

# Memory Candle

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**I**T BEGINS TO OPPRESS ME THE DATE, WEEKS BEFORE, TO WEIGH ON ME, LIKE AN OLD DEBT THAT WAS ONLY PARTLY PAID, WHICH ONE DOESN'T WISH TO PAY. IT DOESN'T COST THAT MUCH, BUT THROWS a way of moving through the day, out of whack. It is an obligation, strangely painful. Why?

I remember when my father imposed it. "Say it," he said. "It's an honor—to your mother."

It had to be said in front of others, of course, in some place, usually a downstairs room, or a half empty hall, musty but often sweet with the smell of damp old books.

When I was a child it meant nothing in my house whether you went, or you didn't, except in a social sense. It was nice if you went. Now and then my father might take the trouble to explain something there, but only to amuse himself, as part of his natural bent as a storyteller. That anything was serious about it—was never impressed upon me. If you made a fool of yourself, however, that was awful. You made *him* look like a fool. In fact, better not to get up, or make a show of what you might know, because you would *never* know as much as your father did, and therefore you looked silly from the point of view of the family, his, that is. He could do the whole thing. Not just on ordinary days, holidays too, what sounded like a tremendous rigmarole to a child, impressive, beyond reach, tunes, the right words, intersection of fine print and bold. (The book under your nose was only a reference. You had to know it by heart.)

My father would get up, easily, rise on the few stairs, to the *bimah*, altar, bend over the book, begin. Everyone in the place took a deep breath—

right from the first note. My father didn't use the voice in which he sang, which was deep and mellow. His own father, Grandfather, was known in Boston for an elegant cantorial delivery, and my great grandfather I was told by our family's oldest member, was a *baal tefillah* in Pinsk, "master of the chant." Dad could go on and on in the car speeding along the Merritt Parkway down to Connecticut relatives singing Gilbert and Sullivan, trilling over and over, "a twisted cur, and elliptical bil-liard baaallls," our Dodge doing a dance back and forth across the white line down the center of the highway. Not a bit of that embellishment, its ringing, echoed when he got up to lead a service, though some of the fury of the patter, syllables puckering his lips in rapid fashion, the whole thing done—before it had hardly begun. It was a dry rush. The obligation was all, any show of enthusiasm an insult. It was typical of a certain kind of Litvak—the dried herring delivery I was to be served up in a number of dusty basements after my father obliged me to my mother's memory.

Since I stumbled over the simplest elements of the language, fluency out of the question, the idea of having to go through it, even for the sake of Mother, was upsetting. Still I let my father wrap the straps around me, set me up.

Now it's too late to stop. Now the date has become part of a calendar which marks the year like the fall of leaves, the first green chives coming up out of the wet chill earth in the April backyard. I begin to feel it weeks before, although it has no mark on the calendars in the offices through which I trek. It can be in April, May, since it is a date tied to a moon's cycle, but the twinge starts in my kneecaps. Your mother's death—it's coming. Remember, remember, for to forget is to lose her, lose her one bit more.

Only it's forbidden to remember too much, too soon. It is the morning before that the dread settles in earnest over me. In the bed, the morning of the evening when I have to go, and do it, I see, waking up on sheets still clammy with dreams, the white candle suddenly flickering in the pantry, my father taking out his blue bag embroidered with symbols, flowers, in red and orange threads, filled with a silk *tallis* threadbare but huge, bunching on the angry red boils in his neck, and spilling over his jacket shoulders and a smaller bag, a crushed green velvet faded away to brown and yellow strings. This is what he takes to these cavernous rooms and basements and in the smaller bag, bulging it, large leather boxes of his *tefillin*, phylacteries, or *tefillin*

inherited from my grandfather, enclosed in boxes of colored cardboard covered with the intaglio of kabbala. He is going for his parents.

Did I go with him? The memory of wandering into cold halls with stale air early in the morning, scrambling over empty benches while he chanted in a corner with the meager count of ten, twelve men, taunts me. It is the candle I am sure of, flickering in an octagonal glass, holding the white wax which drips toward its own flame, self consumed, the sadness radiating from it, the sole source of light, painting shadows of the dead on the cream paint over plaster pantry walls late at night, looming on the linoleum, moving between stacks of dishes on the shelves, piled up in ziggurats to the ceiling.

Then the second morning, the day after, a tiny glow still there, the memorial light like a sick person guttered fitful, coughing last faint breaths, wanting to be, it seemed to me at five, six years old, with us. In the sad steps of my father moving about the kitchen, slumping against the counters, I did not doubt that the ghost of my grandfather, Israel, dogged the house. Dad's mother, Devorah, about whom he never talked, who died in his childhood, was an indistinct face in a photograph, prematurely old, blown from a small negative into a bitter presence against the living room walls. Her face was wary, angry, disapproving of me. The picture was taken in the weeks after Devorah's brother was murdered by the Poles in Pinsk. A kidney disease that would kill her in a few months was eating in her vitals. The will to see her husband, Israel, who had slipped away to America, nine years before, stiffened Devorah to shepherd their children over the Atlantic. Knowing only the photograph, not her story which no one cared to tell me, I could not see my grandmother, Devorah, in a flame.

Did my mother light candles? I don't think so. Her father was absent in the house, never part of her conversation. Her mother, Channah, lived in a dozen Yiddish remarks we had heard from the cradle, all sarcastic, put-downs. "*Mein groyse lappen*"—my big spoon, sung when I reached for a portion larger than Mother thought due my plate, or I heaped hamburg patties, covetous. "*Iz nisht gefilte fish*"—not the real thing, okay, "something," but a *patchkee*, not what was asked or called for—not what she wanted. Some of this drum roll was rapped out half in English, "Don't mix *kashe* and *borscht*," i.e., opposites, dishes for different days of the week. My mother's favorite, "*Maishe Kepara*," a synonym for a hopelessly mixed up person, naturally, me, the Maishe in the house. Apart from these asides, the religion

brought from Poland in my mother's family had washed away off the seaboard of America, leaving behind a mouthful of jokes, pebbles, smoothed by wealth.

The Grandparents' law on both sides of Mother's family, prayers, customs, were stowed away, creaky out of fashion furniture in the attics or cellars, a few displayed at weddings and funerals. Whatever came from Europe with the parents was dissipated among the comings and goings of the older siblings who practiced mostly disapproval. Twelve brothers and sisters; my mother, the next to youngest in the pictures that show her on the steps, in Harlem, Flatbush, has that watchful, angry concentration I see in my daughter, an eye on her older brother about to bear off a gift she isn't getting. My mother lost her mother, Channah, before she could claim any attention and her father wandered off as a pariah while her older sisters brought her up.

My father had found his father, Israel again after a nine year lapse, separated by family quarrels, immigration, World War One. Israel walked on the boat in the hour that his wife, Devorah died and his three children, my father at twelve, the oldest, clung to the tall stranger's coattails as they came down the gangplank into a strange land. My father talked often about Israel's death, blaming himself, and the doctors who sent Grandfather home early from the hospital after a bout of pneumonia. Dad would tell me the story every year, on the day, or the day before, the *Yahrtzeit*. I don't remember Dad said they gave my grandfather, Israel, penicillin against his infection but I see Grandpa getting up, proudly in his high silk hat, frock coat, in the round bowl of the Fowler Street schul. The congregation is packed up into the balconies, over a thousand, not a seat empty, standing in the outer vestibules with the swinging doors open, and the noisemakers, big wooden clackers and little tin *gregors*, cap pistols, wind up machine guns, bicycle horns, party tooters, ready to unleash pandemonium, and clutching the *Megillah*, Scroll of Esther, my grandfather starting the chant, at the cry "Haman!" falling over the bimah, off the platform. Rushed to the hospital, he died. Heart attack!

In a search for my family history I have heard other versions. There was a meeting at the Beth El synagogue the night before the holiday. The finances of Beth El cemetery came up. My grandfather was attacked by one of his enemies on the synagogue board—this collected from an aunt. The rabbi of the congregation, still alive, in Jerusalem, forty years after Israel's death, told me of a meeting just before the holiday service in which my grandfather with no warning, collapsed in the rabbi's arms.

Now I see it, his suit jacket half off, white sleeve folded above the elbow, the arm of my father naked, hairy, coming out of his shirt, wound seven times with the flat black phylactery strap, the boxes, a bit absurd, on his forehead, arm—but it is death naked in his white, hairy arm, rarely exposed, his mutter about Grandfather, falling on the bimah, in the middle of reading the *Megillah*, and the hospital, "the damn hospital" that had sent him home early, as my father in his pew wrapped the thongs up skillfully in front of me, through dim, morning light.

In the wax of the candle, wasting away, those last moments in my mother's life, drip, painfully, into the light, catch fire, disappear. That hour, she waved me from the foot of a bed in the afternoon, and her hoarse voice, "Go away! Go away!" As if she was before some last nakedness—for I had taken her body up from the bed covers, washed it, moved it, handled it like a relic, a dozen times with the nurses turning her constantly during my visits in the final months to help her flesh resist the bed sores. There was no longer in that body the power that flashed between the cracks of half opened doors in childhood, a tower, or emerged in a bathing suit shimmering briefly, white, pink, black haired, as her slim frame, large bosomed, jumped from a rock, cleaved the cold Atlantic waters, salty and warm when I went crying to it. I cradled a set of bones, barely covered, from which my mother's voice still spoke, articulated. No, it was the bare stripped away last throes she barred me from, and I went home not knowing it, but frightened, wanting as she ordered, to flee her.

A former girlfriend was living in Cambridge, a few miles away from our family flat in Mattapan, a Boston suburb. Not the woman I was living with but I needed to be close to a female who was sympathetic that night. I called and invited her to our house for supper where my sister, her two little girls were staying. They had come from the far west to wait with my father and me for the death rattle.

I brought the friend back to her rooms in Cambridge, early, her sweetness making the gloom more awful. I took the oldest of my two nieces, five years old, along for company. I was afraid to be alone, even for fifteen minutes, in the car. It was only nine o'clock on the way home to Mattapan from Cambridge and we passed the hospital. I wanted to go in. I didn't. It was unusual not to stop. One of us, I, my father, my sister, had been by the bed for weeks now through most of the night. Was it my turn? I don't know. Going by

the driveway for the hospital which loomed in brick towers beside the highway, I remembered my mother's hand, pushing the air, pushing me away. My niece beside me, I went on driving, went to what had been home to my mother and father for fifteen years, a rented floor in a brick Mattapan two decker.

The call woke us two hours later. It was Friday night. Later that would mean something. I only recall starting up in the sheets as my father cried, "She's dead!" at the telephone, ripping my white undershirt in two, as if making up a bandage right away against the terror, although it was because I had been told that you were supposed to tear your clothes. I wondered what else I should tear, my hair, my suit, the bedspread. I went into the hospital and the body was already wrapped. "It's moving," I told the nurse. "I see it moving."

"No, no," they said gently, pushing me out of the room, away from the body to which I had bent, trying to bite through the white adhesive tape which was wound around it from head to foot. "You are imagining it."

I wasn't. I wanted it unwound. Only it was too late. No one will do that for you. So I let myself be taken home. I went to bed. That's when it happened.

I felt her. She came for me. I was lying in the bed, in the darkness still, two or three in the morning, not asleep, not awake. When I felt her, saw something of her, a force, a wind with a shape, come down and begin to pull me up after her, taking me with her, toward something I knew was evil, dangerous, and I pushed her away.

Why did I do that? Was it you? What could I have wanted, more, Mother, than to have gone with you, yet I too pushed you, pushed you away. For you were angry, so angry I was afraid.

I was alone. Afraid to lie back, go to sleep, knowing that in sleep, she would come again, and for some reason, in fear.

In that moment I did not let myself take the hand that had only twelve hours ago pushed me away. I recognized my mother's face in the spirit furious over me, wanting to tear me away from the bed. But I recoiled from the force which had half drawn me up in the sheets after her.

Now collecting among the few surviving sisters, bits of my mother's childhood so carefully screened from me, I understand the anger under the calm hands that were only laid upon me in days of sickness; my fevers, the grippe, measles, fits of hysteria. I go over the photographs and I

see her looking into the camera for love. The teeth marks she left in my lips at the corridor door of the ward of the dying, one afternoon in the last months sink into my flesh. "I was my mother's favorite," the next oldest of her sisters says. "My mother, Channah, used to take me into the bed and when I was too old, she put the last, the youngest, the one after your mother, there. Channah wanted to keep her husband who had given her twelve children out." So my mother was caught between the favorite, her next oldest sister who was sickly, and the youngest, the baby. According to the aunts, Channah sent her husband, my grandfather, away from the house, kept him out of the business which had originally been his, but which he made, I guess, a mess of. He was harrying his own children and her, unbalanced.

I remember what my father told me, that my mother had shrugged at the news of her father's death and had no plans to go down to the Connecticut town, to join her brothers and sisters at the funeral. It was impossible to get my mother to talk about her father and it was a surprise to me when I learned that he had lived some years after her mother. Yet his name had been given to me, in an abbreviation, as my middle one, Joseph, as Jay, though whether it was his or my father's mother's father, another Joseph, was left ambiguous.

As I stared at death in its long wasting, eating away my mother's face in the last few months, I saw the angular, stern bones of my oldest uncle, aunts, who bore the brunt of this missing grandfather, rise, the flesh sinking. I did not understand. I thought my mother was angry at me.

In my dreams she stalks with a bitter separation. She appears in a corridor of one of our rented houses, or the home we briefly owned with tenants on the top floors. She won't talk to my father and for me she has barely a word. She is alone, but she doesn't need us, not me, my sister, my father. She is living in Florida, by herself, a last minute miracle giving her life but without joy, hope. Not the woman who tugged at my arm in the final month and asked me, "Is it?" afraid still to give the malignancy a name.

"What do you think it is?" was all I could say.

She nodded. Mouthed the word silently. We didn't speak the word, which she and my father had refused to use. "All I want is six months," she whispered. "Six months is enough." We did not love her, not enough. We didn't arrange to take her home though she asked us to. The nurses were keeping her alive, we said. My father shouted at me when at last, I started in ...

“You told me in my office, yourself, you couldn’t take...”

“Stop,” she whispers. Now, over the paper, as I write this, “Enough. Go away.” She doesn’t want to see my father, my sister, me, naked, around her bed. In showing us, I throw harsh illumination on her, as if she was always flayed out, helpless, a body being consumed by itself. No, she takes my hand as the young girl, who once bent to hoist me over a barbed wire fence to a forbidden garden, then bounded over herself, in shorts, ankle socks, loafers, laughing.

Her need to take me up the night the bandage was wound around her was part of a romance we had hidden, never given a name, and I tore myself apart from those arms that seized me, her last anchor, hope, and now I watch the flame, in its last flicker, each year, and wonder, jerking at the light.



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