

Shabbat With My Mother

After a year of painful grieving, a young woman's memory
of her mother became a blessing.

by LEEAT GRANEK

Fridays used to be my favorite day of the week. I would wake up early, grudgingly, to the sound of the alarm screeching in my ear. I am not a morning person. But on Fridays, the alarm hurt less somehow. I would stumble to the bathroom, then to the kitchen, put the kettle on, measure out the coffee, the sugar, the milk and reach for the phone. This was my routine every day. No matter where I was in the world, no matter what bed I was in, no matter what time of day it was in Toronto where my mother lived, I would follow the same ritual every day. Brush my teeth, wash my face, prepare the coffee and call my mom. A ritual so ingrained that it took me six months to stop picking up the phone each morning after she died. Each day, the same — brush my teeth, wash my face, prepare the coffee and pick up the phone. Each time, the same result — a wrenching sensation, painful, encompassing, a grating of my fleshy, vulnerable heart with the discovery, the *re*-discovery that I have no one to call. My mother died of breast cancer after living with the disease for 18 years. It is still hard for me to believe that she is not here even though four years have passed.

On Fridays, when she was alive, it was different. Less a habitual routine, more an anticipated thrill. “Hi, Ima, it’s me,” I would say. “Hi Zycie!” she would respond, always with joy in her voice, always greeting me with exuberance and excitement and even surprise. Such a warm, welcoming voice — I am yet to hear a greeting like that since her death, no one welcomes me so entirely anymore.

And it would start. What time would we meet that day? Was she working? Was I? Would we have time to shop? Would we go out for lunch? What would we make for dinner that night? Did we need to go to Sobeys, the Jewish supermarket by her house? What about dessert? Was anyone coming over for dinner? Did I hear the latest gossip? How was my date last night? Would I be sleeping over? What should we do on Saturday? Shop? See a movie? Go for a walk? The pleasantness of this conversation, its mundane everydayness, its easiness, its familiarity sustained me. My mother would talk and I would listen. We would make plans. Good plans. Plans to shop and eat and cook and gossip and

laugh, be together, as it was when I was a child, a pre-teen, and then an adolescent, as it was before I moved out, and in my mother’s words “had my own professorial life.”

There were never any doctors appointments on Fridays. There were no scans booked, no chemo drips, no walks down the long pale green hallways of the hospital. There were never oncologists, or palliative care specialists, or radiologists to punctuate our day. Never any real crisis to solve, no pain to endure, no big decisions to make.

The biggest dilemma on Fridays was my mother’s weekly panic that there wouldn’t be enough food to feed our guests. “It’s a shande [disgrace] not to have enough food, Leeatie,” she would say with the same serious tone she reserved for blanket statements like “always bring a gift when you visit someone’s house for dinner, and if there are kids, bring a gift for them, too” and “don’t go outside with wet hair!” She would say these things as she pulled out tray after tray of potatoes, bourekas and chicken from the oven.

My mother hated cooking, but Fridays were an exception. When she got too sick to lift the pots and pans, her range of motion limited by the painful tumors that had spread down her back and lungs, I would drag her favorite white armchair into the middle of the kitchen floor and she would sit and instruct me on how to make chicken soup and brisket and Persian rice. A queen, she was. Her head wrapped turban-like in a turquoise scarf to hide her hairless scalp. She instructed, guided and entertained me with stories about her friends as I negotiated four burners and the oven working at the same time.

My mother always set the table early on Fridays. She would spread the white tablecloth over the large wooden dining room table, smoothing out the ripples with her hands. My grandmother’s dishes would come out of the pine cabinet and would be laid carefully, setting by setting on the table. Delicate ivory dishes adorned with exquisitely hand-painted pink roses traced in fine gold paint. The big round plates first, then the salad plates, then the soup bowls. Silver cutlery, thin transparent glasses, and the wine goblets came next. Napkins and flowers and condiments followed, almost

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as if an afterthought. By the time Oprah came on at 4 p.m., the table was set, and Shabbat, although several hours away, had already entered our home.

And so we would move to the library. We would sit together in the small room on the plushy blue couch, my mother curled into the corner, my head resting on her lap, my legs dangling off the end of the small love seat. Sometimes we would talk; I would tell her stories about my day, about the inconsequential details that only mothers care about. Or sometimes she would knit and I would read, or she would read and I would mark papers, exploding at the stupidity on the page. Or sometimes she would stroke my hair as she told me about her day. I would close my eyes and rest, really *rest*, in the warmth of her embrace and the lull of her words. It was the safest place I have ever known. We would take turns getting up, checking on the soup, the cake, the potatoes, the chicken, the roast or whatever else was on the menu for that night.

I grew up in a secular Israeli family. We didn't keep kosher, go to shul, or even keep Shabbat, but Friday night dinners were the one tradition we cherished as a family. So many of my childhood memories harken back to the ritual of getting ready for this meal with my mother. The food shopping and preparation, the feeling of having time to talk and listen, and the reprise from hospitals, tests and treatments made Fridays the highlight of the week. One of the things I found hardest to deal with after she died was what to do with myself on Shabbat.

In the beginning, I stayed in bed. Literally. All day. Despite the insistence of my family, friends and colleagues that I should "move on" with my life and "get back to normal," I took a full year to grieve for my mother. There were so many losses to contend with — our daily conversations, the sound of her laughter, her wisdom, feeling her arms around me, her sweet scent — that Fridays went unnoticed at first.

When you grieve, time takes on strange dimensions. Each day seems identical. There is so much pain and sorrow, and it is so consistent, you feel as if you are living in a horrible, never-ending nightmare. All the normal demarcations of time and space evaporate. It's hard to keep track of the year, let alone the day. And yet. Each week, I would find myself dreading Fridays as if somehow the day itself was marked on my soul. No matter how hard I tried to avoid Shabbat, my

body and spirit refused to let me forget it was coming.

About six months into my grief, I decided to get out of bed and light candles. I felt the overwhelming desire to see the flickering lights, even though I had not prepared a meal or planned to celebrate Shabbat. It was completely spontaneous and it was completely wonderful. I watched the flames for a very long time, thinking about my mother — about all the mothers, all the Jewish women — who were lighting candles at that very moment. A tingly sensation washed over my body from head to toe. I could feel every strand of hair on my head. While I didn't recognize it then, I eventually realized that I only felt this way — only entered this heightened physical and spiritual state — when my mother came to "visit" — and the first time this happened was when I lit those candles.

Lighting candles on Shabbat has become part of my regular Friday night routine. While I always hope my mother will "appear" when I light them, I now do it for other reasons and have incorporated new traditions into the ritual.

For example, I have added a litany of prayers that fill me with faith, love and gratitude for the people in my life. I ask God to help my friends find partners, conceive children and advance in their careers. I ask God to bless my brothers and help my father find peace and equanimity. I ask God to heal the rifts in this violent world and help us appreciate and love each other. These prayers calm me down. I am not a religious person, I don't know if God hears me, or if S/He even exists, but somehow I am soothed by the act of asking, recognizing that no matter how much I do, or how hard I strive, most things in life are out of my control.

After moving out of bed and out of the living room with my burning candles and my prayers, I found my way into the kitchen. I started out by cooking small Shabbat meals for my family. I am a vegetarian, but I learned how to make chicken soup and schnitzel because my brothers love it, and seeing them happy makes me happy. I cook thick, hearty soups in the winter and make light, breezy salads in the summer. I bake cakes, drink wine and tell stories at the dining room table every Friday, sometimes in my small, cramped, downtown apartment and sometimes at my dad's suburban split-level house. It is hard some-



Avi Katz

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times to continue this ritual, especially when we gaze over at my mother’s empty place at the table, but most of the time, these dinners are fun — and one of the few times in the week we get to catch up on each other’s lives.

Recently, I have added challah making to my Shabbat routine. My mother never baked a loaf of bread in her life, and so, this part is completely new to me. Sometimes I invite friends over Thursday nights and we knead, bake, talk and laugh together. Other times, I work alone and allow myself to sink into the repetitive physical action of making the dough, watching it rise, punching it down and braiding it into neat thick loafs. It is a welcome reprise from my daily intellectual work conducting research, writing grants and reading articles.

Although my mother did none of these things when she was alive, she is intimately embodied in these rituals. I think about her each Friday, indeed, each day when I wake up, but the quality of the thinking and the longing has changed. Whereas I used to dread Friday because of how much it

reminded me of her and what I missed most about our time together, learning to “do” Shabbat in new ways has reinvigorated the sacred energy for me. Instead of mourning her in misery on Shabbat, I now honor her with love and vibrancy each time I light the candles, say a prayer, stir the soup or serve the warm sweet challah for my guests. My mother’s memory continues to be a blessing for me every day. There is nowhere where I feel her as close and as strongly as early Friday mornings when the alarm clock goes off. A blessing, indeed.

Leeat Granek earned her Ph.D. in psychology at York University in Toronto, Canada. She is currently working at Princess Margaret Hospital and Sunnybrook Odette Cancer Centre in Toronto with cancer patients and their families. Granek is the author of a forthcoming book on grief and mourning. She blogs for the Huffington Post and Heebonics, and in the coming year, her writing will appear in Chatelaine magazine.