

Solomon and Hilda are Dead; Long Live Solomon and Hilda!

Solomon and Hilda, must be gone now I thought with a pang, adding up the years. Solomon had seemed ancient, Hilda only slightly less so, when I lived with them in Boston in the early eighties. Solomon and Hilda! In my solipsistic youth I had let them go, let them slip away from me in my headlong rush towards this, my own life. Why, my husband and I must be approaching the ages they were then—how had it happened? Hilda and Solomon had seemed both old and eternal, unchanging—a sort of enduring shelter.

But that was because they had sheltered me. And I was a girl in need of sheltering.

I was twenty-two, just out of college, having fled the South and landed in Boston. I was unprepared to make my way in the world, but dead-set on doing so, propelled by a great unhappiness. I had washed up with a group of missionary nuns who lived in an impoverished part of Jamaica Plain and had an extra room for rent. I settled in with them, writing poetry, and taking black and white photos when I wasn't working as a temp. I would get early morning calls to go to this or that part of Boston to do clerical work or substitute teach or work in a factory. Each day, I dressed in the cold and slipped out of the house into the still-dark morning. It seemed enough that I could maintain myself this way, that I could be independent. I was like a girl in a fairytale completing each day's onerous task, believing it would all add up to something, someday.

My art photography was put to an abrupt halt one winter afternoon. While taking a photo of a bloom of rust on an abandoned car, I felt a shadow fall over me. I took my

eye from the viewfinder. A large man suddenly loomed above me. He was pointing to my wrist and I thought he was asking the time. Then he let loose a string of “f—ing bitch, f—cunt” in a strangely hushed voice as he grabbed the camera strap and twisted it around my neck. I went limp. He relieved me of my camera and camera bag, the camera and lenses gifts from my father. He pulled off my gloves, looking for a diamond ring, glaring at me when I turned out to be ring-less and watch-less. As he backed away, he told me not to scream, muttering that he was watching me, that he knew where I lived. Mute, I stayed rooted to the spot for a long time before finding I could move.

For weeks afterwards, I was unable to let anyone get physically close to me without panicking. On the Orange Line, my breath would grow shallow, my stomach clench as people pressed closer. That invisible psychic buffer I never knew I had was gone.

I had a friend, Tom, a gentle young man I had met months before when we’d gotten off at the same subway stop and he’d commented on my copy of *Seven Storey Mountain*. Skinny Tom, swathed in a wool muffler, a watchman’s cap on his head, with frameless glasses that magnified his doleful brown eyes, reminded me of Lara’s Bolshevik husband in *Dr. Zhivago*. He had that same pale otherworldliness. We walked all the way to the nuns’ house that first day and stood by its chain link fence, talking in the meager afternoon light. The mutt next door snarled and barked as we talked about books and ideas. Tom’s round lenses flashed. What books? What ideas? Who knows? We were young, and passionate in our bookish ways. Now, alarmed at my funk, Tom invited me to a party at the house where he boarded. I hesitated, still spooked, unsure if I

could handle a party. The thought, though, of watching Lawrence Welk with Sister Mary Martha was so dispiriting I overcame my reluctance.

Tom walked me over the night of the party. The house was in a more gentrified part of Jamaica Plain. Just a few blocks away, the large Victorian house sat on a small hill, sheltered by giant, shaggy snow-covered cedars. Lit from inside, the interior rooms glowed, the light from them spilling out onto the blue-white snow. Tom opened the heavy wooden door, and I was ushered into a foyer papered in a lush William Morris floral, a thick red Persian carpet underfoot. I looked up at the sweeping staircase, and around at the large pocket doors and gleaming wood floors. Laughter and music spilled from the next room; I could smell the fire in the fireplace. I was dazzled. Here was the exact template of my dreams. After so much sensory deprivation--the nuns' cold house with its gray linoleum floors, the subway cars with their odor of urine and the crush of stale bodies, the unrelenting diet of pizza and peanut butter sandwiches--I felt as if I were thawing, coming alive again.

Tom introduced me to Alex, the owner of the house, a slight, middle-aged bespeckled man, rumped in corduroys and a tweed jacket. He might have smelled of pipe tobacco, or that may be memory's ornamentation. He was different from what I expected. He had a recessive quality, but was kind, and soon had me talking about poetry and Yeats. He had a wife, a blonde Valykrie, who was hugely pregnant, and children that ran willy-nilly through the guests. I regaled him with what I hoped were amusing stories about my life as a temp. Alex must have taken in the whole picture—my haplessness and naïveté, my lack of carapace. On the spot, he offered me a job at the Board of Education

as a “consultant.” I remember great relief, but I am not sure I was surprised. Here was the fairytale’s unexpected boon.

The job he gave me paid more than I’d ever been paid in my life and looked good on paper. It felt like a step up. It was weeks before I realized I was doing nothing more than glorified clerical work. In my innocence, I was shocked at how language was distorted to create bureaucratic opacity. I was appalled at the mind-numbing drudgery of office work, at the dispiriting gray cubicles, and the petty office intrigues. I couldn’t believe that shuffling paper could be called work. I actually liked factory work better, liked the banter of the Southies who worked at Gillette Foamy. But on the other hand, I liked knowing where I was going everyday, and getting a salary. I understood that Alex had the beautiful house because he had traded his love of Yeats for the security of this job. I was beginning to see how the world worked.

Hilda was the head secretary in the office. She commanded a warren of desks for the secretarial staff. I had seen and heard her around the office. She was tall with a large squarish torso and an oblong head covered with black and gray hair in a severe bowl cut. She wore bright shirts in purple or pink hibiscus prints over slacks, as if she were on a perpetual vacation in Florida, and her raucous laugh frequently pierced the dull rat-tat-tat white noise of the office. I think my first encounter with her was when I needed aspirin for menstrual cramps and someone said, “Go ask Hilda

Hilda, like Alex, must have taken one look at me and seen me for what I was. She clucked and challenged and teased me about my feckless state. She made fun of me to the other secretaries, “What are we going to do with this girl?” she’d say, so that I’d turn red, my feeble impersonation of an adult unmasked. She wasn’t fooled by my love of Yeats or

Merton; she wanted to know what my plans were, why I was living in a slum, why I sick all the time, and if I had a boyfriend. She even sometimes brought me chicken soup. I protested that I could take care of myself, but I soaked up her fussing.

I was, however, becoming increasingly restless and disillusioned with the job. I no longer wrote poetry or read, my mind used up by the endless filling of forms. Tom studied theology at Boston College and took me around to look at it, urging me to apply. I liked the thought of spending a few more years reading and writing while postponing real life. So in my freezing attic room I prepared for the GRE, struggling painfully through the math and spatial problems. I squeaked by and to my amazement, was accepted into the Masters program in English. I resigned from the Board of Education. Hilda was delighted. She and Solomon lived in Chestnut Hill right next to BC. I could rent their extra room. It was perfect—no more long subway rides, no more late nights walking past bars or drunks. And lots of chicken soup. I moved in that fall.

The house was a modest red brick one-story house. The front door opened onto a formal living room with a plush velvet sofa, loud floral cushions, and windows covered in lace and brocade. No one ever sat in that dim room. My room, off from the living room, must have originally been a sun porch. It was filled with filing cabinets, boxes of papers, odds and ends, and shoved into the middle was a bed. It may have been crowded and dusty, but it was mine.

All the real action in the house took place in the kitchen. Solomon, Hilda's husband, was as slight and quiet as Hilda was large and noisy. Gaunt, bald and leathery, he seemed always to be sitting at the kitchen table hunched over pieces of leather that he worked assiduously with his small metal tools, his glasses threatening to slip off the end

of his nose. It wasn't a large kitchen, and Hilda worked around him, kvetching at every opportunity. He showed me his strip of leather, "Vat I used to do," he mumbled. His accent was very thick; I couldn't tell what it was, German or Hungarian or Polish. I never thought to ask, too involved in the drama of my own life. I think now that Hilda was lonely with her quiet husband. She made a lot of noise, banging her pans, muttering under her breath.

And so we passed that winter. I was happy in my new routine, working hard, and so surprised when I lifted my head from Cervantes one day and saw the first signs of spring. Spring in Boston comes slowly, tentatively, and each inroad made—a daffodil, snow melting off a roof, sunlight penetrating dusty southern windows—feels like a slow war being waged, one battle at a time. The sweaters come off, and the days lengthen. Still, when Solomon asked me one day, "Sarrah, do you want to go to the bitch?" I had no idea what he was talking about. Mutely, I stared at him. We were in the kitchen as always and Hilda laughed, turning from whatever pot she was stirring to explain to me that he meant "beach." His "beach" was the south side of the house where he had placed two plastic lounge chairs facing the sun.

Of course I said yes. He was delighted.

Solomon and I trooped down through the dark basement to the outer door. He settled himself in one of the chairs, stretching out and sighing contentedly, as if this were the finest pleasure afforded a man. I was freezing. I turned my face towards the sun and hugged my sweater tight. Then Solomon took off his shirt so that he was in his sleeveless undershirt. "Have to get my beauty tan," he winked at me and closed his eyes again, a big grin on his face. It was only then that I saw the inked numbers on his inner forearm.

I stared. Suddenly, I was back in junior high, films of concentration camps and skeletal bodies flickering by as we sat dumbstruck in our hard chairs. The shock of those films had never left me. Solomon had come through *that....?* The Holocaust seemed to have happened so long ago, yet here he was. My sense of history underwent a seismic revision. I wanted to ask him about those numbers, but when he opened his eyes again after a long time, I said nothing.

As Passover approached, in between writing papers on Faulkner and Henry James, I helped Hilda with her cleaning and cooking. The oldest of six children, I was competent when it came to domestic chores. “You would make such a good Jewish wife,” Hilda said, shaking her head. “What a waste.” Their daughter, a social worker five years older than I was, came around infrequently. I could see that being their only child was a big job. They were constantly grilling her about getting married, and they disapproved of her living with her boyfriend. Hilda could not resist bringing up her non-existent grandchildren. I recognized the daughter’s need to keep some distance.

Whenever our paths crossed, she regarded me with the clearly sardonic expression of the old soldier towards the young recruit. When I think of her, I always see her leaving, running down the steps of the house with her long black hair flapping behind her like a flag in retreat.

They didn’t like my boyfriend either, and for good reason. I’d become entangled with an older man. It wasn’t good and I knew it. Yet it was as if I were in his thrall. He had sniffed out my primal wound, the same wound Hilda tried to salve with chicken soup. I was sure I was unlovable. I thought enduring his abuse was the test of love.

One day when I came home late, Hilda asked to talk with me. Standing in the middle of the sacred living room, framed by brocade and lace, she said she and Solomon were worried about me, about this man. “He is not for you,” she said, her dark eyebrows pinched together. Solomon stood beside her, reiterating everything she said in his heavy accent, like some sort of Eastern European echo chamber. I told them I appreciated their concern but that I could handle the situation. I went into my room and closed the door. Tears of shame and anger washed over me. I didn’t want to admit the truth of what they said. I was an adult, after all. They were just old-fashioned. They really, really needed to stay out of my business.

Hilda never mentioned my boyfriend again, but I found myself invited that summer to parties with their daughter and her friends. Hilda worked behind the scenes, as would any good Jewish mother worth her salt. One of the daughter’s friends took me on a few dates, and then one day offered to set me up as his mistress, since he couldn’t marry a non-Jew. I didn’t even like him, had only been going out with him to mollify Hilda. Horrified, I slammed out of the car and ran up the steps, catching a glimpse of Hilda behind the curtains. I wanted to tell her that her daughter’s friends were creeps, even if they were good Jewish boys, but of course I never did.

I did break up with my alcoholic boyfriend. I like to believe I would have left him without Hilda’s urgings, but I wonder now if I would have. Hilda was more right than she knew—his next girlfriend was found dead in her car of an overdose, and it was never determined whether it was suicide or an accident. Learning of her death was like waking from a dream. If I had stayed with him, would it have been me? We had been dancing close to the edge of an abyss.

It was winter again all too soon. Every afternoon I packed up my Selectric in its cumbersome plastic case and slogged through the snow to the library to work on my thesis. It seemed that it was always dark walking to the library, dark and snowy with a biting wind that went right through my thin jacket. I was doing research on a little known female novelist whose name I no longer remember. What I do remember is how hard her life had seemed, how she had used her own unhappiness in her work, and how her work had been neglected by history. I liked her work, but can remember thinking glumly that someday some poor graduate student might stumble upon my scribblings and write a thesis about how I also just missed the mark. My mind then had a dark cast.

One day, walking to the library, I slipped on ice and sprained my ankle. After that, Solomon insisted on driving me to the library. My sprain healed soon enough and I began walking to school again, despite Solomon's protests that he didn't mind taking me, that he worried I'd hurt myself again. I was anxious not to have them hover over me or treat me like an invalid. I didn't want them waiting around for me. I felt like an adolescent, desperate to get out of the house, to be free, to meet my friends without a schedule, to be responsible only to myself.

One night, after a group study session, several of us decided to get Chinese down at Cleveland Circle. We walked outside into a blizzard. The sky poured endless snow; snow swirled violently under the street lights, and suddenly giddy, we found ourselves pelting each other with snowballs. Breathless with exertion, exhilarated by the cold and then the warmth of the restaurant, we dropped all talk of French deconstructionists and the work of William Burroughs. When I think of how ponderous we were at so young an age, at how we took ourselves so seriously! My head was full of Bachelard and Barth, of

Gadamer and Pynchon, although even then I wondered what on earth any of it meant, really, for me.

I remember how that night, our faces flushed, we ate our steaming sweet and sour soup and talked about our futures. One friend was anxious to meet a Holy Cross boy and get married and have babies, another was planning on law school. One already had worked out the minimum salary she would need to support her lifestyle. They were girls from a good Boston suburb, and this was their interlude before taking up their safe, proscribed roles. I couldn't articulate what I wanted, what my plan was. I felt passionately about so many things, and yet I didn't know how to translate that passion into a life. "I am going to take photos of plums in a glass bowl," I said, and as soon as I said it, realized how ridiculous and pretentious I sounded. I remember them laughing, someone saying, "you are content with so little." But that wasn't it at all.

It might have occurred to me as we ordered our next rounds of beer and pu-pu platters to call Hilda and Solomon and tell them I would be late. It might have, or I might have been having so much fun that they never crossed my mind.

We left the restaurant and began walking back up the hill. The snowstorm had not abated, if anything it had grown stronger, shrouding the buildings and trees so that we could barely see where we were. I remember how I loved it, loved how everything was muffled, indeterminate. Then, out of the corner of my eye I registered Solomon's old mustard-colored Chevy emerging from the curtain of white to come alongside us. My heart dropped. I slowed, and then stopped. My friends in front of me turned to look, puzzled. The streetlight gleamed on his bald head as he leaned over and cranked the

passenger window down. “You gulls need a ride?” he said, looking at my friends. No, they said, thanks, while I reluctantly got into the car, mortified.

Solomon pushed the gas peddle and the car jerked and huffed into traffic. The humidity I’d brought with me fogged the windows. He looked straight ahead, driving with great concentration. Up close, I could how deep the lines mapping his tan face were. Finally, he said, “Do you know vat time it is? Ve vere so vorried about you, Sarrahh. I’ve been looking for you for an hour.” He turned to me, and I could see he wasn’t really angry, just deeply worried. I sank down in the seat, ashamed of myself and yet irritated that my night out had come to an abrupt end. “I am so sorry, Solomon,” I said, and I meant it. I hated that he had been out in a blizzard searching for me. I hated that I had caused him anguish. Looking out the foggy window, I realized it was time for me to go.

I moved out that spring. I never told them what they meant to me, because I didn’t know.