

## HONORING THE SABBATH

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Every Friday evening when I was a girl, our family, including my mother's aged parents, dressed in our best clothes and ate in the dining room. It was my job to set the table with tall white candles, our best china, gleaming silver and Mother's freshly ironed linen tablecloth with matching napkins.

My grandfather, and grandmother always arrived separately. In the late afternoon Grandma Gussie, pushed open the unlocked front door of our apartment and then slammed it shut with such force, the elaborately framed photograph of me and my younger brother, Maurice, that hung on the wall over the living room couch, tipped to the right and the windows rattled.

Gussie routinely rushed briskly past me scowling, her best black cotton dress swishing, and headed for the kitchen where Mother, freshly coifed, tinted and manicured from the beauty parlor, was preparing the Sabbath dinner. Mother, who never used a recipe took pride in her outstanding cooking instincts. On Friday, she always prepared her famous "better than Aunt Dora's" roast chicken.

As soon as she entered the kitchen, Grandma Gussie slammed her large black leather purse on the counter and begin shouting at Mother in Yiddish, while wildly gesturing, while she paced the worn linoleum kitchen floor. I wondered what she was saying but in our family Yiddish was the language reserved for the thousands of secrets held from the children. I was greedy to know them, but wary of the unimaginable consequences.

Pointing at the canned goods, the volume of Grandma's screeching increased. When she stamped her foot, a pointy black lace-up shoe peeked out from under her long black skirt. When she waved a boney white fist, grimacing, I quickly took cover at the far end of in the dining room. What was she carrying on about this time, I'd wonder? Was it the canned peas? The Goodman's Noodles?

"What's she saying, Mommy" Mother, frying onions in chicken fat for the chopped liver appetizer barked Yiddish back at Grandma Gussie and shrugged her shoulders.

"Who knows? Go set the table, Sondra."

Gussie never yelled at me; only at Mother, especially when Mother was distracted, perhaps daydreaming, or memorizing her lines in a new play. Mother adored the theater and took part in amateur productions. She favored the tragic roles: Medea, Hedda Gabler, Lady Macbeth. She and I spent many afternoons together as I cued her lines.

Meema detested the theater and was furious at Mother for participating in such foolishness.

I can't remember Meema ever speaking directly to me, or smiling at me, but sometimes on Friday after dinner and dessert, passing me in the dark hallway of our Brooklyn apartment she'd turn her head toward me, raise a papery hand in a weak wave, and offer a grunt.

My tiny frail grandfather arrived at our apartment at five o'clock on the dot, prayer shawl on his shoulders, yarmulke on his bald head. He had walked from home, honoring the tradition that forbade riding in a vehicle on the Sabbath.

My father came home next. He'd driven across the Brooklyn Bridge in the Friday rush hour from Manhattan's garment district. Daddy sold dresses and suits wholesale to out of town buyers. He always arrived a few minutes before sundown, singing or whistling.

My grandfather on the other hand, had crept in so quietly we wouldn't have known he was there, had we not passed the living room where he sat silent on the couch, soft hands folded on his lap.

I called my diminutive, sweet-smiling grandfather "Peepa". I loved sitting close to him on our couch, looking into his blue eyes. I loved his blue eyes, the only ones in the family. My freckled redhead father had green eyes, much brighter than my everyday brown. Why was I, the only daughter, cheated of color? Olive skin. Brown eyes. Like Meema.

Peepa was a good listener. We'd sit together for hours after dinner, talking. He answered in Yiddish. It didn't matter that we didn't understand each other's words. Sometimes I read to him from the Book of Knowledge.

My Grandparents lived together sporadically. Their shabby little house on DeKalb Ave. was about ten blocks away from our apartment. None of the other relatives dared visit them, fearing a scolding from Meema, her unsought advice, fanatic opinions, nagging. She was reputed to be very clever with numbers, but too religious, obedient to all of God's rules, and harshly judgmental of infidels.

On the occasions that Grandma's screeching and screaming wore him down, Peepa would pack his pajamas, tallis, and yarmulke and move into our apartment and my brother's tiny room where Mother set up a cot for him next to Maurice's crib.

But unfailingly they sat together in peace each Sabbath. After sundown, after the candles were lit, the challah blessed and shared, my grandmother chewed Mother's perfect roast chicken silently in her chair next to Peepa, strands of her long white hair floating down her cheeks from her topknot. Not a peep out of her. We were grateful.