

# THE GIFT

A memoir by Stephanie Waxman

**T**here is a photo taken of my grandparents on their golden wedding anniversary. They are seated next to each other on their faded brown couch. Her hands are folded in her lap, his balance a hat on his knees. Their shoulders are barely touching. They are both smiling a smile that seems meant for the camera, not for each other. I never saw my grandparents exchange any tenderness or affection. They regarded each other with friendly indifference, as if they were held together only by the glue of habit and history.

When I was a young girl filled with romantic notions of love and marriage, I asked my grandma to tell me about her own wedding. We were walking to the market to buy a fresh brisket for dinner. It was Friday morning, before the cooking and cleaning and polishing for Shabbos had begun. “Feh,” was all she said. “What does feh mean?” I asked. She wrinkled her nose as if there was a bad smell. “Nothing to write home about,” she grunted, offering nothing more.

Grandpa was a tall, elegant man who rarely spoke. When he did, it was with a heavy Yiddish accent which somehow made him seem very old. He was a master tailor. He once made me a purple corduroy bedspread with piping around the top edge so that it fit snugly onto the mattress. Another time, he made a green and white striped skirt with a ruffle on the bottom and a matching bonnet for my costume in a play about pioneers. His eyes were crystal blue and even though he was wrinkled and balding, I knew he once must have been handsome, even dashing. I thought of him that way no doubt because of the family stories about his youth as an actor in the old country.

Grandma was a stout woman with thick white hair held in waves by tortoiseshell

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combs. Her face had a square shape, solid on a thick neck. Behind wire-rimmed glasses were watery gray eyes. Her earlobes were stretched from years of heavy earrings. Her hands were rough and red, as if she'd just washed the dishes in scalding water. She wore thick cinnamon-colored hose rolled just above the knee. Her breasts were large pendulums that blended into her thick middle.

When I was 11, and my own two bumps were changing into tender new breasts, my grandmother had one of her enormous breasts removed. I was shocked and horrified when mother whispered this secret to me. But along with this most intimate detail of my grandmother's life came another piece of information that gradually overshadowed the first. This other secret concerned a package that grandma found when she returned from the hospital. In learning what that package contained, I discovered something about the mystery of love which was to impact me for the rest of my life.

But in order to understand all this, we must imagine my grandmother's life 40 years before that operation. We must go back to Lithuania, to a small shtetl near Vilnia.

Hyman is a tiny, miserly man who ekes out a living as a tailor. From him young Brinekah learns how to make darts and buttonholes, how to do a blindman's stitch, how to make pockets and collars. She gets a job working in a roomful of seamstresses who sew for the czar. Imagine her thrill! A girl of 16, making 25 kopeks a week to help her poor father feed the family.

Her father receives her first week's pay and, smiling, drops a kopek into her skirt. She turns the precious coin over in her plump hand, the hand of a child, though her body has magically produced two large breasts and two wide hips and each month the curse comes and she must take a new kind of care of herself. She wraps the coin in her kerchief and tucks it under her pillow. That night, as she unbraids her hair, she tries to think up an excuse to leave her job early the next day. Her little brother and sister are tumbling on the floor, arguing over a doll. "Sha!" she snaps. Oh, how she wishes for a moment's peace.

The following day, claiming a terrible headache, she leaves the sewing room early and hurries down the cobblestone street hoping to reach the theater before the performance begins. She has dreamed of this moment—to actually sit in a theater and see a real play with live actors. A damp smell of sweat and cigars assaults her as she climbs the stairs to the balcony and squeezes in between an elderly, plump woman with a bad cough and a man who is snoring into his beard. She has never before been in a room so large, so dark, so full of promise. Finally, the curtain is pulled aside and a man in the riding clothes of the gentry

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begins to pace. He is talking about a problem he is having with his mother-in-law and the audience howls.

But young Brinekah hears not one word. She cannot take her eyes off the man—his strong jaw, his ramrod posture, his piercing blue eyes. Throughout the performance, she is in a daze. She walks home in the twilight oblivious to the horses pulling carts, the butcher taking down carcasses, the men hurrying home from shul. She drifts along with only one thought in her dizzy brain: how to meet the handsome young actor. She imagines what she might say when they meet, how it will be to hear him addressing her, to feel his eyes on her. She pictures the two of them walking down this very street arm and arm. Then she has a vision of him smashing the glass on their wedding day and suddenly she knows without a doubt that they will be married!

That her father would disapprove of a marriage made without the aid of a matchmaker does not disturb her. That her future husband is making a meager living as an actor does not thwart her resolve. That the young actor may not respond to her in like manner does not even occur to her. She only thinks, how can I meet him?

Her destiny is sealed the following week with the help of a thunderstorm. She waits by the stage door, feeling the icy water soak through her thin boots, holding onto her umbrella against the pull of the wind. Berkey Cunigus comes out the door just as she knew he would, clasping his umbrella to keep it from being torn from his hand. He hurries down the stairs, does not see the cat ready to pounce. Their umbrellas collide. They both become drenched in the effort to disentangle themselves. Her umbrella now has a large hole in it. “I am so clumsy,” she shouts above the rain. “The fault is mine,” he shouts back, adding, “You must allow me to replace your umbrella.” She replies, “Only if you agree to sit by our fire and get dry.”

And so the handsome young actor puts a firm hand to Brinekah’s elbow. Her knees become as liquid as the puddle they’re standing in.

They make their way to her house. There, an astonished father closes the door behind them and quickly stokes the fire; a nervous mother flies to the samovar to provide a cup of tea; and a young sister and brother peek from behind the tattered curtain at the tall stranger who has entered their lives.

Life under the czar becomes more and more unbearable. When he begins to conscript the young men, Berkey and two friends steal out of their shtetl in a cart buried under a bale of hay. When they get to Gdansk, they hop a ship bound for America. At Ellis Island, Berkey Cunigus becomes Ben Cohen.

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Ben keeps in touch with young Brinekah, telling her how fine it is to be in Cleveland, confessing how much he misses her. She pines for him, wondering how they might ever meet again. Finally, between what she and her father (and now her younger sister) earn, her own family is able to make the trip to America. She sits in steerage, clutching her tiny bundle, trying not to throw up, wondering where Cleveland is. At Ellis Island, Brinekah becomes Bertha.

Bertha's uncle is living in Colorado trading with the Indians. So it is there that Hyman settles his family. He gets a job doing detail work at Daniels and Fishers, a stylish men's clothing store. Bertha and Ben exchange letters which soon become impassioned love letters and within months, he joins her in Denver. They marry and move in with her family.

The demand for Yiddish actors in Denver, Colorado, in 1912 is not high. Fortunately, Ben is clever with his hands and is also a quick learner. Between Hyman and Bertha, he learns to sew. He gets a job in the back of a dry cleaner's sewing on buttons and mending hems. What he can't finish, Bertha finishes at night. They struggle to learn English and to fit into the American life. Finally, they can afford to move into their own home. The rooms are small. The sound of the streetcar crashes through the walls. Their neighbors are Catholic. But there is a lilac bush in the backyard and a small enclosed porch which might do for a crib.

When the babies start coming, Bertha must slow down her share of the sewing. This means that Ben earns less. Their money troubles worsen because Ben sends half of every dollar back to his family. He has ten brothers and sisters living under the repressive regime of the czar and he has resolved that he will bring over every last one of them. No matter that his own children wear cardboard in their shoes. No matter that the single dollar that he leaves on the mantel each morning must stretch to buy bread and milk and pay the electricity bill. Bertha yells and screams, cries and begs. But he is unmovable. As they lie in bed, she hisses, "You put them before your own family!" He growls back, "*They* are my family too!" The air is thick with anger.

And so they fall asleep, the gap widening between them, until soon they are in twin beds.

In the winter of 1955, Rose Hospital releases Bertha after a 6-day stay. The word "mastectomy" is never uttered. She cannot bear to look in the mirror, even with her dress on. Ben drives her home in the green Hudson. She looks out at the light snowfall trying to feel grateful that they got out all the cancer. He asks if it hurts. Yes, she tells him, a little sore. They speak Yiddish. The walkway is slippery and he holds her elbow to steady her. The house is empty and cold without the usual aroma of pot roast or chicken. (Ben has been taking his meals with

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one of the daughters.) She adjusts the thermostat, reclaiming her domain. She says she will lie down for a little while. He does not know how to make a cup of tea and it does not occur to her to ask him. He goes to his chair in the living room and opens the paper.

She takes off her heavy coat but hasn't the strength to hang it up. Her left arm aches. Her body heaves a sob. She lets it pass, then lowers herself onto the chenille bedspread.

That's when she notices the small package lying on her pillow. It is wrapped in the brown wrapping of the dry cleaner's, tied roughly with a piece of string. She unties the string, removes the paper, and picks up a small oddly shaped pillow, padded with cotton batting. It is too small to sleep on. It is too large to be a pincushion. Then it comes to her. It is meant to be placed in the cup of her brassiere, in the left cup. He has stitched her a breast.

Does she call out to him? Does she drift off to sleep with it in her hand and then quickly hide it when her daughter comes later with a casserole? And what about him, sitting there pretending to read his paper, knowing she has discovered his package, yet not moving from his chair. How is this gift acknowledged? Maybe just the act of wearing it in her brassiere is acknowledgment enough. Maybe when you've spent 43 years with someone, words are no longer necessary. One thing is certain: the threads that tie two people together are often invisible. ■