

They Didn't Mention Papa

Peter Weiss

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Nathan opens the door to the phone booth. It is hard for him to believe that after three years of wishing and longing to be home, he has returned. He drops the army-issue duffle bag to the sidewalk and reaches into his pocket for a dime. Thoughts explode in his mind like the initial brightness of a flare, then burn slowly, becoming darker and more abstract until finally they are burned out.

The smells and sights of New York excite him in a way he has never known before. They were always there, all twenty six years, but he never realized them until now. He looks at the buildings, American buildings. How different they are from the German and Italian ones. Freedom, he thinks. Perhaps what I feel is freedom.

He lifts the receiver and deposits the dime. Even seven-digit numbers are American.

"Hello?" The word comes through the wire in a language not unfamiliar to Nathan, though it's been a while since he's heard or spoken Yiddish. He finds himself speaking in the same language.

"Mama, this is Nathan." There is a pause. Mama struggles to keep the phlegm out of her throat, to be able to speak. She has expected, almost anticipated that he would return today, but still she cannot believe that her baby is home, talking to her on the phone.

"Nathan, is really you?"

"Yes, Mama. I'm home. I'll get on a bus and be there in an hour. Tell someone to get Pearl."

"All right, Nathan."

He hears a click and then nothing. It's almost as if he hadn't spoken to her, as if there were no connection between what he said and what he thought. He remembers Pearl. How many nights he dreamt of her, how many times he called her name and imagined her slipping into bed next to him. There wasn't even time for a honeymoon. They had one weekend and then he was shipped out.

He takes another dime from his pocket, deposits it, dials another seven-digit number.

"Fanny?" This time he speaks English.

"Hello?"

"Fanny, this is Nathan." He hears her call out, "Pearl," and tries to imagine Pearl as she is, coming to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Pearl? Your voice has changed."

"Nathan, where are you? Oh God, I've missed you so. I love you, darling."

"I'm at the Navy yard. I'll be in Canarsie in about an hour. Mama is sending someone to get you."

"Don't hang up, Nathan, not yet. Please, talk to me. Are you all right?"

"I am now, sweetheart. I was sick for the first four days of the trip, but I'm okay now. Let me get on a bus. By the time I get home you'll be there. Pack a suitcase. We'll go away for a few days."

"Nathan, I'm so happy." Pearl drops the phone to the table, too excited to put it in its proper place. She runs to her mother and hugs her. "Mama, he's home." She dances to the closet and carelessly reaches inside, pulling out a suitcase, knocking other things out as well. "I'm going to meet him in Canarsie, and then we're going away for a few days."

Nathan trips over the duffle bag trying to get out of the phone booth. He picks it up and tosses it over his shoulder, already walking toward the bus stop. It was raining over the ocean last night. The water was choppy and he couldn't even see the raindrops making ripples in it. Now dark clouds hide the sun. The sky is seasick, he thinks. Pretty soon it will vomit. He feels the urgent desire to see Mama and Papa. Why didn't Papa answer the phone? Slow down, he tells himself. For Christ sakes, slow down.

He does not have to wait long for the bus to come, though to him it seems as if he's waited a year. The bus driver changes his dollar bill and he puts the fare into the box.

"How long to Rockaway Parkway?"

"Just got in today, huh, soldier? You guys are all alike. You all ask the same questions. How long to Linden Boulevard or Rockaway Parkway? Can't you go any faster? Why don't they synchronize the lights so we don't miss them all? It's at least forty minutes, longer if it starts raining. Relax, you're young, you've got your whole life to live."

Forty minutes, Nathan thinks. He chooses a seat near the driver and looks out the window. Though mid afternoon, it is already as dark as most nights. Nathan sees his reflection in the window. He notices, now for the first time, that his hair has grayed and his face has wrinkled. A small pellet of water hits against the window. Another follows, then another. He cannot recognize the streets but sees them turn from dull, dark cement to slick, glistening pathways. It will be longer than forty minutes.

The slow pace of the bus has managed to calm him down, to make him realize the absurdity of racing ahead. They didn't mention Papa in their letters. They just stopped talking about him. His stomach gets heavy, weighted with possibilities. He could have been sick, or had nothing to say that the others hadn't said. He's dead, I know he is. Why can't I admit it? He used to tell so many stories, funny stories.

Papa called him to his lap two weeks before his Bar Mitzvah. "Come here," Papa said in Yiddish, patting his knee. Nathan obediently climbed on it, his Haf Torah in his hands. "Say," Papa demanded. Papa's back was straight, the tone of his voice rigid. He was a man.

Nathan started to sing. He had gotten no farther than three lines when Papa violently clapped his hands. "No," Papa said. "Is not right. You say holiday Mafteh." Papa knew the books, the Torah. He didn't have to look at them. He knew them even better than the Rabbi. He stroked his long, black beard and smiled. "I teach you, you'll say right." Papa made him learn the right words to say. He gave the Rabbi hell too for teaching his son the wrong ones.

Papa can't be dead, Nathan thinks. He was always strong. God wouldn't have taken Papa. He can't be dead.

"Rockaway Parkway, buddy. You want out?"

"Yes," Nathan answers. "Thanks." He steps out into the chilly downpour. The cars, buses and trolleys all have their lights on. Several blocks in the distance, there is a house. Mama will be there; so will Pearl and all my brothers and sisters. Nathan is confused. They didn't mention Papa in their letters. He can sense Papa's death, yet he cannot think that Papa is dead.

He walks the short distance, the duffle bag thrown over his shoulder. He is surprised by how little things change. Klein's

tailor shop is still next door. The window sign is still there, the same letters chipped off as when he left. In three years things haven't changed much.

He stares at the two-family house. His aunt lives downstairs. No doubt her door will be open. He pushes deep into the background the fear of Papa's not being there and walks through the doorway. His aunt's door is closed. She's probably upstairs. He climbs the steps and enters his home. The entire family is standing in a distant corner, as if posing for a portrait. No one moves; Nathan stares. He surveys them, left to right, once, then again, then a third time. Papa's straight face and black beard are not there.

Nathan runs to his mother, holds her close to him, kisses her thin, dry lips. He rubs his cheek along hers, feeling the smooth skin.

He kisses her again, this time on the cheek, then turns his back to her; she should not see her grown son cry. He runs out of the room, to the first bedroom he can find, and throws himself in a corner. Squatting, he buries his head in his hands and weeps like a small child.

A long time he spends in the room alone, letting the confusion and anguish flow from his body. Papa, forgive me crying. He sees a Yamacah and Siddur on a dresser. He puts on the small hat and opens the prayer book.

Outside, his brother Max has his ear pressed to the door. He hears the prayer Nathan is saying, how Nathan struggles to thrust the words ahead of the tears in order to articulate them. He sneaks into the room, also wearing a Yamacah, and stares at Nathan's back.

"Yiskadol, v'yiskadosh, sh'may rabbah."

"Amen," Max adds.

Nathan finishes Mourner's Kaddish, Max inserting Amen when it is necessary. He closes the book and replaces it on the dresser.

"Thanks, Max." Nathan hugs his brother. "How did it happen?"

"A heart attack, about two years ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Mama. She said you had enough to worry about, being a POW and all."

"You could have told me without her knowing it."

"C'mon, Nathan. You know that Mama is Mama. No matter how old you are, you do what she says."

"I think I'd like to see her." Max is right, Nathan thinks. You do what Mama says.

Max leaves the room and several minutes later, Mama, a slim, small woman appears in the doorway. She walks hesitantly toward Nathan. When she reaches him, she runs her fingers over his lips, nose, eyes and forehead, like a blind woman trying to know him. She gently strokes his head.

"Thank God you are safe." She holds out her arms and he enters them as if he were a small child.

"I love you Mama. And now I know what it is for a child to have a mother." She smiles as if she understands what he is trying to say.

Nathan cannot speak further. In silence, he stays in her arms, his head resting on her breast, her hand stroking his head.

"Son, my baby son, you have a wife now. Don't forget her."  
"Thank you Mama." He kisses her. "Thank you."

"I'll send her to you." Mama leaves the room. She calls Pearl into the kitchen, where they can be alone. "Go to him," she says. "But remember, he is a baby now."

Pearl enters the room and runs to Nathan. They kiss once, lightly, then again, this time a greedy kiss.

"Kisses don't express what I feel," Nathan whispers.

Pearl sits down on the bed and motions him to her. He joins her, putting his head in her lap, taking her hand in his own. They look deeply into one another's eyes, as though they can communicate this way, without words or tones. For several minutes, there is neither motion nor sound.

"I want to see Papa today." Nathan breaks the silence.

"You'll have to take me with you. I'll never let you go again." They leave the room together, arm in arm, and move to

the living room where Nathan greets the rest of his brothers and sisters. Mama goes to the kitchen with one of her daughters to prepare a snack. Pearl and Nathan sit on the couch, surrounded by his siblings.

"Did they treat you bad?"

"Not too bad." Nathan looks at them. There's so much to say, but where should I start? "That's all over now. I'm glad to be home."

Outside the rain continues to fall. Is it over? Nathan wonders. I don't feel like I can ever forget it. Papa objected to my enlisting. It hurt him, to see me go against him.

The windows are steamed. Nathan sees Papa's face in one of them. Pearl presses against him, sitting as close as she can without being on his lap. I couldn't even be here with him when he died, Nathan thinks.

"Did Papa have much pain?"

"It was sudden and fast," Max says.

"He prayed for you at the end," his sister Tillie says. "He told Mama he loved her and prayed for you."

"God answered his prayers," Mama calls from the kitchen. 'God,' he said looking at me, 'save my baby Nathan.' Every night and every morning he said 'God save my baby and take me if one of us must die.' And at the end he thanked Him. 'Thank you God,' he said. 'Now I know my son is safe.'"

Nathan can say nothing. It was like Papa. He loved God and spent his whole life following Him, understanding Him, knowing Him. I hope Papa understands how I love him.

"Come." Mama claps her hands. "I have a food for all." Nathan grabs Max's arm, and holds him in the living room. "Where's Papa?"

"In Mount Zion. You know where it is?"

"Yeah. I have to go see him."

Max reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys.

"Here, take my car."

"Thanks, Max." Nathan and Pearl go to Mama. Nathan explains that he can't eat now, that he must see Papa. Mama is disappointed yet glad to see how much Nathan really does love him; she's not surprised at all.

"Go," she says to both of them, kissing each on the forehead. "I keep the food warm and you eat when you come back."

The rain is falling harder, as though the storm has reached a peak. It's been so long since I've driven, Nathan thinks. He remembers learning to drive on his brother Sam's laundry truck.

He wonders what it will be like standing over Papa's grave. The last he knew, Papa was healthy and strong. He remembers once when they were in Shul and he tied some of the old men's prayer shawls to their chairs. Papa saw him do it and he knew he would get hit. He could see the door close and Papa come towards him

like he always did, the leather strap in his hands and a fierce look in his eyes. "Play around will you?"

He saw me do it, watched closely to see that I was tying bows instead of knots. When the old men stood up, their shawls fell to their chairs. I looked at Papa. He started to laugh but turned his head I shouldn't see. He never beat me, never said anything about it to me.

He was a man. He was always good to me. He'd blame the others because I was the baby.

"What are you thinking about, Nathan?" Pearl has been watching him as he drives.

"Oh, about Papa. It's all so sudden. I wonder what it will be like standing over his grave. He's still so alive in me."

Nathan parks the car just outside the cemetery grounds. He makes sure that Pearl has buttoned her raincoat and he turns up the collar for her. He realizes now that the Yamacah has been on his head all the while. It's a good thing; his head must be covered. Pearl too must cover her head. It's custom and tradition. She pulls a dark veil from her coat pocket and fastens it to her hair with a bobby pin. "I thought you'd want to see Papa."

Nathan smiles. "I love you. Are you sure you want to go with me?"

Pearl opens the car door. "I'm sure."

They walk through the cemetery gates together. Strait is the gate, Pearl thinks, remembering it as if it were the only book she's ever read. There is no one else around. The rain has formed muddy pools on the grass, the graves and the paths. Nathan looks ahead through squinted eyes. The cemetery is dark and he can barely read the row and path numbers. Row six, path twenty four, isn't that what Max said? No stupid. You forgot to ask. Where'd I get the numbers from?

"Do you know where it is?"

"No," Pearl answers.

"We'll have to stop at the information place."

They approach a building.

"This must be it." A large sign stares at Nathan and Pearl.

"It's closed. I'll have to call Max."

"I remember at the funeral, Max pointed out your uncle's grave. Papa is right next to him."

"Then it is row six path twenty four. How did I get these numbers?"

Nathan cannot think clearly. They walk along row six, watching the signs for path twenty four. The rain falls hard and steady, as it has been for the past hours. Papa is dead, Nathan thinks. Now I know. When I was still working, each night at dinner Papa would say the blessing, and before he would eat, he'd survey the table, making sure there was enough food. He

looked deep into my eyes, one night, and said to me "My baby, you're grown, but you're still my baby." I ran to Papa and kissed him.

He extended his hand and said "Squeeze." I knew what he meant and wrapped my fingers around his hand then squeezed as hard as I could. I knew I hurt him. "You're getting strong," he told me. But he didn't flinch, not once. I held out my hand and said "Your turn." He laughed and repeated my words. He was weaker that night than ever before and for the first time I had to fake it. "Ouch, Papa," I said, quickly pulling my hand away from his. He looked at me. He knew. He looked at Mama and said "I'm getting old."

Nathan and Pearl turn onto path twenty four.

"If I remember," Pearl says, "it's not far from here." But Nathan has already run ahead and when Pearl catches up to him he is kneeling in the mud at the foot of Papa's grave. Tears slide down his cheeks then fall to the ground mixing with the rain. Pearl stands behind him and rests her hands on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Papa." Nathan frees himself from Pearl's grasp and begins to fuss with the plants which cover the grave. Two years, he thinks, noticing that the plants have grown thick and are green and nourished. He pulls out weeds lightly, removes them without upsetting the soil, then begins to shape the plants

by patting here, then there, as if he were a woman shaping her hair.

The rain continues to fall. Satisfied with his work, he turns to Pearl. Her raincoat is almost saturated; the pellets of water are absorbed rather than repelled by the material.

"You'll catch cold," he tells her.

He reaches into the mud and pulls out two stones, then places them on top of Papa's head stone. He puts his arm around his wife, holds her to him and feels her shivering against him.

"Let's go home," he says.