

Obit
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I never read the obituaries, but last Thursday was an exception. For some reason, they were mixed in at the end of the sports section. I scanned them with morbid curiosity, and there, halfway down the page was a photo of Robert Meyers. My forehead tingled. I knew Robert, or Robbie, as people used to call him. In fact, about 25 years ago, we worked together and were best friends. At least I thought we were. With Robbie, you didn't always know where you stood.

The obit said he died of lung cancer. He was 51, same as I am. Robbie was a heavy smoker; Camels, the unfiltered ones. I smoked them, too, until I quit ten years ago. I rubbed my chest. I thought about my own mortality.

The memorial service was set for the next day at Binstock's Funeral Home. For the last 50 years, pretty much every Jew from the old neighborhood has been laid out there. It's where I had the services for my mother and father. Careful people, they'd reserved their plots and paid their burial expenses in advance so as not to burden my brother and me.

That night, as we were cleaning up the dinner dishes, I told my wife Sharon that I was going to Robbie's funeral. She asked me what the connection was, since I'd never mentioned "this Robbie" to her before. I shrugged and said that he was an old friend, and that it was part sadness, part nostalgia because he was the first guy from the old neighborhood to die, at least as far as I knew. I told her not to feel obligated to go with me since she'd never met him. She said O.K.; she had important meetings that morning, anyway. I was slightly miffed at how quickly she agreed, that she wasn't more regretful

about not accompanying me as my dutiful wife. At the same time I was relieved, since I really hadn't wanted her to come, anyway. It would have meant meeting Robbie's wife Daisy and telling her about Robbie and Daisy and me.

The service was scheduled for 10 a.m. I arrived fifteen minutes early. There were maybe a dozen cars in the parking lot. I lingered in the hallway outside the chapel, walking back and forth, reading the bronze plaques, wondering if coming had been a big mistake.

A beige leather guest book sat open on a low table. I ran my finger down the page, looking for a familiar name, but I didn't recognize anyone on the short list of signatures. That was to be expected. Most of our crowd left Pittsburgh after college.

I did, too, 20 years ago, after the rift between Robbie and me. Sharon and I met in New York. We moved back to Pittsburgh four years ago to escape the Manhattan crush. We cashed out our stock options and made killing on our Tribeca loft. Now we live an easy life just beyond suburbs, in the exurbs, next to a 40-acre lake, where geese and ducks come and go with the seasons.

Sharon loves the woodsy sounds and the mature trees that surround us. She's become a joiner and has developed a wide circle of friends, both from work and in the neighborhood. We get invited to the homes of other empty nesters for dinner parties, where we drink expensive wines and talk about investments and movies and politics. We also take long walks in the woods with our Brittany spaniel and paddle our canoe around the lake. I suppose I should feel content.

About a dozen people were scattered on the benches inside the chapel. I sat in the last row and kept my sunglasses on. Robbie's older brother Denny was up front, in a

motorized wheelchair. What a shock. Denny was the shortstop on our high school baseball team. He was tall and lean, with whipcord muscles and we all looked up to him. He won an athletic scholarship to Ohio State University. I couldn't bring myself to approach him. I didn't want to know what had crippled him. I preferred the image of Denny as the fastest, strongest kid in our crowd.

Standing next to Denny, with her hand resting on the back of the wheelchair, was a slender, pretty young woman in a black dress. Next to her, with her back to the closed casket was Robbie's wife, Daisy Gates. She turned to shake hands with the rabbi. I caught her profile. My heart palpitated. I bent forward and coughed into the back of my hand. When I'd heard from a friend from my former agency Robbie married her, I hadn't expected it to last two months, much less 20 years.

A short, bundled up old woman settled sat down next to me, so close that our shoulders bumped. She poked my arm and said, "Levine." There was no mistaking that grating voice. It was Ida Shapiro, or Old Lady Shapiro, as we used to call her, but never to her face. She owned the neighborhood grocery store on the corner of Stanton and McCabe Streets and kept it open 18 hours a day, except for Friday nights and Saturdays. She looked exactly the same as she did 40 years ago, with her black eyes and the fat brown mole on her chin, but now, her hair was white instead of iron grey.

"Hello, Mrs. Shapiro."

"Hello yourself. Help an old lady off with her coat." Her breath smelled like herring. "So, Levine, I haven't seen your face for a long time."

Mrs. Shapiro used to keep a revolver under the counter. She would flash it at us kids every so often, to remind us that stealing from her store was punishable by death.

Some of us said the gun was loaded, some not, but no one wanted to find out. I wondered if she had it in her purse. It wouldn't have surprised me. "I was living in New York until my wife and I moved back to the area a few years ago."

"The area? What are you talking about, the area?"

"We live in Woodmere Township."

"Way out there? With all the goyim?"

I decided not to tell her that my wife was a fallen Catholic. "Well, we like it."

"It's for the goyim. So, you're married? Any children?"

There was no way to explain to Mrs. Shapiro that Sharon and I didn't have children because we met "later in life." We had been too busy with careers and travel and by the time we had decided to at least seriously consider children we felt we were too old to deal with babies and subsequent teenagers and relished our lifestyle too much to compromise it. At least that's how we rationalized it. I said, "Married, but no children."

She clucked her tongue. "What are you waiting for?"

The room became silent as the rabbi approached the dais. He was a young man, but he had the same singsong delivery as every other rabbi I've ever heard. He began to read, *I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains: from whence shall my help come...* and then in Hebrew. The words began to run together. Every once in a while I caught a glimpse of Daisy's face. She still had bangs, just like she did when I fell in love with all those years ago.

I met Daisy at The Squirrel Cage, a junky off-campus bar where 20-something year-olds talk about their post college round-the-world backpack trips and their job interviews. Daisy was the waitress, a grad student. She never stopped smiling, floating

from table to table, serving shots and beers and greasy hamburgers, making it seem like fun, as if she were entertaining guests at a party. She wore cut-off jeans and cowgirl boots and loops of plastic flower leis. I thought she was way too cool and pretty for me, so I was shocked when she agreed to have coffee. We saw each other off and on for about two months. We made love once. The sex was embarrassing. I came in about ten seconds. When she politely dumped me, she told me she still really liked me because I was funny and had a good heart, and she wanted to remain friends always. It's not what I wanted to hear, but a hungry dog will take any kind of bone.

I kept going to The Squirrel Cage just to say hi, hung-up loser that I was. The night of my 26th birthday I was so depressed I had four shots of bourbon and a pitcher of beer. I had to lay my head sideways on the bar to keep from keeling over. I kept babbling about unrequited love as slobber drooled from my mouth. If it Daisy hadn't intervened with the bartender, he would have kicked me out into the street.

That was the night I introduced her to Robbie, who'd move back to Pittsburgh after college. Robbie was my partner from work. We were a young hot creative team, copywriter and art director, but the truth was, I did the ideas and the writing and told him what to design. He did the presentations. Robbie had presence, like the front man in a rock band. He had a square jaw and blue eyes and shaggy dirty blond hair and a smile right out of toothpaste commercial. From the way he looked at Daisy and she at him, I knew he'd be screwing her before morning. I hated him for being him.

That night, Robbie took me back to my apartment about an hour before closing time. I knew where he was headed next. It was more than I could bear. I remember screaming at him, "So how are you gonna do her, Robby? Are you gonna be nice to her,

or are you just gonna make her suck your dick?” I took a swing at him. He shoved me back on my bed. I spat at his face before I puked all over myself. Two weeks later I took a job offer in New York.

“Levine! Stand up!” Mrs. Shapiro shoved her elbow into my ribs. Oddly enough, there were tears in her eyes.

“Mrs. Shapiro, are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be?” But the tears kept coming, as if Robbie were one of her family, and I guess in a way all the kids in the neighborhood were.

Denny passed by us in his wheelchair. I keep my head bowed, but I could still see Daisy and the young woman. Daisy had her arm around the girl’s shoulders. I couldn’t see any of Robbie in the girl, but with her heart shaped face, there was no doubt she was Daisy’s daughter.

I watched two attendants wheel Robbie’s casket toward the back exit, where the hearse would be waiting. It was then that it struck me, that he was truly dead. How could this be—Robbie, Mr. Cool, the guy that made the girls swoon. Robbie, who drank but never got drunk, who smiled but never showed his emotions. Robbie, the last person on Earth who deserved her.

“Phillip?”

My head snapped around. “Daisy.” My voice was two octaves higher than normal.

“Phillip, are you all right?”

She looked at me with the same sweet smile that could make me forgive her anything, even marrying Robbie.

“No, I’m fine. It’s just I’m a little shook up, seeing Robbie like this.”

“It was so good of you to come. Phillip, this is my daughter Emily.”

“Hi, Emily.”

Her eyes were red. She nodded toward me.

“It’s her first death.”

“I see.”

“Phillip is an old friend, sweetie.”

I tried to sound halfway normal. “Not *that* old.”

Emily frowned at me, and I felt as if I’d just said the dumbest thing ever said.

“Phillip, are you coming out to the cemetery?”

There was a time when I would have crawled naked across a mile of razor blades to be close to Daisy Gates. But I couldn’t go out there. Not this day. I muttered, “I can’t, Daisy. I have to...I just can’t.”

“It’s O.K. I understand.” I wondered what she understood. “We should talk, Phillip. Call me sometime. I’m in the book. Daisy Gates.” Her maiden name. I was surprised she kept it.

Then they were gone. I helped Mrs. Shapiro on with her coat. We stood there on the steps for a while, each of us lost in our thoughts—hers were on Robbie, I supposed

The wind had kicked up and snowflakes flew in random circles in the milky March sun. We watched the hearse pull away, followed by a limousine with blacked out windows. Denny and Daisy and her daughter would be inside. I wondered if Daisy saw

me standing there. I fought the temptation to wave. A small procession of cars, maybe five or six, with funeral flags mounted on their roofs trailed behind the limo as it headed down Forbes Avenue.

“You know, Levine, the ones in your little gang, the only one I liked was Robbie.”

“I didn’t think you liked any of us.”

As if she hadn’t heard me, she said, “One time I caught him stealing a Slinky. He told me it wasn’t for him, it was for his little sister, who was in the hospital with a broken leg, and he didn’t have enough money to pay for it. So I let him keep it.”

“You did? But Robbie didn’t have a little sister.”

“You think I didn’t know that? That’s not the point. Robbie was clever. A little charmer. And that face. Such a handsome boy. You should have been more like him.”

A woman in running suit and over the knee boots pushed a baby carriage along the sidewalk. I asked Mrs. Shapiro if she needed a ride. She looked surprised. “Well, it would save me the wait for the bus. They never come on time anymore. You think you can find the old neighborhood, Levine?”

“What? They moved it?” For the briefest second I thought I saw her smile.

That night Sharon and I made love for the first time in two weeks. I closed my eyes as she stroked me, and I imagined it was Daisy’s touch, and just the idea of it made me very hard very fast. I kissed and licked the side of her neck and it was Daisy’s neck.

Sharon moaned as I entered her. We rocked and banged together like teenagers, me on top, then her, then me again. Afterwards, as I handed her a warm towel, she patted my thigh and said, “Wow. Maybe you should go to funerals more often.”

Two weeks passed. It was Saturday, the day Sharon was leaving for her Broads Gone Batty three-day weekend with two women from her office. Both are single; one is a widow, one is divorced with two teenagers. They drive to the Laurel Mountains to stay in luxury suites at a fancy spa. They overdose on massages and treatments and girl talk. Sharon told me they paint each other's toenails.

As the Volvo pulled away, Sharon shouted, "Be good, honey. Don't forget to feed the dog." I blew her a kiss. The dog began to whine. He's much more her pet than mine. I pulled on his leash. His nails scraped on the driveway until he followed me inside and lay down on the oval rug in front of the fireplace.

I stared at the telephone. On the day of the funeral, I had looked up Daisy's number. I thought about how I would open the conversation: *Hi Daisy, how long has it been?* Or maybe I would just come right out with it and tell her that seeing her at the funeral made me realize I was still as much in love with her as I had been all those years ago, that all she had to do was say the word and I would drop my current life as if it never existed and run straight to her. But of course I wouldn't say any of that, not really. I checked my watch. It was 8:15 a.m.

The phone rang. "Sharon?"

"Hi, honey. I am so sorry. I forgot to tell you I love you."

"Oh, that's O.K."

"O.K.?"

"I mean, I know you do. Love you, too."

“All right...wait...no, turn left, *left*, Karen. I gotta go, this dumb broad doesn’t know her left from her right.” I hear hysterical laughter in the background. “Love you, Phillip.”

I tossed a chew toy to the dog. I opened the refrigerator and leaned in. Sharon had stocked it with stacks of take-out stuff from the gourmet supermarket, but the only things that appealed to me were a jar of pickles and a bottle of Guinness.

At ten a.m. I dialed her number. Her daughter answered. I said, “May I speak to Daisy, please?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Oh, this is Phillip Levine.”

“Who?”

“Phillip Levine. I met you at the funeral.”

“Huh?”

“I’m an old friend of your mother’s.”

“Hold on. Mom, some guy’s on the phone for you.” Some guy. Not Phillip Levine. As I held on, biting the loose skin around my cuticles, I realized this was one of those moments when something might happen that could alter my life, deeply, for better or worse and even if I wanted to, it was too late to stop it.

“Hello?”

“Daisy? Hi, it’s Phillip.” As an afterthought, I added, “Levine.”

“Phillip! Oh my God. Emily, why didn’t you tell me it was Phillip? How are you?”

“I’m fine, fine.” Actually, I was giddy with fear and excitement. I tried to make my concern sound genuine. “Daisy, I am so sorry about Robbie. Did you get my card?”

“Yes. That was sweet of you.”

“Well, it’s the least I could do. Poor Robbie.”

“I told him to quit smoking 20 years ago. He wouldn’t listen.”

I hesitated. “Well, that was Robbie.”

“Yep, that was Robbie all right.”

“It must be strange to be without him.”

“Not really. We were divorced 18 years ago.”

My heart pounded. “Really. I mean, I didn’t know.”

“How would you?”

“Well, I just assumed you were still, I mean, seeing you at the funeral.”

“There was no one else besides me to make the funeral arrangements. You saw how Denny is, right? Poor guy. ALS. Who knows how long he has. So it was good old Daisy to the rescue. Plus Robbie is Emily’s father. He was sweet to her. Nasty to me.”

I wanted to say, the fucking bastard, how could anyone be nasty to you. “I’m sorry.”

“He was always looking for the next best thing. After two years of marriage it wasn’t me anymore. Hold on a second. Emily, wait! Call me if you need a ride home, all right? Tell Kara’s mother I said hi. Bye, sweetheart. So anyway, how are you? You still a hotshot ad guy? I thought you went to New York.”

“Oh, I did. I moved back here about four years ago. Out in Woodmere Township.”

“What? Woodmere? I’m in Cranberry. We’re practically neighbors.”

“Yes.”

“So what else?”

“Well, I work as a consultant now. Companies pay me a lot of money to tell them what’s wrong with them. If I tell them they’re doing a good job they don’t think they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“You’re funny, Phillip. You were always funny.”

It thrilled me to hear her say so. “Me? Well, I don’t know. Do you really think so?”

“Yes, of course. So, are you married, do you have kids, what?”

“No. I mean no kids. I’ve been married twelve years.”

“12 years. Wow. Your wife must be great.”

“Sharon? Uh, yes she is.”

“I’d love to meet her. We should get together some time.”

I took a deep breath. It was all moving so fast. The words just spilled out.

“Yeah, we should. Hey,” I said, as if I’d just thought of it that moment, “What are you doing this afternoon? I’d love to have you over.”

“Well, I...this afternoon?”

“Yeah. I mean, well, if you’re not busy.”

“Uh, well, why not? O.K.”

I gave her directions to our house. The dog whined in its sleep.

As far as I could remember, Daisy drank diet soda, but maybe her taste had changed. Sharon and I kept a modest wine collection in the basement. I put a bottle of the best white in the refrigerator and left the red on the counter. I trotted upstairs to get dressed.

Every wrinkle on my face looked like a crater. Every pair of pants felt too tight. I finally pulled on a pair of jeans and an oversized black sweater that hid the bulge of my waistline. It was only 11:45. Daisy wasn't due for another two hours. I considered taking the dog out around the lake, but then I'd have to change and shower all over. I checked my email about 20 times. Nothing but junk mail for middle-aged men, vitamin supplements and Viagra substitutes, and one from my brother. After he got divorced he started dating younger women. I forwarded the Viagra email to him. I made another pot of coffee and tried to focus on the portfolio review our financial advisor had sent the week before.

I was dusting the coffee table when the doorbell rang. The dog barked like mad. I shouted, "Ranger, quiet!" but he kept it up until I got to the door.

"Phillip." She gave me huge smile and a polite hug. She smelled of jasmine. She held out a bottle of wine with a red ribbon around its neck. "For you and Sharon."

She had on a short leather jacket over a pink cable knit sweater and jeans. She looked as slim as she did at the Squirrel Cage. Her hair was bobbed shorter than I remembered it, but still it was golden brown. There was a thin white scar from the bridge of her nose to the tip.

I stood there for a moment, frozen like a wooden Indian. "Come in, come in."

"Phillip, you look great."

“You look great.”

“But that goatee has got to go.”

Immediately my hand flew up to my chin. *“Yeah. I was meaning to shave it off.”*

The dog approached her, its head down. She immediately hugged it to her chest.

“Good boy. What a gorgeous dog. What’s his name?”

“Ranger.”

“Ranger. Good boy. So handsome, Ranger.”

The dog immediately sat on its haunches. I could have told it to sit until it was dark outside and it wouldn’t have listened to me. *“You have a dog?”*

“No. Emily’s allergic.” She looked over my shoulder, toward the kitchen. *“So, where’s Sharon? I’m dying to meet her.”*

“Oh, well I guess I didn’t mention it. She’s out of town. I mean, she went away for the weekend with some friends of hers.”

After a pause, Daisy said, *“Oh.”*

“Yeah, she goes away with a couple of her girlfriends around this time every year. They say they have spring fever.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just me and the dog.”

“I can see that.”

Here it was, all in front of me. Daisy Gates in my living room. Daisy Gates, as beautiful, as beatific as ever, unattached, kneeling down in front of me. I felt dirty. I felt on fire. I took a step toward her and froze. *“Daisy.”*

Without looking up, she said, *“Yes, Phillip?”*

I cleared my throat. “Would you. Would you like a glass of wine? Would you like to see the house?”

She stood. The dog clung to her side. She smoothed her jacket. “Sure.”

“Red or white?”

“The house.”

Her answer hit me like a brick in the face. “Oh. Well.” I looked around, feeling lost. “This is the den. We had the fireplace redone.” I touched the fieldstone front. “Last year.”

We walked through the first floor. I pointed out the appliances that we had built in when we re-did the kitchen, how we had the original dining and living room baseboards and crown molding restored, the energy efficient windows, and on and on. I sounded like a real estate agent.

Daisy nodded at my catalog-like descriptions. The dog stayed close to her.

We reached the stairs. I flicked the hallway light. I ran my hand over the oak banister. “Well, that’s the first floor. Would you...would you like to see the upstairs?”

We stood so close that I could see gold flecks in her eyes. She stepped away from the stairs and said, “Great deck.”

For a second I didn’t understand what she meant. “Oh, that. Yes, it’s mahogany. We had it put in last summer.”

“You have a lake.”

“Yes, it faces west. We have some great sunsets.”

“You know, Robbie liked you. He did, really. As much as he could like anybody besides himself.”

“Daisy, I’m sorry.”

“Phillip, we can go upstairs and sleep together all weekend but it wouldn’t change anything. I still wouldn’t love you. Not the way you wish I would. I won’t say I’m sorry for that. It wouldn’t be true. That’s how Robbie told it to me. He said, I don’t love you anymore, not the way you wish I would. If nothing else, he was honest.” She took her car keys from her jacket. “Your home is lovely.”

When Sharon returned three days later the first thing she wanted to do was make love. I couldn’t get an erection. She said it was O.K., not to worry about it, it’ll be better next time, and I believed she meant it. But it wasn’t.

We separated six weeks later. I moved back to New York and took a job at a financial services company, in their in-house ad agency. They were impressed with my credentials, but they wondered why I would want a job as a copywriter when I had been a creative director. I said wanted to get back to doing the writing, not overseeing it.

I wrote a long letter of apology to Daisy; two, in fact. I held out hope for three weeks. Yesterday I got a reply. My hands shook as I ripped open the letter. It was one typed sentence: *I hope New York will be good to you.* There was no signature.