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The Hobbyist: A Scientific Examination

BETTE PESE SKY

Abstract

Mrs. T. has killed her spastic child. Mrs. T. was driven to the limits of her endurance. We’ll stick by her, the neighbors said. She is a saint. Due to a temporary loss of spirit, I am empty. As empty as the mysterious Mrs. T. Drained of those highly touted life juices.

I feel much better now, thank you. It was quite a shock, of course. Seeing the blood and all. Bludgeoned, just as the papers said. Terrible thing. Poor Mrs. T. Driven to the limits of her endurance.

Mrs. Settle has wished that Mr. Settle’s father would die. She had wished it for a long time, and finally, Mr. Settle’s father died. Then she looked at the faces of her own children and wondered if they wished she would die. It was only natural, the turning of the generations.

Take a deep breath, he said. I won’t let you drown. Cross your heart and hope to die, she said. Damned right.

This is basically an account of how Mrs. Settle drowned, the killing of Mrs. T.’s spastic child or the patricide of Cissie S.

First of all, let me tell you that I am all right. In top, top condition despite all that has happened to me. Also, despite the fact that people whom I know seem to be acting in inexplicable ways. For instance, Cissie S. is a patricide. Her father lies on the kitchen floor, a knife in his back. The floor is strewn with glass. Poor Cissie was driven to the limits of her endurance. Nevertheless, I am all right.

Materials and Methods

Sociologists have at last come into their own. When I was a child, my parents often took me to those evenings of family entertainments at my father’s lodge or to the vast Legion Hall. Always I waited for the conjurer of homely facts. The man who would stand with hand clutching his forehead and ask, “Is there a gentleman in the audience with the initials S. J.?” From that high point, he would go on to guess your age, birthday, occupation. I hoped that he would choose me, but the conjurer never did. There are, although at the time I didn’t know it, few worthy facts ascertainable about a child or secrets hidden in his
wallet. “Miss L. M. in your handbag there is ... let me see ... it's coming ... yes, it's a handkerchief. A handkerchief with a small embroidered flower. I believe that it's a rose. Yes, a blue rose.” A gorgeous communal gasp was emitted as Miss L. M. wafted her handkerchief aloft. A white handkerchief with a small blue rose.

Your grandparents’ apartment must be vacated by the thirtieth, my husband says. Either do it or don’t.

Of course, I will do it. It is part of the modern spirit to be unselfish. First, I assemble the materials: broom, mop, pail, sponges, Comet Cleanser, Spic and Span, plastic trash bags.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother went to California to live in Venice Beach with her sister-in-law Aurelia. My grandmother is seventy-three but in good health and a sturdy woman. I have no heart for the debris of my life, she wrote to me. I have packed my clothes and a few staples of existence to contribute to Aurelia’s housekeeping. Here is the key to the apartment. Please close up, sell, or otherwise dispose of all that is there. Love, Grandmother.

Without sentiment, my mother says sadly when I read the letter to her. Nevertheless, you must do it. She would not want me poking among her things. My mother and her mother had fallen out many years ago over issues that had no meaning to me. It was the classic quarrel over who had done what to whom and the order of the doing.

Previous account of the apartment to be vacated.

“It’s quite a nice apartment,” Mrs. Carewe said and began measuring off the living room with her feet. It looked like a professional thing to do, but she had no idea how to translate a 7½ shoe into the proper length of the room.

“A find,” Mrs. Ploughton agreed and amiably paced off the width. “Convenient,” Mrs. Laurelton said. “And not too expensive.”

“Well, they’re not exactly poor,” Mrs. Carewe said and stopped counting her feet. “As a matter of fact, he is doing all right, considering all.”

Mrs. Laurelton smiled brightly. “Lovely bedrooms,” she said and then at once regretted the observation. It was, after all, bedrooms that had caused all the problems.

“Yes,” Mrs. Carewe said. “Very sunny for the children.” She cleared her throat.

Time for examining, cleaning, and vacating the apartment will be between ten in the morning and four in the afternoon. I do not want
you in that neighborhood after dark, my husband says. Muggers, rapists, junkies are in abundance.

*Current account of the apartment to be vacated.*

There is little of value in my grandparents' apartment. My grandfather had been a follower of Plekhanov and Axelrod. His lack of interest in possessions had been a thoroughly held belief untouched by the later changing customs of his family.

I do not know why I was chosen to vacate the apartment. I am not a favored grandchild. I seldom visited the apartment, and before in the flurry of family dinners and affairs, I had never really looked at anything. Now, I am astonished that my grandmother actually packed her clothes and maybe a pot or two and abandoned everything. What courage.

Contents of the apartment will be disposed in the following ways. The living room furniture will be taken by a small, borrowed truck to an Hadassah Thrift Shop. Much will be abandoned as garbage. Bills, pictures, letters, great mounds of paper I rip up until my hands ache. This fits in with my peculiar notion about personal papers that they must at the very least be torn in half in case a stray breeze carries them uncharred by an incinerator to the scene of crime.

Picture of unknown elderly couple found clutched in hand of father of Cissie S. Bill for refrigerator on floor near battered body of spastic child.

Nearly half the letters of my grandparents are written in English, and I attempt to read them. They are about Ossipovich, emancipation, Kazan, Kuibyshev, Krasnoarmeysk, Sirion, semantic arguments, scandal, will Jair marry Beulah, Sholono's divorce. Their complexity frightens me.

My mother had married a Scotsman, a Protestant. But that was not the occasion of the falling out with her parents. However, raised in my father's faith and ways and seldom seeing my grandparents, I try to avoid prying.

*Description of the people.*

My grandfather died at age eighty-two. He was a tall, remote man who had not been happy these last years. And he had, in the opinion of the family, welcomed death. He had been buried according to his instructions in a non-sectarian cemetery with neither ceremony nor eulogy (a man must not weaken in the end) in a single plot. When my grandmother dies, she will be buried in California as she has
requested in the orthodox manner. She, after all, is as deep and twisting as he. They had been married forty-eight years.

My grandfather had very few clothes, and they were not in good condition. I pack them in large plastic bags for throwing out. I have been working at my task for a day and a half. I could have finished sooner, but my husband insists that I leave the building before dark. Muggers, rapists, and junkies lurk. When I pass other occupants of this building, I cling to the wall and move warily as do they. The next tenant waiting anxiously for occupancy has visited the apartment. By mutual agreement and no exchange of cash I would leave her the remaining furniture in the bedroom, the stove, the refrigerator, and the formica topped table with four matching chairs.

Account of grandmother incidental to the study.

One of the sore points of a marriage clearly not made in heaven was my grandfather's hobby. He was meshugga, my grandmother declared. A disgrace to the family. What would people say? This, of course, is how to view this woman. She is wiping her hands on a white apron, a short, stocky woman in the middle of an emotional jeremiad. Worrying about the neighbors. Worrying about appearance. It's a good act. A damned blue rose.

My grandmother yearned to be a martyr. With her brother she had helped to run a secret printing press and had fled to this country after a conspiracy failed. For my grandmother, everything that followed was unreal. When she was angry, she berated her husband's agnosticism, the weakness of his politics as compared to hers, and his inability to become rich. The man, she declared, is torment to my soul. My grandfather's hobby was collecting dust.

Serendipity.

I find the collection in four specially constructed cardboard cartons beneath my grandfather's bed. Each box has layers of cardboard, and each layer is subdivided like an egg crate except that the spaces are miniature, and in every space is a tiny bottle neatly labelled.

I am filled with joy. I sit cross-legged on the floor. It is wonderful. The collection was real. I had always supposed that it was an imagined imprecation of my grandmother. I haul the cartons into the kitchen and call my mother. Yes, she says. It was true. Father always collected dust. A very idiosyncratic man. But it's perfect, I say. And he put the dust into labelled bottles. Did you know that? I guess I did, my mother says, but I've forgotten. I haven't thought about it in years. My father was an odd man.
Discussion

My grandfather was an odd man. I pull out a bottle. The writing is tiny but visible, and the ink has faded to brown. From the hallway. Our apartment 8A. April 12, 1917. I hold the glass up to the light. Grey fuzzy dust. The dustmop variety.

There were bottles with addresses on them covering decades. Dust from everywhere. Dust marking momentous events. From the offices of T. S. Rich & Company. July 12, 1924. Why from there? I would write my grandmother.

I could not go through the thousands of bottles. So I carried them, one box at a time because of their weight, down the two flights of stairs and put them into the trunk of my car next to a few books I'd rescued and a framed wedding picture of my grandparents.

The doorman at my building piles the boxes into a cart and brings them to my apartment where they are placed in a dark corner of the closet in the hall. The doorman does not ask me their contents. My husband does not ask. Esther, the daughter, does not ask. Wilson Edward Jr., the son, does not ask. It is understood that I have taken away some mementoes of those old people scarcely known by anyone in my house. I stare at my children, at their placid blue eyes. What has happened to the spirit of inquiry? “Yuk,” my daughter says and steps away from my outstretched arms. “You’re all dirty.”

What are the offices of T. S. Rich & Company in July, 1924? And what about the sidewalk of Eighth Street near the florist in 1927? Don’t know, my grandmother writes in tiny, grudging letters. Surely, you have not kept those boxes burdened with disease and mold and germs. Think of your children.

My grandfather was twenty-two when he arrived in this country as a political exile. He was a formed man, not to change. My grandmother arrived ten years later. It was the common fate that they had escaped that drew my grandparents together. My grandfather was thirty-four when he married. In 1929, he gathered a sample of dust from beneath the bed of G.C. I cannot write my grandmother and ask who was G.C. In 1929, my grandparents were married, and my grandmother does not have those initials. Still, it is evil of me to think what I think. It could merely be innocent.

Illusions abound.

Dust from Halley’s comet. 1910. Really, grandfather. Avoid these flights from sidewalks. And this one. Meteoric matter. September 9, 1925. Cousins, Julius and Ilyich, got him his first job in a coat and
suit factory. But he had no talent for thread. No glad-hand manner for selling. A careless and lazy peddler. He was a man in a daze, his concerns displaced. He worked happily as a janitor’s assistant in an office building. It was a job that went nowhere, but he liked it. After he married my grandmother, they used her savings to open a store selling yard goods and linens. They were only slightly successful. There were things to remember about accounts and about lowering the awning against the fading sun. Still, eventually my grandmother learned how things were done and became shrewder. She became a tradeswoman.

*From the store on Essex Street. 1933.* It is ash white. Stores are everywhere on that block. One sells tallithim, phylacteries, prayer books and other religious needs. My grandparents moved uptown sometime in the thirties.

*From the knapsack of three political exiles fleeing. 1939.* You still lived at home, I ask my mother excitedly. Who came to the house in 1939? Are you raving mad, my mother says. I went to school. I was a schoolgirl. My father said to me. Study. Not so much noise, child. Certainly, there were people in the house. What did I care. Those weren’t my concerns. Anyway, those men are all dead now. All of them. They must be dead. They were all older than my father.

My grandfather came to my high school graduation party. I remember that. He was already an old man who walked with a cane. He had cataracts over both eyes and was sad. The following year he had an operation, and his sight was mostly restored. But that day, that warm June typical graduation day, he could barely see. Kiss your grandfather, I was told. And it was all right. I was no longer a small child. I kissed his cheek indifferently offered as a cachet.

*From a walk with three people prior to departure. August 2, 1940.*

Among the things I do at this time are plan dinners, go to the theater, face my fears firmly. Once I said to my husband that I would rather be dead than one of those old women tottering across a street hoping to make the other side before the light changes. He thought that was rather funny. All things come to that, he said.

*From the store on 93rd Street. Blood on this dust. 1935.* My grandfather’s English was excellent. He had studied the language both here and before he left Russia. He had virtually no accent. He was proud of that and of the secular education he had received as a boy.
There was a robbery in the store, my mother says. They started to hit my mother, and my father became furious. He was a big man and always very strong, and he hit the two men and stabbed one man with the knife he was holding. He was a hero on the street for days, but it made him sick. He couldn’t eat. Violence was against his principles.

**Dust from volcanic activity.** In New York? Had he ever left the city? No, everyone says. He sent his family to the country during the summer in later years when money was easier, but he never went anywhere. He stayed home. No one remembered him leaving. But perhaps they are wrong.

Write me no more questions, my grandmother insists. Enough. Must this dust pursue me to my grave.

In the United States there are approximately 43,000,000 tons of dust each year. The distribution of this dust is both horizontal and vertical. The possibilities are enormous.

My husband and I are having an argument. It has lasted three days. Now we are going through the silent phase. We do not speak to each other except when absolutely necessary, and then it is with the polite tones of pass that or no thanks. At night with the aid of a flashlight, I turn inside out the empty pockets of his clothing. Nothing can be scraped from the pockets of his trousers but the lint of a handkerchief. From the pockets of his jacket there is a fine, red toned fuzz.

Twice in his life, my grandfather’s sight failed. Both periods lasted more than a year. The glass bottles dwindled during those times, and those that were filled were labelled with some code of X’s both large and small. He never relabelled these bottles so I do not know what they meant.

In the late thirties he must have taken a mistress. *Dust from the dress of R. Dust by the bed of R. Dust near the door of R.'s room. 1938.*

R. has gone. I have fumbled quickly through the next few years of bottles, and she does not reappear.

*The Great Dust Storm of 1933. Sent to me.* Motes, specks, microns, millimicrons.

In the forties there is dust *From the grave of Joel.* He is the son-in-law who died in the war. He was the father of my cousin Max, whose mother has married again and lives in Phoenix. He was a brilliant boy, Joel. Everyone says that.
Atmospheric dust and Magnetic dust from localities unknown, late fifties. Two glass bottles both containing indistinguishable mixtures of brown-black dust.

Most of the dust in the older bottles has faded to white or pale grey and is of the consistency of powdery ash. Some, however, has inexplicably retained color. These are some of the colors. Brown, both pale and dark. Coffee brown, khaki, olive brown, and copper. Deep black and shimmering soot black. Pearl white. Sober grey, grey-black, iron grey. Dark wine-red.

One day my husband calls me into the small room used for his office at home. It will be solemn, I know. Have you a moment, he says. Certainly, I say, and I follow him into the room. He closes the door. You have been very preoccupied of late, he says. Do not reply, I tell myself. You are always shut away somewhere. You are mistaken, I say. I am here as always. I am home. Did you think that Esther and Wilson Edward Jr. would not notice? I had no idea, I say. They wanted to know what you were doing, he says. They spied on me. I am truly horrified. Not at all, he says. They merely wanted to know what their mother was doing shut away so much by herself. They saw that you were always pulling one of those cartons from the closet into your bedroom. It was natural that they should look inside.

It was foul, I say. Wrong. Wrong.

I looked too, he says, after the children told me. And, although I am tolerant of singularity and unorthodoxy, I want that dust out of this house. Now, will you do it or shall I?

I will do it, I say with dignity. As it happens, I was planning to do that. I have finished my examination of the bottles.

Well then, he says. That’s fine. Tomorrow then?

Yes, tomorrow. I say.

Summary
The dust is gone. My grandmother lives in Venice Beach in an area of old women. She totters across the street hoping to escape the changing light and the fierce passions of the cars. Mrs. T. walks the neighborhood scot-free. Poor Cissie S. languishes in the asylum. The circumstances of Mrs. Settle’s death are declared an accident.

Sometimes, for comfort, I whisper to myself the great dust words of the world. Khamsin, Gibleh, and Haboob.