

July, 96

Links

Every Friday after lunch we took turns. We'd pack a small bag, the smallest bag, of personal belongings and move for Shabbat to Mameh. Each grandchild made the hole in the wall a little bigger. That was all you could do for some 30 long hours of complete devotion. She was dressed in her fineries, small and elegant and attired in black, rarely dark-blue, often a white removable lace collar, little black heels and thin black silk stockings. In her thin arms she held the holy books, small at first, then large-type ones, muddy colored covers, wet looking, like pillows of hidden tears and candle-wax drippings. She did not understand a word of the Hebrew prayers except for the ones absorbed into Yiddish, warped as they made the transition. But she made us pray with her, fast, with devotion and tears, with all the customary repetitions like mantras against all evil. Like mantras that did not help.

There were numbered meat patties in the refrigerator, ready to be eaten through the night and the following day, and challa, and torn pieces of newspapers ready in a crochet sack in the bathroom, so as not to spoil the sanctity of the Shabbat by tearing paper. And you were hungry all the time: of boredom, of the counted and numbered patties, which grew tastier as they grew fewer.

At 10 the lights shut off automatically, and in the dark she removed the comb from her shiny black hair and let it down to her shoulders, or below, flowing freely in that dark room where we could just imagine it. And she put on her very white and clean nightgown and slip herself quietly to bed where she sat to recite her "krishma", her very own version of the prayer before sleep. And we would scratch the wall next to our bed and hear the silent stucco powder falling like fine snow on the sheet. And next week it will be someone else's turn and they will continue the holy task.

Because Mameh was not to celebrate the holy day alone. Mameh was widowed at age 40, left with four small children and no cash, in the small hometown of her husband, our grandfather, for whom she had preserved her loyalty and longings until her death, at 89. After her death we found her black dresses with white removable collars, the crochet sack, a brown and white photograph of our grandfather, his good eyes watching us warmly from inside the door of her commode, which you could only see if you looked at yourself in her mirror, her thinning prayer books with everyone's birthdays written in their inner covers, the tears and the candle-wax. And also a folder, an old official manila envelope with dozens of letters inside white-blue-and-red airmail envelopes with Canadian postage stamps on them. We saw the British kings and queens smiling officially and synthetically from those yellowing envelopes, the carefully folded onion-paper letters safely tucked inside each envelope, the blue ink showing through them like blotches and stains. They all came from one inkwell, one handwriting, one address, for some 40 years. Kings died, abdicated and returned, queens rose to the throne, and the Yiddish witting, twice a year,

on Rosh Hashana and Pessach, first by ships and later by planes, pistons, propellers, then jets, were sent, received and remained unanswered. But kept, read and re-read, and folded neatly into their envelopes like the prayers in the holy books. Mameh's suitor never tired. In elaborate and third-person pleas, he told her of his life, which was a good one, and about his wife, which, bless god, is good as well, and the children, god bless them and the never ending love he keeps flaming in his heart for the time that she, our Mameh, would, perhaps reconsider, since they were a match made in heaven and an unfinished business. It was an enchantment, a lifetime, across many oceans, from the Polish shtetle whose name was not on the map even before the Germans erased them, from a glance in the street and a peek through the curtains of the women's section in the little synagogue that burnt.

And although he gets no reply he knows that she receives these letters because they are not returned to the sender. But she would not write, even if she knew how, or fly, or talk on the telephone when the face is not seen. Yet, on weekdays, when we were not there, and she wore her day-dresses, she unfolded and folded and held and embraced these envelopes as holy books.

And we found that the hole in the wall grew deeper and bigger and you could see the light from the adjacent apartment glistening into the room which was her living grave for 40 years or so. And the refrigerator was emptier than ever, and lonely pieces of newspapers were waiting for Shabbat in the toilet.

Such a woman we used to call a righteous one in our places. Except that she did not throw the letters away. And the one cigarette butt that she kept in her commode, as she claimed, "to give the feeling that there is a gentleman around". It was dry and lost its masculine odor long ago. And grandfather's photograph is fading, he is losing his hair and shedding his mustache, but his good, coffee-colored eyes were watching out of the commode.

Glorious, glorious Mameh, the emblem of our family tradition. The emblem of our never failing loyalty, our pride in asceticism, our digging into the walls.

What shall I do with your letters? Why did I keep them, neatly folded into their white-red-and-blue airmail envelopes, forgetting them as the days went by, but knowing they are in a manila folder next to the insurance policies and the title to our house. Should I burn them now, before I die? Should I leave no stamped one-way envelopes for the children to find? Should I cover the traces of a road untaken? Will they notice the tears and the candle-wax? Will they question my loyalty, their own lives, the fatal links? Or, should I, once and for all break the line and write back, just saying hello, just saying I am here, just saying the cigarette butt wilted and there is no feeling of a man around here, at least we could have a little dialogue. Perhaps I could even ask you, eventually, very elegantly, why did you remember me so much for so long and why in the world you did not pursue me at the right place and the right time? Perhaps if you would, we would not have to deal with death, but it is also possible that if you keep the letters

coming I would not die so soon myself. Did he sustain her every day of the week until the holy day of Shabbat, when god sustained her and we ate the walls of her room? Did she not answer so as to keep the letters coming? Did she not have you as atonement for not having followed you to begin with? Did she blame herself, in some mystical way, for grandfather's death of pneumonia? Was it punishment or was it ablution?

She tells me now to stop powdering the walls, to put on my black dress with the white collar and my heels as if it is Shabbat and for once, write you back, after 37 years, just asking how was I then? and why did you never cross that ocean?

And we become one, as if the difference between three generations is just a stamp, all of women's achievements, in almost a century, from coals to microwaves, is but that stamp that I licked at a an insane moment, that found you without proper addressing, and you were just, by some chance, thinking about me, as it happens frequently, you say, and all these walls fell like Jericho's, across times and continents and loss, as if the generations, thank god, did not erase the almost single remnant of eternity, a form of magic.

Raw, but Hot -

you