

Torn
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By Amy Yelin

I.

My parents were married for forty five years.

“A lifetime,” is how the rabbi at my mother’s funeral describes it. The man says it with such a tone of familiarity, of genuine sadness, that one might think he has known and adored my parents all their lives. But the rabbi is a stranger, a person hired only for the service, which is held at Zion Memorial Chapel in Westchester County, New York.

My father found the funeral home in the local yellow pages, his eyes drawn to the ad’s big, black Jewish star. “What do you think of this one?” He asks.

“It’s fine,” I assure him, although I do not know. I am still an amateur at planning for the dead—a status that will soon change as I write my first obituary, and help choose a dress for my mother’s cremation.

We are sitting in the basement of my family home, in my father’s office. His credentials hang slightly crooked on the brown paneled walls: a medical degree from Hebrew University in Jerusalem; a certificate from the American Psychiatric Association. On his bookshelf are the same ancient-looking textbooks I remember from childhood, the ones with Freud and Adler and Jung written in oversized letters down the spines. Staring at a box of tissues and an ashtray overflowing with cigarettes, I think about the people who usually sit here: the men and women I’ve seen walking quickly up the driveway, hands in their pockets, heads down so I can never make out their faces. I imagine them here, crying and confessing and mourning their losses, telling their tragic stories while keeping one eye on my father’s prescription pad. I keep my eye on the tissues but unlike

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the strangers, I don't cry. I will save it for later, when I am alone. Crying is not good form in our family.

My father hangs up the phone and says, "It's done," to another diploma hanging a few inches above my head. "The funeral will be on Friday." He lights his pipe and for a moment, disappears behind a cloud of grey smoke.

We sit in silence for several minutes and it strikes me that this is the first time that I am truly alone in the world with my father – a man I have worshipped for 33 years, but a man I hardly know. He shifts in his chair and I notice his fly is down. I lower my eyes and focus on a pile of ashes that have fallen from his pipe to the floor.

II.

The funeral is controversial. My mother will be cremated, although I learn that this is not what "good" Jews do. "Good" Jews bury their dead in a simple wooden casket, at least according to my children's book of Jewish questions and answers.

"Is this what mom wanted?" I ask my older sister Jackie. "To be cremated?"

No one seems to know. And there is no Will. My father, in his mid-seventies now, wants to be cremated, so this is what my mother will have as well. The nice Italian man who runs the Zion Chapel offers to help by having a simple wooden casket present at the service, to "throw the more conservative Jews off." We decline.

Before the service, the rabbi asks us to describe my mother. My sisters and I do most of the talking:

"Enthusiastic."

"Athletic"

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“Kind”

“Stylish”

“loved Billy Joel...and the Mets.”

My father is silent, which I find odd until I notice that his bottom lip is trembling. I wonder if this may be the first time I will ever see my father cry, but the moment passes. His lip steadies.

The rabbi then gives each of us a black ribbon which he pins to our clothing and cuts with a scissor down the middle.

“What does it mean?” I ask, rubbing my finger against the ribbon’s fine ridges. The rabbi explains that the torn ribbon represents the torn fabric of our lives. I find comfort in this symbolic gesture.

When I can’t find my ribbon the next day, I spend hours searching. I scour the seats in my sister’s car, fruitlessly retracing my steps through the back yard, up the porch and into the house. But the ribbon is gone.

A few days after the funeral, I accompany my father to pick up my mother’s ashes from the funeral home. In exchange for the check in my father’s hand, the funeral director hands her back to us in a simple, silver tin resembling a paint can. I am surprised to see something so ordinary. I suppose I had expected a fancy urn of some sort, something stylish that my mother would have liked.

In the car, as we leave, he only says, “It’s strange. She used to sit up here with me.”

We stop at a restaurant at a local shopping center, right next door to my mother's hair salon. We sit at a little table and order eggs and bacon and try to talk about mundane things. I can tell that morning at breakfast, as we butter our toast and stumble through conversation while my mother's ashes wait for us in the back seat of my father's car (we didn't have the heart to put her in the trunk), getting to know my father without my mother will not be easy. Like the first of a series of aftershocks, I sense there is more to come.

III.

As I try to make sense of my parent's relationship, it feels as though I know little more than the rabbi. There was their shared love of Sinatra, their late night talks in bed while watching Johnny Carson, their habit of throwing around Yiddish words like 'sfartza' and 'mensch.' But – perhaps because I am the youngest of three, born when they had already been married for almost fifteen years – what I remember most were their disagreements.

Like the time I asked them why they named me 'Amy.'

"It was a variation of 'Ann,'" my mother explained. "In honor of my Aunt."

My father shook his head and snapped, "No it wasn't...what are you talking about? Amy in Hebrew means 'my country' or 'my homeland'...so we named you for my homeland, Israel."

"Oy vey," my mother mumbled under her breath.

"What 'Oy vey?' That's why we named her Amy."

It was always this way. My father would say it was one way, my mother, another. Even the story of how they met in Israel in the early 1950s –my father, the young medical student at Hebrew University, and my mother, a stylish, young transplant from New York. She had come to Jerusalem to be a good aunt and help her eldest sister Betty care for a newborn baby. The way my mother always told the story, my father had to steal her away from one of his friends.

“He wooed me away,” she’d say, and then kiss him on the head as he cringed.

As a child, I liked this version of the story. It made her seem an empowered and desirable woman, and matched the way she looked in the old black and white photos when she wore a scarf tied around her head, sunglasses, and held a cigarette in one hand. My father, on the other hand, claimed to have no recollection of such a friend, of such competition, and he remained evasive about the wooing.

And then there was the time they actually fought over whether or not a picture of my father as a boy was actually my father.

“Shouldn’t I know who I am?” he demanded.

As usual, my mother only mumbled something and shook her head, an act of surrender that was frustrating to watch, but I now understand, easy to absorb.

For the first few months after my mother’s death, my father is miserable. He complains about the neighbors, the same ones he has always tried to avoid, saying, “They never say hello.” He gripes about the state of healthcare, the state of New York, the United States.

“I don’t know why I ever came here in the first place,” he sighs.

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He daydreams of retiring to Mt. Carmel in Israel, or Vienna, where he went to medical school as a young man before returning to the university in Jerusalem. Curious, I encourage him, but these discussions always end the same way.

“How can I leave?” he says. “There’s too much to do here.” I am not sure what he means.

Occasionally, he has a good day, telling me about an interesting conversation with the Jewish repairman from Sears, or the UPS truck driver. That’s how he gets into the dangerous habit of ordering shoes and clothes and unnecessary objects off the Internet - such as the refurbished toaster that he insists I take.

“I like it when the UPS man comes,” he tells me between puffs on his pipe. “It’s nice to talk.”

I begin to notice that my father has started spending more and more time in the basement, in the bowels of our family home. It is the land where my sisters and I once reigned supreme, playing with Barbie dolls or ping pong, listening to old 45’s while surrounded on all sides by cheap, brown paneling and my sister’s hippie posters: a young Mick Jagger; Woodstock’s *Peace, Love and Happiness*; Ali McGraw and Ryan O’Neal embracing and forever reminding me that *Love Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry*. Although the paneling and stiff yellow rug remain, the rest of the basement resembles the cellar of an old museum. Part of the ceiling is falling down, sprinkling white paint on all the artifacts of our lost community – old books, toys, abandoned exercise equipment, stereo equipment, eight-track cassettes, my treasured doll house.

In the early nineties, my father attempted to turn half the basement into a new office space. He had a wall built, bought new office furniture, hung some pictures on the walls. It was a promising endeavor, and for a while, it was a nice place. But it didn't last. For some reason, he didn't really use the new office, but continued to use his other home office, on the upper level of the basement, right next to the garage. Now, the newer office is being overrun just like the rest of the basement, but with one difference – this mess has a more modern flair. There are three or four old printers sitting on the floor, a couple of answering machines and, smack in the middle of the room, a giant shredder standing fierce-like and tall, foaming at the mouth with strips of paper. Tiny bits of paper, like crumbs, surround the shredder. They make their way across the floor and weave a trail towards the stairs, as though beckoning someone to follow.

IV.

My mother first raised the issue of the woman in the basement after her cancer diagnosis, when she was going through her initial chemo treatments. I came home often, then, driving down from Boston and remember on more than one occasion, noticing an unfamiliar silver mini-van in the driveway. I thought little of it until my mother shared her suspicions.

“He spends so much time down there,” she whispered, pointing towards the floor.
“Especially when *she*'s here.”

“Who is *she*?”

“I don't know...some black woman.”

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“Maybe she’s a patient,” I said, “Or maybe she’s teaching him how to use the new computer?” It was enough to deal with my mother’s illness. I could not also absorb the idea that my father had something inappropriate going on with a woman in the basement.

My mother shot me a look then that said *don’t be so naïve*. She handed me a copy of *The New York Times Magazine* and told me to read the article on a psychiatrist who allowed his patients to move in with him. By the end of the article, it was apparent that this particular psychiatrist was as crazy as any one of his patients.

When I was done reading, I looked up at my mother, incredulous not just at the story of this doctor, but at the fact that she was giving it to me to read in reference to my father.

“Who knows?” She said leaning back in her chair, gently adjusting the pink turban that sheltered a newly bald head. “Next thing you know she’ll be sleeping upstairs. Maybe in *your* room?”

Her name is Terry Baker. I know because I’ve seen it on the caller I.D. when I am home visiting my father, months after my mother has died, the phone ringing late at night. I’ve also seen receipts and letters with Miss Baker’s name on it, even a checkbook, scattered about the desk in the basement. Once, when I go down there to check e-mail, I find a bowl of pasta and tomato sauce congealing next to the ash tray of her cigarette butts. It is the dinner my father and I had the night before, and I suspect he waited until I was upstairs in my bedroom before sneaking the leftovers down to her. Then, another night, I overhear my father on the telephone, speaking in a hushed and unusually affectionate tone: “*Don’t let the bed bugs bite.*”

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I share my clues with my sister and, although we discuss the bizarre situation at length, no one confronts him. Nor does my father offer any information. Occasionally, he even lies, like the time when I am talking to him on the telephone and a strange woman's voice interrupts us.

"Hello?" she says.

"Hello?" I respond.

There is silence and then my father sighs, a loud, angry breath.

"Oh, ss-sorry," the stranger says. A couple of bangs follow as she hangs up the phone but can't find the receiver.

"Who was that I?" I ask him.

There is a lengthy pause. I imagine him struggling to come up with an explanation, his silence telling and amateurish.

"Dad? Who was that?"

"The damn lines keep getting crossed," he finally says.

"Really? Are you sure?" I am shocked. Does he expect me to believe this, to accept this? "It sounds like someone is in your house."

He sighs again.

I drop it.

"This is how men mourn," a friend informs me over lunch one day. She is the first of several people who will proudly share this theory with me. "They can't be alone, they need a new woman to take care of them. It happens all the time."

I nod as I bite my turkey sandwich, but I have some doubts. What my friend doesn't understand is that this is *my* father. This is the shy man, the intellectual, the man who once, as a boy in Eastern Europe, spit in the eye of a Nazi youth and later served as an Israeli soldier, his face young and brave in the old black and white photos. This is the same man who played puppets with me for hours on end, who held the back of my bike after removing the training wheels and later taught me to drive a car, the same man who took daily naps and had a love affair with books while other fathers in our well-manicured, suburban neighborhood cheated on their wives or abandoned their families, leaving behind chain-smoking, anxious mothers and heartbroken children in their wake.

"Maybe they're just friends," she offers, but before I can even respond she adds, "Yet what if... what if they were together? Could you be happy for your father, you know... that he's not alone... that he's found someone to share his life with?"

I remember the advice my father gave me once- a bit of wisdom that left its impression because, like spotting an endangered species, such intimate moments between us were rare.

Indecision is the worst place to be he had cautioned.

But again, like so many times in my life, I could come up with no clear answer to my friend's question.

V.

I bring my fiancé Ben to the house for a visit and Terry is there again, her car an unwelcome greeting as we turn up the driveway. My father is agitated and excited at first, running up and down the stairs from the living room back down to the basement,

claiming that he needs to “fax some insurance papers to Medicare.” During dinner, we talk, but no one mentions the woman in the basement. My father eats quickly before announcing he must go back downstairs.

“I don’t understand why you don’t just ask him,” Ben asks. “Demand an answer. You and your sisters are so intimidated by your father. That woman could be ripping him off or something, using him for his money.”

We hear the garage door slam, and both of us rush to the den’s sliding glass door to get a look. We see my father and a petite, African American woman standing on the driveway, outside the driver’s side door of her mini-van. I inch Ben out of the way, trying to get a closer look, to make out her age, or some of her features. But I am blocked. All I can see is my father’s perfectly round bald spot, the one that always reminded me of the bottom of a Chock Full of Nuts Coffee can.

“Well?” Ben says. “Are you going to ask him?”

Still looking out the window I say, “Yes, I will...I just have to be alone with him. I’ll do it when I’m alone with him.” But the words, meant to be firm and sincere, come out weak and unconvincing.

The next day, when no one is around, I do a little investigating and find five packs of Newport Lights in the battery drawer in kitchen. They are *Her* cigarettes – concrete evidence that she is now extending her reach from the basement to other parts of the house. In another drawer, in the living room, I find a card addressed to Terry and Doc. *Terry and Doc*. I also find several receipts for hair replacement products, in Terry’s

name. 'Losing hair,' I add to my growing list of mental notes. But despite the hard facts of the case, I leave without asking my father anything.

It is not long after that my father calls to announce that someone is moving into the house

"Her name is Terry," he says, as if I have no idea.

Although he tries to be elusive about the nature of their relationship, he gradually crumbles under my questioning. I learn that she is in her late fifties, a lawyer, divorced with no kids, and has recently sold her co-op in Mt. Vernon, which is supposedly the reason she needs a place to live.

"How did you meet her?" I ask.

He tells me that she once referred a patient, an alcoholic aunt, for treatment. I still can't shake the idea planted by my mother, however, that this woman was or currently is still a psychiatric patient herself.

When I ask, "Is she your girlfriend?" my father giggles like a schoolgirl, replying, "Well, she's not my boyfriend."

At the end of the conversation, he jokes, "Quite the little private investigator you are, huh?"

Shortly before Terry moves in, I have a dream: I am standing on the porch of my childhood home, looking at the overgrown mess of plants and shrubs that was once my father's prized garden. I remember, as a child, watching in awe as he planted and dug and

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watered. Then, when he was done for the day, I helped by kissing his scratches and smearing on the calamine lotion to cover his bug bites.

In the dream, a wave appears –although the house is nowhere near the ocean. The water is so powerful that it washes away the remains of the garden in one sweep, leaving nothing but mud as it recedes. A moment later, there is another wave, a larger one. It makes its way onto the lawn, creeping closer to the house, threatening me, threatening to wash everything away. In the dream, I cry. I open my eyes before the last wave crashes.

For a moment, I believe I am a child again, waking up in my bedroom. I expect to find my pink walls, my bulletin board, the black-and-white photo of my parents posing cheek to cheek on their wedding day. But as I move more from sleeping to wakefulness, I reach out and touch my own husband asleep in the bed next to me. I see my own wedding picture on the dresser nearby. I look and see the walls here are lavender, not pink, and too adult for a bulletin board.

Ben and I are the first in the family to go home and meet her. When we arrive, she is in the basement, which seems appropriate.

“She’s working,” my father says, “Has some important contracts to finish.” Then he quickly changes the subject. “So, how’s the job?”

“It’s ok...” but this time I am directing the conversation. “Will she be having dinner with us?”

He nods, “I think so.” He is rapidly squeezing the little rubber ball a doctor gave him years ago when he broke his wrist. He had slipped and fallen on the ice on the

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driveway but as a doctor who refuses to go to doctors, he treated himself. The end result was a wrist that had healed, but now had a more bulging and crooked appearance.

Twenty minutes later, I hear footsteps coming up the basement stairs and she appears: a petite black woman in a dress shirt and sweat pants, with curved colorless fingernails and glasses too large for her face.

“I’m Terry,” she says, putting out her hand. I feel torn between my natural instinct to be polite and welcoming, and the feeling that with every nicety I’m betraying my mother.

“Amy,” I say, standing up and briefly taking her hand.

“I’m sorry that I have all this work to do today,” she says, shaking her head and her hair which remains perfectly still. “These real estate contracts – you’ve got to read them very closely.”

“Oh, is this for your place – the one you just sold?” I’ve kicked into Nancy Drew mode.

“One is,” she says, “the rest are for clients – but I tell you, I’m growing tired of the whole legal thing. I think I’d really like to do something else.”

“Where did you go to law school?” I ask.

“CUNY.”

“But she got into Harvard and Yale,” my father adds, as though proudly talking about one of his daughters.

“I couldn’t afford those schools,” she says.

Perhaps it is her anxiety about meeting me, but within the first fifteen minutes she reveals not only her desire to give up law, but also the fact that she is divorced from a

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man that she and my father jokingly refer to as “Osama Bin Laden”, that she worked as an administrator for a college for 16 years, and that her father’s death occurred just as she was graduating law school.

“I had to take a hiatus after that, I really bottomed out.”

I nod in sympathy, wondering again if she had ever been my father’s patient.

“Well, I should probably check on dinner,” she brushes a hand across my father’s shoulder. “You need anything, hon?”

Hon? I turn to Ben for confirmation on the strangeness of this whole event, but he is focused on the television, absorbed in a Larry King episode about a woman attacked by a bobcat.

Now that she is “in,” I notice Terry has scattered her belongings all over the house.

“It’s a little different,” my father had tried to warn me before we arrived.

Every room now has an extra couch, or chair, or dresser squeezed oddly into a corner, or pushed in front of the original. I find stacks of her clothes in the living room, her files in the dining room, her shoes, makeup and toiletries in the upstairs bathroom. *My* upstairs bathroom. Her toothbrush and toothpaste are now in the medicine chest, resting between some old nail polish and perfume bottles, items that should have been thrown out years ago. But even now, I don’t bother to toss them.

Whenever possible, I rifle through her things. In the garage, we find a set of hat boxes stacked one on top the other, like a towering, floral sculpture.

“Should we peek?” Ben says. “See what’s in there?”

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He shakes one and says “body parts?” He laughs, but now we must open it.

“Maybe they’re filled with letters,” is my guess.

When we finally get the lid off, we are surprised to find only a purple hat inside.

In the den, I find her briefcase. I make Ben stand guard while I look through it. I tell myself this is for my father’s protection and I imagine finding a stolen credit card, or a napkin with pen scrawl detailing her insidious plans to poison my father and steal our house. But I find nothing of the sort – only some more files and an e-mail from my father that she has printed out and saved. I read it. He tells her that he can’t wait to see her and mentions some names I’ve never heard. He signs it “love” and I think: *Who is this man, this romantic?*

I am reminded of the story, the one I adored as a child, where my mother loses her shoe on a date with my father. She is riding the back of his moped, in a rainstorm, and it falls off. Later, my father drives around until he finds it and returns it to her. A Cinderella story.

We hear footsteps then, and I quickly put the e-mail back in the briefcase.

At dinner, Terry serves us Cornish game hens—a first for our house—and then sits in my mother’s chair. She pulls it slightly closer to my father, at an angle, so it almost takes on the appearance of a completely different seat.

Terry is a small woman, small enough to sit with both feet up on the chair, her little white moccasins tipping slightly off the edge. They are the same kind of white moccasins I once wore, when I was ten or eleven.

She tells us that she grew up in South Carolina and was one of ten children. She talks about the Klu Klux Klan.

“Was it scary?” I ask.

“Nah, not too scary” she said. “They would never touch our family. My father was an important man...”

Before she can say anything else, my father interrupts. “Yeah,” he says, “I know what that’s like...she had the KKK, we had the Nazis.”

My father holds up his empty plastic cup and shakes it in the air. His sign for ‘I need something to drink.’ My mother was trained to respond to it, and so, it seems, is Terry. Almost immediately, she is out of her seat, standing at what I still consider the “new” refrigerator, pouring him some ginger ale.

Although not an expert in Cornish game hens, I can’t help but notice that mine seems dry and tasteless. Still, I tell Terry it is delicious, and Ben agrees. For the next minute or so, all that’s heard is the sound of forks clanging, lips smacking, people chewing. I am relieved when my father pulls out one of his favorite old, meal-time jokes to ease the tension.

“This smells funny,” he says, holding a spoonful of mashed potatoes to his nose.

“What?” Terry asks, doubtful. “What do you mean by funny?” She picks up her own spoon and holds the potatoes to her nose. I consider warning her, but am amused when my father gently pushes her hand, leaving a cream-colored dot - my father’s calling card - on the tip of her nose. She is a good sport and laughs along with everyone else, wiping her nose with a napkin and promising revenge when my father least expects it. I belch then, and my father lifts his cup, as if making a toast, saying exactly what I know

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he will say: “Good for you!” The scene is so eerily familiar and comfortable that I quickly get up and excuse myself.

That night, before bed, I help Terry empty the dishwasher.

“It’s ok,” she says, trying to wave me away. “Your father and I can do this – we do it every night. Guests shouldn’t have to work.”

Guests? I assume she is aware of her mistake. Despite her claim that she and my father do this every night, he has already disappeared upstairs. I stay and help her, partly to be polite and partly to exercise some control over the task that I witnessed my mother do most evenings. The swishing and whirring engine of the dishwasher is still the sound I associate with bedtime.

“You know, your father is doing much better these days,” Terry says, handing me some bowls to place in the cabinet.

“Yes, he seems happy.”

“I think he’s really improved over the past six months. It was really hard on him, your mother’s death.”

The moment she brings up my mother, I feel uncomfortable. I nod but say nothing.

“For a while, he didn’t want to see me. But then he came around. Before your mother died, we were just friends, but your father would talk to me a lot. He opened up. It was all just really hard on him.”

Just friends. I appreciate her offering me this, but I want her to stop talking.

“I think I’m going to go to bed now,” I say. “I’m tired.”

“Will you and Ben be sleeping in Jackie’s room?” she asks. Jackie’s room has the full-sized bed; mine, as though frozen in 1986, still has the little twin. “Do you mind if I sleep in your room?”

I see my mother’s face then, the smug expression, her lips mouthing the words, *I told you so*, but still, I give Terry my bed.

VI.

I go home less frequently now that Terry has become permanent. When I do visit, I watch her with the curiosity of a scientist observing an animal that has wandered into the wrong habitat. At moments, when she feeds my father or laughs at his jokes, I am fond of her, but later, when she wears my mother’s shirts or has the shag carpets torn up and replaced, my feelings change.

One Sunday morning, I find Terry arranging flowers by the sink. My father sips coffee at the kitchen table, strands of his hair extending out in opposite directions as though stretching. He talks of selling the house and moving. “North Carolina,” he shrugs. “Maybe.”

I know he knows nothing about North Carolina, about the south. I know it is her idea. “Who needs these cold winters,” he complains.

I consider talking him out of it but he is looking at Terry and smiling.

Instead, I surrender.

“I’ve heard good things about North Carolina,” I say. “Maybe you should.”