

*In the
afternoon
Seniora's
two sons
came to the
hospital.*

Crushed and silent they sat next to Matilda Franco's bed. She had been closer to their mother than any of the other patients and she was the only one with whom they had exchanged a word when they came to visit. Now Matilda Franco tried to cheer them up, to draw them out — in Hebrew, Ladino, Turkish, but in vain.

Two big men, bowed under the weight of their grief, they had just risen from their mourning and they were inconsolable. They had large black skullcaps on their heads and their faces were unshaven as a sign of their bereavement — a coarse, dense stubble, black as pitch, covered their cheeks and only their eyes, demented with sorrow and despair, were blacker. The older, Albert, held a little suitcase on his knees, clasped it to his chest with both hands and wouldn't open his mouth. The younger,

Victor, who was apparently more sociable than his brother, muttered something and sighed, and Albert grunted: "Shut up."

And once more they felt silent, looking at Matilda Franco with heartbroken, expectant looks. From the little she managed to get out of them it transpired that they had come to thank the doctors and nurses who had taken care of their mother and the roommates who had been with her in her last hours, but they didn't know how to do it, or where to find the doctors. So they clung to Matilda Franco and sat by her bedside as if rooted to the spot. Albert said nothing, but kept nodding his head. From time to time Victor, who found it harder to conquer his grief, took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly, and his brother gave him an angry, rebuking look.

"It was like this, said Matilda Franco, "in the morning *May-she-rest-in-peace* went to wash. After a bit she didn't come out. And then she" — she pointed to Mrs. Moscovitz — "saw her there. Lying on the floor, next to the shower. Then she got a big fright, she came out and began to yell. Then Raffy ran right in and picked her up. She was already gone..."

While Matilda Franco was speaking the two men did not take their eyes off her, they sat there as if hypnotised. When she stopped, an expression of anguished, disappointed expectation returned to their faces. They sat and looked at her, waiting for her to continue. But there was no continuation, because the story was over.

"*May-she-rest-in-peace* was so good," added Matilda Franco in the attempt to do what little she could to appease their hunger, "always ready to help, a kind word for everyone. Everybody loved her. She helped me like my own mother. Seeing as I can't get out of bed because of the nails they put in me here" — she pointed to her hip — "she was always coming up to ask me if I wanted anything. She brought me everything I wanted. At night she slept hardly two hours, not a minute more. Early in the morning, when it's still dark, when everybody's sleeping, she's already awake — first thing she takes hold of the crochet hook and begins to work. Without any light, without seeing a thing. Just by the feeling in her fingers. What a saintly woman, *May-she-rest-in-peace*, a real saint."

They sat on, their eyes fixed questioningly on hers, waiting for more.

"And how much she loved you," said Matilda Franco, "too much. And she was only sorry for one thing all the time."

The two brothers shook their heads sadly, in impotent agreement.

"But it's not too late," she said and looked at them intently, to see if they understood her meaning. "And now go to her," she pointed to Mrs. Moscowwitz's bed, "she saw her there at the last. She'll tell you."

Obediently they rose as one man, taking their chairs with them, and went to sit next to Mrs. Moscowwitz's bed. Albert stood the suitcase on his knees again and clasped it in his arms, while his brother blew his nose in preparation for what he was about to hear. "Stop that, woman," growled Albert.

Mrs. Moscowwitz saw their faces blackened by their beards, their thick brows and their eyes smoldering with the fire of their dark suffering, and took fright. Two big men, who looked to her like hired assassins, were sitting next to her bed and waiting for her to speak.

She didn't know what to say to them. Matilda Franco had already told them how she had found their mother lying dead in the bathroom, how she had screamed in horror. What more could she find to say? And if she did find something, perhaps they wouldn't like it, and who knows how they would react. There was something violent, something savage in the silent sorrow of their grief, as if they had made up their minds to revenge themselves on whoever had robbed them of their mother, whether man or god. In the end she found a way of appeasing them. She opened the drawer of the locker next to her bed, took out a crumpled, transparent plastic bag and drew forth the crocheted doily which Seniora had given her, spread it out before them and said: "This she gave me for a present. It's called crochet work. How beautiful it is! Everything she made, she made the most beautiful. All my life I'll keep it with love in my heart."

For a moment the two brothers sat still, astonished or stunned with grief, their eyes fixed on the cloth. Then Albert

laid the suitcase flat on his knees, took a bunch of keys out of his pocket, selected the smallest key and opened the lock. It was crammed full of crocheted tablecloths, napkins and doilies, dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, neatly packed, folded one on top of the other. Mrs. Moscovitz gazed at the open suitcase and couldn't open her mouth, so unexpected was the sight. A long moment of silence fell on the three people, surrounding and enclosing them, as if they had been granted a glimpse of a secret not meant for human eyes. Albert bowed his head, raised the open suitcase to his chest, bent over and buried his face in the cloths. His shoulders shook. Victor blew his nose, sighed heavily, and this time his elder brother did not chastise him. Tears gathered in Mrs. Moscovitz's eyes.

"That's enough!" cried Matilda Franco from her bed. "What's the matter with you boys? Stop crying over your mother. You'd be better off doing what she was waiting for all the time. Go and get married and have children. And if there's a girl, you can call her Seniors for a memory of your mother."

The intimacy and fellowship of the tears gave Mrs. Moscovitz courage. "That's true," she said to them, "to be alone in life is no good. I myself remained alone, I know what it means."

Victor explained: "He already got married and divorced from his wife. It's only me who remained a bachelor."

Albert's voice choked inside the suitcase: "You shut your trap."

"If you want to give her soul a little joy, may she rest in peace, go and get married already and bring her grandchildren," said Matilda Franco. "Nothing will come of your crying, not children for sure."

Albert raised his head. His eyes were red, his cheeks wet. He looked in horror at the delicate crochet work, afraid that he had stained it forever with his tears. Then he shook his head and spread out his hands as if to express his helplessness. "I dunno what I'm going to do with all this," he said hoarsely.

"Sell it to the tourist shops," suggested Mrs. Moscovitz. "It's hand-made, you can get a lot of money for it."

Albert shook his head from side to side and Victor explained:

"In the synagogue they told us to give it to poor people, or to the hospital, or for the soldiers in the army."

"Enough, enough!!" cried Matilda Franco. "Stop with those tablecloths already. Do something for her soul, May-she-rest-in-peace. Look how much she loved you and all the time she was eating her heart out that you don't get married. With the Ashkenazim," she turned to Mrs. Moscowitz, "they don't care if someone doesn't get married, they're even proud of it. But with us Sephardim, who's ever heard of a person not getting married?"

"After our mother," said Victor tearfully, "there isn't a woman in the whole world to suit a man as good as her."

"Shut up already, I'll kill you!" shouted Albert in a terrible voice that reverberated in the room and the corridor.

"Did you hear that?" cried Matilda Franco to Mrs. Moscowitz. "The oldest's forty-five and the other one's forty-two. And that's the way they talk!"

"It's the grief," explained Albert, "he doesn't know what he's saying." And he took the little lock out of his pocket, slipped it between the two rings and pressed it shut. Then he rose to his feet, and his brother followed suit.

"Missus," said Victor to Mrs. Moscowitz, "God give you health and strength for what you did for our mother."

And they each took their chair and resumed their places next to Matilda Franco, silent and waiting.

"Go home!" said Matilda Franco, "You're wasting your time."

"We'll come again," said Albert.

"No! Don't come! What do you want to hang around a hospital where there's only sick old people and invalids for? At least when May-she-rest-in-peace was alive you had a reason to come here every day, but now? It's not healthy for young people."

"We'll come to you, seeing as you was our mother's friend," said Victor.

"It's not good for you, believe me. But if you want to do a person a favour, then you can go and give regards to my daughter Rina."

She studied both of them and her eyes rested on Victor, the

younger brother, whose face was more delicate, whose temper was better and whose heart was more open. "If you want," she said to him, "you can take her regards from me. Tell her to come on Monday, tell her I need her. I'll give you the address. Write!"

"Is there a phone?"

"No, don't phone! The phone's broken. You go talk to her yourself. See her for yourself. What's the matter with you, are you afraid or what?"

"If I tell him, he'll go," said Albert, "for the Mother's sake he'll do whatever you want."

A nurse came into the room to help one of the patients and asked the brothers to go outside for a while. Matilda Franco said to Victor: "Write quick, have you got something to write the address ? "

"I don't need to write," said Victor, "I'll remember it by heart."

"If you don't write it down, you won't go," said Matilda Franco. "You wait outside now and come back when she's finished. You hear what I say? Wait and come back later!"

They left the room, and stood in the corridor looking up and down. Perhaps one of the doctors would appear at last, perhaps someone would tell them something they had not yet been told about their mother. Raffy passed down the corridor, holding a bundle of faeces-soiled bedclothes, which he had just come from changing, under his arm. They turned to him and asked him where they could find the doctor. He replied with a question: "What's the problem?" From his reply they concluded that one of the doctors was finally before them. The young man with the childish body and the heavy face, an evasive look in his little eyes, stood uneasily next to them, holding the stinking bundle behind his back. But they were not offended by the smell. They explained that they wished to consult him as to how best they could express their gratitude to the hospital for the devoted care given to their mother. When they mentioned her name, Raffy told them that he was the one who had picked her up from the bathroom floor and carried her out in his arms. They trembled, caught him by his unoccupied hand, and begged him to sit down with them for a minute and tell them about it in as much detail

as possible. Raffy, embarrassed and apologetic, mumbled that he had something urgent to do — and anyway, he had just told them everything there was to tell. But they hung onto his hand and implored him to tell them everything he remembered without holding anything back.

"Doctor, if you're busy now, just tell us when to come," begged Victor, "you tell us what to do."

And Albert added: "May the Lord bless you."

Fear fell on Raffy. His heart told him that he was heading for trouble, that his civility was spreading a trap at his feet. He looked around anxiously, scanning the corridor for someone to rescue him, but there was not a doctor or nurse in sight to come to his aid.

"In two, three weeks' time," he said, "come in three weeks' time and talk to the doctors."

"Thank you very much, doctor," said Albert, "may the Lord bless you."

They let go of his hand and he tucked his bundle back under his arm, said goodbye to them, and hurried off. Next to the nurses' station, before turning into the corridor of the men's wing, he glanced back and saw them. The younger brother, apparently insisting on trying his luck again, had turned back in the hope of finding someone who would satisfy their need on the spot, while the elder, holding the suitcase, was dragging his brother along the corridor by force to the exit from the ward, where they both finally disappeared into the darkness.

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