

Elsa knocked repeatedly on the bathroom door. "Herman, what's taking so long ...Herman?"

The gathering at Cedar Meadows Cemetery was small. Herman Stehlen was old at the time of his unceremonious death of a coronary during a laborious bowel movement, 85 to be exact, and Solly, his closest friend, was bed-ridden, so it was mainly family who gathered at his New Jersey gravesite. Ezra had flown down from Upstate New York; Tante Greta and Uncle Lou, who people called Lou-Al because he was tall enough to compare to Lou Alcindor, had driven from Philadelphia; Herman's friend Herzl had come despite a recent hip replacement; Herman's baby sister Elsbette wrestled her walker through the maze of graves to stand next to the site designated for her brother; and, hanging back, unwilling to fully acknowledge the event, was Herman's widow, Elsa, whose life had revolved around her husband. All in all and not including the rabbi or Herman himself, there were 6 people in attendance, not much of a showing for a man who had once had a large number of friends and associates and who, at the height of his powers, had been awarded the Employee of the Year by the American Association of Furniture Salesmen. The rabbi handed Elsa the shovel after pronouncing the words "Al mekomo yavo veshalom: May he go to his resting place in peace."

"What's that?" said Elsbette, fingering her hearing aid. "What did he say? I couldn't hear him." Everyone in their meager group, ignored her since explaining would have involved yelling. Also, what could the rabbi possibly have said that required repetition; he hadn't even known Herman.

Elsa was supposed to throw the first shovel of soil on the coffin. The rabbi handed

her the shovel, down-side up, and it was the one part of the ceremony that made sense to her. Right-side up would have suggested harmony and co-operation; upside down, it was a sign of reluctant participation. Elsa tried not to imagine Herman inside the coffin, neatly dressed in his navy blue suit with his hands at his sides, a little soldier hors de combat, as he liked to say after he became bed-ridden. It was the one of the few phrases in French he remembered--remembered and repeated endlessly since, in addition to his other problems, he had suffered from dementia. Elsa knew that throwing the dirt was supposed to be healing, although she had a strong suspicion that it was a gesture of finality in a process that would last forever.

Ezra was having a hard time focusing. He kept thinking about a book manuscript he had submitted for publication and wondering when he would hear whether it had been accepted. He looked at his mother, whose aristocratic features were most pronounced in profile--her aquiline nose, her cheek bones, her slightly protuberant jaw,—and remarked upon the correspondence between her appearance and the way she carried herself, erect and distinguished. It was her posture more than his father's death that really got to him. He even found it depressing. Hard to say why exactly, or maybe he knew why and couldn't fully admit that the reason was his failure to be a better son to her, and that he felt her dignity as a personal reproach. Resolving to be more attentive, he wrapped her arm around his and, when the last shovel of dirt fell on the coffin, shepherded her along the path that cut a swath through fields of graves, cubicle after cubicle, like Co-op city in the Bronx. Despite her age and loss of height from osteoporosis, Elsa was 5' 8", and the two of them together, both tall and proud, gave an impression of lineage.

Ezra's resolve to be a better son began to weaken on the ride back from the cemetery. The problem was not with his mother, who was staring out the window fixedly as New Jersey peeled off the moving car; the problem was with Aunt Elsbette, sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued, who reminded him of the immigrant world he had escaped from. He and Elsbette were sitting opposite each other in the limousine that was part of the burial package Herman had purchased years earlier, and Elsbette was complaining about the extravagance.

"Herman was careful with his money, never took a limousine in his life, and now that he's dead and not around to enjoy it, he's getting driven in a big, beautiful car. Ridiculous."

"A hearse," Ezra interjected. "It's called a hearse."

"Alright, if it makes you feel better to know the right word, a hearse. He was driven in a hearse and we are sitting here in this fancy limousine with leather seats and water bottles. For what?"

Ezra actually agreed with her. He thought it was sad that the only time anyone got to ride in a limo was for a prom, a wedding, or a funeral; but Elsbette's timing, her sense that you could say whatever you wanted whenever you wanted, made him squirm with the social embarrassment of someone who has moved beyond his origins and hates to be reminded of them. Sometimes people mellow with age, sometimes they become more abrasive, and Aunt Bette, whose opinions had hardened with time and repetition, like a coat of paint that is re-applied with every chip, clearly fell into that category. They looked at each other for a long moment, neither of them bearing much resemblance to the man who had died, Bette more like Ezra's paternal grandfather with

her long nose and beady eyes, locked in a game of chicken before Bette broke the stalemate with the observation that the rabbi should have spoken louder. She couldn't hear him.

Ezra could contain himself no longer. "Some of us, Aunt Bette, are in mourning. Maybe you could hold off on the criticism for a little while."

"Oh, and I'm not? This was my brother who died, in case you've forgotten."

Ezra looked over at his mother, who was staring out the window. She was thinking about the funeral and wondering whether Herman would have found it satisfactory. He had been very clear on the subject of his death: all he wanted was a simple graveside ceremony, family and friends. Afterwards, anyone who wanted to could pay their respects. The whole thing was already paid for in keeping with his belief that the man of the house should take care of life's necessities. That included buying plots for himself and Elsa. Everything had been done in advance except the writing of his epitaph, which he thought was Elsa's job, although, even in this, he had certain ideas. Something witty, Herman had said; short and witty. You, in a few words? Elsa had laughed, the thought of squeezing the loquacious Herman into a pithy statement reminding her of a political cartoon of a python engorging itself on a pig. To help her out, Herman had come up with a few quotes from Shakespeare and one from the Bible. A Woody Allen quote would have suited him better but he didn't want to die an imitator. The same was true of Rodney Dangerfield's "There goes the neighborhood" —too easily attributable to someone else. Shakespeare, Elsa had pointed out, was not exactly an unknown either, but the unspoken rule of epitaphs seemed to be that you could quote the dead but not the living.

One quote Herman particularly liked was from a book Elsa had brought with her from Germany. The quote by Heinrich Heine--God will pardon me, it is His trade-- surprised Elsa. Did he know that she knew about him and the other woman; was this his deathbed confession, or was it just that he liked the wit? Herman's head was propped up by pillows and Elsa was sitting by his bedside looking at him. "Is there something you would like to tell me?" she had prompted. He had turned his head away and, since he was dying, she left him alone.

When they finally settled on an epitaph, the cemetery rejected it. According to Cedar Meadows, a long inscription required a larger gravestone and the additional space would disrupt the layout of the rows. So despite Elsa's extensive efforts, the wording for Herman's headstone was largely determined by Cedar Meadows, and the result was essentially three words-- husband, father, friend—that, with only slight variations, were repeated across the entire length of his row. He would have been furious if he had known that he had been reduced to three words and that, worse still, he shared them with thousands of other Jews. It had always been his intention to distinguish himself from the little guy and be a macher; and yet he had ended up exactly where he had started out, in a ghetto.