

JONATHAN LIEBSON

*After the Bolsheviks*

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and the flights got further and further delayed. Not until the airport closed did she finally accept that, like my grandmother, we weren't going anywhere, any time soon.

MY GRANDPARENTS HAD MOVED to Florida before I was born. Though they'd intended to take care of themselves, Aunt Bernice still followed them down, apparently unwilling to give up custody. When Grandpa Saul died a few years later, and before anyone else had had time to react, my aunt whisked Bubbie into a nearby residence called the Zion Home. It was a backhanded move. My mother spread rumors that while everyone else had been sitting Shiva for my grandfather, Bernice was out visiting rest homes all along Miami Beach. Furious, but not to be outdone, Mom phoned a car service that delivered Bubbie to the airport—and on to an awaiting flight to Boston, where we picked her up and brought her to Brookline. For two weeks she was set up in our guest room—a “try-out,” my mother called it. But this time it was Aunt Bernice who cried foul. She brought kidnapping charges with the Miami Police, and she only dropped them on condition that Bubbie returned to Florida. Since then, Mom had tried everything she could think of to win her back.

In her mind it was no contest. Bubbie belonged in the northeast, where Mom and Bernice had been raised. In Springfield, an hour west of us, she and her sister had grown up on a combination of Yiddish and my grandmother's broken English. Bernice was ten years older, so she'd gotten an early start doing check-out work at my grandfather's grocery store. Later, she worked nights and weekends while studying at Springfield College. By the time my mother got to high school Saul had already sold the store, which meant that instead of studying between shifts she could spend more time on her homework. She earned a scholarship to Smith College, where she met eligible Jewish men from the Ivy League. From then on the lines were drawn. Bernice made a constant virtue of her family sacrifices—from her education to her bachelorhood—but Mom took honors for giving Saul the two things he had always wanted: a son-in-law and a doctor.

THE SNOW EVENTUALLY STOPPED by late Sunday night, but with the backlog of travelers we were put on stand-by for the next few days. Mom refused to sit idle. On Monday she drove down icy streets to the first photographer who would develop our picture and have it framed by afternoon. In the meantime, she stayed in constant contact with the doctors. Amazingly, by Tuesday Grandma had regained full motion in her body—or whatever measure of it a ninety-one-year-old still possessed. But her swift recovery became a mixed blessing. In our absence she had signed legal docu-

ments declaring my aunt her health proxy. Bernice could now make all medical decisions without us. So the next person Mom got in touch with was our attorney, who warned her, as did my father, that a signed health proxy had little chance of being overturned. But in my mother's book, 'little chance' meant not impossible, and for her that was enough to go on.

By Wednesday—three days after the stroke—we reached Miami. With all our luggage in the taxi, and the framed photograph between my knees, we drove straight to the Zion Home. It was my first time visiting in three years. The salt smell followed us everywhere, and with my eyes peeled for the ocean I rediscovered the thrill of my earliest trips, when every feature seemed beautifully exotic. Along one side rose towering condos with darkly tinted windows and gleaming balconies, while on the other, speeding by much faster, were low, stuccoed apartments in brilliant colors.

Growing up, I'd heard all kinds of stories about the hardships of Russia—how Jews were forced to speak Yiddish as a first language, how Saul's family made counterfeit coins, and how both of them got out right after the revolution. Mom made it sound like a fairy tale. My grandparents had met on a steamer coming to America, where Saul impressed Bubbie by doing card tricks. But he died before I got to know him. And my grandmother, in her old age and worn-down English, remained an abstraction to me even in the flesh.

The Zion Home was a pink low-rise with wooden shutters and a patio in front, the kind that sparkled so much it looked like pindrops of glass were embedded in the concrete. The patio curved into a lawn that was neatly bordered by white alyssum and baby snapdragons. The first time I visited the home Dad had described it as an assisted living facility with stand-by nurses and a full-time staff. A lot of the residents cooked, cleaned, and took care of themselves. "That's Bernice talking," Mom said. She found the home depressingly spare. "A halfway house for the dead," she called it.

We were welcomed in the lobby by a smiling, mustached man named Michael Levin, the daytime manager. He gave us a hand with the luggage. "I saw that blizzard," he said. His shoulders shook at an imaginary breeze. "How do you survive each year?"

By the elevator was a lounge with tall, tinted windows and a group of men seated around a television. A few vacant chairs were scattered outside the nurse's station. When the elevator slid open, my mother looked into a space much smaller than what stood in front of her.

"Our whole family's from the cold," she said, as if a wound born proudly in battle.

Michael nodded. After Dad and I had joined her, the manager retreated from the closing door. I felt cramped in the elevator; it was one of those old-fashioned models with wood paneling and inlaid mirrors. It balked between floors, as if in preparation to stop, and when I felt my stomach go I spread my feet apart for better balance. It didn't help much.

EVER SINCE GRANDMA had moved into the Zion Home, Bernice had been forbidden to see us in Brookline. On our trips to Florida, the manager was always apprised of our whereabouts, so that he could run interference between sisters. Only at Grandma's request did everyone spend time together. In those rare occasions my aunt moved fast to shower me with affection. She bought me books like *The Little Prince* or *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which always carried a clean ten-dollar bill tucked inside the front jacket. "You'll miss your aunt, won't you?" she whispered. "You could write me a letter, maybe we'll be secret pen pals."

Sometimes Mom unpacked brochures of other rest homes, trying to court Bubbie with pictures of Georgian brick manors and well-groomed lawns. But all it did was provoke Bernice. Three years ago, when everyone was eating lunch in a steakhouse, Mom mentioned a prominent Jewish home she'd read about in Braintree. Wiping her mouth, she said the floors were scrubbed more than once a week. Dad groaned. Bernice dropped her silverware onto her plate. When the manager asked nicely for us to take our arguing outside, I could feel the hateful eyes of everyone in the restaurant.

By then the trips had grown bitterly unpleasant. For all the tension I had to endure, those few short hours at the beach just didn't seem worth it. So in the wake of our public humiliation, I told my parents that I preferred to see Bubbie only in Massachusetts from now on. It seemed a longshot, but even at that age I'd learned a trick or two from my mother. While making my pitch, I turned the tears on at just the right moment.

"Oh, Elliot, you're right," said Mom, sweeping me into her arms. "I've considered it for a long time, too." Dad was startled by her quick agreement, but she would talk him into it later on.

Eventually, my mother's reasoning made sense to both of us. It came to pass that the most trivial of activities, from soccer games to Boy Scout meetings, were events for another photograph. Mom made me the centerpiece of her campaign. I was the one and only grandson in the family—the boy who lived all the way across country—and Mom made sure to drive home that point. A month ago, she'd put together an

illustrated calendar that spanned my infancy to my Bar Mitzvah. The pictures were in chronological order, and the message conveyed by the calendar was unmistakable. It showed a childhood ending in one quick episode after another, and it warned that I'd already be grown up before too long.

AT BUBBIE'S APARTMENT Mom gave two firm knocks on the door. A long pause ensued, during which she took our hands, and when the door cracked open to the end of its chain there came a single inspecting eye, followed by the faint Yiddish word I recognized as Mom's name. Then the latch came undone and the two women embraced in a long hug. I wasn't sure what to expect of her, what a person looked like after having lost and then regained her ability to move. But the only visible difference was that Grandma seemed shorter and somewhat more emaciated. Her face was sun-tanned and her white hair pulled into a large, porcupine-tooth comb. In my arms I discovered a surprisingly solid frame beneath loose skin, like water-logged wood.

The apartment was a narrow studio divided into a pantry kitchen and a bedroom. The blinds were closed, and the few bars of light that snuck past seemed swallowed up by her dark upholstery. "It's not living," Mom said, zipping up the shades. She immediately gravitated toward the bookcase, where she browsed the countless small photographs from her side of the family. Even from across the room I sensed an awkward stalemate on those shelves, a group of people still vying for my grandmother's attention.

Dad clasped his hands on the table and smiled. "How about a chat," he said to my grandmother, in a voice I recognized from his hospital office. Calmly, he asked her questions about her hearing, about the feeling in her fingers and toes, and—in order to test her memory—about what she'd been doing the day before. Bubbie hedged uncomfortably in her chair.

"*Steven*," said Mom, "she was at the hospital, what do you think."

Grandma bent down to fix her stockings. She wore snap shoes and a brown dress with a long triangular collar, like two petals of an orchid. The dress seemed perfectly familiar to me, in the way we always put faces to clothing. And yet it was a false sentiment. In all her stays with us, I'd never moved past the feeling of two strangers in a library. Even the normal things she did, like dust furniture or empty trash cans, had a distant, premodern feel to them. The cultures we'd been born from were immensely different, and when she brought her rituals of devotion into my own house, it made me feel like an impostor. Every Friday, as the sun went down, she covered her head

with an embroidered scarf and buried her face in her hands, to bless the Sabbath candles. Her body rocked forward almost imperceptibly, and a joyless, musical inflection escaped through her fingers. Other times, swallowed up by the family-room recliner, she mumbled words from her ornamented prayer book. Like Bubbie herself, the book seemed handed down from the ages. It had a metal-plated jacket that was embossed with fake jewels, and the pages, tissue-thin and oily, were inked with small Hebrew letters that looked dark and wildly illegible, like squished bugs.

Strolling around the apartment some more, Mom rummaged through odds and ends in desk drawers and on cabinet shelves. Dad kept close watch on her, his arms folded in suspicion.

I was glad to see them preoccupied. I felt cooped up in the apartment, like being on a small raft, so I went to the window and looked at the distant shoreline. The area had been built up over the years, and the beachfront lay in small parcels between the condominiums. A fast surf pounded the shore, while further out the gulls swooped down on the dark green water, breaking the surface with their beaks. As in the taxi cab, I felt percolating inside of me an appetite for the ocean. Never mind that we were here to see Grandma—I had my own agenda. My whole life Mom had insisted that her favorite beaches were on Cape Cod, but in my mind there was no comparison between the warm Florida water and the icy Atlantic of the Northeast.

In a few minutes Mom rushed back from the kitchen. “The calendar, you told me you got it,” she said to Bubbie. Grandma knitted worried fingers in her lap, as if she expected a whole new round of questions. Mom shot an unfriendly look at Dad and said something I didn’t understand.

“I guess it’s elves, Steven, they always get their hands on things.”

Mom helped Bubbie from her chair and led her to the portrait, which I’d left standing in the corner. She stripped off the bubble wrap and invited Bubbie to look. “It’s our house,” said Mom. She balanced the picture on one knee, and Grandma obliged her by leaning in close. Soon, though, her lips clenched with uncertainty, and her face wrinkled on the margins of distress. Mom placed a hand on Bubbie’s shoulder to relax her. “You remember it,” she said, as if she could thread hope through a command. But Grandma was unswayed. Even after Mom had put the picture down my grandmother continued to shake her head, refusing. “Oh, Bubbie, you’re not even trying,” said my mother.

AFTER WE'D CHECKED IN at the hotel Mom came to my room. She and Dad had an appointment with Bubbie's doctor, the aim of which was to find out anything that might indicate coercion on my aunt's part when it came to getting Grandma to sign the health proxy. Sitting at the edge of my bed, she rubbed her hands over one another. They had an artificial shine from sun screen. "I burn so easily," she said. "Bubbie must go through bottles down here." Then she glanced around as if she were looking for something, like the calendar missing from Grandma's apartment.

"I want you to hang that picture while we're at the doctor's," she said, smoothing her hand along the bedspread. "You can say no if you like." No was exactly what I had in mind, but because she'd caught me off guard I fumbled for an excuse. "If you do this," she added, "you can have the whole day off tomorrow."

Seated on the window sill, I carefully weighed my options, but after a few minutes I still couldn't decide whether a day of freedom was worth a couple of hours alone with Bubbie.

Mom shifted on the bed and coughed. "You're old enough to decide, Elliot, I can't force you." The irony in her voice only half convinced me. Far more threatening was the vision I had of her at Bubbie's age: with a store of malice locked away in an old woman's chest of grudges.

I hadn't forgotten how she'd snapped at Michael by the elevator. Tugging at me since then was the memory of a onetime visit we'd made to Springfield, on our way back from the Berkshires. Springfield was a city of unflattering side streets with fenced-up lots and old warehouses, and with run-down homes protected by wide front porches set on brick pilings. There were black children playing on the sidewalk and Mexicans standing next to low-slung cars. "They've left," Mom said. "All the Jews have." She asked Dad to pull over next to her house. I thought the siding needed a paint job and the front steps bowed dangerously down the middle.

Still in the car, Mom pointed out a wooden hatch that led to the basement. "In winter it made a perfect slide," she said. "When I was young, your Grandma used to twirl me like an airplane and set me down with a little push to the bottom. Over and over we went—and when I was worn out from screaming she brought me inside for a nap. That was quiet time, she called it. It was her last peaceful moment before the others came back from the store."

She stopped talking because a delivery truck had honked. It couldn't get past us. At the next gas station she made Dad pull over again, and for the rest of the ride she sat quietly in back while my father let me pick stations on the radio.



DAD HAILED A TAXI in front of the hotel. He'd changed into a smart gray suit with black wingtips, but his tie squeezed into a small button from too much pulling. I knew he was uncomfortable with Mom's plan; no matter what she said, it would reflect worse on him, as a doctor. Just before we reached the building, Mom turned to me in her usual way, squaring off to get my full attention. She wanted the picture hung above the bed. That way, she could see it first thing whenever she came into the apartment. So could Bubbie, I almost said, but it made more sense to let it go. As long as I played it safe, the whole ordeal would soon be over with.

I entered the lobby to find Michael deep in conversation. His eyes flashed up from the blinking switchboard, and with a single raised finger he told me to Stay Put. He showed none of his earlier enthusiasm. I dropped back respectfully but didn't drift too far, because in the foreign waters of the rest home his desk still felt like a safe harbor. I guessed his duties caught up with him on a typical day, but what I couldn't begin to imagine was the kind of tolerance required to work here long term: to be a caretaker for people whose only destiny was hardship and eventual death.

When he'd hung up, I gave a hurried explanation of my visit. I rolled my eyes to signal there were fifty things I'd rather do than bother him for a hammer and nail. His face was unchanged. "I'll take a look," he said doubtfully, and went to his back office. While he was away the phone rang two separate times, and the unanswered rings drew curious and distrustful stares from the nearby residents. I was grateful when he finally returned. He offered me the hammer in a substitute handshake and said, "You know my job's a lot harder when your parents don't do theirs."

I was shocked, but while waiting for the elevator I reconsidered. My mother should have called first—a simple courtesy to a busy man—and by not doing so we had broken a rule of etiquette. Or rather *she* had, not I. And yet in Michael's eyes I still shared in the blame. In the elevator, what started as frustration on the ground floor sharpened into bitterness by the time I reached Bubbie's apartment. Her door became a convenient target. I choked up on the hammer and began pounding small half dollars in the wood—a whole orbit of them, but the bolt turned unexpectedly, and I caught my arm right as the door jumped open. Aunt Bernice stood in front of me, and for a moment we simply stared at each other in mutual astonishment.

"What in God's name?" she said. My arm grew bashful and slipped down to my side. Bernice took my jaw like a dog's muzzle and shook it. "Not too old for pranks," she laughed. She was a short woman with a pageboy haircut and the compact frame of a wrestler. Her hand felt like a vise around my chin. After stretching on her toes to kiss me she led me to the dining table, where Bubbie sat by one of two tea settings

and an open dish of cubed sugar. Grandma had a neutral, unassuming smile—as if accidental company were hardly the thing to throw her off. Both women took notice of the hammer, and in what sounded like an apology I quickly explained why I'd brought it.

"I know—I saw the picture," said my aunt excitedly. "Your father looks a lot thinner, you'll have to tell him for me."

She said something in Yiddish to Bubbie, who ladled short spoonfuls of tea between her lips. Grandma shrugged, and next thing Bernice had unhooked her purse from the chair and was slinging it over her shoulder.

"Elliot, I'm between errands right now, could I trouble you to walk me out?"

She looked strange to me then, and it took a moment before I realized why. In the past, I'd always noticed some resemblance between her and Mom, mostly in the angled nose they shared—and mostly because I already knew they were sisters. But in every other feature, from the body type down to their accents, they seemed products of opposite breeding. Now I sensed how much alike they were. It boiled down to the way they got what they wanted. Instead of arguing they preferred pre-emptive strikes, like sabotaging an unfilled balloon. They were experts at hoodwinking the men in my family, and in this case I was no exception. Two minutes later I found myself back in the elevator, and when we arrived downstairs I discovered for a second time how quickly things changed in the Zion Home. Michael was on the telephone again, but when he got a read on me and Bernice—walking arm in arm—he smiled to us with glowing approval.

At the patio she waved her hand extravagantly and said, "Table for two?" We both chuckled and she elbowed me to take a seat. A salted breeze helped cool things off, but the large umbrella couldn't stop the sun's ricochet off the patio. Bernice laid her handbag on the glasstop and took out her sunglasses, the only pair she had. "They're women's glasses," she apologized, "they wouldn't suit you."

She sat up in her chair and peered in both directions, as if a waiter might really appear. She turned her watch band to read it. Then she took a deep breath and leaned toward me with two outstretched hands.

"So, tomorrow, what say you and I meet up again—I was thinking we could buy an expensive lunch, maybe go to the aquarium. You could say you were with Bubbie," she said. Her eyebrows crested hopefully above her frames, and in her lenses I saw two reflected versions of myself. The breeze blew in steady off the ocean, and a man seated two tables over sniffed the air like he might sneeze. They were tough metal chairs with wire backs and flattened arm rests, like aluminum siding. I could

feel a sweat beneath my arms. My day-off hadn't even been earned yet and it was already in danger of slipping away.

"I would—but I don't know my plans yet," I said.

The clouds were speeding overhead, and what seemed remarkable was the way Bernice kept smiling, even as her eyebrows went flat.

"I understand, Elliot. I guess it's not your decision."

Her words pricked with needle-accuracy. A long shadow slid across the terrace, and the wind made footprints in the alyssum. Though clumsy, I quickly brought up Bubbie, and what a miracle it was that she'd recovered so well.

"Yes, but take a look at her," said Bernice. She peeled off her sunglasses and joined her hands in an odd gesture between praying and rolling a pair of dice. "Tell me, would Grandma enjoy waiting out a snowstorm—or getting on a plane to fly across country?"

I fingered the umbrella crank and made it seem like I was taking extra time to consider her words. The crank swiveled back and forth but the canvas didn't move.

"What about trains?" I said.

Bernice raised her head. Peering across at me she said, "Elliot—" but then fell short of speech. She switched her legs in the chair. Her eyes roved closer together—almost involuntarily, it seemed—and when she sneaked her thumb across each lid I pretended not to notice.

"You know your mother's had all the breaks," she said. "Everything's gone her way in life, but she's still not satisfied. She wants Bubbie on top of it." Bernice scratched her foot through her sandal top and left a red mark. "It's no secret Judy's kept you away all these years, but here's news you might not know. Even though it burns her to no end, she'd rather I poach calendars from Bubbie than spend even a few minutes time with you."

I glanced at her sharply, but Bernice had already put her sunglasses on and was standing to leave. During a short hug our cheeks brushed lightly, and after letting go she said that personal visits helped an old lady remember far more than sending extra photographs. Then she left. Her handbag came under the tight control of her arm, and her sandals clicked sternly behind her.

MUCH LATER, when I thought back on the incident, an important question came to mind. Had my mother set me up for something? The manager's behavior seemed to suggest this as well. So careful over the years, why had she suddenly slipped up this one time? Perhaps she thought that by dangling me in front of Bernice, she would

entice her sister to the bargaining table. But whatever the motivation, I never found out. Mom herself never mentioned it, and for my own part I avoided saying anything on the subject. I worried that no matter how I brought it up, it would look to her as if I'd chosen sides.

And I had other secrets to keep. As Bernice walked away from the Zion Home, I already knew my dad would never hear her compliment about looking thinner. No more being a pawn for everyone else, I decided. I marched through the lobby and straight up the stairs, refusing another ride in that rickety elevator. Bubbie regarded me as casually as before, and she didn't ask questions when I retrieved the portrait. I stopped to look at it first, and it felt as though a lot more time had passed since we'd posed in front of our house. The driveway was neatly shoveled, and yet a fresh layer had already resettled around our feet. Behind me, my mother wore a red felt hat and matching lipstick. Her glove made a tight leash on my shoulder, as if to prove how much control she had over me, my father, and whatever circumstances might interfere.

But I was alone now, and out of everyone else's reach. I decided that the picture belonged somewhere else. I would hang it in the corner, right above Grandma's dresser, a place less obvious to visitors but more apparent to anyone who looked out the window. It was comforting to think that whenever Bubbie viewed the water, she might remember us. It was then I felt her staring at me. She'd covered herself with a light shawl, and I imagined she was comparing me to the many scrapbook photos placed around her apartment, or to whatever images she had left from memory. She wouldn't know it, but I'd shot up one more inch since my Bar Mitzvah. I was a narrow teenager with crooked arms and peg knees. My fingers grew long and wiry like a rake, and I felt clumsy writing with a pen or holding a hammer. But in this case it didn't matter. Hunched over the dresser top, I gave my full concentration to the nail. My arms extended above the jewelry box, her gilt-cased mirror, and the silver prayer book. I was so focused that when Bubbie spoke I didn't even hear her the first time.

"It's too cold," she said.

She pulled her shawl in tighter, and I smiled as a quick understanding filled in. This was my mother's mother, I finally realized. Years and years ago, with only a handful of English and the slim promise of a better life, she'd left her homeland and had found a husband before reaching America. In her own image she had raised two daughters, which meant that they could argue all they wanted to, the final say would still be Bubbie's. Not until her death a full year later would she be uprooted again.

The funeral was held on a freezing day in Springfield, when the sky seemed a darker blue than normal, as if to compensate for the lack of clouds, and when a light snow dusted the rear car bumper. At the gravesite the ground lay in a crumbled heap next to the open plot. The shovel was passed around slowly, and the spray of dirt made an awkward crunching on the lid, a noise too loud, and too insignificant, all at once.