

Caitlin McGill

How Much for That Pair of Shoes?

*What the son wishes to forget,
the grandson wishes to remember.*

—*Marcus Lee Hansen*

I.

I AM GAZING THROUGH THICK, OBSCURING SNOWFALL, EACH SHEET another barrier I must see beyond, push out of my way. I am creating a path through these ivory slips of memory and time, intuition my only guide as I blindly shuffle through powder, ice hardening beneath my boots. I am peering into a time before my own life—before my mother’s—and into my grandmother’s childhood. It’s 1933, and she is four years old. Her grandfather, Aaron, sits beside her, the two of them leaning over a table in her New Jersey home, the alphabet strewn out before them. Claire, who will become my grandmother, is teaching Aaron—my great-great-grandfather—how to read and write in English. Curls hang at her shoulders. She has only begun to learn herself, but still she is ahead of him. He speaks fragmented English during their lessons, Yiddish words rolling out of his memory and onto his disobedient tongue.

“Ach,” Aaron says, scratching out the words on his paper. “I cannot get right.”

“It’s okay,” Claire says, looking into her grandfather’s blue eyes. “We can try again tomorrow.”

Aaron takes her chin in his hand, runs his finger over her long, pointed nose. He forgets about the English words on the page and reminds her that we do not speak of our religion if we want to survive Russia. He reminds her of his time in the Czar’s Army, of his shoes, made only from cloth and string. He talks of Ellis Island and not looking back. Never look back. Claire doesn’t quite understand what this means, but she’ll remember his words.

She sticks a gold star on Aaron’s paper. I wonder if he is proud or if he thinks only of Russia, of his home, of the place where once, long ago, he was allowed to let his Yiddish tongue run free. It’s too

early to imagine he is ashamed of that gold star on his paper; the Nazis have only just begun to force the Jews in Europe to wear stars and my grandmother's cousins—the Moskowitzs and the Horowitzs—have not yet stepped into the gas chambers. Claire stacks papers together as Aaron scratches his black beard.

“Oy,” he says, thinking again of the English words on the page. “Oy. I cannot get right.”

Aaron's blue eyes are fading now, my grandmother's curls growing straight with time, and the wind is whipping the snow into squalls, pushing me away, away from them. Into 1934, 1935, 1936. Into the moment when my grandmother's mother, Lillian, suggests that my grandmother should attend Hebrew school—the moment when Aaron shakes his head no, no religion for the girl. Lillian doesn't resist because, although she was raised Orthodox, although her family observed all of the holidays and kept Kosher, she believes that the Jews in their New Jersey town are snobby, that they only attend temple to show off. She believes that she is a better person for not flaunting her money. And she believes, then, that Judaism is not for them—not for her husband, whose father, Aaron, scorns his own Jewishness anyway; not for her daughter, who *will not* become one of those trashy temple women; and, although she does not know how far her disapproving hand will reach, certainly not for her grandchildren—my mother and my uncle—whose father will also ignore his Judaism.

Lillian could not have known that ignoring her family's Jewish identity would last for generations. She could not have known that over twenty years after her death, her great-granddaughter would sit before her computer screen, searching for the moment when Judaism was eliminated from our family's consciousness, trying to regenerate our history from the few live, remaining pieces. Aaron could not have known that I would imagine him, barely ten years old, marching through the snow in Russia, or that I would think, *ah, yes, this is the moment; this is the moment when one of the connections was severed, our Judaism cut loose, the cloth come undone from his bloody foot.*

II.

THE BOYS WALK IN THE SNOW, FRAYED STRINGS WRAPPING THEIR BARE feet in cloth. They fall in line between Russian officers, praying for the string to remain tied around their bony feet. If those cloth shoes slip off

they cannot stop; they cannot bend down to save their cracked, bloody toes from the frozen ground. There are hundreds of them, these young Jewish boys, repeating to themselves *don't speak in Yiddish, don't speak in Yiddish*. They don't want to starve for three more days. They don't refuse anymore when the soldiers feed them only pork; they eat to survive.

Snow falls onto their eyelashes. Some try to blink it away before the liquid runs down their dry cheeks, before an officer shouts at them, the pathetic boys, for crying for their mothers, but most of their lashes are already encrusted in frost and it's too difficult to blink. They hope it's cold enough that the snow won't melt. They march on. One boy, his eyes glazed and blue, suddenly drops to one knee.

"You!" the leading officer shouts in Russian. "What do you think you are doing?"

The boy hangs his head at his feet. He ties his string in a bow around his cloth shoe and slowly uncoils his spine to stand, his black hair now tousled before his eyes.

"I'm tying this scrap of cloth around my bloody foot, Sir," the boy says in Russian. Then, in Yiddish: "Do you want to do it for me instead?"

The officer grinds the toe of his right shoe into the snow, stomps toward the boy and slams him to the ground.

"Yiddish?" he says. "You want to speak Yiddish?" He kicks the boy in the ribs, stands him up, shoves him down, and kicks him again, this time in his back.

The boy rolls over in the snow and curls his legs into his chest. The others watch as he crawls to sit on his behind and reach for the cloth that's now detached from both feet. The boy wraps the string and cloth around his feet again. He does not lift his eyes. The soldier huffs, pivots, and crunches ahead to lead the children of Czar Nicholas I's Army. It is 1850, 1853, 1855. Each year, each scene, is the same. Jewish mothers wail for their babies' return. My great-great-grandfather, Aaron Sussman, defies the soldiers.

In 1827, Czar Nicholas I enacted a law that forced all Jewish boys, ages twelve to twenty-five, in Russia, to serve in his army for twenty-five years. Nearly 50,000 Jewish boys served between 1827 and 1854. Thousands were as young as five years old. Rabbis were forced to swear that these five- and six-year-old boys were really twelve and thirteen. Some Rabbis pretended to be thieves, snuck into army quarters, and blessed the boys. Mothers begged their sons to remain Jewish men forever. Russian soldiers forced boys to dip their heads in water, to be baptized.

Prayer was strictly forbidden. Speaking Yiddish or Hebrew was strictly forbidden. Children hid in forests, in Christian homes, in shadows.

An old folk tale describes Czar Nicholas I's visit to the Russian city of Kazan, where a group of Jewish boys were to be baptized in the Volga River. The water lapped at the boys' toes and, as the Czar approached, they jumped into the water.

"What is this?" the officers shouted. "Pull yourselves out of there."

But the boys did not emerge from the river. Instead, the boys kept their heads below the water and drowned themselves.

In these tales lingers a myth of young boys who cut off their fingers. Desperate families hoped that without pointer fingers to pull the trigger of a gun, their sons would be useless to the Czar's army. Now I imagine these mothers and fathers laying their children's hands on long, wooden tables, stretching their little fingers out, and slicing them away. I imagine villages of them, these young, Jewish boys, running around with missing fingers, shrieking in Yiddish. I imagine some were young enough that their fingers healed, grew back. But I imagine those fingers were never the same.

III.

THE EARLIEST YEARS OF MY LIFE OFTEN RETURN TO ME IN SEGMENTED memories, the most vivid of those memories serving as time posts, sectioning the years into "the times before Grandpa died" or "the times after my niece was born," acting as scaffolding and holding together those that feel too distant and too blurred to accept as true. This should ground me in the past, I find myself thinking, but—there are so many stories that feel too distant and too blurred—I cannot discern memory from re-memory; I cannot see clearly the past.

How truthful is my memory of waiting in an emergency room, I wonder, the rough lining of my blue party dress scratching my thigh?

As the memory exists in my mind today, I was two years old when I sat in that emergency room. I was two years old when, just hours before arriving at the hospital, I was playing dress-up with my sister in our living room. My thin, brown bangs stuck to my forehead as I crawled into the cabinet below our bookshelf and, acquiescing to my stubborn curiosity, slipped my left pointer finger into a hole. As Lindsay, my four-year-old sister, closed the cabinet door, a sharp, metal hinge entered that hole and carved off the tip of my finger. While

my mother, a nurse, bagged the severed tip in ice, Lindsay wiped blood from the tile floor. I can still feel the nurses coating each of my fingers with some sort of antibiotic. I remember thinking the antibiotic looked like brown paint. They brushed either side of my hands with the paint, knuckle to fingertip, knuckle to fingertip.

For weeks after my fingertip was severed from my hand, I stuck that finger into cups of hydrogen peroxide that my mother poured, the liquid fizzing up toward the rim, my feet dancing beneath me in pain. On my first day back at preschool after the accident, my mother dropped me off and drove to work, worried that I would play on the playground even though I wasn't supposed to, that I would get an infection from the dirty sand that would inevitably creep into the bandages she'd so meticulously wrapped my finger in. Was it when she closed her eyes to pray that this wouldn't happen that she slammed into the car in front of her at the four-way intersection? The airbag burned her forearm and neck, but I never got an infection.

My mother tells me that because I was so young and still growing, my fingertip slowly grew back.

Now I find myself wondering: what happens when too much has been lost, when the fingertip has been severed too far back, the wound forever sealed?

Ed Yong, award-winning science writer, explains in a *National Geographic* article titled "Why Fingertips Might Grow Back but Entire Limbs Won't," that "children can sometimes regrow the tip of an amputated finger, as long as there's a bit of nail left over and the wound isn't stitched up." Stem cells underneath the base of the nail are responsible for the regrowth of a partially amputated finger, so if the finger is amputated too far back—too much lost—regeneration is not possible.

My finger was never the same. I look at all ten of my fingers now and stop at the left pointer. Its tip is rounded, the hard nail curved down unlike any of the others, the skin beneath exposed and fleshy. I often wonder what would have happened if it'd never grown back. Would my childhood have been drowned in self-consciousness, in more self-doubt and embarrassment and insecurity than I already felt? And what is different about me now? What was lost with that fingertip, replaced by new tissue and skin and that hard, hard nail? What happens when we lose a piece of ourselves—of our families—and something else grows in its place?

As for the memory of the scratchy blue dress, its significance lies not in what I've recalled or how I recalled it but rather what

understanding it has led me to. Perhaps the ability to remember—the ability to regenerate the past—should *not* be scrutinized, and the way in which my mind does the recalling can vary—*should* vary—the paths to the past innumerable and interdependent.

Perhaps there is no such thing as misremembering.

If there is something, anything, left for us to cling to, why not begin regeneration, seizing what little has been left behind?

Does it really matter how much of that memory my mind has reconstructed from stories told to me by my mother? And does it really matter if the details I recall are true? Perhaps the answer lies in how we define truth. If we equate truth with meaning—if truth is simply what we discover upon exploration of what we *believe* is real, what we *believe* happened—then it doesn't matter whether my party dress was blue or purple or red; it doesn't matter whether my mother told me that story or if it's been accurately etched in my memory since its occurrence; it doesn't matter unless, perhaps, you can't shake the sense that a memory should count, unless you're pushing your grandmother to remember the color of your great-great-grandfather's eyes as he looked into hers and said, his words cloaked in Russian or Yiddish or both, *we hide to survive*.

IV.

DAVID WALKS ALL THE WAY HOME THROUGH THE NEW JERSEY SNOW.

Why, I will ask my grandmother years later.

Oh, my father was a stubborn man, she'll say. Kind and quiet, but a stubborn, stubborn man.

He does not work in New York City's Garment District as his father, Aaron, did. He is a successful jeweler—learned the trade by sweeping jewelry shops as a boy—but his wife, Lillian, ensures they don't flaunt their money in synagogues like the other Jews she despises. In fact, they don't enter synagogues at all. They never took their daughter, Claire, to services, never observed holidays, never kept Kosher. They certainly never hung mezuzahs—encased parchment scrolls that are nailed to the right side doorpost of Jewish homes—outside their doors. Claire is already twenty-eight years old on this particular night when her father trudges through the snow again as he has since she was a girl. She is home with her husband, her one-year-old daughter, and her infant son. As a child, she prayed for her

father to walk through the door, boots covered in slush, and release her from Lillian's wrath.

When he walks into their home, he must be shivering, his fingernails turning blue. He must think of his grown daughter and her baby boy, and when he asks for them, Lillian calls for an ambulance instead.

At the hospital his wife berates him for walking through the snow—at least *I had shoes*, he says—and commands Claire, her grown daughter, to fetch water from the hall. Pneumonia, the doctors say, but they've caught it early and he'll be just fine. Penicillin to cure the infection, and he'll be just fine.

Claire goes home to her family for the night, and when she returns in the morning he's already gone. I imagine Lillian, my great-grandmother, presses her thin lips into straight lines and yells for my grandmother to fold the blankets and sheets in the hospital room.

David leaves much of his savings to Claire.

Allergic to penicillin. Dead from his long walks in the snow.

V.

MY GRANDMOTHER HATED HER NOSE. SOME TIME AFTER MARRYING my grandfather she had plastic surgery, hoping to change her nose from pointed and long to round and unrevealing. But plastic surgery was far from advanced. Techniques were still developing. Though her nose is no longer pointed as it once was, it still calls attention. Her nostrils flare up a bit too much—a bit too exposed—and when I look at a picture of her and my grandfather before the surgery, her hair pulled back, her dress ruffling at the shoulder, my grandfather's dark features accentuated by his black suit, I think that she was stunning, that she never should have changed her nose at all. The nose job, my grandmother tells me, was a birthday gift she gave to herself, paid for by the money her father left her.

Over twenty years after that surgery, she moved in with Ed, her third Jewish husband. He was unpacking boxes, hanging clothes in the closet, pictures on the wall, their towels on hooks in the bathroom, when he pulled his mezuzah from a box and ran toward the front door, eager to hang it outside their new home.

"What do you think you're doing!" she yelled. She didn't yell often. Her mother had done enough yelling. "I won't have that thing on my door. Get it out of here."

He complied, afraid to upset her more, and explained that mezuzahs had hung outside his home since he was a boy.

Now she lives with her Christian boyfriend, and I think she is more ashamed of being a Jewish woman than she was when she was married to Jewish men. (Her mother, the very woman who stopped my grandmother from growing up in the temple, demanded that she only marry Jews. She obeyed.) And she says there's no point of getting married at this age—*I'm eighty-four; it's too complicated*—but perhaps something is stopping her from marrying a Gentile man. Perhaps she doesn't believe her boyfriend when he tells her he doesn't mind that she's not Christian, that he'd marry her anyway. Perhaps she's afraid to taint *his* life. Or perhaps she prefers to handle the burden of hiding her identity on her own as she always has, concealing the evidence one perceived blemish at a time, ignoring the truth so well that when she lays her head on her pillow each night, she can hardly remember who she is at all.

Between my grandmother's urge to hide our past and the fallibility of memory, I wonder: how much of our history can I ever truly resurrect?

VI.

MY GRANDMOTHER CLEARS HER THROAT AND I PRESS THE PHONE HARDER against my ear, impatient for answers.

"What color were his eyes? Was he tall?"

"No, no," she says. "He was a small man. Blue eyes. Fair skin. When I was a girl, he worked all the time doing—"

"What? What'd he do?" I ask.

"He sewed flies on men's pants," she says, laughter slurring her words.

"Oh, Grandma," I say. "You're too funny."

"And you know what else?" she says. "We called him Harry sometimes. I don't know why, but we called my grandfather Harry."

We hang up, and, again, I try to imagine that small man.

There he is, Aaron, sewing zippers on men's pants somewhere in New York City's Garment District in 1896. It's been five—maybe six—years since he left Russia with his wife and children and settled in Union City, New Jersey. Some of his cousins followed, their last names changing to Susselman or Zussman as they journeyed through Ellis Island. Aaron's oldest son, David, would be thirteen now, working

in the Diamond District, his birth in Russia never recorded. All they know is that it was snowing when he was born, so each January, when the snow returns, his mother bakes his favorite cake.

Aaron hunches over a long, wooden table, his back aching from day after day in the factory, wrinkles lining his forehead and curving around his mouth. His feet are warm in his leather boots. Men and women—other immigrants—work beside him. More than eighty percent of these factory workers are immigrant Jews. Most of their bosses are Jewish, too, and allow them to observe the Sabbath. But Aaron would rather work and get paid. He does not perform religious duties.

They work just inches apart, elbows bumping. In their native tongues they grunt and groan, but Aaron—Harry—practices English words in his head. *Hello. How are you? How much for a coffee?* He continues sewing, pausing for the cramps in his hands, spreading out and stretching his ten fingers.

Good morning. Good night. Good day. His stomach rumbles. He's almost finished installing his last zipper of the day. *How much for that pair of earrings? That pair of pants?* He repeats. *How much for that pair of shoes?*