

## Coffee Cake

Short story by Allison Fine

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“Bernie, come here.” Bessie Cutler pulled him back by the loops on his pants.

“What is it Bessie?”

“Tuck your shirt in, doodles.” She, like a huge clucking mother hen, tucked in his shirt before they went into synagogue. He went up to the front, with the other old men, dovoners from Brooklyn and the Bronx by way of Poland and Russia. Bernie’s brother Phil was there, along with Hyman, Harry, and Sam; all brothers.

Harry was the only Cutler brother not born in Russia. The family had emigrated from Russia to England, and Israel Harry was born in Stepney Green, London, where he trained to be a baker. Now here he was, retired from Motor Wheel, with his sons Francis and Henry supporting him and Clara, and the rest of the family as well. It was a good life in America.

The dovoners mumbled Hebrew throughout the orthodox service. It lasted 40 minutes. The reform members sitting in the back, waiting patiently for this to be over, heard their mumbling. Bernie bowed and mumbled, kissing the end of his Talis and kissing the Torah. The beautiful lovely Torah that he had brought with him from Minsk as a child, the Torah his grandfather gave him at his Bar Mitzvah, and one day he would give to Michael, his little grandson.

Bessie sat in back with the wives, Dottie, Yetta, Clara and Florence. They were all wearing their temple suits, with hats, as was the custom, their faces covered with makeup

and powder and rouge and lipstick. Dottie had magnificent long, thick, white hair she wore in a bun with tortoise shell combs.

The other women kept their hair short and permed. No one was thin. They were all large, buxom women with thick ankles stuffed into black sensible walking shoes with square heels. The men, on the other hand, were all skinny and short. Sam was the only tall one, over six feet. His Dottie was five feet. They made a striking couple.

The men’s suits hung on their bodies; their pants had room to spare. Bernie was the shortest and the skinniest. His shirts were always coming out of his pants he was so skinny. Bessie had to buy his belts in the boy’s department.

He was retired from the garment industry; he had been a tailor on Seventh Avenue. Bessie was just a mere fifteen when they met. They both worked in the same sweatshop.

Bessie had come over to Bridgeport with her brothers, stayed with cousins, and then went to stay with more cousins in the Bronx. She was making good money pressing cloth in the huge iron presses. The job was hot and sweaty and tiring, but she made good money, she told herself. Good money was why she was here in the first place.

She was known for her coffee cake. Bernie always asked for a second piece, sometimes a third, every time he came calling at her house. Her cousin bragged constantly to everyone about Bessie’s coffee cake.

“My Bessie,” said cousin Jerome, “her coffee cake is to die for.”

“I hope not,” not Bernie, in his sardonic Bronx accent, shoving another piece into his mouth.

“Forget it. You live, you live to eat Bessie’s coffee cake!” and they all would laugh and continue eating.

Bessie worked hard in the city. Some of her pay went to her cousins for the room, and the rest went to her family in Bridgeport. She wondered if she would ever get ahead when she first met Bernie. Bernie was a tailor, a skilled tradesman, and he made a good living. She saw a future with him. In time, he opened his own little retail outlet, and the bucks rolled in. The kids came, they moved from the Bronx to Brooklyn. She felt life was moving along, stepping upwards, as she hoped. Then they went to Michigan to visit her brother Harry and his wife Clara, and Bernie liked it.

“This is a good place, this Michigan. There’s green grass, lot’s of trees.”

Bessie thought it was boring. What would she do with her time? The kids were grown and on their own, where would she go? They joined the temple, Harry had been one of the founders, and Bessie got involved with Hadassah and B’nai B’rith. It occupied her time. Pretty soon all the other brothers and their wives came to Michigan too. It was a regular Cutler enclave. She settled in. Francis built the apartment house and gave them a deal on the rent, Henry made sure they got a new car every year.

Family takes care of its own, thought Bessie. She was grateful for her life. No, she was not attractive, or even pretty, she was always heftier than she wanted to be, her legs looked like tree stumps. Bernie loved her anyway! They could afford to retire and spend winters in Florida in Cousin Meyer’s hotel. The kids were happy, and the grandkids were gorgeous. What more could she want?

When she turned eighty Bessie did not want a big deal made. Bernie told Francis to invite the family and hold a party at the Club. Bessie deferred.

“No, no, no,” she said. “I just want my girls over to play cards, go for a swim at the pool, and watch a little TV. That’s it!”

Her oldest daughter Nancy insisted that this was a “passage”, not just for Bessie, but for the whole family.

“Passage?” asked Bessie and laughed. “Listen, the only passage I know is the ticket you buy to get on the boat. Passage. Leave me alone about this, Nancy.”

Nancy at fifty looked thirty. Her hair was dark, curly and long, her body lithe, tan and muscular. She and Danny had a great life in Royal Oak. His stock brokerage was doing extremely well, and their children were in all the best schools. The only thing she could not do was talking her mother into allowing a little hoopla on her eightieth birthday.

“Come on, mom, it’s not such a big deal.”

“If it’s not such a big deal, how come you keep asking?” Bessie asked. She was not a fool for nothing.

“I just want the family to appreciate who you are and what you’ve accomplished, mom.”

“What I’ve accomplished is here,” she tapped her chest, “inside of me. Everybody knows. What--they appreciate? Everyday they appreciate. They are my family. What’s to appreciate?”

Nancy and Bessie argued back and forth on this point for the entire day. Nancy had come in from Detroit to take mother shopping and get her hair fixed.

“Doesn’t Francis fix things?” Nancy asked as she walked around.

Bernie was at the little table in the kitchen drinking his tea and reading the newspaper.

“Francis always fixes everything,” he said in one of his more loquacious moments. He usually left the negotiating to Bessie.

“Who needs fixing?” Bessie said as she followed Nancy to the bathroom.

“Mom, just a sec, I have to go,” Nancy said and shut the bathroom door. Bessie stood outside the door.

“So what needs fixing? What’s the problem?”

“I’ll make a list and give it to Francis, okay? Now let me go!”

Nancy came out of the bathroom and saw her mother standing by the door.

“Must you stand by the bathroom door like when I was a kid?”

“You remember that?”

“Yeah--it’s given me lifelong indigestion.”

“You have indigestion?” Bernie asked as he walked into the bedroom.

“Where you going, Bernie?”

“I’m going to lie down and read the paper.”

“Can’t you read the paper in the kitchen?”

“You two are making too much racket,” he said as he closed the bedroom door.

“Why don’t the two of you take a cruise, mom?”

“A cruise? Why should we want a cruise? It is nice here in the summer. Pinky’s little boy Max comes and mows the lawn here, for Francis, and then Max comes in and has lemonade and cookies, I’ve got my girls I play cards with, we go to the club--I’m fine.”

“How old is Max?” Nancy asked, fingering the crocheted throw on the back of the couch. “Who made this?”

“What?” Bessie said, settling into her easy chair with a thwack.

“I’m not getting up from here. Hand me the channel thing, will you?”

Nancy dutifully handed her mother the remote. She hoped and prayed eighty would not look like this for her. She hoped she made it to eighty. She exercised regularly. She would not let herself get fat, lethargic and comatose like her parents.

“Mother?”

Bessie was channel surfing religiously.

“What?”

“How old is Max?”

“He’s seventeen. He is driving now. He took us for a ride in his father’s car, no less.”

“That’s nice.” There was a pause as her mother became transfixed by the television.

“This CNN--news all the time. What a concept.”

Nancy marveled at how her parents could be fascinated by such trivial things.

“Who made the afghan throw?”

“That what?” Bessie asked.

“The afghan,” Nancy shouted back. She hated these conversations with her mother; they never went anywhere. Bessie was either out to lunch in some other corner of her brain or surfing the past. She never seemed to Be Here Now. Zen her parents were not.

“Focus mother, would you?”

Bessie looked over to Nancy. She got very tired of her daughter’s constant intrusive talk. Talk, talk, talk, that is all Nancy ever did. Ever since she was a kid. They used to call her motor mouth. The kid had a mouth on her. When she was only six or seven she was already shocking the family with that mouth.

“Becky made that.”

“Becky?” Nancy held the afghan in her hands. It was dark crimson red mixed with cream. It looked very Russian; the colors were not the sort of colors people chose now. It had a distinctly non-American feeling to it.

“Becky Smookler, Aaron’s daughter. She married Abe. They lived in Muskegon. You didn’t know them.”

“Oh.” Nancy looked at the afghan, trying to construct an imaginary life of the woman who made it.

“Were you and Becky close?”

“What?”

“Were you and Becky close?”

“Close? What do you mean close?”

“I mean--oh, never mind.”

“We were third cousins, once removed. I never even met her until we were in our fifties, when we moved here.”

“So how did you get the afghan, mom?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Dottie had it and she did not like it so she gave it to me. I do not like it either, but I’m stuck with it. That’s it.”

“When’s your hair appointment, mom?”

“Two o’clock. Now shah! I’m watching.”

Nancy couldn’t disturb her father in the bedroom reading his newspaper, her mother was lost in television-land, and she went out on the little patio and sat on one of the lawn chairs. Bernie had made a bird feeder and hung it from a hook on the overhang. She could see her dad from the window on her left.

“Dad,” she leaned in the window. “Dad?” He was sleeping, the newspaper laying on his chest.

Nancy started to cry. Her parents were so sweet. Life was so difficult. Why was everything such a bitch? Random thoughts. She wondered about Becky and the afghan and her parents and everything else. Her mother was turning eighty. What could she do? She hated to admit how much she feared their death. Even if she was grown and they were old, she just didn’t want them to die. They were her only link to another life, long past.

Maybe I ought to write a kind of family history, Nancy thought. It was a great idea, but she knew she would never do it. After all, she had tennis lessons, and her stock club meetings, and Danny had bought a boat they kept in Charlevoix. All their spare time was taken up with the boat. They invited friends up to the lake and spent many long weekends on the boat. When would she write a family archive?

Nancy sat on the little postage-stamp patio, fantasizing herself doing research, going to the library, getting on-line and finding the records of her parents and grandparents coming from Russia and Poland. She fantasized herself going to Russia and finding the little village *shtetl* where the Cutlers lived before they came to the United

States. Maybe it didn't even exist anymore. Then how would she find the history? Minsk existed. Perhaps they had records there. Bialy. She remembered hearing that name mentioned once or twice. Clara came from Bialy.

She saw herself finding the gravesites of great, great grandparents and relations long gone. At this point she would have researched the historical lives of these people, with voluminous and detailed files of the lives and marriages and deaths and blood crosses and ties.

Nancy settled back comfortably. Fantasy was so much more fun than reality. She saw herself carrying large expanding file folders and a briefcase, knocking on the doors of distant relations, twenty-fifth cousins or whatever, being welcomed into their tiny little Russian homes, being offered tea and those little rolls they eat. Maybe the Vodka would be brought out, sandwiches with strange meat or whatever, laughter, old world nostalgia coupled with modern problems. Nancy would be seen as the New World savior--the family member to bring them all together; hands across the ocean, visits between relatives, crying, sending her kids as ambassadors, perhaps even a medal of honor from the President for her work in historical archival research about immigrated Americans. Maybe she'd go on National Public Radio; have an interview on *20/20* with Diane Sawyer, talk of her many varied experiences in discovering her family and its roots. A book would follow, perhaps the National Book Award, maybe even the Pulitzer Prize--

“Nancy! Nancela! What you doing out there?”

Her mother's voice screeched into her fantasy.

“What, mother?” Damn, her mother always interrupted her thoughts, all of her life. These were important moments; she wanted to savor them.

“Come here, I want to show you something.”

Nancy dutifully got up and went inside. This had been her whole life, serving her parents, serving her children, her husband, when could she serve herself? Her mother especially, drove her crazy.

“What is it mom?”

Bessie was watching a program on TV. Nancy tuned in for a moment. It was about the life of a movie composer Bernard Dubin.

“So who is this?” Nancy asked.

“Shah!” Bessie shouted. The piece finished. Bessie looked out the window in an uncharacteristically pensive moment.

“What’s the big deal?” Nancy pushed.

“I think this might be Blanche’s long lost real father.”

“I thought Rachel and Ben were Blanche’s parents.”

“They adopted her when she was ten.”

“When she was ten?” Nancy asked, shocked. “Wow.”

“She was part of the Jewish welfare board.”

Blanche was Bessie’s favorite niece.

“So, I don’t get it--”

“Her real father was a famous movie composer.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Rachel showed me the adoption papers, and they had her mother and father’s real names, and everything.”

“So--how is this significant? I mean, Rachel and Ben are dead, God rest their souls, and Blanche is happily married. Does she care?”

Bessie looked at her daughter with all the disdain she could muster.

“Of course it matters. This is her real kin.”

“So--is Bernard still alive?”

“No, he died in the fifties. But maybe he has some estate or something.”

“Oh, forget it, mother.” Nancy knew her mother’s ulterior motive had to have a reason, and money was it.

Nancy walked into the kitchen in disgust, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“Mother, you know what,” she said, coming back into the living room with her coffee, “maybe it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Bessie was staring out the window.

“Mother?”

What secrets could possibly be inside the head of this woman? Nancy thought. What could she be thinking?

“Maybe that’s where little Susie got her piano talent--from Blanche’s real father.”

“Susie does not have that much piano talent--I mean, come on, she’s not Rachmaninoff or something.”

“Rachmaninoff’s dead,” Bernie tooted as he came out of the bedroom.

“I know that dad,” Nancy intoned. Logical conversation with her parents was impossible.

“So, you want some coffee cake?” he said to Nancy and pinched her cheek, just the way he did when she was three years old. Nancy suddenly felt young and small and

loved. Standing between these two old people who had loved her, raised her, spanked her before it became unfashionable, who had worked all of their lives to make her life something better, two people who were so politically incorrect they were off the map; there was a sense of identity, continuity, and reasonableness. The historical archives could wait.

“Sure daddy,” she kissed her father on the cheek. He smiled.

“You too Bessie?”

“Sure, sure,” said Bessie, lost in Television-land.

Nancy followed her tiny little father into the kitchen.

He took the saran wrap off the still-warm coffee cake.

“So,” he said cutting the cake as if he were performing a *Bris*, “we’re going to savor your mother’s famous coffee cake?”

“Yeah. Hey Dad, you ever hear of a guy named Bernard Dubin?”

“Who?” Bernie asked as he sliced a generous portion of cake, placing it deftly on the bone china that Bessie’s mother had brought from Russia.

“Take this in to your mother.”

“Did he play Rachmaninoff?” he shouted after her.

Nancy sighed.

It was time for Coffee cake.

The End

