

Chapter Three

As far back as I can remember, my relationship with my mother has been filled with conflict and acrimony. She was an angry, unhappy woman, and I was clearly not the daughter she wanted. Although it's hard to imagine what kind of girl-child could have pleased her. My brother came closer, not for any particular qualities he had, but just because he was a boy. But a girl, well, **"Girls shouldn't be born!"** was one of the refrains that dominated my childhood.

When I think about those words now, I can believe that, whatever else she meant, they were also a comment on the lot of women, on the hardships of her own life, on what she saw in store for me. Perhaps like many African-American families who try to harden their sons for the life they'll face with discipline that seems harsh to an outsider, my mother was getting me ready for the difficulties of a woman's life. But as a child I'd hear those words--**"Girls shouldn't be born!"**--and all I could think was that she hated my presence.

So why am I not relieved at the news of her death? The pain I feel seems old, primitive, as if from another time and place. A child's sorrow--the same terrible sadness I felt when, as a five-year-old, I stood and cried as my father's coffin was lowered into his grave. But it isn't only death that evokes these feelings, it's the memory of a life. I'm assaulted with memories of the loneliness and heartache I suffered in my mother's house, of her displeasure and disapproval that were tattooed on my body and my soul. I feel once again the pain of living in a family where I

didn't fit, where I might as well have been, as a man I know once said, a dog growing up in a cat family.

I search almost desperately for some good memories. There were moments of kindness, moments when a smile lit her face, even moments of love. I know there were. So why can't I remember them now when I need them? Maybe later. Now I can only weep--for my mother, for myself, for what we never had, now never will have.

One of the things about death, though, is that it calls you into action. There are things to do, funeral arrangements to see to, people to notify, plans to be canceled, new ones to be made. I call my daughter who lives on the other side of San Francisco Bay. **A**Grandma died, **@** I say through my tears. **A**Are you okay?**@** she asks anxiously. Then before I can answer, **A**I'll be right over.**@**

I hang up and call my brother's first wife from whom he was divorced many years ago. Although he remarried a woman who is now also dead, it's Rachelle, the wife with whom he shared his youth, the one I've known since I was a teenager, who remains the sister-in-law of my heart. After we speak of my mother for a while she offers to notify her children--my niece and two nephews who are scattered around the country. My niece calls back a few hours later to say she's sorry but she can't come to the funeral. I don't hear from either of my nephews, not even the one who was her favorite grandchild.

There's no one else to call. Ninety-four years old and there's no one else to call. She lived a long time, I tell myself; everyone else is dead. But I know it would have been the same at fifty. My heart twists when I come face-to-face with the impoverishment of her life, and a voice inside me cries, *No one should die that way.* But in truth, she died as she lived, isolated from others by the bitterness, rage, and paranoia that poisoned her life and relationships.

If I had a more mystical temperament, I'd be inclined to think my mother's death on the day before Christmas was her final triumph, her way of making sure I could never enjoy the holiday again. For Christmas had been a sore point between us for many years.

As a child in a Jewish family where we didn't acknowledge the holiday, I always felt excluded and isolated during this season. No celebration of Hanukkah, which in those days wasn't greeted with the kind of fanfare many Jewish families accord it today, could compensate for being left out of Christmas.

Once, when I was about nine years old, I talked Lenny into joining me in saving our pennies so we could buy my mother a Christmas present. I thought about it for weeks, examining all the possibilities, turning them over in my mind again and again, wanting desperately to buy something that would please her, that would bring a loving smile to her lips. Finally, I settled on a pair of silk stockings, a treasured luxury she would never have afforded herself.

On Christmas morning I awoke before dawn and waited impatiently for my mother to arise. Even now, more than sixty years later, I can almost feel again the giddy excitement as I anticipated her pleasure and imagined myself basking in her approval. It seemed like forever before she finally opened her eyes. When she did, my brother and I hopped on the bed, and I handed her our treasure. **A**Merry Christmas, **@** I cried expectantly. She sat frozen for a moment looking at the small, clumsily wrapped package I pressed upon her as if she couldn't believe her eyes. Then without a word, she raised her hand and slapped me across the face with a blow so hard it sent me tumbling from the bed. The gift, never opened, wound up in the garbage.

I understand now that I had crossed a forbidden border, that giving her a Christmas present was tantamount to announcing that I had joined the *goyim* (Gentiles). Most immigrant parents are ambivalent, both wanting their children to become Americanized and fearing that they'll lose touch with their heritage. For Jews--people who are part of a tribe that has held on to the faith through more than five thousand years of prejudice, discrimination, forced conversions, expulsions, and attempts to exterminate them--the dilemma is compounded by the knowledge that they live in a dominantly Christian country whose seductions offer powerful temptations to their children. And Christmas is the most tantalizing of all, since this is the moment when Jewish children are most likely to suffer their difference most keenly, when their Judaism can feel most burdensome.

But I didn't think any of these things then. Nor, in her characteristic fashion, did my mother make any attempt to explain why she was so angry. The slap and the icy silence I was treated to for the next week or so--a punishment that was much worse than getting hit--were all the explanation I would ever get. For me, however, it was one of the several critical moments of my childhood, moments when I saw my mother through hate-filled eyes and promised myself that I would never be like her-- a promise that was never far from my consciousness, even when I couldn't keep it. Or maybe especially when I couldn't keep it.

I swore to myself that no child of mine would have to feel so lonely and excluded at Christmas, a pledge I kept by encouraging my daughter to believe in Santa Claus as a small child and by bringing friends together around our table each year on Christmas day. I didn't flaunt our Christmas activities, but I didn't hide them from my mother either, which brought us into conflict around this holiday in my adulthood, just as it had when I was a child. For my mother, I was an infidel and, worse yet, I was **A**turning my daughter into a *shikseh* **@**, an apostasy against which she raged. I think now it probably was pain that she felt as well as anger. But my mother could never acknowledge pain, which made it much easier to keep doing what I wanted to do.

Normally, Jewish funerals are held within twenty-four hours after death, but there are certain days in the Jewish calendar when burials are not permitted. This year Christmas Eve is also the first night of Hanukkah, and Jewish law forbids

immediate interment. Consequently, my mother will not be buried until Wednesday morning.

We cancel Christmas dinner, of course, and I refuse friends' offers to bring food and comfort. I'm moved by their warmth and caring, but I don't feel much like seeing anyone else right now. So we sit in the living room--Hank, Marci, and I--sometimes silent, sometimes talking quietly about my mother, each of us sharing some part of our experience of her.

Hank remembers his first meeting with her--her cool appraisal, her wariness when he bent to kiss her cheek, her flirtatiousness when he continued his warm and courteous attentions. In the years ahead, he, who loves flowers and fills our home with gorgeous arrangements, would bring her flowers whenever we visited--the first she'd ever received. But while she often said she thought he was **A**too good**@** for me, he never got past his outsider status. For my mother, as for so many immigrants trying to make their way in an alien and often hostile culture, if you weren't related by blood, you were outside the magic circle.

Not that being inside the circle was any assurance of acceptance. It was as if she felt that the relationship of blood was so privileged, so permanently fixed, that she had permission to do or say anything she pleased. Marci remembers the pain she felt when, during a visit to my mother when she was twelve years old, she was forced to listen to a tirade of invective about what a **A**rotten daughter**@** I was.

AWhat about good memories?**@** I ask.

It's funny, I have lots of them about Grandma Fanny (her birth father's mother) but not about your mother. I never could get close to her. I remember when I came to visit you when you were teaching in New York and Grandma was there. I kept trying to talk to her and tease her to make her laugh. But it was no use. I guess she loved me in her way; I mean she'd say she did, but it never really felt like it. ©

The time passes slowly. It's three days yet until the funeral; it seems too far away. I understand now why Jews bury their dead so quickly; why they save the ritual mourning period until after the funeral rather than before. It's hard to go on with life while the dead are still around.

I need to mark this moment, but we have no rituals with which to do so. I say the words; Marci reminds me that we can make one, pointing out also that it's the first night of Hanukkah. It's a holiday that has never claimed much of our attention, but now making potato *latkes* (pancakes), the ritual food of this festival, seems the perfect thing to do.

Marci suggests that we go to her house, since we've now been sitting in ours getting progressively more depressed for several hours. I resist at first, feeling somehow that I shouldn't be doing anything that might be remotely pleasurable. But it seems important to her, as if this is the one way she can take care of me. So I agree, and we gather ourselves together for the drive across the bridge to Oakland, where she lives.

By the time we get there Larry is waiting, and he and Hank go to the market while Marci and I set the table and she gets out the menorah she reclaimed from us

years ago. It hadn't seen light in our house since she was a child, and she wanted it partly as a reminder of that time in her life and partly because she wanted to light it in her own home--her homage to her Jewishness when she was raising a stepson who himself wasn't Jewish. A few hours later, the menorah lit, we sit down to a traditional Hanukkah *latke* dinner. But first we lift our glasses in a farewell toast to my mother.

We celebrate Hanukkah now, the same dinner at Marci's house each year, although it has grown larger and more inclusive, as friends are invited to share the Festival of Lights with us. My mother, I imagine, would exult in this aftermath of her death, just as it probably would give her pleasure to know that the timing of her death will forever cast a shadow on Christmas for me.