

Is That Really What The Conductor Says?

By Rabbi Marc H. Wilson

My body is 33,000 feet over Kentucky, just a month from my fortieth birthday, but my mind is hopelessly stuck in Saturday morning, 1955. And for now, I don't particularly want it unstuck.

My flight to Chicago is one more tedious episode in the four year exercise of trying to bring some order to the irreconcilable disorder of my Aunt Minnie's death. Struck down on her way home from synagogue by an over-anxious driver. How tragically poignant — or perhaps how divinely unfair — a way for a decent, pious woman to die.

Minnie was my mother's soul-mate, her closest confidante, and confessor of deepest secrets and emotions. No amount of pastoral hard knocks could have readied me for the unfathomable trauma, the seeming disintegration of everything sane and sensible in my mother's world, that ensued from the most difficult words I have ever spoken, "Minnie is dead."

Her death, I realize, ruthlessly signaled the end of my mother's childhood. And mine, too. For Minnie, never married, the successful executive, was the bridge who spanned the difficult transition from the insular naivete of my youth to the tentative, self-doubting first steps of my adulthood. She was my introduction to theater ("Fiorello"), and serious cinema ("Lord of the Flies"), and Downtown dining (corned beef at Hardings and Viennese pastry at Carousel in the Sky), and shopping at Marshall Field's, and understated agate cufflinks she brought me back from Stockholm. She became my literary mentor and greatest fan and severest critic ("Loved your sermon, Marc, but try to watch ending your sentences with prepositions"). A credible caveat from a woman who did the *New York Times* crossword flawlessly in ink.

Ironically, though, it is not sophistication, but the little bit of 1955 Saturday morning silliness with Minnie that makes me wax most bittersweet over the childhood that died with her death. Saturday morning meant six-year-old Marc snuggling deep under the covers in Minnie's bed pretending to ride the southbound Chicago El — "Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo... WASHing-ton, change for the Lake Street train...Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo...Aunt Min, is that really what the conductor says each day?"

"Yes," she would assure me, "that's exactly what he says."

Minnie named me executor of her will. Only then did it sink in that she had actually come to see me as an adult. And now, four years later, I in my somber, ministerial suit-and-tie return to Chicago to answer yet another set of interrogatories about the circumstances of her death and unfinished affairs. And four years later, we wearily capitulate to the demeaning process of actuarial tables, and standards of liability, and projected earning capacities, and obstructive insurance tacticians who will, through some sort of obscene alchemy, determine the intrinsic worth of one Minnie Goldsmith, deceased. And four years later, my mother and I sigh that knowing sigh and surrender to the oxymoronic futility that it is "now in the lawyers' hands."

And then, six-year-old Benjy crawls deliciously under my Saturday morning covers and petitions me for an episode of *El Train*, a legacy that Minnie has left me for my children, and all things that have grown tedious and weary suddenly become new. For it is I, not he, who is six-years-old again. "Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo... WASHing-ton... Daddy, Daddy, is that what the conductor says each day?"

"Yes," I tell him, "that's exactly what he says." And I pray that he hears just the childish innocence, not the edge of melancholy, that creeps into my voice.

So now let's see: If the deposition is at 10:00 and my plane back is at 4:00, it should leave me just enough time to grab a sandwich at Hardings, then catch the El, head north to Fullerton, turn around and head south again, "Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo... WASHing-ton, change for the Lake Street train..."

Yes, I'll tell Benjy, that's precisely what the conductor says. And somehow I will convey to him without ever speaking the words that the real worth of someone beloved is never, ever, in the lawyers' hands, but in the most tender recollections of a snuggle deep under Saturday morning covers and the Ka-shoo, Ka-shoo of an imaginary El train headed Downtown. And he will laugh. And I will laugh, and the tears I shed will be more, incalculably more, of the sweet than of the bitter.

Aunt Min, is that really what the conductor says?

Thoughts from Adrienne

By Adrienne Rosenberg, JFS Director



The first memory I can recall is my father and zeyda trying to dig out the car from a severe snow storm. My mother was in labor and needed to get to the hospital. I was 3½ years old and when my parents did leave to go to the hospital, I rode on my zeyda's shoulders to stay with him, my bubba, and Aunt Tillie, my mother's younger, unmarried sister. We arrived at their house at the same time my aunt was coming home from work. I still remember the brown fur coat she wore and the hugs we gave each other in greeting.

My Aunt Tillie has always been a major support and favorite family member all my life. Before she got married, she would babysit my brother and me, play paper dolls with me, and read us stories. I remember attending her wedding, and even though we did not live in the same community after that, she was always there for me emotionally and lovingly.

In May when Jennifer was confirmed, my aunt and uncle came. After that I saw her in July while on a vacation trip. She told me she wasn't feeling well phys-

ically and was feeling depressed. The doctors thought she may have had a stroke. Between then and now, her health has steadily declined; now the doctors are saying she has the symptoms of Alzheimers disease.

How glad I am that when I did see her last and she was not confused that I told her how much I loved her and how important she had always been to me. It seems so unfair that at 66 her quality of life has such a poor prognosis. I am slowly trying to adjust to this change.

Unfortunately, as people live longer, more and more people are victims of this neurological disorder. It is estimated that 2.5 million adult Americans suffer from this disease. There is no known cure. It causes memory loss, personality changes and functional changes with the person eventually unable to survive without total physical care. The duration of the disease is progressive, but from my experience, the younger one is, the faster the disease seems to evolve. That pains me for my aunt and our family.

The burden of care, of course,

falls on my uncle. Their children are also trying to adjust to what is going on. The book, *The 36-Hour Day*, deals with the facts that the victims become the family members who are directly dealing with the personality and physical changes that are taking place. To quote from a booklet I have in my office about Alzheimers, "to be a member of an Alzheimer's family is to taste a bitter stew of frustration and anger and guilt and embarrassment and grief." It means mourning for the loss of what the person was and seeing a constant regression where there becomes total dependency, for the person is capable of no other state.

My mother, uncle and cousins, all are turning to me for the answers and for support as we slowly try to adjust to what is, rather than what we'd like to be. They think I will be strong because of the field I am in. I hope I'm helpful to them. But I am aware I am dealing with my own sorrow and emotions. It isn't fair, you know. My Aunt Tillie certainly deserved better!

Panama's Jews Showed Fear/Heroism

(cont'd from page 2)

Israeli, Avi Cohen, was a leader in the vigilante brigade.

One native Panamanian Jew, Victor Angel was credited with the defense of Punta de Patilla. Angel, owner of a chain of women's wear stores, La Casa Amarilla, found his business looted down to the tiles on the ceiling. In his stores, as well as those of others, looters carried away not only all the merchandise but the toilet facilities, rugs and lights.

About 300 business leaders held a meeting at the local synagogue, Shevet Achim, and estimated that their losses from looting amounted to \$400 million, with some 5,000 Panamanians out of work. Their insurance situation is unclear, they report, and they say they need help.

David Mechanic's phone, 556-1466, is now in operational order. Sorry for any inconvenience. See ad, page 17.

JFS Thanks Tzedakah Givers

JFS as an agency and the Charlotte Jewish community in general are fortunate because we have so many "angels." A Jewish angel? Yes. It is all those individuals, families, classes and organizations that donate monies and gifts to us that help us benefit others. What are some of these gifts? The list is long but includes some of the following within the last month: (1) canned goods and food items; (2) food coupons; (3) paper goods (kleenex, toilet paper, napkins, etc.);

(4) toilet articles; (5) money for emergency purposes for those in financial difficulty; (6) Charlotte Hornets tickets for youngsters whose families could not afford them; (7) and, our largest donation, a station wagon which we will donate to the JCC for its senior nutrition program.

Please know that we are ready to have more "angels." Just call the Jewish Family Services office, 364-6594 or 364-6596, to find out how you can help.

— Notice —

If you or anyone in your family has an alcohol or substance abuse problem and wish to talk confidentially about this, please call Adrienne Rosenberg at Jewish Family Services, 364-6594 or 364-6596.

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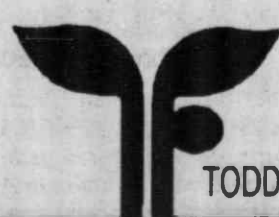
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