WORDS *Matter*

Elder Project
ANTHOLOGY

2023
Writing from the
Frank Residences at
San Francisco Campus
for Jewish Living

LITQUAKE

About Litquake's Elder Project

Litquake brings together writers and readers of all ages to celebrate the written word with year-round literary programming and an annual festival in San Francisco. Litquake reaches seniors through the Elder Project, which focuses on creative expression and community in writing workshops, including those at Frank Residences at the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living.

In our workshops, the group expands the possibilities of imagination, unearths memories, and finds connection with one another. We discuss craft and technique. Participants deepen their writing while describing the joys and quandaries of long, rich, varied lives.

Many thanks to Robert Sarison, Geoffrey Washburn, and Coco Koster at the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living. Our gratitude goes as well to the California Arts Council and the Joseph & Vera Long Foundation. And to the writers at SFCJL, thank you for your honesty, humor, and willingness to explore.

Table of Contents

Fredi Aks

A Love Match?

A street in the poor part of Baltimore on a hot summer day. A handsome young man stands outside a tobacco shop, leaning against the store window. Several of his friends are close by, engaged in conversation, but he is not interested. He looks, in profile, like Rudolph Valentino, and he knows it, adjusting his slouch to increase the effect as he puffs on his cigarette.

Nearby, a slightly chubby young girl stands with another group, but her gaze frequently turns toward the cigarette store. She wears a light-colored cotton dress that moves in the summer breeze, and wisps from a curly mop of hair stick to her forehead and neck. She is carrying a bag of large, sweet green grapes and she plucks one and holds it between her teeth before she chews.

She takes three steps toward the young man, who is watching her now. "Would you like a grape?" she says, wondering if she

looks like Theda Bara, as she straightens her dress with her hand. He smiles, flicks the cigarette like Valentino, and accepts the grape.

This is how my parents met. Each was from a family with 10 children, my father the eldest in his, my mother the youngest in hers. Their families had arrived in Baltimore at the turn of the century, and they both considered themselves Americans. I don't know how their relationship continued, or when they got married. I remember hearing about a trip to Ellicott City, Maryland, a town famous for instant weddings, but I can't connect it to the two of them.

There must have been a period when they displayed affection for each other, but by the time I was old enough to notice, their only form of discourse was argument. If divorce had been as available and acceptable then as it is now, I am sure I would not be here to write about their meeting.

My Mother the Baker

My mother was not a good cook, mostly because my father ate only three or four

things. She was, however, an excellent baker. She spent the day before every family gathering creating one of her specialties… crispy cream puffs filled with vanilla custard, cinnamon rolls that made you lick your fingers, frosted sugar cookies that were crisp on the outside and soft inside. Her pièce de résistance—the thing that everyone longed for—was her pineapple-upside-down cake. No boxed cake mix, it was a thing of beauty!

She would wrap herself in her well-worn flowered apron. First, flour, sugar, eggs, butter went into the mixer in the right order. Add vanilla extract, pineapple juice from the can, and a little red juice from the maraschino cherries. When it was blended, she would set the batter aside and prepare the double-size rectangular pan. Melt butter in the warm oven, sprinkle a liberal amount of brown sugar in the pan, and then place pineapple slices in a design. Into and next to each pineapple slice she placed a perfect red cherry, enough so that every grandchild would get a piece of cake with a cherry.

While it baked, the aroma all over the apartment was overwhelming. When time

was up, she'd remove the pan from the oven, place a baking sheet on top, and, holding both together, turn them over so the cake released from the baking pan. It was a moment of danger—one false move and the cake would break apart! The disaster did not occur, and then, we had to wait… and wait… and wait.

The Heat

1950, dead of summer, Washington, D.C. The city was built on a swamp, so the heat was enhanced by rancid moisture coming from the underground dampness. Government office buildings had begun to adopt air conditioning, so employees were eager to get to work, where oppressive outdoor temperatures were put aside during the heat of the day. However, those without a government job were sentenced to suffer, all available windows open in hopes of any sign of a breeze. Clothing, no matter how light, stuck to the skin. Ordinary tasks seemed to take much longer than usual. Things slowed down.

My mother, in her cotton printed housedress and worn-out slippers, moved lethar-

gically, not only because of the heat but also because of the extra 200 pounds she carried on her frame. Movement was exhausting, and the usual chores, like vacuuming, were put off until nighttime or sometimes skipped altogether.

As a six-year-old, I was gifted with an afternoon shower from the apartment's garden sprinkler with all the other children for an hour or so. The mothers hung in the building's shade while kids ran through the hose's pattern again and again, until we were too tired to do anything but sit and wait for the water drops to find us.

What's in a Name?

My mother named me Fradelle. She thought it was fancy. It was a transliteration from Yiddish for Freidl, which, according to her, meant "joy." Her second choice was Florine, also fancy (though more chemical than nature-like), but it went to a cousin born a few weeks before me.

My name was always mispronounced, distorted, or embellished until unrecogniz-

able. We moved a lot, and each time I entered a classroom as the new kid, all eyes on me, I knew the teacher would struggle with my name… Faradel, Fradeel, Feladr, Frodale, etc. I'd watch the faces of my new classmates react with smirks and raised eyebrows.

I learned to tell the teacher that my name was Anne (my middle name). I was Anne all the way until my entrance to college. My dormitory had 20 girls (back in the days of segregated housing), five of them named Anne. We were each asked to choose a new name to avoid confusion, and I became Fredi, the name that has accompanied me through the balance of my 84 years. Fredi fits me—it is succinct, easy to pronounce, and uncomplicated. Best of all, it is not fancy!

Preparations

From the time we found out for sure and realized that action was necessary, his first thought was we needed to practice getting to the hospital, because it was so far away and traffic might be a problem and we definitely needed to scout out different routes—a

responsibility he had to conquer to make this safe and secure for me and to ease my mind, even though traveling to the hospital was really months away and there were hundreds of other things to take care of before the event occurred, like buying a crib and baby clothes and getting to and from all the doctor appointments and even just telling the family the big news, which were undoubtedly going to become my tasks while he worried and planned how to get there. I guess it was his way of handling the future unknown.

Before the day, the baby stuff was in place. Relatives were appropriately excited. We had driven two routes at least 25 times, at different times of day. We were extremely well prepared. On the actual day, there was no traffic. Lucky!

Halfway there, he took a left turn when he should have turned right. We drove in circles for at least three contractions before he knew where we were.

His look of panic disappeared as the nurses rolled me away. When I woke up, he was holding our new daughter.

At 84

My daughter recently said to me, "Your children are grown, your husband and his illnesses are behind you, and now you can make choices you wouldn't have earlier. What do you want to be when you grow up?" I'm trying to figure out the answer.

I am 84 years old, but it's difficult to adjust to that. In the last year, I have had to respond to the loss of my husband of 61 years. I've kept myself occupied with meaningful work, and have remained physically active in spite of aches and pains. I find it easy to forget that I can't walk briskly or bend down to retrieve something that has fallen to the floor. The daily reminders, from twinges to grimaces, help me remember.

It drives me crazy when I misplace something, but it happens less frequently now that I have fewer things to keep track of. I have begun to depend on equipment I never thought I'd need—a walker, an iPhone to help me remember appointments, a chair in the shower. I've had to curb my once hearty appetite, not for beauty but for health's sake. I've also be-

come accustomed to having white hair, and keep it cut short to require less styling. I no longer recognize the face I see in the mirror.

Aging has given me the luxury of time to review what has been really important in my life. For the most part, I find I would change very little of my past. My fondest memories take me back to when my children were small and family life was active and noisy and happy, when I felt necessary and capable and emotionally in control. I love those memories. I'm happy to still be here, aches and all—the alternative only a glimmer on the horizon. I'm determined to enjoy the time I have left with those I cherish and who care for me.

Esther Mugar

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

It was early evening when the steamer docked in Yokohama. For some time I had been watching the glow of the city lights grow brighter on the horizon as the voyage from Siberia came to an end. This city was huge, overwhelming after the restful train ride spanning several days and four time zones from Moscow, across the vast taiga forest and along the shore of Lake Baikal before arriving in Nahodka (at that time the only eastern port of the U.S.S.R. open to foreigners), followed by the sea crossing to Yokohama.

I was nervous. Japan was bustling and expensive, exciting yet intimidating. I was a weary backpacker with limited funds that shrank by the day as the yen climbed against the dollar, with three weeks to go before my flight home to San Francisco. I had sublet my apartment to a Japanese student studying English. Her friend Jonny, who had recently

returned to Yokohama, agreed to meet me at the dock. How would I find him in this crowd? Would he even come? As my eyes scanned the throng, I heard my name shouted out and there he was, waving frantically in his Mickey Mouse shirt. My nervousness turned to joy as I disembarked. Jonny, as excited as I was, gave me a crash course in this foreign culture, showing me how to walk through the crowds, how to find small, unmarked eateries with good cheap food, how to negotiate transit, and how to find street addresses (the building numbers went around each block). By the following day I felt confident enough to head for Tokyo, the address of a student hostel in hand.

The hostel was clean but basic, with dorm rooms for each gender and a traditional bathroom for each. The only other females in residence were a group of teenage students. One was preoccupied with pressing her pleated skirt under her mattress, and two others with applying makeup, but I was by far the biggest attraction. It's doubtful that they had seen naturally curly hair gone wild before and they were clearly impressed.

There was much giggling and pointing until I invited them to comb it and watch it spiral back on itself. That broke the ice, but not enough for me to share a traditional bath with them. I waited until they were asleep to get clean. The bathroom had water spigots spaced along the walls about a foot above the cement floor with a bucket and a tiny stool by each. The idea was to soap up, then fill your bucket from the spigot to rinse off. Only when clean could you get in the communal pool. The soak was glorious and I slept like a baby that night, but the next day I knew that I would have to wash my hair. But how?

After breakfast I had a walk around the neighborhood. When I returned, the gardener was watering the carefully manicured shrubs around the entrance. His hose was cracked and leaking. As I watched, he cut the hose at the crack and left about two feet to dispose of later. In my well-practiced pantomime I asked if I could have the remnant. He handed it to me with that "crazy American" look I had seen many times before. I ran my treasure inside. The girls were gone.

The bathroom was all mine. And, wouldn't you know, the end of that hose fit the spigot perfectly and I was able to shampoo all the grime of the past week out of my naturally curly hair. I carried that hose with me all through the country. Many adventures followed but I always had clean hair.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

Summer Is Over!

When I was growing up in the Bronx, summer meant hot, humid days, droning mosquitoes, a proliferation of indestructible waterbugs emerging from the sewers around dusk, and the odor of stale beer wafting from the neighborhood bars each morning as doors were propped open to air out the excesses of the previous evening.

Occasionally my uncle would organize a Sunday trip to Jones Beach. We'd leave at 7 a.m. and return in the early afternoon to beat the traffic. That gave us a couple of good hours to frolic in the surf and enjoy a picnic lunch before heading back to the sweltering car, our toes caked with sand and our clothing plastered to our damp

bodies. There was no air conditioning, not in cars and not in houses, except for the cumbersome window unit that occupied a place of honor in the living room. Then there were the subways: the stations malodorous, the trains either devoid of breathable air or frigid after the introduction of air conditioning in my teen years.

When I just couldn't take it anymore, I moved to San Francisco, where summer lasts about two weeks in early September. Perfect. "Dress in layers" is the summer mantra. From mid-June through August, mornings are cool and foggy, with only a glimpse of the sun in late afternoon before the wind rises and carries the fog back in. Better have your fleece and a windbreaker at hand, especially if your plans included an evening game at Candlestick.

First Memory

I lie wide awake in my crib. The room is dark except for bits of street light that edge the blinds on the windows opposite. My mother is hosting her women's club in the living

room. It's supposed to be a sewing circle, but with all the food, drink, and gossip, there's little place for anything else.

Suddenly the door to my room opens and one of my "aunties" steps inside. She stands between my crib and the window, struggling to pull off her girdle. Her hips and shoulders gyrate in slow motion as she works, sounds of exertion escaping. Finally, success: a sigh of relief, the straightening of clothes, and the exit of auntie as she reenters the world of laughter and light.

This is my memory, a snapshot recorded in my mind's eye. I know the moment to be true as no one else was present, unlike the memory of sitting in my highchair, cheering my mother on as she chased a mouse with a broom, sweeping it out the front door and down the first of five flights of stairs leading to the street. That story was told and retold with embellishments along the way.

Then there were the photos—albums and boxes of black-and-white and, later, color images documenting special occasions, new outfits, get togethers. My memories are built around these photos and the stories that go

with. As I grew older and had experiences in different places, photos usually recorded the event. Later, much later, there were home movies, then videos.

As an adult I pursued professional photography for several years. I found that my most successful images evoked a mood created by lighting and composition as well as subject matter. Even though I avoided digital manipulation, the viewer still saw the image through my eyes.

Are the only "pure" memories the ones unadulterated by the viewpoints of others? If so, how do we know what's real? When we remember something through the filter of a photo or someone's description, is it really our memory or just a piece of the narrative that we've adapted to define ourselves?

Corrine Sacks

New York Beach

I was among the lucky ones—we lived near the ocean, at the end of Coney Island in Brooklyn. It was lovely year round—even in fall, when hurricanes drove the water up the street in great waves. But in summer, in those years without air conditioning, living one block from the water was a privilege. As a teenager, it was obligatory to spend as much time as possible on the beach with your friends, gossiping, criticizing, and generally being obnoxious, as teenagers will.

Being a member of the herd required me to be there—and I would dutifully put on my bathing suit, get my blanket, and out I'd go. I always carried a small bottle of oil mixed with iodine. You see, I have skin that turns red and blisters in the sun. There was no sunscreen then, and I used this concoction in an attempt to coat the skin so it wouldn't burn. I loved the water, and when I wasn't talking to my friends or flirting with the gangly, big-footed, awkward boys who were try-

ing to get our attention, I would spend all the time in the ocean. I swam like a fish, loved riding the waves and floating back from wherever those waves took me. But I paid a price for this pleasure with shoulders coated with salt, blisters, and red, peeling skin.

One year I had a Saturday night date with a good-looking guy who was willing to travel to my house (in those days the boy came and picked you up, and returned you to your parents later that night). This guy would have to take a subway train and two buses to get to my house. No mean feat, this showed sincere interest. With that in mind, I came back from the beach early to prepare for my big date.

After showering I made a terrible discovery: my shoulders were so sore, red, and blistered that I couldn't stand having the slightest pressure on them—no bra, no cloth, nothing. Mom and I picked out a sundress that would work with a strapless bra, but the pain was so bad that Mom had to cover my shoulders with vinegar to soothe them, the only medication available.

So there I was—dressed up, hair and makeup perfect, and smelling like a pickle.

Stuart Span

The Prized Possession

When I worked at Roger's Gardens in Newport Beach, I wrote a handbook called *Growing Roses in Southern California.* Lots of people write books on roses, but mine is one of the few that concentrates on Southern California. I was proud of the book. People in my family were better educated and made more money, but I was the only one who'd written a book.

One day a lady walked up to me with my book. She said she'd checked it out of the library. I would like to see the library's card catalog:

Shakespeare – *Hamlet,* etc.
Shelley – *Frankenstein*
Span – *A [Lousy] Way to Grow Roses*

But that handbook is my prized possession. I have other achievements, such as California Certified Nurseryman, Consulting Rosarian for the California Rose Society, television interviews and newspaper articles on my work. Nothing compares to my prized

possession, my book. I've carried the book everywhere I have lived as an adult. It is in my room at Frank Residences.

Richmond, Virginia, 1942

When I was 10 years old, I used to walk to the Grand Theatre on Broad Street. I'd go up to the counter to buy a ticket and dig into my pocket for the 12 cents to get in. The Grand Theatre played Westerns along with about six cartoons and a serial. They sold popcorn in the lobby for 10 cents, and that was how I spent my Saturday afternoons.

Now that I am 91, I still think of those afternoons. I watch TV, and all I see is war, crime, and Donald Trump. I wish I was 10 again, when life was sweet and easy, and I watched Johnny Mack Brown, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and those weekly serials.

In the Navy

When I was 18 years old and in the Navy, I was stationed in Virginia at Oceana Naval Air Station, in Security. I was on

Gate Watches. I had never shot a gun before, but had to carry a loaded .45. They showed me how to use it—if someone attacked at the gate, I was to shoot him in the stomach because the head moves and is harder to hit. The .45 will blow his stomach out. All that made me sick as hell, but I served my country and got an honorable discharge with no great war stories to tell.

A Freeway Through the Street

As a boy in Richmond, Virginia, I did not get along with my parents and couldn't wait until I was old enough to leave. Many years later, my wife picked up the phone and cried. I said, "What's wrong?" and she said my mother had died. All I said was, "Too bad!"

A few years after that I was back in Richmond and thought I would drive by my old house. It wasn't there anymore; they had built a freeway through the street. I thought I would call my mother and tell her. But then a tear dropped from my eye. I realized she was dead.

A Great Man

When my grandfather arrived in this country from Lithuania at age 17, he enlisted in the Army. He said his name was Peter Span. I don't think there are any Peter Spans in Lithuanian phone books. He made the Army his career, which gained him his citizenship. He served with "Teddy Bear" Roosevelt in the Spanish American War in Cuba. My grandfather was wounded, with shrapnel in his head, but refused to go back to the States for treatment because he didn't want a medical discharge—he wanted to stay in the Army. When he married my grandmother, he retired from the Army. They had three kids—my father, his brother and sister. My grandfather was about six feet tall and never fat, even in later years. He was always in military shape. He died when he was 78 years old, and still looked like he could beat up anybody in the room. I miss him to this day.

Michael Thaler

My German Lessons

At the end of World War II, my parents and I found ourselves among other survivors of the Holocaust in a Displaced Persons camp near Linz, the capital of Upper Austria—and incidentally Hitler's hometown. Father had been elected treasurer of the committee that governed the camp, and Mother helped with retraining the younger women for employment; I was left free to hang out with a handful of other unsupervised children in the camp.

This ideal arrangement (from my perspective) lasted for more than a year. Days after my bar mitzvah in the camp recreation barrack, Father confronted me: "As far as I can tell, you have nothing to do all day but play ping-pong in the rec hall or soccer with a *schmatta* ball in the street. Soon you'll turn into a hooligan." "What's a hooligan?" I countered, to change the subject. Next morning, Mother dressed me in my Sabbath outfit—white shirt, tie, long pants, polished

black shoes. I asked her what's up, and Father cut in, peering closely at me over the top of his glasses. "Instead of going to the office today, I've made other arrangements. I'm taking you to a school in the city." Having never attended school, I was intimidated, but as a budding hooligan, didn't let on how I felt.

We got off the bus in front of an ancient three-story stone edifice with *Realschule* carved on the entrance above the trace of a recently removed swastika. Father and I mounted the wide spiraling stairs to the top floor, and entered a large, well-lighted room lined with bookshelves that rose to the ceiling. A gray-haired man emerged from behind a massive desk and smiled at us under an enormous mustache that made him look like Kaiser Franz Joseph in my stamp collection. He and my father spoke in German, so I understood not a word. At last, they shook hands and we left. "You are now enrolled as a *Gastschüler,* a guest student," Father announced as we walked out of the building. "Just sit in the back, keep your ears open and your mouth shut, and you will begin to understand what's going on." "But I don't

speak German," I pleaded. Father nodded. "Don't worry. The principal arranged a tutor who will give you lessons in German twice a week. The tutor was once a top Nazi, so they can't employ him officially, but the principal assured me he's an excellent teacher."

The tutor and I met Tuesdays and Thursdays in an abandoned chemistry lab. We perched on high stools and leaned against lab benches with dusty black Formica tops. He was younger than Father, very elegant and formal. "Every Tuesday you will hand in a *Komposition,* which I will correct in red ink and give you a grade on Thursday," he enunciated slowly in German, which I even more slowly deconstructed into my primitive Yiddish. After an hour with my Nazi, I proceeded to an assigned class and sat in the back, attracting over-the-shoulder glances from curious boys. This went on for three months; each week my German improved and I was beginning to match the students' faces with their names. But my *Komposition* bled red ink and earned grades of *"nicht genügend* [unsatisfactory]." Finally came a Thursday when there was less red ink, and a

single word below the text: *"genügend."* "Does this mean we can stop the lessons?" I asked. He nodded. "*Sehr genügend!* [Very satisfactory!]," I exclaimed, and climbed down from my perch. He wagged a finger at me. "You don't understand. This is truly a great day for you. *Kommen Sie mit!* [Come along!]"

We went down the winding stair to a cellar. The tutor turned on a naked bulb encased in cobwebs. Shelves bearing mildewed volumes of student records, each denoted with a year on its spine, ran along the rough-hewn stone foundation of the building. The tutor pulled out a tome with "1904" on its spine. "*Da! Lesen Sie!* [Here! Read!]" He pointed with the red-ink-stained finger to an entry on a moldy, yellowed page. *"Adolf Hitler, Deutsche Sprache, Nicht Genügend,"* I read. "Congratulations," he said, and almost imperceptibly clicked his heels. "Today, your German is superior to the Führer's!"

The next Tuesday morning, I slept in. When my bewildered mother woke me up, I announced, "I don't need to go to that school anymore. My German is better than Hitler's!"

Gimpel's Revenge

Gimpel the Fool was the certified crazy in our shtetl. On rainy days, he was a source of amusement for the children, and perhaps provided merriment for not a few adults as well. You see, Gimpel carried on a feud with sparrows, little gray birds that sat around the potholes in the road that cut through our town from Poland to Russia. The birds appeared each fall when rains filled the holes to overflowing. As if on a signal, the entire host would plunge their sharp black beaks into the muddy water and spear the kernels of wheat that fell when the wagons bounced as they traversed the depressions in the road.

Gimpel the Fool would approach the circle of swallows stealthily, leaning forward with short, gliding, silent strides, arms pressed against his thin body, hands clenched, his gaze fixed on some distant horizon, as if sneaking up without directly looking at the birds would catch the jittery creatures by surprise. Suddenly, with a cry of "*Ya sie msciu!* [Revenge!]," he would lunge at the avian assembly, aiming to trap a bird within his grasp. *"Ya sie msciu!"* he would yell again, as if to justify his Fool's errand, each time coming

up empty as the birds escaped to their perches on the wires between telephone poles along the road. *"Ya sie msciu! Ya sie msciu!"* yelled the children crowded around windows for the show, hoping to experience the moment when Gimpel finally got his revenge. Nobody knew nor inquired about Gimpel's feud with the birds. The adults just shrugged: "What do you expect from a meshuggeneh?" We kids dubbed him with a new name: Yasiemsciu.

The summer arrived and with it came the Germans. All day long and through the entire night, steel-gray columns of tanks, motorized artillery, and armored trucks loaded with expressionless helmeted soldiers churned eastward toward the Russian border under the gaze of the sparrows, plowing up the surface of the road until the potholes disappeared. The Einsatzgruppen followed within days, rounding up and shooting Jews and "communists." We kids huddled in ingeniously concealed "bunkers" under our houses or hid in the wheat fields.

By October, the unstoppable Wehrmacht had advanced 1,000 kilometers eastward to-

ward Moscow and the SS established a ghetto in our shtetl. Rain fell most days that autumn, but we kids were deprived of Yasiemsciu's antics. No one had seen him since the Germans occupied the shtetl, and we all assumed his luck had finally run out. To tell the truth, even the kids realized our days were numbered, except for a few dreamers who clung to the hope the Germans would be pushed all the way back to our shtetl before they murdered us all. Rumors of the first German defeat, at the battle of Stalingrad, provided a slim possibility a handful might survive the SS, the hunger, and the cold long enough to be rescued by the Red Army.

A group of young men and women formed a partisan brigade. They had said goodbye to parents and younger siblings, likely forever, and cut off all contact with the ghetto. On a sunny summer day in 1943, the dreaded covered wagons of the SS with blackened windows arrived from district headquarters and began the final roundup *(Judenrein Aktion)* for the march to the Jewish cemetery. Suddenly, shots sounded from the forest and wheat fields. Through peepholes in the bunkers, we

recognized several boys running from tree to tree as they shot at the Germans. "*Juden Waffen!* [Jews have weapons!]" the Germans shouted in astonishment as they dove for shelter. The encounter ended quickly, and the SS drove away to return and finish their mission with even greater zeal.

We stayed in our bunkers for a few hours, and once we emerged, turned our eyes toward the road. Two bodies, intertwined like a Greek statue, lay in the brown mud. A few of the kids, myself included, snuck out later that night to hide under bushes in the garden of a nearby monastery. Just after dawn, a German army truck arrived and a quartet of soldiers in the steel-gray uniforms of the regular Wehrmacht headed for the corpses on the road. They lifted the inseparable pair of corpses and doused them with buckets of water. Instantly we recognized Yasiemsciu, his frozen face lit up with his familiar crooked smile. Even in death, it radiated deep joy. One arm grasped the throat of a black-clad SS man, the other stretched as if in a mock Nazi salute. The fist held a dead sparrow. You see, Gimpel the Fool revenged us all!

Janet Underwood

Middle Name

When I was born, my name was Janet B. Shapiro. As I grew up, I often asked my mother what the "B" stood for. She said, "Oh, it could be anything —Beth, Betty, or whatever." I asked why she gave me an initial and not a full name. She didn't have an answer.

"Call yourself whatever you want," she said. "Beatrice is nice," she said.

"But why didn't you give me a name?" I would ask. She could never reply except to say B. would help to identify me if there was another Janet Shapiro.

I just always said my name was Janet B. Shapiro. Now I ask you—how hard would it have been to give me a name instead of only an initial?

In Line at Safeway

A small incident in my life constantly comes up in my mind. Why does it constantly come up?

I was in Safeway, alone. I was in the checkout

line and placed my groceries on the conveyor belt. Then I placed onto the belt the "stick" they provide to separate one person's items from the next in line. The woman behind me picked up the stick and put it sideways on the conveyor belt so it didn't separate my food choices from hers. I thought, Doesn't she know what the stick is for?

So I picked it up and placed it after my groceries, as before. She again picked it up and put it on the side. I didn't say anything. I thought perhaps she had no understanding of the purpose of the stick. We repeated this folly again. I thought, What if I put my purse on the belt instead of the stick—would she pick it up?

I did, and she didn't touch my purse. I took a look at her face for the first time. She appeared agitated and angry. I didn't understand what had just happened.

Mom's Cooking

My mother was raised in lower Manhattan by her mother, who cooked in the restaurant she owned. As a child, my mother would come home from school, sit down, and be

served her meals. My mom never saw food prepared, so when she married my father, the story goes, she hid behind the kitchen door hoping to catch a glimpse of him making the morning coffee. She had no idea how that was done.

As a very young child, I just ate what was served. But as I grew up, I tended to hate dinner time, which was repetitious. Mom would put a piece of meat, whether it be steak or lamb or veal, into the broiler a half hour before my father got home from work. Then she opened two cans of vegetables, peas or carrots or whatever, and pour the contents, water included, into a bowl, never thinking that they would taste better warm. She'd take a whole head of lettuce, cut it in quarters, and place it on a salad plate. Then she'd add a tomato, sliced, and maybe a cucumber, shaved and sliced. This was "salad," without salad dressing.

I grew up with no interest in food and would eat anything I was served. This annoyed my husband, who was a terrific cook. He would exclaim, "Why do I bother? You'll eat anything!"

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