A Man of Faith

By Kirsten Levy

It's a hard-won thing, this vacation, a treat that Christine and Marc put on their bucket list for retirement. Carrying it out has proved tricky. Here they are, in Tuscany, where Marc has long wanted to spend a month in an Italian villa. They have rented it with housekeeping, the easier to host their children and grandchildren who are expected soon. They joke about having a few precious days together in advance of the home invasion.

Tonight, they enjoy an evening out for dinner. Christine, aged 75, fit, a follower of the Mediterranean diet, has in mind great mounds of roasted green beans, salted, peppered and stir-fried in just the right amount of olive oil for sopping up with peasant bread. Meal ingredients so simple she could whip them up in her own kitchen but which taste better when eaten out. What better place than Italy? Long ago she moved on from New England Boiled Dinner, a family favorite of her Boston Irish Catholic upbringing. Her tastes have continued to evolve, and simplify, over time. She's less interested in meat and honors just the vegetables now. Plus, eating out has become complicated—so few restaurant opportunities at home and the fact of kosher, which, with the passing years, has loomed larger and larger in their lives. She's looking forward to the restaurant, it's a high point, a welcome end to a long tiring day in a long year.

They are seated and she looks around the small neighborhood trattoria. It has a good reputation. "Is no noisy," promised the housekeeper in Italian-accented English. Christine is pleased. Rustic and traditional, no studied effect. Light-years from American franchise restaurants where all is noise and commerce and fusion cuisine for GenX-ers and millennials at

odds with her equanimity. Clientele—a few baby boomer couples like them. In a burst of gratitude and *bonhomie* she takes Marc's hand, kisses it, releases a smile that grows, the kind of smile that has been hidden and now is free, "This is lovely. I am so glad we could come."

Marc, 81, relaxes in the rays of the smile. He has been diagnosed as pre-diabetic and hypertensive. It shocked him into buying a home blood pressure monitor. He has lost some weight, banned sugar, but looks fine. He uses the monitor twice a day because as a scientist he is curious to know his readings, is the diagnosis true? It is. The readings are variable which intrigues him but causes his friends to tease him for all this attention to measurements—silly and counterproductive. A calcium blocker was prescribed recently. It causes swelling in his ankles after long periods of standing. During *Yom Kippur* prayers he could not last and it upset him. Today he forgot his medicine, perhaps yesterday, too, but has not let Christine know. He's not feeling well but doesn't want to worry her. She does not take control of his health; he appreciates that about her. Since they met a lifetime ago in Paris, where as a Jew from a Muslim country he had sought asylum, he has loved her laissez-faire attitude in contrast to the way he grew up in Egypt. They would have nagged him in two languages, Judeo-Arabic and French, "Too much wind on your face," and not given him a moment's peace. Still, he's uneasy.

They sit at a corner table and it takes the waiter a few minutes to come. This annoys Christine but she doesn't want to give in to annoyance. Instead, taking on the air of a grand Tudor lady of her most recent book club-recommended romance, she play-acts in British English, "We're the riff-raff, I see. Placed below the salt! We shall never be served."

Seeing the quizzical look on Marc's face she feels suddenly ashamed for putting on airs. It brings on a wash of familiar feelings, intermixed with some resentment, like when she remembers bad things about Marc. Why only the bad? It makes her feel a bit disloyal. Their

manner of conflict hasn't offered her a way back from believing that she is the thing that's wrong, her upbringing suspect; how, she despairs, can her easy undramatic American life compete with the cultural drama of the Middle East? She recalls their conflicts so vividly and it comes on so suddenly, like now.

Marc's qualities, on the other hand, don't come to her in that vivid way. They drift in when she is musing, thinking, working, more like a wafting aura of how he is and who he is than the sharp recollection of a moment. She thinks that when they met, she must have wanted it so, the appeal, the sturdy, favorable impression, the warmth. He was far different from her usual type. Above all she liked the excitement which, although dimmed, still entices. He has been a good partner and she has enjoyed their long-lived partnership, has looked forward to their elder years, their comfortable years. She's no longer young, or blonde. Still, she's ready to take on the world, has done everything in her power to thwart aging, exercising to the point of injury to stave off dementia to remain an intact couple who enjoy each other and can plan a vacation such as this. Surely let's not waste it, she thinks.

Her thoughts continue to see-saw. That way of judging and embarrassing her—others, too. An authoritarian, like a father or a boss, so on top of everything. Why did she want that kind of authority in her life? An authority on fixing things, that's a plus—from plumbing to life choices, the champion of plan B. Christine marvels at Marc's street smarts. How he owns the running of a household and how he knows his way around City Hall. His watching from the window, sharing his opinion widely, on everything, running commentary on the neighbors, tsk-tsk-tsking why they picked such large deck columns when 6x6-inch posts would have served equally well. He keeps the *minyan* members prompted that they don't miss the start of morning

services. Once, her daughter, sensing her alienation, offered comfort, “Don’t worry, Mom. You’re not in the way. I’m glad for your help; I’m sure Dad is, too.”

“Huh?” Marc turns toward Christine, wondering what all the fuss is about. Before him are his wife and two waiters, hovering. He gazes about, not remembering where they are. It takes him a moment to catch onto Christine’s play-acting. Long ago he realized about her that she was prone to flights of fancy but often he forgets and it tires him to see her at it.

Christine’s charades have been a flop. In her spouting off she has muddled a book she had been reading with a television series she had been watching. These airs—an impulse that she regrets. Her old defensiveness has returned, the evening’s enjoyment replaced by foreboding. Marc’s hand, the one she was holding, she carefully lowers to the table.

Christine says, “Let’s eat quickly and return to the villa.”

Marc agrees. He wants to shut himself down for the evening. To undertake this trip, he left something of himself back home. He has been feeling that he wants to go home to reclaim it, to reclaim himself, to return to the company of men at prayer and students in class. His known quantities. The trip took months of planning and is in his honor. He is thankful that Christine hurries the meal along, for he had not wanted to cast a pall. Normally he would be in his element, raising a glass to his wife’s efforts on his behalf, but not tonight. They rise from the table, his heart racing. This puzzles him greatly. He concentrates on relaxing his breathing, slowing his heart, walking slowly alongside his wife.

His thoughts wander to his favorite things. Is the congregation, the one he founded, in good hands? The place that under his leadership was renovated into a synagogue, the only one in their town. Marc hails from Cairo. He is of the ancient Sephardic tradition, a man who shoulders

with ease the passing along of his tradition; it's a lovely burden especially in his elder years when he channels his parents' experiences and mode of living as his own.

It relaxes him to call up these moments of intense retrieval. He tries to conjure them every day, for their intimacy and for their counterpoint to his secular immigrant experience in a country not of his birth, not of his choosing. In his hands he can feel the rich midnight-blue velvet of the *parochet* in memory of his parents, see its gold lettering and read their names there. He inhales the smell of the woodwork and can stroke the grain of the case that it drapes. The image then shifts to his students. He can feel the chalk leap in his hands as he makes his way through a lecture, chalk being the best tool to illustrate complicated physiological concepts, he tells them, hearing them clap.

Re-experiencing these images, Marc's walking and breathing smooth. Christine seems patient by his side, which eases him. He returns to the chanting of morning prayers up to the first *Kaddish* that he says in his parents' memory every year on the date. He misses the chant. He recalls the prayers as an awakening during his period of loss, so many years ago, which he has continued every day. He embraced it with joy; it formed a structure that framed his every morning and evening, indeed became the beacon that not only comforted him but righted his experience of an increasingly aggressive intrusive world. He doesn't seek transcendence, as if by simple obedience to the rituals will he be rewarded. He doesn't seek to understand the why of the doing. Rather he melds himself to the recitation, immerses himself in it, says it perfectly in the right intonation so that by his very scrupulousness can he make of himself an offering to God. It is the point at which he feels the closest to their departed souls. By his prayers do they reach out and touch him and he them through the words.

Marc is so solicitous of the duty that when it is the turn of other congregants to say *Kaddish* he comes prepared with a word or two, a gentle correction, a reminder of the protocol, all in the hope that others will find helpful the many kindnesses as were shown to him. He stage-manages where to go, what time to start and stop. He mourns their mourning. They take great comfort from him and follow him carefully and look upon him as a rabbi although he is not.

Christine and Marc have reached their room at the villa. Marc is breathing more easily now, letting air into his lungs, feeling its transformation into oxygen-rich breath, and letting it out, transformed, as carbon dioxide. Ordinarily they would top off the evening with a nightcap, but the mountain of trip planning that Christine must review for tomorrow's meals and activities awaits in the other room so she leaves, moody and concerned about her dark thoughts.

His Father's Passing

Often Christine thinks back to when Marc's father died, her meeting him at the airport to convey the news, the days that followed. He had set about packing, notifying work, getting the car ready. He was following a script and had a plan. With the passing of years, she realized that there began the choreography by which each person in the family circle plays a role in a death, a role that lasts a lifetime. Christine, lonely, had come to believe she was the bystander with the bit part.

The burial was to be the next day, in Toronto, a long drive. "Are we all going with you or are you going alone?" she asked. Marc looked at her in disbelief. "Of course, all of us are going. Get the kids ready. We'll notify school that they'll be gone for a week."

"A whole week?"

With a baleful look, he said, patiently, “Of course,” as if talking to someone who doesn’t understand.

“And so begins a week of *Shiva*,” said the sisters-in-law, after the burial when everyone re-gathered at the house. Christine had found her place with them around the living room, the wives, the chorus of this modern-day drama that she likened to ancient Greek tragedy, listening to them explain the play. And she was grateful to receive instruction. “Just forget about him,” they said. “He will be occupied. Morning and evening. Every day for a year.” A puzzling roll of the eyes—their way of alerting her to the ban on marital relations. No sex for now. No music, no dancing, no movies, no jokes. Marc would not leave the house except for prayers, they told her, accompanied by friends and family only, taking turns according to the custom never to leave a mourner alone. Not for a second, the sisters-in-law were clear. *Shiva* would be followed by the 30 days and the full year of observance of *Kaddish*.

She had seen the low *Shiva* chairs arrive that morning and the mirrors being covered. The mourners, showered, had put on their best clothes; she saw the rabbi cut a swath of lapel fabric to symbolize the renting of garments. Then, the procession to the cemetery.

She was the driver and had joined the line of cars, maneuvering in tight traffic, Marc in the passenger seat. Brutal, snowy, cold, February. Braking to avoid an accident she lost her place and pulled to the side of the road, “I don’t know what you want me to do.” Marc, exasperated, spoke harshly, “Christine, please, just follow the car in front, how hard can it be. Shall I explain the obvious? Can’t you just do what everyone else is doing? It’s bad enough, your red coat. Don’t make me late to my father’s burial,” he said. “Hurry, here, pull in here, before we miss it. JUST GET IN LINE. Please.”

It was a low point and the prospect ahead was dismal.

"By the way, the children will be needing meals," said one of the in-laws, later. Christine seized the moment. She could cook. Her station was the kitchen. She was certain there were other ways to help but did not know what. Nothing in her upbringing had given her the knowledge of the right things to say or do. She should have had some customs, a funeral, to rely upon. But there had been no deaths except her grandfather's, when she was a child. No Irish wake for John Joseph. Her people no longer practiced the keening or the communion of the dead and dying among the bereaved and living. At her grandparents' house the silence was deafening—worse than the Protestants! A small table of remembrance, one picture. One obituary. A far cry from hot lines and obits three times a day—customs that allowed folks to keep up with fresh deaths or check up on any they missed, customs that they brought from the Old Country and discarded in the New. She had no customs. No immigrant experience. Might as well cook.

As the days went by Christine amassed knowledge about the ritual. It was kind of like studying an anthropology textbook in which you might read interesting facts. This perspective did not help cultivate her husband's experience however. In fact, she withdrew from it, and worse, it returned the barely perceptible insight encountered in her marriage that she was *Wife*, she was not the whole of *It*.

Her Mother's Passing

Christine's mother died a day after her daughter's wedding. Christine was in mid-flight, on a vacation with the whole family to continue the celebrations. The news put an unsettled

demeanor on the events. People asked about the deceased, trying hard not to press, expecting her to turn right around and go home. They were solicitous and considerate as was she in catering to their need to know. She set them straight. She had no plans to leave. It was important not to detract or make people worry, she felt. A strange reversal, this need to assuage people's state of mind. Like shoes on the wrong feet, she was overly mindful of others' feelings instead of her own. In fact, she didn't really have any, on the moment. Nothing popped up as it happened for most people. So, at a loss for explanation she simply said, "My mother would have wanted me to stay for the party," knowing that, although true, it was hardly the point.

They returned home in time for the memorial. Marc was surprised at the informality. "Did you really not want to do anything in honor of your mother's passing," he asked. She knew he was referring to *Shiva*-time practices. "Nothing at all?" He tried hard to put it into context. Not her fault really, he reflected, they don't even visit their gravesites, her father a Protestant atheist and her mother an Irish Catholic Mass-attending, Communion-receiving, free-thinker. He struggled with all the permutations, not quite making sense of it. Such a wide spectrum of differences between him and his wife, from the most emotional layers down to the nth degree of details of daily living like measuring in inches and feet. He had to laugh. That he, a measurer, had embraced non-metric measuring, was just the smallest part of it.

Shiva

Marc takes a seat on the bed. He looks around at the unfamiliar space, retrieving the thoughts which governed him earlier which were set in motion by his wife's unseemly behavior.

He has come to understand that, with regard to the religious dimension of his life, Christine is a hindrance, which pains him.

Christine cannot understand religion although she means well. She hovers at the outside, trying to connect, annoyed not to connect. It annoys Marc that she's unconnected, still, he worries that she is a misfit and feels a twinge of not-quite-blame-but-certainly-regret that they do not share the solace. "Damn," he mutters, as she re-enters the room. "Those sad eyes."

Will they go for a ride, perhaps tomorrow? Christine wants to know, hopeful and fearful.

It's a reminder of how far she is from the sensory dimension of prayer. He had only understood it himself on the loss of his parents. Marc has mused that what he welcomes in his daily *minyan* is something beyond their marriage, that life with his wife has been in some sense sensory-deprived. How the prayers, the sights, the sounds helped him, created a shield of observance. Unforgettable. Each time he comes back to it he holds onto it with more conviction, though such conviction is at odds with his persona of the data-driven man, the scientist.

For, with age has come a welcome way of being solitary within himself, all his senses employed. They hold truth for him, beyond the intimacy of couples to the realm of personal metaphysics, where he takes joy in the first principles of his upbringing and feels his being—identity, time, substance, and cause. That mystical realm beckons to him constantly. Like breathing, it is transformative.

And the explaining to her, indeed the having to explain (he had to acknowledge that he had not explained), had hindered. "Does it need to be spelled out for you to understand?" he asked more than once. "Well, of course it does," she responded, yet remained ever ready for

those moments when she would be needed—a ride to the service, a meal just in time. He had to admire her pluck.

Once she told him, “Don’t forget we’re 3 for 3 and I’m an expert on loss now. Judaism is practical, like you,” she had said. “There’s a timetable, prescribed actions, phases that return you to normalcy and to society quickly. I get that you want to preserve tradition. But. Can I not mourn equally outside of *Shiva* as in it?” That question he had no real answer for. And, she had continued, “Deadlines don’t work well for me as remembrances. There’s all the time in the world to mourn my parents who have gone to a place where there is nothing but time. I think of them often, it’s private and personal, the thought comes whenever it does. When we renovated, don’t forget, the room we built with my mother’s money was a room like no other room; I can feel her in it and tell others about it. One carries one’s grief in one’s own way.”

Marc sees that Christine is waiting for an answer to her question.

“Not quite up to a ride early morning, sorry,” he says.

He drifts off to sleep.

Christine’s bedtime ritual takes a good half-hour, brushing and flossing teeth, applying creams, lotions, moisturizers and lubricants—all the stuff of aging. She climbs into bed, spoons Marc in their favorite snuggle, murmurs “Good night.” To his sleeping back, she adds, “Nice day, right? It’s nice to have a partner to share it with.”

No sound.

She waits a moment.

“Marc, is everything ok?”

He murmurs, sleepily, “Huh?”

Hearing the sound that she was waiting for, Christine’s thoughts crystallize around the what-if. As she tries to fall asleep she imagines, would she one day put out her hand to seek his body, the body of her beloved, and not find it? Reach out, roll closer, and find nothing? Would she go to sleep alone, in their bed? It would be like understanding, finally, crushingly, that she really is alone.