

The Day I was an  
Angel



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My big, twentieth birthday comes with a wakeup phone call from my father, “How’s my angel doing?” His engaging voice and hefty Russian accent undoubtedly make it a traditional invitation into one’s childhood, if one can peer as far back as one can. And I do, and in doing so I am transformed into some deeply personal timelessness.

I am ten years old, taking a cross-country flight with my dad to New York. During our trip to New York, my father and I stayed at my aunt Janna’s delicate, late seventies, medium size, suburban home in Brooklyn. Not a masterpiece, the outside of the two-story wood-frame house has a brick overlay. A wide iron gate is guarding my aunt’s white SUV. It was our family’s annual New York destination, but for a ten year old my aunt’s home was comfortable in only one room, the living room. In all of the other rooms on the first floor my aunt made sure I was careful not to touch her glass Russian art figurines, her shiny Petroff piano, or her fancy gold-brimmed table plates soaking in alabaster chandelier glow. She was especially protective of the downstairs guest bathroom, which was covered with mirrors. My “bahlahbooste” aunt, or “neatest”, had her reasons. Her delicate house was not what one would consider “child-proof.”

When I was around six years old, inside that gem room, I covered my hands completely with soap and began to draw on each of the mirrors. She screamed Russian

expletives at my father, as he sternly asked me, “you couldn’t just wash your hands and get out?”

“I couldn’t find the door,” I said, “it’s like a mirror room at a circus.” My father thundered in laughter, but my aunt wouldn’t have it.

Down my aunt’s street and across an intersection, beyond a playground, was the delightful Manhattan Beach, locked between Kingsborough Community College and some private waterfront estates, not far from the famous Brighton Beach boardwalk. About a mile from my aunt’s house is MJHS Menorah Center for Rehab and Nursing home where my Grandma Baboolya stayed before she passed away. Visiting my aunt always included a trip to see my Grandmother and the time to experience New York with her, so it was tough realizing she would no longer be joining us on that trip.

I was still in shock of her passing. It was just the previous year that my whole family spent time together with our beloved Baboolya at the neighborly beach in Brooklyn. Baboolya was eighty-five at the time and, unfortunately, could no longer take extensive walks, so we took turns pushing her in the wheelchair along the sea wall. When it was my turn, I carefully but enjoyably swerved and sped up to make the ride more enjoyable for the both of us. She spoke little English, but could express her feelings fluently—I was sure she enjoyed me as her driver. It was unfortunate not being able to speak to my grandmother in her native tongue, or mine for that matter, but the little words we did exchange fully presented our relationship. As we strolled down the beach she would ask me, “Ty lubish’ menya—do you love me?”

“Niet!” I wittily responded and shook my head.

I always denied my Grandmother's sincere question, but I loved her unconditionally and she knew it. Denying her was part of our funny and loving relationship. It broke my heart that I no longer had my beautiful, compassionate, jovial, whitest-of-white-haired Grandma Baboolya.

My dad and I had a trip plan sealed by his promise. The plan was to go visit my grandmother Baboolya's grave at Beth David cemetery in Queens on the way to the New York Mets game. Obviously, as a young, impatient ten-year-old, I was eager only for the historical last Mets game at Shea Stadium, but I felt my father's wish, to see his deeply missed mother's tombstone, must be obeyed. After all, my grandmother taught me to practice my patience and understand that, if I do what my parents care to do, then, in return, they will only make my wishes even more memorable. My father, sensing my craze for the big game, allowed me to dress for the Mets game. I threw on all-blue Nike shorts, a Dodger blue Under Armour shirt, simple white and black Nike shoes, and my Dodger blue and Giants orange New York Mets cap. I proudly expressed my love for the Big Apple and my favorite team. My father, able to contain his excitement, dressed formally for the gravesite and carefully packed his Mets gear in a recyclable Kroger's bag. I got ready in ten minutes only to sit on my aunt's old, deep-seated couch in the living room and turn on her surprisingly modern television. Flipping through many Russian-only television channels, I finally found ESPN that was presenting a *Make a Wish* segment. In no time, I got glued to the screen talking to me personally.

The reporters were expressing a dying boy's wish to meet New York Mets star third baseman David Wright. I barely understood illnesses, barely knew why my

grandmother passed, so I was jealous of this kid. I felt sorry for this boy for having to deal with cancer at such a young age, but *I* wanted to meet my favorite baseball player.

Upstairs my father was still getting ready. “What’s taking so long?” I would yell as he started down the stairs.

“Come on,” my father would say in his loving and familiar, funny-to-me Russian accent. But our roles had changed, and now I was messing with the plan.

“Hold on,” I would mock in my attempt at a Russian accent, stuck watching the *Make a Wish*, “Baboolya isn’t going anywhere.” My dad laughed at my clever joke, but insisted we go now if we wanted to make the Mets’ batting practice. Off we <sup>went</sup> go, with our exciting plan and anticipation of a very special day. ten am  
8.10.14

I woke up in my Aunt Janna’s Suburban just as my dad turned off the car. I slowly opened my eyes to the bright sunlight and craned my neck right and left, curious <sup>about</sup> of what was around me. It was my first time being at a cemetery and I did not expect anything like it. Even inside the car, I instantly felt surrounded by stones in this ancient neighborhood of the deceased. For miles in each direction were multitudes of Jewish family gated courts, monuments, and plaques evincing to the rich history of the former inhabitants of Long Island.

So lost in my thoughts, I did not notice that my father already started toward my grandmother’s grave. I opened my side door and jumped out onto the historical grounds. Surrounding me were sprawling grounds of impressive and expertly manicured and maintained memories that extended like city blocks. Some graves even had blue stickers with the letters *PC* on them; this meant Prepaid Care—for the maintenance crew to take care of the gravesite. The whole cemetery had freshly cut green grass and evenly trimmed

bushes that gave off an enlightening feeling. A fresh ocean breeze hit me, but my goose bumps came from being surrounded by thousands of graves in this city of the dead. Not really scared but anxious in the palpable quiet, I wanted to see my grandmother's memorial and leave as soon as possible.

"Don't forget the plan and don't mess up your gorgeous outfit," I thought to myself.

"Papa, wait up!" I yelled, frantically running towards him like a kid running out of a dark room. I ran past countless shapes and sizes of graves that had flowers and/or light pebbles set by loved ones. Each grave seemed to beg for my prayers and memories, but I was too scared to stop and appreciate all the beauty. I ran so fast past each grave that I almost ran into my father as he pulled out his camera. I fell down, gasping for air.

Looking up was my grandmother's headstone. One precisely chiseled granite stone on top of a wider granite stone. Carved on the front is a scroll that says:

*PESYA  
BEREZIN  
Beloved Mother  
And  
Grandmother  
Feb 10, 1919  
Nov 11, 2005*

To the left of the scroll was a candle with a fire burning to symbolize eternal light. And at the top a five-handled candelabra that just served as a family preference. It <sup>stood</sup> stands surrounded by many other headstones, all of which seem<sup>ed</sup> taller. However, when I was there it was the center of them all.

"Get up, solnechka" my father said quietly, "let me take a picture of you next to your Grandma."

“How about I lie on top of her?” I tried to lighten up the moment if sarcastically.

I wasn't really sure how to properly behave at a cemetery, but by the way my father responded and smiled back at me, I couldn't have been that bad. He proceeded to take a picture of me lying down and standing up on both sides of the grave. Then, I did the same for him. I am sure, it was his way of passing a skill of ~~the~~ on-site photography.

Suddenly, all my fear was gone. I felt comfortable next to my grandmother, like she was actually there with us. I'm sure my father felt the same way as we began to say loving prayers. My father began to recite the *Kel Maleh Rachamim*, a Jewish memorial prayer for the soul of the departed, and remember all the great times we had with Grandma Baboolya. I tried to follow along, but mistakenly mumbled the words instead. My words were not correct, but my intentions were at their finest. Oh, how I missed my Grandmother and all that she had taught me. As my father continued the *Kel Maleh Rachamim*, I began to place pebbles on the top of the head stone with my left hand. Placing small stones symbolizes a lasting, near heart, presence of the deceased's legacy and memory. Each pebble shows how many visitors have recently been there.

I loved spending the time remembering my grandmother, but I was still anxious to leave for the baseball game—the last game at Shea Stadium!

“Can we go, Papa?” I asked nudging him on the shoulder.

“Not yet,” he responded, “You don't have any other prayers to say?”

I guess I could have looked in the prayer book for more prayers to recite, but my head began to hurt from reading all the Hebrew. There was this rhythmic noise of chisel grind. I looked all around the gravesite only to notice a worker in the distance carving on a headstone.

“Whoa! Papa, look at what that guy is doing,” I said, “Can I go look?”

“Sure,” my father said, sensing my inability to stay still.

“Spaciba Bal-Shoya” I said in my poor Russian. I left to see this mysterious worker.

I slowly began to walk towards this hammering man, carefully watching my feet, afraid that someone's hand would pop out of each grave and grab my leg. The feeling of death scared me, but all that surrounded me was immaculate. The whole cemetery was heavenly and angelic with not a dull color ~~was~~ in sight. Between many of the graves were freshly trimmed bushes that stood just as high as most graves. Morning dew was still visible as the sun reflected off the grass, creating a wonderfully bright shine. Everything was so fresh it felt like I was walking in a heavenly garden. As I continued to walk through this suddenly lively cemetery, I came across an enormous tree that gave shade to a few graves. It was not tall, but covered a large portion of the area we were in. I started walking towards it, but turned around only to see my father missing.

“Papa!” I yelled, “Where'd you go?”

For a moment, I heard nothing but the same rhythmic chisel of the worker's carving tool. I started walking back to my grandmother's grave, but then my dad stood up.

“Still here, solnechka,” he said, “no worries, enjoy.”

I was relieved to see that my dad had not left me and so I continued on towards this restless worker.

As I approached the rest of the cemetery block I came across many more memorably impressive tombstones and perfectly pruned hedges. A particular tombstone I



passed had the name Dworman scripted at the top and was in the shape of a large, beautifully designed door. The inviting design had a checkered pattern, but in the middle of the black-spaced intersection lay what appeared to be a war badge of some sort. This unusual tombstone effectively captured the rich history in Revolutionary War lore and patriotism that this cemetery presented. It stood significantly taller and wider than the rest of the graves—no way it was for just one person. I felt invited and walked around the door, pretending I walked through it, and found three simple Dworman tombstones placed right behind. The Dworman family must have created this tribute in order for their whole family to be buried near one another. The Dwormans<sup>✓</sup> is not the only family memorial court in this cemetery, but it surely presents the rich family love this cemetery brings out in public.

I “exited” the door and found a new neighborhood of graves, the one the stone carver was laboring in. This neighborhood was by far one of its<sup>o</sup> own; I felt like I was walking through a graveyard museum. There were thousands of graves evenly spaced in rows, some flat, some arched, peaked, or in a semicircle shape. However, all of these graves were blank! Each one waits for its ceremony for the person<sup>/</sup> of whom it will represent and hold memories. The stone carver was in the middle of this neighborhood carving someone’s name, birth to death dates, and other information for a newly passed human. I kept walking towards the carver, carefully watching the impressive work he was doing. It was like watching an artist painting on a new canvas in a museum—it just does not happen so real. I was simply enchanted. This neighborhood was by far the greenest of them all, possibly uncharted by anyone other than the workers. I was on the inside of history being made, and for the ten year old it was a pretty dramatic discovery.

The worker was unmoved from his carving position in which he was kneeling. He worked restlessly on this tombstone and I was sure that his finished product would be remarkable. To protect him from the flying debris, he wore a fitted black welding mask and gloves, a dark *Beth David maintenance* long sleeve shirt, and simple, dark jeans covered in sparkling granite dust.

I walked closely to the row behind him and watched. By the time I got there he had already finished a couple of headstones. He began carving the first letter of this next deceased person. To my surprise and strange fear, it was the letter S. After he finished this first letter, he decided to pause—the first break I had seen since I started watching him. Afraid that he would see me, I stood still as a tombstone. He lifted his mask, paused, and then turned towards me in a completely obvious surprise. This worker was just as shocked as I was startled. He was staring at me, a young boy dressed in all blue, for a minute straight. Nothing was said, nothing. As I continued looking at him nervous and anxious that he would continue his artwork, he looked away, rubbed his eyes, and then back towards me. My father must have been kneeling again because this man could not see him. He was alone. We were alone. The worker was even more shocked than before.

“What is wrong with this guy?” I said softly under my breath. I had no idea what he was thinking or feeling, but the shock on his face was unforgettable. It started creeping me out, so I began walking back to my father.

“Are,” he stuttered, “are you an angel?” he asked in a most serious, somber tone.

Now I was shocked, even frightened, but kind of amused. “How can this guy think I am an angel?” I thought, “I am not even wearing white!” But he was as grave as these gravestones.

“No!” I said nervously, still with a smile, in a laughing tone. I then ran back to my father, thinking that I should have said yes. The minutes seemed strangely long but light.

I floated past the unnamed graves, back through the Dworman “mystery” door into the first plot of graves that my Grandmother’s grave laid in, and, still in disbelieving shock, gently nudged my father’s left arm. He felt my touch and turned his sad face to me.

“Papa,” I asked softly, “am I, am I an angel?”

This was perhaps one of the most memorable, and enjoyable questions I have ever asked my father. His face changed, and we laughed as I told him of my strange, unique experience, but even he could not give me a definite answer. “Let’s go, my angel, the game awaits,” did not count.

In the palms of my hands, a couple of fine pebbles, brought all the way from Austin<sup>s</sup> hill country, did not seem heavy at all. They got heavier as I must have felt the grief of my father, still unprepared to leave. I did not dare to joke or rush anywhere, and he said nothing. Still, we had the plan to see the Mets. Off with those pebbles! My left-hand placed them to rest on Baboolya’s headstone in a sort of last goodbye.

nic  
line!

We made it to Shea Stadium. Somehow the kid in me connected that timelessness of the cemetery and the inevitable demise, even if intentional, of this formerly magical place. The entire setting in the Queens proximity of the once World Expo site was not vibrant. Its fountains impressively <sup>lay</sup> lied dead dry.

The true joy returned to my mind with the roar of the jets accenting our national anthem, right over the diamond. It lasted the whole game, as my favorite player, David Wright, was perfect in my New York Mets victory. My father and I felt as if we won too.

The plan worked out perfectly. Ardent fans, we were allowed to stroll down the field and the bases, and even scoop up some red sand. Soon, the new City Field would welcome all of us back. But I remember Shea Stadium, David Wright owning its third base, and myself decked out in a classic Mets blue jersey. We lingered and lingered until we were the last guests out and headed back to the subway.

Finally, outside the stadium dimming in nightlight, I asked my father once again why he thinks the worker believed I was an angel. I will never forget how he responded. My father said nothing, he simply, on the subway to my aunt's Ships-head Bay home, wrote down his inspiring, essay-like answer:

*Listen with your heart. What might not even be true to you, most likely is to someone. Would you rather tear it away or gift validity to pure "it"? What would make you care, one way or the other? We all seek an angel, the guardian of our inner peace and the outward joy of our selves. To the hardworking simple stone carver, you appeared in the moment of his need, and you came about and then disappeared as a mirage. Not an image of fluffy seraphim, but an angelic boy in a blue glow, that man's beloved colors. You did good being kind and felt awesome sharing with me the moment of timelessness.*

In a retrospect, maybe I should have had a bigger smile for that tired stone carver, maybe even <sup>said</sup> ~~say~~ something reassuring, but "of course I am" would not be true. Or was it?

As usual, the "happy birthday" from my dad was more than a traditional wake<sup>up</sup> call. It is a nice time to remember stories and look forward to more happiness.

“If my story was that long ago, is it still true?” I asked my father. I do want to think I was an angel that day. And while it might well be my very first story, this one is a true story.

## Epilogue

What is the fabric of a story, any story? Is it a poorly woven rag of disjointed memory scraps, or a tightly sewn quilt of colorful snaps in one's twisty mind? Is it a memory of a personal event that refuses to die, but why? Perhaps, it is a worthy lesson for one's heart of innate goodness? Could it be some need searching for its quiet place in one's soul, to keep warmth and caring native to one's character? What does it mean to remember something from the past, no matter how long ago it took place? I believe my story is bearing a load of goodness to keep forever and to retell my children someday.

I still think about my Grandmother, the worker, and his question today. In life, sometimes we stumble on rare instances of timelessness. That trip to <sup>the</sup> cemetery and the Shea Stadium game, both shared with a parent - it captured timeless moments that make us grasp the beauty of intangible value like nothing else. It must be really special event, for the memory to keep details even though vague and tattered by time. What is the essence of its meaning—to become a part of our soul? And why do we need to invite someone to step in time long gone? What true perspective have I learned to glean into something so long ago that it just might not be accurate anymore? Is it still true? Why is *that* memory still alive? My father says, "Our memory keeps whatever is kind and beautiful because it helps cure our soul and heal those wounds we suffer in life. We think of G-D with those powers, and as far as I am concerned, G-D does it impassionately, without defining the recipients. However, it is in your power to find the wavelength of the unique meeting of minds. In telling the story, your heart is the true guide." I know now, it may take years, to discern and hear the voice of real truth if there is one.

Did G-D make me angel then? My answer is definitely, "Yes".

**POINT OF VIEW.** Is Point of View used consistently, or are there lapses in the execution of it? More importantly, does the choice of POV enable the author to shape the sympathies of the reader appropriately, and does it contribute to the unified meaning of the story?

Scale: Poor-----Adequate-----Good-----Excellent-----Superb

The older perspective you now use, starting at the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, now makes the whole thing work — that reflective perspective adds a wonderful layer of thought to the whole thing.

**SETTING.** Is the setting described well, so that we see the story in a specific, concrete place (e.g., the third block of West Water Street in Maryville, Missouri, rather than “a street down there”)? Does the choice of setting seem appropriate to the story and its meanings? More importantly, how does setting contribute to the meaning of the story?

Scale: Poor-----Adequate-----Good-----Excellent-----Superb

And of course setting is everything. The three settings are crucial to let us in on the culture of the family (the aunt's apt) the cemetery, and Shea stadium.

**FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, TONE, MOOD.** Does the writer use metaphor, simile, and symbols (e.g., interesting and appropriate names of characters, or a dominant symbol in the action) so as to contribute to the meaning of the story? Is the tone and mood of the narration something that contributes to the effects on the reader, or is it a distraction?

Scale: Poor-----Adequate-----Good-----Excellent-----Superb

Beautiful language, especially in the Epilogue. You have worked toward this, but you have a gift for these words.

Solomon, you have grown by leaps and bounds in the writing of this story, and I saw it in the way you started to read the novels with so much more attentiveness. Keep reading and writing! Tell the stories of your family's culture!

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