

Death and the Diaspora by Sheila Swartzman

I have been obsessed with death from an early age. It stemmed from my first appearance on stage. We were holidaying at Margate, a seaside resort on the east coast of South Africa and I had wandered off on my own. My parents were frantically searching for me when they heard my voice. As they ran towards me, I was solemnly reciting this poem:

*Inky pinky ponky,
Daddy bought a donkey,
Donkey died, Mommy cried,
Inky pinky ponky.*

I was two years old.

Of course, that obsession was exacerbated once I left my family in South Africa for North America and it became part of the immigrant experience to wait for that three o'clock in the morning phone call that all of us who have left our aging parents in a far off land dread: come quickly, there is no time to spare; she's very bad, can't breathe or walk or talk; if you don't give permission to place her on a ventilator she will die; if we don't operate, she will be dead in three months; she's in the toilet and fell and the door is locked and we have to break the door down; how soon can you get here?

And one hastily looks for the passport which is kept up to date for any such emergencies, but the fastest one can reach Johannesburg or Cape Town or Karachi is thirty- six hours flying non-stop and you know that it is too late for farewells and last-minute hugs; no bedside confessions of past transgressions or forgiveness; with luck and no delays from volcanic ash you'll make it to the funeral.

'I'm so sorry, but we can't allow any man not of the Jewish faith to touch the coffin of the late Mr. Bloom.'

This statement is delivered in unctuous tones to my father-in-law's best friend, his golfing partner of fifty years, who happened to show up on my father-in-law's honeymoon with a set of golf clubs in time for a round or two; his poker buddy with whom many pound notes changed hands on Thursday nights; the man who was his confidant, who was not allowed by some ancient law conceived in the desert to pay his last respects to his closest friend. Instead, a distant cousin, one who hasn't spoken to Cecil for twenty years over a never forgotten or forgiven spat about money, steps forward as one of the pallbearers to lay Cecil in the ground according to the law of Moses.

How different it is for Grace, my mother-in-law, only a few years later. Apartheid is no more. No longer is South Africa the most hated nation in the world and one doesn't have to pretend any longer that one is from New Zealand; Mandela is the anointed saint of the twentieth century and everyone is proud to be a part of the "rainbow" nation in the new democratic South Africa.

Lucky for Grace too. As she becomes more and more demented, her faithful retainer Margie moves from the servant's quarters at the back of the garden into the house, sleeping in the study now bedroom and providing the succor and sustenance for Grace that her children, far away in Sydney and San Antonio are unable to do. Margie is now the one who is constantly at the bedside. She is not only the housekeeper and cook and cleaning woman, but also a friend, a true friend, Grace's friend, whose hand she now clasps. We rush back to Johannesburg when Grace has a debilitating stroke -- she is paralyzed on the right side and can't speak clearly. Now Grace is in the Jewish Old Aged Home, hating every minute of her enforced immobility, her worst nightmare. She'd always been determined that she wouldn't be put in "that place" with all those old women: otherwise, she said she would just die.

She clutches a passing nurse with her left hand and begs for help;

" I have my check book -- I have money -- get me a taxi to take me to my home."

But not even Margie is there when Grace has her second and fatal stroke. Despite the orders not to resuscitate, Grace is transferred from her nursing home to the acute care hospital by the Jewish Orthodox Services, who do not believe in DNR orders. Life is sacred, they say, it is the Law. So, she has all the interventions done to her, even though we know it is not what she wants but we are too far away to stop anything. It is out of our hands, her children's hands.

We return a scant six weeks later for the funeral. Who are all these old people gathered at the West Park Cemetery? They are mostly ancient women, tottering on canes, bereft of their husbands who have died years before. There aren't enough available men to carry her coffin to its place next to Cecil and the few men present are wafer thin and pale.

But this is the new South Africa, there's Philomen, the driver, and Sizwe, the gardener, and Margie's nephew, Lucky, and the security guard from the Hypermart who helps Grace when she shops, and the taxi cab driver who parks his car outside Grace's house, an army of strong, young Africans, certainly not Jewish but male, all available to place their willing and friendly hands on this old Jewish woman's coffin and lower it in the ground. And now they are allowed to do so by Jewish law.

The Rabbi arrives later that evening to hold prayers for Grace. I stay in the living room with the women, separate from the men -- the sexes aren't allowed to mix. But there's a hitch, there is no tenth man. You need ten Jewish males for a "minyan" -- the quorum for saying prayers and Anthony, who would have been that important tenth man, is held up in traffic. We make frantic calls to all available men, but there are late shifts, other commitments, no answers. Suddenly the Rabbi launches into the service.

Surely the Rabbi is not going ahead despite the missing man. I have not seen the door open to let anyone in. At the end of the service, when everyone files out, I notice that there is an extra man; Mr. Goldberg the plumber who has been working in the kitchen and has been conscripted into making up the quorum. I wonder if he will send a bill for "minyan making" as well as for fixing the creaky old hot water heater. But at least the Law is upheld.

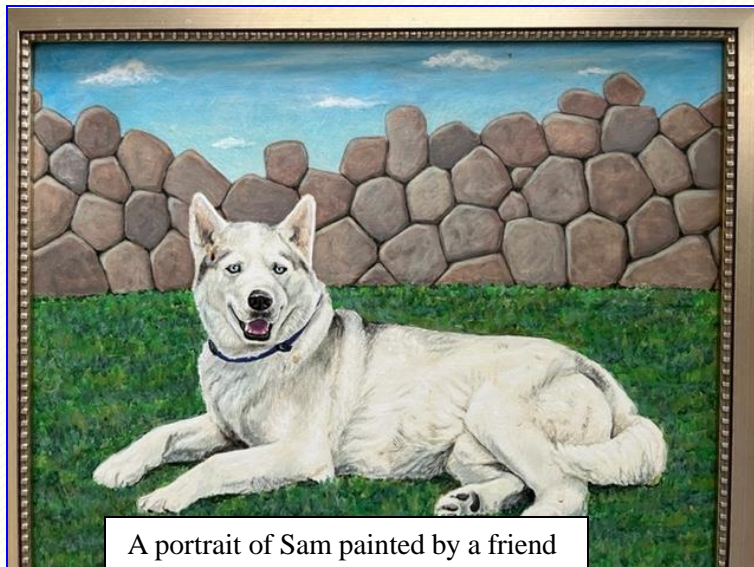
I hope there are no more funerals for a while. My mother arrives from Toronto, looking fragile. How could she have managed to fly that distance? How could the airline have allowed her to board the plane? She doesn't want to die in Canada, that cold and wintry country, she wants to be with me, her daughter. Her heart gives way and she is in

intensive care, on a ventilator, giving me a quizzical look. I am filled with remorse; perhaps I should have done nothing when the cardiologist says; it's now or never, we have to intubate her or she will die. But no one is prescient enough to know what the future is and she dies within hours, in the intensive care unit, alone and on a ventilator.

Some years later we take a trip to Flagstaff, Arizona for several days of Wagner's Ring Cycle. As we walk into our charming B&B, there is a phone call from my brother in Toronto: our father, who lives in Toronto has just died. I hear the EMS technician in the background. We give our tickets to the young man at the inn, leave and fly immediately to Toronto.

My sister-in-law tells me that my father asked her for a cup of tea, thanked her and then quietly died. I think it was an easy death, but for my brother it is horrific. Only years later, does he tell me that when he called the Toronto EMS, he was instructed to perform CPR on our father, although quite obviously dead and had to continue until the doctor arrived to pronounce the death.

Then Sam enters my life. He is an abandoned dog, a pure-bred Husky, white with blue eyes and far too skinny, his pelvic bones jutting out and his neck easily circled by my hands. He has a collar: My name is Sam and I need a home. It's love at first sight. He is my blue-eyed boy and through all the surgeries to



fix his many ailments at hospital, in intensive care, he's lived through it all and manages to pull through. But this last episode looks like his number is up. We try special treatments for him at the rehabilitation hospital. One treatment entails water therapy and he is deathly afraid of water. Have I sent him to Room 101 in Orwell's 1984? The vet tells me that she can't do any more for him and that he is depressed. The time has come. He manages to stagger with me to the special room that they have for

euthanasia. He collapses onto the blanket and lies there, with his head in my lap. I scratch his ears, which he likes; he makes growling cat- like noises when he's feeling well, but not this time. I whisper into his ear. The vet finds a vein in his front leg. My tears splash onto his head. She injects the sedative and leaves me with him. His breathing slows, then stops. She listens for his heart beat. There is none. "He's gone," she says, her eyes red rimmed. No convulsive movements, no involuntary emptying of his bowels, no gasping to breathe, nothing that she had warned might happen. Just a quiet death, his head in my lap.

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A word about me:

My name is Sheila Swartzman. I was born and raised in Johannesburg where I went to Medical School at Wits, married and had a daughter. We emigrated to Cincinnati in 1972, where we had a son, moved to Toronto and finally came back to San Antonio, Texas in 1979 where we still live. I retired from a very busy cardiac anesthesia practice in 2008. Although I had always been a voracious reader from my early childhood days, I had never attended any lectures on the Humanities, philosophy, poetry or writing. One went straight from high school to Medical School in those days. As I had spent long hours in the OR and ICU , one of the first things that I did was to shred all my medical licenses so that I could not be persuaded to come back to work. The next on my schedule was to attend Literary Excursions, run by an excellent professor from one of the major Universities in San Antonio. I also joined a group of women physicians to learn journaling, writing memoirs and keeping diaries. The teacher would give us a subject - A Portrait was the first piece I wrote which was read out to the class. I found that it was cathartic to look back at events that I recalled from childhood.

I have a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke in front of me:

Be patient toward all
That is unsolved in your heart,
And try to love the questions themselves,
Do not seek the answers
That cannot be given you,
Because you would not be able to live them.
And the important point is to live Everything,
Live the questions now...
Perhaps you will gradually,
Without noticing it,
Live along some distant day
Into the answers.

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