

Sample story from The Sleep of Apples

## WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS

By

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When my fever hit 105 degrees, my father put me in the hospital. I remember coming home from my Bubbe Zelda's seventieth birthday party, shivering and sweating and aching all over. Apparently later that night, I was raving mad and did not know my own name. I was eight years old, in grade three.

I'd never seen my father, a calm and collected doctor, so anxious. Dad hovered over me at Mt. Sinai and even stayed overnight by my bedside. There was very little that could make my father miss work, as he was devoted to his patients.

Once my fever broke and I knew who and where I was, I liked being in the hospital despite my miserable flu symptoms complicated by a strep throat and that bone-deep ache. No school, for one thing, not to mention all of the attention I craved. The nurses catered to me and the doctors, who all knew my father, gave me vigilant care, telling their lame jokes and remarking how much I resembled my Dad, especially around the eyes. This compliment pleased me no end. Dad had magic eyes: hazel, changing colour depending on what he wore, a starburst of gold at their center. Early in

my stay, Bubbe Zelda sent over a pint of maple ice-cream which I had for dinner. Best of all was having my father all to myself, not another patient--of his--in sight.

Dad was a man of few words but because I felt as if a razor blade was caught in my throat each time I swallowed and dissolved into a hacking cough when I tried to speak, he talked to me. He told me how much he'd loved to kayak on Kezar Lake in Maine when he was my age and how we would go together this coming summer, just us two for a long weekend. He described the lake and the shivering reflection of the pines in its dark mirrored surface when the wind picked up off the mountains. He remembered how wonderful the crisp mornings were, clear and chilly enough to wear a sweatshirt, and how good eggs and toast cooked over the fire washed down with a breakfast hot cocoa tasted out in the fresh air, as the sun rose over the lake. Bracing was the word he used, new to me and so I wrote it down in a little book I kept for brand new words, Dad's idea.

At home, I didn't have to share my father with anyone other than my mother. And yet, sometimes I longed for a brother or a sister, even a twin. I didn't know why exactly but I was thinking about this as I lay in my hospital bed pampered by grownups. My Dad was an only child, too, and I asked him. "Did you ever wish you had a brother or a sister?"

He took a long time to answer. I was eating the ice-cream Bubbe had sent over and savouring the cool melting chill and sweetness against my raw throat.

"Yes," he said, "often."

"Why did you and mom have just me?"

He mumbled something I couldn't make out, then added, "Miri Monks, it just turned out that way."

I was in the hospital for ten days, the longest in my life except for my recent stay, which is what got me thinking about this first time. As soon as I got home, I wanted to see Bubbe. I was on

my way out the front door when my parents called me into the kitchen and sat me down. They almost never did this unless something terrible had happened.

“Bubbe Zelda’s gone,” Dad said.

“Gone *where*?”

My Dad pulled me into his lap. He was a tall, lanky man with beautiful, expressive hands that looked sculpted by Michaelangelo and he wrapped his long arms around my waist. “Bubbe came down with the flu. It progressed to pneumonia and a secondary infection we couldn’t treat. The antibiotics didn’t do much; the bug was resistant.”

I was too stunned to think. I knew Bubbe had gotten her flu shot but Dad said the doctors had got it wrong that year. A bunch of questions flooded my mind. *When did she get sick? Why didn’t anyone tell me? Did she catch it from me? Was she in the same hospital at the same time?*

As far back as I could remember, I visited Bubbe nearly every day after school and we sat at her kitchen table with sweet milky tea and her homemade apricot rugelach and I told her my news. Bubbe Zelda was a glamorous older woman, full-figured and graceful, impeccably dressed, always with a string of pearls and matching earrings and bracelet, not to mention a slash of crimson lipstick. Once when a snotty friend asked her if her pearls were real, she paused dramatically, thumped her ample bosom and quipped, “*I’m* real.”

She had such cool things in her old Upper West Side apartment, like a giant box of buttons more precious to me than coins or jewels, which I loved to sort through and make up games with, as well as a collection of dozens of purses hung on hooks like puppets, which she let me borrow for dress up and impromptu one-girl stage plays. Bubbe Zelda liked detail, lots of details about my school days and my life in general. If I didn’t have a good story, I’d make one up. The week I got sick, we’d seen each other every single day because the weekend was spent celebrating her seventieth as a family. Bubbe doted on me and pampered me with gifts and kisses and hugs and often when she

didn't think I was looking, I found her staring. I knew I was Bubbe's favourite person and she was my second favourite, after Dad.

Dad was the reason I decided to become a doctor, a psychiatrist in particular.

As we're Jewish, everything then happened very fast. I don't remember the funeral all that well after these many years, only my parents' big bust-up beforehand about whether I should be allowed to attend. My father was opposed whereas my mother felt I should have the chance to mourn Bubbe and to learn about death: I was old enough, she insisted. Mom won, as usual, and I needed to be there.

After the funeral, we drove to the graveside at Mount Hebron cemetery in Queens, a sweeping burial ground spread out as far as the eye could see. The day was very cold but with a crisp shining sun that made everything shimmer and look like it had been outlined in black ink. The cruel brightness made my head and heart ache. I'd never been to a cemetery before and the expanse of graves that went on and on, the outcropping of headstones, reminded me of unending fields like the ones I'd seen on a cross country trip through Iowa. But these were fields of dead people. Thousands of them, each with loved ones left behind.

We drove to the area where Bubbe was to be buried and there was a huge open hole, the closed casket already lowered before our family arrived, and some burly men who were not part of the family standing around with shovels. I stared down into the hole, Bubbe's white pine casket pale against the dark wound of earth. We stood in a semi-circle as Rabbi Stein distributed black ribbons to our family. Dad helped me pin mine to my winter coat which was bright red, my favourite colour at the time, and I watched as Rabbi Stein nicked the grosgrain with a small knife to make a tear, a symbol of the tear in our hearts, he explained.

We were about a dozen at the burial ground though the synagogue had been crowded with many times that number at the funeral. I did remember a big crowd there.

Rabbi Stein began a prayer: *Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam, dayan haemet.* Praised are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the true judge.”

He talked on, but looking down at the casket, I didn't believe Bubbe Zelda was inside. Or she was trapped, alive and still breathing. I had to know for sure. Panicked, I ran to the hole, sat down on my bottom, and slid fast down into the ditch. The smell was musty, rich, an inside of the earth smell, an inside of the body smell, and I was within all of it now. I heard the group of mourners gasp, my mother cry out. And then my dad was talking softly to me, stooping low and reaching for me. But I was down too far, about six feet under, and I was crying and shaking, still coughing a little. “We need to open the box!”

I was standing on Bubbe's white pine casket; there was no other place for my feet.

My father shucked off his winter coat, murmuring reassurances to me, as he lay on his stomach, his arms extending down into the pit. I raised mine and he managed to grasp me under my arms. Dad got into a crouch, and with help from the other men, he lifted me out, as if I was just being delivered, born out of the very earth.

I was wet and filthy, covered in mud and leaves, as cries shook my body. “Where's Bubbe? Where is she!”

My father swept both arms around me, encircling and confining me, his suit jacket streaked with damp earth. Rabbi Stein came over to me and put his hands on either side of my filthy head which was clotted with clumps of earth. “Your dear Bubbe Zelda has passed,” he said in a low voice, “but her *neshama* is here with us. Her essence, her love. Now, her *neshama* is on its way to Heaven, to the eternal world, it will leave her body once it is buried in the earth, like a beautiful bird flies into the sky.”

Rabbi Stein led us through more of the prayers and then asked each of us to share a thought, a wish, a memory, or a feeling about Bubbe. I still couldn't believe that she was inside that box and

I was terrified that indeed she was and needed to be freed. Nothing made sense. I felt she was still somewhere I could find her. I was still going to talk to Bubbe Zelda and would still eat her rugelach. That's what I said. Some laughed and I coughed; I still had a bit of bronchitis, a remnant of my flu.

My father spoke last with trembling voice and hands and he addressed Bubbe directly, as if she were still alive, and he was talking to her. I believed he was. He said, "Ima forgive me."

Though I had only half-listened to my mother and other relatives and close friends, I didn't want to miss a word of what my father had to say. It was a key not only to aspects of Bubbe I didn't know or understand, but to my father's heart.

"Ima, I forgive you. I forgive you everything. You were all I had after Dad died when I was seven. Ima, forgive me."

His words puzzled me. I didn't know why he had to forgive Bubbe and why he asked Bubbe to forgive him.

After Dad spoke, he alarmed me by emptying the first fistful of earth onto Bubbe's grave. It made a gritty clattering sound in the quiet winter morning. Seeing or sensing my distress, Rabbi Stein approached me once more and murmured, "Miri, this is how we show our love. This is our tradition, our final ritual act, honouring your Bubbe. We bury our dead in the ground so they can return to the earth. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

My mother's hand clawed and she gouged earth; straight backed, she walked to the edge of the pit, opened her palm to the sky and let the rich brown dirt sprinkle through spread fingers onto Bubbe's casket. We each took a turn and I filled both hands with earth and slowly opened them watching the dirt splay against Bubbe's coffin. I felt as if I had drifted outside of my body and was split in two: spectral, a stranger to myself, floating free. But with this falling earth, I would reach her, my Bubbe, my Bubbe Zelda.

My father and a few of the uncles each took a turn with a shovel and heaped earth onto the coffin until it was completely covered and then the workmen took over until the hole was filled.

*Where was she now? Was she still somewhere? What was her body like now that she no longer breathed or thought or felt or had a heartbeat? Where was her soul? Had it flown to Heaven, like a bird soaring high in the sky, as Rabbi insisted? Could I believe that?*

My Dad was crying and I went to put my arms around him; I had never seen him shed tears before. “Miri Monks find a stone. Find a beautiful stone for Bubbe’s grave. We put a stone.”

I didn’t want to let him go, but I set about looking for a beautiful rock, sifting through the dirt. It was hard to find a stone, a good one. There were lots of pebbles and gravel and sand, but finding a pretty stone was hard and gave me momentary respite from my confused and painful thoughts. At one point, my mother tried to pull me up from under my arms, but I made myself limp and went right back to my foraging. Frustrated, I stood up to find my father, but saw that he was not among the knot of mourners at Bubbe’s grave. Everyone was talking and sharing memories, so I slipped away and wandered among the gravestones looking for my Dad.

It took me awhile to find him. At last I spotted him sitting on the cold, damp ground in front of a small gravestone of pink granite. (A year later, we would unveil a larger stone of the same beautiful rose-coloured rock mottled with silver and onyx for Bubbe.) Dad’s long arms were wrapped around himself, as if to keep warm.

I looked at the engraving on the stone: **Miriam Gildener** and felt my bones lurch. No one ever called me Miriam and yet the name was on all of my official forms for school, emblazoned on my birth certificate.

“She only liked to be called Miriam. Three years old going on sixteen,” Dad said softly. “We did everything together. I taught her the alphabet and the sounds of each letter and read to her every night before bed. We had a language of made up words, just us two. *Deetoe*, was thank you,

and *Shadah*, meant do it for me, whatever needed doing. She liked me to sit on the edge of her bed until she fell asleep. She wouldn't accept anyone else, not even our mom or dad. She would cry and call out for me until I came and sat. I waited for the sound of her slow, steady breathing. Loved that sound."

"But that's what you do for me. Every night."

"That's right, Miri Monks."

"I thought it was *only* me"

My father went quiet for awhile. Then he said, "Miriam would have been reading by her fourth birthday. Just like you did."

I looked at the tiny, perfect pink and black and quartz marbled stone. There was my name and the dates: 1938-1941.

"When I was five years old, I came down with measles," my father went on. "Miriam caught it from me. When I heard from my parents that she had died, I wished it were me. She died, I lived."

My father, agile and lean, lifted himself from the ground without uncrossing his legs, pulled a lovely black stone veined with mica from his pocket and placed it on his baby sister's grave.

"Your Bubbe tried to forgive me. But she couldn't. She could not forgive. Ever."

I wanted to comfort my dear father, to comfort myself. There was a stone bench beside the grave and Dad sat down and pulled me into his lap. I sat there for awhile until he lifted me to standing, and brushing off his coat and pants, stood as well. Not long after, I returned home with my parents. But I was not the same girl I had been before. Forever changed, changed forever.

It took me years to understand all of what had happened on that day and in my father's past, which was carried inevitably into my present and future as surely as donated blood passes from the giver's vein into the person needing to receive the infusion. I now have two children of my own. I

vowed when I became a mother that I would not keep secrets from the two of them, secrets that could fester or explode, and yet, I do. I am.

I've begun to read up on Mount Hebron Cemetery where my family is buried and how it entwines with Bubbe's family history. I am trying to decide if I want to be buried there, if I want to be buried at all.

Bubbe was an immigrant from Minsk and came to this country as a child of eight, my age when she died. She and her family lived in an apartment on the lower east side which only housed immigrants from her village in the old country. They formed an informal society which provided social life, a synagogue, health coverage of a sort, and burial benefits. Bubbe's family purchased the tract of land at Mount Hebron where most of my family are buried. There is a gate at the entrance of Bubbe's family plot with the name of our family and the original village in Minsk that it represented. I barely noticed it on the day we buried her.

I understand that we keep secrets from our children as much to protect ourselves as we do to protect them. I've forgiven Bubbe. I've even forgiven my father. I will hold my secret only so long as I can still forgive myself.

I've begun to collect stones. I store them in clear glass jars and they are placed here and there and around my apartment on Tupper Street in Montreal. They comfort me and bridge the past, present, and my future. We place stones on the graves of our dead to honour them. Stones speak to the dead. Stones testify to the presence of life. At least for the moment.