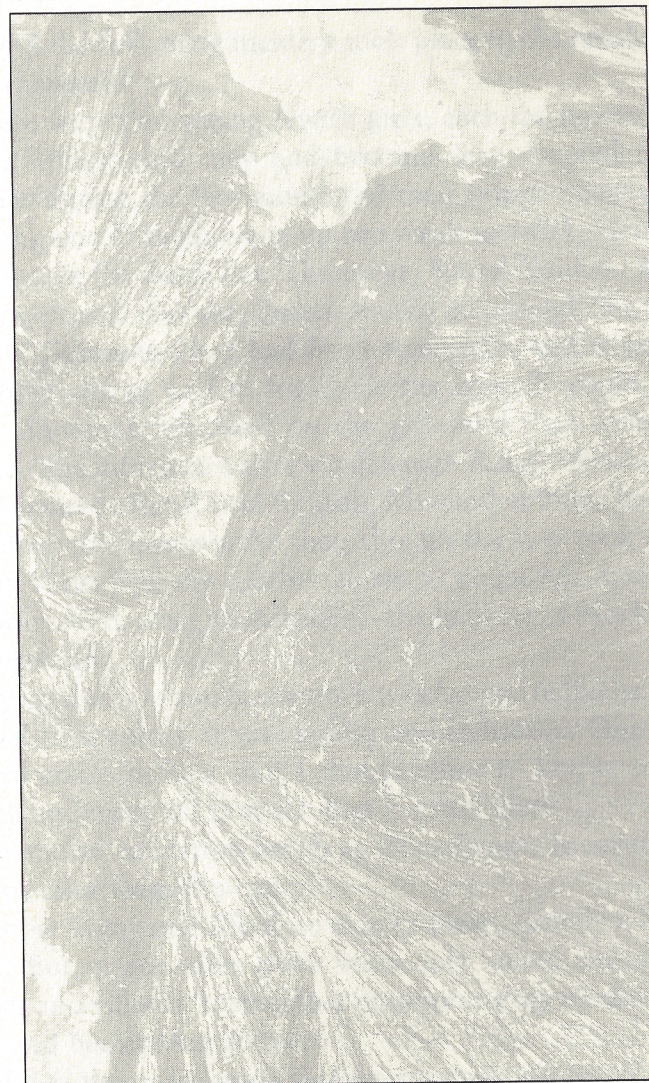


me look precocious and distinguished. But I know Mommy wouldn't have liked them. She'd have said it's better to be pretty and have the world blurry. But I don't agree. I like to see things clearly.

And I also think that Mommy was wrong about things only staying beautiful if you float past them. I know I would have always thought Mommy beautiful. Always.

THE LEGACY OF RAIZEL KAIDISH



In 1945 the following incident took place in the death camp of Buchenwald.

There were two young Jewish girls, each the last survivor of her family, and they had become very devoted to one another during the few months of their imprisonment. One morning one of them woke up too weak to work. Her name was put on the death list. The other, Raizel Kaidish, argued with her friend that she, Raizel, should go instead. She would tell the Germans there had been a mistake, and when they saw how strong and fit for work she was, it would be all right. Someone informed on the girls and they were both gassed. The informer was rewarded with Raizel's kitchen job.

I'm named after Raizel Kaidish. My mother knew her from the camp. It's noteworthy that, though the war took all her family from her, my mother chose to name her first child, her only child, after an outsider—the heroine of block eight, Buchenwald.

My mother's moral framework was formed in Buchenwald. Forged in the fires, it was strong and inflexible. One of her central concerns was that I should come to know, without myself suffering, all that she had learned there.

My moral education began at an early age. It consisted at first of tales from the camp.

People in my real life were nice or mean, usually a little of both. But in the tales there were only saints and sinners, heroes and villains. I remember questioning my mother about this, and her answer to me:

“When times are normal, then normal people are a little

nice and a little mean together. But when there are hard times, when there's not enough to eat or drink, when there's war, then you don't find a little nice and a little mean mixed together. You find only greatness. Very great badness and very great goodness."

The people in my life didn't seem so real to me as the people in the tales. When I closed my eyes I couldn't picture the faces of my friends or family. All that I could make out of my father was a vaguely sad face around the glinting rimless glasses. Even my mother's features wouldn't come into focus, only the outline of her: tall and always erect, in the gray or dark-blue suit and the white blouse, her light-brown hair in a low bun at the nape of her neck.

But my images of the camp were vivid and detailed. The pink rosebuds on my wallpaper weren't so real to me as the grayness of the barracks, the brown of the mud. It seemed to me that I knew the feel through decaying shoes of the sharp stones in the main square, the sight, twice daily, of the terrifying roll call.

It seemed I, too, had quickly glanced up at the open sky, and wondered that others outside saw the same sky.

My father, like my mother a doctor, didn't approve of the tales:

"She's too young. You'll give her nightmares, traumas. A child this age shouldn't know."

"A child this age. You know you would never consider her old enough to know."

"And why should she know? Can't we forget already? Can't we live like others?"

"Would you really want it, Saul, to live like the others? To join the mass of sleepwalkers, with the glazed eyes and the smug smiles? Is that why we lived when all those others didn't? Is that what we want for Rose?"

And at this point I can hear my father's sigh, the deep drawn-out sigh so characteristic of him, which had always

seemed to me, when I was young, to hold the slight tremor of a sob. My father's sadness was something I felt I could almost reach out and touch, like my mother's goodness.

The arguments between my parents continued throughout my childhood. And my father, so gentle, was a man who hated to fight. In the quiet of the night, awake in my bed, I would catch the cadences of their voices, my father's sad and low, so that I missed much of what he said, my mother's burning with the pure flame of her certainty.

And the lessons continued, the simple stark tales of cruelty and sacrifice, cowardice and courage, which always came back to the story of my namesake. My mother would tell me that she had honored both Raizel and me in choosing my name. She sometimes called me Raizel, or even Raizela, in rare moments of tenderness, stroking back my hair.

When I reached fourteen, my mother, deeming me to have arrived at long last at the age of reason (and also, perhaps not coincidentally, at the age at which Raizel had lost her life), began to instruct me in the moral theory she had worked out in Buchenwald.

The theory is elaborate and detailed, reminiscent of the German my parents spoke to one another: complications nesting within complications. The brief account I give here is necessarily inadequate, and perhaps not intrinsically interesting. But I feel that the picture of my mother is incomplete without a description of her moral outlook.

My mother believed that the ethical view is the impersonal view. One is morally obliged to look at a situation without regard for one's own identity in it, and to act in the way dictated by this impersonal view; to act in the way one believes will minimize the sum of suffering.

My mother's emphasis was always on minimizing pain and suffering, never maximizing happiness or well-being. She explained this to me once, when, much older, I asked her:

"I know what is evil. To know suffering is to know evil.

None of the attempts to identify the good have this same certainty."

So far there's nothing, except for its pessimistic cast, to distinguish my mother's view from the great bulk of utilitarian theories. The special twist comes in the foundations she claimed, and it's a twist that mirrors her personality: her uncompromising rationality.

Ethics, she believed, is nothing "separate"; it's a branch of logic. The moral obligation is nothing over and above the obligation to be logically consistent, and virtue reduces to rationality.

Why is this so? Because, she explained, to deny the obligation of acting on the impersonal viewpoint, one would have to maintain that one's self has some special metaphysical significance, that it makes a difference that one is who one is. And how can this consistently be maintained once one has recognized the existence of other selves, each of whom is who he is? Only the solipsist can consistently be unethical.

To use one of my mother's favorite analogies: the person who acts only in his own interest is like a person who says there is always something special about his own location, because he can always say, "I'm *here*," whereas everyone else is merely *there*.

Once one has granted that there are other subjects of experience, other selves who suffer, then one can maintain that one's own pain matters—and who would deny *that*?—only if one grants that the pain of everyone else matters in exactly the same way.

Raizel Kaidish's behavior was therefore, by my mother's accounting, paradigmatically ethical. Viewing the situation impersonally, this fourteen-year-old had seen that the stronger child would have a better, although slim, chance to survive. She acted on this view, undeterred by the fact that it was she who was the stronger, she who was unnecessarily risking her life.

In fact, I have no doubt at all that my mother's ethical view was the straightforward consequence of taking Raizel Kaidish as her paradigm, and not the other way round. The heroic action of that child was the real foundation of her theory—which, like my name, honored the girl's memory.

After the liberation my mother returned to Berlin to continue her formal training in medicine. She also began her lifelong study of philosophy. She was curious to see who among the philosophically great had shared her discovery.

She considered Kant to be the most worthwhile ethicist. Socrates she loved for his devotion to the ethical questions, for his conviction that nothing ought to concern us more than the questions of how to live our lives. Hanging over my bed, the only piece of embroidery I've ever known her to do, was the Socratic quotation: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

But for the most part my mother found the great philosophers of the past a supreme disappointment. The truth, so simple, had eluded them, because they had assumed the separateness of the ethical realm. Some had grasped pieces of it, but few had seen the seamless whole.

It was contemporary philosophers, however, particularly the positivists and their "fellow travelers," who aroused her genuine wrath.

For here were theorists who dismissed the possibility of all ethical theory, who denied the very subject matter of the field. Instead of conducting inquiries into the nature of our moral obligations, they offered analyses of the grammar of ethical propositions.

She would look up from some contemporary philosophical book or journal, her eyes blazing their blue fury:

"Positivists." The intonation she gave the word was similar to that she gave "Nazi." "They don't see, because their eyes aren't turned outward but inward, into the tabulae rasae of

their own minds. To forsake the important questions for this dribble! To spend your life examining endless quibbles!"

And I? How did I feel about my intensive moral upbringing?

The object of so much attention, of all the pedagogical theorizing, the fights in the night: I felt ignored, unloved, of no significance.

And, especially as I grew older, I felt angry: an unvoiced and unacknowledged outrage.

It wasn't just a matter of the rigidity of my upbringing, the lack of laughter in a home where one could reach out and touch one's father's sadness and mother's goodness.

It wasn't just the fact that I was always made to feel so different from my friends, so that I often, though always with an overwhelming sense of guilt, fantasized myself in another family, with parents who were frivolously pursuing happiness, and didn't have numbers burned into their arms.

It was something else, more elusive and more potent, that infuriated me.

Of course, there's nothing unusual in a daughter's resentment of a mother. My friends, from early adolescence onward, were always enraged with one or the other of their parents. But theirs was the pure clean indignation unashamed of itself.

Hadn't she suffered enough? Shouldn't I try to do everything to make it up to her? By hating her, I joined the ranks of her enemies. I allied myself with the murderers.

And so the resentment was folded back on itself, again and again, always thickening, always darkening.

I never spoke it, not even to myself. Its acknowledgment came only years later, after my mother had died, during the years I spent deliberating over whether to have a child of my own. The mental delivery of that decision was so much more agonizing than the physical birth.

In debating the reasons for having a child, I asked myself

whether any reasons could ever be right, whether one was ever justified in bringing a person into being for some reason of one's own? But if not for one's own reason, then for whose? It seemed a moral inconsistency woven into the very fabric of human existence.

The solution really only came to me after I was a mother: It's possible—it's right—for the reasons one had for creating a child to recede into insignificance when faced with the fact of that child's existence. Whatever considerations went into the decision to have a child lose themselves in the knowledge of the child itself.

In my view, this is the essence of good parenting, and once I finally knew this I knew at last what I had felt all along to be wrong about my mother and myself. I had known what no child should ever know: that my mother had had me for some definite reason, and that she would always see me in terms of this reason. I sensed this in my mother, and I hated her for it.

I said that my anger never showed itself. Actually there was a brief rebellion, whose form was so typical of my family's peculiarity that now, years later, even I can see its comic aspect and smile.

My first semester of college, while my friends developed their own conventional modes of rebellion, I worked out mine. I became a positivist. I took Introduction to Philosophy with a self-intoxicated young professor, a new Ph.D. from Harvard, and, although this wouldn't be his own description, a neopositivist.

He told us during the first lecture that he was going to show us, over the course of the semester, why we were lucky, insofar as we were philosophy students, to have been born now; that it was now possible to see that previous generations had devoted themselves to pseudo-questions concerning the nature of Reality, Truth, and the Good; and that such questions were expressions of logical confusion. These fine big

words don't name anything, and thus there is nothing there whose nature is to be explored.

I sat there, drinking in his words, thinking: "This is it. This is why I came to college."

All through that term, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from ten to eleven, while others dozed and doodled, I listened in a state of delirium, following the arguments with a concentration I've never attained since. My mind bubbled over with the excitement of this illicit doctrine, this forbidden philosophy.

And the most forbidden, and therefore enticing, view offered in the course was that devoted to ethics, or, rather, to the dismissal of ethics.

I memorized whole passages out of my favorite book, A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*:

We can now see why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements. It is not because they have an 'absolute' validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience, but because they have no objective validity whatsoever. If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgements do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood.

I was inexpressibly moved by the sparse beauty of the arguments. How had I never seen it before, never seen that my mother's supposedly impermeable theory was nothing but an insubstantial confection fabricated of pseudo-statements?

My preparations for final exams were trivial compared with my cramming for the visit home during intersession. I arrived back about eleven at night, too late for philosophical

debate. But my mind was so teeming with my professor's methods of query that when my mother wished me "good night" I almost challenged her: "What do you mean by that? What do you mean by 'good'?"

The next evening, after my mother and father arrived home from the hospital, we all sat in the living room, while Bertha, our housekeeper, finished dinner. I was waiting for the right moment for launching my attack, poised to pounce on any comment that was mildly speculative.

But my mother, with her practiced perversity, was being very concrete that night. She asked me about the food at school, about my roommate, even told a funny story about her own roommate, in Berlin, before the war. Then, finally:

"You were always so brief on the phone when I asked you about your classes. Tell me more about them. You seemed to have enjoyed them very much."

"They were wonderful. Especially philosophy. I'm going to major in it."

"Really? And are you thinking of this as a profession?"

"Absolutely. It's it. There's nothing else I'll even consider."

"Well, that's interesting. Very interesting."

"That's *all*: interesting? Are you pleased, horrified, what?"

"At the moment maybe a little baffled. To tell you the truth, I've always thought it a rather funny kind of profession. Every person should of course think about the big questions, but it seems an odd way to earn one's living."

"But what about teaching, Marta?" my father, the eternal peacemaker, asked. "Don't you think it's important to have people teaching philosophy?"

"Well, yes, that's true. Yet I suspect that most of them don't think of themselves primarily as teachers, but as thinkers, professional thinkers, however peculiar that sounds. Well, we can ask Rose here. What do you fancy yourself, a teacher or a philosopher?"

"A philosopher, of course. The need for professional train-

ing in philosophy is no different than anywhere else, no different than in medicine. People think they can just jump in and start philosophizing and that they'll make sense. They rarely do. It takes technical training. Years and years of it."

"Oh? I disagree very much, as you know, with this emphasis on technical training. Instead of humanizing the mathematical sciences, they try to mathematize the humanities. Translating into a lot of fancy symbols doesn't show the truth of what you're saying."

"But it does often show its meaninglessness."

I brought out this positivist buzzword with all the provocative emphasis I could muster.

"Do you think so?" responded my mother, not even lifting an eyebrow. "Yes, I can see how that might often be true."

Impossible woman! What was wrong with her? Her kindling point was usually so frighteningly low, but tonight she wouldn't burn. She wouldn't even flicker.

The explanation, of course, would have been obvious to anyone not occupying my vantage point. She was, quite simply, very happy to see me.

I had no more patience for her unwonted tolerance. I abandoned my hopes for a smooth transition.

"Mom, there's a question about ethics that's been bothering me."

There. I had opened the door. Now I had to walk through.

"Yes? Tell me. Perhaps I can be of some help."

"You've always said that the moral obligation is nothing but the obligation to be logically consistent. But why do we have to be logically consistent?"

My mother smiled.

"I must say, you surprise me. Such an antirationalist question. And after a whole semester of college! The answer is, of course, that the truth is important. And logical inconsistencies can't be true. If you ask me, as I can see you're about to, why the truth is important, I can't give you a noncircular

answer. Anything I say is going to presuppose the importance of truth, as all rational discourse presupposes it. And this impossibility of a noncircular answer is itself the answer."

"I don't understand a word you're saying!" I exploded. "The Truth! The holy Truth! What's the Truth? Where's the Truth? Let me see you point to it! What can it possibly mean to say, 'The Truth is important'? What cognitive content can it possibly have? It's nonsense! Emotive nonsense! And the same with all the other so-called truths of your so-called theory! You claim to be so rational, so superior and so rational! But you're only emoting—eternally emoting—and I'm sick to death of it!"

My speech was not delivered in that calm voice of detached reason I had so obsessively rehearsed. Instead it tore out of me with a force that frightened me, sweeping me along.

The effect was immediate. My mother's face had the capacity for instantaneous transformation I've observed in my own young daughter. In fact, I often find myself wondering whether this is a trait characteristic of early childhood, or whether it's something my daughter has inherited from her grandmother, along with her name.

My mother had never raised her voice to me, and she didn't raise it now. As always, her eyes did all the screaming.

"Positivist!"

Her intonation wasn't the usual one. There was anger, but it was softened by sadness.

"After all that I have taught you, you lose everything in one semester of college? Do you have so little substance that at your first exposure to the jargon of these antithinkers you disintegrate?"

I had no answer for my mother. The brilliant arguments spilling over in my mind only the night before were all vanished. My head was so hollow it felt as if it were floating away from the rest of me. The deadening fog, of shame and guilt, was settling back over everything.

Dimly, I saw my father sitting there, staring out at us over the wall of his sadness. My mother's voice cut through the haze.

"You disappoint me. You disappoint us all. You aren't worthy to be named after Raizel Kaidish."

Soon after my wedding, when my mother was fifty-six, she learned that she had ovarian cancer and didn't have more than six months to live.

She reacted to the news of her impending death as if she had been preparing for it her whole life. She looked at it with her customary objectivity: Yes, she was relatively young, and there were still many things that she would have liked to experience, particularly being a grandmother. But that she, a Jew from Berlin, had been given these past thirty years was a fact to which the proper response was gratitude, not a greedy demand for yet more years.

She never complained. Her grief seemed entirely focused on the anguish her terrible illness was causing my father and me.

She died as I had always known her to live: with super-human discipline, courage, and rationality.

A week before she died, she told me that it had been she who had informed on Raizel Kaidish. She asked my forgiveness.

STRANGE ATTRACTORS

