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N ECESSARY FIERCENESS

Ellen Meeropol

When I walk into her kitchen, Ma is squinting at the eggbeater. It's the old-fashioned rotary kind. She holds it three inches from her nose, studying the rounded metal prongs. They are still bent from the time when Tim and I were kids and tried to rototil the garden with it.

"What do you need?" I ask her.

She looks at me. For a moment I forget, and expect her to ask me, "Jasper, why do we still have this old thing?" Instead she turns her gaze toward the can of creamed corn on the counter.

I rummage around in the gadget drawer and hand her the opener, slipping the eggbeater from her grip. In a minute she won't remember that she got confused.

We're getting ready for Russell's birthday party. In three hours, the family will gather on the gray shag rug in Ma's living room to watch

my nephew open presents. We do all the family events here now, since Ma started with the accidents. Martha is setting the table and our daughter is assembling the ingredients for the birthday cake on the kitchen counter.

We argued all morning, but finally Jill agreed to bake the cake here, so Ma can help.

"It's the last time," Jill said on the drive over. "Too creepy." She announced she wasn't going to be able to stop by after school every day either, to help when the health aide's shift ended. Starting Monday. Now that she can drive, she got a job serving burgers and fries at the mall.

Jill's eyes narrow as I put the eggbeater inside and close the drawer. She judges Ma's actions, then communicates her verdict to me in a flicker.

For a moment, I wonder what Ma wants with the canned corn.

Ma shouldn't be living alone. I know that. I work in geriatrics. We've driven around these sentences many times before, Ma and me. Even so, once they get the cake in the oven, I bring it up again. We're in the bedroom and I'm helping Ma get dressed for the party, because the health aide doesn't work on Sundays.

"Assisted living is different from a nursing home." I suggest to the musty air of her closet, wondering if the lavender blouse still fits her diminishing frame.

Ma doesn't buy it. "Six of one, half dozen of the other," she says.

Clichés bug me. Why can't she just say there's no difference? But then, I should be grateful that today is a good day and she's speaking at all. Yesterday she had no words, just stared out the window watching the snow drift cover the top of the stone wall dividing her back yard from the Goldberg's. Some days her words get stuck, other days they break loose and tumble uselessly like the clumsy gerbil Jill had in middle school that ran around and around the Ferris-wheel built in his wire cage. Ma's sentences do that, spin and spiral until I have to leave the room.

It's partly my own fault that she's still living alone, because at Pop's funeral she made me promise never to put her in a nursing home. Ma insisted on an open casket, even though Jews aren't supposed to.

"I've seen him naked," she said, "so what's the big deal seeing him dead."

I rolled my eyes. We stood next to the casket, right before they opened the room for guests.

"You're all I've got left, Jasper." She put one hand on Pop's silent chest, the other on mine, as if she was completing an electrical circuit between the two of us. Then she leaned with both hands on Pop's good blue suit jacket, over his heart, and crooked her neck around to look me straight in the face. "Don't let me down."

"Sure, Ma." I would have promised her anything right then. Because Pop was gone. And because I was worried about his ribcage, the way she leaned on it. I remembered that bones lose their calcium when someone dies, but not how quickly it happens. Anatomy and Physiology wasn't my best subject in nursing school. I was afraid she would lean too hard and his ribs would crack and cave in. So I eased her small hands off his chest, encircling them both in mine. "I promise."

Where was Tim in all this, I remember wondering. How does he always escape Ma's weirdest stuff? He's the big brother. He's supposed to be the responsible one.

Like now. Tim is playing nerf ball catch with his stair-step daughters, the four of them stationed in the corners of Ma's living room. I called him last night and asked him to find a quiet minute today to talk to Ma about assisted living. I'll bet he hasn't said anything yet. He catches the ball from Daisy, throws it to Maizy, who drops it and Roxie grabs it from her. When I look at my nieces, and think about their names, I shake my head and toss Tim the same comment I've made dozens of times.

"How you could do that to your daughters?" I ask.

Instead of answering, Tim tosses me the look. He got it from Pop, and has perfected it since Pop died. I can't exactly describe it to you, because why should one scrunched eyebrow connected to the pursed corner of the mouth with a deep wrinkle crevasse communicate so much? But it does, and it means *Don't Waste My Time*.

Six years ago, after all those girls, his wife finally produced a son. Russell. Don't ask me where he got that name, but in that family it could be far worse. Weird name or not, today is Russell's day, and he sits in the middle of the rug, wrestling with the circus-themed wrap-

ping paper of our gift between his chunky legs. Finally he rips through the tape, revealing the picture of the yellow truck, and he yelps with delight. The box offers no resistance and soon he is varooming the truck around the rug on hands and knees.

"Show me your new truck." My sister-in-law calls him over in that singsong voice some people use with kids, even though Russell is in first grade, too old for baby talk. I hated that when I worked pediatrics. "Come here," she urges him. The woman is never happy to just let the boy play.

Russell looks at his mother, head tilted to the side.

"Bring me the truck," she says again.

From his crawling, truck-pushing position, Russell struggles a little to straighten both knees. He perches like a chubby bug. Hands and feet are planted at the four corners of an invisible square, elbows and knees out straight, momentarily stuck.

Then he lifts his head and looks at his mom. His right hand grabs his right knee and pushes down. Next his left hand grips his left knee and pushes a little more. Right hand on right thigh, press and push. Left hand on left thigh, one more time. Each push brings him slowly more upright. No one speaks. We all help Russell by holding our breath. When he stands, everyone breathes out, and then there's chatter and the nerf ball arcs over his head.

Except me. I forget to breathe. I haven't worked pediatrics in over ten years. I haven't seen a Gower's sign in longer than that. Maybe I remember wrong?

"Come here, baby." His mother's voice is urgent.

Russell grins and walks towards her, waddling a little, cradling the yellow truck. At the last minute, he swerves and veers away towards Ma. She is a statue on the piano bench

behind the baby grand which takes up a quarter of the living room. He puts the truck on Ma's lap and she leans down until their foreheads touch. Together they work the truck's toggle and make the shiny plow go up and down, until Russell's mother pulls him onto her lap and tickles him with the plow.

Maybe I'm wrong. I don't think so. You never forget what a Gower's sign looks like, when a kid's legs are so weak that he has to push hand over hand up his thighs that way, just to stand up. You never forget how the muscular dystrophy progresses either, to his lungs and his heart and his spine. While I'm being honest with myself, I acknowledge the flicker of worry I had last month at Russell's kickball team tryouts, watching his wobbly run, his thick calf muscles. Had he always been so clumsy?

"Jasper?" Martha looks at me funny, her head tilted to the side. "You with us?"

My wife hates it when I zone out. So I tell a little fib. "If Jill takes this job," I ask, "how will we manage?"

Martha shrugs. "Without Jill after school, we can't keep Ma here."

I don't want to think about Russell or about Ma, so I get up and bring the tray with birthday cake and ice cream in from the kitchen. Russell blows out the candles. Good, his lungs are still okay.

I bring a piece of cake to Ma, alone now on the bench, back straight and her hands playing over the shiny wood that protects the keys. She's here with us at the party, and not here, at the same time. She doesn't play the piano any more, but she insists that she needs the piano. Whenever we discuss assisted living, she makes that dismissive clicking noise in her throat and says that she can't move because there's no room in those little apartments for her baby grand.

So every three months I pay Irv Goldberg

from next door to tune the piano, even though Ma hasn't played it in years. I should pay Irv extra for listening to Ma's same story every single time. About how she studied to be a concert pianist but the depression came and she had to quit Julliard to work in her father's drugstore. At this point in the story, Ma always looks down at her hands, palms up in front of her, a perplexed expression on her face. As if her hands betrayed her, instead of the global economy.

Thing is, she used to play beautifully. When Tim and I were young, she'd leave the dinner dishes soaking in the sudsy kitchen sink and make music all evening. Broadway show tunes mixed up with Chopin and Brahms, a little Blues sometimes if she was in the mood. Pop would sit in his chair, the mightily upholstered one in the front corner, with his stockinged feet on the coffee table. Tim and I would ask Pop to play office with us. In our house, office meant the Bureau of Standards, because Pop worked there his whole life.

"What do you do at work?" Tim liked to ask Pop, to interrupt his disappearance into the *Washington Post*.

"I keep the standards." He would answer, opening to the national news.

"What are standards?" My turn to ask.

"The benchmark, the yardstick," he'd explain, already deep into the latest capitol madness. "Like the standard foot, so everyone in the country makes their rulers the correct length."

As a kid, I imagined Pop at work with one leg up on his desk, his pants leg rolled up and his sock in a ball inside his brown shoe. People filed through his office all day checking their red and yellow plastic rulers against his standard foot—from calloused heel to yellowed toes. But Pop wouldn't let us play that game at home, so we'd sit at his feet and build forts out of Lincoln logs. Our armies of

molded metal soldiers hid and plotted, attacked and fought and conquered each other in the shag forest to the harmonious or dissonant or triumphant tones of Ma's concert.

I can't remember when the music stopped.

Wearing a pointed cardboard party hat, Tim motions from the kitchen door. Before I get up, I wipe a blue smudge of frosting from Ma's chin, then kiss her cheek. Tim leans against the fridge, his shoulder wrinkling the Chanukah card Maizy made for Ma in school.

"I tried to talk to her," he says. "She wouldn't listen."

I nod.

"Jill tells me she's got a job. Won't be coming here after school."

I nod again. I can't figure out what to worry about, what to talk about. "Martha and I can't get here until after five," I say.

"Is she safe alone?" Tim looks out the window, at the unbroken snow in the back yard. It never looked like that when we were kids.

"What do you think?" Now I'm getting annoyed. Sure, I'm the nurse, but that doesn't mean he can't see what's what.

Tim looks back at me, then checks his watch. "I know. She's not safe. She needs to be supervised."

Okay. He said it. I nod again, feeling somehow victorious.

"We gotta go," Tim mumbles. "You make the arrangements, okay?"

I put my hand out to stop him. "Tim." But he's out of the kitchen. I call to him. "There's something else." He doesn't come back.

In the living room, the party is over. Martha stacks the paper plates with cake crumbs floating on a thin scum of strawberry ice cream. Tim's family says goodbye and everyone wishes Russell happy birthday again. Jill has homework so she hitches a ride home in Tim's van.

"We'll talk when I get home," I tell her in a quiet voice.

"Sorry, Dad," Jill says. "There's nothing more to say."

I'm useless getting Ma ready for bed. I try to comb her hair but it feathers free of my hands, fluffing up like the down on the head of the ibis that Martha and I saw in Florida the last time we could get away for a vacation. Finally I give up and ask Martha to help Ma, and I'll finish in the kitchen. But I keep thinking about her as I put plastic wrap over the piece of cake saved for Ma's lunch tomorrow.

She's stubborn. Once she got used to it, she would like living someplace like the Care Center. She refuses to move in with us too, even though we live less than ten minutes away, in the same neighborhood.

"I don't want to be a burden," she says.

So she lives alone, in the two-story house where she's been since the day she married—not one minute before, she likes to remind anyone who'll listen. Like anyone cares about her maiden credentials in 1938. Martha would never admit it, but she is relieved. Can't say I blame her. My Ma can be one nasty lady. Not all the time, but sometimes, like when she gets it into her head that the cleaning lady is eyeing her jewelry. Hardly the crown jewels. She makes comments, you know, prejudiced ones. The cleaning ladies—they're really home health aides but Ma doesn't admit she needs help, so she won't call them that—mostly they just smile like they know what's going on. One time I saw one of them roll her eyes, and that made me mad, but I never said anything because the agency didn't send that one back.

I finish washing the dishes and hang the dishtowel on the hook over the faucet. I hear Martha getting Ma into bed, her voice a soft

murmur as she reminds Ma that we'll be leaving soon. I hear the initial static when Martha turns on the intercom system. Its twin is at our house, so that if Ma needs us during the night, we'll hear her.

I sit in Pop's chair. The house is quiet and I can't avoid my thoughts. By now, my brain has been working overtime, bouncing back and forth. Between how to take care of Ma without Jill's help and then across the court to Russell. How to talk to my big brother.

I kick off my shoes and dig my bare toes into the shag. I've gotten past trying to convince myself that the tangled nap of the old rug made it hard for Russell to get up. Or that I didn't see what I know I saw. No more excuses. I think about the last night I worked pediatrics. The little girl was Jill's age, with the same brown hair and freckles. Brain bashed in by a drunk driver, but her body kept going. I remember going home and weeping, telling Martha that I couldn't do it any more, I wasn't fierce enough.

I try to picture Tim's face when I tell him tomorrow that Russell has muscular dystrophy.

"Jasper?" Martha calls me from the bedroom.

Ma is under the covers. Her ibis hair floats around her scalp and I wish again I could do something with it.

"Tell Jasper, Ma," Martha says. "What you told me."

Ma smiles. "I like it here," she says. "I didn't think I'd like Assisted Living, but I do. You were right. It's nice. They have a piano just like mine."

"I'm glad, Ma," I say, bending down to kiss her cheek. I take Martha's hand and lead her out of the bedroom, so we can go home. The unopened can of creamed corn lies on Pop's pillow.