



After the Flood...Me

A STORY BY KAREN ROSENBAUM

I don't remember," says Aunt Dora, becoming small in her corner of the couch. She is pressed against an aqua and pink afgan, her own creation; there is one in everyone's house, even mine. "It was so long ago." Her voice doesn't go down. It never goes down. Her sentences have no ends.

"You remember, Dora," says Auntie Esther. "Of course you remember." She lights a cigarette and shakes the lighter across the coffee table at Aunt Dora. "She doesn't remember," she says to me.

"You were only six when you left Poland," I say, remembering my calculations in the margin of the family group sheet. I pat Aunt Dora's mottled hand. There is no flesh beneath the skin. I am ashamed of my condescension and glance down at the notebook in my lap. "Do you remember the boat ride at all?"

Aunt Dora stares at her own thin legs in their saggy hose, then looks over at my thick ones in their high black boots. She says nothing. "My mother came first class," says Uncle Isaac. "They had money, my parents. In Lublin anyway they had money."

"Shut up, Ike," says Auntie Esther. "Ellie doesn't want to know about *your* family." Technically this is true; Uncle Isaac is only the husband of Esther, my youngest great aunt, and he is the second husband at that. Still he has a good heart and better stories. I hoped Aunt Dora would have stories. Aunt Dora is the oldest one left, only four years younger than my Zaydeh, my long-dead grandfather, her brother Jack. She and Zaydeh were born in the lost world of Ostrava. I grin at Uncle Isaac. He winks back.

"We were all in one bed." Aunt Dora's voice is small but clear.

Editors' Note

This story won third place in the D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest.

"Who?" I poise my pencil.

"My mother, my brother Jack and me," says Aunt Dora. She stops suddenly, mid-breath, and doesn't go on. I write in my pad, "Boat—Dora, Zaydeh, their mom—one bed." Aunt Dora sighs. "That's all I can remember," she says.

"You probably kicked them both all night," says Uncle Isaac.

I let my pencil roll onto my lap. "Auntie Esther says your mother talked about herring on the boat. That was all she would let you and Zaydeh eat." Aunt Dora's eyes look vague through her thick glasses. She doesn't speak.

"Our mother was very strict," says Auntie Esther, gesturing with her cigarette. "Dad was working in Denver at the Star Bakery and living with a cousin. So when he got enough money to send to Ostrava for Mother and Dora and Jack, they moved to Cripple Creek so he could work in a mine. The mine'd give them their own house and he could make more money. But Mother made Dad move back to Denver. It was too hard to keep kosher in Cripple Creek." Auntie Esther squashes the filter into a souvenir-of-Tel-Aviv ashtray. "Your Bubeleh was strict too. Everyone used to be strict."

"My mother went to Chicago," says Uncle Isaac.

"Shut up, Ike," says Auntie Esther.

"Do you remember Cripple Creek?" I ask Aunt Dora.

"Cripple Creek?" Aunt Dora sits forward a little on the couch. "Cripple Creek." She sinks back into the afgan. "I don't remember."

"Denver was the mudpits," says Uncle Isaac. "Now Chicago was a real city."

"Ike," says Auntie Esther.

"That husband of yours," Uncle Isaac folds his hands over his belly and nods, "*he* was from Chicago."

"Yes," I say. I take one of the hard candies from the

milk-glass dish on the coffee table. I unwrap it. "He was."
"Ellie, would you like some ice cream?" asks Auntie Esther.

"No thanks."

"She won't drink whisky; she won't eat ice cream."
Uncle Isaac runs his finger around the rim of his glass.

"I eat ice cream socially," I say. I retrieve the pencil from a fold of my skirt and drop it and my notebook into my briefcase. "How long will you be in Oakland, Aunt Dora?"

"Oh a month," says Aunt Dora with a shrug at the end of her sentence.

"Another week," corrects Auntie Esther. "Betty is flying up on Sunday. She'll take her back home again."

"Palm Springs," sighs Uncle Isaac. "You ever been there, Ellie?"

I shake my head.

"I could get used to Palm Springs. And Betty's house. Why couldn't our kids make it big? Every house on the block has a liver-shaped swimming pool and their backyard is a giant golf course. I could get used to that real fast."

"Kidney-shaped," says Auntie Esther. "Kidney-shaped swimming pool."

"Liver," says Uncle Isaac.

"I guess I'd better be going," I say. "It's getting late and I don't want to wear Aunt Dora out. And anyway I haven't been home since seven this morning. Had a deadline to get a new office brochure to the printers." I squeeze Aunt Dora's hand. "I'm going now, Aunt Dora. It's good to see you."

She looks hard at me, her eyes suddenly lucid and intense. "You're alone too," she says.

"Yes." I stand up. "I'm alone too." I bend and kiss her cheek. She smells a little of whatever Bubeleh smelled of—powder maybe. Poppy seed cake. Years.

Uncle Isaac gets my raincoat from the hall closet and helps me into it. "You ought to find yourself a new man," he says at the door. "What's it been now? Four years anyway."

"Five." I button my coat.

"If I were a little younger, I'd offer." He kisses me and pats my cheek. "You'll dry up and get old."

"Ike," says Auntie Esther. She kisses me too and hands me my umbrella. "It's her stroke," she says, tilting her head toward the living room. "She used to remember good, but when Harry went into the convalescent home she had that stroke and now she forgets everything. She wouldn't even remember they should visit Harry, Betty says, but that she reminds her and drives her over there. Not that Harry knows anything. He doesn't know anything now."

"Nobody knows anything," says Uncle Isaac.

The rain hasn't let up for a week. The gutters overflow under my car. I left a generous space between the front of my Toyota and the rear bumper of a Chevrolet, but a Volkswagen has wedged itself in. I throw the umbrella into the back seat, look through the rain-pelted window, and fantasize about power steering. I set to work.

On the freeway the rain is faster, heavier. Cars in the

left lane bisect high fountains of spray. Along the right side are a few dark vehicles, evidently stalled. I switch on the radio. "A woman in Sausalito was killed," intones a voice, "when mud engulfed her home and sent it skidding down the hill. Highway 101 is closed at the Waldo grade. Highway 17 is closed north of Santa Cruz. The governor has called a state of emergency in three local counties." I turn up the speed of my windshield wipers and push the button for classical music. Mozart to the rescue.

Aunt Dora, what music is in her mind now? What does one think about when one can't remember? I expect some day I'll find out. There's a long tradition of senility in my family. It hits most of us at eighteen. Zaydeh's mind stayed clear, but his body only lasted sixty-three years. Adenocarcinoma of the prostate, the death certificate says. I wrote Denver for a copy of the death certificates. Zaydeh died when I was still in high school, twenty years ago now. Bubeleh died two years later. Her death certificate says cardiac arrest. She was 64.

It didn't occur to me when I was young and they were both alive to ask them what their lives had been like. Every June, Mother, Daddy, Melvin, and I would make the pilgrimage from Las Vegas to Denver in our Pontiac. When we arrived, Mel and I were put to bed in the basement on army cots. Waking in the morning I would stare at the ivy patterned wallpaper and pretend I was in a secret garden. I would fondle the crystal ball paper-weight I carried down from the upstairs coffee table. It spoke to me of magical times and I treasured it, breathed on it, polished it. In the early mornings and during the nights I was much too enchanted by the world in my mind to wonder about the world of my grandparents. During the days, from eight until dusk, we played hide-and-seek with our cousins in the alley, put together 1000-piece puzzles of English cottages in a corner of the living room, fed the ducks on Sloan's Lake, pumped "I'm Looking over a Four-leaf Clover" on the player piano. During the days I lived in my own present.

Besides I wouldn't have known how to ask. When he got home, Zaydeh would sit in his green upholstered chair, smoking cloudy-smelling cigars and reading tabloid-sized newspapers printed in a strange, inaccessible alphabet. Bubeleh couldn't understand our English unless we spoke slowly, and she would scold us when we would blow out the Sabbath candles or grab the wrong dishtowels. We were the goyicher grandchildren. Daddy had married a Mormon.

It didn't occur to me to ask questions until there was no one to ask questions of. It occurred to me at my father's funeral, eighteen months ago. When I got back home, I called Esther, Daddy's favorite aunt, whom I hadn't seen for two years. Isaac had been in the hospital for stomach surgery, she said; that was why they hadn't gone to Nevada for the funeral. Yes, she would be happy to tell me what she could remember. Equipped with notebooks and cassette recorder, I began driving this freeway to their Oakland condominium; I began the biographical bombardment. Did Zaydeh spank my father when he played hooky from Hebrew school? (No.) How did they cook on the Sabbath if no one would turn on the stove? (A Christian lady down the block baked everybody's food in her oven.) Did Bubeleh fast on Yom Kippur too? (Everyone fasted except the children—

they'd have a sack with maybe a chicken leg in it.) Auntie Esther was closer in age to Daddy than to Zaydeh. They all lived on the same street—one now asphalted over next to Mile High Stadium—and everyone wandered in and out of everyone else's house.

Mother also started asking questions when Daddy died; in fact her research overwhelmed us, consumed her in a frenzy of letter-writing and document-searching. I think of her as quite passive when we were growing up; she consulted Daddy about everything and seemed to have adopted his views on politics (Democratic), sports (baseball), and bridge. His death was not expected. Mel and I, by that time nouveaux Californians with one failed and one failing marriage between us, were in some awe at their devotion to each other and we worried that Mother might not be able to, in Mel's words, fend for herself. Even at the funeral though she was sturdier than we. She tightened her lower lip over her teeth and smiled grimly at all the relatives from both sides of the family, the ones from Daddy's side who came late to loving her and the comfortable, plump ones from her own. The next month, assuring Grandpa Ed and Grandma Ellen she'd return often to visit, she drove a U-Haul from Las Vegas to Salt Lake City where she moved in with her never-married sister, our Aunt Beth. She spends her days reading microfilm in the genealogy library.

The northbound freeway passes under the southbound and I am sheltered from the storm except when I pass under the intermittent drainage slashes. Then loud sheets strike the car, and the metal rings. I turn the radio louder. "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" muffles the outside sounds. Bach a la Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Mother came to genealogy through the Mormonism which she practiced unobtrusively during Daddy's lifetime. She hasn't told us, but Mel and I figure she must have gathered the necessary data to begin work in the temple for Daddy. Now that he is safely dead she can have him baptized and married to her in a proper Mormon ceremony. Recently she has shifted her focus to her own ancestors. "I have Great Uncle John's whole family done," she'll say, "except for two birthdates." Or "I'm working on the Arnold line. If you meet any Arnolds, ask them if they're from Somerset." She and Aunt Beth are going to England in the fall and they are trying to convince Grandma Ellen to go with them. There are some Arnolds over there they are hoping to meet.

Dates, names, places are of little interest to me, but then since Jay left, I have been rather eclectic about Mormon principles. I came to genealogy through my love of stories. Daddy would tell us about Zaydeh driving the junk and bottle wagon or later working in the Tivoli Brewery. "He worked so hard," Daddy would say, his eyes blinking back a few tears, and I would see my grandfather, standing in water and beer higher than his shoe tops, holding empty bottles under blasting spigots. I don't *know* that it was like that. It has always been hard for me to distinguish history from other truths.

I deliberate now about which freeway exit will be the least flooded and decide on University. Even though I slow down, the steering wheel still jumps out of my hands as I hit the water in the first intersection. I bring the car to a crawl and, tense, creep on home.

My front door sticks in wet weather and I resign myself to three more months of inconvenience. After the divorce, I briefly considered selling the house, but it was not, Mel advised, the economically sound thing to do. Now, once inside, I drop my briefcase and umbrella, push up the thermostat and turn on the TV set. The late news anchor man is wearing his most concerned look; his eyebrows crease the swatch of forehead between them; his lips are tight and wrinkled. Across the bay in Pacifica, three children have been smothered by a wall of mud. Cars have been abandoned, streets have become rivers. Motor boats are rescuing senior citizens in a mobile home park in San Jose. I sit down on the couch and unzip my boots.

Paralyzed for a moment by a camera commercial, I count ten and heave myself up from the couch and into the kitchen. I pour myself a handful of chocolate chips. I'd better check the basement, I think. I probably have a little water leaking in around the sides. It happens every winter when the rains saturate the ground. After the second winter, we put everything up on bricks though—detergent, sacks of flour and sugar, packages of toilet paper. That's the tenet of Mormonism that's the easiest for me—storing a year's supply. I snap on the light and grip the stair railing.

It takes me a minute to realize what's wrong. I seem to be seeing the downstairs bedroom floor through a large lens. I crouch and feel. My hand is wet, so is my forearm. The strands of green shag rug ripple like fern fronds. My basement is a half-foot deep pond. I sit down on the next-to-the-last dry step and stare.

I don't know how long I sit there. Fascinated, I hear myself laughing. Finally I stand up, pull off my stockings, skirt and slip, and walk in. It's cold. Stored under the bed, I remember, are extra sheets, blankets and sewing supplies. I grimace at the thought of squeezing them all out and lugging them over to the laundromat. We bought a Maytag our first Christmas in the house, but we planned to hold off on a dryer until we had a child. I splash around the sewing table. The foot pedal of the sewing machine is under water and the machine is plugged in. Water reaches the supporting rungs of the chair.

I open the storeroom door and flip on the light. Out sail a gardening bucket and Jay's old wooden sandals. Startled into another laugh, I contemplate the chaos before me. I was going to organize this room my next day off. Detergent boxes, sugar sacks, kleenex cartons—everything under the water is sodden, swollen, disintegrating. Above the water, against the wall, a dark wet line creeps upward. I put my finger in my mouth. The water tastes faintly like soap and sugar. I sigh.

I unbuckle my watch and put it on a shelf atop the canned beans. Brilliant foresight to have put the canned goods on the shelves and the flour and sugar on the

bricks on the floor. Bobbing against my knees are old, partially filled paint cans. We had painted the outside of the house the summer before the separation. When I step backwards, the cans bang against each other and knock against the wall.

I turn as I remember. Next to the washing machine is a metal trunk in which I keep my past. Daddy used it in his Army days, and from my thirteenth birthday until my wedding day, Mother and Aunt Beth filled it with embroidered dishtowels and table cloths and pillowcases. It was, they said, my hope chest. When Jay and I bought the house, I transferred the contents to the upstairs closet. Most of those dishtowels now are stained, some torn. The cotton pillowcases still sit, pressed and stiff, on the closet shelves underneath the down pillows that I am allergic to. Mother and Aunt Beth hadn't anticipated matching sheets and cases in tinted and patterned, no-iron polyester blends.

I haven't looked through the trunk in years, but I have opened it upon occasion to toss something in. Water laps halfway up the outside. I wonder if it is waterproof. I lift off the box of dress patterns resting on top and put them on the lid of the washing machine. I undo the truck latch. Inside is water.

And bundles of letters. And pictures still in their Kodak yellow envelopes, with inked notations—Christmas in Vegas, M&D 25 Anniv—smearing as I watch. I pick up the announcement of Mel's second marriage—it is mostly dry—and lay it on the washer next to the patterns. I carry a rubber banded clump of letters and several envelopes of photos into the bedroom. Carefully I separate the letters and lay them out on the chenille spread. I make the effort not to read the thickening blue words. I peel apart wet, weak-colored snapshots which have curled, sticky, one inside the other. I have to look at those. Our jeep trip to Canyonlands. Our skins were so dark the sands looked light on them. Me, thin then. Jay—I search his face, squinting into my Instamatic, for signs of unrest. I close my eyes. I shiver.

From the trunk I lift out more wet paper—damp manila envelopes with the house papers; water-darkened medical reports—the shots we got when we flew to France and Italy; dripping keepsakes—some in labeled folders, some loose—obituaries and funeral programs—Daddy's on top—two theatre programs, a Golden Anniversary newspaper article for Grandpa Ed and Grandma Ellen, an old Las Vegas library card, Mel's outdated driver's license, an engagement picture of me from the Las Vegas *Sun*, a paper velvet photo folder with matte finish photograph of Mel and Donn and baby Melanie in a sunsuit. The news clippings are transparent except for the ink. I drape them over the sewing machine, the wardrobe, the upper rungs of the chair.

Wedge upright in the trunk by the stack of college yearbooks is a legal-sized folder I leave for as long as I can. Finally I pull it out. By now I have spread a thin layer of wet things up the left side of the stairway so I grab my clothes from the railing and take them and the folder upstairs. In the living room a woman in a metallic dress is shouting from the TV screen. I twist the off button and carry the folder into the bathroom.

Sitting on the bathmat, I look at the bumps on my legs

and at my fat wrinkled toes. I blot off the water and lay the towel in the tub. I open the folder.

Water beads on the metal clamp at the top. The pages are heavy, soggy. I unfasten the clamp and separate the papers, spread them on the towel and try hard not to see the words. As with the photos, I fail. Request and declaration for Final Judgment of Dissolution of Marriage, says the one on top. I paste sheets up the porcelain. Standing, I draw the shower curtain around the whole tub.

I flip down the lid of the toilet and sit on it. I am cold. What time is it? My watch is downstairs on a can of beans. My elbow brushes the extended shower curtain. During prohibition, Zaydeh had a still in their bathtub. And sometimes when Daddy came home from school, he'd peek into the tub and there would be a carp that Bubeleh had bought from the fish seller. She let it swim around until it was time to kill it. But never would Zaydeh and Bubeleh have had, drying in their bathtub, official forms and receipts of the Clerk of the County.

There is work to do. During the mid-70s drought I learned how to siphon the water out of the bathtub and the washing machine into the vegetable garden. I wade back through the basement, open the downstairs door, and turn on the back light. The water on the sunken entrance steps is the same level as in the basement, but the lawn and garden are lower and they don't appear flooded. The rain is falling more lightly now. I assume none of my neighbors are peering over their fences at me as clad in my underpants and sweater, I drag hoses from around the yard. I squirt water down one hose the wrong way, Jay taught me that trick, and lower it into the basement pool. I feel a satisfying pull as the hose begins to suck. I have to leave the basement door open all night, but there's not much a thief would find interesting now anyway, except maybe a can of beans. One of the documents up there in the bathtub is a restraining order forbidding Jay entrance to the house. Even in the divorce days of numbness and despair, I could see the irony of that.

I remember my watch. It is 3:15 and tomorrow is a work day. On the corner of the bed, one smeared blue airletter stains the spread. Firenza, I had written at the top, June 17, 1974. Mother saved all our letters from that trip and wrapped them for us for a present the next Christmas. We'd spent an evening rereading them. But why was I saving them now? Why am I saving any of it, I think. For whom? Why not borrow my boss's truck and just haul it away to the dump? I strap on the watch and climb the right side of the stairs. I pull my sweater over my head and spread it on the living room rug.

My bedding straightened, I flip off the nightstand lamp. Most nights I read mysteries in a wad of blankets and pillows and then try to think my thanks to the god of my mother and the god of my grandfather, but tonight when I close my eyes, there intrudes an image of the submerged sewing machine pedal. I send my gods each a sigh instead of a prayer and sink beneath the pink and aqua afgan and swim my way into sleep.

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