

the death of janet's husband

It wasn't easy waiting for Barry to die. Every month Janet had a few days when she said to herself, This is it, he's really dying. But he didn't die. She tried to get out every day for fresh air, walking beneath the shade of the tree-loaded park, avoiding dog shit. In cold weather she wore a polyester scarf over her every-which-way gray hair, and on hot days she dared to leave her arms bare, knowing full well how unpretty her skin had become. Draping like curtains over her frail bones, the skin showed a variety of age spots, brown stains, blue veins. Oh well. She knew she must leave the house daily for at least two hours, so she did.

At home she must continue, watching Barry in the old wooden armchair they had moved to his room as he raised an eyebrow, signaled with one hand, nodded. He responded to Janet some days with a blank stare, and those days were hardest. When he connected, knew she was present, raised an eyebrow, those were the easier hard days. If he spoke or smiled, she wept.

And most nights she hoped he would die, peacefully at home as they had agreed. No hospital, no tubes in body orifices, no injections. Just drift away in his sleep. Occasionally Janet would rewrite the obituary, "Barry Herschel died peacefully in his sleep at home in Oaxaca, surrounded by his closest family." Or "Barry Herschel, age 87, died peacefully at home surrounded by his closest family on August 29, 2019." Then Janet left the obit on the computer waiting for further revision, because he hadn't died.

Finally it was necessary to hire male nurses who could lift him and

bathe him, who could feed him when he wanted food. Janet was herself too frail now. Arthritis had attacked her hands and feet which seemed to resemble cottage cheese; one knee wobbled in an alarming way when she walked. So the nurses came, some kinder than others, some neater, some more conscientious. But since it didn't matter, really, Janet tried respect their professional training, their physical strength, and their youth. A truce. Now they fed him, changed his diapers, massaged his feet. She wouldn't complain, even if doing so offered a vent for her own distress.

One day a new nurse came. He looked Mexican, like all the other nurses, with a complexion permanently tanned and a nose that resembled the old Spaniards'. He was, in fact, a Sephardic Jew. Janet was astonished, although when she thought it over she recalled that Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 must have survived elsewhere. She asked Neftalí after one meal when he said he couldn't eat pork, and left his Hebrew bible on the nurses' desk. What clues! She asked the boy, Neftalí, Why is this? and he told her. He knew only the Hebrew connection to words she and Barry had heard as children and left behind as adults. No Ashkenazi words, no Yiddish—how would he? Only the Hebrew. And the cultural facts: no pork, no crabs, no lobsters. Neftalí had been Bar Mitzvaed, just as Barry had been, seventy-four years ago. As Janet and Barry left their respective parents for university and professional lives, they left also the memories of great-grandparents, the albums of grey ancestors poised on straight-back chairs, their antique names, all of that. They were proud to be atheists, and undefined cultural citizens of the world.

Neftalí's home language was Spanish; the words that salted his speech with his mother were Ladino. Yet he didn't know where his great-grandparents came from, nor when. Only that Mexico took them in, and they remained. Janet speculated they fled directly from Spain, where some Jews had survived until the 20th century. Or that in the 15th century when they left Spain they survived in small clusters in Europe. Or Morocco? Or where? It was a great unsolvable puzzle; Neftalí couldn't help. He was more in tune with his friends from nursing school, the friends who didn't know he was Jewish or didn't care. Few kids cared. You had to be old to care.

But clearly Neftalí cared, or at least was curious. He had never met Jews not like himself and his mother. Nor Janet! Ladino was more mysterious to her ear than contemporary Spanish, just as Shakespearean English

was harder to decode than her own 21st century speech. The only time she heard fragments of Shakespearean English in her entire life was listening to Black kids up from the south who didn't know they still spoke a 16th century dialect. That shows what isolation will do to us, Janet mused to herself as she skirted the dog shit in the park. I have to leave the house, isolation will kill me. I must look at the babies and wave to the toddlers. I will admire the cloudless sky and the blooming palm trees. The blooming cactus flowers astonish me with their colors. Here come the bees...

That night Janet dreamed that Barry had died in his sleep. She dreamed she went into his room and sat down beside the bed to pick up his fallen hand and hold it between hers. Beside her she heard Nef intone "Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam". In the early light when she woke, Janet sat on the side of her half-empty bed for several minutes before gathering the courage to rise to her feet. She swung her gray hair to the side, and combed through it with arthritic fingers. Neftalí was not on night shift, it was Erik. So it had been only a dream. But how strange.

Finally Barry did die. Not peacefully in his sleep surrounded by the friends and family Janet had conjured, but accompanied by Neftalí, while Janet was out for her walk. The housekeeper called Janet on her cell phone and said simply, Come home now. Janet knew there was no rush. She turned on the path and retraced her steps across the park, avoiding the dog shit, gazing upward for the few scrawny squirrels living in one tree. When she arrived home the housekeeper indicated with her head where Janet should go to find Barry. In his room, on his bed.

Nef sat beside Janet while they waited for the hearse from the crematorium. Janet was prepared, she had embroidered a cotton bio-degradable pillow case for Barry's ashes. She marked with her eye where she would deposit the ashes, bag and all, beneath the mango tree Barry planted some twenty years before. It was a gift from a friend he knew at the forestry station, a baby tree now grown to second-story size, re-gifting them every year with baskets of mangoes. Together, before Barry's stroke they had agreed it was a nice place to plant their ashes, nourishment for future seasons. A private affair with neither religion nor ritual. Seated by his side Janet held Barry's dead-weight hand, already much cooler than her own and let the tears drain down her face.

Nef sat beside her in a green plastic chair brought in from the patio.

He was dressed as always in his standard white medical smock, setting off his brown Mexican skin and his maybe Aztec nose. Gazing at his open hands supporting an invisible book, he began “Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam”. Janet recognized that Nef was praying. She knew it was Hebrew, and tried to recall which of her great-grandparents lived and had been buried when she was a very small child. How small? Babies didn’t attend funerals. Where then? Clearly she must have heard the prayer, to recall it in her dream. Or maybe she heard it at her parents’ home, a surreptitious invocation by her father. “Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam”, to alleviate some long-endured and never mentioned grief.

Or perhaps from the black sky full of stars, through the open bedroom window. Hers, she thought, the dream came to her directly. After a moment she let Barry’s unheeding hand rest on the bed by his side, crossed to the two-desk den where once upon a time they companionably worked, and opened her own computer. Scanning down the varied translations she found the one she sought: “Holy One of blessings, your presence fills Creation”. Then she closed the screen and rose to her feet because she heard the housekeeper open the front gate to allow entrance for the hearse.

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