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Ceramics After Sundown
My Family's Jewish Diaspora Grief and Resilience

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I think to live in this world is learning first how to see the demons and then how to endure them....There are demons we must fight, and demons we must dance with.

–Abbie Goldberg, “Jewish Drag in Dangerous Times”

Introduction

In my eyes, Judaism's most beautiful rituals are those which center death. Immediately after a loved one's burial, we sit shiva, a seven-day period of rest and communal healing. We do not embalm; instead, our dead are buried in wooden coffins so that their bodies can return to dust. In the eleven months following the day of our loved one's passing, we are invited to rise during the Mourner's Kaddish in our synagogues—though anyone can stand and recite the blessing (“Jewish Prayers: Mourners Kaddish”). We burn a Yahrzeit candle on the annual anniversary of this death as a reminder of what is sacred. As evidenced by Proverbs 20:27, “the soul of a person is the candle of God” (“Yahrzeit”).

In this world of late-stage capitalism, we are not even allowed to acknowledge our grief, really, lest it impact our work and productivity. Time, healing, and progress are presented as linear narratives driven by scarcity and competition.

Judaism pushes against such rigid ways of being. When we sit shiva, we learn that these seven days of community are only the beginning of our grieving process, that there is spiritual connection in mutuality. Wooden coffins cater to the continuous cycle of living and dying. Mourner's Kaddish and Yahrzeit candles remind us that there is no linearity to healing. There is no timeline. In many cases, there is no line at all¹.

One Jewish practice in particular views the profound through the lens of intimacy, relation, death, *and* renewal. Interestingly enough, I learned of this tradition through a writing assignment for my secular elementary school.

For this project, we were to research the history of our names—not in a global context, but a sort of how-you-relate-to-your family exercise. I discovered that like many other Jews, I had inherited the name of someone who had passed away.

Most explanations of our naming tradition resemble pretty much everything else in Judaism—they're lengthy and vast. I'd like to believe that we don't name our children after living relatives because it would make gossiping about them so much harder. But more than anything, we inherit the names (or the initials) of our ancestors as a way of, quite literally, embodying their admirable traits (“Jewish Naming Practices”). Some even believe that part of the namesake's soul lives on in the one who is named. (“Jewish Naming Practices”). When we take on the name of an ancestor, we take on their history—and the history of our people.

Though I'd grow to appreciate my name, as an elementary school student, I was extremely intimidated by the assignment. And I was not alone in my negative reaction. The tragedy was in the details: some kids learned that they were named at random, and others learned that their names accompanied too grave a responsibility. I was in the latter camp, which, if anything, was preferable to being that one kid in my class named John III only because there was already a John I and John Junior and third time's the charm, I guess. But still. I lived in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was one of the only Jews in my grade. I felt isolated and altogether burdened by my discovery.

¹ It's important to note that nonlinearity is not unique to Judaism. A few instances of non-linearity in other cultures: the Aztec Calendar is, quite literally, a circle. Indigenous people have used talking circles and healing circles as a form of sharing wisdom and community for centuries. The Islamic Calendar is a lunar calendar, following the cycles of the moon. The Chinese Calendar, like the Jewish Calendar, is lunisolar (Hocken).

My name is Lily Eliana Levin, and I am named after Lillian Elizabeth Fleishman. Lillian was my maternal great-grandmother. She played a large role in raising my mother and developed Alzheimer's later in life. In my assignment, I wrote that Lillian wore lots of monochrome, especially purple. It seemed that she had a knack for standing out. Her husband, my great-grandfather, was a little dull, my mom had said. So Lillian ran the household. She was stubborn and opinionated and also my history.

This description of my great grandmother was human. However, Lillian had become the subject of my full-blown idealization (hey, I fully blame my underdeveloped prefrontal cortex at that time). For years, I thought of Lillian as perfect, a belief evidenced by absolutely nothing. In retrospect, I think I was still trying to process how all of this memory felt in my body. I was uncomfortable with uncertainty because uncertainty came with the potential for inadequacy. If Lillian was infallible then I could justify defaulting to the familiar language of perfection.

I am now an adult and I understand that Lillian was not faultless. Such knowledge has brought about some confusing internal reactions—my childhood beliefs, to some extent, are still standing in the way. As a result, I'll mention my predisposition for black-and-white throughout my thesis as I discover how much I have to unlearn.

I am trying to give myself as much grace as possible. I have been shaped by a world of binaries and their rigid linearity. On the personal level: I thought I had failed if I did not receive an A on every single quiz. I deserved to be punished if I had not chosen kindness and humility. I stole a snail shell from a preschool friend and felt such remorse that I spent hours making her an art piece, though it wasn't enough to forgive myself.

On the systemic level: I learned the national anthem of the Israel nation-state, a place that uses extreme violence to maintain its borders, before I knew what Palestine meant. I grew up believing that bad people went to jail and good people got good things. I worked for a summer in El Paso and witnessed every physical incantation of binary imaginable: the thirty-foot border wall, the armed soldiers, the searches and seizures, the devastating government-induced poverty.

Sometimes I ask myself why I chose to write about Lillian after all. I wasn't sure for a while. Now I think the answer is more that I finally reached a place in my life where I was ready to confront the unknown. Among all the broken things in this world, there is so much that is worth celebrating.

Lillian is not the only ancestor discussed in this narrative, though she is one of its central figures. I describe my relationship with both sets of grandparents and the core beliefs I have regarding each side of my family. I talk about the social forces of Jewish immigration and diaspora and white flight and incarceration. How we have been harmed and have harmed others too.

I thought of this project while lying in bed one afternoon. I couldn't sleep and yet I was completely exhausted. I like to imagine myself having been a cartoon character at that moment. There was a lightbulb on top of my head turning on and off and on and off repeatedly, not quite sure what to do with itself. I wanted to discuss my Jewish maternal and paternal history for selfish reasons, if only because I had so many unanswered questions. Lacking information, however, I had no idea where to start.

In the end, I decided to split my project into four parts. Parts I and IV are about my maternal grandmother Beverly's story of Lillian, who was her mother. Part II recounts my maternal lineage and understanding of the diaspora. Part III is about my relationship with my paternal grandparents and also their history.

I'd be lying if I said that writing any of this was easy. While I was working on the last portion of my project, my family experienced a tragedy that made everything feel a bit more jarring. But I am grateful for such an outlet of reflection. And I hope, more than anything, that it might speak to other people too, in one way or another.

When I am asked to summarize "Ceramics After Sundown," I'm never sure what to say and so I am usually silent. Editor Cindy Milstein has enough words for the both of us. They write in the brilliant *There is Nothing So Whole as a Broken Heart*—an anthology of Jewish essays which are the sources of each epigraph, "I try to intentionally embrace the double-sidedness of my diaspora: the one hand, my ancestral trauma compelling motion/flight as protection, and on the other, my ancestral resilience weaving roots/relations of magical, caring spaces as prefiguration" (Prologue, XVII). My words are carved from this double-sidedness, too. "Ceramics After Sundown," if anything, is both a testimony of reconciliation and a love letter to my heritage.

Part I

I had never been here before, but my bones had, my blood had, my tradition had.
-Ami Weintraub, "How to Scream, How to Sing"

I've always been able to tolerate the darkness more than the daytime. A barrage of sunlight in the peak hours of afternoon is guaranteed to cause my uncontrolled slumber. This happens during my waking hours, too. Following my first cup of coffee, after the rest of the world is moving, my brain, despite full sobriety, slips back-and-forth from feelings of drunkenness to hungover to drunkenness again, forever supplied by some unknown chemical mimicking Xanax in overload. After the sun sets, though, my energy is blissfully renewed. I'm still tired, but this time, it's not so debilitating. My chronic hypersomnia might damn me to nocturnalism were it not for my long sleep hours. Instead, I doze far into the morning. At some point I am shaken awake by ten different iPhone alarm clocks in two to three minute intervals.

In her last stages of life, my great-grandmother Lillian struggled with a near-opposite problem: at night, when her brain switched gears, her symptoms were exacerbated. Sundowning is what they call it, and it's a thing in about 20% of people with Alzheimer's and dementia ("Sleep Issues and Sundowning"). After dusk, Lillian would be more agitated, aggressive and heartbreakingly confused. She might lash out physically or verbally at those around her.

When my family spoke of my great-grandmother Lillian, we spoke of her monochrome outfits and her plates of brisket large enough to feed an army. Lillian kept cans and cans of food in case of a war or another devastating event of that magnitude, perhaps because she was acutely aware of her parents' struggles. Lillian was my mother's explanation for our consistently overstuffed cabinet in the land of suburbia and Harris Teeter. We rarely discussed Lillian's disease or any potential shortcomings; I believed my mom and Lillian's relationship to be absent of any conflict or emotional complication. And even when Lillian's Alzheimer's was mentioned, it was contextualized solely by my Grandmother Beverly's fear of developing this disorder. Grandma continued working well past retirement age because her genetics are predisposed to cognitive decline and because engaging the brain aids long-term working memory. My grandmother feared nothing more than she feared forgetting.

Our Jewish culture, too, is one that revolves around memory as a mechanism of preventing further genocide and preserving ancient tradition. To remember is to carry the weight we've been gifted by our ancestors. To forget is something else entirely.

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is horrifically cruel to those with the illness, their caregivers, and their family members, which is to say that it is horrifically cruel to everyone it touches. AD patients are at risk of being perceived by popular society as "the living dead" or "zombie-like," an attitude that, while often benign in intention, can be extremely dangerous, promoting the abuse or discarding of people living with AD (Karlawish). In a country that so heavily prioritizes the experience of the individual—and the autonomy and productivity of said individual—this diagnosis can justify the dehumanization of its victims. As a result, some have pushed back against the notion that to have Alzheimer's is to be bereft of

personhood. Reform Judaism promotes making sense of Alzheimer's through Biblical thought: the breath of life is still present, though the soul may be fading away (Medwin).

However, it's hard to know how to relate to someone with AD when their lucidity is not at the wheel. Lillian became physically abusive during episodes of increased anxiety and anger after sundown. Her loved ones—my mother and grandmother included—were deprived of any emotional or relational consistency. After each visit, they said their temporary goodbyes to a Lillian they might never really see again.

Like anyone else with AD, Lillian was a full person, and her life before disease was not any less important because of any later mental absence. If I wanted to get to know my great-grandmother, I thought (well, as best as someone can know someone they're never going to meet) I must try to do her justice. I must learn about who she was in full cognitive capacity. I knew that, even still, this was a selfish endeavor. As I sorted through Lillian's life and its artifacts, I might just discover a little more about the history of myself.

As I boarded the Penn-Station-bound Amtrak in Boston, I realized that I'd chosen to visit my grandmother on one of the hottest days of the year. Even worse, I'd somehow forgotten to pick the seat overlooking a window. I *never* forget to pick the seat overlooking the window. In any case, I was forced to stare through a thin slit of glass in the next row if I wanted any reminder of the outside world—a nausea-producing affair.

On the Long Island Railroad to my grandmother's station, I committed a graver offense. My indictment was given for sitting inadvertently in the backward-facing row. I'd placed my luggage in storage directly above my head; it would not be accessible from another aisle. I braced myself, turning my neck horizontal. Facing perpendicular was preferable than being opposite the direction of the train. Damn motion sickness—and no dramamine left to remedy it.

I arrived at the station sweating profusely, my hyperhidrosis in overdrive. Grandma Beverly saw me instantly from the window of her gray Corolla. Her greeting took the form of a comment about how skinny I was looking these days. I was embarrassed by her unwanted attention to a body I'd never quite felt comfortable inhabiting. The remark itself, though, was unsurprising. The women on both sides of my immediate and extended family have always viewed pounds as something to be shed. I'm not sure where down the line this standard began, but either way, it was present in my maternal grandmother and sometimes in me, too.

After I climbed into the passenger seat, Grandma asked me where we were headed. I told her that, despite my nausea, I wanted to see my grandma's old house and school. I mean, when else would I get such an opportunity? She complied readily.²

When we eventually arrived at my grandmother's current house in Nassau County, my body still felt absolutely disgusting. I showered immediately, desperate to rid my skin of the two turbulent train rides. After getting dressed, I joined my grandmother on her bed alongside her scruffy terrier, Charlie.

² I describe the details of this experience in Part II.

As per usual, I promptly began complaining. This time, the subject was my hips and their aching. In response, Grandma told me I should just wait until I get older because then everything will hurt and no one will want to listen to you talk about it. We chuckled softly.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I’m going to get the picture of your Great-Grandma Lillian and Great-Grandpa Harry on their wedding day,” Grandma suddenly exclaimed. “It just sits in my closet and I thought you might want it.”

I did want the photo, but I wasn’t sure what function it would serve in my living area and noted that it would most likely also collect dust in my closet. Nonetheless, my grandmother returned with a black-and-white image encased in a concave glass frame. I brought the picture closer to my face. As I studied the details, Grandma left the room to retrieve a few other four-by-six prints of Lillian and Harry during various stages of parenthood. Their faces were stern and rigid but I noticed a spark of playfulness in Lillian’s eyes.

I thought about a phone conversation I’d had with my grandmother weeks earlier. She mentioned a narrative she’d written about her relationship with her parents. Grandma told me that, one time, she gave the story to some sort of professional, and all he had said after reading was, well, “I’m sorry you had to grow up this way.” The essay was apparently quite heavy—this being the reason for her refusal to read it to me over the phone. We’ll read it when you visit, she’d told me.

“These are nice,” I commented, “but what about the journal entry you told me you’d share today?”

In simply mentioning this story, I felt strangely apprehensive. It was, as I’d understood from our previous conversation, filled with anecdotal evidence of Lillian and Harry’s parental misbehavior. My perception of my namesake would be permanently altered—and, let’s be real, probably not in the best way.

Anyway, Grandma agreed to show me the essay. As always, my curiosity outweighed my desire for caution. She walked toward a shelf at the top of her closet and grabbed a few lined sheets of notebook paper, gifting them to my outstretched hands. When I tried to read her writing, however, I came up empty.

“This is illegible,” I finally snorted, giving up my trek through the jungle of letters for what felt like a lifetime but was probably only thirty seconds.

“They just don’t teach cursive like they used to,” Grandma retorted.

“I learned cursive. This isn’t cursive,” I said. A half-truth. Both of us were holding out for the other to admit faulty judgment.

“Whatever,” Grandma said. I looked over silently.

“Well, do you want me to read it to you?” she asked, meeting my expression.

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

“This is gonna take a half hour. It’s really long,” she sighed. I could hear in that long breath years and years of tired.

“What else have we got to do?” I asked, running my hand through Charlie’s silky fur. He wagged his tail thump-thump across the pillow.

Grandma's essay started like this: Lillian was born to Russian immigrants in Brownsville, a neighborhood in Brooklyn that was, at the time, an insular Jewish community. When Lillian married Harry, the two initially remained in Brownsville, only relocating to Queens after Lillian's father Morris passed away. Formerly a domestic worker who performed the duties expected of married women, Lillian took up odd jobs to compensate for the loss of her father's earnings. Her stints ranged from school bus driving to teaching to working at Abercrombie & Fitch and finally to insurance company employee. Because Lillian did not have a formal education, she was relegated to low-level positions at each place of work. It didn't matter, though. My great-grandmother had never been set on making her life any easier.

"My mother was extremely hard of hearing and didn't want to wear a hearing aid. She had nerve damage," Grandma read aloud from her notes on the paper.

Apparently, this refusal of medical treatment was a pattern, a testament to Lillian's extreme stubbornness and pride. And her anti-medicine sentiment didn't solely apply to her own troubles. After my grandmother's late brother Alan hurt his arm severely from a down-the-stairs tumble, Lillian refused to take him to a specialist. Alan spent day-to-day life in unnecessary pain until his limb finally healed on its own. My grandmother remembered being disgusted by Alan's maltreatment, chalking it up to parental neglect, if not outright abuse.

This purposeful lack of engagement with a system upon which my great-grandmother would later so heavily rely could have, in addition to stubbornness, been an indication of her distrust of Western medicine. Maybe it was Lillian's normalization—or glorification—of suffering. Maybe it was caused by her more pronounced pattern of inordinate frugality. Though the family was working class, Grandma said, there was no need for Lillian's extreme shopping habits, many of which were undoubtedly illegal.

For example, my great-grandmother liked to take any souvenir she could get away with taking, a practice known as, well, serial shoplifting. The family wore plastic shoes, always. Lillian marked down prices at department stores when this behavior was still commonplace, despite its criminality.

I, admittedly, found her behavior legendary.

"I mean, you all didn't have any money at all. Way to take from the capitalist system that's tried to scam us," I exclaimed.

Grandma rolled her eyes, used to my blasphemous rhetoric. "Not something to endorse, Lily," she responded, her voice a warning.

"Why?"

"Eh, you could get in big trouble for doing that."

"But what if you got away with it?" I responded. I didn't have the guts or initiative to imitate Lillian's actions, but I nevertheless admired her. And given her position in society, the confidence necessary to pull off countless heists seemed an impossible goalpost—one she'd cleared every time.

My grandmother was not convinced. “My mother certainly didn’t get away with it. Every month, she sent a check of the same amount to a company. Turns out she’d been caught shoplifting. Arrested and everything. Didn’t stop her, though. She was addicted.”

This clarification brought my parade of verbal anti-capitalism abruptly to a halt. Addiction to shoplifting is known as kleptomania, and it’s not about rebellion or even necessarily personal gain (though Lillian did phrase her tendencies as the latter). It’s a disorder of impulse that plays out inside the store and inside the brain’s chemically-charged reward system (“Kleptomania”).

Kleptomania brought to mind the tale of the overachieving high school senior a few classes above me. She was charged with stealing \$500 worth of Kohl’s clothing. Before her arrest, she was the recipient of a prestigious scholarship at the University of Chicago; the school later rescinded her acceptance entirely. The decision didn’t much change her life trajectory—she’s financially successful now and a consultant for McKinsey. But that’s not the point. At the time, we all joked about why she’d chosen to steal from Kohl’s, of all places. I mean, she could’ve picked something a little more classy for her arrest record.

Like my grandmother, however, hers was never a choice. Whether she walked into Kohl’s or Prada, there existed an uncontrollable urge to steal. I felt a pang of guilt for how we treated this girl at the time—and for the way I’d stigmatized kleptomania in general. I’d known addiction ran in my family, but I’d been previously unaware of the ways in which it manifested.

As I continued to reflect upon my misconceptions, I remembered something my mother had said about my great-grandma: kleptomania was not her sole issue. Lillian juggled many mental health struggles, one of which was probably a personality disorder.

Even growing up, as Lillian spoiled her silly, my mother understood the woman’s starkly contrasting treatment of Grandma Beverly. I’d heard, during an interview with my late cousin Burt earlier this summer, of my grandmother being a difficult child. But Burt’s perspective was mere spectatorship, one-sided at best.

Lillian was apparently blind to her own faults, speaking of herself in the sort of exaggerated grandiosity which is inevitably rooted in self-delusion. In taking into account how intergenerational trauma works, it’s probable that Lillian had a strained or tough relationship with one or both of her parents as well, though none of this is certain. In any case, there were no apologies given—not by Lillian, at least.

Harry wasn’t any more caring than his wife, Grandma Beverly had said. My great-grandfather lacked Lillian’s stubbornness but displayed no less emotional distance.

“He was hard to characterize,” Grandma read from the paper, pausing for a few seconds to squint in hopes of correctly discerning her own handwriting. “I think he had a difficult time being a father because he had no role model.”

Harry was essentially orphaned as a child. He enrolled in a formal education after having experienced the ins and outs of a tumultuous foster care system. It was only in school that he learned his name. I’m not sure what he had been going by previously, but if anything, Harry’s confusion surrounding something so ubiquitous was proof in itself of the extreme

emotional neglect he'd endured. After having spent so much time digging at the roots of my own name, I couldn't begin to understand how life might've looked had my search been impossible.

Of course this childhood trauma had acutely impacted Harry's worldview and perception of fatherhood. He was what our capitalist society might call functional, though he spoke with a stutter and he lived with a mental disability. In addition to his developmental problems, Harry was rigidly strict and controlling. My grandma and her brother were subject to seemingly arbitrary restrictions.

"As a child. I remember that after he ate dinner, read the paper, watched TV, and went to sleep. He had limited interactions with me and Alan, and my mom generally ran things. He never spoke while eating unless he yelled at my brother or me. My dad did not like us going into the refrigerator. And if we did, he would watch us and monitor anything we took. I guess it was because he didn't have a stable home as a child. And food was very important to him," Grandma said of her father.

I found my grandmother's interpretation of her father's behavior overly generous, though perhaps I was too judgmental. I'd conjured an image in my head of a tight-lipped Harry only opening his mouth to chew his food or reprimand his children. Needless to say, the picture didn't sit well.

With Lillian acting as the food hoarder and Harry acting as the food police, the attitude of the household around eating must have been tense and unpredictable. Both parents had legitimate reasons for their actions, but an explanation does not, in itself, reverse any harm that might have been perpetuated. I decided then that I would have more grace for my grandmother when she was commenting on my body or engaging in unhealthy dietary restriction. I knew the origin of her belief system, and it wasn't like societal messaging had encouraged any of us to think in the opposite direction.

Turns out Grandma Beverly's earliest true memory of her father, though, did not take place at the dinner table. Instead, it was when Harry bought her a plastic sewing machine.

"My mother yelled at him because I didn't need it. I had no say in the matter. According to my mother, I never needed anything....I guess I never asked for anything. This whole burden just caused me to become very resentful and angry," Grandma said.

Where does one go with all of this baggage to hold? I wasn't sure. I was, however, acutely acquainted with this feeling. I had always been an extremely anxious kid. Somewhere in the trenches of my childhood, I learned that needs were merely a distraction. That survival depended upon shrinking oneself to appease the people around me. As I grew older, though, this coping mechanism became more and more maladaptive. In tucking my feelings away to serve others, I had completely abandoned my own emotions, even to the point of distrusting them. Recently, as I've worked on unlearning these habits, I've noticed that they inevitably result in resentment—resentment at oneself for being invisible, at others for reinforcing this invisibility.

"She said I was nothing," my Grandma Beverly recounted of her and her mother's reaction.

Resentment, for my grandma, might've looked like rage at her mother for denying her needs, and rage at herself for not speaking up for them. Though I couldn't quite picture how Beverly might've processed Lillian's verbal maltreatment. I found myself simultaneously discerning my negative feelings for Lillian and my closeness to the person she most heavily mistreated.

"My mother wanted me to get a boyfriend so badly; she said that my boyfriend could buy stuff for me instead. Then when I turned up with Fred, an Italian Catholic, that was the end of it." Grandma Beverly said softly.

By "the end of it," I knew my grandmother meant a break in an already-tenuous relationship. This testimony didn't help Lillian's case either.

However, I interpreted my great-grandmother's words, interestingly enough, to be a sign of vicarious yearning. I had learned weeks ago that before marrying Harry, Lillian had a boyfriend of whom her father did not approve. Apparently, though the man was Jewish, he was unemployed, a condition Morris deemed unacceptable in a potential husband.

When my great-grandmother became the age of the too-old-to-be-unmarried, it was about urgency rather than love. Harry was someone Lillian settled for. Maybe, underneath all the patriarchal messaging Lillian projected, there existed a sense of regret or sentimentality.

No wonder my grandmother got married at sixteen, though. She was both invisible and without a man to complete her: a double whammy. Sure, Lillian viewed this marriage to gentele Fred as some sort of rebellion, but from the outside, it seemed inevitable given all that she had encouraged.

Lacking parental support and guidance, my grandmother dropped out of high school, already pregnant with my mother. Later, though, my great-grandmother was an extremely important presence in my mom's life. She assisted Beverly heavily with childcare and, after moving to Florida, would host my mom and aunt every summer. My great-grandmother continued to treat her daughter poorly, but any of Lillian's previous abandonment or neglect fortunately yielded to the pressures of familial responsibility.

After learning more of my grandmother's home situation, I was hit suddenly with the disassociation that is inevitable to the spectatorship of one's ancestry. My name is Lily, derived from Lillian, yet there was nothing about its origin that I could consciously relate to.

Lillian wore monochrome. I'll never be seen in public with an outfit of less than two colors. Lillian cooked extravagantly. I prefer to microwave my salmon on high for three minutes. Lillian was verbally abusive. This is a character trait I have fallen victim to interpersonally and therefore view with hatred and resentment. Lillian married a man who was submissive, lacked emotional intelligence, and acted out much of his hurt unintentionally. I fall for people who are the opposite (take this as you will). Lillian preferred the bliss of willful ignorance. I'd rather die by exposure than live immune to suffering.

"I'm not sure what to say," I responded, still processing all the information I'd recently heard and the gravity of its meaning, "I'm sorry. This seems like a lot to remember."

"We're not even halfway," Grandma said. "We haven't gotten to her illness."

"Oh," I responded blankly. My mind was racing. I could barely sympathize with Lillian in her state of full cognizance. What would happen when I heard about how much worse she would become, albeit for reasons beyond her control? The narrative of my namesake—which was meant to help me figure out who I was—had left me with a restless

feeling of betrayal. And there was also the guilt, yes, the guilt, for learning about all of this intergenerational pain and harm and thinking of nothing but what it might add to my story.

I took a deep breath and recentered myself, arms hugging my torso in preparation of the unavoidable. I would listen actively and compassionately to Lillian's decline, and I wouldn't think about what all of it meant until after. Essentially, I would push all of the bad things I might be feeling into a drawer of the nearby nightstand.

What if, though, when it came time to process my response later, I realized that Lillian's story meant nothing to me at all? What if it was all just pain and grief and things that could have been? How could I approach this outcome with anything other than selfishness and personal responsibility?

I turned to my grandmother. She was patiently awaiting a response.

"Let's keep going," I decided.

"You sure?"

I nodded. If she took the time to write this so beautifully and read it with such conviction, the least I could do was pay attention. Grandma licked her finger and shuffled into the next page of the story.

Part II

How do we bridge our differences when all we have are stories colliding against each other?

-Moira Leibowitz, “Dialectics of Mourning, Dialectics of Bricks”

When I am confronted with the label “endangered,” I typically think of Siberian tigers and leatherback sea turtles, of creatures dying so quickly by the hands of our leaders that we, as individuals, have been awarded the guilt of preservation. The term endangered, though, while holding the same definition across all relevant themes, refers to so much more. It applies to the living and breathing. Cultures, heritage sites, languages. To be endangered is to be vulnerable to suffocation and pollution and slaughter.

UNESCO’s endangered language list warrants a lifetime of scrolling, and it spans centuries and centuries of loss. The classification system encompasses five categories—vulnerable to extinct—in order of most to least severe (“Endangered languages: the full list”). The level of endangerment depends on how comprehensively the language is passed to the next generation (“Endangered languages”).

“Yiddish (Israel)” takes the eighth column of the dataset, with a “definitely endangered” status, at three million speakers (“Endangered languages”). But the number of speakers doesn’t matter as much as one might think—at least in comparison to the generational makeup. For example, Uspantek, a Mayan language introduced to me by a soft-spoken man named Juan in El Paso, has only 3971 speakers, yet it is merely classified as “vulnerable” (“Endangered Languages”). This is because Juan spoke this language with his children, and it is his village’s primary tongue.³

While it has been passed down less comprehensively, Yiddish, like Uspantek, has been negatively impacted by the politics of the nation-state. Peretz Markish, author of an anarchist 80-page text written before his arrest under Stalin, penned the following phrase (Markish, Book Two, Poem 9, p. 81, trans. Anna Torres): *Un vos iz a grenets un vos iz a rand, Az s’frilingen kinder fun land iber land? / And what is a border and what is a limit when children are springing from land to land?*

Though it may be a dying language, the subversion of borders inherent in Jewish transnational diaspora has ensured the longevity of Yiddish within, of all things, American popular culture. From my personal experience, one source of pride for the United States’ Ashkenazim is the subtle Yiddish sprinkled into everyday English vocabulary, a phenomenon directly credited to Jewish scriptwriters, authors, and comedians (Muraskin). There are New York bagels and Macbook glitches and long schleps to a cousin’s house on the weekends. What is so special about these terms is their untranslatability. Schlep means nothing but schlep. Glitch means nothing but glitch. Bagel means nothing but bagel. And I would be remiss to mention that Yiddish coined the term kvetching (which, to be clear, is not the same as complaining). Kvetching is how one moves through the world with self-conscious realism, performative humor, and insightful cynicism (Engber). One example of kvetching, which

³ Though, when Juan enters the United States, he will be inevitably forced into speaking English or Spanish. And with climate change in Latin America driving unprecedented waves of immigration—especially from farming communities—Indigenous languages like Uspantek are in greater danger of disappearing altogether.

probably occurred in my own home: Hey! The dog ate the couch! There's nowhere to sit and watch Seinfeld!

I might be boasting my knowledge of these particular words, but I, like many of my peers, am not a speaker of the Yiddish language. My generation's lack of knowledge is indicative of our tumultuous history. Yiddish is a Central and Eastern European language that originated from Jews in Germany and the surrounding areas (Walfish). It was created by combining cultures and native tongues (Walfish). I think of Yiddish as a language grounded in its community's distinct ways of being and the fluidity of its origins. Yiddish is full of humor and life; it is a language of plays and folktales and songs.

The downfall of Yiddish can be traced back to the Holocaust, other instances of anti-Semitic nationalism, Americanization, and forced and willful assimilation (Walfish). I was dismayed to see that UNESCO listed the central location of Yiddish as Israel, a country which outlawed local Yiddish theater group productions—a cornerstone of Yiddish culture—until 1951 (Walfish). Even today, Israel seems to swear by Hebrew as the correct expression of Judaism. Why? Israel claims to be a space of overt nationalism and militarization. Hebrew is the biblical language of the Israelites—one which can be weaponized as an argument for Jewish statehood. Yiddish, however, is the language of people who transcend borders; people who have resisted oppression. It does not not bode well with, say, IDF soldiers wearing submachine guns.

Unfortunately, the connotation of Yiddish as a marginalized tongue was also what drove Lillian's decision not to pass the language down to her children. And so Yiddish was buried with my great-grandmother. It was always meant to be that way.

I like to think of myself as someone who is mourning this language, as someone who would have ensured Yiddish's intergenerational inheritance. But as I write these words, I realize that when I'd visited New York, I did not go to Lillian's grave.

This decision wasn't intentional. I just never got around to it. I, too, had been guilty of viewing time through the lens of scarcity. In other words, I did not look to past and future generations. Instead, I prioritized the urgency of the living.

If I have any hope of spiritual redemption, it lies with the small old Yiddish autobiography that has fallen from my bedside table. I'd found this book while poring over the depths of the Internet a few months earlier in search of a distant ancestor. This ancestor's name was Bernard Chasnov and he was Lillian's uncle and he was a Revolutionary. Yes, the capital-R kind of Revolutionary, the brand of militant comrade who pranks union-busters (an incident described in great detail) and is imprisoned in labor camps and acts on sheer impulse haughtily and gracefully (Chasanow 16). The kind who lives to tell the tale.

Bernard's autobiography is called *Teg un yorn: funem lebn fun a Yidishn arbeter*, or *Days and Years from the Life of a Jewish Laborer*. The narrative was published posthumously in 1956 and includes an introduction by someone called Avraham Bik, which I used my impeccable Google translate skills to decipher. Bik says of Chasnov, "He hardly writes very smoothly, perhaps not sufficiently elaborately, but he managed to bring out the truth of a beautiful ideological life" (Chasanow 6).

Well, at least we know the guy's being honest. I could imagine Bik's hypothetical kvetching after finishing the book: Oh Vey! This writing is terrible!

All in all, a quintessential Yiddish introduction.

Why I spent about thirty dollars on this hardly-written-very-smoothly book is a reasonable question to ask. I tried to tell myself that this purchase single-handedly redeemed my English-speaking soul, but alas, this was not the case. My underlying motivations were closer to arrogance and isolation. I wanted so badly to have revolutionary blood, an ode to my self-importance. And I wanted so badly to have an ancestor to idealize, an ode to my loneliness.

I had not experienced the loss of Lillian, but I had lost the idea of her, this due to my own unmanageable expectations. Bernard, with his Jewish Santa Claus face and unkempt beard and wild eyes, provided an alternative source of self-projection. One could compare such a phenomenon, perhaps, to wishing upon a star. You might know, deep down, that the fiery ball of dust will never respond to your desire. And yet, for a moment, you find comfort in the promise of magical thinking.

Bernard Chasnov's story was never about me, but I felt like it had to be some sort of sign. As an individual, he was too easy to mythologize. My belief in his character could never be verified or, more importantly, undermined, by any living relative. Bernard had a relationship only with Morris, whom he joined in the United States in 1909 following his imprisonment and flee to Siberia.

Though, in Ellis Island, we found no records of Bernard's arrival.

Tours of Ellis Island are included in a groupon-like passage wherein one pays for tickets for the cruise—yes, that's what it's actually called—and the Statue of Liberty, if so desired. We departed from the hotel following an all-you-can-eat breakfast that had my grandmother swearing she was not going to eat another meal. I told her that was unhealthy and she really had only eaten a bagel anyway, though I was fighting thoughts of restriction myself. Regardless, we found an Uber, trekked three hundred meters in the unbearable heat, boarded the not-cruise cruise ship, and set off for our destination.

Ellis Island had been converted into a proto-typical museum of history, and it was smaller than expected. The only difference from, say, your neighborhood art museum was a refurbished old cafeteria. The banner by our tables said something like the following: the immigrants ate here too, pretend you're them for a second, how might you feel, *really*?

In fear of being overly facetious, I swallowed my chicken-avocado-honey-mustard hot dog as if it were a competition. Grandma and I's decision to eat at the museum had been one of instant regret. At the checkout counter, the employee looked at me with disgust: what *is* that? I'm dairy and gluten free, I had said, catching myself before I cracked a joke that might get me kicked off the island. I was suffering, too; in my dietary restrictions, I had truly *felt* the immigrant experience.

In all seriousness, this landmark had indeed been a place of immense fear and loss. For one reason or another, I'd envisioned Ellis Island to be intimidating in size and appearance. It was neither, a fact I found to be even more troubling given the trauma it had

engendered in so many who passed through its doors. In other words, if the architecture of Ellis Island was not to blame, then all culpability could be placed within these American systems and their people. And in Russian, Ellis Island was known as the “Island of Tears” —everyone cried there (Weinberg 85). Many people died by suicide (Weinberg 85). In the end, despite completing the trip across the Atlantic Ocean, some found it better to avoid what might come after.

Following our condiment-heavy lunch, Grandma and I scoped out the landscape of the site. We found a plaque marking the Stairs of Separation, where some had met a ferry into the Promised Land and others had met detention rooms. One exhibit featured old passenger tickets and entry documents and Yiddish posters dating back to a time when Yiddish was an acceptable and widely-spoken language. The main hall reminded me of the Boston Public Library, though every nineteenth-century building in these parts looked pretty much the same to a Southerner. There was a sense of elegance in this room amidst memories of all the poverty and destruction. (These days, no one tries to hide it.)

Grandma and I subsequently encountered a room of big 2010s style Dell desktop computers. We were confused until we caught sight of the boldface instructions. Pay ten dollars, print out a receipt, go to a station, find your ancestors! Quick! You only have thirty minutes! (Of course, said instructions neglected to mention that an individual could locate their ancestors through the same website in the comfort of, say, their living room.) Though we eventually searched for Bernard Chasnov within the Ellis Island People Finder, my grandmother and I’s chief goal when accessing these archives was to discover the records of my great-great-grandpa Morris.

After ten minutes and three dollars and thirty-three cents dollars down the drain, we’d come up empty. No Morris—or anyone with the last name of Chasnov, for that matter.

Alas, we persevered. Cortisol pumping, we finally tested the novel idea of searching for the Chasnov surname in alternate spellings. We hit a match after five minutes at Chasanoff. Sabsche, another brother of my great-great grandfather, immigrated from my family’s hometown of Witebsk, Russia—now Vitebsk, Belarus—in 1911 on a ship named Columbia to stay with Morris. His nationality: Hebrew (America’s code word for Jewish). We never found Morris, though. My great-great-grandfather may have not gone through Ellis Island. Or maybe he was never documented. There was an entire laundry list of explanations.

When we were down to ten minutes remaining, Grandma suggested we try her first husband’s side of the equation.

“Why not? We haven’t even thought to look,” she said, her thin eyebrows arched in curiosity.

“Who are we looking for?” I asked, if only because I’d never known.

“Alfonso,” Grandma said quietly. “He—”

“Who’s that?” I interrupted.

“I’m getting to it! He was Fred’s father,” she reprimanded.

Fred, meaning grandma's ex-husband Fred. The one who had died alone in upstate New York, an event which necessitated a police visit to each of his daughter's houses to present the information.⁴

"Okay, I'll put Alfonso's name in," I responded after a moment, typing Alfonso Panico clack-clack in the search box.

There were two of them. Both from Italy, understandably. Though only one Alfonso was born in the North, the site of my heritage. To me, Northern Italy is simply sunburns and Catholicism and chalky white skin. None of the self-proclaimed tenacity and affection of the Sicilian people whatsoever.

I knew Fred like I knew Northern Italy, which is to say I didn't know him at all. Though this was not for lack of trying; I had scoured the internet for Fred's obituary years earlier and closed my browser hours later, empty-handed. And I only had seen one photo of Fred once—in passing. He was sixteen at the time, arm in arm with my grandmother. Blonde hair and striking blue eyes.

I found it impossible to envision what Fred might've looked like at the time of his death—or even in middle age or early adulthood. Fred, to me, was the dad who neglected—the father who couldn't face parenthood as a teenager. The man found drugs more familiar than his children.

I didn't want to be anything like him, this infamous addict who made grand promises always before running away. I've asked myself time and time again: for which of my faults might he refuse responsibility? My addictive personality—was that him embodied? What about my fluctuating sense of self? My sleepiness? My sloppiness?

I knew I'd never find the answers. But none of it really mattered anyway. I am descended from Fred and I am descended from Bernard and I am descended from my parents and none of these people define me. Solely sharing genetic material with another individual does not require that I impose their ways of being on my abundant definition of selfhood.

My only association with Fred continues to be the fact of my blood and my sunburns. Yet I was, at that moment in Ellis Island, face to face with a digitized record of his father's Atlantic voyage—the predeterminate of everything. It felt inexplicably intimate.

I scrolled through that 1915 ship manifest and knew it was all I was going to get. Two minutes remaining and it was time to let go.

"I think we found everything for today," I announced, eyes tracing and retracing the curled lips of Alfonso's penned ink.

Grandma Beverly nodded in agreement. Plus, neither of us was willing to pay an extra ten dollars, even if it granted us the permission to sit lazily in our plush chairs for a couple more minutes.

Next in our itinerary, Grandma decided, was what she called "The Film," a thirty-minute documentary about life on Ellis Island.

"What neoliberal propaganda will they give us next?" I asked.

⁴ Our police visit was relatively uneventful. Unfortunately for my aunt, her little terrier wasn't feeling so jolly. The usually amicable dog sensed danger and lunged for the officer's scrotum. The officer arrested the poor animal and sued my aunt, given that canines cannot legally represent themselves in a court setting. The case was settled, eventually, through the sticky hands of a mega-insurance company.

“Oh my gosh, stop having such a cynical attitude! If anything, it’s another half hour of sitting before we have to go outside and face the suffocating temperature.” Grandma rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out in that characteristic rude-but-not-really expression.

That shut me up (though I wasn’t wrong, entirely). A grave masculine voice accompanied B-roll footage of starving white faces, narrating the story of families who’d come from nothing and weren’t deported and learned English and became good people called Americans. I chuckled dryly at the absurdity of such glamorous assimilation. All I could think about were the broken backs and knees and spines I’d seen when working at the shelter in El Paso. The starving people of Ellis Island were not greeted with a border wall to fall from or eight-hundred dollar ankle bracelets to monitor their every movement. Those things didn’t exist yet. If they did, they would’ve been used.

After procrastinating our journey in the halls of one final exhibit, Grandma and I reluctantly boarded the next cruise back to New York City. We’d gotten some of what we’d come looking for, but not enough. It’s always like that in reality—never quite what you might’ve imagined.

Despite grandma and I’s failure to locate the records of Morris’s arrival during our trip to Ellis Island, I did already have some of his documentation. One took the form of a certificate marking his first address in the United States—Herzl Avenue, a street in Brownsville, Brooklyn. The other was proof of his association in a Jewish men’s organization. My grandma had sent these papers in a manilla envelope postmarked to Raleigh a few weeks prior to my visit. Though they could not provide a firsthand account of my Great-Great Grandfather Morris, they were something, and something is another word for potential. And, at the risk of sounding overly cliché, potential is what creates a story.

The story of Morris, as I know it, began with his marriage to a Jewish woman called Sadie. Lillian was their third child. At the time, in the early twentieth century, Brownsville was seen as a working-class Jewish “ghetto” rife with crime (Pritchett 26). Loew’s Pitkin Theater was the best place to go then, a space of Jewish performers which included a Yiddish theater (Pritchett 30-31). Brownsville was also a place with a history of labor agitation and radicalism; it was the site of the nation’s first birth control clinic (Pritchett 36). The neighborhood boasted a Socialist Sunday School more involved than nearly every other branch nationwide (Pritchett 35).

As the twentieth century progressed, Brownsville became the subject of white urban development (think: gentrifier) nostalgia. The neighborhood, by the 1960s a majority-minority community (Pritchett 206), suffered immensely at the hands of the city-sponsored urban renewal program (Pritchett 243). Those who had at some point viewed the area with endearment expressed nothing but condescension. One reporter echoed this sentiment when discussing the neighborhood in the 1970s: “Once a temperate Jewish ghetto, Brownsville today is little more than char, rubble, filth, and the residue of violence” (Pritchett 242). Contemporary Brownsville, however, has experienced a partial revitalization due to increased business and economic opportunity (Pritchett 270).

My grandmother and I encountered Brownsville at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), of all places. We'd intended to visit the MoMA simply to experience its aesthetic. With Brownsville on display, however, I was compelled again to confront my family's history.

MoMA's Brownsville took the form of a computer-generated map of seventeen single neighborhood blocks: the "million dollar blocks," it said (Kurgan et al.). The question: how much money in this small area is being spent on incarceration? The answer (which you probably could've guessed): seventeen million dollars. The total number of incarcerated people from these blocks: 109. The year: 2003.

I wondered why the data was twenty years old. Certainly this high-budget museum could've conducted a new and improved research survey. My only semblance of conclusion was that this map might have been purposefully outdated. A statement was being made here, maybe. Something like, imagine how much these blocks cost now. Imagine how many more cages.

As illustrated by the map, white flight dramatically changed Brownsville (and Lillian's second neighborhood, Cambria Heights) socially, politically, and economically. Although Brownsville's earlier, mostly Jewish population displayed a significant degree of racial tolerance (Pritchett 46), tolerance is not acceptance is not anti-racist practice. The arrival of public housing, initially popular to these residents (Pritchett 63), later created divisions in Brownsville (Pritchett 126). Slums were designated unlivable, and landlords, the majority of whom were middle and working-class, lost their properties (Pritchett 64).

In the 1950s, with the increased construction of largely minority-rented public housing, Black churches began to replace neighborhood synagogues (Pritchett 139). Like my great-grandmother, white Jewish residents cited increased crime as their final impetus to move out of Brownsville (Pritchett 153). Scholars of neighborhood change, however, have argued that this mentality was mostly a result of confirmation bias (Pritchett 153). In other words, these residents believed their neighborhoods were racialized sites of escalating criminal activity and used every instance of lawlessness as proof of their theory.

In reality, white Jewish flight in Brownsville was multifaceted. Community members wanted to follow their synagogues, and many in Brownsville had been subject to closure (Pritchett 149). Socioeconomic mobility was the largest underlying cause of neighborhood change (Pritchett 151); the Jews who stayed in Brownsville after the first wave of movers—a population that included Lillian and her family—were among the poorest in the Jewish community (Pritchett 171). Finally, racial prejudice and fear were certainly to blame (Pritchett 149). In this way, Jews both were victims and perpetrators of systemic oppression and trauma, infusing a hierarchy that placed them, in the 50s and 60s, below Christian whites and above everyone else.

This mentality was present in my great-great grandfather Morris, a tailor by trade, who owned slums eventually cleared to make way for public housing. Morris and Lillian, who managed her father's properties as he grew older, looked down on their tenants, many of whom were Black and Puerto Rican. No matter how poor you might have been, the old adage goes, there is always someone poorer. No matter how much discrimination you might face, there's always someone who faces it more. To Morris and his daughter, solidarity with other marginalized groups was a missed opportunity for assimilation. It was not ever an option.

The racist and classist attitudes that my ancestors adopted might've felt to them like a survival mechanism, as did refusing to pass on their language to the next generation, as did rescinding any ties to a form of culture subdued by oppression. This does not justify or excuse any violent racist actions. More than anything, it contextualizes socio-political conflicts Jews have been tasked with confronting for centuries. On one side there is xenophobic fear. On the other side there is something else. Something that, to me, feels like how Yiddish might sound: liberating, musical, reverberating with love.

I am a product of my ancestor's decisions. This doesn't make me at fault, per se, but I am tasked with responsibility. What that means I am still figuring out. A few ideas come to mind at the moment: giving reparations, fighting for housing justice, moving through the world with acute self-awareness. None of this, though, will be enough. The sad truth is that one cannot reverse generational harm. The only option is to dilute it.

Grandma and I's earlier journey to my maternal family's second residence in Cambria Heights, Queens—following my pickup at the Long Island Railroad Station—was also one of reconciliation. Though initially even my suggestion that we visit the old house was met with disapproval.

"There's a lot of drugs and crime in that area. It isn't safe," Grandma had said.

Crimegrade.org assigns a grade to each zip code based on data per-capita. Cambria Heights received an A+ ("The Safest and Most Dangerous Places in 11411, NY"). My zip code—a white, suburban Raleigh neighborhood? B- ("The Safest and Most Dangerous Places in 27612, NC").

"Oh please," I'd responded. "How do you even know about that?"

Grandma's answer: "I just know." It reminded me of all of the similarly-absurd *because I said so's* made to be sound logic by my childhood authority figures.

"Is it because the neighborhood is predominately Black?" I'd asked. The census zip code data listed the region as 93.3% Black ("Zip Code 11411").

Her response was indignant and self-righteous. "Of course not!"

At the end of the day, I'd won the battle. Grandma Beverly had been persuaded to take me to Cambria Heights, albeit with a little help from crimegrade.org and my mother. I knew my grandmother was curious about what the house would look like too, whether or not she was willing to admit it.

We parked the Toyota on the sidewalk in order to stare entranced at the house from the rolled-down window. The exterior of the old residence on Murdock Avenue looked exactly the same, with the exception of a brick wall where the garage once stood, Grandma said. Toys lined the front of the wall—little plastic cars with purple wheels, a scooter, pool toys, tires. There was a second entrance by the former garage. My grandmother nodded knowingly.

"An illegal tenant, they all do that. It's cheaper."

"Does their landlord not care?" I asked.

"Guess not," Grandma shrugged.

The stairs leading up to the main door were cement-lined, the detail slowly fading. An external AC unit perched on one of the windows: no central air in these houses, in this neighborhood, in the Northeast entirely, heatwaves be damned. The entire structure was narrow and connected on either side to the other units which lined the pavement.

I turned to face my grandmother and noticed that her eyes had crinkled a bit at the edges from the emotion of it all. This was the first time she'd seen the place since the sixties. The sameness of her house must have been overwhelming, especially when juxtaposed with by Pentecostal church in place of the old synagogue and the addition of multiple trailers to the elementary school.

I wondered what the house looked like inside, what the family cooked, if it was brisket like Lillian, if they ever made enough food to serve fifty people at once despite a family of few, if they hoarded condiments for the next Great War, how old their children were, if their children were happy. I wondered if my grandma was wondering all of these things too.

I opened the door of the grey Toyota to take a few better pictures, sheepish all the while of how suspicious I looked in action. I was a white onlooker documenting a Black community—so inappropriate and so deeply unsurprising. It mattered only little that this was my family's history and it mattered nothing to a resident of this neighborhood. This place was not mine to reclaim or even my grandmother's. It was an earlier segment of our story, long and winding; one which had a place in our lives then, and one that is worth retelling and remembering, all the while through the respectful lens of distance.

The barebones bench in Central Park was a sufficient contrast from the Toyota, and we could people-watch in the shade without the potential of voyeurism. But first we had to endure the chaos of getting there.

Grandma and I set out for Central Park after a long day of museum visits and walking. The city had been cooking our skin, and we'd hoped Central Park's asphalt-laden greenery would be somewhat less suffocating. The subway was a nightmare and a quarter (as you can tell, I'm not quite cut out for the horrors of big-city public transportation). Terribly aware of my predisposition for nausea, I'd faced the front of the subway, a position which allowed me the option of either staring at other passengers' backs or staring at screeching metal. The announcer-thingie finally read in that deceptively-robotic feminine voice: West 86th Street/Central Park West. [Ding-Dong!] Stand clear of the closing doors.

A confession: Subway announcements bring out some of my most pitiful intrusive thoughts. It's like, What if you *didn't* stand clear of the doors, Lily? What if you *didn't* mind the gap? What *then*? Sometimes I wonder what it might be like if one of those ultra-famous people reading train announcements—Jerry Seinfeld, Awkwafina, Whoopi Goldberg—were to verbalize these thoughts, as though to add a human touch. The headlines the next day: Metro Transit Authority is reportedly suffering from a mental breakdown! We'll be back later with more exclusive details.

Rest assured, I minded the gap when departing the subway. Grandma and I climbed the stairs as safely as possible—which, well, for both of us, meant as slowly as possible. As

we exited the station, we were engulfed in an unexpected drizzle. To our left was a multimillion dollar penthouse building. To our right was a houseless man on a chipped wood bench. At our front was a dirty pigeon hopping with such fierce determination that we had no choice but to shuffle step-by-step, accepting our duty to follow.

Our journey led us to the Museum of Natural History, though Grandma and I agreed that we'd rather be complaining about the weather in the open air than behind closed doors. Anyway, my grandmother had been mostly interested in locating a bench—there *had* to be another one around here somewhere—so we'd continued wandering, past the hotdog stand and the taxi smog and the horse shit sunbathing on the grass. We'd backtracked our steps a bit, heading toward a more central area of the park, I suppose, where we'd come across a brick-layered building that resembled a clubhouse of one of those old money country clubs with girls in such lavish white dresses that one couldn't possibly tell if they were wedded to society or the King Himself.

“Ah,” Grandma had said. “Tavern on the Green.”

“You know this place?”

“Yeah, it's famous. For the rich-y rich.” She pronounced “rich-y rich” with gritted teeth.

We'd walked over to the menu posted outside, emblazoned with a green-and-gold crest between two rams seemingly copy-and-pasted from a Greek mythology book. The tavern itself boasted a red-carpet-style entrance under a deep red canopy—the type you might see at urban hotels and apartments and sometimes vintage movie theaters. The lunch specials were posted; the main courses ranged in price from the Heirloom Grains & Roasted Vegetables for \$26 to the Charred Filet Mignon Salad for \$35.

“Not as bad as I expected,” Grandma commented. It was above our price range but not unimaginable. Then her eyes lit up. There was a barebones wooden bench just feet from the entrance to the tavern. Immediately, we knew what to do.

As planned, Grandma and I sat for a few minutes without saying much of anything. We were content—the drizzle had faded. I stared at a majestic stone apartment building adorned with gothic-style decoration. Eventually, the subject of the BMW in front of the complex was broached by one of us. The vehicle had become hopelessly entangled with its plastic cover when the doorman had attempted to drive it to another location. The sheet was I guess meant to protect the car from any sort of weather or potential burglary, and its damnation to the rim of the tire felt inexplicably fitting. I wasn't sure why I was so enamored with this BMW and its ill-fated sheet or even why this interest manifested as mockery.

“These people just have so much,” I said after a moment of silence. I both couldn't conceptualize their wealth and desperately wanted to. (I blame *Gossip Girl* and my unfortunate crush on Blair Waldorf.)

“You have a lot too,” Grandma interrupted my musings.

“I know,” I admitted. I was ashamed that I needed such a reminder.

“The world isn't really like this,” Grandma said. By like this she meant casual exhibitions of glitz and glamor. The segregation of the 1% into a community of high-rises which looked over everyone walking like ants beside the traffic. And yet it was all so endlessly seductive that the city's skyrocketing homeless rate and financial corruption and all of the other Bad Things we all know to be true felt like only an afterthought.

In reality, Central Park West is an exemplary model of the conflicting forces of tradition, upward mobility, and assimilation. New York City's uptown—consisting mainly of the Upper East Side—was alienated from other communities as early as the beginning of the twentieth Century (Goren 15). Many Jews lived in this uptown area, but they were typically affluent first-wave German immigrants in deep pursuit of Americanization (Rubinstein). The working-class Jews of the “downtown” Lower East Side, most of whom were second-wave Eastern European immigrants, reserved a certain disdain for their uptown neighbors (Goren 15). The downtowners believed that wealthier Jews had weaponized philanthropy to maintain a culture of silence surrounding workplace abuses (Goren 19).

In the midst of all of these social dynamics, the Upper West Side became the destination of new money Ashkenazi Jews who wanted to assimilate and find community (Rubinstein). Eastern European Jews have benefitted from upward mobilization due to our whiteness and general belief in meritocracy. The new money crowd expanded; today, many uptowners are Eastern European.

In my experience, even when considering this complex history, class divide in the Jewish community does not warrant so much as a conversation. Instead, when we discuss socioeconomic status, it's through the framework of combatting the anti-Semitic rich-Jews control-the-world trope. This is important work, and I also wonder how we could open the conversation even further. How we can acknowledge that most Jews *are* pretty damn wealthy—that affluence *is* an unspoken norm in our community—without playing into a harmful sort of ignorance or excluding poor Jews from the conversation. Because no matter how alienated I felt from these apartment owners or tavern-goers, no matter how much my experience as a Southern Jew separated me from many of my big-city University peers, no matter how often I was introduced as The Jewish Friend or the One Who Doesn't Celebrate Christmas, I believed that I had more in common with the uptown New Yorkers than my downtown ancestors. This was the truth, sure, but I wanted to more to challenge it.

New York City Jews and their wealth piqued my interest because I do not fit any internalized stereotype of my religion. I am queer and disabled and fiercely Pro-Palestine and I have not lived outside of the Triangle area of North Carolina for more than four months at a time. My family has two sets of kosher silverware but we hardly ever use them. I am upper class but pitifully defensive about it because I'm not *that* kind of upper class; you know, the kind that lives in penthouses and is chauffeured to school. Though sometimes I wished that I was, not because I desired such opulence, but because my identity would be more simple had I been included in the conglomeration of New York City Jews despite everything about me that was different.

But as I reflect, I know now that my *liminality* has driven immensely important self-interrogation. How do I move through this world when, on one hand, I hold so many identities of the oppressor? And when other identities I hold are unique to the oppressed? These, I know, are age-old topics broached by many who came before me. There is a community of people in the space in-between. People who have questioned and who will continue to engage in this sort of questioning.

If I were to think of myself as a whole individual, I might be both a downtown Jewish immigrant's prodigal dream and a downtown Jewish immigrant's worst nightmare. Assimilation, upward mobility, endless desire. Legacies of trauma. I lie within a crossroads

inherent to my background. I can turn to wealth and fear and generational opportunity at the expense of marginalized groups of people. Or I can turn back to the wondrous, beautiful parts of my history. The joy. The Yiddish.

This decision has always been easy for me, at least in theory. But in practice, as I sat on that bench in Central Park, I'd subconsciously put on my sunglasses. I was paranoid of an unexpected encounter with the person who embodied all of the wrong choices I had made. He was Jewish and he lived over in those big Central Park high rises and he had left me heartbroken.

There's an insidiously mundane type of emotional manipulation which poses as reality. In falling for someone who was Bad, capital letters and all, not just because of the wealth and privilege and power, but in that he was the kind of person who resembled my grandfather and my mom's old step-father and Lillian in her worst moments. I'd been enthralled by what I'd wanted so badly to get away from.

He disguised it as yearning—to escape the world in which he'd grown up; its money, its people. I'd taken it upon myself to be his reason for leaving. In the process, I was sucked into the confusing ease of his lifestyle. I discovered only later that I was his supplier of moral assurance. He'd get good-boy admiration for at least attempting to choose joy and liberation. It would look nice and neat and really, truly honest. And then he'd leave, convincing everyone, quite possibly even himself, that nothing had ever happened, off to repeat the cycle with another unsuspecting person. I wanted him back, still, then. I firmly believe that it is easier to make the wrong decision after having so recently been wounded.

And so sitting there, I couldn't help mentioning him to grandma.

"Remember that guy I told you about? He lives somewhere over here," I said, praying she wouldn't ask me why I tend to gravitate towards the worst of them all. Sure, I'd done all the psycho-analysis, the necessary processing, the self-help podcasts about childhood and developmental trauma and why we go for people who seem safe and familiar and end up becoming our worst nightmare. Even here, in the display of grass and trash bags, I was thinking about him.

"Is there anyone else now?" Grandma asked.

I blushed in embarrassment. My sexuality meant I had everyone in the world to choose from, and still, well. Nothing. I prefer to think of myself as someone who is healing rather than someone who is emotionally unavailable, but both can be true, and both probably are. There, with my grandmother, I was ashamed of letting a boy ruin my sense of self. I was ashamed of not being truer to my queerness and its abundant and expansive and courageous expressions of desire.

"No. Not really. Not sure I want anyone," I answered, fingers crossed on my lap in anticipation of Grandma's response. In the past, when we had this conversation, she'd said something along the lines of, but you're so pretty! Then I'd have to say something along the lines of, too bad I have the worst personality. We'd laugh, though it never felt all that funny.

"It's okay. It's not like I picked so great myself," Grandma said. I sighed in relief before acknowledging her words. I knew these not-so-great choices were applicable to all three, really. Fred first. Then the next one who didn't even deserve the dignity of a name, and we'll leave it at that, as Grandma would say. Then the last one, Glenn, who has aphasia, and

he also did the unforgivable, though that was later, after this trip to New York. He is now awaiting indictment.

These choices were evidenced by the fact that Grandma has married three times and she lives alone with her terrier. Sometimes it's not about trying and sometimes there's no meaning afterward. Sometimes it's just the luck of the draw.

I put my hand gingerly on my grandmother's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"A lot of it was on me," she said, "I married Fred and dropped out of high school. I had your mother soon after. In a way I was almost set up for failure, though." This was in reference specifically to her relationship endeavors—Beverly may have been set up for failure romantically, but never financially. If anyone represents class mobility, it's my grandmother.

At first, she didn't finish high school. Then she went back to get her nursing degree. At first, my mom and her sister lived on food stamps and welfare. Now, my grandma has excess wealth in her bank account. My grandma purchased her house in the sixties for \$35,000. Now, predominately-white Long Island sells, and it's worth over half a million.

My mom and aunt legally own my grandma's house now. Selling the property would generate years of funding, some of which might be passed down to my siblings too. Such is the game of intergenerational inheritance.

"Maybe the only thing I have in common with Lillian is our stubbornness," Grandma said. "I succeeded in order to spite her. I see that stubbornness in your mother. I see that stubbornness in you, too. It helps you survive."

"It's not on you," I said quietly.

At least, in this line of daughters, something was shared that was neither benign nor dangerous: a hopeless degree of stubborn. I found comfort in its, well, liminal ethics; its inability to be cast as good or bad, to subscribe to my often binary-stricken definition of this world.

I wondered, then, if you could grieve someone you'd never met. Could I grieve who I thought Lillian would be? Could I grieve the loss of innocence that comes from a realization of the dissonance between the symbolism of my name as a pure flower—and its unavoidable history? Could I grieve my family's choices in the past and even their choices in the future? Could I grieve my own? Who did that make me, then? Who was I to judge the past when it had bestowed me with such responsibility?

Maybe what I had been missing all along in my journey toward familial and self-understanding was less about disowning and relegating the bad than moving toward a state of acceptance. Not despite the complications, but because of them. Sometimes we fall for shitty people or expend our energy too quickly or devote ourselves to a cause entirely unworthy of our time. And sometimes the drizzle fades and we are pouring with sweat and our hair drips and we don't know if it's from our body or the sky. But really it's impossible to tell and it doesn't quite matter because everything is so profoundly present and also so profoundly intertwined.

My grandma rose from the bench, instinctively stretching her arms. "Wanna keep going?"

I yawned and stood up quietly. Together we walked past the stray pigeons and matted grass and horse buggies and toward nowhere in particular.

Part III

I now know that our ignorance itself was an expression of grief unfelt generationally.
–Diana Clarke, “I Will Not Finish Grieving”

If I were to generalize my maternal lineage, I would say that it is more or less a series of tenuous relationships bound by continuity. In other words, it is intact but inconsistent. If I were to generalize my paternal lineage, I would say something close to the opposite; that it is more or less a series of proximate but fragmented connections.

All of this can be contextualized by an obscure analogy: Yiddish is an endangered language and Grossinger’s is completely demolished. What I mean is that I fundamentally associate Yiddish with my maternal heritage. It’s a dying tongue and it’s embedded into American vocabulary and so at least some of it will last a little longer. It lives in a space of tenuous continuity.

Alternatively, I associate Grossinger’s with my paternal heritage. Back in the day, it was a famous resort in the Catskills for vacationing Jewish singles who just wanted to tie the knot already. The encouragement of Jewish dating is still well-known today—points for Jewish youth groups and the mere option of choosing “Jewish: visible” as Religion on your Bumble profile (hopefully the government doesn’t collect that in a database). But Grossinger’s itself—the meta real-life JDate, one might say—is an abandoned pile of ashes. There’s a certain proximity to the idea of it, and yet a fragmented sort of reality. Either way, I am of the firm belief that in order to adequately explore my paternal heritage, I’ve got to start with Grossinger’s.

Most of us have unknowingly heard about this place before, albeit through a different medium: an iconic romance called *Dirty Dancing*. Yes, the setting of *Dirty Dancing* was, in fact, inspired by Grossinger’s (Diaz). (Though there was never a Jewish Patrick Swayze. We can’t have it all, I guess.)

The resort physically collapsed in a 2022 fire (Diaz), but Grossinger’s symbolic demolition began much earlier. As written by Gothamist—a non-profit newsroom which features an ad of a rat-decorated tote bag—and verified by other sources, Grossinger’s met its doom in 1986 after being sold to Servico, a now defunct hotel-chain owner (Maurer). Servico initially planned to renovate the resort, well, until the company realized that doing so would come with a large cost and negligible financial benefits (Maurer). Ownership has changed hands many times since the buyout, and nothing good has come out of it.

In 2014, Foxwoods Resort Casinos dropped its bid to raze the property and build—you guessed it!—a resort casino (“Foxwoods Catskills Resort”). Three years later, a real estate developer named Louis Capelli proposed that Grossinger’s be designated a contaminated area due to years of commercial chemical run-off (Shaffer). In one article, Capelli seemed to oscillate between remediation of Grossinger’s and absolute replacement (Shaffer). “I want to build what is a 2017 model of Grossinger’s—with some sort of memories still there,” Capelli is quoted to have said (Shaffer). It’s unclear now if this offer is still on the table; I couldn’t find any related pieces published after September 2018.

Regardless of any tentatively-planned development, the resort was crumbling and viciously overgrown on August 16th, 2022, the day of the fire (Diaz). The flames overtook a

three-story white wooden building on the grounds, one of the only structures that had survived demolition (Stack). The fire could be seen as the end of a long line of destructive forces, finally condemning Grossinger's to oblivion. Luckily, the resort's first saving grace is a proposed historical documentary "in-the-works" as of December 2022 (White). The second saving grace is that Grossinger's is so much more than its downfall.

In the early twentieth century, the site which would house the first Grossinger's was initially slated to be farmland. Farming, Asher and Malke Grossinger believed, was preferable to the alternative: working in the sweatshops (yes, this family had downtown roots) (Bush). However, the couple was unable to make a living, and so their daughter Jennie proposed opening their farmhouse to boarders (Maurer). This idea proved successful. In 1919, the family sold their farmhouse and purchased land on which the famous resort would be built (Bush).

Jennie Grossinger ran the business until her retirement in 1964, when Grossinger's boasted a 1,200 acre property with an airport, tennis courts, Olympic-sized swimming pool, and a post office, among other attractions (Bush). The resort also averaged 150,000 guests per year and acted as an elite boxing training center for, among others, Barney Ross and Rocky Marciano (Bush). Random, yet impressive.

Grossinger's was a predictably progressive enterprise due to its Jewish origin, particularly during such a time of widespread anti-Semitism. The hotel was the gem of the Borscht Belt, or Jewish Alps, a group of resorts clustered in the Catskills of New York (Willet-Wei & Lakritz). These resorts, Grossinger's included, catered to middle and even working-class Jewish folks, a remarkable testament to their accessibility (Willet-Wei & Lakritz). Grossinger's also welcomed Black people as performers and guests before the end of segregation, most notably Jackie Robinson (Bush). While Grossinger's was not perfect, it was a pretty damn good place to spend the summer. And it did for my grandparents what it did for so many single Jewish folks at the time: it brought them together.

Though my grandparents' marriage was not borne out of the adage "nobody puts Baby in a corner," their story was perhaps as fast-moving as that of Baby Houseman and Johnny Castle. Grandpa Harry saw Grammy at the singles table. Harry's first impression of Helene was that "she was very popular and had many girlfriends."

If not for Grossinger's, there would be no such thing as the Levin family. But, like many things in my grandparents' lives I'd come to learn about, Grossinger's lived in the past and the past only. The present is always a little more complicated.

In 1960, Grandpa Harry took the bus from his small hometown to Grossinger's for summer break. If not for the plane strike, he would've visited Grammy on the way back to his hometown of Evansville, Indiana before proposing marriage. Instead, Grandpa Harry returned to Philadelphia later to meet her family. My Great-Uncle Herby, Grammy's brother, picked Harry up from the station. On the way home, they passed a department store warehouse on Roosevelt Boulevard—an eight-story gothic tower built in the 1920s that had become a landmark of the city.

"Have you ever heard of Sears?" Herby asked the newcomer.

Grandpa Harry hadn't.

In that time, not knowing of Sears might be compared to, say, never having listened to a single Taylor Swift song. It was culturally incomprehensible. In Philadelphia, especially, Sears was all the rage, employing thousands of people and serving as not only a business, but also a popular landmark (Altmann). Though you might guess how the story would continue.

Sears did not remain well-known or well-connected (Altmann). On October 31, 1994, thousands of people once again flocked to this once-famous location—and not to work or shop for last-minute Halloween costumes (Huebsch) They'd come to watch the 25-million cubic foot building's methodically-constructed implosion shown on the 6ABC News Broadcast (Altmann). It lasted a grand total of seven seconds (Altmann).

The end of the Sears tower is not comparable to the fire at Grossinger's. One was a corporation; the other, a space of love and connection. But nonetheless, both represented the erasure—whether purposeful or not—of what we see as “the old” to make way for “the new.”

My paternal grandparents, both in their nineties, are hoarders of the old. This manifests as their one-room collection of photographs, abounding with uncles, grandparents, grandchildren, sons, and daughters-in-law. The living room is furnished with a large TV for watching UNC basketball games—a strong point of contention in my family—yet they only recently purchased an iPad. My grandfather can send emails with my dad's help, but the iPad is a foreign language.

It wasn't always this way (a phenomenon common among many of their generation). When the two married, though Grammy was dirt-poor, it became obvious that she represented the metropolitan and more promiscuous behavior of this new age of young women. In addition to her government job, she worked as a fashion model. After the wedding, Grammy relocated to Evansville. Grandpa Harry's family made the following observations. 1. Helene wore tight clothing. 2. Helene was not a modest woman. 3. Helene looked like a *nafka* (prostitute). The dislike was mutual, at least; Grammy was miserable in Evansville. The two moved to Philadelphia some time later.

Grandpa Harry, on the other hand, was a simple man. His family had immigrated to the US from Lithuania—passing through Ellis Island around 1915—and resided first in Chicago before settling in small-town Evansville, Indiana. Grandpa Harry's liberal father read the Yiddish paper daily and made his living as a shoemaker. Harry's mother Miriam was wise, supplying him with bagels and unconditional love. The family made great effort to assimilate into American ways of being and, like Lillian, did not pass down the Yiddish language. Their immigrant culture was inevitably the minority in a town of gentiles. Nonetheless, Grandpa Harry did not experience any firsthand anti-Semitism and was even able to keep kosher at parties He attended Evansville College for one year as a basketball player *and* cheerleader before enrolling in the army. My grandfather narrowly made the cut to qualify as a World War II veteran: induction was August 28th; the war ended on September 2nd.

After the official conclusion of WWII, my grandfather became a military policeman for the railroad in Germany, guarding trains against pilfering. It was then that he first experienced anti-Semitism, and from the mouth of a fellow soldier. *Damn Jew*.

When I began processing my grandfather's story, I lingered upon this one experience in particular. It's a common myth that the United States fought Germany in WWII because

we were against anti-Semitism. In fact, we expelled many Jewish refugees attempting to enter the country, damning them essentially to life or death under Nazism. I could be mistaken, but it feels to me that despite popular debunking of said myth, many still believe that the Allied forces were synonymous with Jewish liberation. The fact that my grandfather worked in a former Nazi state yet endured anti-Semitism from an Allied soldier spoke volumes. If anything, it represented the culture of xenophobia perpetuated in the US military then, one which has continued into the present moment.

It's important to note that Grandpa Harry hadn't witnessed other forms of discrimination before the army either. The first time he saw segregation, he couldn't make sense of it. Another white person caught him drinking at the Black water fountain and asked why he'd do such a thing. Grandpa Harry shrugged. It was a water fountain and so he was drinking.

Sometimes, I and those around fall into the trap of associating big-city innovation with progress, at least in our Western capitalist understanding of progress. Grammy and Grandpa Harry's story pushes back against this narrative in favor of a nuanced interpretation. At first, Grammy and Grandpa Harry embodied a big-city small-town dynamic. However, Grammy, the more urban of the two, was only progressive when it came to her choice of clothing. I'm not sure what she believed during that time; she was raised liberal, and at some point her politics flipped a full one-eighty. Harry's small-town upbringing, on the other hand, sheltered him ambivalently from the big-city world. Evansville was almost completely white—in contrast to the demographics of cities—which implicitly communicated who belonged and who did not. In 1925, admitted KKK member Herbert Males was elected mayor (Webb). Nonetheless, when Grandpa Harry was growing up a few decades later, segregation was not in existence and anti-Semitism was never visible in Evansville. Though entirely anecdotal, his business went well and was absent of any worker-related violations. Grandpa Harry's father was free to read the Yiddish liberal newspaper whenever he desired. Evansville, at that specific time, wasn't necessarily better or worse than a place with more innovation and urbanization—it was merely different.

In the present moment, Evansville struggles with the same issues as much of the United States; namely, the hegemony of systemic racism. Business is declining and the town is still devoid of diversity, with an 80% white population (Webb). *Washington Post* Reporter Peter Jamison described the town as “the sunken place” for African Americans (Jamison). The area is currently reckoning with police violence and low income housing crises (Webb). Forty percent of the area is affected by food apartheid—another word for the intentionally-constructed nature of food deserts (“Urban Seeds Case Statement”). Even today, eighty or so years later, it seems that only white people belong in Evansville, disrupting the association of modernism with inevitable progress.

Like many other places with problematic drug and poverty legislation, big-city Philadelphia has been hit hard by the opioid epidemic (“Philadelphia 2022”). As opposed to Evansville, Philadelphia is not a majority-white place: in 2020, its white population was only 34.3% (“Philadelphia 2022”). Gun violence is a major problem but the city's jail population

has actually decreased since 2013, thanks in part to a grant from the MacArthur Foundation (“Philadelphia”).

Evansville and Philadelphia have displayed some degree of change and continuity. But my grandparents don’t live in these places anymore. Though Philly has been the site of a previous family reunion, Grammy and Grandpa Harry’s ties to the two cities are fragmented, less than visible.

My ties to Grammy and Grandpa Harry are fragmented too, but not by reason of distance. My grandparents are hoarders of the old in a different way than their aforementioned collection of photographs and chatchkes might demonstrate. It’s not the save-Sears or save-Grossinger’s type of old; it’s more closely related to the forces that might advocate against critical race theory and in favor of conservative tradition. This form of hoarding, more than anything, is a belief in the wrong type of preservation.

After moving to Philadelphia, Grandpa Harry pursued a career as a retailer. He later worked for Art Pope, chain-store retailer and Republican patron (“The 40 Million Dollar Man”). The Pope family once told my grandfather to get out of the car, you *damn Jew!* They wouldn’t sit at the same table as Black folks. In an absurd display of cruelty, John Pope discovered his wife had donated to a needy family; accordingly, he made her ask the family to give the money back.

One might think that Pope would be a household cuss word. Instead, Art Pope is often a topic of argument between my father and his parents. Somehow, and without consistent explanation, my father’s parents ended up dead-set on the violence of right-wing politics, both voting for Trump in the 2016 election (though my grandfather voted for Biden in 2020). They are what is stereotypical of the white elderly: ignorant of their racism, speaking of their misogyny and other backwards beliefs with a touch of nostalgia.

I’ve engaged in arguments with my grandparents about these things that truly end in nowhere productive or useful. I’ve settled upon donating the money they give me for my birthday to abortion clinics and mutual aid funds. But if we were to again discuss politics, I might ask now what they are so bent on preserving.

I’ve consistently found myself reflecting on what endures, and all too this leads to spiraling and despair. Sears has been replaced by other mega-corporations; Evansville has never had a Black mayor. In reality, not much has changed, because so much has purposefully lasted. White supremacy was designed as an intergenerational system of violence made possible by the existence of capitalism. We might see these things change form in the elimination of segregated water fountains and the sprouting of LGBTQ+ friendly companies, but they are always followed by the reinforcement of what is foundational. Progress was enshrined in our Constitution as justification for enslavement and genocide. At its best, progress is ambivalent—any forward-motion is accompanied with, for example, a building burning to the ground in silence.

This is not to say that we shouldn’t look forward with courage or hope. Preservation itself is neutral, otherwise defined by its content. All of those photographs in my grandparents’ unused room are worth keeping and celebrating. I am eternally grateful for the

oversized Duke sweatshirts my grandfather has gifted me (I'll admit, I wear them pretty frequently). The Jewish chatchkes littered throughout my grandparents' kitchen area, some from our synagogue, are also timeless and meaningful.

I'd be remiss not to say that my grandparents' synagogue is my immediate family's synagogue, too; that in this strange contradiction of old and new there lies the dichotomous nature of distance and connection, of fragmenting and continuity, of tenuousness and proximity. Grammy and Grandpa Harry live twenty minutes away in Raleigh's Summerfield North—and I'm much closer to my grandmother Beverly, who resides in Nassau County, New York. This phenomenon might be explained by a variety of reasons: my mother is the family matriarch; Grandma Beverly is of a younger generation than my dad's parents and so is more relatable; my dad's parents and I have conflicting belief systems and so cannot talk about much but Panera and basketball and schoolwork.

I've always accepted the absence of connection with my paternal grandparents, but I feel now that grief is a necessary byproduct of missing out. All four of my grandparents, technically speaking, are still alive. But one is doomed to spend the rest of his life incarcerated and two are, despite their physical closeness, emotionally distant. We're amicable but superficial in our interactions. I wonder what it might have been like to really know my father's parents for who they were and what they had experienced. What it might have been like if they could revisit Grossinger's today and turn back the clock only on the resort premises, if only to feel again what it was like to be among a real community which fought, however imperfectly, against the forces of oppression. In reality, I know that it's a white and liberalist pipe dream to believe a few days in the past might change years of indoctrination.

As much as I am disgusted by over-sentimentality, I think maybe things would've been different if we all could go to the Jewish Alps on vacation. But to guarantee the continued presence of the Borscht Belt, the Jewish community would have had to remain insular and uninfluenced by assimilation. I'm not sure what this alternative might look like or if it would even be any better. It might just be like Evansville and Philadelphia—incomprehensibly different.

When I asked my grandparents my final question, their responses were similar. Both were remarkably content. They did not hold spite for the future generations of humanity. "It's been a good life," Grammy said. Grandpa Harry, if he might have done anything differently, would have lived life more connected to his Jewishness, despite his already-strict observation of kosher dietary laws and continued presence in synagogue. Notably, his words negated my previous blanket statement about the type of preservation inherent to my grandparents' thinking. If he could do anything differently, Grandpa Harry would have tried to preserve the beliefs worth keeping.

After all, there is a preservation innate to my grandparents' existence—and mine too. My last name is derived from Harry's side of the family. "Levin" descends from the Biblical Levite tribe, a group of Jewish men who acted as ritual caretakers of the temple and played secretary to the Kohanim, or the priests, who were also Levites but thought to be descended

from Moses' brother Aaron ("Levites Today"). The second aliyah, or reading of the Torah, is reserved for the tribe with which my last name is associated ("Levites Today").

The Levites and Kohanim are essentially the Jewish aristocracy, and apparently their distinction can be proven through DNA testing of a property of the male Y chromosome (Rozovsky). Though the Levites seem to be under the shadow of the more exclusive Kohanim, the latter group has many religious restrictions, including prohibition from close contact with any dead bodies, excepting relatives or close friends (Rozovsky). Honestly, I think we've got the better end of the bargain.

In tracing the roots of my ancestry, I found that my last name dates back to no earlier than my grandfather. His parents' last names were modified for the sake of pronunciation (i.e. assimilation), though the original title of ben-Zvi Lazer indicates a connection to the Levite tribe.

My Grammy and Grandpa Harry both share my surname, and so too do my dad's two brothers and their children. But we all pronounce it differently. In this family, even in sameness, there is contradiction. My dad's parents and younger brother Steven say Levin like there's an "e" at the end. My dad's older brother says that Levin must rhyme with sin and din and kin. For us, it's just Levin. Like Kevin or Devin or you get the idea. Each party thinks their way is the right way, and I speak for myself all the same.

But, if read aloud by an unknowing party, our names would sound identical. I think maybe this is a less-than-coincidental metaphor for the various tensions among members of my paternal extended family. My grandparents are not the only ones we view with fragmented proximity.

Nonetheless, there is an underlying acknowledgement in the Levin family of what has been sacrificed and lost. If anything, this grief can be literally situated in the destruction of Grossinger's—the reason for everyone's existence. The site associated with us and with the paradox of our beginnings. If Grossinger's were to be viewed from the most nihilistic angle possible, one might say that Jews know all too well the destruction fire brings to our bodies and minds.

Grandpa Harry's father shipped a care package to his sister in Lithuania during the 1940s that was mailed back to his address "return to sender." When my dad had opened the manilla envelope to read the transcribed stories told by his father, he found a curious document titled the "Holocaust Victims Database." It was blank. Grandpa Harry had procured the paperwork and for whatever reason decided that it wasn't worth marking with a name.

Part IV

In the liminal space between death and burial we watch over each other.

–Cindy Milstein, “Direct Action of the Aggrieved”

I stared intently at my great-grandparents’ glass-encased wedding photo as Grandma continued her story. Lillian, standing center-frame, is stoic and unsmiling in her wide-skirted wedding gown. Her hair is pinned up voluptuously. She looks a bit like the stern elementary Hebrew School teacher who would threaten a trip to Ms. Amy’s office if I tried to screech the prayers in an overextended operatic vibrato just *one more time*. There was a pit in my stomach as I registered my great-grandmother’s expression, as though if the glass melted away—if she could be warm and alive and three-dimensional again—her face would be one of strong disappointment. I was not sure who was the source of her negative reaction, but at that moment, it felt like it was me.

Harry, behind Lillian in the frame, is merely an accomplice to this portrait. Which is to say that my great-grandfather is absolutely dwarfed by her petite shadow. He’s short, thin-lipped, thin-haired and stern-eyed too, but in a different way. I don’t see myself in either of them. I’m not sure that I want to.

“Why did Harry and Lillian get married?” I once asked my mom, who, after partly growing up with my great-grandparents, knew them nearly as well as did my grandmother. We were seated on the couch in my living room, my phone’s voice memo app pressed into the cushion.

“Because she was older,” my mom responded.

I pressed further.

“Not because she liked him...” my mom hesitated, “I guess she probably liked him.” I could almost feel the shrug in her unconvincing voice.

“I mean, he grew up in an orphanage,” my mother continued. “Lillian could wallpaper a whole house. She could paint and sew clothes and knit. She could do pretty much anything. Harry just didn’t have anything. And he wasn’t very bright, but he probably just didn’t get any kind of education.”

Harry’s orphanhood, at that time, was news to me, but of his lack of intelligence, in my household, much had already been spoken. To say Harry wasn’t educated would be perhaps the gentlest label we might have used to describe him. Other phrases included the following: He was dumb as a bird! He didn’t have any brains! Oy Vey, no common sense either! All was said in good fun and all could be safely described as kvetching.

However, truth be told, I’d never quite understood how much emphasis my family placed on not only being educated, but excelling in academics. As a kid, my intelligence seemed reasonable justification for a slight superiority complex. It was the method through which I received external validation. My personhood was tied to my smartness. I didn’t know then that intelligence—and its perception—depends significantly upon parental education level, racial background, class background, and gender identity, among other things. And because smartness is also unmeasurable, my success was constantly subject to my own interpretation, any self-diagnosed imperfection a catastrophe. So sure, I had condescended to no-common-sense-Harry, but I was redeemable, because I had also condescended to myself.

Because Harry lacked intelligence, I'd mistakenly thought that he believed nothing so strongly as to be worth arguing for (another item to add to my long list of false conclusions). Lillian and Harry fought *all* the time, according to both my mom and grandmother—I've got double the sources.

Grandma recalled of herself and her brother, Alan, "It was very disturbing to Alan and I to hear our parents fight. I recall them fighting nightly when I was a child. And I also remember my brother telling them to shut up so we could do our homework."

The phenomenon Grandma described is known as "parentification," a term I know thanks either to my Psych 101 professor or Google, I can't quite remember. Parentification is pretty self-explanatory. Basically, the children take on the role of the parents. If the parents are upset, the children might comfort them. If the parents are misbehaving, the children might try to mediate or de-escalate the situation. In Grandma and Alan's case, the remedy would've been their parents' silence. The repetitive nature of parentification, however, ensured that Grandma Beverly and Alan's requests would go unanswered. Though it is healthy for children to assume some semblance of responsibility, this role-reversal leads to unavoidable trauma (cue itemized list of Harry and Lillian's parenting mistakes).

As I returned my attention to Grandma's story, small, fluffy Charlie rolled onto his back, patiently awaiting a belly rub. I placed the wedding photo on my grandmother's dresser, freeing both hands at Charlie's behest.

"You know, Charlie kind of looks like that dog. Where did you get him?" I asked my grandmother, interrupting her narration. One of my hands was on the terrier's belly. The other motioned to a large-eyed sleepy ceramic hound on a nearby shelf.

"Your Great-Grandma Lillian made them," she responded.

"Oh. Guess artistic talent does run in the family after all. Or at least someone had it," I joked halfheartedly. I'd known of Lillian's skills in the form of homemaking and painting and sewing. Yet I hadn't believed Lillian could create something so beautiful and real and alive—and with such refinement. I scolded myself for being so blind to her talents in the face of her incapacities.

It's how I've always been, though, ditching nuance for a world without color. Perhaps I shared this stringent worldview with Lillian, albeit in a dissimilar way given that Lillian was convinced of her unfailing nature. These problems, unfortunately, endure for generations.

Grandma was still staring at the old ceramic hound.

"Lillian made that one in Century Village, a senior living community, after she moved down to Florida," she said.

"When did she move to Florida?"

"I'm getting there!" Grandma exclaimed. We both understood that waiting was not a virtue I held in my limited scope of possession.

"Fine," I pouted softly, petting Charlie's fur. His tail wagged stubby in the air.

"Lillian and Harry moved when your mom was thirteen. My parents had a very nice home in Century Village. They had a clubhouse and would go to the movies. And my dad especially liked having two bathrooms. It was the first time he had two bathrooms—he actually had a bathroom of his own," Grandma read aloud from her handwritten notes.

“That’s sweet,” I said, smiling. Leave it to Jewish immigrant families to wax poetic about the simpler things in life, especially if they didn’t love sharing, especially if they were so uncompromisingly frugal.

Lillian and Harry had about ten good years while living at Century Village. They took a trip to the Bahamas and would travel to Miami with other Jewish couples for the High Holidays.

One could deduce from these group vacations that Lillian and Harry had at least some sort of social life. The High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are the two singular most important days in Judaism. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur, the more holy of the two, is the Day of Atonement. Both have themes of birth, renewal, relinquishment, and dying. To experience them with others would have been imaginably intense. I wondered what Lillian and Harry reflected about and what types of people they had experienced these holidays with.

“It was around 1989, I believe, when I noticed a decline in my mom's thinking processes,” Grandma continued reading, “and she started to become more confused and asked the same questions over again. Her doctor told me he thought she had early Alzheimer's. But it was such a gradual decline that was not measurable. Sometimes she would amaze you and say something very perceptive. But her apartment became more unkempt. There was rotten food in the refrigerator.”

Other residents looked down on Lillian, too. “My mom was loud due to her hearing loss. But she would yell at my father in front of others,” Grandma said, “so she started losing her friends at Century Village. By that time, my brother and I made the decision to move them. My mom and dad had no visitors at all.”

No visitors at all. I felt the burning sensation that is the harbinger of tears as I envisioned all of the Century Village residents one-by-one pairing with visitors stretched a mile long in front of them. The line would run out, at some point, and Harry and Lillian would stand in the background of others’ lively chatter and affectionate hugs.

They had been alone in the most excruciating way possible. Which is to say love had them surrounded and refused to extend an invitation. I blinked twice and looked away.

Grandma recounted that at their new place of residence, The Forum, Lillian and Harry received more hands-on aid. But Lillian lost her only friend because of a spell of Alzheimer’s induced-agitation. By 1992, Lillian couldn’t pay her bills or cook for herself any longer.

“It was sad to see her decline and not be able to do anything about it,” Grandma said.

Sure, control gets a bad reputation these days. But wanting control is so human when someone you love is suffering. It’s a form of safety, to be able to do something. To give life any fraction of meaning. I could only imagine how it might’ve been to simply stand by and watch.

There’s actually a term for losing someone this slowly. It’s called “complicated grief” and I learned about it through Google or Spotify, I can’t remember which. Complicated grief is, well, complicated, because it occurs over an extended period of time and lacks any sort of closure.

Sometimes this absence of closure can look like not finding someone’s body. Sometimes you’re not grieving a person but your life as you know it (i.e. COVID-19). In the

case of Lillian Fleishman, both things were lost: her life as everyone knew it, and then her life itself, when she passed away.

“My mother was a very keyed up individual—she always had to be doing something. With Alzheimer's, she was still keyed up. But her mind forgot what to do with all of the energy,” Grandma read.

Lillian signed up for a ceramic class at the Forum to maintain mental equilibrium. Unfortunately, she had trouble remembering to go. When she did participate, her ceramics were small and childish; nothing like the droopy-eyed hound resting soundly on the wooden shelf. Later, when presented with evidence of her creations, Lillian would ask bewilderingly: where did *that* come from? Grandma would be forced to explain the answer.

It felt devastating to me that Lillian couldn't recognize the beauty she had created. Ceramic-making was a practice of joy and giving, of doing something for the sake of it, because it is meaningful. In losing her ceramic form and memory, that meaning had been so callously ripped away.

“At the Forum,” Grandma continued, “my mom didn't have any friends except for this one strange bird neighbor. But then she hit the neighbor and that was that.”

I stifled a chuckle. I knew this wasn't funny. The absurdity, though, demanded some sort of attention.

“She *hit* her neighbor?” I clarified.

“Yeah. Like I said, she got aggressive because of Alzheimer's.”

My grandmother's phone interrupted our conversation with the ding of a new text. Her notifications were set to preview banners, so I could read some of the messages. It was from my Grandpa Glenn and the sentences were illegible.

Another chime, another text.

“Grandma, I think Glenn texted you,” I said.

“It's fine,” she responded curtly, attempting to silence her notifications. I found it darkly ironic that Glenn texted grandma in the mess of words typical of his aphasia while she was reading a story about cognitive decline. And also that his aphasia, like Lillian's dementia, increased his agitation. Grandma was living the progressive illness of a loved one while narrating another.

Some try to find purpose in loss by professing that it makes you grateful for what you have. But what if, really, the point is that loss is at random—that it is utterly meaningless? What then? I didn't know what I believed in but I remember thinking that the form of suffering my grandma endured was one of the cruelest things imaginable, that if love made one more vulnerable to this tragedy, then loving—really, truly loving—required a great deal of energy.

“I'll keep reading,” Grandma announced, finger placed by the interrupted sentence. I nodded, understanding.

“By this point of my mother's illness, me and my brother Alan were visiting our parents every month,” Grandma said.

Harry was on blood pressure medication while suffering from multiple mini-strokes per day. Lillian was increasingly confused. The two were codependent to the degree of some warped type of mutual functionality, but Lillian would yell at her husband and push him in some of her more aggressive moments.

The couple was transferred to the assisted living floor at The Forum, one of its multiple levels of care, though Harry would be moved to the nursing home floor after breaking his collarbone and eventually to assisted living plus. The big bucks part of the place, as Grandma called it.

Meanwhile, Lillian was prescribed an antipsychotic called Haldol to reduce her sundowning episodes after she'd confined herself in an elevator and refused to leave. MedlinePlus—thanks, Google—contains a page on Haldol and at the top there are the words IMPORTANT WARNING surrounded by an unmistakable red rectangle (“Haloperidol: AHFS Patient Medication Information.”). The warning says the following:

Studies have shown that older adults with dementia.... who take antipsychotics (medications for mental illness) such as haloperidol have an increased chance of death during treatment. Haloperidol is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of behavior problems in older adults with dementia.⁵

Alzheimer's Foundation describes Haldol as a drug “used only in emergencies as the last resort” (“Antipsychotics and other drug approaches in dementia care”). Of course, the same quality of medical care did not exist thirty years ago when Lillian was receiving treatment. She was, after all, at risk of harming those around her. And yet I still wonder if there could have been a better route than such a devastating medication, especially when taking the widespread mistreatment of AD patients into consideration.

In any case, the medication was too strong. The nurses informed my mom and grandma that Lillian was only receiving Haldol in low doses, but she was so sluggish from the medication that she was barely able to walk. In the face of her lethargy and personality changes, it was obvious my great-grandmother was looking for companionship. After Harry was admitted to the hospital for severe edema, my mom took my great-grandmother to visit. Lillian and Harry were profoundly affectionate; it was a reunion of hugs and kisses.

My knowledge is, admittedly, less sophisticated than a psychologist or neurologist or other sort of doctor, but I can infer from Grandma's retelling that even as Lillian became someone unrecognizable, there were parts of herself that were still, for lack of a better word, herself. This idea defeats the ill-informed AD human-zombie trope while showing that complicated grief isn't a steady downward slope. Instead, it ebbs and flows and ebbs again. The good parts are wonderful. And they make the bad parts feel even more challenging.

The next time my grandmother visited Lillian, the older woman didn't know her own name. She was wearing a diaper and shuffled silently. Grandma Beverly decided to transfer her mother out of the Forum.

In order to move Lillian, Grandma was forced to sell her mother's furniture. During the week-long process, my grandmother slept in Lillian's bed every night, heartbroken.

I thought of my grandmother's action as the ultimate display of wounding, the desire for maternal care and closeness in the face of so much emotional distance. A trauma bond: so unhealthy and yet so hard to break.

⁵ From <https://medlineplus.gov/druginfo/meds/a682180.html>. Accessed March 2023.

Lillian was eventually placed in the Liberty Inn for Alzheimer's patients.

"The people were cold at the Liberty Inn. It reminded me of an insane asylum," Grandma said, "but they called it the Liberty Inn because people there had the ability to move around freely."

I sighed. After reading about how Alzheimer's patients were treated, that the basic principle of dignity should be a privilege at the Liberty Inn was as upsetting as it was expected.

Harry, on the other hand, moved in with a couple recommended to Beverly by his nurse. The couple, Steve and Marlene Wright, had a nursing home license and ran the business from their residence. When my grandmother first toured the house, she met an elderly patient. The two struck up a conversation.

"They treat me very well here," the man said. "In the nursing home, I was treated like an animal."

After talking to this man, Grandma was sold. She never once regretted her decision, either. The Wrights served her father bagels and practiced an ethic of kindness.

"They were a Black couple," Grandma said, chuckling at the irony. Harry had always been a racist. And at the end of his life, he was indebted to this family. They'd provided an environment that was safe and warm—the way end of life care should always be.

I wondered if, when living with the Wrights, Harry ever had the capacity to begin unlearning his racism, if he recognized all of his harmful prejudices. He never communicated these things, though, so it would be mere speculation. Anyway, I thought to myself, racism is so much more than the interpersonal. It is about systemic displays of power. It was only when Harry lost his relational power that he would consent to care by people who were not white or Jewish. To me, it felt like such a visceral display of all that is broken.

Harry did not deserve the Wrights' compassion. They gave it to him anyway. This is how the world tends to work.

While Harry was living in the private nursing home, Lillian's AD progressed. The last time Beverly saw her mother was in January of 1995 at the Liberty Inn. She and Lillian walked around the property that day, side by side. Lillian held onto her daughter's hand.

A few days after Beverly left, however, Lillian flew into a rage. She took a visitor's purse and refused to return it. She hit a nurse's aide.

"I couldn't believe how strong she was," Grandma Beverly remembered the aide saying of her mother.

I wasn't really thinking about Lillian's physical strength, though. I was thinking more so of her physical opportunity. My great-grandmother could've hit her daughter at any time, really. But Lillian decided to hold Beverly's hand instead. Lillian, in the end, had said her goodbye gently.

After the nurse's aide incident, Lillian was sent back to the psychiatrist. A neurological evaluation was scheduled and increased Haldol dosage was administered. Then more lethargy. The hospital at Coral Springs. Sepsis which was unresponsive to the strongest antibiotics.

The doctors asked Beverly and Alan to make a decision. In the end, both sister and brother gave the order: Do Not Resuscitate. Lillian remained unresponsive in hospice for multiple days. On February 22nd, 1995, she passed away.

My grandma visited her father a few weeks after Lillian's death. Harry was frail and extremely thin. Grandma asked him if he missed his wife; Harry responded that he hadn't seen her in a while.

"She's gone," Grandma said finally.

Harry said nothing for a couple of minutes. Then, his stomach started hurting. "He used it as an excuse not to talk to us. He never asked anything else about Lillian," Grandma recounted.

Not many days after, when Harry was lying in bed, he turned his head to the left. The Wrights moved to check on him and noticed that he'd stopped breathing.

The hospital asked again for Beverly and Alan's wishes. They chose to honor their father's living will and not administer invasive treatment. Harry wanted to die in peace instead. On June 23rd, 1995, my great-grandfather was buried in Mount Hebron Cemetery, the site of Lillian's funeral exactly four months prior.

"Lillian was his one reason to live. When Harry lost her, he lost his purpose," Grandma concluded.

It dawned on me then that Harry and Lillian's relationship was not simple or straightforward. It was evidently rife with verbal and later physical abuse. The two had fought so constantly that their children pleaded with them to stop screaming. My mom had hesitated when I'd asked her if what existed between Lillian and Harry had ever been rooted in love. And, in the end, they were each other's reason for living. So often, I tend to view relationships as right or else wrong. While certainly toxic, this marriage really was neither.

Similarly, my grandma's relationship with her mother was marked by intense conflict. Beverly was a latchkey kid. Lillian called her a nothing and nearly disowned her daughter after the initial pregnancy. But, with a profoundness only promised by a singular moment, the two could be seen walking through Liberty Inn side by side, arms slightly bent, fingers hopelessly intertwined.

Epilogue

The final words of my grandmother's essay were a product of improvisation. "I hope you never have to go through any shit like that, Lily," she'd said.

I think I responded with something along the lines of well, we have better medical care these days. Either way, I was trying to circumvent the particular type of vulnerability which is called the future. I feigned assurance because it was a sound alternative to admitting that I had no idea what the rest of my life would be.

Here's what I do know: these things can happen all at once. One minute you're living one life and the next minute you're living another one entirely. These things can also happen more slowly. You don't know you're being cooked until the water in your bathtub boils over.

Such uncertainty is so incredibly frightening, especially during a time when the ocean is burning and entire communities have been decimated and our bodies are hurting for all of the reasons imaginable. Holocaust Survivor Viktor Frankl first coined the term "tragic optimism," and I think it applies to these sorts of situations (Kaufman). Tragic optimism, according to *The Atlantic's* Scott Barry Kaufman is "the search for meaning amid the inevitable tragedies of the human existence." We can acknowledge our grief and despair and still try to find meaning—in the mundane, in our nostalgia, in what we endure. We can sit in our pain unquestionably like we sit shiva because it is necessary.

To look ahead with conviction, I firmly believe that we must consult those standing behind us, both those physically present and those who have returned to the wisdom of dust. For me, this means calling upon my namesake as a multidimensional human who has made mistakes because sometimes abuse is the only form of treatment someone sees and so sometimes they are doomed to replicate it. This is not to justify any behavior, only to say that Lillian's actions cannot be reduced to a series of moral rights and wrongs wrapped tightly and neatly together. My great-grandmother may not have ever had the capacity to guide me, but she can offer to hold my hand, instead.

I wish none of us had to go through any sort of tough shit, but usually we have no say in these matters at all. Perhaps tragic optimism, then, is witnessing this broken, broken world with the knowledge that, one day, I, too, will be the name that my descendants inherit.

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