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# JUDY'S KALEIDOSCOPE

Rose Rappoport Moss

The answer jumped at Judy during a political science lecture, another recounting of Hitler's rise to power. The moral cried out—Do not accept abuse. And, since her daughter-in-law seemed incorrigible...QED.

Though Erin's mode was more subtle than Hitler's. She did not speak to Judy. After the restaurant dinner when Tom introduced them to each other, Judy had told Tom's father, "Something felt wrong. I don't know what. She didn't meet your eyes." They had been seated facing each other. Ten years later, Erin still did not meet Judy's eyes.

The first years of their marriage Erin had persuaded Tom too to treat his mother like a distant poor relation, never invited to Thanksgiving—that they celebrated with her family—never visited herself. Now there was Kevin, and Tom had come to his senses but

when Judy called, Erin still handed the phone to Tom without a word of her own, and when Judy visited, walked around her like a piece of furniture.

In bloodthirsty mood, Judy swerved from her usual old-lady menu choice—chicken or fish—and, at their quiet neighborhood restaurant, ordered steak. Her friend Miriam turned observant eyes on her, "Feeling stressed?" Judy often quoted her father's recipe against bad days, 'Steak, red wine and good chocolate.'

"Nothing special," Judy lied.

Since Kevin's birth, Tom had invited Judy to visit three times. Each time Erin had addressed her mother-in-law once—"Have you washed your hands?" before Judy could touch Kevin, 'He's not hungry. I'm taking him down,' while Judy was feeding Kevin, and last, while Tom took Judy's bag from the

trunk and Erin moved to the front seat, Judy closed the car door for her, and Erin opened it to spit out, ‘You almost hit my foot!’

Miriam said, ‘You didn’t ask a single question after the talk. That’s not like you.’

Judy met Miriam’s eyes clear as a brown mountain stream and wondered whether her patients ever felt they couldn’t lie to her. ‘Enough about Hitler in the ’30s. Is going over it again and again really useful?’

‘We tell it again to make sure it never happens again.’

‘It’s happened again. At least three more genocides in our lifetimes. We’ve lived too long.’

‘I wouldn’t say that.’ Miriam tasted her shrimp, coated in a sauce dotted with black mustard seeds, ‘Another ten years, minimum.’

‘Let’s drink to that,’ Judy raised her glass and Miriam hers. Agreement. Judy savored her good Chianti stirring memories of Tuscan civility and beauty. In her lifetime, Americans had learned to enjoy wine. Some things in life had become better.

Miriam had written about descendants of Nazis and Jews who dream similar nightmares, ‘The unconscious remembers.’

Drawn from reverie, Judy argued, ‘As a society, we’ve turned the Nazis into entertainment. And we live with so many pasts. Belfast, the Khmer Rouge, Rwanda, Turks and Armenians... Too much. No wonder we suffer historical Alzheimers.’

‘You are in a gloomy mood.’

‘I’m thinking about murdering my daughter-in-law.’

‘That’s better,’ Miriam set down her fork. She sipped her wine. ‘Remember that murder Umberto Eco talked about—the friend who confessed he’d put pheromones in Eco’s toothpaste so frustrated wasps would sting him to death.’ They’d heard Eco’s lecture in Sanders Theater together.

‘Not enough wasps in Brooklyn.’

‘You could thwack her with a heavy object. Thrust a knife between her ribs.’

‘And to hell with civilization?’ Judy cut into her steak. ‘I like that.’ She was cheering up. ‘But blood’s too messy.’

Miriam allowed a smile to hover, ‘You don’t mind blood.’

‘It’s the housekeeping I couldn’t stand. You know I’m not meticulous and there’s that light that shows the tiniest traces of blood. I’m not going to prison for her.’

‘Pity. Blood’s so compelling, so *blood*. Blood of life, blood of death...’ she raised a fetal shrimp toward her mouth.

Slightly sickened, Judy returned, ‘I don’t want a stain on the family.’

‘A blood-mark, a Cain mark,’ unwinding her spool of symbols.

Irritated, Judy cut into her steak. A pink stain seeped across her white plate.

Hearing Judy’s rebuking silence, Miriam returned to Judy’s topic, ‘So it’s not just killing her, it’s getting away with it.’

Their little tug-of-war won, Judy praised Miriam’s insight, ‘You’re right. Memories last in families. Even if they don’t know exactly what happened, there’s that shadow.’ My mother the murderer. My granny killed my mother. She didn’t want that bad aftertaste.

‘From what I’ve heard in clinical practice,’ Miriam developed the theme, ‘There must be lots of pseudo-accidents, quiet poisonings.’

A waiter cleared and asked about dessert. ‘You bet,’ Judy ordered chocolate mousse. Miriam, watching her weight, declined. Judy embroidered Miriam’s words, ‘In five generations we have so many relatives all of us could have a murderer in the family. Perhaps not that far back.’

The waiter brought the mousse with two spoons. ‘I’m feeling much better,’ Judy

pushed the chocolate toward Miriam, “Just a bit.” Friendship salved the pains of family.

**B**rushing her teeth, she recalled Eco’s anecdote. Most friendships included struggle.

She replaced the electric toothbrush, took her Thursday pills and dressed in a flannel nightgown she found comforting these bitter nights.

It’d been a risk, telling Miriam, but duplicity had unexpectedly felt beyond her. Could she practice it the rest of her life?

If Erin’s death seemed natural, Miriam wouldn’t know for sure and tonight’s conversation could pass as elderly maundering or a game like Eco’s. Anyhow, researching a good method would take months and Miriam’s health might not hold out that long. These past years she’d accumulated troubles—that bad fall last year, failing hearing, heart episodes. Before Christmas, she’d lapsed into rare complaint, ‘It’s getting too much.’

What would be the equivalent of wasp pheromones in Brooklyn?

Government and marketers watched everyone these days. Nothing is really private. She’d write an article on political murders. Napoleon and arsenic; Rasputin; that South African who poisoned the clothes of anti-apartheid activists—there must be many examples.

Poison had problems. She’d need something to harm only Erin, so, no poisoned chocolate, though for chocolate, Erin would renounce her food obsessions. Judy’s last visit to Brooklyn, there’d been a moment... As usual, Erin had not answered her greeting but an hour later, when Judy went into the kitchen for a glass of water, she’d surprised Erin holding a cracker mounded with chocolate-hazelnut spread, Judy’s gift. Crumbs round her mouth, Erin did not say a word. Neither did Judy.

**B**rushing her teeth, Miriam also recalled Eco

and examined her own shock. When patients talk suicide, it is good practice to believe them. It would be good practice to forestall Judy. Judy could murder, she believed. She creamed her face and went to her computer—you never know when it’ll be too late. Her e-mail told Judy she’d written friends about their amusing conversation. Judy would be annoyed, but... She would re-read the e-mail before sending it tomorrow. She didn’t want to lose Judy’s friendship.

She switched off the light and looked out at the paralyzed river. Judy was too gloomy about history. In their lifetime, polio had almost disappeared. And, a century ago, Judy might have had to live with her daughter-in-law.

Miriam climbed into bed, forgetting her heart pills. She’d take them in the morning.

**S**nug in her flannel gown, Judy pondered poisoned clothes. Too dangerous for Tom. He still loved his wife. And for sweet Kevin, nestling at his mother’s bosom. An image of Kevin’s baby hand, fingers outspread and moving to feel the texture of Erin’s blouse, distracted her. What a darling boy. ‘Granma,’ he’d summoned her to the sandbox last fall, and Tom had left them alone. Coming indoors after an hour, she found Erin upstairs. Good. Toward evening, Erin came down and Tom negotiated a three-way conversation about take-out. Both women spoke to him without a word to each other. Smooth enough to seem invisible. Judy chose fish, Tom chicken and Erin, Buddha’s Delight. When Judy had told Miriam, ‘She’s vegetarian,’ their conversation had drifted to Hitler’s tender-hearted diet.

Erin did not want pets though advertising imagery called for a dog to complete the family picture and advertising seemed to shape Erin’s life. Could she be allergic? Judy did not know. Erin’s unique wishes disappeared in a

camouflage of conformity, brand name clothes, jewelry, kitchen appliances and leather accessories. Who was this woman?

Before dawn, Miriam dreamed of basements and blood, and woke to a frenzy that twisted and dragged her to a bloody void.

A sports watch. Judy thanked her unconscious. Waterproof, shock proof, and, if such existed, measuring pulse beats and calories consumed. Intimate with the skin, it might deliver poison undetected. Erin loved numbers, did the couple's income tax, kept a notebook in her car tracking gas prices and miles between fill-ups, tallied her daily calories and grams of fat. A lawyer, she planned her hours and years as though all could be known and billable. A prideful misunderstanding about life, Judy believed, that deludes dictators and invites assassination.

Judy had known phases of dieting and exercising, watching her retirement money, weighing numbers against life and death. Obsessed with these numbers she learned to see dictators' thirsts and billionaires who count and multiply pennies.

She'd talk with Miriam about numbers and control. They could write a paper, like their one on the Belladonna effect—when people look at what they love, their pupils expand, when they look at what they hate or fear, their pupils contract and the involuntary confession evokes mirror emotions. They'd enjoyed collaborating and afterwards Miriam had given her a pretty kaleidoscope.

Passing that kaleidoscope en route to the morning paper, she stopped at the side table where it lay among silver framed photographs, picked it up and looked through it. Magical and infinite, but soon repetitious.

At breakfast she read how the usual power struggles threatening human life had shaken

up since yesterday. Repetition. Another section of the paper quoted the head of the physics division at Oak Ridge, "Neutrinos are slippery little rascals. They can fool you. They can bounce and show up around corners you don't expect." A man she'd like to meet.

Poor Erin, in a world full of neutrinos. The very grain of things resisted her.

Breakfast and paper done, Judy drove to the glittering watch store supplanting a favorite greasy spoon after a bitter zoning fight. Dissatisfied with the store's selection of clunky plastic or steel, she accepted the assistant's last offer, a pamphlet describing a unisex that integrated chronograph, barometer, altimeter, thermometer, compass and alarm. No pulse monitor, but a claim, "Whatever tomorrow brings, you can be sure the F.I.X. will have you covered." Erin would like that.

"May I take this?" Holding out the pamphlet among the mirrors and halogen lights, she saw her own easy-to-read men's watch. What a trial Erin must find her, fashion-blind, academic and self-willed. Again compassion quickened.

She'd known Erin ten years and never seen how she saw. She must have been looking through pinpoints. Mirroring Erin.

Tomorrow, she would try to see. She would listen.

A strong waft of coffee drew her memory to a store where her mother used to buy dried fruits and nuts and she used to long to be grown-up and sophisticated and to drink coffee, still a forbidden liquid, and to wear jewels and travel to places in picture books. What had Erin longed for?

Intent on surmise, Judy slipped on a pad of ice. People surrounded her. "Are you hurt?" "Can we help?"

"Thank you... I'm fine." People helped her up, "Can you stand?" The intimation of fragility appalled her. She wasn't that old. It

was the ice. Her knee hurt, but the rest seemed O.K. No sign of hip fracture, a major precursor of death in old women.

That's how it could come. No warning. This chill had nothing to do with weather.

Someone handed her her purse and the watch pamphlet. "You sure you're all right?"

"A cup of coffee and I'll be perfect." Someone took her elbow to guide her to the door.

She should drink something with sugar for the shock, but first she needed to collect herself. She turned her back on people engaged with laptops or mobiles and found a seat. The whole business had upset her more than she'd expected. She'd been thinking of Erin's death, not her own.

A man pulled the door open, fresh air flooded past his sheepskin jacket, he slid his Prussian-blue backpack onto a chair and embraced a woman with shining black hair. Darkness visible. Smiling, shoulders touching, the couple stood at the counter where machines gargled to each other.

She was old. Almost as old as Miriam, heading toward frailty. She stood to wait behind the couple, then, still shaken, hands threatening to slop the hot liquid, took a near window seat.

Killing had seemed easy, but dying... That was another story, not Eco's.

A woman muffled like a fedayeen pushed a stroller to the corner and waited for the light. Her sleeping infant's head lolled, protected by both hood and medieval jester's cap and Judy recalled dressing Tom. At two, he used to tear his mittens off and weep at the pain in his cold hands. She'd wanted to cry with him at the same time she wanted to laugh.

When she told Miriam that Erin wanted children, Miriam said, 'They'll teach her. Sticky. Messy. Raising children's hard for control freaks.' Miriam had raised three and now had eight grandchildren. 'She's got no idea,' Judy agreed.

Across the street, snow crouched on the roof of an historic house. Two teens glided by on the leaf of ice that had undone her.

She'd been losing her sense of proportion. Erin was a disappointment, an indictment of Tom's judgment, but she didn't need to kill. Children and rascal neutrinos would teach her. As for herself, it was time, after all, to prepare for dying.

Barely glancing at the old lady going through a conversion experience in the window two schoolgirls were giggling like Judy with her best friend at fifteen. A truck passed. "Hunter's," she read, reading an irresistible reflex now. Darling Kevin would learn to read.

At the toy store, longing to cram life's slipperiness into Kevin's gifts, Judy bought a crane and a picture book called *Trucks*.

She called Miriam to confess her own fall. She wouldn't say she'd been feeling immune, like a teenager, but their lives mirrored each other. Miriam would feel her new solidarity. On reflection, their long friendship seemed more and more a treasure of old age.

Miriam's machine answered the phone.

On the coldest day in twenty years, looking through the window of the early shuttle, Judy saw Boston harbor frozen. Atom by atom the night had shackled lively waters in ice all along the coast to La Guardia. Like the lake where Dante saw Satan frozen.

Tom drove up to the curb and Kevin, in his car seat, took her kiss for granted and, as Tom navigated the city, said, "Bridge... crane..."

"He takes the dump-truck you sent to bed with him," Tom said.

"Like father, like son."

"Did I do that?..."

"Your wooden train."

At the preschool Tom wanted to check

out, Kevin wandered among children and grown-ups and took toys that caught his interest and Tom said, "Share," "Please," "Thank you." Leaving Judy to watch Kevin, he talked with teachers. Soon, it was time to buckle Kevin into his seat again and when he protested, Judy sang, "Twinkle, twinkle little star," Haydn's motif, and Kevin commanded, "Again, again." They parked and met Erin at a store where she was choosing new glasses. Ah! Poisoned frames! But, Judy recalled, she'd given up murder.

In the store's wall of mirrors, Kevin wanted to look at himself and Judy took photographs of him watching his reflection, Tom's, Erin's, the sparkling counters, the world in double. From a lens above them, this glassy cell and the people moving in it might seem in a kaleidoscope. In heaven's eye, the pattern might reflect time as well as space, Kevin repeating his father's infant ways, and herself, after yesterday's procession of the stages of life, reflected in Miriam and in Erin, growing through her own stages. And Erin, in heaven's eye?

She'd resolved to look. She'd resolved to listen. She followed Kevin reaching for his mother's attention, Erin's cheeks like cream, hair glossy with health. She'd been thinking of murder as though they wouldn't mourn, Tom bereaved, Kevin orphaned. It was only a joke, a conversation with Miriam.

Erin was turning to Tom for advice. Both

took it for granted Judy would have nothing to say. But she said, "Those dark frames accent your clear skin."

Erin ignored her and Tom looked nervous.

"They're great on you," Judy persisted.

Erin's pupils tightened. Judy tried again, "But you know what suits you."

Erin raised her eyes, not meeting Judy's. Her pupils had grown from pinpoints to the size of a mustard seed.

A long way to go yet, and it would take work, but Miriam would be amused if words proved stronger than poison.

In Tom's basement guest room after lunch, while Kevin napped, Judy called to tell Miriam. The machine answered. Could Miriam have left home without fear of the bitter weather? An itch of anxiety recalled her cavalier calculation that Miriam might die soon. She stopped to think, then called the building superintendent.

"I'll call back," he promised, but took so long she went upstairs. Tom had fallen asleep in his chair. She listened to her son's living breath and read until Erin brought Kevin downstairs.

When the super called, Tom asked, "What's wrong?" and Kevin, "Granma, are you crying?" Erin looked at her.

She nodded, speechless at the pain in her cold heart.