

GILA TAL

Spider Places

THE APARTMENT HAD ONLY two rooms and a kitchen that felt crowded unless you were in there alone. There was a small rectangular-shaped veranda, but it made my *Bubby* nervous if anyone used it; even if the door to the veranda was open she was on edge. As soon as you walked in you immediately bumped into something: an end table loaded with empty jars, a smoke-blue vase with lifeless plastic flowers. The hallway was so narrow that the picture frames would shift on the wall as your shoulder rubbed against them, leaving streaks of dust on your clothing.

Whenever anyone came in, she'd be sitting there waiting on the green couch. It was striped varying shades of green from very pale like wild dry grass to very dark, almost black. It only had room for two and if I ever slept over it pulled out into a bed. Her large frame spilled over onto the second cushion and I always hesitated a little bit before sitting down. Scratching her psoriasis she covered the couch and the floor around her feet with white flakes of skin like ashes. I had to brush off my jeans and my top before I got into the elevator when I left, but it was stickier than normal house dust, more like cobwebs.

Bubby wore enormous primary coloured dresses or equally large vibrant tops with matching elastic waistband skirts. The tops often had V-necks and I would stare at the gold Stars of David or strings of coloured costume jewellery in the wrinkled hollow above her bosom. It was difficult for her to do up her shoes because of her weight, so her red or blue or green shoestraps often dangled open around her thick ankles until someone, usually my *Zaide*, bent to do them up for her. She always carried a cotton handkerchief to mop up the sweat around her forehead and above her upper lip.

"You two aren't like the other four," she said to me often enough for me to know that she really believed it. She said it to me plainly, not maliciously, as though reading an inscription on my forehead. For her it

seemed a fact of life; finger and toe nails grew long and needed to be cut or they broke off, hair dulled and greyed, and my brother and I had foreign blood flowing around in our bodies, into our hearts and brains.

"You're half wild Indian," she'd always add. "Half wild Indian."

I could hear the chanting. "Ah yay, ah yay, ah yay." In my mind my older brother and I patted our hands repeatedly over our opened mouths, hopping down on one foot and then the other in furry moccasins. There were long white feathers sticking up out of our tan leather headbands. I could hear the steady rhythm of drums covered with the dried skins of dead animals in the background. Who was playing them? My father? We were protesting the government for burial and hunting rites. That's what Indians did in Ottawa as far as I knew; they sat unmoving like totem poles in front of the Parliament buildings waiting to dance and contort their half-bare bodies around the dry-looking men in stiff suits who came and went out of the grand doors and shielded themselves with their briefcases.

"I don't know what got into your mother, marrying an Arab after her awful divorce."

"He's from Israel. A Jew from Israel."

"He sounds like an Arab. You look like him. Dark."

She'd place her chubby itchy hand on my knee and kiss me. Then she'd rub the redness on the tops of her hands until they were even redder and I'd watch as more white flakes fell into the crack between the cushions of the couch.

"Well, I love you dear. I love all of my grandchildren. I don't know where your mother gets it from. Not from me. She's like Ida. Not me."

Ida was practically a code word in my grandmother's home. Anything associated with her was something she disapproved of, something one should keep at a distance like disease. She slipped phantomlike in and out of my Bubby's conversations. No one except my grandparents had ever seen her or heard her voice. There wasn't even an old picture of her amongst the crowds of framed photographs on the walls.

"Oh, Ida disappeared in New York."

"Ida never married. No children."

"Never liked that I was the favourite, that Ida."

"Oh, she must be long gone."

But no one seemed to know if she was gone or not or if she did go when or how. It was as though most of her had burnt up in the chimney of my Bubby's memory banks. There were only some fragile charred bits remaining; she liked to shop, she liked to get her hair done. To questions like why did she leave, how did she support herself, why did she never contact you, there were never any answers.

I sometimes sat with my Bubby on the couch waiting for a thin spinster with wild straw-coloured hair to enter, perhaps through an open window or the veranda. She would be drained from decades of sifting through bargain bins in a larger-than-life city teeming with stores. She would be either drooling or licking the spit that had leaked out and down the side of her mouth. Loaded down with plastic shopping bags, she would have red circles around her wrists where the plastic handles had dug into her skin and mixed with sweat. My Bubby would look at her with a dead smile and wonder if she'd come for money. It was known that dollar bills and coins slipped out of Ida's hungry thin fingers like ice cubes in just-served soup. My grandmother detested wasters.

"I know you smoke dear. That's okay. I won't tell your mother. Come on, share with your Bubby."

She reached out her reddened hand and I paused, reluctant. "It's okay. Got a match?" She asked me encouragingly.

Finally, I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and took out a pack of Player's Light. My hand shook a little as I offered one to her. She never inhaled. Still, guilt stung me. What if I killed her?

"I would have bummed one in the elevator anyway, dear," she said smiling and putting her free sweaty arm around my shoulders. She kissed me on the cheek.

"Want something to eat, dear? Here, I'll get up and make you something."

It was an effort for her to stand up. She hauled her upper body into an upright position and heaved herself off of the couch. Her large frame touched both walls of the kitchen as she cracked eggs and looked for dish-washing soap.

The fridge door opened and closed, cupboards banged, cutlery was moved about and water ran in the sink. It took her about a quarter of an hour to emerge with a plate full of oily French toast dripping with Beehive Honey Corn Syrup.

I ate alone at the card table on one of the fold-up chairs my Bubby had brought up from the games room downstairs after sandbag night. That was every Tuesday night.

I chewed without speaking. I knew she was sad inside for my Uncle Allen. I knew he was dead only a few days, although I did not know exactly how many. I knew there was no grave. I kept chewing.

I tried to remember him, my mother's older brother, the tall one, the basketball player, the scientist. He lived in the United States. He was married to a Gentile and he had four children.

"What happens to a spider when you step on it?" Uncle Allen asked me one time during a break in the Passover meal. He raised his foot up in the air and brought it down on the tiled floor. Whack!

"It's smushed."

"And where does it go?"

"It's dead."

"And where is it?"

"Nowhere. It's gone. Poof."

"That's what happens to all of us Miriam. We aren't any different from spiders. Don't believe what they tell you in Hebrew school. One day all of us will end up like the spiders. Same place."

I remembered that now. I imagined myself a smashed up spider on the bottom of a pair of Uncle Allen's black patent leather shoes, bits of me fallen away. I stopped eating.

"You know your uncle's gone dear, eh? You know that? Only forty-six. It just spread right through him in only six months."

I nodded while I soaked the crusts of the white egg-bread into the syrup. I wanted milk to absorb the sugar in my mouth. I thought of my uncle's wide laughing face, his balding head.

"You were the cleverest baby," Uncle Allen told me once. "Do you know what your first words were? *That's ridiculous*. You were this tiny thing just over a year, running around saying, *that's ridiculous*, to everything I told you."

As soon as my grandparents heard about his sudden death from stomach cancer, they boarded up their tiny apartment and got into their green Ford. It was a long, hot, eight-hour drive to some small American town over the border, but my grandfather was terrified of flying. Scared stiff.

I don't know what that eight hours was like; if they could eat or drink on the way to saying goodbye to their first-born son. I could see it different ways: my Bubby with tears dripping into her sticky cheap rosy lipstick, talking into the window pane about how it was a punishment from God. He had married out and God was putting his foot down all right. I could see it that way or possibly she sat repeating his name over and over again mixed in with some traditional prayers my uncle would have mocked.

I am certain that my grandfather never said a word. He kept his eyes on the road, the road signs, the side and rear-view mirrors, the red line gauging the gas burning up, his mind on crossing the border, getting over to the other side without any hassles about passports or ID. Maybe there was an occasional *shush* or *psht*, but that's all there could have been.

At the end of the eighth hour they would have arrived at my uncle's large home. I had never seen it, but my Bubby always said he lived in a mansion. He had married rich and done well on his own. Both of my grandparents had prepared themselves mentally to say goodbye, to be greeted, guided. They longed to place a final kiss on their son's forehead or hand, to exchange whispers with some foreign nodding rabbi.

"I was ten months pregnant with Allen," my Bubby used to say proudly. "We thought he was never coming out I was so overdue and he ended up over ten pounds. A big baby boy and, look how tall he is today, six-foot-four."

I remember my Bubby showing me newspaper clippings of Allen's basketball awards in the Jewish Athletes section of the *Jewish Bulletin*. He was always smiling into the camera, one hand confidently on his hip, the other clutching several gold trophies.

When my grandfather had finished helping my Bubby extricate herself from the passenger seat they both noticed there wasn't another car in the long driveway. My aunt responded to their knock, but over her shoulder there was only silence.

"We're here," my grandmother announced in a trembling voice. "How are you? Can you take us to him or should we go ourselves?"

"No, I can't do that," my aunt slurred, she was clutching an empty bottle in one hand.

"Can you just tell us where?"

"I mean, you're too late."

My grandparents looked at one another and then back at my aunt's long face, her doll-like lips and reddened eyes.

"I had him cremated immediately. That's what he would have wanted. His ashes are—"

"Ah!" my Bubby shrieked, her hands flying up to protect her ears. "His ashes? Cremated? Our son, our boy. We've come to say goodbye. How could you not let us say goodbye? We came as quickly as we could. We want to say goodbye to Allen. Allen! Why didn't you wait?"

But my grandfather was already putting his white windbreaker back on, tightening his black shoelaces, his hand on the doorknob.

"Izzy? Izzy do something. I want to see Allen at least. I'm his mother."

"Let's go, Bets, let's go," my Zaide said. His voice was just above a whisper. He had already opened the door wide.

"How dare she? How dare she? No asking, no telling, so fast, my God," Bubby demanded.

"That's what he would have wanted," Uncle Allen's wife repeated firmly, she steadied herself on the sideboard.

"What's wrong with you?" Bubby asked. "We're his parents."

But my grandfather never heard these words. The engine was already running.

Bubby staggered back to the Ford. Her tears mixed with the white flakes from her hands. The passenger door had been opened for her. When she sat down Zaide would get out of the driver's side, go around the car and close it. I never once saw my grandmother straining to close the door herself.

"The *shiksa!* That lush! Ashes, my God, Izzy."

"Psht. Shush."

"But Allen, Allen. Where is he? No funeral, no stone, he's burnt up, all burnt—"

"Psht, psht, psht."

I imagine all of this while I continued to play with my corn syrup, drawing lines in it with the soggy crusts of bread. My grandmother was as still as a totem pole. The cigarette had burned itself out in her hand. Neither of us looked at the small pile of ashes on the floor. I watched a spider in the corner of the wall devour a mosquito, dead in her web, and inched my chair away.