

ALIX KATES SHULMAN

AUTHOR OF *MEMOIRS OF AN EX-PROM QUEEN*

*A Good Enough
Daughter*

A MEMOIR



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A Memoir

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IN MEMORY OF

Robert Davis Kates (1931–1989)

Dorothy Davis Kates (1907–1996)

Samuel Simon Kates (1901–1996)

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*With my brother Bob,
in front of our Ashurst house, 1937*

Preface

The books I've written tell me that my imagination sees the basic human drama as a struggle slash patriarchal bonds—Part I: Take Off, Part II: Wise Up, Part III: Freedom. It's not just a feminist plot but an ancient imperative. Long before Simone de Beauvoir gave it a new significance, Jesus said it and Freud said it: *Leave thy father and thy mother*. Not trash or blame them, as is the fashion nowadays, but simply leave them. Not the bad parents only but the good ones too; it may even be harder to leave the good ones.

In their way, mine were the best of parents. Which is to say, they loved me abundantly, and when the time came for me to leave, which I did abruptly at twenty and seldom looked back, they let me go. Or to put it another way, they raised me to fly away but remained poised to catch me should I fall. I confess, this enabled me to take them shamelessly for granted once I took off—especially since I left my brother behind to clean up after me.

The lawyer who recently drew my will told me that in her experience, no matter what may have gone before, by the time parents reach their end, their children usually come through for them. Though, I've noticed, not always willingly. In my doctor's waiting room shortly after my parents died, I bumped into an old friend. "Last year I found out I have severe diabetes," she said. "Around the same time, my parents discovered they have it too. It's a terrible thing. All my life I struggled to escape from them, and after I finally got away, we're now connected again in this inseparable way. You always were, I wanted to say, but I held my tongue. Not till my parents were dead did I recognize escape as a leap on the long road home. My friend, whose parents were alive, would surely have bristled at my paradox.

I once read that in all literature there are only two plots: someone takes a journey or someone returns home. My other books have all recounted journeys. In this one I'm going home.

*He took away my birthright; and behold, now he
has taken away my blessing.*

—GENESIS



*Bob, me, and two-year-old Johnny,
with Aunt Lil, the lawyer, on our front steps, 1939*

Chapter 1

Whenever my parents came to visit me in New York City, I never met them at the airport; even during the years my husband had a car, I let them take a bus or taxi. Yet for forty years, each time I flew to Cleveland, my parents or brother met my plane no matter how I might demur. They did so out of courtesy and love and to ensure that no preventable discomfort could provide me an excuse to stay away. Still, once I wrenched myself out of their lives, nothing they did could bring me back to them. I was ready. The years rolled by, with some years only the occasional phone call and not one visit.

Now I was back—smack in the center of their lives. But this time my parents' car, armed with a car alarm, sat idle in its garage, and my brother Bob was dead. So I took an escalator down to the lowest level of the Cleveland airport, hopped on the convenient Rapid Transit that goes directly to downtown Cleveland and straight out Shaker Boulevard to a stop not two hundred feet from my parents' house. The Rapid had been whisking affluent professionals and businessmen from the downtown offices past Cleveland's industrial slums back up to their grand Shaker Heights houses ever since the 1920s, when the Van Sweringen brothers built the suburb, along with the fancy shops of Shaker Square, for successful Clevelanders—including the architect who built for himself my parents' house. I used to think the proximity of the house to the Rapid was Mom's trump card in persuading Dad to sell the modest Cleveland-Heights-style three-bedroom on Ashurst Road where Bob and I grew up ("a postage stamp, but sweet," recalled my mother) for this six-bedroom English-style Shaker edifice: any day of the week he had only to step out the front door at five minutes past the hour or half hour to catch a train that would deposit him in a mere twelve minutes on Public Square, a five-minute walk from his office. Some people might have taken longer, lingering at the enticing windows of those great thriving department stores, Higbee's and May's, or (like me) stopping for cashews at the Nut House or for chocolates at Fannie Farmer; but S. S. Kateborn Samuel Simon and known around town as Speedy Sam, was in too much of a hurry to saunter. "I saw your dad on Prospect Avenue the other day walking so fast he leaned going around the corner," reported a young lawyer to me admiringly when my father was ninety. The brief memoir Dad composed at eighty-eight begins: "I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, November 10, 1901, in the kitchen of my parents' home, apparently in a rush to enter the world, and the habit of rushing—hurrying—being impatient—being early—has stayed with me ever since." Now I know my father agreed to buy the house for Mom for a weightier reason: Okay, Bummer, he said when the time came, I'll move if that will bring you back to me.

I carried my bags up the drive past the long leaf-strewn lawn spotted by one tall spruce and one towering elm. There used to be three elms, but two succumbed to Dutch elm disease years ago and were felled and hauled away. Around the garage I trudged, past Mom's flower garden, dormant but for three late roses, to the back porch. Fishing out my key and the secret code to the alarm, I felt a illicit excitement: in the forty years my parents had lived in this house, I'd never stayed in it alone.

Now I could search out its secrets without asking permission.

~~An ear-piercing wail violating the dignity of the entire stretch of boulevard shattered the air as I~~ let myself in. Dropping my bags, I dashed past the kitchen to the foyer, flung open the door of the coat closet, and groped behind a scarf for a keypad to shut off the alarm. Consulting my notes, first I punched in the code for the outer ring, which controls doors, windows, cellar, and porch, then the one for the electric eyes that scan the interior spaces in search of an intruder who, breaking the beam, can set off a tremendous clanging in the house and simultaneously a signal at the police station.

This tyrannical burglar alarm (and its cousin in the car) was the highest-tech object in the house. Until a decade ago, my parents didn't own a clothes dryer, but had their laundry hung by wooden clothespins on lines strung the length of the basement. Though Mom was passionate about music and a lifelong concertgoer, they never upgraded their sound system to stereo, much less to cassette or CDs, remaining content to play their old 33-rpm records on the same Magnavox phonograph on which I learned the classics back in the 1940s by playing them over and over endlessly, driving everyone away. (It was only fair, since Bob was allowed to blast through the air all summer long the play-by-play of every Cleveland Indians game.) Except for the garage-door opener and a microwave oven, there were no electronics in this house, no VCR or answering machine or even a digital clock, though my mother invested in an electric typewriter when she decided to write a novel at sixty-six. At eighty-two she considered buying a computer to write a book about Bob, but never did. I'd been using a computer for years by then, but I didn't encourage her. Worse, fearing her too old to learn, she was evasive when she sought my advice. Too bad—it might have kept her mind intact. That's one book I'd now give anything to read.

When the deafening noise stopped, I stretched a tentative toe into the hall before venturing out into the living room. Pale pleated drapes of beige linen covered the windows, dulling down the late afternoon light. I drew them open window by window as I circled the rooms—living room, sun porch, dining room, even the small corner library where my mother always sat with the drapes drawn tightly shut. Not that the neighbors could have seen her through the shrubbery, but for a public person Mom always husbanded her privacy, hugged close her secrets. Sunk into the cushions of the sofa with her stuffed datebook beside her and her mail piled on the low Japanese lacquered cabinet that held the telephone, she could linger all morning over coffee in negligee and slippers, the phone cradled on her shoulder, a pencil between her polished fingernails. A slow starter compared to Speedy Sam. Or maybe just a leisurely dresser, given the rigors of her exacting toilette. Hurry up, Bummer, make it snappy—Dad's signature words to Mom, sixty years' worth of which are indelibly etched in my ears. He taps his foot and pulls out his pocket watch. Speed it up or we'll be late. Come on, move the bodouv!—short for *bodouviator*, Dad's elevated coinage for behind.

As light filled the library, I was taken aback to see no sign of life. The plants on the table drooped in their pots, the unanswered mail lay somewhere in a drawer, Mom's active datebook had taken its place in the cabinet alongside dead ones going back to the 1950s, the clock had stopped, and no smells wafted in from the kitchen.

Returning to the living room, where no book lay open on the coffee table, I walked to the farthest end to survey the vast expanse. So much space for just the two of them—as Bob repeatedly observed, bugging them to sell their house, forgetting that even back in 1954 when they bought it there were just the two of them. If you stood beside the Anthony Caro sculpture at one end, looking past the large tiled fireplace with Dad's Crystal Owl, bestowed by the American Arbitration

Association for distinguished lifetime service, on the mantel, straight through the entrance hall, past the paneled dining room with its long mahogany table, marquetry sideboard, and tea cart with hammered silver tea service (“Your mother,” pronounced their friend and neighbor, Carola de Florent, “set the most elegant table in all of Cleveland, down to the tiniest detail. The silver, the china, the table linens, every last teacup was exquisite. And the food!—the food was perfection!”) and on to the distant library, your eye took in an expanse of pale blue walls, blue carpet, and Persian rugs extending eighty feet from one end of the house to the other—and every table and wall boldly adorned with art. There they hung, my mother’s pride, warranting the loud alarms: the de Kooning, the Motherwell, the Frankenthaler, the Avery, the Dubuffet, the two Stellas, the Kline, the Olitsky, the Tworkov, the Nevelson—gay or serene, somber or wild, resplendent in their colors and forms, embodying my mother’s ambition, resourcefulness, and taste, and, despite his ambivalent mix of disapproval and pride, my father’s security and solace.

.....

I plopped down on the living room couch to study the Nevelson while there was still light. A three-foot-square wooden construction of black-painted disks and cubes set inside an irregularly shaped black formica frame, it now belonged to me. Last year I asked for it—the only thing of value I ever asked for. Because it was the one piece in the collection I really loved, I said I hoped they would will it to me rather than leave to chance my drawing it in the elaborate face-off between my brother’s children and me whereby, according to the wills, we were to take turns choosing what we wanted, so long as the values wound up equal. (Dad always made a fetish of equality between me and my brother, alive or per stirpes). We were finishing dinner at the time. Since she turned eighty, Mom had been gradually dispersing her things, at the end of each visit inviting her granddaughter to select a pair of antique cups from her collection and urging me to choose something valuable to take home; but I was so loath to appear acquisitive that I usually accepted only trifles. Tickled that at last I wanted something, Mom waved her fork and said, Well of course, darling, it’s yours, and turning to my father asked, Why don’t we give it to her now, Sam? Whereupon my father tossed his napkin on the table, leaped up, and penned a letter on the spot conveying the Nevelson to me. Signed, dated, witnessed, done.

Alone now in this empty house, too late I realized I should have admired her things more openly, accepted her gifts of love. After so many years apart it was foolish to feel that my independence could still be compromised or might melt away in love’s heat. How old would we have to be before I would finally let down my guard?

Except for Milton Avery’s *Purple Mountain Landscape*—another picture I admired and Mom’s first major purchase for which in 1967, the very year I discovered the fledgling women’s liberation movement, she scraped together a small down payment—the rest of the art was a blur to me, if not an outright embarrassment. Her collecting represented all I’d rejected when I fled Cleveland for New York at twenty: acquisitiveness, frivolity, suburban pretension. Not sharing her interest in art, I assumed the worst, unaware that at the same moment I was beginning to transform my life through feminism, my mother was opening a space in hers for her own suppressed ambitions. I remembered the chagrin I felt in the office of a SoHo gallery the day she bought the Tworkov. Show me what else you have, she said, prolonging the transaction while the normally imperious gallery owner offered coffee and fawned as he brought out canvas after canvas. My distress eventually drove me from the office into the gallery, where I pretended to look at pictures, then outside to wait.

Yet Mom's shopping style on that day seemed hardly different from on those treasured days of my anointed childhood when we sat together on easy chairs in department store dress salons viewing garments displayed for us by a salesclerk who produced them one by one from a back room—a style that eventually drove my frugal father to wait outside, foot tapping, whenever Mom stepped into store. In his later years he grew so phobic about shopping that when I took him with me to the wonderful farmers' market in New York's Union Square he wouldn't even sample the apple slices set out for tasting, afraid it might oblige us to buy. You go ahead, he'd say, I'll wait here.

Here was the very image of their conflict: she reaching out, he drawing in. And I? Torn between them, like him I left the gallery in disgust, like her I tasted every apple. Unable to endorse the differences, yet too implicated to make a choice, for a long time I simply fled them both.

.....

In my childhood, extravagant love had flowed between us. Theirs were the trunks I scaled to see the world, theirs the fruit that nourished me, theirs the leafy canopy that sheltered me, theirs the soil that fed my curiosity. But they were firmly rooted in suburban Cleveland, a place I had come by the early 1950s to find so airless and constricting that I knew I would suffocate if I didn't leave. Which meant I would have to leave them too. But how—short of hacking myself off at the roots?

That brutal image matches the agonizing shock of my first return to my childhood house after leaving home at twenty: autumn chill, dead leaves massed along the porch steps as I open the door on the sudden smell of her perfume and the breath-stopping knowledge, like a blow to the solar plexus, of what I've thrown away in the name of freedom and can never regain. That ambitious lure for freedom that tempts each successive generation of Americans to obliterate its past propelled me in my rush toward independence to identify my family with everything I'd renounced—a move not only cruel but self-defeating, since my scorn was soaked in guilt. No wonder the first novel I attempted when I started to write in my thirties was about that family—a novel I abandoned after three chapters. I barely understood my own feelings, much less theirs. The independence I flaunted by leaving home was evidently still too shaky to support such scrutiny, and laying aside the manuscript, I took on other work, returning my parents to comforting oblivion.

*

In the big kitchen I rummaged around for a snack. Not much to choose from since I'd tossed out all the opened boxes preparing for my parents' move. A year earlier, after Dad fell from the stepladder trying to put away a bowl, I had cleaned out every cupboard and countertop. I'd weeded a rat's nest of yellowed recipes and clippings, tossed out a mountain of plastic bags, cleared the cluttered surfaces and rationalized the cupboards, moving the everyday dishes to the lower shelves and Mom's cup collection to the upper ones. Dad was grateful for my efforts, and even Mom, who had forbidden Dad to tackle the job, thanked me, though she soon complained that she could no longer find anything. Was it my zeal that confused her or her dementia? Gradually she'd been losing control of her things, letting objects stay wherever she dropped them in unattended piles that threatened to teeter into chaos unless my father or I rescued them.

I found an unopened box of raisins in a canister where I'd placed it during the grand cleanup. Always a staple in our house, raisins were Dad's choice of constipation regulator, which he consumed daily to forestall constipation and once distributed to his children as performance rewards. One raisin for Number One, two raisins for Number Two; one to urinate, two to defecate. (These are the

words our family used, no others. The rest Dad considered vulgar.) I remember the tenderness with which he held my small grubby hands in his big clean ones as I sat on my potty seat atop the toilet trying to let go, facing him perched on the bathtub rim hissing gently. After a while he turned on the sink faucet to add a trickle of water to his sibilant hiss and waited patiently while I concentrated. When at last my own trickle joined the chorus, I claimed my reward: a joyful grin spreading from his lips up his cheeks to his dancing blue eyes and the roots of his red hair—and a single raisin.

Still, Dad was deeply ambivalent about the body. Where did innocence end and corruption begin? On the one hand, he crinkled his nose in embarrassed disgust at the etching Mom had hung in the study of a bathing nymph with exposed backside, which he disgruntledly dubbed *Pants Down*; on the other hand, our family showered together every weekend. On weekday mornings it was my job to join my father in the downstairs lavatory, where he performed his daily ablutions in the nude—pleasure abruptly replaced by shame the day he realized I was staring at his privates while he shaved his lathered chin. (How did he, focused intently on his beard, catch me looking? And why, after all those showers, did he care?) I was mortified by my breach, of which I was afterward daily reminded by the white towel invariably wrapped around his waist to hide those fascinating jiggling genitalia.

Yet my mother's jiggling parts as well as the dark beard of her pubis I was permitted to gaze upon unstintingly. Was it an instance of Mom's liberality triumphing over Dad's propriety, or simply a privilege of our mutual sex? Until I turned five, when Mom went to work for the WPA (Roosevelt's New Deal Works Progress Administration) and I began kindergarten, I daily accompanied her through her morning toilette—from the steamy shower where I sometimes joined her, to the cloud of lilac-scented talc she exuberantly applied with a giant puff to her body and nose, to the womanly mysteries of her dressing. She was a small woman, only five feet two, but to me, a child—straight, tubular, skinny, hairless, not unlike my brother except in one particular—my mother was a marvel of strange undulating protuberances, a voluptuous creature of rippling flesh carefully hidden from the world inside an array of bizarre garments.

The complicated ritual of her dressing began with her wriggling her way into a formidable elastic girdle stiff with stays, from which hung six garters. (No matter what she had planned for the day, never in those years did she skip that girdle.) She then plucked two silk stockings from her top dresser drawer, examined them for runs, and one at a time rolled them down to the ankle, inserted her narrow foot, and rolled them up her legs to attach to the garters above. As she had not put on her underpants, her beard remained on tantalizing view beneath the girdle. Are my seams straight? she asked me, turning her back. Earnestly, I rendered my report, grateful to participate in those secret ceremonies. Next came the bra, which she hung from her shoulders and filled by bending over and lifting one breast at a time into the cups. Even at thirty her substantial breasts hung flat and loose against her ribs—a result, she said, of the tight swaddling they'd undergone in the hospital to dry up her milk. Whatever they tell you, she warned me, don't do it, it breaks down all the tissues. Then came the panties, a satin slip, and finally the outfit she'd selected from the double rack of clothes on her side of the compact closet she shared with Dad. Sliding her dainty feet into leather pumps, she tied on a makeup cape and proceeded to do her hair, tweeze her eyebrows, and “put on her face” by applying the makeup promised to me as a distant reward for growing up.

Like Mom, I had no shame about my privates. We called them *maked* (two syllables), source of Number One, and *bodouviator* (five syllables), source of Number Two. Occasionally the form *vagina*, comparable to Bob's *penis*, and the vernacular *behind*, but never *bum*, *rump*, *butt* or—heaven forbid!—*ass*.

To my decorous father words seemed to matter more than the natural parts and processes they represented. One of the rare times I saw his deliberate calm give way to rage was when, standing at the top of the stairs, I yelled Bull! down to my brother who was badmouthing me. Not *bullshit*, just *bull*: in junior high school then, I didn't know what *bull* was short for. Dad took those stairs two at a time and, confronting me in the upstairs hall with his whole body tensed to shaking and his voice almost but exploding from the strain of keeping it down near a whisper (never in my life did I hear him raise it in anger), said, Don't you ever let me hear you use that word again in this house! At that time, I laughed at him, regaling my friends with the story of his ludicrous linguistic purity, but secretly I was proud. This singular relationship to language, distinguishing him from all those fathers who cursed and hollered, became one of our strongest bonds, one of his golden gifts.

Though *maked* was possibly my own coinage, a noun variant of the common bathroom verb "to make," the latinate *bodouviator*, with its soupçon of French, was obviously Dad's. My very name, Alix, was another—the only one of his long string of hypothetical names Mom okayed. (Recently, I asked my parents what other names they'd considered, but all of them were buried deep in that imaginary realm where my father had found them.) Though odd, Alix had a sound basis: I was named after Alexander B. Cook, my father's mentor at law. Had I come out a boy, I would have been Alex; Dad decided that changing the *e* to *i* would adequately feminize it. How wrong he was. To my endless satisfaction, my name remained for me such an inextricable combination of the masculine and feminine that I grew up feeling secretly exempt from the standard restrictions of gender that limited everyone else. Indeed, until my first pregnancy erased all doubt, I secretly suspected I was really a male in an ambiguously female body—a suspicion confirmed each time I received mail addressed to *Mr.* Alix Kates. As my body inevitably bound me to my mother, my name bound me to my father.

Jews, of course, were not supposed to name their children after anyone living—and Alexander B. Cook was not only alive but a little bit Christian, having agreed when he married to raise his son Catholic. Giving his child an invented name in honor of a living Catholic-Jew was a triumph of the optimism and rationality on which my father, self-made and proud of it, constructed his life. He had changed his own name from Katz to Kates soon after going into practice in 1925, when he discovered that there were already three lawyers in Cleveland named Samuel Katz. Katz itself had been a misrendering of Kotkess, the family name in Poland, Dad reported, lest we think he was trying to hide our Jewishness. Still, that duplicate-lawyer story doesn't explain why Dad also changed Katz to Kates for his parents and all his siblings but one, Louis, the oldest, who had already begun to make a name for himself as young Professor Katz of the medical faculty of Western Reserve University. Many children of immigrants aspired to make themselves over as pure Americans. My mother told me that her paternal family, in Russia named Radnitsky, had changed their name to Davis at Ellis Island on someone's shaky advice that most of the important people in America were named Davis. (Who? The Confederate president Jefferson Davis? The writer Rebecca Harding Davis and her son, Richard Harding Davis?) A cousin speculated that they were named for Grandpa's brother David, the first Radnitsky to immigrate. Mom's maternal family anglicized the German-sounding name Kurlander to Curtis during World War I to escape the rampant prejudice against all things German.

Words, names, heritage—none were immutable; all were opportunities for self-improvement. As a child, I practiced forging my parents' signatures until I had them by heart—not only for such practical purposes as writing school excuses but as a sign that with the magic of language, even in written language, I could be my parents if it suited me. In America one could become anyone, just

as my brother Bob, whom Mom and Dad legally adopted a year after his birth, became a Kates.

—Dad's linguistic inventiveness and refinement of which I was so proud also ensured that as I grew toward my teens I would know precisely how to provoke him, eventually cultivating a foul mouth as a badge of independence. The single physical battle I ever had with my mother was over some not-forgotten excremental expletive. The one-more-time-young-lady threshold had been crossed and the appropriate disciplinary sentence, thrice threatened and ultimately backed by the full force and credit of my father's authority, invoked—called in like an unpaid debt: Mom, teller at Dad's bank, must reluctantly wash out my mouth with soap. She dropped the handle of the carpet sweeper and grabbed a bar of Ivory—"99 and 44/100 percent pure," in stark contrast to my foul mouth. While one of her hands held me around the waist, the other searched my bobbing head for the erring mouth—the very one that had, just so, once blindly rooted for her nipple. But even as we struggled, leaving a soapy trail on the floor, we found the situation so farcical that soon we were doubled over laughing, tears streaking our cheeks like suds. Ivory—the very brand my mother had, with the extravagant generosity I treasured in her, permitted me to carve into fanciful animal shapes during the dark days of World War II when soap was strictly rationed.

Dad's verbal purity extended far beyond rejecting the "vulgar" and "profane." Semantic sloppiness, grammatical error, mispronunciation could equally distress him. A usage was correct or incorrect; in case of doubt, the dictionary could settle it. Although Mom had officially taught English, it was Dad who brought it into our house to party and dance, inviting the objective subjunctive, and conditional to join us at dinner. You mean to *whom*, not to *who*, don't you? I would suggest gently; or, If I *were* you, not if I *was* you, since it's contrary to fact; or, I believe you mean it's *irritating*, or *exasperating*, not *aggravating*, sweetheart: a feeling may be aggravated but aggravated is not a feeling. As Dad's first mentor—the chief engineer of General Electric, who hired Dad fresh out of high school as his stenographer—urged him to stretch his vocabulary and soften his guttural *ng*-ending words, so Dad attempted to improve us. Gently now, children, softly try to modulate your voices, was his usual response to our arguments. Speak up, son. Don't mumble. Try to e-nun-ci-ate, he was always bugging Bob, who supplemented his thumb sucking and nail biting by chewing his syllables and swallowing his vowels.

Though Bob resented Dad's corrections of our speech, I welcomed them. If English was the mystery train that had carried him out of poverty into the law and onto the Heights, I didn't want to miss it. Like him, I tried for ten new words a day and several books a week, though I stopped short of reciting famous speeches before the mirror.

*

When evening fell, I turned on the lights and took my bags upstairs. The wide, graceful staircase had been significantly narrowed by a chairlift I'd had installed a year ago (the Electric Chair, Dad called it), following Dad's hospital stay. Several of the signed prints that lined the stairway had to be moved to make room, but the Picasso, the Matisse, and the Rockwell Kent were still there. More art in the upstairs hall and in every bedroom: constructions, drawings, muscular prints, and, leaning against a file cabinet in Mom's dressing room/studio, the tall framed oil painting she bought in Paris that a curator from the Cleveland Museum suggested might be a genuine Maurice Prendergast. What a flurry of research followed! Imagine! said Dad, eyes widening like shining moons. It might turn out to be worth a tremendous sum of money. Can you beat that?

Was it a Prendergast? Until that moment I'd neither known nor cared, preferring to remain aloof from Mom's collecting; but as the trustee of her estate, soon I'd have to find out. And after the an

the antiques. And the fine china, silver, linens, jewelry. And the books, thousands of them, filling the bookshelves and piled on every radiator and in cartons in the attic—books on history, law, biography, belles lettres, plus a whole library of Mom's French books, and art books on every artist who ever caught her eye.

Now all this must be sold. My parents have moved halfway downtown to a pair of rooms in the Judson Park Retirement Community, and I have returned to discharge my filial duty to see them through to the end.

Chapter 2

It felt more like a beginning than an end, like the exhilarating adventure of launching a new book. I did not take in that my parents would die. Someday, of course—but that day seemed no closer than it ever had, hardly closer than my own death. My grandmother had lived to be a hundred; why not they? True, at ninety-three Dad's heart was failing and at eighty-seven Mom's memory was showing signs of decline. Each had recently suffered a hospital siege. But to me, heir to my parents' midwestern optimism and temperamentally committed to the dictum "Never too late!" death seemed distant, alien, and unthinkable.

I ought to have known better. For several years they had both been dramatically declining. Mom's slide had begun with my brother's death in 1989, which plunged her into despair. She was eighty-two, he fifty-seven. One week she was charming my New York friends at my third wedding with a throaty rendition in English of Marlene Dietrich's signature song, "Falling in Love Again," and the next she withdrew to bed in her darkened room.

Then, weeks after she emerged from her year of mourning, she announced she was going to write a memoir about Bob. Dad had written his own personal reminiscences in the months following Bob's death: thirty pages of anecdote that he sent around to the family with a cover letter stating, "Once, in high school, I was good enough in my typing class to win a gold medal. But that was a long time ago, and as the enclosure demonstrates, my typing skill has greatly diminished. No doubt there are errors and omissions in the story. There are also deliberate omissions of an intimate nature." But Mom never started hers.

Gradually, Dad took over the cooking and household management until, by the time he retired completely at age ninety, he was doing every chore except the heavy cleaning. For that, two efficient women who owned a cleaning service arrived with equipment every second Tuesday and, like a double helix ensuring order, whirled down from the top, scouring and sweeping, while Mom and Dad sat quietly in the living room waiting for them to finish. Months after Dad's gala ninetieth birthday party, to which I flew from my teaching post in Hawaii carrying fresh jasmine leis for the stars, their physician, Dr. Murphy, began urging them to hire live-in help.

Nonsense! We can manage by ourselves, they insisted. Instead, they gave a small dinner party for their most trusted friends and neighbors, handing out with the after-dinner drinks the secret code to their burglar alarm and the phone numbers of their doctors and nearest relatives, in case of an emergency. Once or twice a week Dad continued to take the Rapid downtown to his office, the bank, and the public library, where he exchanged six old books for six new ones. "Beginning as a young boy," he wrote in his memoir, "I frequented the public library near my home. I started by devouring all the fairy tales I could find, and then Aesop's Fables, stories of the knights of King Arthur's round table, and of the Greek, Roman, and Scandinavian gods. I later read and still read widely in biography, history, and literature in general." Now in his old age, for the first time in his life, he indulged himself in popular novels, adventure tales, and mysteries in place of more edifying work.

“What the hell,” he said to me, grinning with freedom.

But the freedom was short-lived. Soon Dad began to fall and Mom to forget. Having neglected to wear his galoshes, at ninety-one he fell on the ice in front of the barbershop; at ninety-two he fell from a ladder in the kitchen as he was changing a lightbulb, and later slipped in the bathtub. He was often covered with bruises. Too late I had handholds installed in each shower and laid rubber mats in the tubs. As for Mom, in a single phone conversation she could repeat the same question half a dozen times, forgetting the answer of a moment before. She forgot to take her pills. Always a demon driver, she forgot the route to the dry cleaner, the hairdresser. By default Dad, whom she had forbidden to drive after dusk because of his poor night vision, began chauffeuring her to all her appointments until she stopped going. Hey, Bummer, don't you need to have your hair done? It's Thursday, said Dad. I'll get to it when I'm ready, she replied.

I began to phone them every Sunday for their news. In preparation for winter, dreading another of Dad's falls, I had iron railings installed alongside the front and back exterior stairs and while I was at it a mahogany banister for the graceful interior staircase down which Mom had made her famous entrances to her parties after all her guests had assembled. (Most people assumed those belated entrances were calculated for dramatic effect, but her intimates knew they resulted from pokiness, not showmanship.) In small ways I tried to ease their daily lives. I found a supermarket that took phone orders and delivered. After Dad vacated his office, I convinced him to bank at a nearby branch and patronize the local public library instead of riding all the way downtown. To spare him the relentless preparation of every meal, I begged him to allow me to hire help and, when he refused, suggested ordering in some of their meals, which he huffily dismissed. Soon I stepped up my phone calls from once a week to every other day.

By the following year, they'd both had bouts in the hospital—she with the first of a series of intestinal infections (diverticulitis), he with congestive heart failure. Sitting up in the hospital bed he said, half amused, half sheepish, “They say it's because of an overdose of salt in the corned-beef sandwich with mustard and two dill pickles I had for lunch. Can you beat that?” Each time, I flew to Cleveland and stayed until they were back home and settled. But daily care for them was urgent. That winter, the furnace conked out twice, the automatic garage door stopped working, the car needed another inspection. I wondered how they'd manage to handle it all, and Dad had no answer. A cardiology resident in the hospital informed him that with his heart so weak he probably had only another year to live. “Frankly, I'm ready to die right now,” he confided to me, “but your mother needs me.”

Before the doctor's news my parents had permitted me to begin looking for an apartment where there'd be no stairs to negotiate or maintenance problems. But learning he had only a year to live Dad changed his mind, preferring not to spend his remaining time—he was pushing ninety-three—on real estate and packing. (How different from Mom who, given a year to live at fifty-two, wrote an essay, “While out loud and even to myself off the top of my head I readily admitted that I had only an ever diminishing year to live, deep inside myself I knew I was fighting that verdict with all my being. I *would* be well. I was determined. I thought often of that 5% chance of remission. What about not me? In my inner self I commanded the malignant cells to go away.”) Instead of calling a realtor I had the chairlift installed and, invoking doctor's orders, hired a nine-to-five caregiver. Then I laid in a store of low-salt soups and saltless seasonings and wrote out half a dozen simple low-salt recipes.

Just home from the hospital, too weak to raise himself from the bathtub, at first Dad refused my help, preferring to remain in the tub. “Please, Daddy, I promise I won't look. Just let me help li

you up.” As I lifted his frail bones, he felt as light as a child, but his groans carried the weight of a century. After that he gave up his cherished daily baths for weekly showers.

Dr. Murphy stepped up his campaign to get them to move to a retirement home. “Sam, you are too weak to take care of Dorothy, and she’s going to get harder and harder to manage. Look—you might as well know it—Dorothy’s in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease.”

Alzheimer’s disease! Just because she repeated herself, lost her way, and wouldn’t take her pills. We refused to believe it. “She’s just being stubborn,” said Dad, and after futilely trying myself to get her to take her medications, I agreed. “What’s the problem, Mom? Just open your mouth and pop it in—what’s the matter with you?” Despite her uncharacteristic recalcitrance, I thought the doctor, an oncologist, had overstepped his expertise.

After that I phoned them every day, visited every month or two and in each new emergency. Convinced by the doctor’s urging, my husband and I surveyed the Cleveland retirement homes. The horror of the worst sent us reeling to the best till we narrowed the choice to two. Dad was torn but cooperative and he filled out the applications. “Gee, Al,” he said, shaking his head, “moving out of this house is going to be one hell of a job.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it,” I promised—though I had no idea how.

Traditional Judson Park seemed the most flexible home, with its three different care levels: Independent Living, Assisted Living, and Nursing, the latter with its own three graduated levels of care. It ran regular excursions by van to the art museum, the symphony, the supermarket. There was a well-stocked library, a beauty parlor, a barbershop, an auditorium, a greenhouse for the amateur gardeners, physical therapy rooms, a commissary, a bank—everything my parents might need. It would be easy for me to reach by Rapid from the airport after the car was sold, and the hospital was only five minutes away. On the other hand, perhaps they would feel more comfortable at the newly built Jewish Montefiore Home in suburban Beachwood. I tried to involve Dad in the selection process, but he refused even to visit the homes until required. “I leave it to you,” he said, taking an active interest only in the costs. When we finally sat down with the numbers, he satisfied himself that by renting an apartment in Independent Living, with only Mom receiving assistance, and by prudently investing the proceeds from the sale of their house and art supplemented by Social Security, the cost would be manageable. Interviews were scheduled.

Then in the middle of one night Mom collapsed, vomiting and in pain, and all plans went on hold. The intestinal infection was treatable with antibiotics, but since she couldn’t keep anything down she had to receive the medication intravenously—which meant the hospital.

As we sat in her hospital room gossiping together, I put off imagining the future. Aside from her appalling forgetfulness, Mom was her familiar vivacious self as she and Dad, to amuse my husband, performed what we’d come to call the Sam and Dorothy Act, Dad playing straight man to Mom’s playful vamp. Returning to Mom’s room from a fast lunch in the hospital cafeteria, Dad discovered a rabbi’s card on her nightstand. With a frown of anticlerical indignation he tore it into small pieces. An hour later the rabbi popped his head through the open door and said, “I see you have visitors, Mrs. Kates, so I won’t stay now. But you can call me if you need me, you have my card.” Dad and I exchanged a smile. As soon as the rabbi was gone, Dad said, “These goldarned chaplains should wait till they’re called.” But Mom countered perkily, “I don’t know—this one’s a rather sweet rabbi.” The next morning when we arrived, Mom was sitting up in bed looking fresh. Dad kissed the top of her head and said, “You’re looking and smelling lovely this morning, Bummer. Did you shampoo your hair?” Mom said, “A nice young man, Patrick, shampooed me. Not just my hair but my whole body. He gave me such a nice shower.” Every few minutes she repeated the

remark until finally Dad rose to the bait and said, "You let a young man wash you?" "Why not?" said Mom. "Patrick is such a nice young man. Why shouldn't I let him wash me?"

From time to time she grabbed her head and moaned in pain. But she refused all pills, even pain pills, and when a nurse who wasn't Patrick began insisting, she became angry and announced she was going home. "Get my clothes, Alix," she said, "I'm not staying here another minute."

We could not placate her.

"I will not be kept prisoner. Sam," she ordered, "get the car. Alix, please come here and help me find my shoes."

Seeing there was nothing to be done, Dr. Murphy loaded us with prescriptions and ordered immediate release, but not before taking us aside to deliver an urgent warning: "Right now Dorothy's situation is borderline. But if she gets much worse, she won't be able to qualify for Assisted Living. If you want to stay together, Sam, you'll have to arrange the interviews quickly and be admitted very soon. You simply cannot go on trying to care for her yourself without adequate help. You are both at risk."

Indeed, even with round-the-clock practical nurses attending her at home, Mom was getting to be too much for Dad. She lay in bed in her book-lined room with the shades drawn, moaning in pain, unable to eat, unable to move her bowels. "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh," was her mantra. It seemed connected with her muscles: whenever she tried to stand or take a step, she repeated her rhythm. "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh."

"Could you try not to make that noise, Mom," I urged, thinking of the upcoming interviews.

"I know. It's just an ugly habit," she said. But as she inched toward the bathroom on her swollen feet, leaning on Dad's arm, there it was again, "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh," with each step. She refused the cane I bought her, would not take her pills. Dad insisted on sleeping in her bed though she was up and down all night trying to move her bowels, failing, moaning. Laxatives might have helped but she continued to refuse all medications even though the caregivers (one for days, one for nights) tried to slip them to her in her orange juice, as Dr. Murphy advised. She wasn't buying it. As I tried to administer the suppositories he prescribed, she screamed in terror. Finally, Dr. Murphy had to clean her out by hand, reaching his plastic-gloved fingers high up inside her as she screamed. Her once elegant room looked and smelled like a hospital, with a bedside potty, a plastic-covered palette to the bathroom, a shelfful of pills, absorbent pads on the sheets. Never again would she sit at her dressing table gazing into the three-paneled French mirror before which she'd spent untold hours applying scented lotions, restorative unguents, expensive cosmetics and perfumes. She refused to brush her teeth, no longer bothered to dress, and seldom went downstairs.

To rout chaos with order and preserve a semblance of decorum, Dad pursued his lifelong habit. Early each morning he returned to his room to wash, shave, and dress, then rode his chairlift down to the kitchen where he warmed his milk, poured himself a bowl of cereal, peeled an orange, toasted two slices of bread, and brought in the newspaper. Fortified with food and news, he rode back upstairs to Mom carrying a glass of fresh orange juice to begin the day's increasingly futile struggle to get her to please, Bummer, just open your mouth and swallow this one tiny pill.

Slowly she recovered enough to receive the interviewers. She charmed them with coffee and cakes served in that long, stately, art-adorned living room. Her composure was so habitual that she almost got away with her faked responses to the interview questions: "Yes, perhaps, but on the other hand ... what do you think, Sam—do you think Clinton is still the president?"

I was elated when they were provisionally admitted to Judson for a two-to-six-week trial. I packed them each a suitcase and helped them move to a furnished suite on the Assisted Living floor. Breakfasts were delivered to their suite, Dad prepared their lunches, and they took the

dinner in the elegant Fisher Dining Room with its fresh flowers on every table, crisp linens, white tablecloths, varied menus, attentive waiters, and sprinkling of familiar faces from their past. Mom's medications were administered by a nurse, and she was given biweekly baths by an aide who also helped her to dress. No more snow and ice for Dad to negotiate, no lightbulbs to change, no furnace or car to worry about, no undetected falls to risk. Knowing that every night someone checked to see that all the residents were safely in their rooms, I heaved a sigh of relief and gladly resumed my free and separate life.

*

In the middle bedroom where I usually slept, I opened my bags and shook out what needed shaking. But when I tried to hang up my clothes, I found the closet so stuffed with my mother's that there was hardly room for mine. The closets of every bedroom but Dad's were packed with a jumble of dresses, suits, and outfits too good to throw away. (I confess that though my clothes are quite ordinary my own closet too is full.) Every corner of the house was so brimming with treasures that despite my ostentatious antithing obsession I never tired of delving into cupboards and drawers whenever I came back to visit. In the linen room were bedsheets and towels in use since my childhood. In the cellar was the mangle Mom used to press our sheets in the 1940s (I still have a scar where I burned myself), the workbench piled with tools my bookish father seldom used, canceled checks going back to the 1920s, and even the industrial scale used by Grandpa Davis to weigh the scrap metal from which he tried to eke out a living during the Depression. In one bedroom was a dresser drawer full of photographs, in another a tall file cabinet stuffed with Mom's papers, and in Dad's top bureau drawer a box of brittle documents tied with ancient ribbon. I could hardly wait to begin trawling for secrets, like a child loose again in Grandma's attic or back in my old treasure-hunting dream, but I still had to hang up my clothes.

To make room I began pulling from the closet outfits so dated or timeless that over the years they had become a private bond between my mother and her visiting granddaughters, Lisa and Amy, who sometimes put on dress-up shows for her, trying to decide which garments to take back home. I could see I'd have to get them to Cleveland one last time to claim what they wanted before everything went. And their brothers, too, Adam and Steve, if there was anything to interest single men in their thirties oblivious of fashion and the past.

I checked my father's room to see. Dad's closet was the opposite of Mom's—everything in perfect order. Hanging on wooden hangers were his three-piece suits and jackets, arranged by season. Ties hung on tie racks, belts on belt racks. A jumbo shoeshine kit, which Dad used every week of his adult life until he moved to Judson, took up a whole shelf. Polished shoes, each straining under its own arched shoetree, were tucked into built-in mahogany drawers. The bottom drawer was padlocked shut, allowing me to hope that should I find the key the treasure inside might please a grandson.

Dad, unlike Mom, seldom bought a new item if an old one would do and quickly disposed of things he no longer deemed useful. Sometimes he overdid this tendency. When he finally vacated his office at ninety-two, I caught him just as he was about to jettison his collection of four thousand arbitration decisions and as many case files.

Daddy, don't!

Why not?

Because they are valuable documents of labor history.

Nonsense, he replied with self-deprecating modesty, there are thousands of decisions like these

the record. Mine are of no special interest to anyone. And I'm ready to clear out of this office.

~~Many years before, in a zealous cleanup I had myself tossed out dozens of stories~~ Dad had penned on yellow legal pads and mailed to his New York grandchildren every few weeks. Once my children had outgrown those "Grandpa Sam stories"—sentimental parables about wounded birds and loyal dogs, with predictably uplifting endings—I saw no need to keep them. But when Dad hinted, after my own books for children began to be published, that perhaps a collection of his stories might also find an outside audience, I was evasive and chagrined. Eager to avoid a repeat of that mistake, I begged him to give me two weeks to find a home for the decisions before he threw them out. He reluctantly agreed. In the end, the chief archivist of the Ohio Historical Society personally drove up from Columbus to get the papers—which now reside in the Samuel S. Katonah Collection, along with other documents and photos I rescued: a monument to Dad's judiciousness and my belated filial fortitude.

At Dad's dresser I stopped before the hinged double picture frame that, like a cross before a vampire, kept my mother from entering this room for years after Bob died. She couldn't bear to see Bob's handsome face looking out from one-half of the frame, despite mine laughing in the other half. The two portraits, which sat on this dresser for years, were taken when we were each in our mid-forties. In mine I am gleeful with the pleasure of having just completed my second novel; in Bob's, the corners of his mouth turn ever so slightly upward hinting at a smile—one of the few smiles I remember him bestowing on a camera. Even from inside our separate frames we look away from each other, failing to connect. Or, worse, connecting inversely: if Bob is frowning, I'm sure I'll be smiling, and if Bob is about to smile, as he is here, you can bet I'll have just broken into a full-throated laugh. That's how it was between us, to the very end, and our parents could do nothing about it.

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