

THINGS

By

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I have always loved things. My mother loved things but we never had enough of them. Not enough of anything.

Not enough of my father. His thing was drinking. I mean drinking in a big way. Most of the time my father came home drunk, after he had used up whatever money he had. He never beat us up, but maybe it would have been better, seeing how hungry we always were.

I'm the oldest. After me came a brother and a sister, and then my father left. Sometimes he tried to come back. He never made it all the way up to the front door. My mother knew his sound on the steps. She went outside and shut the door behind her. We almost always heard yelling, and she came inside, alone. One time we heard that noise when somebody falls down the steps. I ran to the front door and opened it. My mother stood at the top of the steps. My father, arms and hands across his head, lying at the bottom landing curled into a ball and saying bad curses at my mother. That was the end of my father. I tried to do what my mother said we should do. I forgot about him.

My mother worked. I had a job too. The lady downstairs watched my brother and sister until I came home from school. We went upstairs. I unlocked the door and we went into the kitchen. Mother left our three cups all

ready for us in the Frigidaire. Sometimes they were filled with milk, and sometimes it was cold water. There were always bread-and-butter sandwiches on the table.

Then we crayoned over our coloring books or we made pictures over the newspaper that Mother brought home with the previous day's date on it. I knew that because I read days and numbers since I was four years old.

Like I said, my mother always loved things, and she had all kinds of bells in the china cabinet and sometimes, when I was tired of coloring or making newspaper pictures, I went over to the china cabinet and looked at those pretty things. Some were porcelain, some were glass, and some were metal. They were all different colors and sizes, but I never tried to unlock the cabinet so I could touch them. Mother told me how delicate they were.

We never had much room for things. My brother and sister and I slept in the bedroom. My sister and I shared the big bed. My brother had the small cot. My mother's bed was in the living room. She called it magic because sometimes it was a couch and sometimes it was her bed.

We all shared the dresser and the closet. We each had one drawer, and our things needed to be put away neat or my mother got mad and talked about washing and starching and ironing and electricity, so we were careful. We always had just enough of everything, one for wear and one for wash. We always had shoes even if they got a little tight before Mother got us new ones from the shoemaker.

In school we got milk every single morning and that was really good. The only bad part was on Monday when the teacher collected milk money and I had to stay in my seat. I guess some other kids didn't pay either, but I kept looking down so I only heard the kids walking up, the teacher saying their names, and then I heard the kids going back to their seats.

We grew up and my mother worked and worked. On the weekends she took us everywhere, to museums, to the lake, to the park. Most nights during the week, after my mother fed us our dinner, she left again because it was time for her school. She made jokes about how we were all going to school but at different times. Mother told us she was going to college, something she didn't have a chance to do when she was young.

It went on like that for a lot of years. We came home from school, did homework, and waited for Mother. Sometimes she stopped at the butcher and we had meat for dinner. Every Friday there were Sabbath candles, the Challah Mother made, and the chicken that was fresh from the butcher. I asked her one time how she was so sure it was fresh.

“Feel it,” she said.

It was warm.

“I picked that chicken, right in the back of Sol's Butcher Shop. Right in front of me, he killed it and plucked it, and soon we'll have Sabbath with it. When you grow up

you'll do that for your family. You'll be a nice kosher wife.”

Once in a while we went to Temple. My brother sat downstairs with the men, and my mother, my sister and I sat upstairs with the women, behind the curtain.

I had a bad feeling when my brother went alone to Temple so much. I complained. My mother told me to calm myself. She said that after my brother became a Bar Mitzvah, Temple would be over. She didn't understand. I didn't miss my brother. I missed Temple but I couldn't say it because I couldn't say it.

My mother said we were Jewish enough for anyone, but I knew. Real Jewish people did not turn the lights on and off on Sabbath, and my mother lit the candles too late on Friday nights, except during the summer, because she worked all day. And on Saturday we took buses and if my mother needed to make a call, she went downstairs to the neighbor and used her telephone. But I didn't say because I couldn't say it, but I knew when I had my own home and children we would love Shabbos and observe it the way we should, without lights and telephones and buses.

I grew up and went to our city college, the same place my mother had gotten her degree, and even a master's degree in social work. One degree was enough for me, and I went to work as a bookkeeper. One Shabbat day I told my mother that it was time for me to leave and go live with real Jews, get married, and have babies.

My mother did exactly what I knew she would. She cried. I told her I had saved enough from my job as assistant to the accountant to take a bus to Brooklyn. My mother packed a lot of fruit and vegetables for me so I didn't have to eat nonkosher on the rest stops.

When I got to New York, the police at the bus station were very nice. I asked how to get to Crown Heights. They told me which subways to take and how to change.

The minute I climbed up to the subway steps I knew I was home. I asked a lady where I could get a room. She looked at me and my suitcase and said, "Shaina Maidella," which means pretty girl, "come with me." She took me to her house, inside her apartment on the third floor. We walked through the living room and dining room, down a hall where there were three doors. She opened one. "This is the girls' room," she said. I saw three bunk beds. "Tonight," she said, "You'll sleep on the floor on a nice mattress, and tomorrow we'll find you a place."

The house was full of kids, three boys and six girls. They were all over the apartment, yelling and jumping around. The lady didn't seem to mind and just smiled a lot. She gave me supper from a refrigerator stuffed with food. She asked me a little and I told her a little.

The next day, after she got the big kids off to school, and the medium kids off to nursery school and the two little kids, both boys, diapered and dressed, she took me over to the Rabbi, the holiest of them all. He asked me a few questions, like my mother's maiden name and my

family, where I went to school and what I wanted from life. Then he told Mrs. Gottbaum to take me to Mrs. Mendelovitz, who had an empty bed because her daughter just got married. The Rabbi told me he would get me a neighborhood job, and as for the rest, he said that we would see.

Mrs. Mendelovitz was very nice to me. She told me I didn't have to pay room and board until I got a job. I was happy to tell her I could pay because I had saved up some money. She showed me to my bedroom, which had only one extra bed, and she showed me my own dresser and half of the big closet.

The next day Mrs. Gottbaum came to see me. She told me that Rabbi had a job for me at the accountant only a few blocks away. She walked me downstairs and to the corner and showed me where to go.

The accountant put me right to work in my own office. I did bookkeeping like at my old job. I felt right at home with a good light and a handheld calculator.

On the way home I went into a phone booth, called my mother's downstairs neighbor, and asked her to tell my mother I was living in a nice kosher place and already had a job. I read my address to her. She wrote it down, and said she would give it to my mother the minute she heard her on the stairs.

When I got my first paycheck, I went to the bank to open an account. They gave me temporary checks. I couldn't wait to go shopping and fill up that empty dresser.

I wasn't happy until every drawer was stuffed and Mrs. Mendelovitz had to give me extra hangers for the closet.

The girl I shared the room with came from a little town in Montana. Her folks had sent her to Crown Heights so she could meet and marry a nice boy. I didn't like her. She was a giggler and a talker. If you let her, she would never shut up about Montana, about her sisters, about the weather, about anything that came to her empty head. Also, she was my competition for a husband but she was fat so I didn't worry. I was thin and my mother always told me I was pretty. I didn't bother much with that girl, except to sit at the table for breakfast in the morning and supper at night. Once in a while I sat with her in the living room and watched television, but most nights I went to my room to read my prayer book, which the Rabbi had given me as a present.

Shabbat was a pleasure. Everyone in Crown Heights went home in plenty of time for candles and dinner, and on Saturday it was so lovely to sit around and read, take a little walk. Women walked their babies, children hanging on to the carriage handle, the bigger ones holding each other's hands. Havdalah, which marked the end of Shabbat, was a beautiful ceremony.

On Sundays I did my washing and ironing, cleaned my part of the room, straightened everything up, and in the afternoons I shopped and sometimes I visited Mrs. Gottbaum and the kids. Sometimes I met other women at her place, and that's how I made friends. All the women were nice to me, and I really loved my new life.

Almost exactly a year after I moved to Crown Heights, Mrs. Mendelovitz told me the Rabbi wanted to see me the following Sunday. The way Mrs. Mendelovitz said it, I knew it wasn't bad so I tried not to worry. As far as I knew, everything was all right with my mother. We wrote every week. I promised I would come home for a visit as soon as I could.

On Sunday afternoon at two o'clock, I walked over to the Rabbi's office. I didn't wait long until I went in to see him.

He looked up from his desk. "I have a nice man for you to meet," he said.

A man came in from the door behind his desk. He smiled at me.

The Rabbi said, "Eli, this is Shaina. Shaina, this is Eli. Go for a walk."

I didn't talk much. I was scared to say anything, because I didn't want to mess it up. Eli was about my height, and when I took my eyes off the ground I saw his hair was dark. He owned a prominent nose, and to me it was very manly. At five o'clock it was already dark and he walked me home. At the door he told me we would go walking the next Sunday at two o'clock, and he would wait downstairs for me. I could hardly stand it as I climbed the steps.

Mrs. Mendelovitz sat in the kitchen. "I have a cup of tea for you," she said. "How did it go?"

“We’re going to walk next Sunday,” I told her.

We both laughed.

And so it went, until the summer came, and I was outside, under the stars and the Rabbi made us husband and wife. My mother and my brother and my sister were there and it was wonderful. The party was the most beautiful party I ever saw or dreamed of. We peeked from behind the curtain. The men danced, sang, and ate. Then they served us. The food was plenty and dainty. The women brought in the dairy meal, blintzes with sour cream, all kinds of fruit and vegetable salads, big slices of pumpernickel with cream cheese, and delicious buttery cakes. My mother told me she was happy for me. My sister told me it sure wasn’t her way, but if it made me happy she was glad for me. When we went outside my brother told me he had fun with the men, and he was glad he came. I told him there was always a place for him, and someday, maybe he would like it here and maybe my mother would like it too. He shook his head and told me not to count on it.

Now Eli and I were married. I held his hand. He took me to my new home, an apartment with a living room, a bedroom and a bath, and an eat-in kitchen. I said, “It’s beautiful and maybe we’ll have to move someday to make room for the children.” He smiled.

Eli spent his days studying and I continued to work for the accountant. Six months came and went and nothing happened. I spoke with my friends Mrs. Mendelovitz and Mrs. Gottbaum. They told me it was normal, and I should relax and before you know it, I would be pushing a baby

carriage, and holding a little one by the hand. When it came to one year and still nothing, Mrs. Mendelovitz took me to the doctor. She stood there with the nurse while the doctor examined me.

“You’re normal,” he said. “Give it another three months. If you’re still not pregnant, I’ll send you to a specialist.”

Three months later Mrs. Mendelovitz and I went to the specialist. He took tests. “It’s all okay,” he said. “It’s your husband’s turn to be tested.”

I told Eli and he went. “One hundred percent,” he reported, and he looked at me and the fights began. He told me he had been waiting for me to learn to cook, but was patient because he always thought I was nauseated from a baby. He found fault with my housekeeping. He told me the accountant was underpaying me, and I told him and I told him. Instead of our problem pulling us together, it pulled us apart and we told each other that maybe we weren’t supposed to be married.

The Rabbi sent us to talk to someone, and I talked my heart out to Mrs. Mendelovitz and I guess Eli talked his heart out to someone at the Yeshiva, because before you know it, the Beit Din gave me a divorce, called a Get, and Eli gave me the apartment and furniture because the Rabbi told Eli I have no family here and he could move back to his parents until he found a new place.

Now I was alone in the beautiful apartment, and everything reminded me of Eli and the babies we didn’t

have. I covered the furniture with sheets and a few tablecloths and I felt better.

The women were all nice to me, and I had plenty of time to help them. I made a lot of new friends through Mrs. Mendelovitz and Mrs Gottbaum and they were wonderful to me. They invited me for Shabbat and the holidays. One woman even said the women should pay me to be their guests because I was so helpful. I went to one friend the last two days of Pesach so I could put everything away. When I went to Shabbat I always set the family table, and most times I washed the dishes to give the mother and the girls a rest. I loved to walk babies, and I was really good with the little ones who had colic. I babysat for families who needed to go away on a Sunday or after work.

The truth was I was so busy that I really didn't have time to attend to my apartment. I ran in, put the newspaper down for when I would have a chance to read it, along with everything else that I needed to attend to and I ran right out after I ate a little something. Mostly, I used the Kosher Take Out, which was really delicious and plenty for two meals. They put everything in a nice red box that you could use again. It was very pretty with bright lettering and livened up the room. I washed those boxes and used them to store stuff.

I stored all kinds of things in those boxes. Sometimes I found a treasure on the street. If a person looks carefully, the street is full of good things, surprises, and treasures just waiting to be given a home. Sometimes it was a rock or a stone of unearthly beauty, sometimes a bit of silver or gold-looking chain, and sometimes I picked up

something which I could not recognize, but I knew it was something someone had used for, and I saved it. I knew when the time came, I could produce almost anything anyone needed, including all the news they would have to look up in the library.

I went back home a few times, and it was always a disappointment. Nothing changed. My mother still wasn't a Sabbath observer, and my brother certainly never kept a strict Kosher home. His family used Shabbat to run around and have fun. My sister never even tried to be Kosher. When I spoke with her, she told me to mind my own business.

I stopped going home until three years later, when my mother got sick. My sister walked into my mother's place and told me I should move home and take care of my mother. I told my sister that in this world I could never move to a nonkosher home and I needed to be with my real family and help take care of them. She got mad at me and we stopped talking.

After my mother's death I visited my brother a few times, and I tried very hard to explain to him how he should be doing things. We always argued but my brother has a way with him, and we always ended up hugging and laughing. I could never stay mad at him.

Whenever my brother came to visit me, he told me my apartment was a mess. He used to brush things off my sofa so he could sleep there, and he really wanted me to throw everything out. I told him about how I really needed everything and I was going to find good use for my things.

And, furthermore, they comforted me. My things were my other friends, and the place didn't look empty when I came home. One time he came and said I needed to go to Social Services. He really yelled at me. I cried and he calmed down and said I had too many things cluttering up my life. I tried to make him understand how I didn't have too many things. I really didn't have enough of them. The beauty of symmetrical stacks as sculpture, the subtleness of color gradations of my newspapers and magazines completely escaped him. The contrast of different materials, the serendipity of found treasures were the sisters of found poems. Slightly broken, chipped, they were all orphans who needed a home. My brother said he couldn't come back to my apartment anymore, and we agreed that we would meet somewhere else so he shouldn't get so upset.

I have to admit that things began to get away from me, but I couldn't make myself get rid of anything. And to tell the absolute truth, I didn't know where to start. And I couldn't stop. I found myself still bringing things home. I felt so good when I found something, and I just couldn't let it lie there.

Long ago women in my Shul had stopped coming. I told them it was easier for me to come to them. I had no husband, no children, and if I should meet someone, maybe a nice widower, it would be my pleasure to entertain them.

Life goes on. Someday I will make order, but in the meantime, the paths I have created are not yet paved, and I will attend to this in due time.

Jblog Central—The Jewish Blog Network

“MISSING WOMAN FOUND DEAD IN HER APARTMENT”

Crown Heights, Brooklyn—Just as Yom Tov concluded, Hatzalah, the volunteer police, received a call from neighbors who were concerned for the wellbeing of Mrs. Shaina Schneider, a 62-year-old woman who has been living in Crown Heights for many years, the concern growing after Mrs. Schneider was not seen for nearly six days and skipping out of a number of Sabbath and Yom Tov meals.

Upon trying to gain access to her apartment, Hatzalah quickly learned that the apartment was locked and chained from the inside and that there was debris and garbage piled from floor to ceiling on the inside, barring access to the apartment.

Hatzalah then made the choice to call the police and the fire department, who, after a long and exhausting seven-hour search within the apartment, found her body, buried under four feet of rubbish.

A person living in such condition is known as a pack rat or compulsive hoarder which is a person suffering from a disorder in which people fail to throw things out or even go out and collect things. Neighbors were saying that they remembered Mrs. Schneider living in the apartment for many years in which she probably gathered all that rubbish.

In order to gain access to the apartment, rescue workers threw as much as they could find out the windows into the courtyard of the building, which quickly filled, yet not yielding much access into the apartment. Bloodhounds and Cadaver dogs were brought in by police to search the actual apartment and, unfortunately, it was the Cadaver dogs and subsequently firefighters who found the woman.

THE END