

Shoshana Levenberg

A Life

The thought roused her, lapping persistently at her consciousness: was her mother braver than she? This woman, her mother, timid and lackluster in the raucous brilliance of their family, bought a rope (none to be found in a scholar's home), learned how to tie a knot (no sailors here), slipped one end through the chandelier that never got dusted, tied it securely to the doorknob, stood on a chair, slipped the noose around her neck and kicked over the back of the chair. Did she panic when the noose tightened and she knew for certain there was no going back? Or was she unflinching as she outstared death? An uncharacteristic empathy and generosity washed over Naomi as the tide of pills pulled her out to the vastness; yes, in this, their deaths, her mother was the braver one.

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I didn't find Naomi until the next day. We were supposed to meet for breakfast, but she didn't show up or answer my increasingly frantic calls to her cell and home numbers. My cousin was pathologically punctual and never flakey. So I went over to her tiny apartment on a quiet, tree-lined street in New York's West Village. No one answered when I banged on the door, but I could feel her in there. I'm not sure what I thought, the dread filling my airways like a noxious gas, making it hard to breathe. I used my key and opened the door slowly, calling her name, "Naomi, Naomi, are you here?" I didn't really expect an answer, and there was none.

She lay on top of her bed, lightly covered by the beautiful, intricately crocheted brown and orange afghan she bought in Italy, the empty pill bottles neatly arranged on the table next to her. She didn't in the slightest look like she was

asleep; her thick lips, always in motion, seemed carved in wax; large expressive eyes, her best feature our aunts used to say, staring inertly.

“Oh, Naomi,” the words whooshed from my lungs as I sank down on the side of the bed. I sat there, pity suspending all action and thought. My poor small, dark Naomi, unloved as a child, unlovable as an adult. An overwhelming fatigue crept up my body as my head sank into the pillow and I stretched out next to her.

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We were twelve the autumn her father sent her to stay with my mom and dad and me in a small town in Pennsylvania. She found her mother’s body, lifelessly held by a noose in the bedroom of their Brooklyn brownstone. It sounds tragic and horrific to say it baldly like that, but at the time it was just part of my life. I thought it was kinda fun to have a ready-made sister to alleviate the loneliness of my only-child state. My mom instructed me to “Be nice to your cousin because she’s very sad,” but I scarcely heard the words, filtered as they were through my pre-pubescent day-dreams of confidences and adventures.

I was on the cusp between the delicious freedom of a childhood crammed with baseball and bicycles, where I could travel seamlessly from the men’s world of scholarship and ideas, to the women’s domain of family and home in the orthodox Jewish world I inhabited, and the restrictive role of an observant Jewish young woman. I’d fought fiercely to broaden my horizons, insisting, to my family’s horror, on transferring to a public school from the intellectually challenging but socially constraining yeshiva, a private religious school. Now, even the secular world was betraying me, insisting on my “young lady-hood.” I was not going gracefully.

My erudite, handsome uncle, Eli, drove the three hours from New York in a borrowed car to deliver Naomi on an early Sunday afternoon. My mom, kind-hearted, bustled about,

trying to make Naomi feel at home, food being the surest way to love and comfort. She turned to Eli, smiling broadly, and said, “Of course you’ll stay for dinner,” trying for a declarative statement but not quite succeeding.

Naomi, leaning beseechingly into her father, pleaded, “Tati...”

Eli replied, “Thank you, thank you, for your generosity, for everything, I’d love to, of course, but Samuel is waiting at home, his babysitter can’t stay the night.” It had been decided that Naomi’s younger brother, Samuel, would stay with his father because, as a boy, it was too important that his studies not be interrupted. At the mention of her brother, Naomi’s eyes darkened and, unnoticed by her father, she withdrew into herself. A few minutes of hushed conversation with my mother, a quick kiss on Naomi’s curly head, and he was gone. The only time he came back was six months later to pick her up.

Naomi was the darling of the rabbis at the yeshiva. Although there was a large orthodox Jewish community, surprisingly so for such a small town, we were in the backwater of Jewish thought and scholarship. Naomi, whose gifted mind and—by our provincial standards—rigorous training made her a worthy successor to our grandfather, who had been a well-known rabbi and scholar. The teachers had given up on me, muttering in Yiddish about my grandfather spinning in his grave as I blithely careened from one scrape to the next. For a brief time Naomi was a star, unfolding and softening in the warmth of the focused attention. Yet my most vivid memory of her from that time was waiting for the mailman, her wounded eyes searching for the envelope bearing Eli’s distinctive handwriting, a rare gem hidden amid the bills and advertisements.

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The urgent wail of a siren brought me back. I reached out and touched her face, the flesh unyielding beneath my fingers. My watch said a half hour had passed. I needed to

call someone. 911. I needed to call 911. But there's no emergency, I thought, the emergency is long past. My mind sluggishly began to function.

"I need to report a suicide," the words coming out calmly and competently into my cell phone. I watched from somewhere near the ceiling as I gave all of the details and waited for the paramedics. My other cousin. I needed to call him. I rarely referred to Naomi's brother by name, the same name as our illustrious grandfather. If pressed I'd call him by his full title, "Samuel the Younger, Prince Regent of the Goldstein Throne." It made Naomi giggle. Every time.

"Sammy," I began, even now unable to resist needling him: I knew he hated the diminutive. "Sammy, Mimi's dead." Unconsciously using her childhood nickname made me feel small and forlorn. "I'm here in her apartment. She took pills, I think. The paramedics are on their way. What should I do? Where..."

"Naomi? Dead? But I just saw her, last month it was, I think. It's not possible." He shook his head, a noble horse dislodging a pesky fly. "Pills," he said slowly, the truth beginning to permeate the wall of disbelief. Not again. It can't be. He didn't remember much of his mother's death—he was only eight—just the vague feeling of shame shrouding his family. They never talked about it. He didn't even know how his father, may his name be for a blessing, got his mother buried in the orthodox Jewish cemetery. Suicides were not allowed.

"Sara? I don't know anything about her wishes or even her affairs. We weren't that close. You probably know more about what she wanted. Would she want that rabbi, what's his name, to officiate? Maybe you should organize it. Money isn't a problem; of course I'll pay. After all, she was my only sister."

I let the silence lengthen until it was just a little too uncomfortable. "Okay, I'll do it, but only if you let everyone in the family know; I'll give you the details to pass on." I

had extricated myself from my certifiably crazy family in early adulthood. I'd do this for Naomi, but keeping family contact to a minimum was, I thought, a fair condition. And she wouldn't want the little prick in charge.

Even though I was in my fifties, I had the good fortune to never have arranged a funeral. But I was always efficient and organized. The first step is the rabbi. What is his name? David. David Wishninsky. I knew they had a contentious relationship but he would know who should be contacted. Naomi had often tried to draw me into the Jewish renewal movement but I was an unreconstructed apostate and kept my distance. She never went to rabbinical school, even in the last decade when it was a serious possibility, still bitter that her education as a girl had been a second-class one. Nevertheless, her writings and activism made it possible for a whole new generation of women to join the rabbinate. David's number was in her cell phone. "Rabbi Wishninsky. This is Sara Goldstein, Naomi's cousin. I have bad news." I paused, not quite ready to say the words, to give them flesh and substance.

"Yes," said Rabbi David. "What is it?" he gently prodded.

"It's Naomi. She's dead. Pills. I'm here, at the apartment."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That's terrible. When? When did it happen?"

"I'm here. Still here. Now. At the apartment. Waiting. Paramedics." I didn't seem capable of full sentences, their doughy weight pressing in on me.

"Is anyone with you? Shall I come over?"

The kindness in his voice was undoing me. "No, no thanks. But if you could help me arrange the funeral..." my voice trailing off.

"Of course," he said. "Did she have a will? Leave any instructions?"

"No," I mumbled, unsure of myself now. "We never

discussed such things. I don't know what she wanted. I'll look around and see if I can find any legal documents. There's no note."

"Okay," Rabbi David replied, his professional manner slipping smoothly into place. "You do that. Would you like me to notify members of the community? Officiate?"

"Yes, please." I said gratefully. "I'll call the friends in her address book."

"She was a brilliant woman. Such a clear thinker," he expanded. "We argued often, but I always came away with my ideas sharpened by the clarity of that diamond-hard intelligence. A bit death-obsessed, perhaps."

Suddenly I was furious. You'd be a bit death-obsessed too, pal, if you found your mother hanging from the end of a rope when you were twelve. I choked down the rage, aware at the same time that Naomi, never one to soften an edge, would have said exactly what she thought. "I hear the paramedics coming. I'll call you back." And, in fact, I did hear the heavy footfalls and knock announcing the paramedics.

The two paramedics, one a short, heavy-set Latina and the other a tall, thin white woman—a female Mutt and Jeff—were kind and efficient. The Latina gently suggested that I stand in the tiny kitchen while they removed the body, aware that the concreteness of the act might be hard to watch. I knew she was right but felt that I owed it to Naomi, that someone owed it to her to witness her passage. The sound of the zipper closing on the heavy, black vinyl bag echoes still in my mind's ear: it is the sound of finality.

The apartment felt close and airless after they left. I quickly locked it up and walked uptown to a quiet coffee-house in Chelsea. Armed with a notebook and a cell phone, I began with the coroner's office. The funeral home would be Jewish, of course, and the details somewhat simplified because the rituals were proscribed for equality in death: a plain pine coffin, a white shroud. Yet the minutiae of death

in America were mind numbing: a service at the funeral home or the synagogue (synagogue would be bigger); how many limousines (3); how many copies of the death certificate (6); motorcycle escort or no (yes); what music (maybe Fran would know).

Fran. Omigod, I have to call Fran. They had been together for nearly five years, the longest and most significant relationship in Naomi's life—that is, after the drearily predictable string of unavailable older men.

“Fran. It's Sara. Oh, sweet Jesus, Fran, Naomi is dead.” Not waiting for a response, the whole story, not showing up for breakfast, finding her body, the paramedics, all of it came rushing out.

“What? What? Slow down. Where are you?”

“A coffeehouse in Chelsea. Making calls.”

“Come over here,” Fran, ever-hospitable, bid me. “We'll do it together. Sandy won't mind.” Sandy, her current partner, was incredibly tolerant of Naomi's continued reliance on Fran to entice her from the dark caves of her depressions. Sandy was fundamentally kind in a way that made people smile and want to be around her, warming themselves in her goodness. And she was good for Fran, after the disaster that had been Fran and Naomi. Naomi's swings between neediness and emotional impenetrability were exhausting. The quick, biting wit and intellectual honesty that endeared her to so many of her readers were less endearing when directed, unleavened, at oneself. It was a long five years, crisis upon crisis. I loved my cousin, but the truth is that I liked Fran better.

I took a cab crosstown to the East Side apartment where Fran and Sandy lived in an old building, whose glory days, though long past, could still be glimpsed in the lobby's marble flooring and walnut paneling of the creaky elevator with the iron gate. Sandy quickly opened the door to my timid knock and I was swathed in the comforting, mingled smells of coffee, frying onions, and books. Books were

everywhere, in the bookcases lining most of the walls, in piles on the desks, chairs, and tables. Sandy gently pushed me into an overstuffed armchair, and without a word, handed me a cup of coffee and a huge plate of scrambled eggs. Obediently, I shoveled down the food, simultaneously realizing just how hungry I was.

Fran sat on the couch across from me, waiting until I finished eating. We looked at each other for a long moment, then her eyes slid away from mine as she asked, “Tell me what needs to be done.”

“Fran, it’s not your fault.”

She flicked away my clumsy attempt at comfort. “I hadn’t seen her in weeks. I just needed a break. Maybe, if I...”

I moved across to the couch, held her hands in mine and made her look at me. I knew what she really meant. “Fran. Even if you hadn’t left her—and you were choking in that relationship—it wouldn’t have stopped her. It wouldn’t have changed anything. It’s like her soul was unhappy. I don’t know what makes us the way we are. Sure, her childhood sucked. I think her mother’s suicide left a track in a path that should not have footprints, gave her permission to see it as a solution. But there was something in her that couldn’t take in love even when it was offered, like she was missing a critical enzyme to digest it.”

As I talked, Fran leaned into me and we held each other. I could see Sandy over Fran’s shoulder. She mouthed “Thank you” as she quietly slipped back into the kitchen. We slowly disengaged, straightening scarves and shirts, and, like dueling cowboys of the old west, drew our cell phones and began making calls.

The funeral would be impressive. She was, after all, a public figure. They would come in the hundreds: those whose lives she touched through her writings, those for whom she was a pioneer, a fierce warrior. Our family would be well represented, rows of men in dark suits and wrinkled

white shirts, women in unfashionably high-necked dresses and scarves covering their offending hair, swarms of children dressed as miniatures of their parents. There would even be a few reporters, a small obit in *The New York Times*. Fran would be there, out of respect, for who she was, for who they had been, and Sandy as well. And men and women who thought of themselves as her friends. But would anyone mourn her, would anyone wake in the chill dawn and taste the emptiness where she had been, would anyone turn and say, look, over there, forgetting for a moment her passing, before the weight of her absence presses down? Not even me. I'd think of her in the years to come with a sad shake of my head: a life wasted, barren of love. Did her fierce courage provide a counterweight in the cosmic balance? Tell me, please, what is the measure of a life?