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## Her Final Power

Jews bury their dead quickly. Twenty-four hours after her last breath my mother was in the ground, mourners crowding greedily round the hole she was about to be buried in, peering into the nothingness. The casket was lowered into the space, and my son Nathan and I were called forward to be the first to scoop soil onto it from two piles at the graveside.

'You don't need to cover her completely,' whispered the Rabbi. 'Just a little, then pass the spade on. A line will appear behind you.'

'And make sure you pick from the good pile!' added my mother. 'Don't lock me in here under stones and weeds!'

Evelyn was always full of surprises. In life she went to extraordinary lengths not to raise us as Jewish, but in death expected us to form an orderly queue and shovel quality earth onto her in the company of an Orthodox Rabbi. Nathan threw the spade deep into the dirt and thrust a great heap angrily onto the coffin, quickly turning away in disgust. I hit the target the second time, on the first attempt drunkenly missing the hole and muddying the Rabbi's shoes instead.

Back at the house, we waited in the lounge for the vultures to arrive, each of us pacing nervously while caterers worked quietly in the kitchen making sandwiches. Evelyn was not a popular woman and we had tried to explain that it would be a small gathering – the funeral itself was embarrassingly quiet – but they'd brought enough salmon and cucumber for hundreds.

'Death attracts,' said the caterer gleefully. 'Just you wait and see.'

And, amazingly, people began to arrive. They were a curious bunch, mainly acquaintances of Evelyn's attending out of a misplaced sense of duty, but there were also a couple of teachers I had worked with and one or two people my mother may have called friends, though I hardly knew them at all. Their names escaped me. We rarely saw Evelyn's associates, even in her last days. People did not rally round.

The average age in the room was around sixty, close to mine, though I felt young in this company. These people moved slower than me, complained of aches and pains, and seemed attached at the hip to their spouses. They nodded timidly as they arrived, shaking my hand and muttering, 'I wish you long life,' as some had done at the funeral, moving quickly on to others close by for easier, lighter conversation. Some of them looked half dead already. They came with their own black silk head coverings and shawls in blue velvet bags with gold-coloured Hebrew lettering on the front and seemed to be quietly enjoying themselves, though of course they could not say that to me.

I looked around our living room, usually so empty, now half filled with mourners. The ones I caught glancing at me did so mostly with pity, but some with disapproval. A few men discreetly consulted mobile phones for football scores; others arranged their dress in preparation for prayer. The women were not expected to do anything, except stay separate from the men. Soon there was an invisible line between them, with the small glass coffee table acting as the centre of the divide.

I was shown to a low chair that had been brought in earlier in the day by a busy-looking woman from the synagogue who said she was there to help. I sat bewildered, my eyes searching the room for ways to escape between the knees of my guests. A black silk head covering lay unhappily on my head, a borrowed white shawl hung loosely from my shoulders; a child's, thin, small, the tassels at the tip hardly reaching the bottom of my tie. It was all they had to spare.

'There you go,' said the woman. 'Perfect. As soon as the Rabbi arrives we'll begin.'

At the back of the room, just in my line of sight, stood Nathan, my daughter-in-law Arabella and granddaughter Lucille, both with their arms crossed, sternly tight-lipped. Arabella had suggested we burn the will or just ignore it; Lucille had wanted to conduct a service of her own, which she had been working on since before Evelyn died, and was mortified when told she was not allowed to. I said we'd do one of our own later in the week if she liked. A serious, super-intelligent fourteen-year-old with a thin frame and piercing dark eyes, Lucille had been devoted to my mother right up to the end, spending much of her free time at her bedside, bringing her tea and listening to her talk long after the rest of us had stopped paying attention. Sometimes she'd just sit there next to her, reading, while Evelyn wrote the letters that took up so much of her time. Last night, after they took her body away, Evelyn and Lucille had continued their discussions in secret at an altar of old cushions and teddy bears arranged in the corner of Lucille's room, while I listened in through the wall. This was a ritual previously reserved for Lucille's conversations with her own mother, ten years deceased.

*'The whisky, the whisky,'* Arabella mouthed to me.

The flask was poking out from the inside pocket of my suit. I popped it out of view while watching Arabella and Lucille whisper unhappily, arms still locked tight in front of them.

Though they weren't related, they might as well have been. Lucille's mother was weak and unremarkable compared to the woman who replaced her so quickly, and she was rarely talked about. Even Lucille didn't ask questions about her any more. Dressed in an almost identical all-black outfit to her stepmother, fine shoulder-length brown hair perfectly combed in the direction of the floor, Lucille was Arabella in miniature, not her mother. For so long Arabella had been like glue, keeping us all together somehow despite everything. No more though. That time was long gone, eroded by a series

of betrayals which had slowly turned her love to resentment. We no longer deserved her.

A steady hum rang round the room as our guests waited for the Rabbi to turn up, exchanging pleasantries, asking after each other's families, mumbling cautiously about the rumoured circumstances of Evelyn's death. The Rabbi was the last to arrive.

'What's he like?' one of the visitors asked another as the Rabbi rang the doorbell. 'I've not been to Shule since Old Chelm died.'

'One of the new breed,' came the whispered reply. 'They call him The Advertiser. Once he gets his claws into you, you can't get them out without a *significant* donation.'

This received a stifled laugh from the group as I sprinted to the front door to get there before anyone else. A pale-skinned, bearded, fat man of middle age wearing a large black hat with a thick rim and long black coat, the Rabbi clapped his hands together and smiled softly as he greeted me and crossed the threshold. He sweated hard in the heat, breathing heavily. He seemed completely other-worldly to me, a strange, almost historical anomaly against the backdrop of our decaying sixties-style front room with its long-abandoned fireplace, foul-smelling and ugly, its mantelpiece cluttered with cheap, modern, porcelain farmyard animals (pigs included), directly behind the seat he was about to be asked to take.

'Did you find us all right, Rabbi?'

'Oh yes, no problem at all.'

A button on his coat dangled precariously, threatening to drop to the floor. He had cleaned his shoes since my earlier faux pas; they now sparkled in the artificial light. A couple of crumbs nestled comfortably in his beard. Speaking in deep solemn tones, talking and moving slowly as if out of respect for the dead, articulating as much with his hands as with words, almost like a magician, everything the Rabbi said and did was fascinating.

'Much traffic?'

'I walked.'

'Of course.'

I gestured towards his hat and coat.

'Thank you,' he replied, 'but I keep them on for prayer.'

We both hovered momentarily; he kissed his forefinger, then the scroll on the side of the front door.

I showed him to the lounge, wondering through my haze what this large and impressive man was really doing in our house, what he would think of to say to all these strangers and why he was wearing so many layers in such heat.

'Your mother was a special woman, Abe,' he said sympathetically. 'You may know we were in contact by telephone quite regularly in her last weeks.'

'No, Rabbi, I had no idea. What did you talk about?'

'Oh, you know,' continued the Rabbi. 'Theory, Jewish history, the peace process. She was not one for light conversation, as I'm sure you know.'

We laughed. Nathan approached.

'She asked a lot of questions,' said the Rabbi acknowledging Nathan, shaking his hand softly and letting the other hand fall gently on his shoulder.

'Are we ready?' he asked him.

Nathan nodded. The Rabbi went to his space, ushered by the woman from the Shule, and turned to address the growing crowd, which was somewhat larger than I had expected. It fell silent almost immediately. (Behind him, the caterer was grinning broadly, vindicated.) The Rabbi greeted his audience with a simple 'Shalom,' and then started a call-and-response prayer.

Few in the room were able to join in with it. Those who could mumbled rapidly in Hebrew, rocking slightly forward and back, forward and back. Lucille gaped at them, open-mouthed. Like many of the non-Jewish majority present, Nathan and I sat dumbly with our books open at the first page, occasionally looking up to see what everyone else was doing, apart from when we were called upon to recite short prayers ourselves. The Rabbi had written these out in

conveniently numbered phonetics for us, large capitals on synagogue-headed paper, to save us the embarrassment of struggling with the Hebrew, though this was more for Nathan than for me; sober, I should have been able to cope. Nathan's expression as he mechanically read from the script was as I imagined mine: numb. He had hardly spoken to me all day. He and Arabella were not talking either, though that was no longer unusual.

The service passed slowly, each prayer or half-slurred tune sounding like the last, the long minor notes suiting the bleak atmosphere perfectly. It was strange, this faith. Watching the few religiously inclined amongst the group – none of whom I recognised – lolling back and forth, eyes closed, deep in prayer, and seeing uninitiated friends and acquaintances copying the movements out of an odd respect, I let out a stunted half laugh. Several people turned their heads to look at me, embarrassed, while my mother barked in my ear:

'Where are your tears, boy? Make like you love me!'

I had been hoping Evelyn might leave us alone in death; at the icy-clear sound of her voice, I half jumped out of my chair and let out a small cry. The woman from the Shule bolted from her spot by the Rabbi, pushed through the crowds and came to tend to the bereaved, pushing me lightly back onto the chair.

'It's OK, Abe,' she whispered in my ear. 'Don't be ashamed to grieve.'

As the prayers continued, I felt less obliged to join in. It had very little to do with me. Instead, I looked past everybody and into our garden, through the gap in the hedge that lead to the road, where as a child I had watched my wonderful first wife, then just ten years old, pass by. She was the smallest part of her mother's proud troupe, which marched by each Saturday on its way to synagogue, heads held high and bright skirts matching. I loved her even then and used to wonder whether I was Jewish in the same way she was, in

Shule every weekend and on festivals, or whether Jewishness was something that might wear off if ignored for long enough. 'I wish it bloody would,' Evelyn said, when I asked her. I hadn't wanted Wife Number One to leave me. I loved her increasingly as the years passed, showered her with kisses when we were together, loved her habits, her little faults, our secrets, but though I tried to show I cared, it was never enough. I couldn't rid her mind of the things she thought I was doing with others when she wasn't around, and in the end it was our undoing.

Presently the mumbling stopped and the Rabbi kissed his prayer book, laying it down carefully on a nearby seat.

'I did not know Evelyn Stone well,' he began, 'but I knew her well enough to be sure of this: she was a believer in *life*.'

He turned his heavy head to smile at me.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, Evelyn Stone *lived*. Her ninety-three years on earth were remarkable. Who among us can claim to have had a life like hers? Raised in one of the poorest parts of Jerusalem, Evelyn educated herself in the Torah and Talmud, as a teenager moved to a kibbutz, where she worked in the fruit fields and factories, and then came to England, building up a successful international company from nothing. She was a fierce intellect, a dedicated professional, a smart businesswoman and a fighter, but also a devoted mother, grandmother and great-grandmother – an example to us all. Evelyn raised Abe alone in an age when such a thing was much less common and less accepted. Her family was what she lived for – she told me that herself.'

Nathan slowly raised an eyebrow. Behind him an attractive woman looked at me and smiled. Not with desire, just with kindness. Things were changing.

'Evelyn gave kindly to the synagogue over a great many years,' continued the Rabbi. 'She believed in the value of Jewish community. Though she often felt it difficult to take part herself, this didn't stop her supporting others more able to. Yes,

sometimes she had inner struggles, but she told me that belief was always there, even in her darkest moments. If she wasn't in prayers – and prayer was difficult for her – then it was because she was always wrestling with her Judaism, as many of us do, as we all *should* do. Like our forefather Abraham, she was always asking questions of the Hashem, Blessed Be His Name. Sometimes, He does not mind answering. On the contrary, He has been known to find the openness refreshing.'

The crowd laughed politely. I had drunk just enough to feel anaesthetised and so could not join in. Nathan was beginning to perspire. My temples throbbed agonizingly. Everything else was as nothing.

'The Talmud teaches us to ask questions. Indeed, surely Judaism is all about going in search of what we do not yet know. Evelyn's life taught her to do just that, and she encouraged others to do so too. Like the great Rabbis of the past who argued about the tiniest detail of Jewish law, like the youngest child of the family who, on Seder night this week asked, 'Why?' and like the wise son, always asking, always wanting to understand, always grappling for meaning, Evelyn Stone spent her life searching for deeper knowledge. We can all learn a great deal from her.'

At this the Rabbi stopped for a moment to let us all consider what we could glean from such a life, while he wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Nathan's face was now bright red. Arabella could be heard climbing the stairs, the distinctive clip-clop of her high heels disrupting the hush, while I had begun to drift into thoughts of whether I had enough money in my wallet to pay for the drink I would undoubtedly need once everyone had gone.

'This week, at the Seder table,' said the Rabbi, 'we each heard the story of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, and were instructed to act as if we were freed from bondage all those years ago as we go about our daily lives. Evelyn's life was much like the history of the Jewish people – a story full of tragedy, full of mistakes, a struggle to be free,

but a struggle that allowed her to emerge stronger. This is how we should remember her. This week, in the spirit of Evelyn Stone and in the name of Hashem, King of the Universe, let the story of Pesach, as the Torah commands, go from generation to generation. Let the word of Hashem survive, as it does in our synagogue, where, in acknowledgment of her generous donations and her commitment to Jewish life, I am proud to announce that our new hall will be named the Evelyn Stone Memorial Hall. Now let us say, Amen.'

'Amen,' said the congregation.

Evelyn had wanted to die and had talked of little but her determination to do so for many months. She had been slowly shutting down little by little. Her bowels had given up, her eyesight and hearing were almost gone too, and her heart was not far behind. 'If you were a real man you would kill me off,' she had said, holding my hand in her bony grip. 'But you're not. I fear I shall have to do it myself. A son who really loved his mother would not stand by and let her suffer so.' But she had made me suffer too, and was still doing so. With money enough to build a memorial hall I could have paid off all my debts; walls with her name on them were more important to her than her only child's financial security.

Evelyn was preoccupied with her own impending death and the consequences of it, and protected her will fiercely at all times, keeping it locked in her bedside drawer, the key round her neck. Its contents were to be kept secret until the day she stopped breathing and started to rot; until then, we would just have to wait. It was her final power over us. Once, I tried to slip the key from its string necklace while she was sleeping, only to have my hand almost bitten off when she suddenly awoke and sank her teeth hard into it, leaving deep marks that still remain today. I didn't try again.

When she finally did die the first thing we did was open the drawer: as well as her generous donations to the synagogue,

Evelyn had left her savings in equal parts to Lucille and to the Rabbi's good judgement, though she had not actually been to his place of work in decades and openly talked of both the curse of Judaism and her dislike of Israel, which she called an oppressive state run by war criminals. Though she knew I desperately needed it, she left me no money at all; instead, I would retain my rights to half the house, if it was ever sold – what Evelyn could do with her half now she was dead was unclear. Nathan and Arabella didn't even get a mention. In the will, Evelyn demanded a full Orthodox funeral, this traditional service of mourning at home (one night only – the customary full week would have killed us all), and even specified the caterer, though paying for that was to be my privilege. She had fallen out with another, cheaper, local company twenty years before.

Another prayer followed the end of the Rabbi's speech and then people prepared to leave. Salmon and cucumber sandwiches lay hardly touched by anyone; half-finished drinks were left everywhere. As soon as was polite I went to the downstairs toilet, needing water, but was sick immediately on getting there, struggling to crouch in the tiny boxed space as it all fell out of me. A watery yellow stream slipped through without difficulty. I got up, checked the lock was secure on the door, then knelt back down, face in the bowl, arms resting on the rim, remembering my mother. For so long she was the old woman who cried suicide; it didn't seem right that she should actually be dead. I swilled, spat out hard and stepped back into the breach.

In ten minutes the house was empty, the Rabbi the last to go.

'May Hashem keep you in the company of Zion,' he said on his way out, solemn and genuine. 'Your mother will be sadly missed. And take care of yourself, Abe, you look pale. Remember, you can always call me. You are never too far away to come back. Evelyn was a shining example of that . . .'

He placed his card in my palm, smiled and was gone, his grand coat tails flapping in the wind behind him. I read the print – RABBI J. M. TAYLOR, AVAILABLE 24 HOURS (APART FROM SHABBAT!) NO DOUBT TOO BIG OR SMALL – and slipped it into my wallet.

Once the caterers had left, Nathan made quietly for the door as well.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked.

‘Nowhere.’

‘Mind if I join you?’

He shrugged. I grabbed my coat and followed him out of the door and down the path, wheezing and struggling to catch up. My son showed little concern as I waddled up alongside him, puffing on my inhaler.

‘Why so quiet?’ I asked.

‘Why so talkative?’

Silence. My breathing became more regular as the ventolin got to work and my airways opened. I sighed.

‘OK then. What’s wrong with Arabella?’

No answer.

‘Nathan, is everything OK?’

No answer.

‘Is there something you want to tell me? Is this about the will? Or . . . have you been . . . unfaithful?’

At this he stopped, zipped up his jacket irritably and said:

‘You of all people have no right to ask me that. Or anything. Go away.’

Nathan waited for me to leave. I didn’t. I was grateful for the rest. Instead, I said:

‘Why do you treat me as if I have somehow ruined your life?’

Now he raised his voice, the acid tone echoing right around the close.

‘Why don’t you show me you haven’t?’

At a very young age Nathan had decided to become a psy-

chiatrist rather than simply book an appointment with one. He put his hands in his pockets and continued walking, now even faster. I tried again.

‘Strange that no one ate the sandwiches, don’t you think?’

‘Not really, Dad. Passover starts today. You’re not supposed to eat bread. If you’d listened properly to the Rabbi’s speech you’d know that.’

‘Yes . . . you’re right. I forgot.’

We carried on.

The walk was instantly sobering, the afternoon’s heat having been replaced by light rain and a cool, bracing wind. Nathan and I circled the quiet, affluent suburb together in silence, our brisk pace identical, left and right feet in step, shoes scuffing the pavement rather than gliding over it. I’d never spotted that before, how we walked the same way, hurried and ungainly, but suddenly it seemed important; we shared a trait.

Nathan had always been more like his mother, Wife Number One. He inherited many of her physical attributes – the little snub nose, big, questioning eyes, pallid skin, thick jet-black hair – but also her mannerisms, opinions and values. Nathan was sullen too, always silently aggrieved, rarely telling you what was wrong. The detail wasn’t important, really: all that mattered was that all of it was my fault. The way his mother died, the two women I failed to replace her adequately with, the drinking, the pretence; he would never forgive me for it. Not properly.

Nathan had become even more pessimistic about life since his suspension from work. His house was repossessed and he, Arabella and Lucille were forced to move in with me – the ultimate humiliation. The proud graduate I knew had been replaced by an altogether sadder figure, defeated by conspiring forces only he could see. That young man was still in there somewhere not too far away, but he refused to come out. Perhaps if Nathan knew how little money I had as well, it would make him feel better. I thought about telling

him, but stopped myself. Nobody else needed to know, not yet.

We stopped again. Nathan's voice lowered as he turned to me and said quietly:

'Dad, do you think other people's lives are like this?'

'I don't know . . . what are ours like?'

A low brick wall was behind us, opposite the playing fields. We sat on it.

'You know . . . just so . . . *hopeless*. Stupid. Tragic. Senseless. Do you ever feel that everything's just . . . completely out of your control? That you might as well just let it all go . . . people's expectations . . . your own . . . all that worry?'

I couldn't reply. Nathan kept talking, but slower, looking at the pavement.

'I saw this documentary a few days ago . . . about the Buddhist centre in the city. You know, how its members got involved, what it meant to them, that kind of thing. And everyone on it . . . the people they interviewed, they just seemed so . . . I don't know . . . *calm*. This one guy was talking about how he used to get road rage and how it just disappeared when he started meditating. I quite fancy some of that . . . *peace*. I'm sick of everything else.'

'Me too,' I replied weakly. 'Do you think you'll be cleared on Thursday?'

'Absolutely,' he snapped, defiantly back to his old, familiar self. 'I have done nothing wrong. It's the only thing that can happen.'

I watched the movement of our feet for most of the short walk home, considering their shape and size, the way the rain splashed off our shoes while we walked, listening to the grunting sounds my son was making, avoiding eye contact. Nathan has X-ray eyes; sometimes I can't look at him. The rain got heavier as we walked, large droplets crashing off my Sunday-best black boots and the shoes Nathan had worn to work every day until so recently. Our feet took us home, both of us exhausted. On the way back we passed the church at the

bottom of our road where I noticed the sign on the door: a picture of a wild green labyrinth above which was written:

'Jesus: A-Maze-Ing. Solve the Puzzle – Details Inside.'

The signs were always changing; I rarely paid attention to them. We walked past the church and up the hill to the house, where Arabella and Lucille were supposed to be waiting.