SENIOR DAY

By Carol Westreich Solomon

This month I go to Seven Mile Market in Baltimore for my kosher meat on a Friday, a day to be avoided if at all possible, but my calendar leaves me no choice. Past the poultry cases, the deli counter, and the hot buffet of Israeli specialties, I make my way among Orthodox women in sheitels and long black skirts, shopping before the sabbath begins. I am wigless, dressed in forbidden pants, like a visitor to a foreign land.

The checkout lines grow longer by the minute with a few secular Jews like me interspersed between Shabbos-shoppers and their impatient children. My line moves slowly, freezing while the checker packs and repacks bags to an older woman's precise specifications.Keep the meat separate from the dairy, the fish far away from the lettuce, the bag not too heavy but not too light. Suddenly I feel a tap on my back from the cart behind me.

"Oy, s'lach li. So sorry," says a deep voice.

I turn to see a bearded man in a black hat, his ritual fringes dangling beneath his white dress shirt.

"No matter," I say.

But his blue-green eyes, unusual among the Orthodox, grab me. Like a clear country lake with an untouchable bottom, they draw me in. I blush. He blushes. I turn away, as if we have violated each other, and focus on the baby wailing in the cart ahead of me. But the black hatter's blue-green eyes are heating my back like the summer sun.

"Bobbie?" the deep voice asks.

I turn again. He knows my name. His face has reddened, with soft rose patches visible beneath his full white beard

“Do I know you?” I ask.

“Bobbie Schein? From Milford Mill High School?” he asks.

“Yes, I’m Bobbie Schein. And you are?”

“Menachem. . . .” Then he stops, clears his throat and starts again. “Mark Goldman. Class of 65.”

His name peels away his beard, his black hat, his ritual fringes, and at least thirty pounds. His white hair turns brown with glints of copper.

“Mark,” I say. “It’s been a while.”

“A lifetime,” he laughs.

“You weren’t at the fiftieth reunion.”

“I was in Israel. A grandson’s Bar Mitzvah.”

I remember ambling along a secluded path through wooded parkland with a boy young enough to be my grandson today. We’re crossing a stream by walking on the rocks made slippery by bubbling water and a light drizzle. I start to slide. The boy offers his hand, then catches me before I fall.

“You’ve changed,” I say.

He laughs again. “More than fifty years. Haven’t we all?”

“Some more than others.”

“You mean Menachem? Things happen. It’s complicated. And you? All is good?”

“Good enough,” I tell him.

“Baruch Hashem. Thanks to G-d. You’re still here in Baltimore?” He looks at my cart piled with packages of chicken, ground beef, frozen blintzes, corned beef--enough to feed an army.

“I drive from Gaithersburg every couple months for kosher meat.”

I look at his cart. A pre-cooked chicken, a container of chicken soup, challah rolls, and toilet paper. I imagine a small apartment not far from here with bookcases of religious books lining the living room walls and a tiny kitchen table with two vinyl chairs. His eyes have followed my eyes. He shrugs. I avert my eyes to respect his loneliness.

“It’s complicated,” he says again, his voice breaking slightly.

I remember a boy’s husky voice saying, “Here, let me help you.” He guides me across the stream, his hand enfolding mine, the water sloshing into our shoes, oddly refreshing after hours in the June sun. I want the stream to be wider so he’ll hold my hand a while longer.

“So sorry,” I say. “For life’s complications.”

“It’s life. We take it day by day. Find joy where it reveals itself. Find meaning in it all.”

The checker’s voice says, “Next.” I want the line to stay frozen. But the woman with the packing specifications and the mother with the crying baby have moved on, and the people behind Mark are sending me evil eyes.

“So good to see you again, Mark. Here’s hoping our paths cross again.”

“At simchas, good times.”

“Or at Seven Mile Market,” I add. We both laugh.

As the checker scans my groceries, I want to turn again and ask, “How did you get from Mark to Menachem? How are you really?” But he is a religious man, and the intimacy of such questions feels wrong.

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I'm putting freezer packs atop each grocery bag in my Toyota to keep the meat cool for the ride home when I see Mark again. Shoulders hunched, he's carrying two plastic bags and headed toward the dented van next to me.

"So we meet again!" I call out.

He looks up in surprise, a smile flickering on his holy lips. "Twice in one day. It is bashert, meant to be." He unlocks the van, tugs twice on the recalcitrant door, places his bags onto the back floor, and climbs into the front seat. The engine rumbles, sputters, and dies.

As thunder rumbles in the distance, a boy holds me in his arms, his body electric beneath his t-shirt. We're off from the others in our class, far from the teachers schmoozing in the picnic pavilion and the school buses resting in the gravel lot. Just the two of us caught in an unexpected moment--his lips, not yet holy, pressing firmly against mine.

The engine rumbles again, then silence. A third time. Nothing.

Mark opens his car door. "Bobbie, I seem to have forgotten my cell and the van has died. Could I borrow your cell to call AAA?"

I fumble through my purse, then hand him my phone, making sure not to unintentionally touch his hand.

"I see. Yes, yes, I understand. But Shabbos is coming. I can't wait here that long.Well, if you don't have a truck available now, I guess I have no choice. Could I do it tomorrow night after Shabbos?"

He returns the phone to me. "No good. The van will have to spend Shabbos here." He starts to say something, then falters as if the hand of G-d is stopping him.

“Mark, it’s no problem. I’ll give you a ride home. If you feel uncomfortable sitting up front with me, you can sit in the back with my bags.”

He blushes. “You still read minds, I see, like in English class. No bother. I can sit in the front. There’s plenty of room. Do you mind driving me? Will it interfere with you getting home for Shabbos?”

“Not an issue for me,” I say.

“But it is for me. I wouldn’t want you to break Shabbos on my behalf.”

“I won’t. Now put your bags in the back and let’s go.”

The skies are darkening, not sunset coming early, but storm clouds approaching, like that day in the wooded parkland. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have a man in the front seat with me, how two seats separated by the transmission lever feel surprisingly close. We’re driving down Seven Mile Lane to Park Heights Avenue--just the two of us--past aging apartment houses and a nursing home with a long wooden ramp.

“I make Shabbos myself,” he announces. “My wife died last year. Covid. I try to make it nice. I put a tablecloth on the table, use her china, light candles.”

“Your children?”

“In Israel, Long Island, Queens, Toronto. None left here. And yours?”

“Two children. Atlanta and Denver.”

“It goes so fast. The time. I call them children, but they have children, and soon their children will have children. What does that make us?”

“Not old. Don’t say old.”

“No, we’re not old. But we’re not young,” he says.

"Sometimes we are."

We cross Park Heights Avenue, then pass a corner synagogue that used to be a pharmacy where we kids bought snow cones and coddies squeezed between Saltines. The windshield wipers are racing against the torrents of rain unleashed by the heavens.

The boy is removing his rain-soaked shirt and guiding me next to him on the wet grass.His lips feel big, like they're swallowing me; his body stronger, bigger, transferring energy to mine.

"Turn here!" he calls out. "I almost missed the turn. Yes, right here. I'm two blocks down."

We pull up in front of his house, a rambler, probably new in the 1950s, big enough to contain what was surely a large family before they scattered across the world. Its shrubs need trimming, its grass needs mowing, and its shutters need painting. Things that become less important as time passes, as the incidentals burn away, leaving only what it is essential. Like people. And kindness. And love. And faith.

The rain is coming too hard for him to get out of the car, so we sit in the front seat, the air conditioner off, the windshield fogging. He smells the same as he did in the grass—asweetness to him that fills my soul.

As the rain falls, we talk about acting *Our Town* in Mr. Bennett's class with Mark as Stage Manager and me as Emily and discovering the beauty of everyday life in Grover's Corner. And about going off to school during the Cuban Missile Crisis and not knowing if the world would end that day. And about learning on a bleak November day that President Kennedy had been shot and almost everyone in our history class crying at the shock of it all, even our teacher.What

we don't talk about is his wife's death. Or my husband's long, sad final chapter. Or the boy and girl who first connected in the rain on senior day. Or how Mark became Menachem.

The rain has slowed as the boy on the grass reaches under my blouse and touches something no boy has ever touched. I'm a good girl, a pure girl, but I want him to touch me.Here. Now. Then he stops. "I can't," he says. "I'll kick myself in the morning. But I can't."He gets up, puts on his shirt, and turns back toward the pavilion. I button my blouse and take another path, thinking then that Mark had rejected me, knowing now that it was Menachem.

The rain has turned to mist. We stop talking. His blue-green eyes hold my eyes. Slowly he leans toward me until I can see every line in his face—lines of grief, laughter, and consternation at life's cruel surprises. He's so close I feel his breath on my face.

"I remember," he whispers. "S'lach li. Forgive me."

Then he gathers his bags that once touched mine in the back seat, kisses the mezuzuah on his front door post, and enters the house where he has made his life. And I return alone to my home where my dear husband no longer waits for me and remember.