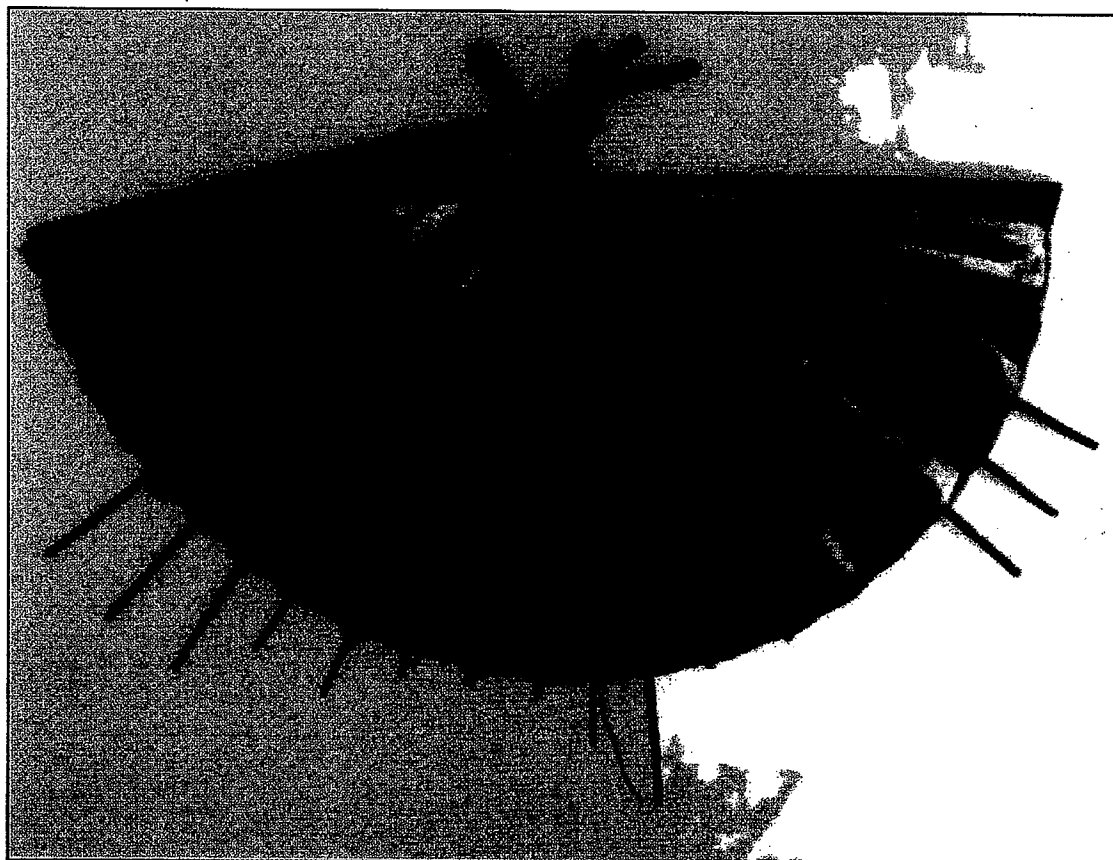


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## *Bayou Jews*

*Risa P. Gorelick*

We walk through the wrought iron gate, gathering in cliques, under the live oak tree whose furry arms, covered in Spanish moss, protect us from the sunlight overhead. On the next block, police sirens roar as the crowd forms behind metal pylons, awaiting the start of the Abdalla's annual Christmas parade. Every now and then, a band member sounds a practice blow into her instrument which intertwines with the honks of angry drivers who are upset the streets are closed for this event.

But those who gather inside the gate are not here for a Christmas parade. Instead, we wait in front of the Bendel monument in the shade of the oak. Malach Homowes, the Angel of Death, reins on the sixth step, wearing a banner on her left arm which reads: "arise, shine, for light has come/and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." A grieving woman, her body across the five steps, with floral wreaths labeled "mother" and "father" in her hands, weeps at the angel's feet. Commissioned by Henri Bendel, the New York department store giant, in honor of his mother, a life long resident, the marble monument graces the Jewish cemetery in Lafayette. While a beautiful work of art, this memorial appears somewhat out of place in a Jewish cemetery, which, generally, is void of ornate objects. Yet this sculpture is a proud symbol of the small Jewish community. It is also not the only angelic monument inside the gate. At the opposite end of the cemetery, a two-story marble statue of another female angel shows gratitude to former Louisiana Governor Alexander Mouton who, in 1869, donated this area of "Hebrew Rest." Folklore suggests Mouton wanted the Jewish businesses to remain in Lafayette, and so he provided a site for a synagogue and a burial ground. Walking through the rows of tombstones and small mausoleums, those who assemble here can witness Mouton's generosity which permitted Jews in Southwestern Louisiana a comfortable place to live, along with a proper place for burial, much like their Catholic French Cajun neighbors who also found religious refuge in this region after their exile from Canada.

The Baton Rouge rabbi arrives a few minutes late. It's the student rabbi's "off" week, so the nearest full-time rabbi must commute to perform necessary duties on an "as needed" basis. No one, it appears, has taken into account the detoured traffic associated with the parade route. The heels of my pumps sink into the ground, still slightly muddy from the rainy month of November, as the winter mosquitos begin to nip at my ankles through my sheer off-black hose. Today's weather, warm and breezy for early December, carries the music and laughter from the parade-goers, bringing a sharp contrast to the mood felt in the cemetery.

We mark the one year anniversary of Mitchell's death: the official end of the period of mourning. Dozens of people gather for the unveiling, a ceremony where the tombstone is placed on the grave. The stone, though, is already in place, covered by a white sheet, next to the grave of his brother's. Untimely deaths reunited the brothers who now rest next to the edge of University Avenue, a few yards from the red-light at Lee Street, which still contains some pre-parade traffic. As Rabbi Kaplan clears his voice to begin, an impatient driver honks at the person in front of him and yells, "hey, you have a green light." We all want to join him in his car, to speed off towards I-10, to escape the family who has yet and may never come to terms with Mitchell's death; we all wish we were somewhere else. This is not the only time I have wished I was somewhere else.

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I had only been to a funeral home once before, when my mother's co-worker suddenly died. Even though I knew the deceased, I could not look at the body in the open casket. But since this was a Jewish funeral, not a Catholic one, the protocol should change.

I walked past the flower shop and to the desk, was pointed in the right direction, and entered the last room on the right. Scott, the twenty-five year old student rabbi who flew in biweekly from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to conduct services, stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, not quite knowing what to do; from the dazed look on his face, it appeared as if this were his first Jewish funeral, too. As I approached him, Dan, seated in the back by the door, joined me. The three of us made small talk as I asked how the family was doing. Their eyes indicated "not well" as we all glanced in their direction. The room, filled with flowers, surprised me; generally Jewish funerals omitted them for one of two reasons: flowers die reminding one of death or flowers are generally symbols of happy occasions. But when I turned to get in line to pay my sympathies to the family, I noticed a bigger surprise on the far wall of the room.

"There's an open casket?" I whispered too loudly to Dan and Scott. They nodded. How on earth could there be an open casket? I thought I was going to a visitation for the

family. It had never crossed my mind that I was attending a Catholic-like wake. Jews don't have wakes; we sit shiva where, after the deceased is buried, family and friends gather to talk, pray, and share large quantities of food. I had made quite a few shiva calls I thought I knew what to expect.

Part of me wanted to leave, but before I could, Madeline saw me standing in line and walked up to me. Streaked glasses replaced the contact lenses she generally wore; in her left hand, wadded tissues, smudged with frosted mauve lipstick, peeked out from a clenched fist. After I hugged her, she wrapped her left arm around my right and began guiding me towards the back of the room. "I'm so sorry," was all I could manage to say.

"I know, darlin', I know," she said as the crowd of people moved out of our way as we crossed the room. "I'm so sorry you never got to meet Mitchell. I just know you two would have hit it off." I smiled uneasily and nodded. *Do something*, I screamed in my head. *Damn it, why aren't you doing something? Say something anything! Help me out here, please.* I thought Dan and Scott were walking with us, but, out of the corner of my eye, I saw them standing on the other end of the room talking to someone I did not know, leaving me deserted. We approached the open casket; my head began to throb.

"I really wish you would have come to Thanksgiving dinner with us. Now you'll never be able to get to know Mitchell," she said as a tear ran down her cheek. It was hard to believe that Thanksgiving was only last weekend; so much had happened since then.

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Only two nights ago Madeline greeted me with her colloquial, "How you?" forgetting the verb as she stretched out the "you" in her question. As I was about to answer, Scott, the student rabbi, made a gesture indicating he wanted to bless the food, Madeline acknowledged him and said, "You'll sit with Jake and me and tell us all about your week."

By now I knew there was no arguing with Madeline, the temple's president. Taking a seat across from Jake, I lifted the Dixie cup with a sip of wine in it and recited, by verbatim, the blessing the rabbi led. Scott then uncovered the challah, baked and braided by Jake. Then he led the children in blessing the ceremonial bread. Afterward, all were invited to fix themselves a plate at the buffet. The children were served first. Walking to the end of the line, I made small-talk with some of the other congregants.

On the smorgasbord table, a wide array of dishes looked appealing enough. The food in this region of the country was unlike any I had ever seen or tasted before relocating to the French-Catholic capitol of Louisiana from the mid-west for graduate school. While at first the Cajun spiciness was a shock to my system, I began to become acclimated to the "kick" of the foods and was even beginning to enjoy the idea of adding hot pepper sauces in small quantities to my own plate. But many of the traditional Cajun foods are forbidden by Kosher law, although, at this reform temple, the Kosher strictness I was accustomed to in other more traditional synagogues was not made a priority.

Bi-weekly temple potluck dinners rotated between meat and dairy meals, and obviously unkosher foods, like crawfish, catfish, and pork, were not brought into the temple, nor did people blatantly mix meat and milk products together. However, no one checked to make sure ingredients were labeled "Kosher" by the National Rabbinic Council nor did anyone ask if congregants kept Kosher kitchens at home. The reason no one asked about congregants' kitchens was that unless one was a vegetarian or had meat flown in from New Orleans or Houston, it was nearly impossible to keep Kosher in Lafayette.

Taking a spoonful of this and that on my plate, much of which contained rice, a local staple I could not make on my own without the aid of a rice-cooker, in addition to a piece of challah, which was still warm, I walked to the end of the table where Jake and Madeline sat.

By the time I sat down, Madeline asked, "Tell me, how was your Thanksgiving?" Madeline, it appeared, was still upset that I had accepted an earlier invitation somewhere else, but she was a bit late with hers. Two weeks before the holiday, I was convinced I would be eating a turkey T.V. dinner on my own, so when another family from the temple invited me, I quickly accepted, grateful to have someone to spend the holiday with since, at this time, homesickness had crept in. "I had a wonderful time at the Klein's," I said.

"Well I'm glad you had a good time. But I really wish you would have come with Jake and me to Carol's in Baton Rouge. I really wanted you to meet Mitchell," she stressed.

"I know," I said after swallowing a bite of challah. I had met Carol, their daughter, and her children during the High Holidays, but I didn't recall seeing them again.

"You'll just have to come to Carol's soon," she said.

"Sure. I'll be around after exams and have more time."

"Good," Madeline said, "I really think you and Mitchell will hit it off." She had mentioned Mitchell, her son, more than a few times, but he was a bit too old for me (over fifteen years my senior), though I was too polite to say anything. Besides, I had been dating the only other single Jewish man outside of the university I had met, a 30-something attorney from New York who occasionally came to services at the temple where we had met over

the High Holidays. She was aware I had been seeing Dan for some time now, but this fact didn't seem to derail her attempts to introduce me to her son.

After dinner, the rabbi announced services were about to begin, so we congregated in the sanctuary. The sixth night of Chanukah, the festival of lights, was tonight. Since it came only days after Thanksgiving, I hadn't had the time to reflect on the holiday much. I only had bought gifts for the children of the two families from the temple who helped me out when I came last summer to apartment hunt. It was the least I could do after they took me into their homes not knowing me from an ax murderer. Originally, a graduate student from the English department, whom I had been in contact with via e-mail, had invited me to stay with her while I looked for a place to live. But she ended up having a flea problem. I stayed there one night and awoke with a lump the size of a golf ball on my neck, as if Dracula himself had bitten me. I was so itchy I could hardly sit still when Holly picked me up from the grad student's house and replied, "My, oh my! This yard's a bit unkempt."

"That's not the only thing that's unkempt," I desperately said, "I can't stay here another night. Look at how her fleas attacked me," I said as if showing war wounds. "And I've never seen such a filthy house. I was afraid to take a shower because the only place I didn't get bitten was where my clothes covered me. Do you know of a cheap motel or something?"

While I'm sure this was not the conversation Holly had expected when she volunteered to take me around town to see some apartments which she had been investigating for me in anticipation of my arrival, she responded without hesitation, "You're staying with me. We'll pick up your things this afternoon."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," she said, "Now here are the places I've circled from the paper. We're going to look at this one on Dunreath first. It's only a few blocks from the university." Not realizing at the time that the Southern hospitality queen was in my very presence, I figured that her home couldn't possibly be as bad as where I was staying and replied a grateful, "Thank you." It amazed me that she would take a stranger into her home, one whom she had only spoken to on the telephone a few times. I was given Holly's number from Bruce, the temple's vice president, after I had investigated if there were any known Jews living in Lafayette, Louisiana, once I was admitted to the university's English doctorate program. I'm not so sure I would have made the same invitation in her place, especially in a house with small children, but she didn't seem to think twice about it. And thus began my association and indebtedness to the temple.

As I headed into the sanctuary, Holly's children grabbed my hands and asked, "will you sit by us?" I nodded and smiled. It was nice to feel so popular.

The service was a typical one except the rabbi's sermon focused on the holiday of Chanukah, and, in addition to lighting the Shabbat candles, a large menorah glowed on the pulpit. The girls, sitting on either side of me, squirmed throughout most of the service, clutching the stuffed animals I had given to them earlier that night.

The rabbi asked us to rise for the Mourner's Kaddish prayer for the dead. I was unaccustomed to rising for the Mourner's Kaddish. In the more traditional synagogue I was raised in, only blood relatives, sons, daughters, siblings, and parents and spouses recited this ancient prayer for the dead. The remainder of the congregation sat in silence. But the reform Judaism movement asked all congregants to rise to remember those who had perished during the Holocaust and to recite this prayer for those who had no one to say it for them. I didn't mind this change some of the other ones didn't make a lot of sense to me but this one did.

"Shabbat Shalom, y'all" was the phrase which Madeline began her weekly announcements, indicating that the service was almost over. The "y'all" still sounded strange to me, especially combined with the "Shabbat Shalom," the traditional Sabbath greeting, although this didn't grate on my nerves as much as having someone call me "ma'am."

The congregants answered back, "Shabbat Shalom, y'all," in response, wishing all a Sabbath full of peace, love, and friendship.

"It's wonderful to see so many of you here tonight," she began then listed the upcoming events. As she spoke, I noticed the telephone, in the other room, ringing. After the third ring, the answering machine must have picked up. Who would call during a Friday night service? I wondered. It must be someone who dialed incorrectly since the telephone never rang before while I was there on Shabbat. But as soon as the machine picked up, the phone rang again and three rings later it stopped. When the phone rang for the third time, I elbowed Holly's husband Mark and asked, "Do you think we should answer the phone? It's the third time someone's called."

"Yeah, I just noticed it. I'll go get it," replied Mark.

Madeline continued to talk about Saturday night's adult Chanukah party, trying to explain what exactly a white elephant gift was, when Mark returned to the sanctuary and tapped Jake on the shoulder and whispered something to him. Jake got up, and Mark returned to his seat. I asked, "is everything okay, Mark?"

"I don't know," he said, "someone said there's an emergency."

As Madeline sat down and the rabbi said his final remarks before beginning the closing prayer, Jake entered the back entrance of the pulpit and asked Madeline to come into the other room. She looked puzzled as she got up to leave. We were nearing the end of the prayer when, from the other room, Madeline screamed, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Noooo, Jake! Noooo!"

Shocked by the outburst of this southern woman who never raises her voice, we ran into the other room without finishing the closing song. Madeline could hardly stand up and Jake, an olive skinned man, now white as bleached sheets, tried to support her on the stairs between the pulpit and the social hall. The others quickly crowded in the hall wondering what had happened.

"I can't, Jake," she said hysterically, "I just can't do this."

By now everyone had returned to the social hall. Jake's moist eyes skipped from person to person. "There was a robbery at Mitchell's store," he said. "Someone shot him. He's dead."

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We were standing in front of the casket now, inches from it, "This is my baby, Mitchell. Mitchell," she cried. "Darlin', this is my good friend . . ." Her right hand was in the casket, caressing his arm, as her left arm still intertwined with mine. I could not escape the grip of this scorned mother. "I just know you two would have really been really good friends or even more." Why wasn't anyone stopping her from doing this? I couldn't look into the casket; for all I knew, there was a headless body in there, an image I could not bear to see. Even with the most advanced cosmetics, I could not imagine how a mortician could hide the fatal, close-range gun shot wound to his head which was reported on all the local network news shows. Instead, I directed my gaze towards the floor as my ears baptized the scuffed black leather flats I wore without stockings.

I'm not sure how I got out of that situation especially without having to view Mitchell in the open casket. Somehow we had inched our way back towards the center of the room, where Scott and Dan still stood talking as the crowd of people increased. They never seemed to notice I was gone. How could they have missed her introducing me to her dead son? I needed to leave. "I'm going to pay my respects to Jake and Carol," I said to Dan. "Do you want to join me?"

"Sure," he said. Scott took a seat in a row of chairs and began talking to another congregant. I introduced Dan, gave Jake and Carol a hug, then made a little bit of small talk before nudging Dan towards the door. I didn't want to face Madeline again. I saw her youngest granddaughter coax her into taking some pill. "Mom said you have to take this, Nana," she said. "If you love me; you'll take this pill. It will relax you and make you feel better."

"Nothing will make me feel better," she said. But, not wanting to fight, she took the pill on her tongue and swallowed something out of a Styrofoam cup as Dan and I exited.

Walking through the front door, we passed Janet with her daughter, Sarah, and with whom I had spent Thanksgiving.

"How are they?" Janet asked.

"Not so good," I replied.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"A little shaken," I shook my head. "It's like a wake...a Jewish wake...."

"Kinda typical for south Louisiana," remarked Janet, who, like me, grew up in Chicago.

"With flowers and," I continued, "and an open casket...."

"What?" Janet questioned, "An open casket?"

"Yeah," Dan interrupted. "You should have seen what happened before you arrived."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Madeline was hysterical," he began, "screaming about how she was never going to see her baby again, how she had already buried one son."

"What?" I asked. "What do you mean she already buried one son?"

"Yeah," Janet said, "they lost another son in a freak accident about twenty years ago, a few years before we moved here. It was in their backyard. There was a gas leak or something. Very tragic. Their oldest son passed out and drowned in a puddle near the septic tank he was cleaning out."

"Oh, God, how awful," I said, "I didn't know they had more children. How do you survive burying one child, let alone two?"

"I hope to never know," said Janet, whose two sons were away at college; Sarah stood silently next to her mother.

Dan shook his head in disbelief and continued, "Anyway, she went to the casket which, at the time was closed and demanded that she be able to see Mitchell again. The daughter, what's her name?"

"Carol," said Janet.

"Well," Dan continued, "Carol couldn't calm Madeline down. So one of the funeral directors came in and, when he couldn't calm her down, he finally said he would open up the casket. But he warned them about not touching him, which I thought was strange."

"He was shot in the head," Janet said.

"Really? I didn't know." Dan replied, "I couldn't tell."

"What?" I asked. "You looked inside?"

"Yeah, before you arrived. But I didn't look that closely. I guess they can do a lot with silicone and make-up."

A moment or two passed in awkward silence. "Well, Sarah has school in the morning. We better go in there," Janet said before saying goodbye.

We walked towards the cars, which were parked next to each other; Dan stood next to me as I unlocked my door. "I can't believe she introduced me to her dead son," I blurted.

"What?" he asked.

"I thought you were with me. She grabbed my by the arm and took me to meet her dead son," I said. "I just couldn't look into that casket."

"Are you all right?"

"No. I feel like I just met a ghost or was introduced to one. This wasn't what I was expecting. I certainly did not expect to see any form of the body here. This was supposed to be a family visitation--not a wake. Are they Catholic or Jewish? Have you ever heard of such things?"

"No, I certainly haven't," he responded matter-of-factly, "and I have master's degree in theology from Yale. Things sure are weird in this part of the country," said the New Yorker. "You gonna be all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

He gave me a kiss on the cheek and said, "I'll call you tomorrow. You going to the funeral?"

"Probably. If I feel better," I replied. "Thanks for meeting me here."

"No problem," he said. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, Danny, I'll be fine," I said shutting the car door. "Good night."

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The rabbi clears his voice and begins. I wish Dan hadn't had relocated to New Orleans a few months ago. I need someone to comfort me. "It doesn't seem fair," Rabbi Kaplan improvises, "to be missing the parade on this beautiful December afternoon. Mitchell should be at the parade, enjoying himself with his family and friends." He returns to his prepared speech and reads, "Today should be a happy day, but it's not. And it's not fair. This is not what God intended to happen. The God we believe in is a loving God. This was not God's plan. But instead of trying to figure out why this tragic event has occurred, let us instead join together in healing and making the world a better place so tragedies like these are not commonplace. And families, like Jake and Madeline's, won't have the terrible burden of burying another son." The rabbi pauses a moment and then removes the sheet. "Please join in the Mourner's Kaddish," requests the rabbi.

"Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka-dash shé-mei ra-ba . . ." we chant as I examine the headstones. Except for the names and dates, the stones are identical; both epitaphs, carved in granite, read, "Our son and brother, we love and miss you." The dates, ironically, resemble each other. Both brothers were born in April, only two days short of two years apart. Their deaths, nineteen years short of three weeks apart, indicate both died before their time. Melancholy, more than healing, fills the air, as the parade passes outside the gates just as we recite the last line of the Kaddish.