the *bubbe* was burying a son. She strained toward my uncle's open grave, trying to throw herself in. Her other sons held her back.

We shivered in the cemetery. Our unhappy group huddled in the shadow of our little matriarch and her shrieking passion. I dug my nails in my palm and moved close to my sister, my father. I was hearing something ancient and deep and huge, and I was scared.

I looked at my sister. Our faces were wet. From his height, my father's face struggled. This raw Jewish emotion alarmed him. On the frozen cemetery soil, we seemed to be standing a distance away, we the Americans. My Canadian cousins drew close to our *bubbe,* familiar. It was her kisses, her cooking, the perfume of her braided hair, that kept their essential clay pliant and moist. We saw her but rarely, knew her less than we wished.

Suddenly the small hands of our *bubbe* rose. Her crooked fingers grasped the collar of her blouse, on the right side, as was proper, having lost her child. Weeping, moaning, with the shocked strength of grief, she tore her garment, ripped the woven cloth. As mourners rent their clothes in Bible times.

The ripping cloth stays with me, an image that serves the *bubbe* as well as her son. Did anyone tear their clothes for her? I do not know. Perhaps such ripping would have helped our healing. We wept, I know. We are a weeping people. In the funeral home, in a little room off the main chapel, and in the cars that followed the hearse to the burial ground, the family wept together. We wept, during the ancient graveside prayers, and as the casket with its unthinkable contents was set in the ground.

The casket was lowered, beside the husband and near the son, near the father who had deserted his daughter, our *bubbe,* near the stepmother who had resented her, whose hostility had pushed her into marriage too young—a genealogy of heartache. Then there was the bleak and hopeless trip from the graveyard to the home of my youngest aunt.

Here in my aunt's house, the survivors would "sit *shiva.*" *Shiva,* from seven in Hebrew, names the week's span of hardest mourning, after the washed, shrouded body is placed in the silent earth. The week is commuted for feast days and Yom Kippur, and suspended for Sabbath. The bereaved mourn hard and sad, but they mourn according to rule and rite—minutely detailed, immortal, and fixed—not as they might choose to mourn, or ever might devise.

For the *bubbe*'s religion envelops death, as well as life. There are instructions and warnings, some in the Torah, some codified by generations of teachers, and some, the most mysterious, passed from one *bubbe* to another. I ask you, where is it written that there must be a dish of hard-boiled eggs on the table when the mourners, stricken and stunned, return home from the burial ground? Yet so it should be, and so it is.

With her scourings and scrubbings and separations, her whisperings and prayers, her hiding things away and bringing others forth, her penny-filled *pushke,* the charity box for orphans and paupers, with her modesty and humility, her visits to the sick—the *bubbe* hallowed the everyday, according to her tradition. Likewise the tradition makes manageable that which is tragic or sublime. There are rituals around death, requirements

incumbent on those who have lost their closest ones. There are responsibilities to the mourners as well, debts of duty and honor the community must pay.

When our *bubbe* died, the world reeled with shock and fresh grief, but someone made calls, someone made arrangements. You are not allowed to mourn in that moment of loss, but only to prepare. The body is washed. Burial must be quick, and dust returned to dust.

There is a funeral service, and ancient prayer at the grave. "Man is like a breath, His days are as a fleeting shadow . . ." As the body is set in the ground, mourners tear their garments. This our *bubbe* knew, in a way that is beyond knowing: so ingrained was the tradition, it had become, for her, pure expression.

In these days of restraint, funeral homes will give you a bit of black grosgrain ribbon, a notch snipped symbolically away, to pin on your lapel. Probably my mother wore one of these after her mother died. Our fears of death, our sadness and guilt and cosmic anger are unabated, but we have lost the chatharsis of shrieking and ripping, that paradoxical means by which one may begin to again grow whole.

Until the burial, say the rabbis, no one may comfort the bereaved. Those who have lost close ones may not mourn or pray, lest they curse God. But after the cemetery, and for a span of seven days, the family will sit together, surrounded by the balm of human comfort. And you have to accept that balm, whether you want it or not, because it is good for you.

During *shiva,* the mourners—sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, wife or husband, or, God forbid, the parents—eschew vanity and luxury. My aunt's mirrors were covered, cushions were removed from her chairs. Sex was banned, though I didn't know it then. My uncle's beards went unshaved. Meanwhile, people came, the second cousins, the friends, the neighbors. They wrung out their salty handkerchiefs and did what had to be done.

By the front door, after the cemetery, someone would have placed a basin and pitcher and towel for ritual handwashing, before entering the house. Inside, the table would have been laid for a meal by women, who came straight here from the service at the funeral home, letting their men drive to the cemetery and witness the emotional farewell. The women would have boiled the eggs and peeled and rinsed them, found tablecloths and dishes and cups and knives tucked in unfamiliar cupboards, and set out food they had prepared.

The bereaved, though sick at heart, should bless the food and eat. At sundown, there must be a *minyan,* the traditional ten-man quorum, to recite prayers and say *kaddish,* the mourner's prayer.

And then there is more food, and tomorrow the same thing, morning and evening the *minyan,* the *kaddish,* a meal. On the fourth day, mourners must join the *minyan,* the formal expression of community. They must begin to return to life.

People come. The family must not be alone, even if it prefers solitude. There will be visitors, a stream of murmuring, kissing, weeping relatives, friends, and neighbors, colleagues, members of the synagogue. They will bring gifts of food and drink, serve the mourners with heaping plates, and, naturally, help themselves. Trays will arrive from the delicatessen, bags of bagels and rye breads. Baskets of fruit will be set out, boxes of chocolates opened, cakes sliced and arranged. The women will be busy, clearing, setting, washing, wrapping and unwrapping, making coffee, making tea.

I have never yet been to a *shiva* where women were counted in the *minyan.* I am unlearned; were I counted, I would not know what to do. In other settings, this worries and offends me, but not in this one. *Shiva,* for me, still is about that old-time female web, the embroidery with which women build and embellish.

The pattern was set for me at my first remembered *shiva,* in the old-fashioned style familiar to the *bubbe,* in whose honor it was held. My impulse, on a *shiva* call, is to draw close, hold a lonely hand, fix a chopped liver sandwich for a grieving friend, that is all. Still, I hope that a *minyan* will gather when I die, and that it will have women in it.

I have wondered at times if the rites, being standardized, are in some sense to be regretted. The *bubbe*'s tradition is fixed, impersonal. Original feeling is compromised. The mourner may not roam the beach all week, let's say, scattering the dead one's ashes, or sail off alone for distant seas. One must confront death in this particular way, among these people, even if you don't like them. Others must try to comfort you, with their presence, their words, their food, though they don't understand, can't understand, all that you feel or don't feel. You must accept this comfort for seven days.

Seven days of waking to the reality of your close one gone from the earth. Seven mornings of brushing your teeth and putting on clothes, though you don't feel like getting out of bed and you couldn't care less. The doorbell rings early, and well-meaning arrive, to ask how you are, to

bustle about, to gather for prayer, to press on you a bagel *mit* lox and a cup of coffee, to ask you how to work your toaster and where you keep the clean hand towels. You crouch on the cardboard box you are using as a mourner's chair, with your paper plate in your lap and a big slice of raw onion on the lox, and you don't like onion for breakfast. They are right there with you, pulling over a chair and reminiscing about the dead.

Seven days of sitting *shiva,* with a break for the Sabbath. Seven nights, except Friday night, for a *minyan* to gather and pray and join you for a meal and a glass of wine and a piece of pastry and sit up with you until you are ready to fall into bed. You are never alone.

Yet every day is different: the week evolves. Midweek, you find yourself smiling at something, forgetting yourself. You pull out a photo album. It hurts every time you think, but still, there was that day, that pleasure, still yours to recall. There is an emptiness here, but the doorbell is ringing again. The day comes when you think, "Please, let there be no more cinnamon coffee cake!"—thus you know you are going to live.

The formula offers a way to experience personal sorrow, and return to the fold. It acknowledges pain and need, and stabilizes the community over time. How might we mourn without *kaddish*? Perhaps there would be more creative responses, more Jewish poetry or music—but then, it wouldn't be Jewish. There may be something to miss, some high or some low, some soaring creative upswing, but then, some free fall of despair. If I lose my footing, I have the woven web of centuries, with all its compromises, even banalities, to fall into. I admit, this is comfort of some kind.

Intense mourning for parents is in the culture, as is the ripping cloth. Our *bubbe,* mother of six, left four sons and daughters to mourn her. One son was dead, one daughter away in a rest home, unaware of change and time. The four sat *shiva* in my aunt's house. The house was small and cramped, packed with things there was never time to sort through, things too good to throw away. This had been the *bubbe*'s second home. My aunt was a widow, poor and young; her mother had been there for her, to cook and keep house and soothe three children when my aunt went off to work.

The visitors crowded in, remembering the *bubbe*'s cheerful, generous nature, her kind, loving heart. We, her grandchildren, were too green at death to know what we would miss: her great soft hug and her big bosom and her long black braid with just one streak of white and the quick ways

of doing and slow ways of moving and her patient warm hands, and her smell like fresh bread, and her yeasty accent, the *colt slaw* she made, the *kitchen floyer* she walked on, the way she understood that children are always hungry and that satisfying such hunger, among all human imperatives, always comes first.

We were sad and fearful and confused at her death. We were excited at this family reunion and commotion. We were dangerous as bare electric wires. We cousins prowled the kitchen for bananas and cookies and sweet carbonated sodas we never usually got to drink. We sat daintily at table and were served by ladies with voices and hairdos and aprons and lipsticks and flowery B.O. As days went on we giggled at names and made jokes and at last shrieked with manic laughter at the peach pie one caller brought.

My cousin Yvonne started it. She was out to get her mother's suitor: Of course Yvonne's spirited mother had a boyfriend—she, the young widow, oval of face, with her eye shadow, long legs, and ebony hair—and of course the eldest daughter, on the brink of puberty, would detest him. He was a marked man, and it was he who had brought the offending pie, straight from the supermarket in a gray box with the price still on it.

"Peach pie! Peach pie! Loblaw's peach pie! Just like homemade! A dollar twenty-nine! Peach pie!" exclaimed the cruel Yvonne.

I knew it was wrong but I had to laugh.

We flew upstairs to the cousins' rooms. We crashed through furniture, bounced on beds, overturned baskets of wash. The civilized veneer crumbled, the tension snapped, the dam broke. A rumble began: The boy cousin with no father taunted my brother. My brother, oblivious, at nine, to psychodynamics, put up his dukes. There was punching and yelling. Eight or nine cousins full of cola drinks, cookies, and sweets, in two small rooms under sloping eaves, bereft of their *bubbe* and her unconditional love: explosive.

Then there was my father, angry at the door, blaming me and not the fatherless lot who lived here.

"You," he smoldered. "You're not even sorry your *bubbe* died."

I was the oldest girl and should have known better. I was thirteen, a great age, and I had let my father down.

Seven days of *shiva,* and three weeks more of standing apart in mourning: no parties or haircuts, and then you join the living. Except for those

who mourn parents. They mourn for eleven months; during this time, observant mourners recite *kaddish* daily in synagogue, and avoid music and celebration.

In all of life to come, a person must remember the parents, lighting a memorial candle on the anniversary of their deaths, the *yahrzeit,* and at other special times throughout the year. The *yahrzeit* candle is lit at sundown, when the new Jewish day begins, and it is made to burn for twenty-four hours. Sometimes, it flickers longer still, jogging memories of the life and stirring up the embers of pain from a time when that pain was fresh.

My parents have chosen to make their own way in the world. They live and let live, from one Yom Kippur to the next. But death is a different matter. When I visit them, there it is, right over the coffee pot, taped to the kitchen wall: a memo page with *yahrzeit* notations, initials and dates in my father's hand. In this fragment of some perpetual calendar, the number of candles grows with time. For my parents now light for their parents, but also for those in their families whose parents and children no longer observe.

Our *bubbe*'s *shiva* ended with Friday night. Someone sent over a *Shabbas* dinner, and the family gathered in. The table was opened to its full size, spread with a cloth, and set. Grownups and children squeezed up to the board, straddling table legs and sharing chairs. The visitors were gone.

It was a good hot dinner, after the days of sandwiches, cold cuts, and salted fish. We spooned it out. There was roast meat, roast chicken, potato pudding, *kishke*—the stuffed cow's innards that made savory virtue of *shtetl* necessity.

From what or whence our appetite, I don't know, but we were hungry, and everyone ate. There was that eating silence. Then an uncle spoke.

"This is a meal that Mother would have enjoyed," he said.

There were nodding heads and glistening eyes, and a pause of remembering, before the dinner resumed. But the pause, and the words, and the grammar itself had done it for me. Would have enjoyed, and never would again. I got it then. Good-bye, dear one, *bubbe,* good-bye.