I Love You Still

By Susan Hodara

"It had to be you. It had to be you." I hear my mother singing and look up from my book to see her cutting vegetables in the kitchen. I've driven from New York without my husband, Paul, to visit her in her suburban home outside of Washington, D.C. for a few days.

It has been less than six months since my father died, and my mother, at eighty-two, is determined to stay in this house where she has been living alone since he entered a nursing home two years earlier, and where they lived together since 1971, the year I started college.

I recognize the tune; it is one I've heard her sing before. My mother has always sung aloud, her voice accompanying the radio or ringing out above the congregation in the synagogue. She sang sweetly, harmonizing with my father, "Inchworm, inchworm, measuring the marigolds." As a teenager, she won a talent contest with a rendition of "Melancholy Baby" and performed it on the radio.

She stops and turns toward me. Her hair is mostly gray now, cut very short around her head, and her skin is soft in the powdery way that skin can age. "I've always liked that song," she says, "but only recently did I realize how appropriate the words are for me and Dad." I try to recall the lyrics, but all I can think is, "It had to be you."

She turns back to her chopping, and goes on to recite some of the lines. "Somebody who could make me be true, could make me be blue," and then, "Some others I've seen, might never be mean, but they wouldn't do…"

Blue? Mean? What is she saying?

"With all your faults I love you still," my mother sings.

My mother is standing by the dining table where my father, my brothers, and I are seated; she is rigid behind the chair from which she has just risen. I am a young teen. We are mid-meal, food on our yellow and white dishes, silverware poised in our hands. My mother has accidentally knocked over a glass of milk. The noise of its clinking against a serving bowl has halted all other sound, and the air in the room has frozen. The only

movement is the slow spread of milk as it travels along the surface of the table and over its edge. I focus on the smooth whiteness.

"What were you thinking?" my father says. His voice is harsh, strained. I keep my head down, my gaze now fixed on my half-eaten tuna salad. There are blueberries in the pattern on the plate. "Why don't you look before you do things?" He is reaching out to interrupt the milk with his napkin. Disturbance surrounds him.

My mother hasn't moved. When I look up at her, I see her eyes are pink and shiny. She turns her head to the side, then walks into the kitchen. I watch her leave; I am pressed flat, too young to identify the pain I feel for her. My father shakes his head. No one speaks.

I always believed my father loved my mother. He told me things like, "My life didn't start till I met your mother," and, "Your mother, she's an *eshet chayall* — a woman of valor." When he said those things, his eyes were filled with pride. He helped her clear the table and clean the kitchen after meals. When they made salad, she peeled the carrots and he diced them. One day my mother confided to me that she wished she could make a salad on her own once in a while.

"*Baruch atah, adonai*…" My mother's voice is a clear stream flowing beside my father's tenor, as my brothers and I mumble beneath them. It is Friday night, and we are lighting the Sabbath candles as the sun goes down. We gather in the kitchen like this every week; we are expected to be home. My mother unties her apron, takes it from her waist and folds it into quarters before putting it in a drawer.

My parents each brought Judaism with them to their marriage, and turned to its rituals to give structure to our family. They deepened their observance together over time.

Two brass candlesticks placed on a metal tray hold the stocky white candles that my mother has lit. She blows gently to extinguish the match, then places it on the tray before raising her hands and holding them, palms down, toward the flame. She closes her eyes and begins to sing the blessing. We all join in, my father's voice boisterous. I cannot stop staring at her.

Her expression is serious, her brow slightly furrowed, the line where her lids meet betraying the smallest amount of pressure. An arc of candlelight illuminates the lower half of her face. There is faded red lipstick on her lips. Her hands do not move.

When the prayer is over, she stands still and silent for what to me seems an uncomfortably long time. The murmur of water boiling on the stove plays with the sizzle of roasting chicken, and I am hungry. I try to imagine what she is saying to God, which one of us she is most worried about, but I can never be sure. Then, with a tiny nod, her eyes open and her hands drop. "Good *Shabbos*, good *Shabbos*, good *Shabbos*," we say, as we each peck the others on the cheek.

For a long time, I considered my mother weak. My father's presence defined the nature of our family and the mood in our home. He could be jovial, spewing jokes, telling stories. He taught us, helped us with our schoolwork. We were captive to his words.

But he also had a near-obsessive need for control and an unpredictable temper. Crumbs on the countertop, hairs in the sink, lights left on in empty rooms could provoke his anger. Waste was despicable, carelessness scorned. He spit curses under his breath. We all — including my mother — treaded lightly, remaining on guard against a sudden shift that could trigger his rage.

It hurts me to say that my mother cowered before my father. Terrified of setting him off, and forbearing perhaps to a fault, she never confronted or disagreed with him. When he directed his ire at me, which he did with increasing frequency as I moved through adolescence, she was mute. I never saw them hug each other. In my memories, she rarely speaks, never laughs.

I watch as my mother flings a white tablecloth over the bridge table she has unfolded in our dining room. The fabric floats into place; she tugs at a corner and flattens the cloth with her hands. I am wearing pajamas, elastic-waist pants with a long-sleeved shirt that buttons. It is New Year's Eve, and my mother is setting a special table where she and my father will eat dinner after my brothers and I are asleep. There are fluted glasses and candlesticks. I am seven.

They celebrate this way every year, though I have never been awake to see them. In my imagination, they face each other, candlelight between them. My mother wears a dress, dark blue trimmed in white; her lips are red and her cheeks are rouged. They start with grapefruit halves topped with a maraschino cherry, and then have baked potato and steak that they cut with wooden-handled knives. Music plays quietly on the record player.

As it nears midnight, my father opens a bottle of Champagne that my mother has brought from the kitchen. He pours half-glasses that they clink. "Happy New Year," they say. "*L'chaim*." Together, they carry their plates back to the kitchen and clean up everything except the bridge table, which I will find bare in the morning. They don't usually stay up this late, so as soon as they've finished, they head up to sleep.

My mother is reaching toward my father with a Kleenex, attempting to wipe his nose. He jerks his head away, his face contorting. "Get the fuck away from me," he shouts, and glares at her with disgust.

My mother withdraws, an awkward smile emerging. "I was just…" she begins.

"Shut up! Shut up!" My father's voice is rough and growly, then he lowers his head and is quiet.

I have come to Washington to help my mother take care of my father, who has sunk into the Alzheimer's he was diagnosed with shortly after being hit by a car several years earlier. He is eighty-two, confined now to a wheelchair because of a variety of physical problems. Sometimes he radiates sweetness and love, but other times, erratically, he lashes out in anger and insult. He knows who we are but he doesn't absorb much of what goes on around him. When you talk to him, it's hard to gauge whether he understands what you're saying. His greatest pleasure comes from eating.

My mother has long retired from her position as a librarian, a profession she took on after my brothers and I were grown. She completed her master's degree the same year I graduated from high school, and continued working even after my father stopped. From the day he was hit by the car, though, her life has revolved around his care. I have visited regularly enough to know her routine. I am there beside her during my stays, but it is she who remains with him hour after hour, updating me on his progress when we talk on the phone each evening.

For days she sat in his hospital room as he lay in a coma. For weeks after he awoke she called for nurses to change his diapers and bring him juice. She read aloud to him from Homer's *Odyssey* and *Time* magazine, and took up her knitting when he fell asleep. When he was well enough to begin rehabilitation, she learned the exercises he was to do and helped him move his arms and legs, lift, down, lift, down, until he insisted she stop. Finally he was able to come home, where she had a motorized lift installed to bring him up and down the stairs, and where aides came and sat on the sofa in the den when they had no work to do.

At night, my father called out her name. "Selma! Selllmmaa!" She adjusted his head, shifted his leg. He woke often, and sometimes his exhales were extended groans repeated with each breath. My mother barely slept. Soon she had an aide come for the night, and she took to sleeping in one of the upstairs bedrooms with the door closed.

On this day, she is in the kitchen making lunch. I sit with my father in the dining room, his wheelchair pushed up to the table beside me. He is silent, staring vacantly in front of him. The light is dim; raindrops scatter on the skylight above.

My mother serves us plates already arranged with food: slices of leftover chicken, vegetables mixed into a salad, a pile of cut corn. My father will eat whatever he is given; she apportions his servings so he will not gain weight. "He is already hard enough to move," she tells me.

Sometimes my father shines with his love for my mother. He stares at her, his eyes glued to her every move like a baby's. His face is soft, a slight smile on his lips.

But now he is sour. He shovels the corn into his mouth.

"Do you want a glass of milk?" my mother asks him, gently leaning in toward his cheek.

"Do you want a glass of milk?" He mimics her, the words singsong, his face scornful. It's part of the Alzheimer's, we've been told, but we recognize my father's rage, now unshackled.

"Fucking bitch!" he barks.

My mother turns abruptly and walks out of the room. "Don't speak to her like that," I tell him, but he doesn't look at me. A few minutes pass before she returns, the rims of her eyes red.

Today, my mother and I linger after breakfast. Sunshine from the skylight streams onto the newspapers, books, and magazines strewn around us. A radio broadcasts classical music. The house is still, empty, permeated with a calmness I never felt when my father was alive.

I skim the *Washington Post* as my mother works on a *New York Times* crossword puzzle from the previous Sunday, one that I finished before I came here. "Diamond center?" she says. "Diamond center?"

She is wearing a cardigan sweater she knitted for herself, a complicated pattern of overlapping stars in lavenders and blues, with silver buttons. Her pants are light brown corduroys and her shoes are beige, thick and round around feet that are planted flat on the floor. Her lips are pale, her shoulders faintly curved.

I get up and stand behind her, look down at the page. She smells like soap.

"Think baseball," I say. "It starts with M." After a pause, I tell her: "Mound."

She doesn't mind me giving her the answers. She fills in the letters with a pencil. She and my father used to finish the Sunday puzzle in an afternoon. Now she completes as many spaces as she can during the week.

When I am not there, we talk by telephone nearly every day. When she calls me, she might begin, "I just wanted to chat." When I call her, I ask her how she is, and she reports on the details of her day.

For exercise, she walks around the neighborhood as often as she can, takes a yoga class and tai chi for seniors. She works on her homework for the Hebrew language class she rejoined in the fall. She is in a book club, and she and her friend Zelda have tickets to a series of concerts. On Friday evenings, she lights the Sabbath candles; on Saturdays she goes to the synagogue. When the weather is good, she walks to a nearby movie theater and takes in a matinee. She cooks meals, fish or meat, roasted vegetables. She sets a place for herself at the table, lays out her pills beside the spoon. While she eats, she reads; she has cookies for dessert.

At night, she settles in the den to watch television. It is here that she ends her days. She sits in one of the two matching leather lounge chairs she and my father bought

years before. She has an array of snacks she indulges in: crystallized ginger, chocolate covered almonds, frozen yogurt. She brings her selection from the kitchen in a small glass bowl and eats it slowly. Around eleven, she shuts out the lights and goes upstairs to bed.