



RESURRECTING BEVERLY: MEDITATIONS ON A LIFE CUT SHORT

Weeks after I began my freshman year at UC Berkeley, I received a phone call from my mother with tragic news about my Aunt Beverly's death.

"Shot herself in the head, oye Got," said Mom.

"What?"

Nothing this shocking had ever occurred, as far as I knew, in my staid, middle-class family. My mother instructed me not to come to Los Angeles to attend the funeral.

"What for? Stay in Berkeley. You should be in school."

Rain drummed against my dorm window that October day, and I felt unmoored, the gloomy weather reflecting my mood. Disoriented and rattled, I fled my room and headed towards Telegraph Avenue. In those days the area pulsated with street people, Hare Krishna followers, political activists, students, drug addicts and the chaos of seekers. A long-haired man stood outside of Cody's Bookstore ranting about killings in Vietnam. I walked past, ignoring the world's problems. I had my own. My mind searched for order, meaning, some way to right my world, upended by my aunt's suicide.

I thought back to one Sunday evening when I was thirteen and Aunt Beverly visited for dinner, along with my grandmother. By then my grandfather had passed away. The family—Mom, Dad, my younger brother Carl, my grandmother, and Aunt Beverly sat in the dining room finishing dinner. Aunt Beverly asked to come into my room to see the new dresses I'd sewn.

Eager to show off my fledgling fashion sense, I led us to my room where I sat at my desk and Aunt Beverly perused my closet. Her delicate fingers explored my dresses, flitting in excitement, caressing, pausing to absorb the tactile pleasure of each fabric.

"They're beautiful. You've got a good eye for color. Ooh, this one, gorgeous."

She pointed to one of my favorites.

"Can you make me one just like it, but in green? To match my eyes." She laughed.

"Sure, Aunt Beverly. I can make you anything."

She picked at a speck on the lace of her blouse while I soaked up her praise. Beverly's attention felt like a salve to my adolescent awkwardness. Mom

dismissed my preening. Beverly acted like a co-conspirator in my quest to be cool. Then, suddenly she stood up and, without a word, left the room. I worried I'd done something to upset her.

Years after Aunt Beverly's suicide, I became aware of the truth that my aunt's image consciousness camouflaged a darkness underneath. My mother told me, years later, that my aunt suffered from agoraphobia. Beverly's Sunday visits to our home were one of few times she ventured outside of her apartment, a fact I hadn't known back then. Mom confided that my grandfather, an immigrant butcher, read Freud in his search for answers to her anxieties, coaxing her out of the house to walk with him. He was her anchor—patient and encouraging of her improvement. With his death, she'd lost that hope.

In her earlier days, my aunt sang in jazz clubs around Los Angeles. Her talent came to the attention of Benny Goodman, the 1940s bandleader, and she planned to tour with him. Yet, for some forgotten reason, Beverly backed out.

My mother, the responsible sister, was sent out, at age seventeen, to pick up her older sister in the family Buick, when the jazz clubs closed at 2 am. I always wondered why Beverly didn't drive herself.

My aunt must have been different back then, confident and fearless. I couldn't imagine that countenance in the aunt I knew. Was her passion to sing merely fleeting? Did the world become too overwhelming for her? Her jazz career became one of those half-remembered family stories.

I would continue to press my mother for details of Beverly's life. There was one conversation about Beverly that I could never square with my aunt. By then, Mom was in her 90s. We were having lunch in the dining room of the Jewish Home for the Aged where she lived.

"Mom, I don't get Beverly's history. How did she go from singing on stage to being afraid to leave her house," I asked.

"I don't really know. It was gradual. But my sister was no shrinking violet. Beverly won a Hadassah beauty contest and after that she told our parents that she wouldn't work in Grandpa's deli anymore. Beverly thought she was headed to bigger places."

"Like where?"

"Hollywood. When I was growing up in LA, the movie industry was small and local. Everyone wanted a part. Beverly had big dreams."

"Was she different then?"

"Yeah, ambitious, but desperate in a way."

Mom looked away. Whenever she spoke of Beverly, her eyes became faraway, as though she were recalling past pain, and I felt I'd lost her. I wanted details. Mom continued.

“Back when Dad and I were dating, one evening he came to pick me up, and Beverly came on to him.”

“Aunt Beverly flirted with Dad, your boyfriend?”

I couldn't imagine Beverly as a vixen, trying to lay claim to Mom's boyfriend. Suddenly Beverly seemed like one of those bullying mean girls I'd encountered in my adolescence.

“Weren't you furious?”

“No, I was embarrassed.” I kind of pitied her. I never dated much. Why was my older sister who had lots of boyfriends coming onto mine? And I felt bad for Dad. She put him in an uncomfortable position.”

I reconsidered Beverly's interest in my adolescent wardrobe and thought maybe she was trying to steal me from my mother by acting like the cool aunt. Somehow the story made Beverly more real, proof of her appetites, passions. She wasn't just a sack of anxieties anymore in my mind.

I didn't attend Beverly's funeral back then, per my mother's request. but I thought of her often that first year of college. Her image would come to me at odd times, pressing into my consciousness as I walked up Telegraph Avenue, or in an idle moment as I sat studying in the library. I wondered what she would think of the hippie fashion, with her 1950s style, impeccable makeup, red lipstick, and well-coiffed hair. I missed her gentle presence, and her self-effacing laugh.

I didn't think to ask about Beverly's burial. In Orthodox Judaism, I later learned, those who die by their own hand are placed in graves at the edge of the cemetery, away from loved ones. Suicide is considered a violation of God's authority, that only God can give or take a life. Though my parents weren't orthodox, my grandmother grew up orthodox in Russia. The thought of Aunt Beverly banished to the periphery of the cemetery, isolated in her “sin,” punished or shamed for her mental illness, seemed harsh and unfair. I never learned whether my grandmother followed that tradition.

As an eighteen-year-old, I knew little of suicide. It wasn't something people discussed. There was no such thing as social media. Tell-all books by celebrities about the ravages of depression would be written in years to come but not during my era. Suicide prevention centers and hotlines were tools of the future, as were modern anti-depressants. My aunt lived before psychiatric treatment came out of the asylums and into the light of scientific discovery.

Beverly's suicide lingered in the periphery of my mind over the years and affected me in ways I wouldn't comprehend for a long time. Trying to understand her became a motivating force for my career as a psychiatrist, a way to delve into the psyche, and find out what went so wrong for my aunt and for our family, in hopes of avoiding future traumas.

Years later, I faced another suicide within our extended family. Steven, the brother-in-law of my thirty-three-year-old daughter, Rachelle, died by his own hand. I didn't know Steven well, but he'd been a bright presence—smart, well-spoken, financially successful, respected and liked among peers. His death shocked us.

Frequently, when a depressed person decides on suicide, their demeanor improves because they believe they've found a solution to take them away from their pain. Likely that happened with Steven, because I ran into him at a family event, social and cheerful, several weeks before the suicide. In looking back, I wondered if, by then, he had decided on suicide.

On the afternoon of the funeral, my husband, Fred and I entered Mt. Sinai Mortuary, a property removed, just barely, from the crawling freeways nearby that crisscrossed the Southern California landscape. Its squat buildings, expansive lawns, tidy rows of headstones, and gurgling fountains, offered an otherworldly calm.

I spotted my daughter, who was eight months pregnant with her first child at the time. She wore black, one of those stretchy dresses that contemporary pregnant women favored because it showed off their bump. I supported her bold fashion choice that spoke to her pride and hopefulness in creating a new life. Rachelle lumbered over to me, brown hair tumbling down her back, her expression pained but her skin glowing with the hormones of pregnancy.

"Rachelley,"

I wrapped my arms around her and held on. She cried.

"One step at a time," she said.

"Yeah."

It was then that I noticed her soft pink, sling back shoes. Maybe she chose the color to honor her baby girl. Maybe she just wanted a bit of fashion for a somber day, refusing to surrender to despair. For me her shoes offered a promise that joy would return to my girl.

"It's not fair," she said. "I don't want to have to share my pregnancy happiness with all this grief. I want my moment of celebration."

"I get it," I said, and I felt a sudden sadness, recognizing that I couldn't protect my daughter from suffering.

Suicide. The word has a shush to it, a silence, a disruptive hissing sound. Back when I was a resident in psychiatry, I read a popular paper by the child psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg called "Ghosts in the Nursery." It began, "In every

nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors from the unremembered past of the parents; the uninvited guests at the christening.”

The essay addressed the unresolved relationships between parents and their families of origin as they raised their children. These relationships were the “ghosts” that influenced the lives of children by their effect on the parents.

I thought about family ghosts, wondering about their impact. My grandmother, a Jewish refugee from the Russian pogroms, witnessed the murder of her mother by Cossacks bandits when she was fourteen years old. She immigrated to the United States, married my grandfather, and had her first child, my Aunt Beverly, by the time she was nineteen. Who knows what mothering skills my grandmother had acquired by then, and how her fraught history affected the life of her first-born daughter. I came to believe that whatever biological loading for depression my aunt suffered, she also shouldered my grandmother’s trauma—the violence of witnessing her mother’s murder, her grief over losing a parent, and her mourning the loss of her country.

I also believed that my Aunt Beverly’s suicide placed an unwitting “spell” on my mother and me. The ramifications haunted me for years. When I had depressive moments, I worried I would wind up like my aunt. When my daughters exhibited adolescent moodiness, I feared they would inherit Beverly’s depression genes. Her ghost hovered.

As Steven’s funeral progressed that day, speeches were made about his life by the people he touched. Sitting in the funeral hall, I wondered if any eulogies had been given about Beverly. She too, had connected with the lives of others, her husband, sisters, niece, parents and friends.

I realized, listening to stories extolling Steven’s virtues, that I had defined my aunt by her suicide, instead of by her life, as though the act sequestered away any fond memories, like the family burial plots in an orthodox cemetery. As I watched Rachelle, sitting in front of me, I thought that Beverly would have loved getting to know my daughter. They both had a gentleness of temperament, and an enthusiastic appreciation for fashion. The thoughts gave me comfort and through remembering Beverly’s joys, I felt less fearful of her vulnerabilities.

The truth is that Beverly was a part of something larger than herself, an extended family, a legacy that included my daughter and her soon-to-be-born baby girl. She would not be forgotten just because no one had taken her name. I would honor her strengths, the beauty in her that she somehow couldn’t see within herself. I would own her weaknesses, her fragility. We were family and we belonged to one another.





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