

So he got on the boat. . .
by Polly Hall

Tyler, Texas, is the Rose Capital of the Nation. Not those long-stemmed roses, but short-stemmed, bush roses. You can get them for two dollars a dozen at the Brookshires.

My grandmother Polly and great Aunt Millie, neither of whom I ever met, used to call each other on the phone. Siiiiister? One would say to the other in a high, sweet voice. Eggs are on sale at Brookshires, sister, so I bought you a dozen.

Brookshires is in the Bergfield Shopping Center, less than a mile from my grandfather's house. The house was huge - four large bedrooms and baths upstairs for the children and a master suite downstairs with blue carpet, a kitchen with a breakfast table and chairs with yellow cushions, a dining room suitable for Sunday lunch, a dining room for more formal entertaining, a library with a whole cabinet full of playing cards, a kind of a ballroom empty except for a piano, a study, a laundry room, restroom for guests, a separate garage and enormous backyard - and a grand staircase that led from the pink carpeted foyer to the second floor, pausing halfway between at a window and then continuing up, a chandelier hanging high from the ceiling --- the kind of staircase that a girl would want to walk down in a gown.

Every time we drive by the house, on Chilton in Tyler's Azalea district, my mother reminds me that it wasn't "too much" for the people who lived in it; here were seven of them living there. She feels guilty, maybe, almost wants to deny how spoiled they were.

My mother's family didn't always live in the house on Chilton - the old house, only a few blocks away, was just as large but less majestic - narrow hallways, small rooms, short doorways and ceilings that would have been fine for my grandmother - 5'3, but miserable for my grandfather, Isadore, who was at least a foot taller - a complicated laundry chute that ran confusingly in

the walls. There was also a garage apartment for my grandfather's brother, Jakie.

Nobody really talks about Jakie, but my Aunt Susie visited him until he died a few years ago. My father said he was burned in a fire when he was little and he never recovered, he had long hair, down to his knees, and his nightgown caught fire one day from the stove. His brother saved his life by wrapping him up in a blanket. He couldn't hold a job after he got back from Korea, they say.

My mother and her family moved from the old house when Sherry, her oldest sister, was nearly out of high school, but she still might have walked down that beautiful staircase in a beautiful gown - Sherry was a Lady in Waiting in the Tyler Rose Festival, which is maybe a little like a debutante ball.

Well, it didn't start that way. In 1933, while pretty much all of the United States was in the depression, Tyler was enjoying a great oil boom and the women of the Tyler Garden Club wanted to celebrate the local economy and showcase the rose industry. So they did that, and it was called the Tyler Rose Festival, and then later Texas got so proud of it that they called it the Texas Rose Festival.

Anyway, the Rose Queen gets picked by some committee and she has Ladies in Waiting and Duchesses and then all kinds of attendants, even little girls of three or four years old. My cousin Julie Diane was an attendant once, and she wore a jeweled green ball gown that poofed up at the bottom with petticoats and ruffles under it. She had to do this curtsy that she showed us - arms to the side, left leg slides back, kneel down, right leg goes out front and points forward, cross your arms gracefully over it as you bend your body over, and then reverse all that to get back up. We're talking crowns and scepters and sleeves out to there or gloves up to your elbows and capes and sashes and all that, the kind of dresses that china dolls wear.

My mother was never a Rose Queen or in the festival. She said over and over, No, I don't want to have anything to do with that. Of course, she was offended when nobody asked.

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Sam, the only boy in my mother's family, was named after HIS grandfather, my GREAT grandfather, Sam Roosth, whose real name was Sholem Rutzky. Now Sholem was born in Korycin, Poland, on May 5, 1888 and when he was 19 years old he said to hell with Poland, he got on the boat and came to the United States through Galveston, Texas, in January of 1908 and stopped being Sholem Rutzky and was Sam Roosth. People weren't being very nice to the Jews in the Bialystok region of Poland around then, and Poland was Russia was poverty and here was a chance it could all be better.

Sam Roosth went straight to Gilmer, Texas, and did what he knew how to do, which was be a baker, placed at the City Bakery by the Industrial Removal Office, a program created to help immigrants adapt to American society and brought Jews through Texas to alleviate New York. Sometime around 1912, Sam brought his family over - his mother, father, five siblings, and childhood sweetheart Tzeril. His brother Moses became Morris Lewis and brother Wolf Daniel became William Daniel, brother Nohem became Nathan Harold, sister Sipa became Celia, and sister Brainka became Bertha.

Bertha got nicknamed BB and she was BIG, not big and huge, but solid all the way through. Big Aunt BB had an accent and she always wore an apron and ran a deli down the street from her brother's business on Spring Street. She had THE best corn beef and would always let my mother and her siblings have a taste before she sliced it. My grandma Polly got her fish for gefilte fish there and there was a barrel by the meat counter that had big kosher dill pickles in it, and the best part was when they'd go check out. There was this two door glass paned candy cabinet and Aunt BB would always let you pick a piece of candy out of it, whatever you wanted.

Down Spring Street was her brother's business, called Roosth & Genecov because it was a partnership between Sam Roosth and Aleck Genecov.

Now this is the story as my father remembers it, as my grandfather told him one night when he sat him down. Apparently, Sam Roosth - he was a baker but he was a whole lot more than that, he was an entrepreneur - and when the depression hit he saw it was an opportunity to start buying things. So when the Kilgore National Bank in Kilgore, Texas, failed, he bought that property. In 1930, Columbus Marion Joiner discovered oil on the Daisy Bradford farm at the age of seventy and there ended up being 26 miles of oil fields in East Texas. My great-grandfather Sam got the idea to drill an oil well in the bank, right through the terrazzo floor in the lobby - in those days in Kilgore, Texas, they tell a story that the oil derricks when they were drilling, they were drilling them so close that with a plank you could walk from one to the other. I mean it was crazy.

So it seems like Sam needed 10,000 dollars to drill the well, so he went around and got 100 dollars from as many people as he could until he raised the money and then drilled the well and hit oil, and that's it, now there's a story. Aleck Genecov came along later and they formed a partnership that was far reaching - oil, gas, real estate. But Sam, Sam was a wildcat - that's what they called them - wildcat oil men, because they were risky.

Eventually, my grandfather, Isadore, who had gone to A&M to become a Petroleum Engineer after serving in the army, took over for the Roosth interest and Aleck Genecov stayed on for the Genecov interest.

Well after Isadore died there was some huge fight and the Genecovs didn't want to be in business anymore and they said all kinds of nasty things about my grandfather but of course nobody told me what, and Roosth & Genecov split up all the oil fields and property between them and that was that, we don't talk to them anymore.

But Isadore and the wildcat Sam Roosth and Aleck Genecov are all buried in the same graveyard, so I hope they get along now.

And that oil boom in Kilgore was what brought them together and what united East Texas, and the women of the Tyler Garden Club had some fancy dresses made with the oil money and started up the Tyler Rose Festival that my aunts Sherry and Susie were the first Jewish girls in, but not my mother, you remember, because she didn't want to have anything to do with that.

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There are these pictures of my mother and her sisters taken when they were each four or so, all wearing the same pretty pink dress, light pink, off the shoulder, smooth until the waste and ruffled to the knee. The four pictures, in elaborate gold frames, hung in the entrance to my grandfather's house - in the pink-carpeted foyer with the big pretty staircase and chandelier hanging high from the ceiling.

We never used that entrance, we always came in the house through the side door under a covered car port, rang the old doorbell and waited for my grandfather to come from his study or let ourselves in with a key and met him back in his room where he might have been taking a nap, his big feet hanging off the end of the bed he was so tall.

He was tall. He had a big, full laugh. He kept his pills folded into a tissue in his coat pocket. He would motion with his finger toward his cheek, and that meant to give him a kiss. He kind of whistled when he talked. He was shy in front of a crowd.

When we stayed there, we slept in someone's childhood bedroom - Toni's room had twin beds, sheets with bright, cartoon flowers and white wicker headboards. Sam's room was itchy and dark, with blue and green wooly bedcovers. Susie's room had a four-poster bed and looked out onto the backyard. My mom and Sherry shared a room, since Sherry was nearly gone to

college when they moved there, and it was pink, like those dresses, and delicate, for princesses.

Mimi and I loved to look through their drawers - for notes from high school, old jewelry and coins, beads, annuals, little clues, secrets.

We did cartwheels in the big empty ballroom, spun in circles. Looked for toadstools in the huge backyard, picked honeysuckle from the brick fence, sat on the cool, smooth freezer in the laundry room while the sun streamed in from the windows.

Meatloaf. Tuna fish. Cornflakes with whole milk.

Nothing ever changed there. The same piles of papers were always on the counter, the same secrets were always in the desk drawers, the same cornflakes and steaks on Sundays and only one TV you had to change manually on the set and a microwave he never once used.

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The Hebrew word *seder* means order, and the Passover *seder* is an order of rituals to remember the Jews' slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh and Moses leading his people from bondage into the desert.

My grandfather, who my sister and I called Zayde, used to lead the seder together with his brother Wiley, but since Zayde died Uncle Wiley has led the seder solo. The seder has been held in Uncle Wiley's house since my mother was a little girl. Uncle Wiley is 83, tall and thin, with a round face just like a circle, he wears high pants and bow ties, sneakers on walks, and is at his medical practice every morning at 7 am after walking two miles before.

My grandfather also wore his pants high.

Uncle Wiley and Uncle Hymie are the only two of my grandfather's seven brothers left living, and they are both doctors. When Hymie was in medical school, he sent his father, wildcat Sam, a letter - Papa, I need some money, I need some dough, I can't get a haircut. The next week, Hymie received a

pie plate full of dough, remember, they owned a bakery. Well Hymie took out his scalpel, because remember he was in medical school, and cut open that dough, but he got nothing. There was no check, there was no money. Then he got a letter from his father, wildcat Sam who at that time had already struck oil, and it said. If you want dough, I'll send you dough. If you want money, you ask for money. I didn't send my son to college to learn to speak like a gangster.

So we're fixin - that's f-i-x-i-n to have a seder, Uncle Wiley says, and in Texas, that means we gone have one.

All the boys are in suits, jackets on, and the girls are wearing their nicest clothes. White tablecloths, china with yellow roses, the good silver. Ceramic place markers with names - the children together but sandwiched in between or at least near their parents - the youngest children at the head of the tables with Uncle Wiley; Aunt Rita, his wife, 35 people away at the other end of the extended tables, small wineglasses waiting to be filled.

It's a complicated story, but Aunt Rita was adopted by my grandmother's brother's wife's family in Corpus Christie, and Rita met and later married Uncle Wiley Roosth because my grandmother Polly Heffler married Isadore Roosth who was Wiley's older brother.

Now the Hefflers were my grandmother's family, and she was one of five. There was Polly, Otto, Rebecca, and Aunt Millie and Uncle Isaac who never got married and lived together and that's who my grandmother Polly used to call and say Siiiister? Eggs are on sale at Brookshires, sister.

Alright, now Rebecca married Jack Berry and they sold purses. They'd go to shows and buy purses and then sell them to department stores in little towns and that's how they made their million dollars. Uncle Jack collected elephants, not real ones, but little figurines. Aunt Beck always had some butterscotch candy to offer you and there was a diagonal board in their living room to lie on so the blood would rush toward your head and they were

both real quiet and sweet and Aunt Beck kind of shook her head while she talked and they were always old, I mean, from the day I first remember them until when they passed away.

Of those five, I only ever met Beck. But Aunt Millie was just the sweetest and Uncle Isaac taught everyone to drive. They were my mother's favorites, and my sister is named after Aunt Millie and my cousin is named after Uncle Isaac and I am named after Polly, so don't worry, nearly all the Hefflers are living again.

Now the Hefflers, Polly's family, lived in Tyler and Polly's father owned a grocery. So one day he was working in this one-room, brick grocery that had H. HEFFLER - GROCER painted on the front, and a robber came in and shot H. Heffler, grocer, who was still relatively young. So after that Polly's mother was very nervous and anxious so she taught her children to be nervous and anxious and Polly taught her children to be nervous and anxious and that's why my mother is always worried when my sister and I drive in the car together. My dad says that explains everything, that my great-grandfather, H. Heffler, was killed in a robbery, and that's why my uncle says his sisters hear things that aren't there.

That brick grocery is still standing but it's all boarded up, with vines growing up the side and graffiti on at least one wall. That grocery is in North Tyler which might have then been a predominantly working-class, immigrant section of town, and then it was the black section of town, and now there are a lot of Tacquerias and about a mile away men here illegally from Mexico stand in groups of forty or fifty on weekday mornings trying to get picked up for work.

So my grandmother Polly married Isadore Roosth, who everybody called Izzy, the son of the wildcat oilman and Polish immigrant, and they had, in this order, Sherry, Susie, Diane, Sam, and Toni. Now Sherry was the oldest and she was in the Rose Festival, Susie is next and she can only taste red

onions, Diane is my mother, Sam was the only boy named after his grandfather, and Toni is the baby, with big feet and ears like my grandfather and kinky curly hair like her brother Sam.

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Aunt Sherry is down at the way end of the tables near the front door. She wanted to sit near me and my sister but was going to have to sit near her Aunt Beck Roosth, so she complained and had her seat changed. Aunt Beck Roosth (different than Aunt Beck Berry who sold purses) was married to Uncle Sol who saved Jakie from the fire, and she's about 81 now with short white hair and a hard face, not very nice.

Aunt Beck is on one side of me complaining that Aunt Rita makes her matzah balls ahead of time and freezes them and she's worried whether or not she made enough gefilte fish balls and keeps pointing at two of her grandsons telling Stevie to sit up straight or Can't you Read, Brian?

On my other side is cousin Elizabeth Melamed, Aunt Rita's daughter's daughter, 19, the same age as my little sister Mimi. Elizabeth has two sisters, twins, Tina and Tanya, and one of them peed on me once when they were babies, I'm not sure which.

Mimi and I used to think that Elizabeth was perfect. Her mother Anne is kind of perfect, too. They're both tall and thin, like Uncle Wiley, and they never spill anything and so can wear white shirts and have good jewelry and really good manners and are so very composed and gracious like Aunt Rita. Elizabeth never complained when we were little and always wore her shoes buckled and was skinny and perfect.

Elizabeth is still kind of perfect - she's going to be a doctor like her grandfather. But she has a hard time being away from home and this boyfriend, and you just know they're going to get married.

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Elijah the prophet visits the earth in many forms. He is the man in corduroy pants at the bus stop, the old woman weeding her garden, the little girl spinning around in the aisle of the grocery store, the person staring barefoot into the ocean, the bum standing on a corner who tells you something has fallen out of your bag - anyone with a kind smile, every stranger you have ever met. The old folk stories explain that Elijah appears this way, hidden, to reward people for acts of loving-kindness, humans helping fellow humans, even if they have no means to help. He appears in times of trouble; his job is to herald the coming of the Messiah, to promise relief, to lift our spirits, to give us hope.

They say he actually existed, in the 9th century before the Common Era, and that he never really died - he was carried off in a fiery chariot.

At the end of the seder, you fill a large glass of wine for Elijah and place it on the table. As the door is opened and everyone rises to meet his ghost, little children watch the glass intently, waiting for the wine - just a trace - to disappear from the glass, the full cup to be just the slightest bit emptier.

Even when you are as old as Uncle Wiley, 83, you still look to the door with a little hope.

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I'm across the table from my seeeeester, Mimi, that's what we call each other, kind of like Polly and Millie called each other Siiiiister? Mimi has fuzzy hair like Aunt Toni, it's lighter than mine, kind of brown and blonde together.

Mimi and I were named after sisters, after people we never met but people my mother loved, we have names that mean something, names that are gifts with histories.

Mimi's middle name is Beth, after my mother's cousin Barbara Beth Dworkin. Barbara Beth was Big Aunt BB's granddaughter. She was only fourteen when she died, in a fire that killed her two sisters and left her mother Beatrice brain damaged, in 1961, when Barbara Beth was fourteen and her sisters were twelve and ten, when my mother was thirteen, and their father Max was left by himself having lost everything.

Mimi's Hebrew name also comes from Barbara Beth; it's Basha. Malka Basha, a queen, a daughter of God. Mimi really is a queen.

My Hebrew name was my grandmother's Hebrew name: Pesha. It turns out that it means "sin." We didn't know!, my mother says, I told you we were yokels.

You speak Hebrew differently in Tyler. It's not exactly Hebrew pronounced with an East Texas accent, it's Southern in attitude - it's old, it's slower, it's how Hebrew was spoken like Latin when it was dead a million years before the state of Israel emerged from the Holocaust; it's not modern, it's not conversational, it's holding on to the way things used to be and sound.

So Moses said Let My People Go and Pharaoh said What?! You crazy??? Ain't nobody doing Nothin, says Uncle Wiley. Now. Fill the cusses.

You drink four cups of wine at the Passover seder, spread out during the evening to divide the long service, or maybe to represent the four letters of God's name, or maybe to represent the four facets of freedom - political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual. Over and over during the seder you say "and we are not free until all the peoples of the world are free," and when you say that you don't just mean free from political tyranny, you mean free to walk around, free to believe in whatever, free to make enough money for dinner, free to think about things, free to get taught things, free to have a say in your life.

"Cos" is the Hebrew word for cup, or glass, and it only follows that if you were from Tyler, you might pluralize the word in English, rather than Hebrew. So Uncle Wiley says Fill the cusses and four men rise from the tables - two at each end - and each retrieves one bottle of Manischewitz wine, wrapped in a white cloth napkin, and begins to fill the cusses. Manischewitz is sweet and dark, like candy and not like wine, so that even the little kids like it, even though they pretend it's gross.

On Shabbat when my mother was little, my grandfather would chant the Kiddush, the prayer over the wine, and everyone would drink their glasses, and then my grandmother Polly would say to her husband, "Izzy - this is such sweet wine," in her high, sweet voice.

So we say the prayer over one of the cups and I look across the Passover table to my little sister, Mimi, and softly and sweetly say, "Izzy" and we kind of smile and look down the tables toward the door.

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The Passover seder, the order of rituals, it takes just about forever. When we were little, we'd almost fall asleep except we were so excited to be up late. By the time you get to Aunt Rita's house after services, lots of people are already crammed into the living room, the little kids running down the hall in between the entrance and bedrooms, Aunt Rita and her daughter in the kitchen with three hired helpers. People are drinking slivovitz, a colorless plum brandy, and when Uncle Wiley gets back from the synagogue there's only a few minutes more of visiting before it's time to go to the tables.

The tables that stretch from the dining room into the sitting room and very nearly reach the door will seat as many people as they have to; it's even a Passover tradition to open the door at the beginning of the seder and check one more time - Let all who are hungry come and eat, is what we say.

This year the first night of Passover is on a Saturday, so we have a pretty good turnout, about 35. The tables are continuous, so it's hard to get to your seat - you can only enter at one end or the other, and there's not much space on either side so you have to suck in your stomach and tip-toe. Red haggadahs are on every plate, the prayer book for the seder that contains the elaborate list of things that need to get done before the Passover meal. First wine, then ritual washing. Eating of the green vegetable, parsley or celery dipped in saltwater, to symbolize the tears our ancestors shed in slavery. Break the middle matzah and set it aside for the Afikomen.

The retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt, including a performance from the youngest children of the Four Questions (why is this night different from all other nights?) and singing the song of the Four Brothers to the tune of Clementine - a particularly Texas Jewish yokel tradition - to satisfy the needs of four different kinds of people - wise ones, wicked ones, simple ones, and ones who are unable to ask, explaining the story of Passover for everyone. The second cup of wine.

Another ritual washing, a prayer over the matzah and our first bite of the year; the bitter herbs - raw horseradish to symbolize the bitterness of slavery but dipped in charoset, a mixture of apples, wine, nuts, and cinnamon, to symbolize the bricks made by our ancestors but also that there are always good times, even in bad times.

A Hillel sandwich - bitter herbs between matzah, the act that replaces an animal sacrifice done in the old old old days.

And then the Shulchan Orech, the dinner. First course, hard boiled egg or cold egg soup - salty water with bits of boiled egg in it, yellowish, with green onions floating, an egg because it's Spring and things are being born. Second course, gefilte fish, served on a piece of lettuce with a single slice of cooked carrot resting on the top, eaten with red horseradish - these are

the hardest to serve because they just want to roll right off the plates. Third course, matzah ball soup, so hot you see the steam coming at you first, Texas-sized matzah balls, the size of softballs.

And you think you're already stuffed, but the meal hasn't really even started. Salad. Roasted chicken. Pink, sweet, starchy rhubarb. Asparagus. Passover Succotash of zucchini and tomato and onions. Two kinds of mashed potatoes. Dessert. Coffee. Special Passover after dinner mints, dark chocolate squares with mint goo inside them, some with bloom on the top because they've been waiting all year in the freezer.

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My mother's sisters and brother are all here, all except for Susie.

My Aunt Susie moved into my grandfather's house because she had trouble saying goodbye. She lived in there with her partner, Aunt Marian, and their two dogs, for at least a year after my grandfather died, when I was ten. Well, we visited them in that big old house without very much furniture, and Aunt Susie took me to the drive-through Subway to get her a tuna sandwich with red onions (that's the only thing she can taste, red onions) and afterwards we drove through the Foley's department store parking lot near the Broadway on the Square Mall and she zig-zagged around real crazy and told me to look for money on the trees because Marian spotted some the other night and had I ever seen a money tree?

No I had not, but I sure thought I might spot some.

When I was in my last year of college, twelve years later, Aunt Susie drove with me from Little Rock to Massachusetts and she had me check every big truck we passed to make sure Al Qaeda wasn't in it. Ooooo, girrrrl, check in there and make sure Bin Ladn in't in there, you know they're lookin for him.

Aunt Susie isn't here at the seder because yesterday Aunt Marian fell outside work and shattered her ankle and has to have surgery on Monday; she

has to have pins and plates put into her ankle because they said it's really not an ankle anymore.

We certainly didn't expect Marian to get hurt, but we almost always expect Aunt Susie to bail, though she'd never let you down if it were really important. Things are sometimes just harder for her. She gets panic attacks.

When we were little and lived in Dallas we hung out at Aunt Susie's house all the time. We liked it over there because there were dogs, and Marian would play Old Maid with us and make us fold-over half-sandwiches with cheese in them and we got to drink coca-cola and go on walks to the park. One time they got rid of their dining room table and got a ping-pong table instead, and one time Aunt Susie bought a drum set but never learned how to play. They had cable and a nice backyard and our paintings hung up on the walls and we rolled around on the floor and giggled about the dogs chasing snot-filled Kleenex.

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After the Passover meal, the children are sent to find the Afikomen, the piece of matzah that was broken at the beginning of the seder and hidden. The tradition is that the seder cannot be completed until the Afikomen is eaten, so after the children find it they hold it for ransom, demanding a small amount of money - silver dollars, uncirculated bills. This way, the children stay awake and excited until the end.

After the Afikomen we say grace, and after it the third cup of wine. The fourth cup is poured, Elijah's glass is set on the table, and he is welcomed with a special song. More songs - called Hallel, praises - and then even more, including one about a goat that a child's father bought for two gold coins.

Finally, in closing, a prayer for our country, a prayer for peace.

At the end of the Passover seder, you say "Next Year in Jerusalem!" hoping that the year will bring the coming of the Messiah, and return all people to the holy land. It's not really a joke that we say, well, we say "Next Year in Tyler."

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Sometimes in Tyler we go visit our family in the cemetery, nearly always after synagogue, so we're all dressed up. The Ahavith Achim cemetery is on the north side of Highway 64, west of downtown Tyler, but still within the city limits. Sometimes when we go, we can't stand in one place for very long because these tiny red ants will BITE YOU before you know it.

Off the highway is an iron gate, it either opens out or in, we can't ever remember, but it heaves open slowly when you drive up to it and closes behind you as you coast into a gravel parking lot with the cemetery on your right. There are two water fountains outside the cemetery, one at the entrance and one at the exit, and a bucket of rocks that gets filled up with rainwater until somebody dumps it out.

You have to be ritually pure to enter the cemetery and then ritually cleanse yourself when you leave it, so you kind of stick your hands under the water quick because it's cold sometimes, and then gather a handful of rocks - you need a lot of rocks because there are a lot of people to visit.

H. Heffler, grocer, and his wife Fannie. Aunt Beck and Uncle Jack Berry, purses. Aunt Millie, siiiister?, and Uncle Isaac, who taught everyone to drive. Tanchum Mayer and Ester Kowalski, parents of my great-grandfather Sam. Sam Sholem Roosth, wildcat oilman and his wife, Tzeril, Celia - Dear Father and Dear Mother. His brothers and sisters, including Big Aunt BB Taylor, deli owner. Five of my grandfather's brothers. Morris Lewis. Harold. Bennie. Sol. Jakie. Barbara Beth Dworkin and her sisters who died in the fire, their mother Bea, their father Max.

You put a rock on each grave so the next people who come through will know someone was there to visit, to show that your love and memories of the dead are forever, to mark their place again in honor, in honor of their memories.

We don't just visit family, we visit neighbors and teachers and the parents of friends and there's a story to tell about everyone. So and so lived down the street or so and so always brought candy to synagogue for the children or so and so's wife died very young and he had nothing to live for after that and came to services every Saturday. Or when you were born so and so sent you that blanket you had or so and so. . .

And there's a clearing, some empty space, down toward the exit of the cemetery, and we make our way there to the graves near a tree, and my mother and sister have used up all their stones and my mother kind of puts her arms around us and says, "Now we know who this is." So I give her two stones and she puts them down on the graves and says to her parents, "This is my Polly, and this is my Mimi." And my dad clears his throat and I reach for his arm. "I know they can't hear us," my mother says, "but I kind of like to think they can, you know?" We all nod.

We've been there a lot, but maybe the dead have a hard time remembering things because every time we go we get introduced all over again. So there we all are in the cemetery, some of us having already passed on and our names left behind still living, some of us staring at the ground.