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After the Bolsheviks

THE FLURRIES ROLLED IN EARLY THAT MORNING; I remember because it was our first snowfall of the year, and as I rushed through breakfast it was only the telephone that could distract me. “Oh, Elliot—” said my Aunt Bernice. She was sobbing, so I handed Mom the receiver. “Go ahead, I’m listening,” said Mom. This was her voice reserved for wrong numbers, or for solicitors demanding the head of the household. But her tone quickly softened. On a piece of stationery she wrote what my aunt dictated, and after hanging up she walked to the French windows and pressed her fingers to the glass. I couldn’t imagine what she was thinking. From experience, I had a good idea of what she might be looking at. Sometimes, when you focused hard enough, you could trick the snow into rising upward instead of drifting toward the back deck. Eventually you blinked and everything went right again—except for my mother, she’d fooled herself too often to recognize what was truly impossible.

She turned from the window and said, “Elliot, clear the driveway.” I hesitated, glancing at my father, but he only seconded her order with a quick nod.

The snow was coming down harder when I went outside. I took breaks from shoveling to admire the disappearing shingles on our rooftop, the elegant braids along our chain-link fence. A few minutes later, Dad arrived carrying a hard black case beneath one arm and a leather bag across the shoulder; he told me Bubbie had had a stroke—and all at once my mother’s reasoning became clear to me. In the middle of a snowstorm, with our grandmother’s life on hold, she would make us pose for another photograph.

“It’s been ages,” she said, when she joined us in the driveway. “Who knows when Bubbie last saw snow?”

Mom looked brave and sounded fully convinced of herself. She positioned me in front of her and fixed the ski hat on my forehead. This was typical behavior. Against long odds she dug her heels in deeper, and in a situation this delicate I knew better than to resist. I smiled exactly as she told me to, and for the rest of the afternoon I stayed put, my suitcase ready at a moment’s notice, even as the snow accumulated

and the flights got further and further delayed. Not until the airport closed did she finally accept that, like my grandmother, we weren't going anywhere, any time soon.

MY GRANDPARENTS HAD MOVED to Florida before I was born. Though they'd intended to take care of themselves, Aunt Bernice still followed them down, apparently unwilling to give up custody. When Grandpa Saul died a few years later, and before anyone else had had time to react, my aunt whisked Bubbie into a nearby residence called the Zion Home. It was a backhanded move. My mother spread rumors that while everyone else had been sitting Shiva for my grandfather, Bernice was out visiting rest homes all along Miami Beach. Furious, but not to be outdone, Mom phoned a car service that delivered Bubbie to the airport—and on to an awaiting flight to Boston, where we picked her up and brought her to Brookline. For two weeks she was set up in our guest room—a “try-out,” my mother called it. But this time it was Aunt Bernice who cried foul. She brought kidnapping charges with the Miami Police, and she only dropped them on condition that Bubbie returned to Florida. Since then, Mom had tried everything she could think of to win her back.

In her mind it was no contest. Bubbie belonged in the northeast, where Mom and Bernice had been raised. In Springfield, an hour west of us, she and her sister had grown up on a combination of Yiddish and my grandmother's broken English. Bernice was ten years older, so she'd gotten an early start doing check-out work at my grandfather's grocery store. Later, she worked nights and weekends while studying at Springfield College. By the time my mother got to high school Saul had already sold the store, which meant that instead of studying between shifts she could spend more time on her homework. She earned a scholarship to Smith College, where she met eligible Jewish men from the Ivy League. From then on the lines were drawn. Bernice made a constant virtue of her family sacrifices—from her education to her bachelorhood—but Mom took honors for giving Saul the two things he had always wanted: a son-in-law and a doctor.

THE SNOW EVENTUALLY STOPPED by late Sunday night, but with the backlog of travelers we were put on stand-by for the next few days. Mom refused to sit idle. On Monday she drove down icy streets to the first photographer who would develop our picture and have it framed by afternoon. In the meantime, she stayed in constant contact with the doctors. Amazingly, by Tuesday Grandma had regained full motion in her body—or whatever measure of it a ninety-one-year-old still possessed. But her swift recovery became a mixed blessing. In our absence she had signed legal docu-

ments declaring my aunt her health proxy. Bernice could now make all medical decisions without us. So the next person Mom got in touch with was our attorney, who warned her, as did my father, that a signed health proxy had little chance of being overturned. But in my mother's book, 'little chance' meant not impossible, and for her that was enough to go on.

By Wednesday—three days after the stroke—we reached Miami. With all our luggage in the taxi, and the framed photograph between my knees, we drove straight to the Zion Home. It was my first time visiting in three years. The salt smell followed us everywhere, and with my eyes peeled for the ocean I rediscovered the thrill of my earliest trips, when every feature seemed beautifully exotic. Along one side rose towering condos with darkly tinted windows and gleaming balconies, while on the other, speeding by much faster, were low, stuccoed apartments in brilliant colors.

Growing up, I'd heard all kinds of stories about the hardships of Russia—how Jews were forced to speak Yiddish as a first language, how Saul's family made counterfeit coins, and how both of them got out right after the revolution. Mom made it sound like a fairy tale. My grandparents had met on a steamer coming to America, where Saul impressed Bubbie by doing card tricks. But he died before I got to know him. And my grandmother, in her old age and worn-down English, remained an abstraction to me even in the flesh.

The Zion Home was a pink low-rise with wooden shutters and a patio in front, the kind that sparkled so much it looked like pindrops of glass were embedded in the concrete. The patio curved into a lawn that was neatly bordered by white alyssum and baby snapdragons. The first time I visited the home Dad had described it as an assisted living facility with stand-by nurses and a full-time staff. A lot of the residents cooked, cleaned, and took care of themselves. "That's Bernice talking," Mom said. She found the home depressingly spare. "A halfway house for the dead," she called it.

We were welcomed in the lobby by a smiling, mustached man named Michael Levin, the daytime manager. He gave us a hand with the luggage. "I saw that blizzard," he said. His shoulders shook at an imaginary breeze. "How do you survive each year?"

By the elevator was a lounge with tall, tinted windows and a group of men seated around a television. A few vacant chairs were scattered outside the nurse's station. When the elevator slid open, my mother looked into a space much smaller than what stood in front of her.

"Our whole family's from the cold," she said, as if a wound born proudly in battle.

Michael nodded. After Dad and I had joined her, the manager retreated from the closing door. I felt cramped in the elevator; it was one of those old-fashioned models with wood paneling and inlaid mirrors. It balked between floors, as if in preparation to stop, and when I felt my stomach go I spread my feet apart for better balance. It didn't help much.

EVER SINCE GRANDMA had moved into the Zion Home, Bernice had been forbidden to see us in Brookline. On our trips to Florida, the manager was always apprised of our whereabouts, so that he could run interference between sisters. Only at Grandma's request did everyone spend time together. In those rare occasions my aunt moved fast to shower me with affection. She bought me books like *The Little Prince* or *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which always carried a clean ten-dollar bill tucked inside the front jacket. "You'll miss your aunt, won't you?" she whispered. "You could write me a letter, maybe we'll be secret pen pals."

Sometimes Mom unpacked brochures of other rest homes, trying to court Bubbie with pictures of Georgian brick manors and well-groomed lawns. But all it did was provoke Bernice. Three years ago, when everyone was eating lunch in a steakhouse, Mom mentioned a prominent Jewish home she'd read about in Braintree. Wiping her mouth, she said the floors were scrubbed more than once a week. Dad groaned. Bernice dropped her silverware onto her plate. When the manager asked nicely for us to take our arguing outside, I could feel the hateful eyes of everyone in the restaurant.

By then the trips had grown bitterly unpleasant. For all the tension I had to endure, those few short hours at the beach just didn't seem worth it. So in the wake of our public humiliation, I told my parents that I preferred to see Bubbie only in Massachusetts from now on. It seemed a longshot, but even at that age I'd learned a trick or two from my mother. While making my pitch, I turned the tears on at just the right moment.

"Oh, Elliot, you're right," said Mom, sweeping me into her arms. "I've considered it for a long time, too." Dad was startled by her quick agreement, but she would talk him into it later on.

Eventually, my mother's reasoning made sense to both of us. It came to pass that the most trivial of activities, from soccer games to Boy Scout meetings, were events for another photograph. Mom made me the centerpiece of her campaign. I was the one and only grandson in the family—the boy who lived all the way across country—and Mom made sure to drive home that point. A month ago, she'd put together an

illustrated calendar that spanned my infancy to my Bar Mitzvah. The pictures were in chronological order, and the message conveyed by the calendar was unmistakable. It showed a childhood ending in one quick episode after another, and it warned that I'd already be grown up before too long.

AT BUBBIE'S APARTMENT Mom gave two firm knocks on the door. A long pause ensued, during which she took our hands, and when the door cracked open to the end of its chain there came a single inspecting eye, followed by the faint Yiddish word I recognized as Mom's name. Then the latch came undone and the two women embraced in a long hug. I wasn't sure what to expect of her, what a person looked like after having lost and then regained her ability to move. But the only visible difference was that Grandma seemed shorter and somewhat more emaciated. Her face was sun-tanned and her white hair pulled into a large, porcupine-tooth comb. In my arms I discovered a surprisingly solid frame beneath loose skin, like water-logged wood.

The apartment was a narrow studio divided into a pantry kitchen and a bedroom. The blinds were closed, and the few bars of light that snuck past seemed swallowed up by her dark upholstery. "It's not living," Mom said, zipping up the shades. She immediately gravitated toward the bookcase, where she browsed the countless small photographs from her side of the family. Even from across the room I sensed an awkward stalemate on those shelves, a group of people still vying for my grandmother's attention.

Dad clasped his hands on the table and smiled. "How about a chat," he said to my grandmother, in a voice I recognized from his hospital office. Calmly, he asked her questions about her hearing, about the feeling in her fingers and toes, and—in order to test her memory—about what she'd been doing the day before. Bubbie hedged uncomfortably in her chair.

"*Steven*," said Mom, "she was at the hospital, what do you think."

Grandma bent down to fix her stockings. She wore snap shoes and a brown dress with a long triangular collar, like two petals of an orchid. The dress seemed perfectly familiar to me, in the way we always put faces to clothing. And yet it was a false sentiment. In all her stays with us, I'd never moved past the feeling of two strangers in a library. Even the normal things she did, like dust furniture or empty trash cans, had a distant, premodern feel to them. The cultures we'd been born from were immensely different, and when she brought her rituals of devotion into my own house, it made me feel like an impostor. Every Friday, as the sun went down, she covered her head

with an embroidered scarf and buried her face in her hands, to bless the Sabbath candles. Her body rocked forward almost imperceptibly, and a joyless, musical inflection escaped through her fingers. Other times, swallowed up by the family-room recliner, she mumbled words from her ornamented prayer book. Like Bubbie herself, the book seemed handed down from the ages. It had a metal-plated jacket that was embossed with fake jewels, and the pages, tissue-thin and oily, were inked with small Hebrew letters that looked dark and wildly illegible, like squished bugs.

Strolling around the apartment some more, Mom rummaged through odds and ends in desk drawers and on cabinet shelves. Dad kept close watch on her, his arms folded in suspicion.

I was glad to see them preoccupied. I felt cooped up in the apartment, like being on a small raft, so I went to the window and looked at the distant shoreline. The area had been built up over the years, and the beachfront lay in small parcels between the condominiums. A fast surf pounded the shore, while further out the gulls swooped down on the dark green water, breaking the surface with their beaks. As in the taxi cab, I felt percolating inside of me an appetite for the ocean. Never mind that we were here to see Grandma—I had my own agenda. My whole life Mom had insisted that her favorite beaches were on Cape Cod, but in my mind there was no comparison between the warm Florida water and the icy Atlantic of the Northeast.

In a few minutes Mom rushed back from the kitchen. “The calendar, you told me you got it,” she said to Bubbie. Grandma knitted worried fingers in her lap, as if she expected a whole new round of questions. Mom shot an unfriendly look at Dad and said something I didn’t understand.

“I guess it’s elves, Steven, they always get their hands on things.”

Mom helped Bubbie from her chair and led her to the portrait, which I’d left standing in the corner. She stripped off the bubble wrap and invited Bubbie to look. “It’s our house,” said Mom. She balanced the picture on one knee, and Grandma obliged her by leaning in close. Soon, though, her lips clenched with uncertainty, and her face wrinkled on the margins of distress. Mom placed a hand on Bubbie’s shoulder to relax her. “You remember it,” she said, as if she could thread hope through a command. But Grandma was unswayed. Even after Mom had put the picture down my grandmother continued to shake her head, refusing. “Oh, Bubbie, you’re not even trying,” said my mother.