

The Smile

After my mother died, my father would sometimes stop in the middle of the street, tuck his head into his shoulders and swivel around in a slow, suspicious circle, his eyes in search of imminent peril. Dad was seventy-six years old then – tiny, slender and fragile. My wife claimed she still spotted an optimistic bounce in his walk, and my nine-year-old son, George, trying equally hard to cheer me up, said that Grandpa looked like one of those amazing old guys who competed every year in the Boston Marathon.

As for me, every one of my strained and hesitant breaths seemed like a pledge to never accept the injustice of Mom leaving us when she was only sixty-four years old.

The morning after she passed away, Dad brought his clunky cassette player into the kitchen before making his coffee and started listening to an interview she'd done with a Sephardic singer from Istanbul whom she'd befriended. A few minutes later, he found me standing by the back fence of our garden. He'd brought me the bowl of oatmeal I'd left behind in my desperation to get away from my mother's cheerful voice. As he handed it to me, he said, 'I'm sorry, Eti, but I won't be able to go on without hearing your mother every morning. So just be patient with me.'

Three days after Mom's funeral, while my father and I were walking through the parking lot of his Chase branch, he stopped and peered around, his hands balled into fists.

'Is it a ghost you're looking for, or an old enemy?' I asked.

‘What do you mean?’ he shot back. His eyebrows furrowed into a V, implying that he found my question nonsensical.

My father has eyebrows like hairy caterpillars. When I was a kid, they sometimes seemed ruthlessly critical of me – especially when I dared to ask him about his childhood in Poland.

‘You seem convinced that somebody dangerous is going to show up around here,’ I told him, trying to sound casual.

‘Around here where?’ he asked.

Rather than say *I have no idea*, I swirled my hand around to indicate the shopping centre, the bank parking lot, Willis Avenue and the rest of what we normally consider reality.

‘Bah!’ he said, flapping his hand at me as if my version of reality didn’t count for much from where he was standing, but he also shivered, which was when a familiar latch opened inside me and I felt time slowing down, and I made the old mistake of gazing into his big, black, watery eyes for far too long, and when he started gulping for air, tears leaked out through my lashes, and that’s when I started thinking that he really was a marathon runner, and not just him but me, too. *I’ve been running behind you, you wayward lunatic, since I was maybe eight years old*, I thought, *trying to catch up while you look around frantically for a secure hiding place.*

In answer to his worried glance, I told him it was the frigid wind that had made my eyes tear. I also tied his woollen scarf around his neck and kissed him on the forehead.

Children of Holocaust survivors learn to hide their irritation early on, of course.

All the time we were in the bank – while he was writing out his withdrawal slip and bantering with our favourite teller, Lakshmi, and drinking a cup of coffee with the bank manager, and making a quick pit stop in the employee bathroom – I kept imagining my father as a panicked eleven-year-old boy standing at the window

of the tailor shop where he spent his afternoons inside the Warsaw ghetto, waiting for his parents to return home.

As a kid, I used to try to imagine what my father's parents looked like. From clues he dropped, I ended up picturing them as rumped, ravenously hungry versions of Edward G. Robinson and – if you can believe it – Barbra Streisand.

Why Barbra Streisand? Dad said his mom used to sing to herself while she cleaned their apartment. He once hummed a bar of her favourite tune to me. Mom later told me its title: 'Chryzantemy złociste' – *Golden Chrysanthemums*.

My father had a sweet baritone, but he only sang when he got a little tipsy or when a synagogue service called for us to join in on a hymn or psalm. It always seemed to me as if Dad believed that showing too much happiness or love in public might get him selected for the ovens – though that speculation of mine turned out to be slightly off target.

The lyrics of 'Chryzantemy złociste' begin like this: *Golden chrysanthemums in a crystal vase are standing on my piano, soothing sorrow and regret*. Occasionally, I find myself singing that verse to myself. My own voice has come to sound to me like a form of defiance – of the way the world has tried to keep my father and me apart.

Dad always grades the public bathrooms he uses for cleanliness, but this time he had no comment. 'I didn't notice a thing,' he said when I asked for his report.

Though he looked a bit weary on shuffling back to me, he regained his energy the moment Lakshmi fetched him a second cup of coffee. He appreciates coffee more than anyone I've ever met – even the bank's stale brew. He licked his lips after every sip as if it were honey – and to make Lakshmi grin at him.

I admired how he charmed everyone, even now, after Mom's

death, and also how he jabbered away so knowledgeably with the bank manager, Ed, about the upcoming baseball season, his coat open to reveal his University of Utah T-shirt – a gift from an old friend – unconcerned about its fraying collar and holes.

When Ed gave me the familiar signal with his eyes, I told Dad it was time we let our friends at Chase go back to earning profits.

Just before he and I walked back through the Chase parking lot to my car, I did up the top button of his overcoat, and he smiled at me – a tight, boyish one meant to look sweet-natured and to cover what he was really thinking.

The smile, my mother and I called it.

Did Dad learn how to shield himself with that smile when he first entered the ghetto in November of 1940, or only after his parents were loaded on a transport to Treblinka a year and nine months later? I never asked; I learned to avoid leading him back to the cramped, nearly lightless ground-floor apartment where he lived in the ghetto with his parents.

Dad told me only the vaguest outlines of this story; it was my mother who filled in the details.

After his parents disappeared and until his escape on April 7th, 1943 – for eight straight months – Dad stood every afternoon at the window of Willi's Tailoring Workshop on the third floor of his apartment house on Koszykowa Street. It afforded him a wide-ranging view over the entire block, and my father figured he'd spot his parents from up there the instant they appeared on the sidewalk.

Throughout the many months he waited, he guarded in the inner pocket of his coat a topaz ring and some other jewellery that his grandmother Luna had given to him; she'd told him to use them as bribes if he ever found himself arrested or threatened by Nazis.

During the first two months his cousin Abe would join him

in Willi's workshop, and they'd sometimes play chess. Abe was a wizard at the game. When he was thirteen, he'd played the great Paulin Frydman to a draw. 'He'd have become a grandmaster, for sure,' Dad would assure me every time the subject came up.

Then Abe was arrested by the Nazis and taken away.

My father was lucky to escape when he did – the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started twelve days after he was smuggled out, and his chances of surviving the bloody battles the Jews fought against the Nazis would have been close to zero.

Willi the tailor had already vanished by the time Abe was captured. Once an apprentice on Savile Row in London, he'd insisted on speaking English with my father, claiming that Jews had no future in Poland and that Dad had to learn to speak like a British gentleman if he was going to survive in this world. He'd gone out to buy bread and cigarettes on August 6th, 1942, however, and never returned. Dad was pretty sure that he was one of the fifteen thousand Jews who lined up for a fake bread giveaway organised by the Nazis and forced onto a freight car to Treblinka.

Two weeks earlier, the slender, long-haired, dandyish tailor had handed Dad his scissors and shown him how to cut woollen fabric. Each fabric had its own personality, Willi had told my dad: wool was stubborn but generous, cotton straightforward and honest, linen deceptively complicated but often comic. Then, while Dad watched his neighbour sewing the collar on a shimmering-blue waistcoat that he was making for a friend, my father realised that great skill and beauty resided in his hands, though Dad couldn't have expressed it that way at his age. When the tailor winked at my father and called him over for a hug, Dad discovered that he wanted to study with him – and follow the same path in life.

If Willi had survived, would he have learned to shield off his

friends and family with a smile like my father's? I suppose I could have found out how common such a strategy was by spending time with the handful of leaky-eyed, joke-telling veterans of Auschwitz and Treblinka at our synagogue, but I avoided them; one old Jew stifling my questions about his childhood with his eyebrows and showing me *the smile* was more than enough.

A Plan Inside the Pain

My father's great-grandmother, Rosa Kalish, was a famous matchmaker from the Polish city of Garwolin. That was also where Dad was born, but his parents moved to Warsaw when he was just two years old. Rosa's family name was Zarco. Her ancestors on her father's side had come from Portugal, she said, which was why she could speak Ladino. And why she had been named Rosa and not Róża. She had a fox-like face and short silver hair. Her hands were affectionate and slender.

Rosa was murdered at Treblinka in May of 1943, at the age of ninety-three. Before her death, her family and neighbours believed her to be the oldest woman in the Warsaw ghetto. And probably one of the smallest, too. Forty-two kilos – that's what Rosa weighed just before she was picked up by the Nazis. 'Boy, was she skinny!' Dad once told me, bursting out with a short, dry laugh that seemed uncharacteristically mean-spirited to me. 'Her ribs stood out like . . . like the beams of one of those Roman ships. What's the English word for them?'

'Galleons.'

'Galleons – right!'

When I was at college, a friend whose mother had survived Bergen-Belsen told me that the laugh of my father's that I described to her wasn't really a laugh. 'How could you not know that?' she shrieked at me, and I had nothing to say to her except what seemed

like the truth – ‘I guess I was afraid to know more about what had happened to him and his great-grandmother.’

Dad knew her weight because his paediatrician father insisted on giving Rosa a check-up every week to see if he was succeeding in fattening her up with the cheese and *schmaltz* he requested as payment from his patients.

Putting weight on Rosa didn’t work, my father told me. Although he never told me why, I picked up clues from the sprinkling of stories that he told me about her that she must have offered most of her grandson’s high-calorie treats to the kids in the family – to Dad and his cousins, Abe, Esther and Shelly. Shelly was the only other person in the family to survive the war.

Four months ago, after Dad’s Valium overdose, Shelly told me in a conspiratorial whisper that their favourite meal in the ghetto had been pumpernickel bread smeared with *schmaltz*. Though Shelly didn’t say that these treats came from Rosa, he implied it when he held his finger to his lips and warned me not to tell my father what he’d said. ‘He’ll scream bloody murder at me if you let on that you know!’ he whispered.

Dad’s father used to summon him up onto the scale just after Rosa, but my father always claimed not to remember his own weight. Still, I know that his ribs must have stuck out like a Roman galleon as well, because I overheard him telling my mother once that when he ate a boiled potato covered in sour cream just after finding refuge in the home of Christian friends on the other side of the ghetto wall, he threw up because his stomach wasn’t used to so many calories.

Though Dad was named Benjamin, after Rosa’s long-dead husband, everyone in the family called him either Benni or – because he was small and slight – *Katchkele*, which was Yiddish for ‘little duck’.

Rosa didn't want to go for a medical check-up every week but she agreed in the end because she realised it helped keep her grandson – Dad's father – hopeful.

As to why her grandson, whose name was Adam, insisted on weighing her, Rosa told Dad, 'He's found a plan inside his pain.'

'What do you mean?' my father had asked the old woman.

'A strategy.'

'And what's his strategy?'

'To keep his grandmother and his *Katchkele* alive long enough to make it out of here. And it wouldn't be very nice for us to spoil his efforts, would it?'

Do You Really Think So?

After he retired, my father started studying kabbalah every day with help from a professor of Jewish mysticism at the University of California. Whenever I was over his house, I would sneak into the bedroom and look at the esoteric texts he stacked in rickety towers on his desk and wonder what the hell he was looking for.

The book he always kept on his night table was *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, by his hero, Gershom Scholem, who had single-handedly revived interest in kabbalah among both scholars and practising Jews in the 1940s and 50s. The text had dozens of dog-eared pages, and so many of Dad's notes in pencil – and even his tiny illustrations of the mythological beasts that Scholem describes – that I once told my father that he ought to try to publish an annotated version, but he scoffed and said that he had never gone to university and nobody would be interested in his opinions, and in any case his notes were really just for himself.

Dad always lacked confidence in his own intellectual abilities, though Mom always said that he had trained himself to evaluate all her articles on Sephardic music with such uncommon depth

and insight that she would never have considered publishing one without getting the go-ahead from him.

Once, when Mom and Dad were on vacation in the Bahamas, I slept at their house while on a trip to New York, and I read all his hundreds of notes in the margins of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. One particular comment he'd written in blue pencil caught my attention: *Do you really think so, Mr Scholem?*

The sentence next to that comment read: 'The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence.'

Another of the books I found on Dad's night table on that visit was *Greek Religion* by Walter Burkert. My father was always reading about the ancient Greeks. When I was maybe just five or six, he told me that in a previous life he'd worked at the Library of Alexandria.

'What did you do there?' I'd asked him. He was walking me to school and we were holding hands.

'Nothing important – I just kept things neat and tidy,' he replied, as if it were completely reasonable to think so.

'Did you like working there?'

He showed me a delighted face. 'Boy, did I! I could read all the scrolls I wanted, and I was fluent in Greek and Egyptian, and at lunchtime I'd go swimming in the Mediterranean. Warm seawater, pretty women, sun, beer, good books . . . Eti, I had it all!'

From that brief list of delights, I discovered what Dad's vision of paradise was. And it sounded pretty good to me, too, but a few days later I realised that the list didn't include me, and I was upset about that for years, though it embarrasses me now to admit it.

While Dad was in the hospital recovering from the Valium overdose, I'd go to his room and sit on his bed and wonder when he'd be able to come home. One time, I found a second book under his copy of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. It was *They Came*

Like Swallows, a novel I'd recently given him. On the first page, he'd written in Yiddish: *Present from Eti. Excellent writing – too good, in fact.* After that, in parenthesis, he'd written to my mom: *Tessa, I think the author would understand how much I miss you.*

They Came Like Swallows was written by William Maxwell. It's about a young boy whose beloved mother dies in the flu epidemic of 1919. Maybe I ought to have given my father a more cheerful novel to read, but he had told me many times that he preferred tragedies.

'When I start to sniff a happy ending, I always look for the doorway out,' was his exact quote.

All I'd Failed to Understand

My mother's father, Maurice, had come to America from Greece in 1937, when he was twenty-four years old. He was the only grandparent I got to know, since Dad's parents were long dead and Mom prevented me from seeing her mother, whom she described as toxic.

Imagine leaving home just after completing your master's degree in music history and never seeing your parents again. All the time I was with Grandpa Morrie – every time he took me to a jazz club or classical concert – I never thought once about the hardships that must have still been throbbing inside his old man's heart. Or about his terror at having to raise two little daughters alone. These days, there are times when my youthful obliviousness seems unforgivable, but maybe it's a blessing that kids don't ever feel the need to gaze out over the length and breadth of their grandparents' lives.

Once, when I was drawing with my father, he told me that we never saw Mom's mother because she was a mean person and didn't want what was best for me.

'Why not?' I'd asked him.

He put down his crayon and looked at me, and I could see him

trying – and failing – to find the right words in English. He lifted me up and sat me on his lap. I must have been about four or five years old. We were in the kitchen at our dinner table.

‘Listen, Eti, your grandmother . . . I think she got lost and never found her way back home,’ he said, but he spoke in an unsure voice.

Confusion made me study my father’s eyes, because I’d learned I could sometimes find emotions there that he tried to hide from me. This time, I wasn’t sure what I saw, but it might have been distress or fear, because it made me want to stay on his lap for a long time.

‘How did she get lost?’ I asked.

He took a deep breath, which made me think – in the itchy way that insights come to kids – that he wasn’t going to tell me the truth. ‘If I said she was jealous of your mother and Grandpa Morrie, would that make any sense to you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘She’s angry, baby,’ he tried next. ‘Though that’s not exactly what I mean. It’s more like . . .’ Dad looked past me, and I didn’t understand that he was looking for a more perfect term, so I turned around to see if Mom was there, but she wasn’t. Neither of us found the right words at the time, or maybe Dad really didn’t want to tell me the truth, though an odd and angry letter I would receive from my grandmother fifteen years later would make it clear what he ought to have said: *Your grandmother holds a deadly grudge against your mother.*

Grandma’s letter was handwritten on four sheets of light-blue paper, front and back, with her name engraved at the top in gold: Dorothy Spinelli. I received it two weeks after I’d spoken to her on the phone. She said she would be overjoyed to make me lunch at her apartment in Great Neck, on Long Island, but also said that she thought it only fair for me to know her feelings about my mother first.

At the time, I was studying painting at the City University of New York, and I'd found my grandmother in the Nassau County phone book. The letter she sent me two weeks after our phone call listed a series of injustices my mother had inflicted on her. The first one was, *When she was five years old, your 'oh-so-sweet' mother refused to eat the moussaka I'd made for your grandfather's birthday, and she ran out of the room shrieking when I took some on my fork and held it up to her mouth.*

'Oh-so-sweet' was written inside quote marks, as though I wouldn't otherwise understand she wasn't really praising my mother.

Grandma Dorothy had pressed so hard with her pen while writing that sentence – and again while warning me to beware of my mother's 'vicious temper and horrid betrayals' – that she had torn both times through the paper.

To hold a grudge against a five-year-old girl who refused to eat moussaka seemed insane, of course. And vicious temper? My mom had raised her voice at me on a number of occasions when I was little, but she'd never spanked me or humiliated me in any way. Though I thought of calling my grandmother to give her another chance, it seemed a lot safer for me to reply with silence. And she never wrote me again.

Every Friday night, Mom and Dad and I would have Sabbath dinner with Grandpa Morrie at his apartment in the East Village. He lived inside three small rooms that he painted in bright colours to highlight the black-and-white photographs of Mom and Aunt Evie that he hung all over the place, even in the bathrooms. The picture he kept above his bed was of himself and his daughters with his hero, Louis Armstrong, and he'd had it blown up to twice the size of a record cover. In it, Morrie, Mom, Aunt Evie and Mr Armstrong are standing in front of Saul's Bagels & Bialys,

where my grandfather used to pick up breakfast every Saturday morning. It is October 24th, 1953. Mom is ten years old and Evie is eight. Mr Armstrong is laughing sweetly while gazing down at Evie, whose lips are pursed and cheeks sucked in. She is making her famous *tropical fish face*, and, as anyone in my family can tell you, her elbows jutting out are her fins.

Morrie is gripping Evie's shoulder to keep her from moving, since her tropical fish imitation usually involved swimming around in circles. Louis is holding my mother's hand.

Mom's eyes are wary. Her painfully slender shoulders are hunched. 'I was on the FBI's Most Wanted list at the time,' she tells people whenever they first see the photo and ask her why she looked so terrified.

'Your mother was just crazy shy,' Morrie explained to me when I asked if Mom had been upset that day. Then amusement widened his eyes. 'But that changed when she got interested in boys. Thank god for oestrogen!'

Morrie used to play bootleg albums of all the great jazz musicians for me and Dad when we'd visit, though sometimes we'd also watch Mets games on Channel 9. When Mom would join us, the three of them would talk about Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger and all the other *warmongers*, as they called them. Their voices were contemptuous. Mom and Dad despised Nixon more than anyone else, it seemed to me. As for Morrie, he never referred to the president by name but nearly always as *that Jew-hating fiijo de puta* – 'son of a bitch' in Ladino. He kept a newspaper on his upright piano of two New York City cops arresting him and Dad during a protest against the Vietnam War. 'One of my proudest moments,' he used to tell me.

Grandpa Morrie died of a heart attack when I was twenty-one years old. He was seventy-four. After the funeral, I played in a

baseball game organised by old friends at a local park, and the first time I came up to bat, I knew I was right where my grandfather wanted me to be.

During high-school baseball season, Morrie used to come see me play as often as possible. Once, when I'd hit a triple down the line in right, I looked up from third base to see him weeping. He told me later that while I was running the bases, he'd realised with growing excitement that our family genes had skipped two generations. 'Papa was a really fast runner, just like you, Eti. He almost made it to the Olympics in Stockholm in 1912 – in the 400 metres.'

I overheard him once saying to my mom, 'Me, a near-sighted Greek Jew with bad knees, and I've got two gorgeous daughters and Willie Mays for a grandson. Who'd have figured it?'

That remark seems so typical of him – and so generous – that I often think of it when I study the picture of him and me that I keep on my night table. It's a photograph that my father snapped of us just after a baseball game. All these years later, I can still feel the soft perfection of my blue-and-grey uniform and how it made me want to show off for my family. I've put my baseball cap on Grandpa Morrie, and my arm is over his shoulder because it makes him feel proud that I'm taller than him and nearing manhood. His eyes are a bit tentative and embarrassed, since he suspects that a little old Greek Jew might look ridiculous in a baseball cap, though everyone who sees the picture invariably says something like *Your grandfather looks so cute*. My wife Angie never knew Morrie but came closer to the truth when she said, 'He looks like he never stopped being a kid!'

I once asked Morrie what it felt like to know he'd never again see the family of his childhood – his parents or his little brother and sister.