

UNBOUND

By Jean Ende

As soon as I noticed that Aunt Rachel wasn't wearing her girdle, I knew she didn't have long to live.

Of course it took a few minutes for this to sink in since, from the neck up, she looked the same as always. With her quivering hand, Aunt Rachel had applied dark red lipstick, sparkly blue eye shadow and thick foundation, all of which seeped into her many facial crevasses.

Maddie, Aunt Rachel's aide, took her to the beauty parlor under the train tracks every week so her little blonde football helmet hairdo was dyed, teased and shellacked into place. I had no doubt that Aunt Rachel's hair was now completely grey or white, after all her 80th birthday was approaching. But I knew she'd go to her grave without my ever seeing her natural color. Growing up, I'd watched Aunt Rachel's hair morph from the palest blonde to the peppiest ginger to the deepest ebony, a new shade every few months depending on the covers of fashion magazines, her planned wardrobe and the whims of her stylist.

Maddie answered the doorbell as soon as I rang, took my coat and gave me a quick hug. "I'm glad you're here today Sarah. Your aunt's out of sorts, feeling uneasy. Try to cheer her up."

As usual, Aunt Rachel was in the living room, sitting on the plastic-covered yellow silk club chair, her swollen feet propped on the matching ottoman, a cane leaning against the chair. The TV played softly but she wasn't paying attention to it. As I walked through the door, Aunt Rachel cried out, "Saraleh!" using the diminutive Yiddish pronunciation of my name, a nickname no one else used anymore. "It's so good to see you. How are you? It's been so long."

"I was here only a few weeks ago, Aunt Rachel," I told her.

Actually, it had been closer to two months since my last visit but I figured she wouldn't remember. I bent over to give her a hug and noticed there'd been a change. Beneath Aunt Rachel's flowery housecoat oozed the physique of Jabba the Hutt, her ample body, unrestrained, was covered by only a thin cotton slip and pooled over the sides of her chair. I didn't know whether to gasp or giggle.

Rachel is my oldest living relative, the last remaining member of a tribe that believed, with Mormon ferocity, in the absolute sanctity of proper underwear. The Jewish matron version of the blessed garment is a one-piece boned corset that kept everything exactly where the good Lord intended it to be. That meant no jiggling or wiggling in the back or bouncing in the front where proudly encased cleavage thrust forward with the rigidity and determination of the figurehead on a mighty ship's prow.

For my mother and aunts and most of the women in their neighborhood, the best place to buy a good garment was Fleisher's Corseteria. With the onset of puberty, many of my contemporaries were taken by their mothers to a place like Fleisher's where stout Russian matrons stuffed hips and busts and bellies into sturdy, womanly-shaped sausage casing. That may be why so many of my friends were early feminists—it doesn't take much exposure to a good garment to make you want to burn your bra.

"Well, you look comfortable," I said, trying to be discreet. But my aunt knew when something as important as her attire was being criticized.

"She stole my girdles!" Aunt Rachel yelled, pointing towards the kitchen where Maddie had retreated. "Now I can't get properly dressed."

I couldn't imagine the type of fetish that would lead anyone to break into an old lady's underwear drawer, rummage through the stained, stretched-out, faded garments and find something worth stealing. I was sure Maddie had no part in such a caper.

I glanced around the living room; there were better things in this house to steal. On either end of the engraved marble coffee table were multi-colored cut glass bowls, each over-flowing with cellophane wrapped hard candies, in the middle was a gold plated vase filled with embroidered silk flowers. On the weeping-willow-print-wallpaper that covered the walls, gilt-encrusted frames held pictures painted on velvet: sunrise (maybe sunset) over the water, roses in bloom, stooped old men praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. On every surface--ebony-stained fireplace mantle, walnut credenza, end tables and mahogany TV cabinet--were silver framed family photos.

I made the trip to the Bronx to visit Aunt Rachel as often as I could. She had always been my favorite relative. Aunt Rachel had two sons, big, rowdy guys she called 'my hoodlums' and I

believed I was the daughter she'd always wanted and never had. Growing up, if I wanted to play with make-up, get a doll more expensive than my mother thought I deserved, or learn important life lessons like not mixing gold and silver jewelry, I headed around the corner to my Aunt Rachel's house.

I never visited my aunt without slowing down when I drove past my old house, close to where the rest of the *misboucher*, our extended family, had lived. They'd fled the Holocaust, arrived in the Bronx from various parts of Eastern Europe and established their own *shtetl* filled with sturdy red brick, two family houses. Parents and children lived upstairs, in-laws or unmarried relations occupied the small downstairs apartments. My widowed mother had died five years ago, most of her generation was gone, their children moved away.

Immigrants from other areas, Asian, Caribbean and Hispanic families, now lived in these buildings. Kosher butcher shops had been converted into bodegas. People bought frozen bagels instead of fresh.

"So, how have you been?" I asked Aunt Rachel, unable to think of a proper response to the disclosure that she'd been the victim of undergarment theft.

"How could I be?" she answered. "I'm an old lady. But I try to keep myself up." She patted her hair and struck a glamour pose, one hand behind her head, the other on her hip.

I told Aunt Rachel she still looked like a model. She'd told me the story many times, (too many, my mother would say), how, when she'd arrived in NY from the area now known as Lithuania the young men called her "The Russian Princess" and said she could get a job as a model or a movie star. (My mother would point out that Rachel never revealed who told her that.)

Suddenly Aunt Rachel paused and looked at me blankly. "Where do you live? Do you have a job?"

I'd left the Bronx for Manhattan after college, stayed there for five years and moved to Brooklyn a decade later when I got married. I told Aunt Rachel I still lived in Manhattan. Brooklyn was a foreign country to people in the Bronx.

"Oh, that's right, you're near the museum," she said.

I wasn't sure which museum I was supposed to be near, but that seemed to satisfy her. I said I made television commercials, because it's the only part of advertising I thought she'd understand. There's no way to explain market research.

Most of my generation had jobs our parents didn't understand. We'd given up explaining that a bank vice president wasn't second in command of the entire firm; a hedge fund manager had nothing to do with shrubbery.

"Are you hungry, Saraleh?" asked Aunt Rachel as she dug into the candy bowl, scattering its contents while she searched for her favorite flavor. "Myself, I don't eat much anymore. But young people need to keep up their strength. Go tell Maddie to make you something."

I was glad to retreat to the kitchen since Maddie and I were old friends. She took care of my mom during her final years when she was trapped by senility and her mind withered away while her body functioned. I couldn't have gotten through those years without Maddie. She had friends who wanted off-the-books income and Maddie scheduled their shifts, made sure there was someone with my mom 24 hours a day.

My mother took too long to die.

I'd like to remember the strong, intelligent woman who raised me, but I can't forget the helpless, confused person she became. I try to remember the woman who introduced me to the joys of literature and theater, even though we lived in a TV-obsessed family and people teased her about being a bookworm. But my most vivid memories include adult diapers, vacant looks and watching my mom stare fixedly at a TV tuned to a Spanish telenovela. I let the aides choose the channel. I knew it didn't make any difference to my mother.

During those years, when I made daily phone calls and visited every week, I spent most of the time talking to Maddie, enjoying the slight lilt in her speech. She told me about her husband who led a church in a part of the Bronx I didn't know, her children who were doing so well at school and at their jobs. I never knew Maddie's age, older than me, younger than my mother. "Island women age differently," she'd say with a laugh when I tried to guess. Maddie was tall and thin and always wore a shiny silver cross on a long chain around her neck. She had the flawless skin my friends and I fruitlessly tried to achieve with expensive facials, a figure that looked like she spent countless hours with a personal trainer.

My mother would sit at the table with us, smile pleasantly and hum a tuneless tune. Sometimes she'd pat my hand. Sometimes she didn't say anything for the whole visit. Sometimes I wasn't sure she knew who I was, or who she was.

I never doubted that she would have hated the woman she became.

There are no old men left in my family. Fathers and uncles died shortly after they closed their businesses, their reason for living gone.

When our mothers started to fade, my contemporaries didn't move back to the houses in which we grew up, we didn't ask our parents to live with us, although we often had extra rooms. We all remembered hearing complaints about mothers and mothers-in-law who lived too close. Instead, we hired people to care for our parents and maintain our childhood homes, we called and visited and took pride in respecting our parents' wishes not to be sent to nursing homes. When my mother died, my cousins immediately hired Maddie to care for their mom.

Of course, Maddie won't be around when I reach Aunt Rachel's age. My friends and I worry how our children will cope with us. We obsess about our physical ailments, have personal trainers, dieticians and contacts with the top doctors in the best hospitals. Our portfolios include lifetime care policies.

The dementia boogey man haunts us. We do crossword puzzles. We stockpile pills.

I went into the kitchen and helped myself to a glass of the seltzer in the fridge. "What's with Aunt Rachel's new casual look?"

"She's too fat for her girdles. So she hid them. Now she blames me and just wears a slip and panties, which I've been suggesting for a while." Maddie shook her head. "I've looked all over and can't figure out where she put those girdles.

"Last month her cane disappeared, just around the time the doctor said she should walk more, she needed exercise. It's probably next to her girdles. I found your uncle's old cane and told her to use it. She knows if that cane disappears I'll get her another one. Canes are easier to replace than girdles."

Maddie took half a roasted chicken out of the refrigerator and cut it into bite size pieces. Then she got a container of macaroni salad and added a hefty scoop to the plate along with some lettuce and a cut-up tomato. Two slices of bread popped out of the toaster.

“Did she say she doesn’t eat?” asked Maddie. “Let me tell you, that woman has a healthy appetite. She thinks if she puts some saccharine in her coffee it makes up for the muffins she gobbles between meals. She insists I pour half a bottle of low-cal dressing over a few lettuce leaves and says she’s on a diet.”

“The doctor isn’t happy with your aunt. No sirree. Her pressure is high, her diabetes isn’t under control and we don’t even mention cholesterol anymore. But she won’t listen. She says her husband worked his whole life so they’d have enough money to eat when they got old. Now that she’s old she doesn’t plan to starve herself. Take it from me, she’s in no danger of starving.”

Maddie put silverware, a paper napkin and a plastic glass of seltzer on a tray. She went into the living room and set a TV table in front of Aunt Rachel. I followed, carrying the lunch tray. Rachel’s eyes lit up when she spotted the food. Then she glanced at me.

“Saraleh,” she beamed. “It’s so nice to see you here. I miss you so much. Where do you live now? Tell me, do you have a job?”

“I’ve been in the kitchen talking to Maddie. I live in Manhattan. Near the museum. I make TV commercials.”

Aunt Rachel nodded and got busy cramming the food into her mouth. It wasn’t a pretty sight. I walked around the room looking at the items on display. “That’s Dessie,” said Aunt Rachel pointing to a nearby photo with a fork that almost slipped out of her trembling hand. “Look at that million dollar smile. Everyone says she looks just like me.”

Desiree Rosenblatt-Schwartz is one of my cousins’ children. I thought she was about four, maybe five or six, it’s not easy to keep track. They’re a fertile bunch. She’s a pretty little girl with big brown eyes and hair coaxed into blonde ringlets. Unfortunately her parents taught her to give an ear-to-ear grimace every time they asked for a smile. The whole family oohed and aaahed over this performance, conditioning little Dessie to stretch her lips further and further apart while everyone applauded.

If my child did anything like that I’d call an exorcist.

I spotted the picture of me, my husband and my son among the family photos. “I’ll bring you another picture of my family next time I visit,” I said. “My boy’s really grown since that was

taken.” There were numerous photos of Aunt Rachel's sons, pictures of their Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, vacations with their wives and children. "How are the boys doing?" I asked.

"Knock wood, they're all fine." She interrupted her eating to tap her fist on the chair leg and then resumed her lunch. She took a piece of macaroni off her fork, eyed it suspiciously, then popped it into her mouth and gobbled up the rest.

"This is new, isn't it?" I was looking at an ornate wooden frame with a picture of a smiling couple in a gondola.

"Bring it here, let me show you, let me show you," Aunt Rachel called as she jumped up and down. I handed her the photo, she pressed a button hidden in the frame and it played "O Sole Mio" while she clapped her hands."

"Really cute," I said and put the frame out of reach as soon as the song ended.

"They were here last week and brought that," said Maddie. She was busy wiping up the macaroni Aunt Rachel had dropped onto the carpet.

"That's Howie and the *shiksa* he married," Rachel explained. "She's a nice girl, she converted. Morris and I went to Passover at her house a few years ago and she tried really hard. The brisket wasn't bad, but those matzo balls." Rachel shook her head.

I'd heard this story before. It's a Passover saga as familiar to me as the four questions. Howie's wife is a gourmet cook. She makes her own bread, has a freezer full of homemade stock, a garden where she grows her own herbs and she slices and dices with lightning speed. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that the cloth covering her dining room table came from her basement loom and the Seder plate was baked in the adjoining kiln. But despite all of her Cordon Bleu courses she'd been defeated by the task of producing soft, airy matzo balls.

"It's just not in my DNA," she'd admitted with a smile.

"Come here, Saraleh," said Aunt Rachel. She'd finished lunch and was watching Maddie take away the dishes. I waited for her to ask me where I lived and worked.

Instead, she took my hand and whispered, "You want to know how I make my matzo balls? I never had my own daughter, you're my little girl. I'll tell you."

The sacred formula was being passed to the next generation. And I was the anointed one. "Sure, I'd love to know." I tried to sound humble

I'd never tried to make matzo balls. Why bother? I can buy them at any deli. I left it to the *shiksas* to validate their conversions by producing the authentic foods of The Chosen People.

But I know lots of gentile girls married to Jewish guys who want to please their mothers-in-law. And Aunt Rachel's matzo balls were always terrific. I grabbed a pen and paper, ready to write down the recipe. Aunt Rachel glanced around, making sure Maddie was gone.

"You go to the store and buy a box of Manischewitz instant matzo ball mix," she said. "You follow the directions carefully but instead of water you use seltzer. So it's fluffy." Aunt Rachel laughed so hard tears ran from her heavily mascaraed eyes.

I stared at her for a second and then started to laugh too. The famous matzo balls came from a mix! Who would have guessed? This from a woman who grated her own beets to make horse radish and assured anyone in the kitchen at the time that a little blood from skinned knuckles enhanced the flavor.

I knew I'd never reveal this recipe. Why share it with the *shiksas* who were born with straight noses and the ability to accessorize? Anyone who can regain her size 4 dress size within a month of giving birth deserves to eat matzo balls that can be used to play pool.

Maddie returned from the kitchen. "So, where's dessert?" Aunt Rachel said. "My niece is starving." She waited until we were alone and looked directly at me. I braced myself. Did her famous gefilte fish come from a jar?

"Where do you live?" she asked. "Do you have a job?"

I almost said I lived in Bora Bora, in a grass hut, wore a sarong and gave lap dances to tourists. But I didn't want to make fun of her, she was still my beloved Aunt Rachel, still deserved my respect. "Manhattan, near the museum," I muttered. "TV commercials."

It was time to change the topic. "So, are you excited about your birthday?" I asked.

I vividly remembered that by the time my mother reached her 80th birthday she was too far gone to have a party. "If you make a fuss it'll confuse her, frighten her," Maddie cautioned. "She gets nervous when she hears loud noises, sees excitement. Why don't you go out with your family and celebrate for her? She'd like that."

Maddie was right. I knew that. But I didn't go out. No one celebrated my mother's 80th birthday, or any of the birthdays that came after.

“Maybe I’ll have a birthday party, and invite everyone,” said Aunt Rachel. “It’s my house. I can do whatever I want.” Then she lowered her head. “But how will I look? Bad enough Maddie takes my girdles, she’s probably upstairs stealing the rest of my clothes.”

I looked at my aunt in her shapeless housecoat and worn slippers and immediately saw the amazing outfits she had worn over her sturdy corsets, her affair dresses. (A Jewish affair has nothing to do with sex, it refers to a large catered event like a wedding or Bar Mitzvah.)

The dresses were usually made from jewel-toned taffeta or stiff brocade, the bodices were clustered with bugle beads, small hollow plastic tubes that came in all colors and sizes. They bounced back and forth and up and down with every movement. Catering hall personnel watched that patrons didn’t slip on beads that fell off during a particularly vigorous hora.

There were also poie-de-soie shoes, each pair died to match a particular dress and then carefully placed in plastic bags and stored in the enormous walk-in closet in her bedroom, under its designated dress. I remembered precariously trying to walk in my aunt’s shiny high heeled shoes with one of her Ziegfeld Girl hats perched on my head.

Aunt Rachel had been famous for her hats, enormous creations with peacock feathers and beads, lots of netting and silk flowers. Each year, when friends and family gathered to celebrate the high holidays in our synagogue, the congregation waited with bated breath to see what she’d wear. And what would her rival, Bessie Shapiro, wear? Were there any new fashion plates who planned to compete for the most spectacular hat of the holiday season?

The hats came from *Bertha of the Bronx, Fine Millinery*, in large round boxes with black and white stripes. Bertha knew which synagogue each of her customers attended and made sure no one arrived at services in a hat too similar to the one worn by her neighbor.

My mother was smaller than Aunt Rachel. She wore simpler dresses, and the hats Bertha made for her weren’t elaborate. My mother called her wardrobe tasteful. I called it boring. My mother had bad feet, wore orthopedic shoes during the day. For affairs she had silk flats dyed to match her dresses.

When she died, I gave all my mom’s clothes to Maddie who kept what she wanted and gave the rest to her husband’s church. I assumed my cousins would follow this practice. The church ladies would be in for a surprise when Aunt Rachel’s wardrobe appeared at their bazaar.

I walked into the kitchen where Maddie was filling a plate with bran muffins while the water boiled for tea. I took a piece of fruit from the bowl on the Formica counter. "What's the deal with the birthday party?" I asked. I long ago learned that Maddie was the best source of information about anything happening in my family.

"The boys are thinking about having separate parties. You know they'll go all out and try to outdo each other. They still refuse to be in the same room. Of course they hide their fighting from their mom. They know she wouldn't stand for it. Each of them calls me at the beginning of the week to find out when the other one will be here so they won't meet."

Like most family feuds, this war dates from some hazy incidents that occurred years ago. Allen was the brother who got better grades, now he made less money than his sibling and felt no one respected his intellect. Kenny believed no one appreciated his achievements. Five years ago, when he was called to read from the Torah at his nephew's Bar Mitzvah, the lights had flickered and he'd stumbled over the text. He was certain Allen had manipulated the lighting to make him look like a dumb kid again in front of the whole family.

Of course, they also fought about how to manage the estate their father had left and how to take care of their mother.

"Allen keeps track of every penny." Maddie shook her head. "Always asking if there's a cheaper way to do something, making sure he's not contributing more than his share, that someone isn't walking off with something from the house he thinks he should get."

"Kenny gets furious if his opinion is being ignored, but sometimes he doesn't have an opinion until after his brother has announced his plans. Then he wants the opposite."

"What do you think should be done about her birthday?" I asked.

"I think she'll be disappointed if there's no party," Maddie said. "But too much carrying on won't be good for her. There should be limits so she'll be comfortable, like she is at home. She gets tired faster than the boys realize."

I thought for a minute. "How about doing it here?" I asked. "We'll only invite family and the closest friends, just enough people to fill the living room. The little kids can run around in the backyard if they get cranky and make too much noise. I'll hire people to set up, serve and clean," I assured Maddie. "You won't have to do a thing."

Maddie knew that was a lie. Nothing happened in this house without her involvement. But I knew Maddie would do what was best for Aunt Rachel, just like she had always done what

was best for my mother. I wondered about her devotion to my family. Did she really care about us? Did she just need the money?

"You think you can convince the boys to go along?" asked Maddie.

"Yeah, I think I can."

I'd tell Kenny it was the least expensive plan. I'd tell Allen it was the most intelligent choice since the doctor didn't think their mother could handle two parties. I'd ask both of them if they wanted to make her sick. (We all responded well to guilt.) I'd make sure their wives knew Aunt Rachel was no longer wearing her girdle, they'd understand and explain to their husbands that the situation was critical.

When I went back into the living room. Aunt Rachel welcomed me profusely, asked where I lived, what I did. I ignored the questions.

"I had a terrific idea," I announced. "We're going to have a birthday party for you right here. With a cake big enough for 80 candles."

I could see the idea of a giant cake pleased her. "You're a smart girl, Saraleh," she said. "If the boys give you any trouble just leave it to me. I can still take them over my knee."

Then she looked into her lap. For a minute I thought she was going to ask me to take her to Fleisher's for a new garment, but she just shook her head. I realized that if Aunt Rachel had wanted a new girdle she would have asked for it. Long ago. She didn't want to be bound up anymore, but she wanted to remain a fashion plate.

"Don't worry," I said. "There's a great dress shop near the museum. I'm sure I can find something for you, something perfect for a Russian princess."

The plans for the party came together quickly.

I negotiated a one night cease-fire between my cousins. They were now competing over who would buy their mother the best, most expensive present.

I hired a catering company and arranged a buffet luncheon and an elaborate birthday cake, making sure to order enough food to feed many more than the number of people invited, just like my mom and my aunt would have done. I asked Maddie to stock up on Tupperware so everyone could take something home.

After a futile search of plus-size dress stores, I found a shop that sold clothing formerly worn by opera singers. I started to look through racks of ball gowns and was approached by a

Wagnerian clerk wearing hi-top sneakers. When I explained what I was looking for, she pointed to a small, tufted chair. “That’ll take a while to find. Sit down and be patient,” she said and disappeared through a doorway in what I’d thought was a solid wall.

Just as I began to wonder if the saleswoman had given up on my request, she emerged, almost hidden behind a dress that looked like it was proceeding through the store by itself. It was burgundy taffeta, empire style. On the front panel, emerald and sapphire-colored crystal pigeon eggs were clustered in a geometric pattern outlined in gold braid. Faux ermine pelts dripped from the armpits to the sequin-flower-studded hemline.

I gasped, then shook my head. “It’s magnificent but it won’t do. I need a dress for an old lady. A fat old lady. My aunt could never get that on, much less walk in it.”

The saleswoman snorted. “It’s perfectly appropriate for the elderly woman you described,” she said as she handed over the garment and walked back into the wall.

I held up the dress and examined it carefully. It was lighter than I’d imagined and wider than it looked. There were sturdy horsehair seams in the bodice to hold erect even the most formidable breasts, a thick inner lining of soft silk to avoid chafing a wearer’s saggy sections, and velvet laces in the rear to create a flexible fit, eliminating the stifling clamp of a zipper-closing.

“Perhaps you’d like to add this to the ensemble,” said the saleswoman as she re-emerged from the wall holding aloft what I immediately identified as a royal scepter. I wondered what this woman expected my Aunt Rachel to do with it. Then I realized it looked just like Uncle Morris’ cane, if the staff had been dipped in sparkling gold paint and the curved wooden top unscrewed and replaced with the crystal knob from their downstairs bathroom door.

“Doesn’t this look like something fit for a Romanov?” asked the saleswoman.

I smiled and nodded and told her she was right. This was the perfect dress. When the show’s over and the fat lady sings, she isn’t wearing a girdle.

All the plans went smoothly until the day of the party when a tractor-trailer accident on the BQE tied up traffic for hours. By the time I got to Aunt Rachel’s house the caterers were already setting up and I could hear her sons arguing. I ran upstairs and heard the boys arguing in their mother’s bedroom. The lady of the hour was nowhere in sight.

“I thought we were going to have something small and tasteful,” yelled Allen. “Don’t expect me to pay for this circus.”

“Doesn’t matter what I expect, you always find a way to wiggle out of paying your share. If you had your way we’d celebrate Mom’s birthday someplace cheap and boring. And dark,” yelled Kenny. “But don’t get mad at me today. I didn’t make these arrangements.”

“I thought you couldn’t pull this off, too complicated. But you allowed it to happen didn’t you? Gave a blank check to our dear cousin Sarah, the little sister we never wanted. The sophisticate who thinks she’s the only one in the family with any taste. The saint who believes she’s the only person on earth who knows how to properly care for an elderly mother.”

“Wait a minute. I thought you were supervising Sarah’s plans.”

I walked into the room, prepared to defend my actions. Didn’t they realize that if not for me Aunt Rachel’s birthday would be a disaster? I was prepared to remind them that, even as kids, I was always smarter than both of them.

Before we could start in on each other we heard a loud bang, the commanding noise a bronze-tipped scepter makes on ceramic floor tile when it’s wielded by an angry monarch. And out of her large, walk-in closet, came a Russian princess, well, maybe a tsarina, followed by Maddie trying to tie the back laces while my aunt kept moving.

My cousins and I froze.

Rachel strode to the center of the room, lifted the scepter and thrust it to the floor again. She frowned. This time all anyone heard was a dull thud, the noise made when the tip of a cane is pounded into thick shag carpet.

“ENOUGH!” she yelled. “Allen, Kenny, have some respect for your cousin who comes all the way from Brooklyn to visit me almost every month. If you weren’t so busy avoiding each other and fighting about nonsense that happened years ago, you might have helped her with the party. And you Sarah, if you want to someday get promoted and make TV commercials instead of just doing research you need to learn to show up on time.”

Wide-eyed, the three of us turned to Maddie. “She knows?”

“Sometimes she has good days,” said Maddie, patting the neat bow she’d just tied. “But never mind that now. Just look at her.” We turned and stared.

The dress had been perfectly altered at a local dry cleaners shop. The track-lighting created dazzling ripples on the material, the jewels twinkled, the fur pelts had been tamed so an observer longed to stroke them.

“You look beautiful, Mama,” said Allen.

“Amazing,” said Kenny.

“Wow,” I said. “You really could be a model.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, I’m just an old lady,” said Aunt Rachel with a nod and a smile and a wave of her hand. It was the exact gesture I’d seen on TV whenever Queen Elizabeth stood on her balcony and waved to adoring crowds.

“Now help me get ready. Kenny, get the hatbox. Allen, reach under the bottom shelf and get my shoes.”

“Oh my God, I forgot about shoes,” I whispered to Maddie. “Is she going to try to walk in high heels? And does she really need a hat?”

“Don’t worry,” said Maddie. “I found comfy cotton slippers and some dye at the 5&10. You can barely see them under that dress. And she knew exactly which hat she wanted. Now you all take over. I’m going downstairs. Guests will be arriving any minute.”

Allen helped his mother put on the shoes, while Kenny followed her directions to the hatbox on the very top of the pile on the highest shelf. I expected one of the hats she’d worn to *shul*, but the tissue paper didn’t reveal a hat that could be worn to a religious event. The box held a glittering tiara which Rachel adjusted so the crown fit perfectly on her newly styled hair.

“Now children, let me just check my makeup,” she said calmly, looking into the mirror while we stared. “Then we’ll all go say hello.”

There were about 25 people noisily gathered in the living room when we finally descended the staircase, Aunt Rachel in the lead, one hand on the stair rail, the other carrying the scepter aloft. Kenny, Allen and I trailed behind. We were half-way down when the crowd spotted us. The room went silent.

I thought, I’ve made a horrible mistake, they think she looks like a joke. I was about to burst into tears.

Then someone started to clap and, within seconds, the applause was rocking the crystal chandelier. Everyone was yelling, Mazel tov! Happy birthday! Aunt Rachel gave her Queen

Elizabeth smile and wave and entered the room. “I don’t know why everyone is making such a fuss,” she said. “But I’m glad you all stopped by.”

The party was a huge success.

There was twice as much food as needed.

Someone’s teenage son had brought his tape deck and Fiddler on the Roof played on a continuous loop while Cousin Howie demonstrated how his photo frame played “O Sole Mio.”

The two women who were wearing the same dress each assured the other that the outfit looked better on her and tried to stay on opposite sides of the room.

The giant birthday cake was bedecked with enough buttercream roses to allow each child to have one to eat and one to smear on clothes or furniture. The towering “8” and “0” candles, which turned out to be sparklers, missed setting Rachel’s heavily lacquered hair on fire as she bent over and tried to blow them out.

Little Desiree was on the verge of dislocating her jaw by repeatedly giving her million dollar smile when Rachel asked if she wanted to try on the tiara. Delighted, the child twirled in front of the mirror until she started to throw-up. The tiara was whisked back to the rightful head and the toddler was cleaned-up.

Angela, the matzo-ball impaired matron, hugged my aunt and suggested that, on this auspicious day, she impart some of her wisdom, like her matzo-ball recipe.

“I’m glad you brought that up. I never wanted to hurt your feelings, dear,” said Rachel. “But your matzo-balls aren’t fit to eat. I know it’s a challenge for a shiksa, even a convert. Maybe you should try a mix.”

The woman blanched. “I’ve never used a mix in my life,” she said.

Rachel shrugged and walked away.

I was nearby, happily eavesdropping. Angela turned to me. “There was no reason for her to be insulting. Your aunt really does think she’s some sort of Russian princess.”

“Well, there is the legend that when Tsar Nicholas II and his family were executed one of the daughters, Anastasia, escaped because the jewels hidden in her corset deflected the Bolsheviks’ bullets,” I said. “And Aunt Rachel has always been very particular about her undergarments.”

Howie’s wife looked at me, didn’t say a word and turned away. I saw her walk over to her husband, say a few words to him, and then they both left the party. I knew that within a week

the story would make the rounds and everyone in the family would know what had happened. And I knew that, of course, no one would think Aunt Rachel used a mix; they'd assume she was just trying to be supportive to poor Angela.

As the crowd thinned, Aunt Rachel pulled me onto the sofa beside her. "So, Saraleh," It's so nice to see you. Tell me, how are things? Where do you live? Do you have a job?"

I stared at her, confused, shocked. What was going on? Was she senile? Pretending? What had happened to the woman rational-sounding woman who had scolded my cousins and me when we were upstairs?

Aunt Rachel didn't wait for me to reply. "Just look at my boys, how well they get along," she said, pointing across the room where Allen and Kenny had their backs to each other. "Even when they were little they were always good friends.

"I'm so lucky to be surrounded by my loving children, my boys and my Sarahleh. I thank you for this dress," she said, stroking the fur. "I want you to have it when I'm gone. You can wear it to a formal party at the museum." She sighed, closed her eyes, and started to snore softly. I didn't disturb her.

I found Maddie and told her about our conversation. "What's the truth?" I asked. "How much does she understand?"

"She's old, she gets confused, that's what's true," said Maddie. "I'm going to suggest she go to bed, she's had a long day." Maddie patted my hand. "It was a good day. You did a good job."

Aunt Rachel didn't bother saying goodbye to anyone, she just allowed Maddie to support her up the stairs. The boys and I explained that she'd asked us to thank them all for coming, that she was too tired to do it herself. Everyone said they understood. Each family grabbed a doggie bag with filled Tupperware containers as they left.

I drove home tired and satisfied, curious about how Aunt Rachel would greet me the next time I visited.

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Three weeks later almost everyone was together again, at Aunt Rachel's funeral. A brain aneurysm. Fast, painless. Everyone said they envied her. "Leave it to Rachel to leave on such a high note," they said. "I hope I go that way."

Jewish funerals require a closed casket, a simple white shroud for the deceased. I was very glad I'd found the right dress for her birthday party and Aunt Rachel wasn't denied a final opportunity to show off.

I bought a hat for the funeral, the first formal hat I'd ever owned. I was sorry *Bertha's of the Bronx* was no longer in business, Bertha would have known what I should wear. I wound up with a black straw dome with polka-dot netting. Not as elaborate as any of Aunt Rachel's hats, but, like my mom, I've never been grand enough to carry-off her style.

Of course Maddie was at the funeral. Both Kenny and Allen acknowledged her contribution to Aunt Rachel's life when they spoke. I'd done the same thing at my mom's funeral. I saw one of my cousin's, whose mother was slowing down, approach Maddie. I hoped she'd negotiate a substantial raise for herself if she accepted his job offer.

Within a month, the boys had sold Aunt Rachel's house and divided up all of her possessions. I imagined her in heaven, sitting on a cloud as fluffy as her matzo balls, watching what was going on and laughing.

I brought the birthday party dress home wrapped in a long cellophane bag. It makes the other clothes in my closet look drab. Maybe I'll get some brighter things the next time I go shopping. I'm also considering a new hairdo, maybe I'll get a few highlights.

Desiree got the tiara, she really does look like a young Aunt Rachel. She'll look even better when she outgrows her willingness to provide million-dollar smiles.

After some intense discussions, Allen and Kenny divided-up the good jewelry and the objects d'art. I know it won't be long before they each claim they were unfairly manipulated and the other one got the more valuable share.

All of my women relatives took the elaborately framed photos of their own families and helped themselves to Rachel's pricey cosmetics and perfume. There was little demand for the dresses, hats or shoes. A few things were scooped-up by fans of vintage clothing or to re-stock children's dress-up boxes.

When the relatives finished gleaning, a few young men from Maddie's church showed up with a truck and took away the rest of the clothing and furniture.

No one ever found Aunt Rachel's girdles.