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an excerpt from

Stargazing in the Atomic Age

I. *“What do you care what other people think?”*

When I was a girl, my father’s behavior in the Boston suburb where we lived struck me as weird. His volatility was embarrassing. His emotionalism was out of place. He was a Rachmaninoff cadence where everyone else played Mozart, a medieval gargoyle perched atop a Lutheran church, a mai tai in the midst of the odorless, colorless gin and tonics that were Boston’s favorite drink. When I grew up and moved away, I recognized his eccentricity for what it was—the incomplete conversion of this assimilated Jew, all quick, erratic motion and nervous energy, to the phlegmatic chill of New England. My parents both grew up in Wisconsin, but the freeze of a midwestern winter was balmy compared with the frigidity of Boston manners. Where Dad worked, at the Harvard School of Public Health, the atmosphere was cool as the inside of a church—as were the faculty, several of whom he had roomed with at Eliot House ten years earlier but never dined with, since the university’s eating clubs in the 1950s were strictly segregated. In their spacious Cambridge houses the faculty remained secluded, the graceful curves of high brick walls separating their parklike acres from the jangly street traffic of nearby Harvard Square.

In the context of the city’s strict composure, an uprightness that hoarded physical energy as if every movement were a waste of vital spirit, my dad’s Jewish exuberance must have seemed shockingly flamboyant. And, indeed, he was all violent activity: he screamed himself hoarse when we squabbled in the car, darted across streets before the WALK sign, rifled wildly through the stacks of papers in his office searching for the sheet he had stashed in some forgotten place because it was “important,” huffed his way through car dealerships when some hapless salesman offered statistics that contradicted the most

basic laws of physics, ate too much off the party trays his Harvard colleagues nibbled from, and blew into our house at the end of the day—disheveled but triumphant as some Greek general returning home at the end of the Trojan War.

Ignoring my mother's demurrals, my dad typically wore sneakers on the several occasions each year when our family drove into the city to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He commented with gleeful sarcasm on whatever stupidity passed for convention, and he took the talk of car mechanics more seriously than the abstracts of some of his colleagues, who massaged their data, he felt, rendering their experiments unethical and valueless at a stroke. He spoofed Harvard's sanctimonious dinner parties in the mock prayer with which he inaugurated family suppers ("Good food, good meat, good God let's eat"). And, aggressively competitive, he never missed an opportunity to let the more socially conscious faculty of the School of Public Health know by example that their inherited facility with the intellectual elite could not stand up to his own uncouth, native brilliance.

Years later, reading Nobel prize-winner Richard Feynman's memoir, "*Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*" I recognized in this physicist's indifference to social protocol and his failure to suffer fools gladly a "curious character" like my dad. Feynman too had a low tolerance for mediocrity. A physicist friend at the Lawrence Berkeley Lab remembers that the Nobel winner refused, point-blank, to attend meetings: they were fine for his colleagues, he thought, but his own brain was too valuable to idle away in committee. This pronouncement must have met with a mixed reception, but it was delivered with Feynman's usual aplomb. The anecdote he recounted as a new graduate student at Princeton might have been one of my father's own. Feynman could sniff out pretentiousness like a police dog trained to find heroin, and at Princeton he found plenty of grandiloquence. The university was "an imitation of an English school" complete with phony British accents. The "Mahstah of Residences . . . was a professor of 'French littrachaw'" who invited him to a tea party—at which he distinguished himself in his inimitable Jewish way. Asked whether he would like cream or lemon in his tea, the scientist replied, "I'll have both, thank you," at which the stricken dean's wife could only manage, "Surely you're *joking*, Mr. Feynman." Here was Dad—except that he, as all four of us children knew, would have asked for five spoons of sugar, too.

I have inherited my father's contempt for pieties—ceremonies of all kinds make me squirm. Like a teenager incapable of suffering in silence, I satirize

homilies at weddings or funerals with whispered aspersions, as if to consent to ritual were to surrender independence of mind. Of course this irreverence made for a stormy childhood, since the edicts I resisted most were my father's. Still, defiance of tradition is my birthright: hard to break. I am, after all, my father's daughter. I have absorbed his Jewish habits of mind. But because I spent my school years within the shadow of the Old North Church, I associate observance with New England culture rather than with Jewish orthodoxy. Two hundred years after the Revolutionary War, the tree-lined streets of Concord and Lexington wind in serpentine curves past stands of pine and the occasional field of corn left intact as a rural reminder of two centuries before. School trips prompted us to recall "our" heritage: the smallish boulder on the edge of the wind-swept coast that was Plymouth Rock, the cotton-smocked women who dipped candles and made soap from lye in perennial re-creation of Salem's Puritan past. Route 126, once a dirt path upon which Paul Revere traveled on his midnight ride, is choked now with traffic from the burgeoning computer industry. The Daughters of the American Revolution still organize an annual restaging of the Revolutionary War hero's call to arms. Each year, the bugle call would drag me from sleep in the early morning hours. I woke to the harsh cry of the riders through the field behind our Wayland house and to the rushed clacking of horseshoes on the tarred road outside: a small group of men in the costume of 1776 galloping by as if time had folded over itself in some quaint history-book illustration of Einstein's theory.

Piety for me is Anglo-Protestant, Boston's choleric interpretation of its British inheritance: Cromwell's humorlessness, the starched white collars of eighteenth-century merchants whose portraits hang in the colonial wing of the Boston Fine Arts Museum—and the prim, moralizing gaze their grandchildren's grandchildren turned upon my voluble family when our excited conversation troubled their polite restaurant murmurings. To be pious was to be dutiful, whether in dress or at prayer, at cocktail parties or school functions. Piety meant proper conduct, form rather than substance, the icy sang-froid of decorum. I favored irreverence because it allowed me a small rebellion against this incurious citizenry, as parsimonious of gesture as they were of speech. For a people who valued social compliance above all else, gaudiness was godlessness, brashness an unpardonable sin. Talking with your hands was showy, vulgar, gauche. It was what my father called, in the loud drawl he designated as parody, "taaaacky," the very word itself too tacky for Bostonians to utter.

When I watched my father speak to my classmates' parents on those few occasions when school functions brought us all together, I read in their slight stiffening the checked but palpable hostility this constricted social world exhibits toward the unreserved. My father's conversational brio distinguished him as unerringly as if he were wearing Joseph's coat. To New England eyes, he must have seemed honky-tonk as a neon sign blaring its advertisement for Budweiser, a loud macaw, a blotch of scarlet in the midst of their graceful monochrome of silvery birches, white-painted churches, and wrought-iron weather vanes tempered dusty black.

Growing up, I detested this obtrusiveness. Now, living some three thousand miles away from Boston's Back Bay, I realize that my father's expansive gesturing and mercurial speech, like his cocky disregard for convention, were inherited from his eastern European predecessors, themselves viewed askance by the Russians, Germans, and Poles they lived alongside. Strong emotion hovers like static electricity over his head. But so, too, does intellectual inquisitiveness, a respect for brilliance—whether in the field of automobile mechanics or theoretical physics—and a refusal to assume that established custom is inherently virtuous. My father's imperviousness to the glamour of the politic and his lack of obeisance to institutional authority constitute a principle pure as faith. Reverence for innovation, curiosity untrammelled by the pieties paid to long-established theory, and pleasure in scholarly epiphany that shatters intellectual tradition without a second's regret define his attitude toward work, as they typify the work of Jewish scientists more generally. Dad taught us that the only way to arrive at new ideas is to be a maverick. But his intellectual irreverence is less the product of "the scientific method" than of a Jewish tradition he shelved and largely "forgot," or rather, translated into an ostensibly nonpartisan affinity for Freud, Kafka, and Rilke—as did many other secular Jews who find themselves living in uncongenial social climates. Framed within the wake of the World War II history that perpetually cautioned where it did not silence, this brashness is not unconscious enthusiasm but defiance—a willful refusal to prostrate the self before the unsympathetic gaze of the intolerant.

II. *Apocalyptic Time*

As a Rorschach test, the coupling of "Jews" with "modernity" is hardly ambiguous. Out of the inkblot, one picture habitually resolves: the Shoah, the second of its century's genocides. Two decades after World War II, the Holocaust became the pivot point upon which Jewish intellectual life turned. It remains

today, more than a half century later, the hinge from which our sense of ourselves depends. Its wake of loss and erasure paradoxically solders American Jews together as a religious and cultural community. But the Holocaust has become the black hole of our history, swallowing the time-space within which it unfolds. Every narrative we produce today must bend and twist to accommodate this central force. If in ancient times we were treated to miracles and monarchs (King David, the burning bush, the plagues in Egypt, Joseph's prophetic dreams), the twentieth century brings only ash, quiet as snowfall.

In the past we had heroes, we had warriors, we had lovers—Solomon, the Song of Songs, the lilt of the lute and the backward glance of the maiden. Rebecca, Deborah, Judah Maccabee. I was raised without these stories. Instead, like many of my secular contemporaries, I have come to know Jewishness as a badge of suffering, an ethnic “knowledge” ironically echoing Germany's yellow star. Like it or not, my iconography is the victim's, informed by photographs of people in the Warsaw ghetto and in the death camps, through whose darkly intelligent eyes we see a prescient knowledge of their own erasure. In some sense the memorials we have constructed to the dead merely strengthen the pull this central sadness exerts upon us. Each visit to a museum, designed to honor our ancestors, reminds us as well of the inescapability of our fate as outsiders.

Such witnessing, in those of us temporally distant enough to be immune from fear, is an upwelling of Job's pride. Like William Faulkner's Anse Bundren, the patriarch of *As I Lay Dying*, we seem proud of being chosen for special misery. Pale eyes glued open in the “pleased astonishment” of the plagued unfortunate, Bundren repeats a mantra—“if ever was such a misfortunate man”—that could be our own. Faulkner's humor reveals the particular patterning of race conflict as it takes shape in the American South. The writer censures the way both blacks and whites accept tragedy as their portion: dumbly unreflective as oxen saddled to a plow, they bend their shoulders in assent to their twin Fates. Bundren is a comical figure whose complacency in the face of his family's endless calamities is vilified by Faulkner, but his smugness finds an uncomfortable parallel with our own readiness to school ourselves to perpetual trauma.

Habituated as we are to understanding the modern period as allegorical of Jewish suffering, we seem to think that writing about Jewish achievement is blasphemous. Images of what Elaine Scarry calls “the body in pain” have crowded out alternate representations so fully that, come time to write this essay upon relationships between Jews as victims of war and Jews as engineers

of war's most devastating technology to date, I initially found myself hard pressed to scratch out more than a few solitary paragraphs. The unfortunate side effect of Paul C elan's brilliant, jetlike poetry is to absorb into its darkness the happier ghosts of the twentieth century. We remember the bitter irony of his "Todesfuge": "he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground / he commands us play up for the dance." But all the others—the painters, the musicians, the philosophers, the doctors, the engineers, the social scientists, the physicists—are forgotten, left without burial.