

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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SOJOURN

I left my home in West Palm Beach, FL that July day at 4:30 a.m., to catch a 6:00 a.m. plane to New York City.

I waited on line at the airport, clutching my driver's license and boarding pass in hand. Since the attack and destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, eleven years earlier, travel had inalterably changed. Although it had been more than a decade, I still viewed the security demands as an indignity. Shoelessness and x-ray examination were now a part of life.

I was flying north to join my youngest daughter upon her arrival from Israel.

I expected a confused, exhausted teenager to be waiting for me at the international terminal.

I found a tall, smartly dressed young woman as I deplaned, who announced that she wanted to return to Israel and join the Israeli Defense Force.

"We'll talk about it," I said, deflecting her.

Secretly, I was pleased.

The past year had been an increasing struggle of missed curfews, ever expanding social life, driving, and independence.

Our family had been fractured a decade earlier when her father and I divorced.

In my mid-forties, I had found myself pregnant, facing the needs of a rambunctious three and a half year old daughter and two teenage sons.

"Dad, I'm pregnant," I finally told my father, nearly four months along.

"That's all right," he countered. "Sarah was ninety."

I laughed.

I would have this child. I would raise it. Alone, if necessary.

She was a beautiful baby, even as a newborn.

Product of a caesarean delivery, she arrived silently and somewhat drowsy, as if she had been reluctantly awakened.

No squished ears or swollen face.

She had feathery black hair and rosebud lips.

Now, she wanted to crawl on her belly in the desert in green fatigues and carry a rifle.

"I think it's a good idea," I said.

We began our adventure.

We found the Long Island Railroad station terminal and bought tickets for Bridgehampton and waited.

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We chatted. She told me of her travels in Israel, the friends that she made.

The modified version.

Soon, we boarded the train.

In all the years I lived in the New York region, first in Brooklyn, NY, then Bergen County, NJ, I had never taken the LIRR. I was not even sure where it went.

I wondered at my own adolescent passivity.

My children traveled a fatherless world.

And I had been surrounded and even overprotected by my immediate and extended family.

The weather was perfect.

Sunny. Low humidity.

People entered the car.

Oriental teenagers. A slender, long haired blonde in a short, tight, red dress. A professorial looking couple, wearing faded, wrinkled shorts and odd sneakers, clothing that looked as if it had resided in a rarely used drawer marked "Relaxation". They stood awkwardly as the car swayed even though there were available seats.

People with dogs.

"She needs a husband," I whispered to my daughter after an hour of watching a woman, probably in her early thirties, maul and kiss her dog.

Finally, we arrived at Bridgehampton, NY.

Our host was waiting in her vehicle and we filled her trunk with our luggage.

The house she had rented was nearly two hundred years old.

It had narrow doorways (were people smaller then?) and creaking floorboards. The home had witnessed many additions and ceiling heights varied. The kitchen seemed small and inefficient. I thought of the outsize marble and granite kitchens common in Palm Beach. Gradually, the beauty of the house was revealed. It was filled with treasures. First editions THE LIFE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON by Washington Irving. Pewter candlesticks. Glossy mahogany furniture. A noble staircase.

We carefully placed our luggage in our room.

I realized that my daughter and I were to share a bed.

It was the first time we had slept together since she was seven or eight years old.

Something had kept her in my bed, in her father's space, even though she had a room of her own.

She wouldn't use it. She seemed to be afraid.

Finally, she left one day and never returned.

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Since she had become a teenager, she refused to let me even peck her cheek. Hugs were out of the question.

"I don't like to be touched!" she declared.

But I knew it wasn't true.

I had seen her embrace her friends countless times.

It was another loss I felt acutely.

So, I waited, until the adolescent storm would pass and she would be a loving, responsive daughter once more.

When we retired that night, she said "Put a pillow between us!"

I rooted around on the floor for a rectangular cushion and passed it lengthwise.

She didn't request it the next night or the night after and I wondered if we had crossed a threshold.

The grounds contained magnificent trees, flowers. A pool. A tennis court.

It had once been a working farm. Decades past.

We decided to go to town.

I looked at my daughter's serene face as we drove and marveled at her resemblance to her father. They had the same warm skin, black eyebrows.

She had grown into a beautiful woman. Long legs. Slender waist. Narrow hips. Her hair, once dark had lightened. Her long, thick, wavy, shiny curls and tendrils sported shades of deep red, even honey blond. She had a startling profile. Observant brown eyes. She was clever and self-possessed. I sighed with gratitude. We had come a long way since her threatened childhood.

My host and my daughter decided to continue on to the beach. "I'll pass!" I said. Beaches were angst ridden. The sand. The towels. The greasy lotions. The heat. I stepped out of the car. They went on. I came upon a church and stopped. Its steeple rose high against the blue sky. I had forgotten about the clarity of the northern sun. In Florida, we never ventured outside without sunglasses. As a result, the light always seemed filtered.

In the north, the light was more defined. I pushed the graveyard gate. It swung open. I entered. When I had been a child, I had been terrified of cemeteries. No longer.

My father had died in May and unwillingly, unexpectedly, I found myself standing at his gravesite. We stood, his family and friends, each in their own way impacted by the formidable man he had been, each lost in their own thoughts. We stood in a park-like setting as a balmy breeze, cooled by an early morning rain, blew around us.

Dry-eyed, numb, I followed the service. The rabbi spoke. His grandchildren spoke. I spoke.

He was buried, according to tradition, in an unpainted, pine box. His Hebrew name was handwritten beneath the word "Rosh" or head. Car-

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tons of worn prayer books no longer fit for use were placed on the lowered coffin and soon, both were covered by reddish earth.

My trip north was my first venture outside West Palm Beach since his death.

I studied the Bridgehampton tombstones. They were weathered. Nearly all the interred had biblical names. I recognized obscure angels.

Couples were buried side by side. Often, the stones read "Wife of..." The woman was given equal honor but her status as "Wife of" was central to her identity. The names of their children who had died in infancy or at a young age were etched on the stones as well. Together in death. Searching the nearby plots, I learned that some of their children had finally survived and had lived to have children of their own.

Suddenly, I stopped, stilled.

One tall, obelisk stood out. I read the name of the owner of the house in which we were staying. 1840. He had been a Captain. I had visions of rum and molasses and piracy and China trade. Copies of Delft china. All here in Bridgehampton. Despite their worldly success, they valued Bridgehampton as a new Zion and stayed, in life and in death.

Somehow, I felt comforted by these people's endurance, their hope for the future (to keep on having children after having lost so many), their faith, their acts in respecting the dead and the living who remember them.

I felt a kinship with them, from their Old Testament names to their love of family.

I exited the graveyard and continued my tour, anxious to tell my daughter of my having discovered something, smiling as I visualized telling her the story with its implication that I had been guided to the Captain's resting place by an unseen hand.

Children, I knew, even almost grown children, need a purpose, a vision and a dream.

The next morning, I woke with a start. At home, I awakened at the same time each day. Six-fifteen a.m. I wondered how my body knew. It seemed that everything in a woman's life was governed by time. Her fertility, gestation, childbearing.

My daughter slept soundly, her blanket completely covering her head. I slipped my feet to the floor and made my way to the bathroom.

I showered and dressed.

My host and I were going to religious services in a nearby town.

It was the Sabbath.

The sanctuary resembled a large wooden tent. Oversize fasteners and bolts connected the pitched ceiling planks. Light streamed in through sliding glass doors on either side of the room. Men and women were separated by a low, wrought iron barrier. We sat in the upholstered pews and withdrew our prayer books. The congregation sang in unison. The melodies were the same as those in our synagogue at home. A woman waved at me.

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"Who is that?" I whispered, frantically.

I returned her wave.

"She was in Palm Beach," my friend said.

The rabbi sat in an oversized slatted chair. The cantor stood at a raised podium in the center of the chamber and led a choir of men.

A strange sense of anxiety filled my thoughts. I thought of all I had left behind, Unfinished matters. Unanswered questions. And yet, I felt comforted by the rhythmic ritual.

I smiled, thinking that the original settlers of this town probably knew the Bible as well as anyone in the congregation.

People continued to arrive. Soon the doors leading to the terraces were opened and the temperature began to rise. People fanned themselves with their programs. At the conclusion of the service, a speaker walked up to the lectern. He was the mayor of a large city in Israel. He spoke articularly, using American idioms.

This is the future of Israel, I thought. Bi-lingual, well-traveled, experienced young Israelis. He talked of tourism, infrastructure, social networking.

The open prayer book rested on my lap. I had barely glanced at it. Soon, I closed it and returned the book to the shelf affixed to the back of the pew in front of me.

We rose and walked outside to the sunny veranda. Food abounded on the tables. Trays of rolled sushi and bowls of floating herring. A slow-cooked stew of beans, potatoes and beef. Petit-fours. And on and on.

Despite, the bonhomie, I felt a malaise among the congregants. The economy? Terrorism? The service had not managed to lift their spirits. No visions of Paradise. Here or elsewhere.

I wondered what the Captain and his wife would have said. We returned to our centuries-old former farmhouse.

I strolled the grounds. I passed climbing ferns, spotted by tangerine colored flowers and mosses growing under the ancient, gnarled trees. Sunlight streamed through the overhanging canopy. The path was composed of slate panels, laid in a meandering fashion. Wooden posts connected by rows of strung wire encircled the property. At home, I mused, we had vinyl picket fences.

We made plans for evening ahead. My daughter would go out with our host's children. My host would attend a family party. I would remain behind. Soon, the house was quiet.

I walked outside the complex and found myself on the main thoroughfare. I strolled the streets as the sun slowly set. I marveled at the difference between Florida sunsets and northern sunsets.

In Florida, the sun seemed to set within minutes. If one looked away from the brilliant, fiery red and orange sky, streaked with turquoise and plum bands, it might rapidly darken in the interval, as if someone had waved a wand.

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Here, in the north, the night took longer to fall.

I looked in the window of a celebrated tavern. People lined up against the bar, drinking, chatting. Many seemed distressed, prematurely aged.

I sat on a public bench and watched people dine. Couples barely talked to each other. They ordered and received their foods, never acknowledging each other's presence.

Yet, I spied wedding rings, engagement rings. I thought of my former husband, how we reveled in conversation and each other's company. We were together all day, every day. I used to say "They are going to have to bury us on top of one another!"

I knew that if we had been sitting in Bridgehampton, on Main Street, as darkness fell, we would have so engaged with each other that we would not have noticed the somber light and would have lit the candle in the webbed jar and continued to laugh.

A bus's roar startled me. I rose and continued to walk. Soon, I came upon an art gallery, lit from within, people milling, drinks in hand and I entered. I stood in front of an absurdly large, meaningless painting and studied it.

A short, elderly man came up beside me. "I wonder what else he did?" he asked, in a vaguely familiar accent. Polish? We continued to talk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied the tell-tale green-blue ink on his forearm. I knew. I waited, politely. Finally, I asked "Where were you from?"

"Austria."

And we were off.

He was vigorous, funny, clever. He was visiting his daughter.

Soon, she came over and addressed him as "Daddy". She was sixty, if not older and he must have been close to ninety, yet she called him "Daddy".

In later years, I never called my father "Daddy." So much had happened, to us, between us, it just didn't seem sufficiently dignified.

The day he died, I held his bruised and torn hand, once so powerful, a hammer, in my hand, or, his nearly comatose hand held mine, for hours.

His eyes were closed. I spoke of how proud I was to be his daughter, how much I admired him, loved him. I felt his spirit in the room, hovering above his battered and wounded body.

I thought of the phrase in Deuteronomy describing how the Prophet Moshe's soul left his body. It was said that it had been as easy as pulling a hair from milk.

I prayed that my father didn't know what was happening. I prayed that he was unconscious. The nurse entered the room and gave him an injection. Morphine? I never knew. She felt the pulses in his ankles and followed me out into the hall. "He's dying," she said, not unkindly. I thought "If I stay in the hallway, he will not die." But he did die.

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I walked into the room and he did not look dead.

I touched his skin. It was not cold.

So I sat, alongside his clean linen sheet and stared and stared, at the face that I had seen nearly every day of my life until I left for college, age seventeen, and on every vacation and each summer until I married and moved to Florida and on every visit thereafter, as I brought my children for his approval.

His authoritative presence filled our home.

I sat alongside his bed and spoke, calmly, as if we were sitting around the dinner table and talking about our day.

I knew that he had wanted to live, whatever his condition. His will was that strong. But his body was no longer able to contain his soul.

Soon, our rabbi came. The first thing he did was cover my father's handsome face with the sheet. And I never saw his strong profile, his intelligent brow, again.

"I was on Sixty Minutes," my companion said.

I didn't understand what he had said.

"Scott Pelley interviewed me."

"Who is Scott Pelley?" I asked.

"He is on Sixty Minutes. The story about the records."

"The records?"

"Yes, On Sixty Minutes."

"Oh, I saw that. Bad Arolsen. The Nazis kept records."

"Yes, that's me. I just spoke to Scott Pelley last week."

"I remember the program but I don't remember you."

"I'm in it."

His daughter walked over. "Daddy, are you hungry? Eat this." She handed him a canapé.

He ate it, smiling at me. We walked over to another incomprehensible painting.

"I don't get it," I said. "They get money for this." "My daughter goes to an art school and they make better things than this."

"How long are you here?"

"Just a few days. That is one gesunde maidel," I said eyeing a six foot two broad shouldered woman.

He turned.

"Are you married?"

"Geget," responded using the Yiddish word for divorced.

"How long?"

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"Nine years."

"And you never remarried?"

"I had young children. They came first."

He was silent.

"But now, they are grown up."

I sat on a nearby desk.

"Shrimp?" a waitress asked.

"No, thanks," I said.

He took a shrimp.

"I have to go," I said, standing. I looked around for his daughter. She was engrossed in talking to another man.

"Please say good-bye to your daughter for me," I said, and, hands in the pockets of my slacks, I walked out.

"How was it?" I asked my daughter the next morning.

Her sly look said more than her words.

"Okay."

"Where did you go?"

"Sag Harbor."

"Where?"

"A club."

"They let you in?"

"Sure, why not?"

"You are sixteen."

"I told them I was in college."

"You lied?"

"Sure."

"You shouldn't lie. Didn't they ask you for ID? She looked at me as if I were a complete naïf.

"No."

"I knew we shouldn't have taken off your braces."

"What?"

"How did you get into a club?"

"I sat at the table."

I took a deep breath.

"And?"

"And what?"

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"Did you drink?"

"Duh!"

I couldn't bring myself to ask what she had drunk. I secretly prayed that she had ordered a soda. "Who paid?" I asked, weakly.

"I have money," she said in a huff, swinging off the bed and exiting the room.

I had lost. Surrendered. We both knew it.

Later in the day, we began to pack. Our clothes were strewn across three suitcases. Somehow, we managed to close our luggage and bring it downstairs. My cousin and her daughter were scheduled to pick us up at 5:00 p.m. on their way back from another Hampton and take us to their home in Bayside, New York.

"We were going to see my younger son." We had several days of college visits planned. We hugged our host and thanked her for her generosity and drove away.

My cousin and I had strong ties. Our mothers were sisters and survived the Holocaust together. Her mother had saved my mother's life. My mother had been unable to go on, defeated and her mother gave her last piece of bread. "You take it," she said, "I'm not hungry."

"She could have eaten it with her eyes," my mother often said.

We talked and talked. We talked about our other cousins, her sibling and my own.

We told and retold stories. We talked about our mother's oldest sister. She had been a formidable character, with a sharp, incisive sense of humor and irony.

"Once," I related to my cousin, "I told her that her that she was spelling her name wrong, that it was spelled 'Frieda' not 'Frida. 'Don't you think I know how to spell my own name?' she asked."

My cousin laughed.

"I had too much education and not enough common sense," I said. The next day my daughter and I took the subway to Columbia University in Upper Manhattan.

I had not been in Morningside Heights since my early twenties, when I had had a summer job at Columbia. And here I was again. I remembered the libraries. They had been my favorite spots.

I wondered what it was within me at that time that sought out books instead of people.

My own daughter celebrated her youth, her drive, her joie de vivre.

We were going to see my younger son. The next day we visited New York University and two other colleges.

"Where do you want to go for your birthday?" my son asked the next day.

"Some place with music."

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We went to the Soho neighborhood, not far from where he resided. A three piece combo played popular classics. The children presented me with a lithograph of Central Park and sang "Happy Birthday!" When we left, I looked up at the surrounding buildings and breathed deeply. The area had been the home of hundreds of thousands of immigrants. I felt their presence.

The following weekend, we stayed at my son's East Village apartment and I decided to go to synagogue, I had found, three blocks distant. As everyone slept, I shut the front door softly behind me and left.

I walked through narrow streets, bustling, even at 9 a.m. on a Saturday.

The first thing that struck me upon entering the synagogue was the odor of mildew. Luckily, it weakened as I stepped into the sanctuary. I heard the sound of groaning and wheezing air conditioning compressors and felt humidified cool air, on my neck. I looked up.

A huge organ dominated the rear balcony, its tubular pipes rising grandly to the ceiling. Two galvanized rectangular vents stood upright on either side of it, pulsating refrigerated gusts into the room. I was confused.

Orthodox synagogues prohibited the playing of musical instruments on the Sabbath. Why was there an organ?

"This is going to be a long day," I whispered to myself.

Bronze colored plaques lined the walls. For a moment, I thought that I rather have read the plaques than follow the service. My former husband's ancestors had lived three or four blocks from the synagogue at the turn of the prior century and I wondered if I would find their names.

A young cantor led the service. His blue jeans were visible beneath his prayer shawl. The men read from the scrolled torah. Rapidly, expertly.

Suddenly, I recognized the slim figure of a woman, a famous actress, whom I had met in Palm Beach the year before. I had been standing as the ark doors had been opened and the torahs withdrawn and I turned. She stood right behind me, almost as tall as I, utterly recognizable. We began to talk. She also had a young teenager daughter and was a single working mother. In fact, she told me, she had a performance that night in West Palm Beach.

"Hello!" I mouthed, waving.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to remember.

"Palm Beach!" I said.

"Oh, hi!" she whispered and waved back.

As the service went on, I watched her from time to time.

She knew the prayers by heart and often swayed with fervor

As soon as the final melody was chanted, she exited her row and left.

"She probably has to return to her daughter," I thought.

"This synagogue used to be a church," an elderly man told me at the kid-dish following the service. "It was a Lutheran church and then there

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was a boating accident and over twelve hundred congregants drowned in the East River. We bought it in 1940.”

“There were no members before 1940?” I asked.

“No.”

“Here is a history of the church,” he said, handing me several sheets of paper.

“Are you married?” a man asked me.

“No,” I said.

“Divorced?”

“Yes.”

“Who filed?”

I grinned at the outrageousness of his question. I was not offended, though I should have been. I just thought that it was so outré, yet so expected, from an insular, intimate and boundary-crossing schul habitué.

“It doesn’t matter,” I answered. “It’s always painful, especially when children are involved.”

“My sister got a divorce and she has never been so happy.”

Strike Two. Gossiping about his sister.

Strike Three was not far behind. He began to tell tales about the former rabbi of the synagogue.

“Ssh!” I said, putting my index finger to my lips.

“Why?”

Despite his bluntness bordering on rudeness, I could not help but be amused at the self-possessiveness of this prankster.

“The cantor was very good,” I said to the schul historian.

“Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes,” I answered and stood up.

“He does stand-up comedy.”

“He does?”

“Yes.”

“Is he any good?”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

I introduced myself to the cantor.

“You have a beautiful voice,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling.

“You do stand-up?”

“Yes.”

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"Where?"

"Clubs, theaters."

Somehow, I could not reconcile this man, this trained advocate of prayer, this deliverer of holy tunes, standing in front of a raucous, half-drunk crowd.

"Did you go to yeshiva?"

"No," he said shaking his head.

"Well, you are very good."

"Thanks."

He turned to talk to his companion, probably about his next gig. I turned to leave but someone directed me to the tall, grey haired man who had made the announcements during the service. His unusual name sounded familiar and then I realized who he was.

His family had owned and operated the most famous kosher restaurant on the Lower East Side. His late brother had been killed in an unsolved robbery and murder as he was making a bank deposit of the restaurant's receipts.

"My father knew your brother," I said. "He said that he was very kind-hearted and generous and that he used to feed poor people for free."

"Thank you," the man said.

"My father was also a Holocaust survivor, like your brother. They were both in Siberia. Where is the restaurant now?"

"We have two."

"Do you still have the Chinese waitresses?"

"Yes. They still think they are Jewish."

"Do you still work in the restaurant?"

"No, I've retired."

"Completely?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will be sure to go in if I am in the area. Good Shabbos."

"Good Shabbos."

When I returned to his apartment, my son was awake and making coffee.

"You really should go," I said. "You haven't found a schul in all these years."

"Yeah."

"Well, at least go during the week. They have jazz nights."

"I'll think about it."

"What do you want to do today?" I asked.

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"I don't know," he mumbled.

"I'd like to visit the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe before I leave. He's somewhere in Queens."

"No, thanks."

"How about the Met?"

"Ugh."

The day wore on.

Somehow, cajoling, guilt inducing, demanding, maneuvering, I managed to get myself, my son and daughter and my cousin and her daughter, who had driven in from Bayside, to the Metropolitan Museum. Nothing made me happier than to go to the Met.

I directed my cousin towards the Roman Gallery. I wanted to visit Hercules. He stood on a pedestal, imperious, full bearded, muscular, handsome, a lion skin wrapped about his shoulders, its paws on falling on his pectoral muscles. I waved at him. The security guard, standing beside him, waved back.

"Not you," I said. "Him."

I entered the Greek Hall, searching for the Praxiteles statue of the teenage Aphrodite. I circled it slowly. Its modesty and eroticism was breathtaking.

We sped towards the Egyptian Division. There it was. The jasper fragment of a woman's head. Colored a Tuscany yellow. Its porcelain-like surface reflected the overhead lights. Its curved lip suggested a bountiful sensuousness. If it had not been damaged, lost, it would have rivaled the head of Nefertiti in the Berlin Museum. I sighed with relief. I had seen my favorites.

I went back to Bayside, leaving my daughter to stay with my son.

The following day, we looked at family photos and artifacts as we waited for the arrival of another cousin, the daughter of our mothers' eldest sister. Soon, she walked into the room.

"I want to visit the tomb of the Rebbe," she announced. "My mother is right near there," she added. "I want to visit her, too."

"So do I," I said.

"You're not going like that!" she announced, pointing to my shorts and sleeveless shirt.

"Are you crazy?" my younger cousin demanded. "Don't you think she knows what to wear?"

I stepped into the fray. "Hold it," I said. "I know how to dress. Do you have a skirt I could borrow?"

We rooted around in my cousin's closet and she gave me a long, narrow, black skirt.

"It looks good. Keep it," she said.

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We drove towards the cemetery.

Speeding past a sign that read 'EXIT. NO ENTRY', we drove onto the property.

"What are you doing?" screamed my older cousin.

"I always go this way," my younger cousin said.

We passed a funeral, parked cars, and groups of wandering visitors, flowers in hand.

We drove aimlessly up and down the narrow roads with cheery, bucolic names. My cousins continued to bicker, instructing each other as to my aunt's location.

Finally we reached the farthest corner of the grounds. There was no where else to go.

"This is it," one of them said.

I stepped out of the car and began to walk in the direction they had indicated and hobbled by the tight skirt, promptly fell headfirst to the ground.

The sound of my skull hitting the asphalt sounded like a thunderclap and I was certain I was dead.

My cousins shrieked and came running.

"Sit down," they insisted as I struggled to rise.

"I'm all right," I said, strangely feeling no pain.

"Wow. It looked like someone knocked you down," my younger cousin said.

They helped me rise and sat me down on a tilted concrete bench. Someone gave me a frozen bottle of water to hold to my head.

"I'm fine," I said, somewhat incredulously as I had fully expected my head to be fractured.

"Wait a minute."

"Okay," I said.

After a while, I rose, and began to walk towards the grave. I stared straight ahead, unbelievably.

"You spelled her name wrong," I told my older cousin.

There, in all its engraved glory was my aunt's name written as "Frieda".

"But that's the way she spelled it on her papers."

"I know how she spelled it. She told me."

"Well, maybe she spelled it both ways."

"And you have the date of birth wrong. She was eleven years old than my mother."

"What?"

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"Maybe she made herself older," my younger cousin volunteered.

"Why?"

"For social security."

"And you spelled Holocaust wrong. Twice."

"Where?"

"It's 'Holocaust' not 'Holocost'".

The three of us stared at the tombstone.

"Didn't anyone ever say anything? In thirteen years?"

They remained silent.

An odd black and white electroplated image of my aunt and her husband, hung from the tombstone. I remembered her thick wig and my uncle's jaunty Alpine looking hat, perched somewhat sideways, covering the same part of his skull that I had just struck. They both were smiling broadly.

We stayed a while and then I kissed my fingers and placed them on the side of her marker.

"I get it," I whispered and smiled.

Somewhere in Gan Eden, my aunt was laughing.

We re-entered the car.

"I hurt my shoulder," I said, lowering my sweater. The skin was scraped and a bruise was starting to swell.

We drove to the cemetery where the Rebbe was buried. His resting place was located at the border of the enclosure. Entry was accessible at all times from the street.

In order to visit, one entered through a building which contained a prayer room, rows of benches and desks equipped with pens and papers, a library and a room with a continuous video loop of a *fabringen*, a gathering of the Rebbe and other Hasidim.

I sat down and began to write a note. Suddenly, all about me was silent. My cousins looked at me expectantly. I started to write.

"Dear Rebbe," I began. "You know what happened."

I wrote and wrote. I wrote my father's name, Yishaya Eliezer ben Moshe haKohain. Isaiah Eliezer son of Moses the Kohain. I sped on. I wrote the names of my children. I wrote, grateful for the opportunity to tell the Rebbe, assured that he was listening.

Hot tears rolled out from under my sunglasses, down my cheeks. We lit candles in another room, then entered the grave site. The Rebbe and his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe were side by side.

Thousands of pieces of white paper fluttered on their graves.

I saw young men, wearing tee shirts and jeans, deep in prayer standing around the enclosure. Families with many children. A little girl, not more

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than five, in eloquent Yiddish, told a man, "It's not very big, Daddy, but it's very nice."

I placed my message on the grave.

"My shoulder stopped hurting!" I exclaimed as we walked to the car.

My observant cousin nodded. My other cousin said nothing.

On our first Sabbath back in Palm Beach, I rushed to attend services.

After fruitlessly trying to persuade my somnambulant daughter to accompany me, I went alone.

As I opened the tall doors to the sanctuary, I heard the familiar voice of my rabbi, announcing the fourth aliya, or calling the fourth person up to bless the torah.

I winced. I was late.

"This chapter is about the conclusion of the Jews sojourn in the desert," he said.

I took my seat.