

"If We Shadows Have Offended. . ."

by *Cindy L. Carbone*

"Why me?" Shades of the argument kept drifting back to me.

"You're the eldest, Clara." Not by choice.

"You would know better than any of us what things are salvagable."
What makes me the expert on family relics?

"Besides, you took two weeks off from work to help Dad through this ordeal. None of the rest of us can afford that kind of time." And I can! Time has issued Clara two weeks, void of responsibility and commitment, so that she can devote herself to sorting through the lives of the family — like sorting through piles of dirty laundry that have accumulated over the years.

Oh, how I resented this imposition, this duty. It seemed my lot in life to be burdened with the chores of this family. I was always the one pushed into the labors of keeping the house neat and tidy, keeping the snotty noses wiped, keeping the dirty dishes out of the sink, and keeping the younger children away from Mother when she was working on a special household project — sewing, canning, or whatever. I swear if indentured servants were still a sign of the times, I'd own half of this county by now.

I tried to temper my anger by diverting my attention elsewhere. I fiddled with the radio in vain, only catching strains of hymns or messages of devotion and humility. My eyes wandered to the hills; just barely visible above this sleepy little town. The contrast between the somber serenity of those bluffs against the intrusion of the mill towers and smoke stacks had an unsettling effect on me. This, coupled with the silence in the car, seemed to prepare me for the duty at hand.

As I entered the house, voices of the past surged deep from within. I heard the strains of Sammy's harmonica trying to imitate the current tunes of the day; Vivi's high pitched squeals in defense of Paul's incessant teasings; and Hannah's pious chants over the ceremony of lighting the Menorah during Hanukkah. I also heard the echoes of Mother's repeated calls pulling at me — "Help me with this" or "Help me with that." Each of these voices drew me deeper into the house, deeper into the corners of my childhood memories — deeper into corners I wasn't sure I wanted disturbed.

Cautiously I ascended the stairs to the second level of the house. Purposefully avoiding each of the bedrooms, I approached the hideaway ladder which allowed access to the attic. I struggled to catch the short cord dangling from the ceiling, and it had occurred to me that it had been tied into a noose. Shuddering those implications from my mind, I finally grabbed hold and pulled. The ladder held tight, resisting all my efforts to unlock its secrets. Mustering up more strength for the second try, I grabbed the noose again and pulled once more. Still, no luck. It was as if someone was on the other side of the ladder door mirroring all my efforts. Oh, for Mother's sake, if on

the third try, I can't pull... Out of sheer stubborn spite for the ladder door, I swore it wasn't going to defeat my purpose and yanked at the noose with all I had. Finally, it gave way, spouting dust clouds at me as it did so. If I was condemned to perform this task, I wanted to do it quickly — with few complications. Nothing was going to stand in my way. And, of course, nothing would. The family had once again abandoned me.

Vivi couldn't possibly come. She had to tend to her horde of children and prepare Tim for a business trip. (The man was 33 years old — couldn't he prepare himself?) She had already neglected them enough with the funeral arrangements and all, and besides, the baby had just come down with the chicken pox and she knew the whole house would be filled with them soon.

Oh, Vivi! I suppose out of all of us, you remind me the most of Mother. You and your devotion to your children, your husband, and your lifestyle. You have graciously resigned your life in favor of theirs. Nothing can tear you away from your martyrdom. Mother should have been proud of you. You were always following in her shadow.

Lennie couldn't stay away any longer than necessary. He had to be in San Francisco early Monday morning for some big warehouse deal his company was undertaking. According to Lennie, nothing could happen without him — or his expert advice. But that was Lennie, always looking out for himself, nurturing his own self interests first. Isn't that what Mother taught him?

Hannah said she'd come over later. (I secretly wished later would become sooner. I didn't want to face the attic alone.) First, she had to make some phone calls and confirm the booth arrangements for the local bazaar. Hannah was always organizing something and whatever she became involved in, she committed herself totally to it. The words "no" or "I'm too busy" aren't a part of her vocabulary. Hannah never outgrew a plea for help — from Mother or the masses.

Sammy and Paul only offered to pick up the refuse and haul it down to the town dump after the initial chore was completed. They needed the day to carefully scrutinize the details of the purchase contract for the offer Dad received on the house. They said they wanted to make sure Dad was getting the best deal possible, to insure him some stability. This was just another excuse. Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard "hockey game" and knew where their allegiance lay. This was a time to be concerned about Dad's stability and financial future — after all the medical bills and travel. Instead the boys chose to waste their time in front of — that shadow box, as Mother had called it.

Fortunately, Dad didn't offer to help. I couldn't handle his grief or remorse until I had my own under control, and the attic would trigger too much of that for him. Fortunately he didn't see the relief on my face when the earlier argument turned to him for resolution. I was shocked when he admitted he would be in the dark up in the attic and preferred to remain, entertaining the grandchildren.

Dad always displayed such confidence when confronted with an

unfamiliar task. For him to admit any kind of weakness was a travesty. Dad was too proud, his ties with the old country too strong. The events of the last couple of days must have drained him more than I thought.

Mother wasn't so meticulous as to clean the attic weekly, but it was still in order — a place for everything and everything in its place. Bits and pieces of all our lives neatly stacked, side by side, starting with a section devoted to each child, room in the house, or seasonal activity. I scanned the room quickly, trying to assess the amount of work to be done during the time allotted. The filtered sunlight fighting its way into the room forced me to strain my eyes, so that I could focus on each nook and crevice, each pile and box, each . . .

There's that damn iron! Mother had sworn she would throw it away as soon as I bought her a new one. I'll bet the steam attachment is still in its original box. None of us were ever allowed to use it because "it didn't do as good a job as sprinkling the clothes and putting them in the refrigerator did." I'm sure that was just her excuse to keep us at the ironing board longer than necessary. Oh, how she made me iron Dad's work shirts and handkerchiefs over and over. First, I had to master the handkerchiefs making sure each one was pressed flat and each crease was at a 90-degree angle. Then I was forced to master his work shirts — collars first, sleeves second, sides third, and the back last. Each time the same strokes, back and forth — no room for diversion. I remember arguing persistently that it didn't make any difference if his handkerchiefs were perfectly pressed or that his work shirts displayed a few wrinkles. No one would take notice of how he looked for work anyway.

It was then that I painfully learned the valuable lesson placed on my parents' pursuit of the American dream. I was taught to respect my father's job, his attire, and the time he spent away from home because he was doing it for his family. And he was proud to do it. For all the time I put into ironing his work clothes, he'd better be proud. Mother, I always knew Dad was a proud man and proud of his job, but you never could convince me why we had to work so hard at making him look good for labor which made him look so dirty.

Suddenly I realized the container I had been sorting through was one of Mother's old wash tubs. I glanced about the attic searching for its mate. It must be buried in the basement. Out of all the household chores, washing was Mother's sole duty. Everyone helped out with the preliminaries — carrying the water, dumping the water, and hanging the clothes on the wash line — but Mother alone ran the clothes over the wash board, while Lennie turned the hand crank on the wringer. I remember chasing soap bubbles — or chasing after Davy and Vivi chasing soap bubbles. It was always a task keeping track of those two. The bubbles kept leading them into the garden or into the raspberry patch or into the field of wild flowers behind our house. If they got lost in there, it was hours before they'd allow themselves to be found.

Everyone loved that field. I enjoyed it, too, when I got the chance. One oppressively hot summer, after Dad bought Mother her first

washing machine, Mother suggested we take the tubs into the field, fill them with water, and have a picnic. Sammy and Paul carried the water from the well, Hannah helped me get the little ones dressed for the swimming adventure, and Mother packed us a snack of fruit and crackers. Lennie grabbed an old blanket from the basement which needed airing out anyway, and off we went — all seven of us. What a relief it was to splash in the cool well-water and then use the fragrant wild flowers as a towel. I felt free, content, and allowed myself to be lazy and carefree. I remember watching the clouds drift by, or the butterflies hesitate above the flowers, or Hannah braid foxgloves and lilies into Vivi's hair. But those carefree hours numbered few and it wasn't long before Mother's voice called us all back to reality. I wonder if that field still blooms as it did when I was a child. I wonder if it is still there. I got up to see if I could see it from the attic window.

Highstepping it over more boxes and piles — clumsy me — I stumbled over a pile of old records and instead of looking out the attic window, I found myself staring at a box labelled Maryachev, David N., Corporal, G Company, 7th U.S. Infantry Regiment. Davy! Oh, Davy. Bungling my way to a safer position I gingerly unearthed the box from its resting place. All that was left of Davy was in this box. I hesitated to open it. He was so young.

Inhaling deeply, and closing my eyes, I lifted the lid. There was the flag Mother received from the army officer, instead of her young, brave son. She opened her arms tenderly to cradle the flag as if she were cradling Davy, one last time. Yet she shed not one tear. Her face was blank. She was deafeningly silent, too. She just placed the flag with Davy's picture, his dog tags, and his Distinguished Service Medal in the glass-covered bookcase near the fireplace. And then she went into the kitchen and started to peel potatoes. Oh, Mother, how could you! How could you shut Davy up, first in that cabinet and then in this box? He was your son, your baby. My baby. He fought for the same ideals you and Dad came to America for. Yet you shut those ideals up in a box away from everyone. How could you shut my Davy up like that? I remember you wouldn't let anyone else touch the flag, then. Well, Mother, I'm touching it now. I'm holding it, cradling it, crying on it. I'm grieving for Davy. I'm upholding those precious ideals of yours and giving them life once again. I'm doing what a Mother should do at the loss of a son, her son. My baby.

I sat nestled in that corner, holding Davy's flag, rocking back and forth for quite some time. Occasionally I would sift through the other treasures contained in the box — old letters from Davy, his platoon picture, and the little mementos he'd sent home from the famous places he'd been to — trying to impress us and reassure us that he was doing "okay" as he always put it. He always made sure his letters were positive ones, filled with news of his adventures, the lives of his buddies — his "new found family," or the plans he'd hope to fulfill when he got home. But he never did. He never upset Mother with news of spilling blood. He never told Mother of the fear that lived with him constantly. And he never told Mother how he hated the death all around him. He never did.

Still clutching Davy's flag, I felt compelled to move on. In that same corner I happened upon Mother and Dad's steamer trunk. The one they used to house all of their belongings on their trip to the promised land. Now all it housed were rags, remnants, and scraps of cloth from Mother's toil-less hours spent behind her sewing machine, patching knees and sleeves, letting out hems, replacing lost buttons, or reshaping an oversized housedress into a smockdress for one of her daughters. Why did she keep all of these bits and pieces of fabric? Here's the brown corduroy from the boys' winter jackets. And the red plaid flannel used to line it. Underneath it lay the gray sailcloth for Dad's work shirts and under that I found some flowered cotton percale used for Vivi's and Hannah's school dresses. Close to the bottom of the pile I noticed the cambric cloth she used to make the white dress with the red apples on it. All of us wore that dress. Each time a rip or tear emerged, another red apple was added to cover the imperfection. By the time the dress had migrated down to Vivi the hem had been readjusted so many times that there was nothing left. To resurrect the dress, Mother found a scrap of very delicate eyelet lace, just enough to go around the bottom of the dress. I remember hating myself for growing up too soon, being too gawky and gangly to wear the "new" dress with the delicate lace hem. Oh, how I hated Vivi, too. She always got to wear the pretty things, the delicate things, the eyelet lace hem dress.

Then my eyes came to rest upon a small wooden box, deeply wedged into the corner of the trunk, protected against the world by yards of fabric scraps. The box was highly polished, so much so, that it gleamed in the feeble light of the attic. I was stunned. This box was thought to have been lost years ago, lost to our memories, lost to our heritage. My hands trembled as I fumbled to reveal its treasures. Inside, Mother's only connection to the old world resided — a garnet necklace, her Star of David pendant, and her wedding ring — none of which she had worn since I was a small child. I think I was the only one aware of this box, aware of its treasures, aware of Mother's lineage. I was the only one who knew. But why were these wonders shut away, like Davy's flag? Why did Mother shut everything that meant something to her, gave her life meaning, up in a little box buried under objects of work and servitude to a house or the family? Why did you shut everyone out, Mother? Especially me. All those others you crowded into your heart. Oh, Mother, every time I needed you, you were too busy — ironing, sewing, washing, nursing another baby! Even in death you seemed . . . preoccupied! Mother, will I ever know you! Will I ever understand? Is the answer here — among the piles, the rags, the shadows? Where did we lose each other, Mother?

"Clara? Clara! Have you found anything?" It was Hannah's voice. As she came up the ladder, she turned on the attic light, chasing away the shadows. I just clutched Davy's flag and Mother's box of treasures to my bosom and held back the tears no more.