

Death and the Fearless Removal of Muskrats

You say you hate fruit. Your problem is you're always eating fruit out of season. Every February you bring home these gigantic strawberries with pale green rims around the top. That's the tip off. The green rims. They signify pulp and tastelessness. So of course, you think you don't like fruit. That's what's so maddening. I don't mean to harp this, but it's metaphoric of so much more. Soon July will roll around and I'll walk into the kitchen with a crate of beautiful, dark-red strawberries and you won't even try one. Look, I hate the same fruit you hate. But conversely, you'd love the fruit I love. That's the point. I know that sounds chauvinistic, but it's true. And now you'll never know. So where was I anyway? Oh yeah, I was gonna tell you about Susie's heart shaped tombstone.

I was in Israel when I got the news. Actually I was just leaving. The bags were packed and waiting in Amir's kitchen. Amir's a friend of mine and he's a very wealthy guy, -at least by Israeli standards and probably by anybody else's. To be totally truthful, I don't know for sure that he's rich, but he tells me he is and his house is huge and he hardly ever works...So that, several expensive cars, a penthouse in Eilat, and an apartment in Manhattan have made me assume he's loaded. He's pleasantly strange. All he talks about is Karate. He's been doing it for twenty years or so, and his best friend is a karate master. He's always trying to twist his wrist without turning out his elbow. It's a movement that's said to be fundamental to the art, and apparently it needs a lot of repetition.

Amir and his wife are hospitable. They put us up at their place the night before we were scheduled to fly home. I should mention that there's a large...really large -photograph of Amir's wife on the wall, near the table where the family eats. One curious detail is that it's a picture of Amir's wife's bare ass. To be fair, her ass is sort of hidden beneath a towel or a sarong or something. Amir's the kind of guy who wants you to think that the picture creates a sense of wonder about the beauty of nature or God but my feeling is that it just comes down to her ass. It's disconcerting to eat hummus beneath such a picture but who I am to judge?

The morning of my departure, I come back to Amir's place and I check my phone messages. There are three. The first one's from my brother in law, Russell. He's calling from New Jersey. He met my Sister, Nina, twenty-five years ago in Minnesota. He was there to study wolves and was about a week away from getting his PHD in carnivore sciences or something like that. Early in their marriage, he took Nina to Israel so that she could accompany him on a wolf tracking expedition in the Negev desert. Nina in a tent in the desert. To know her is to laugh at the thought. She -of the done nails, the Prada shoes...needless to say, the trip was horrendously unsuccessful. It was so abysmal in fact, that Russell wound up quitting his life's passion to work for his Father's hugely successful electronics distributorship in Bergen County. Years later, he came to own the empire. Not a bad trade some might say...and Nina...she was thrilled with the decision. So Russell calls me and it's not a good sound. He says' Peter it's Russell, call me as soon as you get this message". I'm thinking, it's 4:30 in the morning in New Jersey; does he really want me to call him? So I go to the next message...It's Russell again; there's

slightly more urgency in his voice, even though you can tell, he's trying to sound calm. This time it's: " Peter, this is Russell again, I really need you to call as soon as you get this message".

I've dealt with this kind of thing before, when my Dad died back in '83, so I start doing what I always do- I gear down really low. Time starts to stretch out. Everything starts to weigh more. Colors are brighter. I can hear the hands of an electric clock on the kitchen counter or ice melting in a glass in another room.

Amir is admiring an orange plate that we got him as a thank you present for putting us up and for taking us to the karate dojo and to his wife for making us these Libyan potatoes, which were fantastic. You'd never think anyone could be so effuse about a potato, and maybe you're thinking I only thought they were good because I was so hungry. But even when I'm ravenous I can still tell excellent food from average food. Amir's admiring this plate and he's saying, Peter, dis plate iz so beeyootiful. Naomi wants to serve chummus on it but I want to set eet on display"...

As he's talking about his plate, I go deeper and deeper into my, "prepare for tragedy mode". I can hear him talking -but only as a sound. That actually happens to me a lot and my wife sees me going deeper into my head and she's already there with me. She can feel that something is very wrong. That's such a beautiful thing really. I hope I never take it for granted, that feeling of complete empathy - complete attachment. The next message was in Hebrew; it was some guy from EL AL airlines who had tracked me down. How

the hell he got my cell phone number, I'll never know...it was probably the Mossad. Anyway, this guy says in Hebrew, "Meester Heemelman, call right away, your parentz een meenisota...there iz been an emergency". I can hear Amir prattling on -graciously, I should add, about the plate and I then I cut him off- which is difficult for me because I don't like to be rude in that way. I'm terribly rude in dozens of other way but I'm uncomfortable with that form of direct rudeness. I say, "Amir, I've got to cut you off, there's some kind of tragedy waiting for me." That's when my wife says, "What's going on"...even though she could get the gist telepathically, (after only sixteen years of marriage, the empathic vibrations are not yet sensitive enough to complete the details...that comes later I'm told.) So I tell her, I've got these messages on my cell phone that bode extremely ill and that with one touch of a button, I will be connected with some as yet unknown tragedy.

I decide to sit down but I'm very calm...excruciatingly so. Amir and my wife follow me into an enormous living room that looks out into a strange glass enclosed sitting area that is neither indoors nor outdoors. Alas, another Israeli with too much control over an otherwise competent architect. I see a large chair and I sit down in it steeling my self for whatever waits at end of the satellite. I notice another large photograph on the wall. This time there are no wives with exposed asses, just a picture of a pretty young Bedouin girl with a clay jug balanced on her head. Meanwhile Amir is telling me to breath slowly and that somehow the answers I needed were to found in karate. He was calming himself with breathing techniques he's gleaned from over a quarter century of effort in the dojo. The thing was, he was minutes away from a stroke and it was me that was calm and collected.

I touch the green send button...1 201 967 ...I race with the electrical current to the reaches of the atmosphere, bounce off a satellite and fly up with the charge through the wires and into Russell and Nina's house. I can't remember if it took two weeks or two seconds.

It's Nina on the line. She's also calm. She's decided to give me the news...straight up. No orange juice, no coke, no ice. I do some math. All my kids are here with me. My wife is three feet from the Bedouin girl with the clay jug.

My Mom is the oldest in our immediate family. Shit, that would sting...Maybe it's Uncle Mark. He's in his early eighties and deep into Alzheimer's. No, it couldn't be Mark, I mean; I love the guy, but El Al airlines leaving messages? No way. My Brother Paul. He rides his bike to work nearly everyday when it's not raining. That would definitely be worth a call from El Al. That would be definitely fall under the heading of, serious tragedy. And then there's my baby Sister Su...No. No way...I couldn't deal with that... there's just simply no w...and then Nina says, "there was an accident" and then there was a beat. I swear she paused for sixteen years...

.... Susie's dead". "Okay" I said. My wife heard me say," okay "just like that. "Okay, well I'll get back to ya". The laundry's ready -okay, I'll get back to ya. See what you want to do with the living room paint -okay, I'll get back to ya. We could have tuna or salmon, it doesn't matter, you decide. -Okay, I'll get back to ya.

How far away does the soul have to be to allow the mind to signal the brain to cue the mouth to say, “I’ll get back to ya? But I needed to change the flights. There was a funeral we had to get to. Luggage that needed to be shipped to another place, plans needed changing. Efficiency, effectiveness, level headedness. What will the kids eat for lunch? I’m not sure there are any more potatoes.

“What? What is it?” my wife needed to know and so I repeated what I’d just heard.

“There was an accident...she was bracing herself on the tile floor. I looked up at the girl with the jug on her head. She knew what I was going through.

“It was somewhere in Wisconsin”, my wife held her breath. “Susie’s dead.” And then she went up in flames like dry kindling. I’ve never seen it happen. She simply exploded into weeping. I looked over at the Bedouin girl. There were camels loping behind her. It was hot. Someone needed water. I know her face well. It was burned into me. Slowly, deliberately.

It’s a year later and people are always asking, “how’re you doing”, in hushed voices. It’s best not to ask that kind of vague question anyway. It’s almost like saying ummm, between thoughts. Those questions are annoying and they don’t really demand an answer; they hang in the air -rob it of oxygen, and then it’s just hard to breathe.

I know this woman, Carolyn; she’s a good friend of my Mom’s. She knows how to keep quiet when it’s appropriate, Her husband, Burton died a few years ago and at the shiva her twenty five year old son, Marty dropped dead of a brain aneurism. My Mom got a

call from her the day it happened. “Beverly”, she says, “Martin died”. Of course my Mom thinks she’s distraught and talking about Burton. “No Carolyn, Marty didn’t die, it was Burton.” But Marty did die, -on the day of his own Father’s funeral. Trust me, this woman, Carolyn, has mastered the art of standing next to you without saying anything.

There’s a pond in back of my Mom’s house. It’s pretty for about two weeks out of the year. Other than that, it’s either frozen over or thick with slippery green algae. I think they could cure the problem by putting some kind of aquatic defoliants into the water, but then you get the problem of people’s pets drinking the water and dying.

I was over there the other day and noticed this large grey rock about five feet off the lawn in the water. Since my Mom spends a fair amount of time looking out the window and thinking about Susie, she knew right away it wasn’t a rock and after she’d had a closer look, she came back in the house to report that that it was in fact, a large, decaying, muskrat. Her Husband, Dick suggested someone with a large stick move it over to the neighbors lawn. Who do you call to move a muskrat anyway? Someone from the animal control? 911? By now it was really starting to emit a fetid order. And my Mom seemed really upset.

My Brother lives a few houses away from my Mom and it’s generally assumed that he’s a lot better at doing manly things than I am. Somehow though, I believed this particular job to be beyond the scope of his abilities. I looked out at the pond through the huge picture window and that’s when this troubling question struck me: Exactly what is it about these

guys that you call to haul away the stinking and corpulent carcass of a rotting muskrat? What is the worldview of such a person and why is it immediately assumed that I'd have to call him to do the job? Lately, I've surmised that it was my Mother's intense sadness but something caused me to get up, take a three pronged hoe and a snow shovel off the peg board on the wall in the garage, and march through the evergreen hedges to the pond.

It swiftly began to dawn on me that what they, (the muskrat men) have in common, was the sense that accomplishment isn't necessarily a big thing. It doesn't always have to be a degree from an Ivy League school, a huge promotion, or a platinum record. It's often very small. In this case it was medium; about forty five pounds.

I didn't wrinkle my nose at the odor or flinch and squint as the hoe bit into the side of the muskrat with a dull watery sound. I dragged it to me. There was nothing in the world except this dead water rat and me. Entrails mixed with the gurgling algae at the edge of the pond and I used the snow shovel to lift it all into a large black double -thick nylon garbage bag.

It's funny how noble, how brave, how truly free of sin and shame I felt just at the moment I eased the muskrat into the bag and twisted the top shut with the red cord. I dragged the bag up the hill and was working hard to repress a smile. Is there a Jew in all of America who could do for their Mother what I'd just done? This was no call to animal control. This was no pushing it off on the neighbors with a stick. This was just man and

muskrat. I had that sucker in the bag and out on the street in less than ten minutes. Just in time for lunch...tuna salad with pickles relish if I remember correctly.