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My Father's Silence

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My father read the *New York Times* with verve usually reserved for reading Torah. Each morning he would start with the front page and move systematically to the back section, pausing only to spoon from an ever-present bowl of oatmeal placed next to the paper by my mother. From the other side of the paper I watched him scan the print, leaned over like a Rebbe, every morning for most of my childhood.

He always ended his reading of the *Times* with a recitation of the obituaries. This was always done out loud to me, unlike the other parts of the news for which no comment was made:

"Sol Felder dropped dead last Sunday," he would announce.

"Who's Sol Felder?"

"He was Aunt Gladys' second cousin by marriage. He lived in Florida."

"Dad, how did Grandpa die?"

"He dropped dead at work—at his desk."

Except for our exchanges about the obituaries, my father never spoke with me about death, except to joke about it. He usually had a Milton Berle style story to fling at any serious mention of the subject. There was a running exchange between him and mother about having their ashes mingled in a cremation urn (a present from cousin Mel, who thought it was a vase) that sat on our fireplace mantle. The ashes were then to be buried under the stage at Carnegie Hall, "so they could waltz to Strauss and others through eternity." This image, however, was primarily my mother's.

There was of course my father's story of Aunt Luby's death—told over and over at special events and holidays . . . "I was only ten. They put her dead in the back bedroom to prepare the body. She was wrapped in a white sheet only and placed in the ground—but the sheet fell off and there she was, like a ghoul, stiff and shriveled."

My father was an earthbound individual, a lover of this life. "Like a Hobbit" my sister observed at his funeral. We all went to eat delicatessen after the service, the way my father would have, if he were alive and in attendance. His illness was short, a couple of weeks punctuated by visits to subspecialists for action plans and words of hope. He traveled to the doors of Sloan Kettering and received a final blessing: "There is nothing more to do." He was silent on the matter of grave plots.

If he had ideas about what was to come, he never shared them. I'm reluctant to say that this was a flaw. He was who he was—a World War II veteran, a Depression era child, a son of an escaped Russian immigrant, a medical man, a teacher. I am comforted to know I am like him in many ways.

Speaking about death with my patients has become as routine as reading the *Times* was for my father. Yet I sometimes find myself silent in these exchanges and refrain from speaking words that may be perceived as ingredients to a carefully measured recipe. Like watching a foreign film, I look for the subtitles to understand the meaning, having no experience with the language spoken. And when I wait and listen, I wonder if my silence is a gift from my father. Like my father: always there, silent, always with me.

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