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Contents

Part 1. How I Found My Family in a Drawer	
1. The Heiress	3
2. Kipnis in Memphis	14
3. The Report Card	23
4. The Photograph from Kishinev	36
5. The <i>Nudnik</i> and the Boss	49
6. Family Trees	62
7. Suicide in Argentina	71
8. Wolf and Virgin	78
Part 2. Saving the Name	
9. The Mayor of South Tucson	97
10. The Lost Scrapbook	116
11. Distant Cousins	132
Part 3. Memoirs of a Wondering Jew	
12. My Kishinev Pogrom	157
13. The Silverware from Russia	177
14. My Grandmother's Dunams	183
15. Family Hair Looms	191
16. Return to Kishinev	198
17. The Order Book	216
Acknowledgments	231
Sources	235

1. The Heiress

When my father died, I became a middle-aged Jewish orphan. It's not that I wasn't already Jewish, of course, or that I set out to say Kaddish for him—I had no idea how to do that, even if it had been a daughter's place. But now that the last keeper of my Jewish past was dead and I was free to put it behind me, I started worrying about the future of my Jewish self.

As I began to take stock of my father's affairs, I found, tucked away in his bureau drawers and in the many compartments of the Danish modern credenza in the dining room that had become his home office after illness forced him to retire, the unsorted memorabilia of our family. Slotted into the red wells, the rust-colored file folders that for years had traveled with him on the long subway ride between our apartment on the Upper West Side and his office on Wall Street, I found (as I expected) a cluster of pale manila folders, containing the dated remains of cases from his practice as a lawyer in Manhattan. But I also found baffling items from a Jewish legacy I knew almost nothing about: a formal family portrait glued to crumbling brown cardboard, with a fully bearded, fedora-topped patriarch seated in the front row next to my grandfather; a receipt for the upkeep of a cemetery grave in Queens; directions to an unveiling; copies of handwritten letters that appeared to be in Hebrew; an embroidered blue-velvet tallis

Part 1

bag (complete with tefillin); a folder mysteriously labeled “property in Israel” (including a map); and tightly curled locks of dark-blond hair packed into a cardboard box that once held fancy French soap.

My sister readily relinquished her claim to this puzzling cache of random Judaica that had accumulated untouched for decades in the cluttered rooms of the rent-controlled apartment where my father had spent the last seven years of his life, mourning my mother as he vanished into the debilitations of Parkinson’s disease and finally the fog of dementia. My sister, who was passionate about jazz, instead took home the contents of the Louis Armstrong file, one of my father’s two claims to minor celebrity. In the 1940s he had been Lucille Armstrong’s adviser and confidant when she was looking for a divorce from her famously wandering husband.

Without knowing why, I saved it all.

After the death of my parents—and as I thought, inevitably, about my own death—I became possessed by a drive as strong as the one that had led me to hold on to what had already been saved, a drive to figure out what had happened before me. The collection, however eclectic, pointed to a specific enough elsewhere, a map of meaning and relations that nonetheless eluded me. These strange things provided clues, almost an invitation, to follow where they led. Their original owner was gone, true, but I now had in my possession objects that offered hints about the missing narrative, a story about an immigrant family of pogrom orphans (that much I knew—they had come because of the pogroms, a refrain remembered from childhood). But what had happened to this family that had come to America from Russia and then vanished without a trace? Or maybe that was exactly wrong. This family, over generations, had no doubt left discernible traces—in objects, and documents, and finally in me. I could feel that mute history like a deposit in my body, without being able to say how,

The Heiress

a feeling made more intense, paradoxically perhaps, by the fact that I had no child who would in turn inherit the objects from me.

A few years later, when I moved to a larger apartment, I took the boxes out of storage. I had become the custodian of this repository, but was it worth the sacrifice of an entire closet? Not that I thought making room for what I privately called my archive was, on the face of it, extravagant. I had already filled one closet with my graduate-school notebooks, term papers, and drafts of old love letters I could not bring myself to jettison. What was I keeping all that for?

Missing—entirely, it seemed at first—was a way to reach into the silence that surrounded these memory remnants. Early on, my husband's son, a scientist, asked me what my book was about. I told him that the things I have inherited are like signposts to a journey I cannot completely describe; I don't know enough to connect the dots between them. He offered a word he thought might help me, "spline." Splines fill in the blanks between isolated points, construct a complete object from limited information.

I was already captivated by the word when it cropped up again, a few days later, in a framer's shop. The shopkeeper showed me a narrow ridge of wood at the edges of the handmade frame I'd selected; it's a spline, he said. That's what holds the corners together. I'm a sucker for metaphors, and this one has my name on it, especially because it works in two directions: as a way to navigate unknown spaces and as a way to frame the fragmentary map of my discoveries.

Since then, I've conjured stories from my objects about the people to whom they once belonged. They've become evidence, telling details from a family history that was until now lost to me.

I say family history, but what I mean is my father's side, the Kipnis side.

Part 1

There are always at least two sides to a family, and we grow up believing the mythologies that attach to each. We learn that we are like—take after—one side or the other. And each side tends to bear a label that explains or seems to explain who you are like, or which ancestor you favor, as the phrase goes: the nose, eyes, or hair of either parent or their parents. Especially when the inherited trait is unappealing, we derive a certain comfort in knowing where it comes from, the solace of resemblance. Others managed to make it through life with that hair—mine, my father’s—the tribal topiary.

From the beginning, the deck was stacked in favor of my mother’s side of the family, the Millers. For one thing, there were a lot of them—two living grandparents, my mother’s three siblings and their children, my cousins. The brothers and sisters maintained family ties as long as their parents were alive to care for. But the Millers were all about success, which also meant that the siblings competed with each other, noting which of their families was turning out to be the richest (we were always the poorest). Their children—the six cousins—were pitted against each other, everyone looking to see which kids performed the best in school. Still, even when the original siblings succumbed to bitter resentments and mean feuds, they continued to pass on the cherished stories of their childhood. The time Uncle Al lost his leg hitching a ride on the Amsterdam Avenue bus, how Uncle Dave, the bachelor doctor and eldest child, supported himself in medical school by playing poker, how the girls—my mother, Mollie (the baby of the family), and her older sister, Fay—addressed envelopes to earn money that would help pay for Dave’s tuition. The time my mother kept a sardine in her jacket pocket until it rotted and the smell ruined all the clothing in the hall closet. Embellished at every retelling, the stories had, as it were, a life of their own,

The Heiress

eclipsing the dramas of our tiny household, which never reached the status of lore.

Family stories aglow with the aura of myth.

The Miller grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, from Russia, as were the Kipnis grandparents. From where exactly, or even what their name had originally been, was never mentioned. In summer, when the siblings gathered to share an old Victorian house in Deal, New Jersey, Grandpa Miller, who was a master storyteller, would take the six grandchildren for a drive in his boxy, gray Packard and mesmerize us with tales of wolves howling in the forest, from which children like us—three boys, three girls—made a brave escape, laughing all the way home. Our mothers would complain to Pop that he was scaring us. It occurs to me now that we were getting the “Peter and the Wolf” version of tales of pogroms suffered by Jews who, like him, in their own youth had escaped into the surrounding forests, running from the Cossacks and fearing for their lives. But that history was never mentioned—if, indeed, remembered. At the time, being scared was the price we kids willingly paid for the thrill of sitting piled up together away from the parents, while our grandfather deftly manipulated the wooden knob at the top of the silvery stick shift.

My grandfather Willie basked in what Grace Paley called “the summer sunlight of upward mobility.” The only reminder of his Eastern European biography lurked in the occasional slippage between “w” and “v”; his night-school English had banished the past into linguistic accident. When he presided over the Miller family seders, it seemed normal for him to be seated, propped up with pillows, in a large armchair, like the patriarch he was, ensconced in his role as storyteller and head of the clan. Smiling. He was always smiling. As far as he was concerned, his own story had turned out well. He was American; he even voted Republican.

Part 1

My father's side, the Kipnises, first lost by numbers; there were so few of them. Two years before I was born, my grandfather died at age fifty-nine, "of disappointment," my mother said; he couldn't adjust to life in America. We never met my father's brother Sam, who had moved to Arizona because his son Julian suffered from asthma. I don't think I even saw pictures of them. Arizona seemed farther away than Russia.

The second reason for the shadowy status of the scrawny Kipnis branch (compared to the leafy Millers) was a vague sense of gloom attached to their lives. Grandma Kipnis, as we called her, lived in a small, dark apartment in the Bronx, and when my father brought my sister and me to visit her on a Saturday morning, it seemed to me that we had traveled to a foreign country by subway.

"You're so cold and selfish," my mother would say bitterly, exasperated by the stony silences I had perfected as a child. "You'll die like Grandma Kipnis, alone and friendless." I shrugged. I didn't even look like her. If my father had a rosier alternative to my mother's grim prediction, he did not offer it.

My mother waited for her mother-in-law to die before launching into her full repertoire of righteous indignation, tales of how she had suffered at the hands of a woman who could never be satisfied and made you know it. What could you expect from such a woman who in Russia, she said, rejected a suitor because of the cut of his boots? Somehow I always suspected, without understanding until much later, that my mother resented my grandmother's very being—and by extension, in posing our likeness, my own. I did not wonder then why she, and not my father, was the Kipnis native informant.

My grandmother's death, when it came, twenty years into my parents' marriage, changed the course of our family history,

The Heiress

but it's only now, more than fifty years later, that I'm starting to guess how deeply. In almost every way, that death marks the crucial turning point in this story, a story about the extinction of my father's side of the family, that began with my grandfather's early death, my uncle's departure from New York, and the earlier disappearance (a banishment? a removal?) of my grandfather's siblings and cousins. With my grandmother gone, our family was liberated from the dissonant, foreign, unassimilated element she represented. Although my mother's own mother, Grandma Miller, was equally unable to speak English correctly and understand the world she lived in, my mother did not feel threatened by the immigrant past she embodied in the very fullness of her figure. My mother seemed to tolerate her existence because of her abiding love for my grandfather. He was the person and parent whom she wanted to please and whom she loved unreservedly.

My grandmother's death in 1954 coincided almost exactly with my father's one serious, newsworthy triumph as a lawyer. It was also the beginning of my parents' luxury-liner travels to Europe and of the acquisition of the trappings of upward mobility my mother had longed for. They were fully assimilated now. They could be tourists in the Europe their parents had fled and abhorred. Glamour and money had laundered the pogroms.

When his mother died, my father became an orphan at exactly the age I was when I later lost him. Not young at forty-eight, but not old either. At the time, of course, I did not think of him as an orphan, the way people were orphans in the Dickens novels he loved; but in his own way, I think he was. Except for the anecdotes my mother liked to tell whenever she was irritated with my father or me, the Miller waters closed around our little family when Grandma Kipnis faded completely from view.

Part 1

In my thirties, buoyed by seventies feminism with its expansive dreams of self-reinvention, I swapped the family names and became a Miller. It wasn't exactly swapping. I eliminated the name of my ex-husband, which I had so eagerly added to my father's when we married (I was fashionably, if clumsily, hyphenated). I chose what looked like the clarity of the future. Miller. A name you'd never have to explain. I reveled in my new anonymity.

I didn't expect my father to die when he did. He had just recovered from a bout of septicemia contracted in the hospital and seemed to be regaining strength. I was scheduled to leave for a year's sabbatical in Paris when he died at home—on Father's Day weekend in June 1989. After the funeral I had ten days to take a last look at what remained of my parents' things, leaving the final sorting to my sister. How could I stay? It was my first sabbatical. My husband and I had sublet our apartment, rented one in Paris, and an entire chain of plans was already in motion. But not staying also meant that I lost the chance to know really, in detail, what I was leaving behind.

There was almost no one on my father's side with whom to share the news. I first called my father's cousin in Canada, who had visited him during his illness and whose kindness I had admired. Their mothers were sisters, and the cousins seemed genuinely fond of each other. I knew that Gert would be sad but that she would want to know. I assumed that my father's brother, Sam, being nine years older than my father, was probably dead; maybe somehow I knew that he was. I wondered about his son, Julian. I found an old résumé for Julian in the top drawer of the credenza, with a phone number in Tennessee. I reached his wife, Ruth, who surprised me by knowing who I was. "Oh, Lou's daughter," she said warmly. She regretted my father's death, though she had

The Heiress

never met him, and she gave me a P.O. Box address in Magnolia, Texas, for Julian, who was now her ex-husband. I wrote to tell him about his uncle's death, but I never heard back. I filed the résumé though, for future reference, just as my father had.

As my sister and I sifted through the unidentified photographs (who was the formally dressed man on horseback?), we realized how little my father had ever said about his brother, his father, or even his mother, whom we had known, if our ceremonial visits could be considered to have bestowed a form of knowledge. We stared at the portrait taken in a Lower East Side studio where what appeared to be a large family, including our grandparents and a nine-year-old Sam, had come to pose together. But who were those other people?

When I returned to New York after my sabbatical, my husband drove my sister and me to the cemetery in Flushing to see my father's headstone. Instead of feeling finished with the family mystery, as we wandered through the maze of graves, I felt pulled to figure it out. I copied the mystery photograph and sent it to my father's cousin in Canada to see whether she recognized the people in the portrait. They were members of my grandfather Raphael's family, she supposed, but she knew nothing about them. In her letter, Gert volunteered some information about my grandmother's family—about a sister who had emigrated to Argentina—but fixated as I was on my grandfather's line, I was not yet interested in *that* other side. Still, I kept the letter, since that is what savers do.

In the first year of the new millennium, a decade after my father's death, a real estate agent from California contacted me about a parcel of land in Palestine that my father's mother, he said, had bought in the 1920s during the British Mandate. I was convinced

Part 1

that this was a clever Jewish con game. My grandparents lived on the Lower East Side when they came to New York, that much had registered. How could they have had money to invest in land? But as the man continued his pitch, I distinctly remembered a folder in my father's files labeled "Israel property & Sheindel Kipnis" in bold capital letters; "and Sadie Kip" was lightly penciled in at a later date.

The folder contained three cancelled checks from 1926 signed by my grandfather Raphael Kipnis; an inky blue surveyor's map with tiny numbered plots laid out like rows of tombstones; and an elaborate certificate of ownership for two dunams of land in the village of Souba, issued in my grandmother's name by the Palestinian government. There were also copies of an exchange from 1949 between my father and a family friend visiting Israel. The friend, a real estate lawyer, had looked into the matter for him: "The land is constantly increasing in value," he wrote to my father, "and your land is directly in the middle of the new plan for Jerusalem. If you don't need the money, my advice is to hold on to it for some time." The paper trail confirmed the evidence on the map but ended there. Had my father, who certainly needed the money in those years, sold the dunams, those two plots that each represented one-fourth of an acre? I had no idea, but I held on to the folder, just as my father had held on to the property, or so it seemed.

The realtor, a man in his late sixties, insisted that the dunams existed and that he could sell them for me. Collaborating with a colleague in Israel who specialized in identifying property belonging to absentee foreign owners, the agent guaranteed that cooperating with him would pay off handsomely. He didn't bother with estates that were worth less than \$200,000, he said. The prospect of an inheritance was tantalizing. Still, I resisted. How could this be

The Heiress

true? But the man's persistence wore me down. What did I have to lose, he asked, since I didn't have to write any checks? I began to assemble the documentation he needed to navigate the Israeli bureaucracy on behalf of the heirs.

It was too late to ask my father why his parents had bought the miniature parcel of land (did this mean they had been Zionists, something he always denied?), just as it was too late to ask him to identify the people in the family portrait, those ancestors whose name I had so lightly shed. So many troubling questions set in motion by the purchase of the dunams, questions that I had never found the time to ask.

But even if nothing came of it, no money from the dunams, that is, I would gain a story. After all, wasn't it a story about the Kipnises that I had been missing for so long?