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ABOUT MY MOM

A long short story

Part 1

I came out of the subway on Union Square; it had just stopped raining. The asphalt was wet with reflections in puddles of . . . No, I will not lie, I did not see what those puddles reflected. It could've been the sky filled with floating, rippling clouds and unlit streetlights with street vendor carts from the farmer's market. Perhaps some bearded farmer from Pennsylvania flashed there selling honey in round bottles, or some rosy-cheeked sturdy woman from upstate could be seen there displaying apples, onions, potatoes, and fresh bread from her cart. Or there may have been vendors of fish, juice, maple syrup, homemade apple wine—anyone and anything could have appeared in the lenses of those puddles on Union Square when I came out of the subway Friday morning.

The place where I work is located near the train station on 11th Street. There my patients await me in the outpatient clinic. They are angry, exhausted, ill with various psychiatric disorders. Each of them needs something from me.

Within walking distance from the station, on the opposite side from the clinic, there is a book store, Barnes and Noble. Someone waits for me there on the third floor where I order coffee with croissants.

At the end of the work week on Friday night, I often head to that bookstore. This store with its ubiquitous bookshelves and crawling escalators rising up to the ceiling gives me the impression of some deadly maze, easy to enter but difficult, almost impossible, to exit. One row of book shelves leads to the next; ancient time flows into the Middle Ages and then the Enlightenment, where atheism replaces faith, and upon reaching the modern era everything starts to move in the opposite direction, down the same escalators from floor to floor.

Don't we also, rushing towards the future, ultimately return to the past? Don't we die at the same moment that we are born? Don't we bid farewell forever to someone while saying "hello"?

I don't know, Mom, how you screamed when you birthed me. I don't know and don't remember. They say that a baby experiences real shock leaving its mother's womb and entering into the real world. They say that it is cushy and warm in the mother's womb. There is bliss, the same bliss countless philosophers and theologians have sought for centuries, building complex intellectual theories like forests around temples (but few make it inside the temple).

Perhaps the temple of bliss is the mother's womb, where a new life mysteriously begins, where the sky, the stars, and even God and angels may exist.

Before me, mother, my sister Leah lay cradled inside your womb, and then my older brother was conceived, only to be stillborn because negligent doctors infected you with hepatitis during the pregnancy, killing the child you were about to give life to.

While still a child, when I found out about this from my parents' conversations, I experienced a strange mixture of guilt and happiness, since if he had been born, my parents hardly would have wanted a third child. But it's hard to imagine, mother, that you would have rejected the thought of wanting to have me.

I remember *well* the birth of *my* son, how my wife screamed on an obstetric table in a Queens hospital. It was two a.m. The ob/gyn was called at home and was informed that his patient had come from Brooklyn and was having contractions. He ordered an epidural shot and said that he would be there shortly.

While the ob/gyn was washing up, shaving, getting dressed, and filling the car with gas, the African-American nurse on duty understood that it was pointless to wait for him; it was time to deliver the baby. She hooked up the monitors and ordered my wife, “Press your chin against your chest! Like that. Now push! Push him as if you’re sitting on the toilet with constipation! Harder! Harder!”

Finally, the doctor arrived.

I held my wife’s hand, caressed her forehead covered in cold sweat, and watched the monitors which displayed the lines reflecting contractions and the child’s movement down the birth canal.

My God, how my wife screamed while birthing our son! The epidural evidently did not work or the dose was insufficient. Either way, I could not imagine that a person could yell *that* loud. I had seen and heard patients in the Emergency Department with broken arms and legs, with bullets in their stomachs; I had seen and heard drug addicts undergoing severe withdrawal. I had seen and heard victims struck by cars, heard their moans and screams. All that was nothing in comparison to the screams of a woman in labor. I had no doubt after this that humans descended from animals, since only animals could scream this way. A human has no soul-reserves to hold in so much pain, not enough lung capacity, and insufficient vocal cords to generate such cries.

Then a scalpel appeared in the doctor's hand. He said that there was no other option; they needed to cut her open. After a few precise sharp movements, blood squirted onto the sleeve of his gown. The scalpel in his hand, which flashed before my eyes, was already red instead of silver—so too the gown, the doctor's masked face, and the nurse standing near him. Everything was covered in blood.

Oh, how my wife wailed! I only heard something like this twice in my life. The first time my wife screamed like this while birthing my son.

The other time, like a wounded deer, my sister Leah wailed after a sullen Jew in a yarmulke, a funeral home employee, said that your casket, mother, was already inside the hall, and we could go in to tell you goodbye.

I went in first, and Leah after me. After standing for a bit, I left the hall and withdrew to a narrow corridor to be further away from that terrifying place. I covered my ears firmly with my hands, but it was pointless. I could have left this building, got into my car, and drove to the train station, from there to California or Alaska. I could have filled my ears with wax, but still I would have heard Leah's wails over your coffin.

Leah wanted to . . . No, she no longer wanted anything. In those moments there is nothing more for a person to want, not blaming anyone anymore and not asking anybody for anything.

But you looked at us, Mom, and could not help. For the first time in so many years, you could not help us, didn't even lift a finger.

My son lay on my wife's stomach, raising his head with wet hair which was stuck together. He was also yelling. It was a scream of rebellion and joy. It was a demanding scream. A new person was born, had left heaven and had separated from the bliss of a mother's warmth forever. How peaceful and good it was inside the womb of the Universe! But he was banished

from heaven. Now he was demanding a place for himself on Earth; he needed space to move, air to breathe, and heat for warmth.

The nurse skillfully wrapped the child in a sheet and gave him to me to carry to the scale for weighing. I took my son in my arms and the floor moved under my feet.

After three days we brought him home from the hospital. The pine trees by our house were lightly powdered in December snow. A strong wind blew. As we came out of the car, I carried my son wrapped in a thin white sheet. Waking up after a long ride in the warm car, he opened his little mouth and again started to let out a disgruntled and demanding scream.

You, mom, were waiting for us at home. When we came in with our son in our hands, you clapped your hands and jumped for joy. You, mom, were still a child yourself. Happiness was an unexpected guest for you and you never waited for it. But when this guest arrived, you reacted in the simplest way, like children do, by clapping their hands and jumping up and down.

That was the way you rejoiced for my son, your grandson. You took him in your arms and said that we could have frozen him in such a thin sheet. “How can you do this?! He is cold! Now his stomach hurts.”

You worked as a kindergarten teacher and with some special intuition guessed what was bothering the children—who was cold, who was hot, who had a stomach ache. They could not speak for themselves yet.

You know, when my son turned one, I had a dream. Your mother (my grandmother) appeared from somewhere in a robe and apron, came over to my son, who had just used the potty. My grandma took the full potty to the bathroom to flush.

This was the first time I dreamt of my grandmother after thirty years since her death. She came to us to take out the potty used by my son. My wise grandmother. She was probably a bit

tired there, in eternity, from her exalted blissful state and visions of heavenly bodies and God, surrounded by seraphs and cherubs. She wanted to feel a different type of bliss for a moment, and leaving heaven came to us to take out the potty her great grandson had used.

But you, mom, don't even visit me in my dreams. Initially after your loss, every evening, coming home from work, I hurried to go to bed and close my eyes. No, this was not depression. I simply waited for you to visit me in my dreams. I already knew that we would never meet again on this Earth, and I don't believe in miracles, but I do believe in dreams. Dreams are doors. That is the reason I hurried to sleep in the hopes of you visiting me. I did not believe that you would not be able to come to me through this door.

However, time passed, nightmares came one after another; hospital beds with motors, droppers, pills, oxygen masks, all the things which filled your life in your latest years, transformed into my dreams.

But I never saw you.

Part 2

My bank account had fifty-five thousand dollars in savings. My parents managed to save this money after many years by scrimping on everything. Actually, Dad saved, and you, mom, did not understand what it meant to save. You were nearsighted but did not wear glasses and did not see what happened right under your nose. The same with money—you were not savvy with prices and could not haggle. Dad was in charge of the money for the family, setting aside what he could from modest salaries, and then pensions. (My dad worked as a Yeshiva's bus driver for thirty years, taking children to their homes around Brooklyn.)

When passing on their saved money to me, my parents had almost nothing left in their bank account and thus were able to utilize certain state benefits for the poor. Up to a certain point this was acceptable to us all.

I even paid Dad interest on this money. I never inquired what he intended to do with this money, what was he saving it for.

Leah and I occasionally reminded him that he could not take anything with him to the grave and it would be wise to handle the “burial situation” since cemetery plot prices are constantly increasing. He angrily blew us off, saying “There’s no rush!” He loved round numbers and put an ultimate goal for himself to raise the sum of his savings to one hundred thousand.

At the end of each month we sat down at the table in my parents’ apartment and “balanced the books.” He handed over the savings to me, calculated his interest income, and reminded me if I owed him a couple of dozen dollars in the event he bought anything for me. Finishing the calculations on the calculator at first, then verifying on paper, my dad handed me the sheet with the new sum written showing how much of his and my mother’s money was on my account.

The number was growing as zeroes added on. Five hundred dollars turned into five thousand; five thousand turned into fifty-five.

My dad was ecstatic.

By that time I was already seriously enveloped in literature. More often, coming out of the subway on Union Square, I was not headed for the clinic to see my patients, but towards Barnes and Noble, where books awaited me on the shelves, and also, writers, whose pictures were drawn on the walls of that café. In those days, I often asked myself where I should be and where my place was, in an office of the psychiatric clinic or in this café?

The café patrons were varied. Sometimes an African-American preacher in a nice suit sat at the table, or a Buddhist monk in a purple shawl and sandals on bare feet, or some homeless man sinking heavily onto the chair, placing a large old bag next to him. They spoke either with other patrons or muttered to themselves. They brought into the café books and magazines taken from shelves, time-tested classics and recent bestsellers, tourist guides, sports, cooking, political journals, engineering, design, ethics, aesthetics books, or the tell-all of yet another porn star. They leafed through these books and magazines, talking nonstop the whole time. And I, sitting at one of the tables, listened closely to their murmuring, their chatting, and later attempted to resurrect their incoherent words on paper, giving them some harmony and meaning. These were my initial literary experiments.

Some more time passed and I quit my job at the clinic; I spent days on end in the café of the bookstore with pen and paper.

Franz Kafka and Isaac Bashevis Singer stared at me from the walls no matter which table I occupied. Sometimes I was tormented by remorse or doubts. Then I sat in the far corner of the café and, shamefully lowering my eyes, drank hot tea in small sips. Singer and Kafka, however, always sought me out even in the farthest corners, and I understood that I would not be able to hide from their stern, curious gazes.

On the opposite wall a thoughtful Mark Twain smoked a cigar, and a bearded Whitman was staring at me, propping his chin on his fist. Nabokov also studied me, as if I was a butterfly or caterpillar, having moved his glasses down from the bridge of his nose. Is it possible to refuse such company?

However, friendship with these gentlemen, detached from earthly affairs and concerns, as it turned out, cost quite a bit of money. Alas! I soon became not very necessary to my wife, being jobless, penniless, and hopeless, as befitting a real writer.

My wife and I started arguing a lot. I saw that she did not understand my writing ambitions, nor did she want to. It led me to leave my family and move into another apartment. I sometimes met with my son, but all my free time I dedicated to my novel.

Part 3

My sister Leah was inquiring about our parents' money. At first it was occasionally, as if by chance. But mother's cancer turned out to be inoperable and her dementia was progressing rapidly, which is why we had to place her in the nursing home. In a word, all events indicated that it was time for us to start tackling the practical side of death. So, Leah started demanding that I give back my parents' money, not everything, just half, the amount needed for the funeral.

Leah vaguely guessed that I had spent all the money, but she still could not believe it. In Leah's mind I was a strange, unpredictable, incomprehensible person to everybody and even to myself. Although she did not get me at all, she loved me regardless. This is what unconditional love is, when people love in spite *of* everything, instead of *for* something.

Leah, being familiar with and ready for any kind of whims and quirks from my side, still believed that I had clear boundaries which I would never cross. This was an axiom for her. Each of us needs an axiom; otherwise, one can easily get lost in the many half-truths which accompany us during life at every step.

Leah could not give up on many axioms, one of which was her firm belief that if you really want something and try hard enough, anything is achievable. Her life, until recently, affirmed this thesis. Leah made a career as the senior designer in a tailor shop in the fashion district. Leah made it so she and her husband could afford to buy a grand house in Long Island with a pool. She made sure her daughter got into and graduated from Pace University, followed by a successful marriage. The list of Leah's achievements is long and she assumed that they would only keep growing in the future.

However, our mother's two horrible illnesses suddenly underlined this list in bold. Leah could not accept the fact that not everything was in her power, that there are things which she couldn't control. Mother will soon pass away.

Leah wanted to organize the impending funeral and do whatever little she still could for Mom. She wanted to choose, if you can say this, a reputable funeral home and cemetery plot. These things were important to her. She thought about which dress we would bury our mother in.

Dress! Of course, in that same green-blue dress, stitched with a golden thread, which mother wore only during the special occasions. We definitely had to paint her lips with bright red lipstick, since it was her favorite color. It complimented her light skin and black hair well, her hair which retained its volume until her last days, and only got gray a few weeks before she passed.

Leah finally had a serious discussion with Dad, and he eventually agreed that since the time to discuss funeral plans had come, we should also buy a plot for him, next to Mom, and pay in advance for all the services for both of them. The total cost for everything would amount to approximately twenty-five to thirty thousand dollars.

But I had no money. I came to Dad and, shamefacedly bowing my head, confessed everything to him: “You understand, dad, sometimes it seems to me that the novel is already complete, that it’s a success. I find yet another editor, pay him for his edits, but soon it becomes apparent to me that it’s full of flaws and I start to rewrite it again. Who could have guessed that the services of these damned editors cost so much?! Don’t forget I’m unemployed . . .”

My father smiled strangely at first as if I cracked a joke, then pierced me with a heavy, gloomy stare: “You are a damn slacker and squanderer!” he finally managed to yell. “You are a disgrace to our family.”

“One day my novel will be published, and you will all be proud of me,” I objected.

“Stop lying! It would be better if you went back to your family, to your wife and child! Leave, I don’t want to see you.”

Dad got very agitated. I was afraid that his blood pressure would spike and I would need to call an ambulance.

“Fine!” I snapped back, and kicked the door on my way out.

I tried to take out a loan from a bank, but since I had no job no one would give one to me.

When Leah found out about everything, she pounced on me with thunder and lightning.

“You are fucking pig! You don’t have a drop of conscience!” She picked out two plots at an expensive cemetery and services for both our parents, and paid for everything out of her own pocket.

After this we stopped communicating. We did not want to know anything about each other.

I always knew that Leah was a stubborn and insensitive woman, who could not be persuaded in anything. I knew that the only thing that mattered to her was what people said about

her—her colleagues at the tailor shop, her friends who lived in equally luxurious houses, her neighbors.

But in this case, Leah was right when she called me a “fucking pig.”

Our family was falling apart.

Family! For my mother it was the supreme spiritual law, a sacred word and concept. She knew that our life on Earth hinges only on family. It is a very simple formula of human existence. Your kind. Your family. Everything else came from the devil.

My mother did not interfere in her children’s private life. She was wise, even though often calling herself “dumb.” She didn’t say “no”; she only grimaced unapprovingly when she met Leah’s fiancé and the same way, sometime later, when she met my future wife. She wrinkled her face with regret. Mom didn’t take a liking to her son-in law or daughter-in-law, but we made our choices and she accepted them.

There was a period when Leah fell in love and wanted to divorce her husband. She came to my parents to inform them of her decision, apparently in the hopes of getting their blessing. My mother listened to her and, touching her index finger to her lips, was quiet for a long time. Then she got up from her chair with difficulty (she already had bad legs then, which periodically swelled from chronic arthritis—in general walking was difficult—and with age she was prone to being overweight and suffered from shortness of breath because of it). Still, she got up, opened the door and quietly said that Leah should leave, right this second, and go home; it was eleven thirty and her husband and daughter are waiting for her there. She did not want to hear any explanations.

Leah sat for some time rocking left to right on her chair then called her husband to pick her up. Leah could not step over my mother’s “no.”

By the time I left my family, my mother already suffered from dementia and did not understand much of what was happening. She wore a special bracelet on her wrist in case she got lost. But sometimes she had sudden moments of clarity and a desire to act according to her character.

Once I came over and she suddenly asked at the door:

“Is it true that you left your family?”

“Yes,” I replied, attempting to figure out how she found out since we tried to not to upset her with bad news.

Not saying another word, she determinedly pulled on her raincoat and shoes and left the apartment.

“Where are you going?” I asked, following her to the elevator.

“To your house. I want to ask your wife and son for forgiveness for you.”

I barely convinced her not to do that, got her back in the house, promising to return to my family. But I did not keep my word.

Mother’s worldview was limited. She did not harbor great knowledge in politics, economics, or art. She did not read books or newspapers. She only read fairy tales to Leah and me when we were children, and then to her grandchildren. She actually read from the heart, earnestly worrying about the animals and gnomes.

She was bad at calculations and her writing had errors. One year she even studied in a specialized class for kids with intellectual difficulties.

In the café of Barnes and Noble I often spoke about my mother to Bashevis Singer. He confessed to me that the prototype of the heroine in his famous novel *Shosha* (for which he won

a Nobel Prize) was my mother. He said that such limited, “dumb” women are the most valuable possessions of the Jewish people.

“The Jews will exist while such women are born and live among us. Such intellectually limited Jewish women are wiser than all the wisdom of the Torah and all the great German philosophy. God first created Yiddishe Momme—this effort took six difficult days. Creating everything else turned out to be trifles; God only needed a few moments for it.”

My mother was the earth, a black, fertile and rich soil. She was born every year in the wheat, in apples, in corn, in goat and cow milk, in flowers, in roses, in lilacs, in everything the farmers of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and upstate delivered to the Union Square farmer’s market.

On the weekends I visited the nursing home where my mom spent her last two years. I would sit her in a wheelchair, wrap her up in a warm blanket, put a wool hat on her and take her out on the porch. We sat together, keeping warm by the waning autumn sun, its weak rays penetrating under the canvas striped canopy.

I held her wrinkled hand. She was already in that state where one doesn’t know what season it is, whether it’s morning or evening. She did not recognize people who were close, did not remember names. She called me by my father’s name, but I did not care. She knew that it was me by her side, and I did not need any external evidence.

Rarely she would raise her head, facing the sun, and asked in a low, broken-down, trembling voice: “How are you doing?”

“Everything is okay, Mom,” I would reply.

She asked me this question for decades. “How are you doing?” The answer was not important to her; it was enough to hear my voice to understand everything.

When I was studying to be a psychologist in a Pennsylvania college, abandoning my parents’ house to live in a dorm, mom called me every day: “How are you doing?”

“Everything is okay, mom.”

Everything really was fine back then; I seldom attended lectures, but frequented the bars a lot, bowled, and popped ecstasy with students in clubs. “Everything is okay, mom. I am fine.”

If I did not pick up her calls, she would call the dorm management office or the academic secretary’s office. The dorm management office, academic secretary’s office, and even the Deputy Dean knew my mother. She had a reliable agent network.

Mom called me when I was away in other states or abroad. Once, while in Paris, I visited the famous Pantheon, housing the remains of great Frenchmen in the crypt stone sarcophagi. I walked the dark, quiet corridors of the crypt, and suddenly a call came—my mother from Brooklyn!

“How are you doing, son?”

Suddenly Dumas, Hugo, Joliot-Curie, and other famous French politicians, writers, and generals all arose and approached me. They each took my cell phone and replied to my mother:

“Madam Shapiro, bonjour. This is Victor Hugo. Your son is okay, he is doing just fine,” and Hugo passed the phone on to Alexandre Dumas to confirm that I was well and good.

However, mother developed dementia, and one day she did not call me and did not ask “how are you doing?” The evening was approaching, it was getting dark, and the first stars appeared in the sky, but my mother still was not calling.

I always believed that everything in the world could change. A war could start, or the stock market could crash, a cyclone could level houses and drown whole regions in rainfall, but no matter what happened my mother would find a way to call me and ask, “How are you doing?”

However, on that day she did not call. She forgot my phone number. She even forgot that she forgot to call me.

I matured ten years that day. With each passing day of her illness, the whole family—Leah, my dad, and I—all matured ten years.

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION