

My Mother's Funeral

There's a large hole in the ground and inside it lies my mother. Soon it will be filled with a mixture of sand and gravel. Dark brown and ready to go. The color isn't right. Too brown. Like three-days-old manure. There's too much dirt and not enough gravel. I'd prefer a mixture of darker gravel and golden sand. The pile doesn't seem big enough to fill the hole. The rabbi said there were regulations and measurements that have been established for generations. That much gravel for that much weight. That much dirt for that much gravel. My mother deserves more gravel.

Strangers in large-brimmed hats have lowered my mother into the hole and now they're praying under their thick beards. The rabbi offers condolences to the family and recites the names of her children, grandchildren, and one surviving brother. He pronounces our names correctly. He rehearsed it with Ginger earlier. His old skin shines with perspiration and his black coat is wrinkled. My mother wouldn't have consented to be buried by him. She would have selected a young rabbi who looked like Richard Gere. I wish I could have had some influence over the casting, but by the time my plane landed all the arrangements had been made by Ginger. Don't ask Apple. This is Tel-Aviv. Apple lives in New York, so what does she know?

My children are holding my arms and their eyes are moist. My mother was an exemplary grandmother. She was unaware of the mistakes she'd made with her daughters, but she corrected them in her relationship with her grandchildren all the same. While she couldn't refrain from telling us each other's deepest secrets, she never uttered

a word to me about my daughter's habit of smoking behind my back. She conveyed to my children the value of motivation rather than ambition, and preached fun with no purpose. With her three daughters everything had a purpose and life revolved around events. Events that could catch the neighbors' attention. School plays. Sports meets. Public appearances. Awards ceremonies. When I became a young adult and received my first honor I confronted her.

“Mom,” I said, “for years you've been working toward this moment. Now that it has arrived will you finally relax?”

She looked at me with astonishment. “Relax? Who do you think I am, a rich woman who lunches at the country club? I'll never relax. As soon as this ceremony is over I'll begin living for your next honor.”

Damn. I swore I wouldn't cry. This is my mother's funeral and my grief is private. Don't let it mix with the generic grief of the assembly. But the humiliation is getting the better of me. In her youth my mother marched on the sands of Jaffa with banners calling for the exclusive use of the newly revived Hebrew language, and now a group of sweating men who have never met her are burying her in Yiddish, the language of exile. I don't understand a word they're saying except for the “amen” that caps every cadence. It's my punishment for being a casual Jew. My mother didn't think that Jewish manifestation mattered as much as Jewish values, so it's her fault as well. What are Jewish values anyway? Family, friendship, country, guilt—universal values, except for guilt, which is an exclusive national trait.

They asked the family to identify her before the procession, to make sure they were about to bury the right woman. What if she were an Arab spy? Or a converted Christian? Then she wouldn't be eligible for a religious burial, and certainly not for such a coveted burial spot on the hill. The burial spot is important. My mother was a sucker for views. She'd enter into life-long debt for a piece of blue sky and a hint of a sunset from her terrace. From this burial spot she can see the mountains. The view is peaceful and majestic. Ginger chose well, but I won't give her the satisfaction of admitting it.

The rabbi is rushing through the last prayer. Then he picks up the shovel, fills it with dirt and throws it on my mother. He hands the shovel over to her brother, who covers her with some more dirt. One by one the males in attendance fill the hole until it's level with the ground around it. The pile was just right, neither too big nor too small. She's going to be too hot down there. I wish they'd buried her inside an air-conditioned casket, but a casket burial is not the custom. Not allowed by Orthodox Jewish law. Instead they wrapped her in a clothe and buried her naked, all shrouded in white. "Thou shall return unto the ground."

She loved to wear white, even though it made her look heavier. "I'm Jewish; I eat; I'm plump," she used to say. She carried her body with grace, and when she danced at family weddings she seemed lighter on her feet than any of the size-six young women with their long legs. She wore her white dress every New Year's Eve and every Passover, each time she came to the port to meet me, and in all the family videos. I could never get a candid shot of her. As soon as she saw the lenses she'd smile. Sometimes she'd giggle.

Then she'd wear her sweet expression and speak with her girlish voice, making remarks for posterity.

"I'm here with Apple. She's just had a big event. Ginger had a big event last month, and Blessing will have one too sometime soon."

Even though I'd identified her, I hardly recognized her features. Her face lost any distinction; she looked like any one of her ancestors. Maybe they exchanged her with someone else like they exchange babies in the movies. Maybe she saw the light and decided to be a mother to a single daughter—me. Maybe she will now tell me that I'm pretty without immediately adding that Ginger and Blessing were pretty too. Not that they weren't pretty. Ginger was good-looking when she was younger, and Blessing was simply gorgeous. I didn't mind having pretty sisters, I just disliked it when my mother jumbled our looks together. If she would only leave space between the comments, so that I could be the only pretty child for five minutes.

"Apple is impressive-looking but Blessing is simply stunning. And Ginger is pretty too. Blessing is brilliant in math but Ginger excels in history. And Apple draws so well."

She equalized our charms and our achievements as much as she could—stretching here, camouflaging there, exaggerating and fantasizing when needed—but for all her efforts she couldn't equalize our success. I grew up like a flower in tropical climate while Blessing turned out confused and Ginger became aflame with bitterness. My mother went on trying to use logic to explain away the discrepancies, with poor results that she

dismissed with a confident smile: “If not today—tomorrow. The horoscopes of Ginger and Blessing are very promising.”

But she knew better. After she had a stroke I asked her if she wanted me to read her the horoscope. She nodded.

“Shall I read you Ginger’s?” I asked. She frowned.

“Blessing’s?” She frowned again.

“Shall I read you your horoscope, Mom?” She smiled. I read her the prediction from the newspaper. It said she would recover soon and go back home. She smiled. Horoscopes and fortune cookies never lie. Somewhere a woman born under the sign of Libra recovered and went back home, but it wasn’t my mother.

Ginger is making a speech, telling about hours of heart-to-heart conversation with my mother. She’s fibbing. Hers were not conversations but monologues. Long monologues. Ginger can never get to the matter at hand without describing every detail. Who wore what. What material. How much it cost. Then who said what, in what tone, with what gestures. Then the phone interruption after which she’ll describe how she got rid of the interruption with what words, in what tone, and with what gestures, and how she felt about the phone interruption in what words, and in what tone, and with what gestures. And then the repetition of the beginning lest she’d forgotten something. By the time she gets to the essence of the story, her interlocutor has long stopped listening. But not my mother. She listened to every word with intensity and waited patiently until—some three hours later, Ginger would reach the point of the story and say, “So you understand what happened?” whereupon she would offer to repeat any portion of the

story that required more clarification. At the end she always solicited my mother's advice, and wrote it down in detail on a small piece of paper. Her house is filled with thousands and thousands of tiny little sheets covered with neatly written instructions in round letters. Her handwriting hasn't altered with time, and her letters at forty are identical to those she wrote at twenty. Not that she has ever written to me, except when I gave free room and board to her daughter during the first years of her studies abroad, and Ginger wrote that I'd stolen half of her children.

Ginger is my sister but I detect no resemblance between us. Her name isn't even Evergreen like mine and my mother's, even though she's ever green with envy. She carries the name of her husband—that slight guy over there who's shedding tears. He's going to miss my mother. She lent an ear to his grievances against Ginger for as long as they've been married, and now that she's gone he's left with no one to talk to. Whenever I see him I tell myself that he's not a bad guy, but soon Ginger comes over and he disappears under her venomous skirt. Sometimes he holds a loudspeaker and echoes everything she says. He could have been a good guy had he been alive.

Right now I like him because he's crying over my mother's death, even if he's really crying for himself. We all cry for ourselves. Why cry for my mother? She was happy, even when she shouldn't have been. She had accidental encounters with negativity but didn't let them last for more than a few minutes at a time. Then she'd grin and say "Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, the bad stuff came in through one ear and went out through the other." Tragedy over. That drove me up the wall when I was a teenager and my life evolved around Mahlerian drama.

“How can you act like that, Mom?”

She laughed. “When you’re sad you overeat. Your tragedies won’t be real until they make you lose your appetite.”

That never happened to her. She grieved for my father but didn’t stop eating. She surely would have lost her appetite if anything had happened to one of her daughters, but somehow our horoscopes spared us from irreversible bad fortune. Everything that took place in our lives wasn’t really monumental enough. Not Blessing losing her mind, not my divorce, not Ginger getting fired. That’s life.

“As long as they’re pretty and talented everything is bound to fall into place.”

Did Ginger finish describing her heart-to-heart conversations with my mother? She’s making a surprisingly brief speech, but maybe I haven’t been listening. You don’t need to listen when Ginger speaks. Her voice is boomy, like a train blowing its horn as it approaches an intersection. That’s more proof that she’s not really my sister. I talk so softly that people don’t hear my remarks and keep talking over them as if I hadn’t said anything at all. My mother spoke with the voice of a baby swallow, and she didn’t like people with loud voices. After her stroke she was taken to the nearby hospital for evaluation and was placed in a huge room among dozens of other women recovering from strokes of varying severity.

In that hospital—provided you hadn’t died within a week of the stroke—the doctors had to decide whether to transfer the patients to a rehabilitation clinic or to the hospice, and to that end they sent over Maggie, the physiotherapist. A transfer to a rehab clinic gave you a second chance at life, but unless you got recommended you couldn’t get

admitted for love or money. So I approached the buxom Maggie and put on my nicest smile for her, the supreme arbiter of my mother's fate.

"My mother is doing well, Maggie," I said. "We've just had a long conversation and she spoke in full sentences."

Maggie looked at me suspiciously. "That doesn't count. Your mother has got to talk to the nurses. She hasn't uttered a word in their presence."

I explained that my mother was a proud woman, that finding herself in the hospital was a scary experience for her. Maggie listened impassively and muttered, "We'll see." Then she turned to my mother and screamed: "Good morning, Mrs. Evergreen. How are we feeling today?"

My mother gave her one look and pinched her lips together like a four-year-old child refusing to eat his cereal. Maggie lifted the blanket off my mother in one fell swoop and shouted: "Now Mrs. Evergreen, let's see how those reflexes are working. Come on, come on. Show me how we lift our right knee."

My mother pinched her lips even tighter and didn't stir a muscle. I stood behind Maggie and jerked my thumb to the right. My mother didn't acknowledge the gesture. So I mouthed "Bibi." Bibi Netanyahu is the right-wing prime minister, and he was my mother's favorite. After the stroke I tried to reteach her basic motor skills, and in an attempt to convey to her the positioning of right and left I lifted her right arm and said "Bibi." That produced the desired results. Maggie nodded with satisfaction and yelled, "Good girl, we know which side is right! Now lets bend that left knee, shall we? One, two, three!"

Her voice reverberated in the hall, piercing through the moans and sighs of the other patients. “One, two, three! Lets see what we can do, Mrs. Evergreen.”

My mother’s upper lip covered the lower one as she stared at Maggie with defiance. Maggie turned around. “Your mother doesn’t understand a word I say,” she screamed at me.

I protested that it was not true, and that my mother had just responded to all my questions, but Maggie insisted that it was nothing more than a reflex. “She repeats what she hears. That gives her the IQ of a parrot.” She added that since my mother didn’t follow instructions she couldn’t possibly recommend her for rehabilitation.

I hated Maggie. Why couldn’t she say that my mother’s brain was intact? So what if half her brain was damaged? The other half could have sufficed; she was smarter than most people. Maggie left the hall and I ran after her and begged her to give my mother another chance. She ignored my pleas but just before she entered the room marked “For Staff Only” she softened and promised to try again tomorrow. I went back to my mother. Her lips were parted and she gave me a faint smile. Then she bent her right knee.

“Mom,” I said, “you’ve got to cooperate with Maggie if you want to go to rehab.”

“I want to go home,” she said.

“You’ll go home after rehab,” I said. “You’ve got to obey Maggie.”

She pinched her lips.

“She screamed at me,” she said.

“She didn’t screamed at you,” I said. “She can’t help herself. She’s got a boomy voice, like you-know-who.”

My mother looked at me and grinned. I thought that it was a good sign, that she wasn’t all that sick. But soon after she got worse; she could no longer bend her knee on command and her painful deterioration began.

I look around and I’m comforted by the good turn-out to honor my mother. Ginger said there was no need for an additional ad in yesterday’s paper, that she had taken care of it. Luckily I didn’t trust her and bought a large ad in the evening edition. Ginger’s ad was so small that no one saw it, and she didn’t list me and Blessing among the grieving family members. I wonder why my mother named her Ginger. Sour would have been more appropriate. Names can be treacherous. Like Blessing. If you counted her blessings you wouldn’t even need one whole hand. Her two sons. Two blessings. Her beauty. A blessing and a curse. It helped her get jobs and helped her lose them. It stopped her from acquiring other tools for living such as wisdom or the art of the non-seductive smile.

It’s Blessing’s turn. She’s prepared a speech. Three-page long. What am *I* going to do? There’s nothing I want to say to my mother in front of other people. Except, maybe, that I wish Ginger had been born a boy. My girlfriend from the fourth floor had an older brother who used to block my way down the stairs with the menacing grin of a bulldog ready to guard his master. If Ginger were a guy she could have been the protective male in my life. She wouldn’t let anyone hurt me. Ginger is the antipode of

protective. She once had a fight with my father because he agreed to pay for my studies, even though he had previously paid for hers. What's the point of three sisters anyhow? It's a long thorny journey and I can't even write about it. We already have Chekhov's Three Sisters, The Sisters Rosenzweig, Crimes of the Heart, King Lear. Three sisters and an equalizing mother borders on plagiarism. I can't talk about that at my mother's funeral either. Maybe I could tell the assembly what my mother said to me the last time I saw her before her stroke? She said that she had hoped for more. I couldn't believe that she would say that.

I was visiting her for a day. I wanted to come for a week but she said I should come only for one day.

“But I can come for a few days, Mom.”

She was silent and then she said one day and one night would be just right. I was crushed and almost cried. My mother who loved me more than anyone didn't want me to stay with her for more than a day. Where would I go if I were in trouble? After my father's passing we used to spend months together. I'd call to invite her to come to New York for three weeks and she'd say: “It's customary to invite the mother for six weeks.” Then she'd stay for three months, sometime four, and the children loved every minute of it. I said she could move in with me if she wanted to. She wanted to but then she would begin to obsess about Blessing and ask me to book her flight back. Later she became too frail to travel and the disruption of her routine was hard to take, even—or especially—a pleasant one. The same thing was happening to my girlfriends' mothers. They became old overnight and the roles reversed.

I learned to treasure the one-at-a-time days with my mother, except for the obligatory family meal with Ginger's outburst for dessert. So this time I told my mother that I wanted to have one day with her alone. I expected her to protest and equalize as usual, but instead she agreed. Maybe she sensed that it was going to be our last time together before the stroke.

It was a special day, as if we had known in advance that it would be our last time. Just my mother and I. We went to the cemetery to put flowers on my father's grave. We had lunch in a restaurant. We looked at family albums. We told stories and laughed. She even admitted that she had lured my father away from another woman and immediately denied it. Then she suddenly said she had hoped for more. I knew she was referring to Ginger and Blessing. For a split second I was the only daughter and she shared that confidence with me alone. Then she cheered up and embarked on her habitual glorification of her progeny. She'd rather die than admit to a failure. I can't possibly divulge her secret and taint her image with the truth, not even over her grave.

Blessing is reading from Elizabeth Browning. It's a lovely poem and everybody thinks that Blessing wrote it. She doesn't give Browning credit. Later she'll explain that Elizabeth Browning had stolen from her, so she was just paying her back. She has a rich throaty voice, at odds with her skinny limbs and fragile frame. She used to be so stunning. It was well known in our family that when Moses led the Jews out of Egypt he took Blessing along, and when the Red Sea saw her, it parted. She used to drive men to distraction. Some of them are here, gazing at the deep black circles under her eyes and wondering what has happened. She's saying beautiful things. How she hoped to have my

mother for many more years. How sad it is that God has taken her away. She's the first person who mentions God in Hebrew. I'm glad she's not saying that we murdered my mother. She used to come to the hospice, lift my mother's blanket and check out her thinning legs, then yell that we were starving her to death. I stopped giving advance notice about my visits. I'd sneak into the country early in the morning, shower and breakfast at my girlfriend's apartment, then take a cab to the hospice. By the time my sisters found out I was there, I had already stolen away a few private hours with my mother.

The fourth time I came my mother recognized me. Her eyes lit with joy; she grabbed my hand and didn't let go. I asked her about her care and how she was feeling, but she didn't answer. After lunch she fell asleep. I was exhausted with the combined effects of the all-night flight and jet lag and decided to go to her apartment to rest for a while. When I got there I couldn't open the door. Ginger had changed the locks. So I went back to the hospice, sat down on a chair by my mother's bed and fell into the deepest sleep. When I woke up her face was turned in my direction and she said, "I feel well." A full sentence. The patient in the other bed was amazed.

"She hasn't said a word in months," she marveled.

I said to my mother, "I love you," hoping she'd say, "I love you too." She smiled and said, "I feel well."

"I love you" was not part of her vocabulary and it was too late to learn new words.

I desperately wanted to please her. "Mom, I got remarried and I won a big award," I said.

She smiled.

“Shall I tell you about the wedding or the award?” I asked.

“The award,” she answered.

Was she repeating my words or had her old ambition prevailed over her illness? I told her about the award and then I took out pictures of my children. She looked at them with indifference. Better to try something from the past. I took out a picture of my father at twenty-six, holding a pipe. My mother grinned from ear to ear.

“He was handsome,” I said. “Handsome like who, Mom?”

“Like Rudolph Valentino,” she said, almost triumphantly.

She did remember something on her own. The nurses gathered around the bed to witness the miracle of Mrs. Evergreen talking. But that was that. My mother sank into fogginess and didn’t say one more word throughout my visit.

The nurses warned me not to expect a return of the miracle. My mother was getting worse. When I came to see her next she showed no sign of recognition, but on the third day she suddenly squeezed my hand ever so slightly and said, “I’m happy.” I tried to keep the dialogue alive.

“Mom, do you like Peres?” I asked.

“No,” she said and smiled as if we were playing a mischievous game.

“Do you like Bibi?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I would have never thought that hearing her say that could make me feel elated. Whenever I attacked her conservative views she’d say that it was easy to be a liberal when you lived on Park Avenue. If I could only restore her brain so we could fight about

politics and she could tell me that I was pretty and so were Ginger and Blessing. But that wasn't to be. When I showed her the picture of my father with the pipe she turned to the other side and fell asleep. She never said another word, but I knew what she would have liked to say. "Take care of Blessing." That's what my father said to me on the day before his fatal heart attack. "Take care of Blessing."

I think Blessing has finished her eulogy. It's my turn. I can't talk about Blessing. My mother doesn't want anyone to know that Blessing needs my help. Blessing is stunning and gifted, one of the three glorious Evergreen girls. I'm telling the assembly how I once met a gentleman from Tel-Aviv who told me about a woman on the flight to New York who didn't stop praising her three daughters. "That's my mother," I said. It must have been my mother.

Thank you Mom for giving me an education. Thank you Mom for teaching me how to appreciate beauty. Thank you for being my mom.

When I finish the rabbi mumbles something and the funeral is over. Everybody puts a stone on the pile of dirt and we walk away. Blessing lingers behind and I can see her from afar, her hair shining gold in the bright sun like when she was a little girl.

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