

One Act

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SADIE WALKED INTO THE DINER called New Beginnings, which was across the street from the Jewish cemetery. She spotted a decent-looking guy in a baseball cap sitting in a U-shaped booth. Without permission she slid in next to him and pressed herself right against his thigh. She could feel his car keys poking through the pocket of his jeans. Sadie didn't ask his name, but he told her he was Jim. "I don't care," she said. She put her hand on his knee. Sadie could do whatever she wanted in Grand Rapids. No one here knew her but the dead.

"Anything good in this place?" she asked.

"I eat the oatmeal," Jim said. As he pushed a bug off the table, Sadie noticed Jim was missing the first two fingers of his left hand. "I like to mix strawberry jam into my oatmeal."

"Don't start telling me about yourself," Sadie interrupted. "I need coffee, and quiet."

She had just spent two hours in the cemetery, without any tissues. She'd used her silk shirt sleeve to wipe her tears and the drips from her nose. The sleeve was dirty now and looked like a slug had made its way along her forearm. She pushed it up so Jim wouldn't notice.

"You've been crying or something, right?"

"Or something," she said. "It's always something."

Jim put his hand on hers, the good hand. There was brown hair on the knuckles and dirt under his nails. "Do you need to talk?" he asked.

Sadie pulled up her legs and leaned her knees against the table. "I need more than talk," she said. She needed to remember she was more than the mother of infant twins.

Jim shook a packet of sugar.

"Stop it," Sadie said. "That sound annoys me. It sounds like an hourglass."

"What's your name?" Jim asked

"Doesn't matter. And don't ask me where I'm from."

Sadie was from Houston. She had a big house on Birdwood Road that someone else cleaned. Her house was so clean that the flat-bodied roaches didn't bother to enter. She had credit cards in the same metallic shades as her cars. When she woke up in the morning, she had nothing more exciting to do than get pretty and go to Baby Yoga with the twins.

"You're bitchy, that's for sure," Jim said calmly. As he waved to the waitress and gestured for the check, his left hand made a shadow on the wall that looked like a duck in flight.

"I didn't get my coffee yet," Sadie said.

Jim said he had to get back to his truck. He had to get to Milwaukee. "I've got perishable goods to deliver."

"I'm rotting in my seat," she said. She grabbed on to his elbow and squeezed the bone.

Jim took off his cap and set it on the table. Sadie watched as he ran his hand through his matted hair.

“Mind if I smoke?” he asked.

“I hate cigarettes,” Sadie said. “What happened to your fingers?”

“I thought you didn’t want to hear about me,” he said.

“You’re right, I don’t. Any motels around here?”

Jim didn’t think so. “Do you need a place to spend the night?” he asked. “I’ve got a cousin nearby.”

“No. I wanted a place for you and me.” Sadie put her hand on his silver belt buckle.

“Let’s go across the street.”

“I’ll cross the street, but I’m not having sex in a cemetery,” he said. “And why do you assume I’m going to do it with you? Maybe you’re not my type. Maybe I have a wife at home.”

“I had the notion that guys always want to do it,” Sadie said.

There were Stars of David and Hebrew letters on the cemetery gates. The outside of the cemetery was lined with pine trees, but inside there was only one tree standing on the manicured lawn.

“Are you Jewish?” Jim asked.

“Does it matter?”

“I’ve never been with a Jewish girl,” he said.

“You see,” Sadie said. “You do want to do it.” Sadie looked Jim right in the eyes.

“Truth is, I’ve never been with an uncircumcised man.”

“Who do you visit here?”

“Everyone and my mother. All of my dead relatives are here.”

Sadie walked Jim to the lone tree right beside her mother’s grave. She leaned against the rough bark and pulled Jim close. He didn’t push her away.

“That’s my mom.” Sadie pointed at a gray marble gravestone that read *Elizabeth Goodstein*, 1949-1979. The stone didn’t say anything more, no beloved this or that. “My mom is buried right beside her parents,” Sadie said. “Look at them. One, two, three. But my mom died before her parents, way before them. She took pills and died on the bathroom floor in a pool of her own puke. She was trying to make it to the toilet so she wouldn’t leave us a big mess. She wrote a note that said she loved me and she couldn’t help being sick. She signed it, ‘sad and lonely, Mommy.’”

Sadie had never told anyone about the note. When Sadie’s husband had asked about her mother’s death, Sadie told him her mom had died peacefully in a hospital. Sadie’s husband was a good man, a perfect man, who never asked too many questions and never lost a button off his shirt. He ran marathons, steamed vegetables, and didn’t complain when the twins woke up at night.

He’d told her to take a break. “You seem nervous,” he said on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her mother’s death. It was a Sunday, and since he didn’t have to work, Sadie didn’t get out of bed. She had a ballpoint pen under the blanket with her and was pressing it down as hard as she could, popping the seams of their brand new, cushiony two-thousand-dollar mattress.

A yearzeit candle sat in a glass cup on Sadie’s bedside table beside a purple orchid. She

lighted the candle every year on the anniversary of her mother's death. But this year she hadn't. She stared at it until her eyes hurt, and then she threw it at the wall. After the crash her husband came into the room. "I'll take a few days off work and stay with the babies," he said, serious and sad. "Maybe you should go down to Florida."

"How can you say that to me?" Sadie shouted. She didn't want the beach. But she did imagine freedom, what it would be like to leave the house without thinking twice, without thinking about the twins and all the danger life held for them- all the marbles they could stuff into their mouths, all the cliffs they could fall from, all the wrong turns she could lead them to make. She imagined herself far away from them, in Arkansas or Ohio, with nothing around her but long stretches of highway. She'd go to a Safeway as a tourist, not as a mother in desperate need of diapers and laundry detergent.

"I'm OK," Sadie told her husband. He was using a toothpick to clean shards of glass from the broken candle holder out of the cracks in the parquet floor.

"If you need some space, you should take it."

Sadie said nothing. One carefree moment would lead to another. If she left, she feared she might not come back.

"It's not OK for you to be here right now."

So Sadie left. She hadn't gotten weepy and made a fuss. She'd only grabbed some clothes, stuffed them into her yoga bag, and walked out the door without saying good-bye to anyone. She got in the car and started driving north. She crossed five states before she arrived in Grand Rapids to visit her dead relatives.

"Did you see your mom like that?" Jim asked. "Did you see her on the bathroom floor?"

"I found her. I was too young to spell 'ambulance' but I called one."

"That sucks," Jim said. "I don't know what else to say."

Sadie could tell he was starting to feel sorry for her. He put his left hand on her cheek and rubbed his thumb beneath her eye.

"You can skip the pity," Sadie said. She reached up to her cheek and put her hand on top of his. She ran her fingers over his stumps.

"Iraq," Jim said. "I lost the fingers in Iraq."

"I'm here for sex," Sadie said, "not war stories."

"And you're really putting me in the mood."

"Is it because we're in a cemetery? Is that the problem?" she asked. "Are you one of those people who think the dead can see and hear?"

That's how her twins made Sadie feel. They took turns crying all night, and in the morning she felt like a dead woman who could see and hear. But she never got angry at them. She shushed them. She sang them lullabies and nursed them until they fell back asleep. She was a good mother. She was a fantastic, outstanding, top-of-the-line mother.

"I think the Lord can see and hear," Jim said. "The Lord was with me on my flight out of Iraq. I was on the way to a hospital in Germany, and I didn't know if I had a left hand anymore."

"Don't start talking about God," Sadie said.

"You should hear this because it is astounding."

"I want to be fucked, not astounded"

"You need to calm down. Do you want to ride with me to Milwaukee? Do you want to get out of here?"

"No."

Jim looked around at the gravestones. "Sure are a lot of Goodsteins in this place," he said. "Can you read those letters?" he added, and pointed at the Hebrew script.

"No, but my husband can."

"You're married? I didn't know you were married."

"What difference does it make to you? You're not going to see me after today."

"You're not wearing a ring."

"It's in my purse."

"You got kids?"

"I don't want to talk about my kids," Sadie said.

"So you have some?"

She put her hands on Jim's chest and ran them slowly down his abdomen. He wasn't as fit as her husband.

"You're kind of freaking me out. Michigan girls aren't like this," Jim said.

"It's not because of the State of Michigan," Sadie said. "I'm different because I was raised by a man." As a child, Sadie had been different. But now there wasn't anything special about her. She was just another feckless adult, caught somewhere between the hemispheres of death and life.

"Do you miss your mom?" Jim asked.

"I used to. Sometimes I guess I still do." Sometimes after she kissed her own babies good-night, Sadie stood in the dark hallway of her house and remembered the bedroom of her childhood. She remembered her polka-dot blanket, her poster of a palomino horse, and the way her mother's long, black hair fell over her face when she bent down to turn on the night-light.

"Why are you here?" Jim asked.

"I have to be somewhere."

"You really miss her," Jim said. He put his hands on Sadie's shoulders. Sadie put her lips on the side of his neck, where he felt like burlap and smelled of gasoline.

"Tell me your name," Jim said.

"Call me whatever you want."

"I'll call you 'Cynthia,'" Jim said, "after her." He pointed at the gravestone to his right.

"I'll call you 'Cynthia Simon.'"

"That's my great-great-grandmother. Don't call me that."

"Then tell me who you are"

"I'm Sadie."

"Nice to meet you, Sadie. I'm sorry, but I have to get to Milwaukee."

Sadie pulled her shirt off over her head and stood in front of Jim in her beige nursing bra.

"What are you doing?" Jim asked.

"What do you think I'm doing? What do you think of me?"

"You're cute," Jim said. "But that is the ugliest bra I've ever seen."

Sadie reached a hand up her back to snap it off.

"Don't take it off," Jim said. "Put the shirt back on. You don't do this shit in a cemetery."

"Today I'm doing whatever I please. I'm not listening to anyone. And I'm not hiding from the dead."

"Don't hide," Jim said. "Just be respectful. Don't take off your clothes on your mother's grave."

"Don't tell me what to do on my mother's grave. This is *my* mother. If I want to put my

bra on her headstone, instead of a damned potted plant, then I will.”

Jim took a step back. “Are you on something?” he asked.

Sadie didn’t answer. She turned her back to him, pulled off her bra, and threw it down on the grass.

“Are you going to be OK without that?” Jim stared at the bra, not at Sadie. And Sadie looked at all the tombstones, all the familiar names, and thought about genealogy, as immutable as death.

“Hey, Sadie,” Jim said. “Does your husband know where you are?”

“No.”

“If you want, I could give him a call.”

“What for?”

“To tell him where you are, in case he’s worried.”

“Tell him this,” she said. She walked over to Jim and put her mouth on his mouth. She didn’t kiss. She just held her mouth there. She held her breath, too. Jim put his hands on her waist and pulled her close. Sadie leaned into him and let her whole body go soft, so that if he let go she would fall. Then she opened Jim’s belt buckle and tried to pull him to the ground. He wouldn’t let her, so she lay down alone above all the bones. The grass was clipped but inviting.

“You don’t want to do this,” Jim said. Then he started talking about Milwaukee.

He had to get back to his truck, or everything was going to rot.

“I do want to do this,” Sadie said.

“Stand up.” Jim put his hand out to help Sadie, but she didn’t take it. Instead, she curled up. He leaned over and kissed her on her cheek. She knew his lips were there, but she didn’t feel a thing. “Good luck,” he said. “Feel better.”

“Why are you driving a truck?” Sadie called out to him. She had her hands crossed over her engorged breasts, through which she could feel the wild thump of her heart. “Don’t you get some kind of army pension?”

“It’s not enough,” Jim said without turning around. He kept walking, and Sadie watched his shadow, oblique and opaque, moving across the lawn. That’s how she wanted to see him go: not any of the details, just an airy form, like the phantoms she lay upon. In her mind’s eye she saw the details she chose to see- they came at her like a radiant dream. She saw the purple orchid beside her bed, whose petals had the same fine veins as her babies’ eyelids. Then Sadie saw her babies sleeping beneath soft yellow blankets on Birdwood Road, suckling silicone nipples instead of her own.

She sat up and thrust out her arms. There was nothing around for Sadie to grab, but she was reaching.