

Coda

Jeffrey Gilden

THAT WAS BEAUTIFUL, MAYN YINGELE.” GRANDMA IS STANDING AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE LIVING ROOM, LEANING AGAINST THE WALL, WIPING HER HANDS WITH A DISH TOWEL. “SUCH BEAUTIFUL music you make. Play something else for me.”

My hands stumble over the keys, my foot forces the pedal to the floor. The piano groans, moans, laments that it has, after its long life, come to rest here. It dreams of its past might-have-beens: concert pianists who might have tenderly stroked its keys, delighting audiences of tuxedoed men and gowned women; virtuosos who might have gently pumped its pedals while sopranos stood alongside it singing powerful arias from Verdi. And instead there’s this boy, it thinks, a boy whose grandmother tells him that he’s wonderful, and she stands in the doorway beaming while the air chokes on the sounds of his non-songs chock full of misplayed sharps and inverted notes. “Oy,” my piano says, “*s’iz shver un biter tsu zayn a piano.*” I don’t know what this means, but I feel its ache, so I whisper, “I’m sorry.”

INSIDE MY HEAD THE VOICES SPEAK MOSTLY IN YIDDISH. I CANNOT understand them, but I can usually get the sense of what they’re saying. If nothing else, I know when it’s something good or something bad. Everything Grandma has ever touched speaks to me in Yiddish, from the plates on the kitchen table (“*Siz gut esn,*” they say to me, covered with blintzes and sour cream, “*Es tsugeyt zikh in moyl!*”) to the rocking chair on the front porch (“*Kum aher,*” it whispers to me as I walk by, “*Zetz zikh avek!*”). The voices speak, and I long to know what they are saying.

SHE SITS AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, DRINKING COFFEE. "A MECHAYE," SHE SAYS to the cup, and it sings back to her, "*Gezunt un parnoseh.*"

"Hi, Grandma," I say as I pull out a chair.

"*Mayn eynikl,*" she says, "How are you today?"

"Good. Can I have some coffee?"

"Sure," she says, and she gets up to pour me a cup. Mine is much lighter than hers, earth brown swirls settling in a sea of white. I reach for the sugar and put four cubes in my cup.

"Cookies?" she asks, and she is up at the cupboard before the words are out of my mouth.

"Yes, please."

"A *hidesh,*" she says, and she laughs, and the cookies laugh with her.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"You are, *mayn yingele.*"

The time seems right, so I spring it on her.

"Grandma, can you teach me?"

"Teach you? Teach you what?"

"Teach me Yiddish."

"Yiddish? But why?"

"I want to know it, I want to know what's funny, I want to know what they're saying."

"What who is saying?"

"Just teach me. Please?"

"I'm no teacher, Steven."

"But you're the only one who can teach me, *bubbe.*"

"*Bubbe?*" she says. "You've never called me '*bubbe*' before."

"Please? I want to know Yiddish. I need to."

"But no one speaks Yiddish anymore. Who will you talk with?"

"With you. It will be our secret language."

And the plates and the coffee cups ask her, "*Nu, vos zogstu?*" and I follow their lead and ask her, "*Nu, vos zogstu?*"

The whole kitchen laughs with her as she reaches out to pat my hand.

"Yes, *mayn yingele,* I will teach you."

And the cookie I am eating says, "*Mazl tov,* Steven."

"IN THE OLD COUNTRY," SHE SAYS, "MANY OF US LIVED IN ONE ROOM. ME AND my three sisters shared a room, and my brother had his own room. We were very poor and we always dreamed of coming to America. Only two of us lived long enough to make it here."

"Why are you telling me this in English?" I ask, and she leans over to pat my head.

"Before you can understand the language you must understand the culture, the problems, the lives we had. This cannot be separated from the language. It is important you learn about something before you talk about it."

"Okay."

"We were weeks travelling to get here, and I could tell you stories, but not as well as my brother could. I don't remember too well; he did the remembering for both of us. But this I remember: when we sailed into the harbor we turned to each other, my brother and me, and we said at the same time, '*Haim.*'"

"Home, right?"

"Yes, home, but more than that. It was the home we left, the home we were coming to. The family behind, the future ahead. All this in one word. No other language does that. The language breathes our sacrifice, our separation, our pain, but also our dreams. It is happy and sad at the same time, it is filled with smiles and tears. You have to learn more than the words, Steven—you have to learn the life."

SHE TELLS ME A JOKE, AND I THINK ABOUT IT, AND I MAKE ALL THE TRANSLATIONS, and finally, I laugh.

"What are you two laughing at?" asks my mother as she walks into the kitchen.

"Just a joke Grandma was telling."

"Can I hear it?"

"You wouldn't get it."

"In Yiddish, then, I guess?"

"Yeah," I say.

Grandma strokes my face and says, "*Me darf im gebn a knipl in bekl.*"

"No, Grandma, don't, I'm too old."

"What did she say?" asks my mother.

"She said that I deserve a pinch on my cheek. I guess because I'm learning so good."

"So well," my mother corrects.

"So well," I repeat, and my grandmother reaches out to pinch my cheek.

"Have you practiced piano today, Steven?"

"I'll do it right now," I say, and I hear from the other room a great big "Oy!"

"YOU ARE GETTING VERY GOOD WITH LANGUAGE, STEVEN." SHE TAKES A BITE of her sandwich.

"Sarah, how are you?" says a voice suddenly above us.

"Ettie, I'm good. You know, some days are better than others. And you?"

"I'm good, too, knock wood. Who's this fine young man?"

"This is my grandson, Steven."

"Nice to meet you, Steven. I'm Ettie Levine."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Levine."

She looks at me, surprised.

"He speaks Yiddish. How nice!"

"Grandma's been teaching me."

"I wish I had someone to teach it to. My grandchildren aren't interested. You are very lucky, Sarah."

"Yes, I know."

IN THE HOSPITAL SHE SPEAKS ONLY YIDDISH, AS IF SHE'S GONE BACK TO HER far away childhood. She smiles through her pain, and she's laughing with her friends, she's at home cooking, she sails into the harbor to begin a new life. I have to translate for everyone. But I sense that she doesn't want me to say it exactly, she doesn't want anyone to know everything. She wants only me to know. The truth is for me only. By silent agreement I fudge the translation.

"*Bubbe, vos makhsti?*"

"*Me lebt un me mutshet zikh,*" she whispers, and there's something peaceful beneath the pain.

"What did she say?" they ask.

I tell them she said she's feeling a bit better.

"*Ich ken es nisht fartrogn.*"

"What did she say?" they ask.

I tell them she said there's less pain now.

"*Gut gezogt,*" she says, in a voice nearly too far away to be made out.

"What did she say?" they ask.

I tell them the truth this time, that she said that I'm speaking just fine.

"MOM, DIDN'T YOU EVER LEARN YIDDISH?" I ASK, AS I PUT ON MY TIE.

"Not really. Grandma and Grandpa spoke it, but never to us. They wanted us to speak English, and English only. She'd say, 'Yiddish was fine for us and in the old country, but we're in America, so you speak American.' And she spoke English so well; she learned it and practiced it for us."

"It looks like I have no one to speak Yiddish with anymore."

"Would you like me to learn it so we can speak together?"

"No, there's no point. It's a dead language."

I WALK INTO THE HOUSE AND I HEAR VOICES.

"*Yisgaddal,*" chants the doorknob.

"*V'yiskaddash,*" chants the mat.

"*Sh'may rabba,*" chants the table.

"Amen," I reply, without thinking.

"What, dear?" asks my mother, as she enters behind me.

"Nothing."

"*B'olmah divrah hirusay,*" sings the coffeepot.

"*V'yamlikh malkhusay,*" sing the cups.

"Do you hear anything?" I ask my father as he and my mother go upstairs.

"No, Steven. Do you hear something?"

"No, I guess not."

It's a chorus now, a beautiful symphony of voices, each with its own sound, so clear, so individual, that I know each object that is singing without looking. And the voices of these objects blend together in tribute, and when they are finished I am smiling and I say, "Amen."

And then in the sudden stillness I hear a voice.

"*Kum aher*," it says.

I walk over to the piano and tentatively stroke it.

"*Mir zol zayn far dir*," it says.

"No, I need the hurt," I say. "But we can share it."

I sit down on the bench and lift my fingers to the keyboard. The piano guides them as they glide across the keys.

"*Mit gefil!*" it coaches, and my heart takes over for my fingers.

"*Oysgetseykhnt!*" it screams, and it sounds great to me, and I can hear the plates and cups rattling with joy, and I see her drying her hands in the doorway. And she is smiling.

I slow down as the song comes to a close, and the piano, as out of breath as I am, sighs, "*Getrofn!*"

And the whole house applauds.



Jeff Gilden is a high school English teacher in Great Neck, NY. Coda, his first published story, was an entry in the David Dornstein Memorial Creative Writing Contest of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education. The deadline for the next CAJE writing contest is December 31, 1997.