

Lucky People

On the eighteenth anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, Bubbe Jozef and Zayde Sofia gave up.

We are tired, they wrote, tired of trying to become who we are, tired of trying to leave behind who we have been made. We are lucky people. We survived. We have gotten from Ukraine to here, through all of it, and now you must carry on.

Through the war they made themselves invisible, made their daughter and son-in-law invisible, made their grandson invisible, made each step from Lutsk to Warsaw to the Bronx invisible.

And then at last they could make the *simchat bat* of their granddaughter visible, the start of the electrical repair business visible, the purchase of a triple-decker in the Bronx visible.

They lived on the top two floors of the triple-decker, the attic room giving them an extra bedroom. The Sterns lived on the first floor, rich enough to pay for the beautiful parquet floors, the tiled kitchen, the garage, and the distinctive bay windows.

Bubbe Jozef, once a professor of electrical engineering, built his business with his son-in-law, Miklos. Zayde Sofia, once a prestigious Lutsk housewife, cut and basted and sewed and hemmed any dress she could conjure.

He was no longer a professor of electrical engineering. She was no longer a prestigious Lutsk housewife. They no longer visited luxurious Warsaw nightclubs to hear Vera Gran sing purring anthems of love and desire that even the prestigious soldiers murmured about.

But the electrical repair shop was thriving. And Helena was busy, thanks to her mother's industry and her own skills. And their grandchildren were happy in school.

And then that Tuesday morning they wrapped themselves in all of their warm clothing, took the #2 subway to W. 110th St. to Central Park to Harlem Meer, where they lay down and let the snow cuddle around them.

Their bodies were found five days later.

Stanislaw, their grandson, was 20. Lisa Denise, their granddaughter with the bright new American name, was 12.

Miklos said nothing. Helena wept for three weeks. Bubbe Jozef and Zayde Sofia were buried properly.

From somewhere Helena found a respectable family of second cousins to live in Bubbe Jozef's and Zayde Sofia's apartment on the second floor. Lisa Denise always thought of them as Aunt and Uncle and Gloria. Stanislaw tried to not think of them, but if he did, he thought of Gloria, two years younger.

Miklos worked hard at the business in the Bronx, and Helena worked hard at cutting and basting and hemming. Stanislaw completed his high school studies with honors, and his parents stood on either side of him as he wore his cap and gown and someone took their picture on the front stoop of the three-decker. Lisa Denise held his diploma.

Then Stanislaw, now answering only to Stan, started at NYU at its Washington Heights campus on scholarship, at last completely American, a naturalized citizen, a high school graduate, a college student. He came home every evening from classes, tired from learning, tired from carrying books, tired from making new friends, tired from being

completely American. He secretly listened to the Beatles on his little radio in his little bedroom after he finished his homework late at night at the breakfast table.

Miklos, now answering to Michael and almost completely American, a naturalized American, came home every evening from his business two blocks over on Olivet Street, tired of the price of electrical wire, tired of the price of wages, tired of the price of hurrying from one job to the next. He listened to Frank Sinatra on the phonograph after dinner, wishing he could afford a hi-fi like he saw advertised on the pages of the New York Record Messenger.

Lisa Denise, answering at school to Lisa, never to *Leee-saaaa*, especially if it was Stanislaw calling for her, and always completely American, having been born right in the Bronx at St. Barnabas Hospital itself, arrived home first, before either Stanislaw or Miklos, her school being only one block away, never tired from school, never tired from homework, never tired from playing with her friends, never tired of talking, or of asking Gloria any question she thought of, until it was time to help her mother. She listened to any record she could, dragging the phonograph behind the sofa herself to the radiator if her mother didn't, before her father locked her there on the weekends so he could take his nap in peace.

Helena, now answering to Helen if she had to, and despite being a naturalized American nowhere near completely American, was home most afternoons when Lisa Denise arrived from school, unless she was delivering dresses to customers, was most certainly there every evening when Miklos and Stanislaw arrived home, with dinner waiting for them, a nice hot meal, her sewing set aside, as tired as she was already, her real work beginning just now, as the men in her life filled the house with the aroma of

their busy day and their American ways. She listened to all the Broadway show tunes she could afford.

“Any mail?” Miklos helped himself to some potatoes.

“A few bills. The Reader’s Digest.” Helena hurried with the meat.

“Homework?” Miklos didn’t even look at Stanislaw.

“Just some chemistry.”

“Stanislaw, use complete sentences,” said Helena, pushing open the swinging door to the kitchen with her hip.

“You don’t,” he retorted. “Why should I?” He ducked his father’s hand before it could land on the back of his head, but the backswing caught him on his cheek. Lisa Denise suppressed her giggle by choking on her own bite of potato. Stanislaw recovered by interpreting her choking for the giggle it was, and extended his leg underneath the table to kick her unprotected knee with his foot, clad in its workman’s boot, which caused her to spit her bite of potato onto her plate.

“*Sta-a-an!*” she wailed.

“Lisa Denise, that voice!” said Helena. “What would your Zayde Sofia think?”

“Enough!” Miklos yelled. “Get in there!” He pointed towards the living room.

“But he kicked me!” Lisa Denise protested.

“No backtalk!” Miklos was on his feet.

“I haven’t finished!”

“Oh, no, Miklos, let her eat first,” Helena offered.

“Now!” He grabbed the collar of her Peter Pan blouse and dragged Lisa to the place behind the sofa, where the radiator was hissing, where there was no phonograph

hiding, where the chains were waiting to be locked around her ankles to keep her there until Miklos was ready to unlock them.

“And you—” Miklos pointed to Stanislaw “—talk nice to your mother.”

Helena returned from the kitchen and took her place at the table silently.

Stanislaw smirked in Lisa Denise’s direction, but Miklos, too intent on his piece of beef, did not notice. No one spoke until he finished his meal.

“I am going for a walk,” he said. That meant he was going to get Uncle Stefan and go to the bar on the next block for as many beers as they had coins in their pockets to buy. He clomped down the backstairs and his cheery false voice came to them muffled from the second floor. Soon two sets of feet clomped the rest of the way out of the house, and only then did Helena and Stanislaw stir in their chairs.

“Do your homework,” she said. She picked up Lisa Denise’s plate and took it to her daughter in the living room.

“You’re going to give that to her?” Stanislaw asked, incredulous.

“Do your homework,” she repeated. Helena handed Lisa Denise her plate, who pushed the half-eaten bite of potato to the side and resumed her meal. Helena placed the phonograph on the floor beside her, and gave her the small scrap of baby blanket that her daughter still clung to when she was upset.

“I got a new record this afternoon. I haven’t even played it yet. Let me get it for you. I’ll be right back.” She ran upstairs to her bedroom.

“Boy, if Dad knew that Mom gave that record player to you all the time—” said Stanislaw.

“She told you to do your homework.” She could barely see her brother in the dining room, but Lisa Denise turned her back to him to him anyway, and resumed eating. She couldn’t believe her luck to get a new record.

Helena, being a fan of Broadway musicals, having delivered dresses that afternoon, having pleased Mrs. Rubin with her special pleating on the waistline of a new dress for her daughter, and having received a nice tip for said pleating, felt it not only befitting, felt it not only right, felt it not only justified, but also somehow opportune, somehow also convenient, that she should stop by Cohen’s Records and ask Mrs. Cohen’s advice on which new long-playing record she should purchase for her collection. Mrs. Cohen, being the arbiter of all such matters in Helena’s world, would advise her well.

And indeed she had, for now in her possession lay a tightly-wrapped copy of the extremely exciting musical, “Funny Girl,” starring the young woman from so nearby, from Brooklyn, Barbra Streisand, so nearby she grew up even closer than Broadway itself, it was a miracle. It was such luck. And now, miracle again, Helena knew, her own daughter, her Lisa Denise, would hear Barbra Joan sing the glorious notes even before she herself, before she, Helena herself, did, because she must tend to her housewifely chores while her daughter was bound to the radiator, bound by her husband, but as a reward Lisa Denise would hear the lovely Barbra sing the songs of the lovely Fanny Brice and forget for a few moments her own tedium.

Now Stanislaw, in the kitchen with his chemistry homework, lulled by the serious matter of covalent bonds, all other sounds drowned out by the roar of warm water rushing through the kitchen drain, all other sights obscured by the vision in his mind of the image

of a certain cousin Gloria who he was sure was brushing her hair to a very fine sheen in her back bedroom just about now, all other thoughts dulled by his plans to slip down the back stairs and then climb ever so carefully up the inside wall of the garage to balance on the frame of the window where he was certain he could see directly into her bedroom to watch her lovely arm, no doubt bare of any clothing, stroke her lovely hair.

Helena, in the kitchen lulled by her own covalent bonds, hers of the dishwashing kind, as the suds washed over the three plates, three forks, three knives, three spoons, three glasses, as she placed each item in the rack to be dried, she hoped by her son, since her daughter was otherwise occupied, as she considered whether it was worthwhile to ask her son to take a bowl of Jell-O to Lisa Denise or whether she should just take it herself, as she washed the pot in which she boiled the beans, the pot in which she boiled the potatoes, the pan in which she baked the meat, and the resignation with which she wiped her hands and returned to the living room with the little dessert for the girl, who was humming softly to “His Love Makes Me Beautiful.” She smiled at her dreamy-eyed daughter, gave her the bowl, and didn’t notice her son had disappeared from the kitchen when she returned.

Then Miklos, home earlier than expected, spotted Stanislaw clinging to his insecure perch on the garage window and recognized his impure intent instantly, as did the father of the intended victim, and the two less than sober working men stared him into submission soundlessly, and proceeded up the back stairs, Stanislaw valiantly attempting to bond with his father and second cousin Uncle Stefan in a manly way as a 20-year-old might, but finding little sympathy from a father of a 12-year-old and a 20-year-old, as he should have expected, but being 20 years old could not have known.

Helena, having finished the final bowl and utensils she had gathered from Lisa Denise and having gathered up Stanislaw's books and papers and having finally settled down for a few minutes of covalent bonding of tea and water at the kitchen table, rose to her feet at the sound of two pairs of angry feet climbing the stairs, the third pair having dropped off at the second floor, where Uncle left to check that Grace was all right, and upon seeing the angry face of her husband dropped back a half step in fear until seeing the terrified face of her son, as terrified in terror as Miklos's face was angry in anger.

Miklos, propelled through the kitchen, through the swinging door, into the dining room, into the living room, dragging Stanislaw and followed by Helena, stopped in his tracks when he heard the refrains from "Funny Girl," specifically the refrain from "Henry Street." Stanislaw crashed into him, and Helena, crying and calling after them, caught her breath when she realized that the secret phonograph treat she had arranged for her daughter when she was chained to the radiator had been revealed.

"Miklos, no—what would Bubbe think?" wailed Helena.

Miklos, realizing simultaneously that he had been betrayed by his son *and* his wife, whirled from one to the other, then flung Stanislaw from his grasp and flung his own body over the back of the sofa to reach the phonograph. There, even before Lisa Denise could uncover her eyes, he yanked the arm of the record player off the record, scraping it across the thin vinyl, so that it wailed a sharp response in unison with Lisa's.

"Daddy, no!"

Miklos, never one to wait for an answer, much less wait for his daughter, much less wait for his crying daughter, clomped out the front door.

Stanislaw seized the opportunity to fade towards his bedroom.

Helena seized the opportunity to grab Miklos' keys from the sofa, where they had fallen when he flung his body over the sofa, and unlocked Lisa Denise from the radiator.

Lisa Denise hid her face underneath the remnants of her favorite bit of blue haze of baby blanket and sobbed.

The phonograph continued to play a refrain from "Funny Girl":

—*are the luckiest people*

—*luckiest*

—*lucky*

—*lucky.*

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