

Judith Katz

From **ATOMIC AGE**, a novel

There was a funeral. I didn't go. Dan went and Ronny, too, even though Mimi wasn't his real mother. I stayed alone under the watchful eye of Sonia Rafelson who came all the way over from Uncle Jack's neighborhood to make sure – what? That I wouldn't kill myself, too? Dan and I had been sitting in front of the television in our pajamas ever since the middle of the night before when an ambulance came, and three big men in what looked like *their* pajamas strapped my mother to a gurney and rolled her out of the house. A crowd of neighbors in their bathrobes stood and watched while my half-dressed father jumped into the ambulance with them. I waved as it rattled away in a whirl of noisy, red and blue lights.

Ronny sat up between us on the couch and guarded us like a German Shepard until Auntie Riva arrived with Aunt Sophie, both of them sleepy with their hair askew. Aunt Sophie wasn't wearing any makeup, so I wasn't sure exactly who she was at first – her face seemed washed off, she had no eyebrows, and I wondered if something bad had happened to her, too. My aunts cleaned up the vomit in the kitchen. Pretty soon the whole house stank of Lestoil, and Ronny went to his room. Then the phone rang.

“Gottenieu!” Aunt Sophie shrieked, and she whispered something in Yiddish to Aunt Riva.

“Poor thing, maybe now she's better off,” one of them said.

We both heard it but Dan and I didn't look at each other – we just kept watching Porky Pig chase Bugs Bunny through the forest with an old-fashioned musket, and shoot and shoot but never hit him.

The aunts rattled around in the kitchen sniffing until my father came home. He poked his big, unshaved face into the den, and we looked up at him, waiting, but he said nothing, just slipped back into the rest of the house in his undershirt and jacket and disappeared. Aunt Sophie covered the mirrors with bed sheets, and Aunt Riva served us cups of hot chocolate. We didn't look at them, either. Finally, the aunts left and the whole house was quiet except for the cartoon music on TV and, if you listened very carefully, the sound of my father breathing down the hall.

Around lunch time my grandmother came and, to be honest, we did get dressed because she made us but we went right back to the den. For lunch that day she served us American chop suey in white glass bowls on folding trays, and we watched and watched TV, because no one wanted us to go into the kitchen and we really didn't care to go anywhere else in the house. Bronya checked on us all day long, and the aunts returned with Uncle Jack and Uncle Lou. They came in once to say hello to us, but we hardly looked up and when we did, we didn't say anything to them or even to each other.

The adults only talked in Yiddish now or whispers and whenever they mentioned my mother's name, they always said quickly, *All ayah v'shalom*. That's how we knew she was dead: those words in Yiddish meant a person was dead in English. My mother told us that herself once when they were all talking about her father Roman, but no one, not even Uncle Jack, came right out and told us until later that night.

His face was red from crying. He arrived with a black suit and a clean white shirt in a plastic bag for my father. Uncle Jack looked stiff and stern as he handed the clothes to Larry, but then my father threw his arms around my uncle and started to cry. No one had ever seen him like that, whimpering in Uncle Jack's arms or anyone else's.

"I haven't told Dan or Dina yet, Jack. Can you do it for me? I don't have it in me," he said.

At that moment, Uncle Jack actually looked like my father himself – unshaved, rumpled, bleary eyed. "Larry, really, it's your job—one job you personally ought to do . . . ."

But my father held my uncle's hands firmly in his own and looked deep into his eyes as if he were his lover. "Jack. I really can't," he said in a voice that sounded almost tender. In a minute Uncle Jack was staring at my brother Danny and me on the couch in the den. He shut the television off and sat down between us. He took each of our hands. "Dina," he touched my hand. "Danny," he put an arm around my brother's shoulder, "your father asked me to talk to you about your mother."

"We know," Danny said.

Uncle Jack sunk deeper into the couch. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Dan answered, though we both knew he wished it was my father instead. That is why, I think, Uncle Jack didn't smack him in the face.

The next morning, Uncle Jack returned to the house dressed in a dark blue suit. He had Sonia Rafelson with him and knew where to find us. "Danny, get dressed now," he told us, but Dan pretended he didn't hear him, just kept his eyes stuck on the TV. We

were watching *The Three Stooges*. “What the hell is that?” he asked while Moe popped two fingers with a ping into Larry’s eyes, then knocked Curly in the head with a hammer.

We didn’t answer, just stared while Curly caught Moe in the nostril with his pinkie and dragged him around an abandoned doctor’s office. “Nyuk nyuk nyuk,” he said and then my brother Dan said, “Stooges.”

Uncle Jack wanted to object. You could feel it in the way he pulled himself up in his suit jacket and straightened his tie. He wanted to tell us it was wrong to watch three grown men beat themselves up with mallets and pliers, schlep each other all over the place by the nose, breaking windows and smashing light fixtures by accident, because after all, our mother had just killed herself for the last time, and finally our father was showing some remorse even if we weren’t. But he couldn’t do that because no one had told us the real truth yet, which was that Dan was going to the funeral but I wasn’t.

“Dan,” he began, then he cleared his throat, “I want to talk to you for a minute.”

My brother dragged himself away from the television and left me there alone while another little girl on the television tried to sell me a doll that wet her pants. The secret counsel of the Zelkinds had already decided that I was too young to be exposed to a funeral, even my own mother’s. I wasn’t going to get to listen to the rabbi make a dull speech about how maybe poor Miriam Zelkind was out of her mysterious misery once and for all, wouldn’t get to see the plain pine box that held her, swathed in white linen, an egg white painted across her forehead to mark her for delivery to Jewish heaven, black dirt from Palestine sprinkled over her private parts to cleanse her of her sins. It was all right with me. I couldn’t at that minute remember what she looked like except haunted. I couldn’t even tell you the color of her eyes. But Danny, whose birthday was ruined not

only by my father's bowling alley disappearing act but then my mother's stunning overdose, would have to go.

I sat alone and watched while pies and dishes flew through the air, noses were punched, and hair pulled. In a little while, Danny came back wearing a red sport coat and a bow tie and took his place next to me. Then Ronny showed up. His hair was slicked down tight to his head and he smelled like Vitalis. He was wearing a brown sport coat that Uncle Lou had sent along with Jack and a clip-on neck tie. The two of them looked like Paul Winchel and his dummy, Jerry Mahoney. "That's gotta hurt," he said roughly when Moe had Curly in a headlock and was giving him a noogie. He made as if to put Danny in a headlock himself, which scared me, but Ron was only kidding.

"Dina, you lucky duck," he told me. "You get to stay home."

If you listened carefully, you could hear Uncle Jack in the kitchen talking in Yiddish to Sonia Rafelson. A few minutes later, when the Stooges were pretending to be bakers and making layer cakes out of feather pillows, Sonia checked on us again. "You kids," Sonia said, "I'm so sorry."

Curly took a big slice of pillow into his mouth and started puffing out feathers. Ron slapped Dan on the back of the head. "Didn't you hear that? What do you say?" Dan said nothing. Neither did I.

Sonia turned on her heel and walked out. In a minute my father trudged in, wearing Uncle Jack's other suit. He looked at us like he had never seen us before in his life. "Ron, Dan," he said quietly, "time to go."

Everyone on the TV was burping feathers now, Curly most of all.

"Dina, you'll need to get dressed in a little while. There are people coming over."

“Lucky duck,” Ron said as he pulled my brother Danny off the couch. Then, except for Sonia, who was busy straightening the house for company, the only thing you could hear was nyuknyuknyuk.

After a while I did get dressed. Sonya asked me nicely when she brought me Alphabits in a cup, and I couldn't help it, I was sick of sitting in front of the TV. I put on the frilly blue dress that ate into my belly that my grandmother had laid out for me, and Sonia helped me strap on my black patent leather shoes. Then she filled up an old pickle jar with water and put it on the front steps. “They'll want to wash their hands so they don't bring more death in,” she said with a wink. She procured a deck of cards and asked me if I knew how to play *Go Fish*.

“My mother taught me,” I said, which was a lie because it was Ron who taught Dan, and Dan who taught me. Sonia nodded her head and wept, but her mascara ran and she stopped. She dealt the cards and lit a cigarette and I stared at her while the smoke streamed out of her nostrils and circled her head.

“She was a good woman but she wasn't very happy,” Sonia told me.

“Oh,” I said. “Do you have any eights?”

A little while later Aunt Riva came in with Auntie Sophie and my grandmother, all of them dressed in black. They had hats with veils on the front that they pulled off their heads as soon as they entered the house, and Auntie Riva wore gloves. I was glad to see that Auntie Sophie had her face on again.

“Don't you look pretty?” Auntie Riva asked me, and Aunt Sophie burst into tears.

Uncle Jack arrived with Uncle Lou, and the two of them pulled their ties open. When Uncle Jack sat down in the big easy chair in the living room, he looked exactly like my mother those times she lay on the sofa or put herself to bed in the middle of the afternoon. Uncle Lou bent over to give me a kiss but his beard was scratchy and so I backed away. Then he walked to the liquor cabinet and rattled the bottles around until he pulled out something from the back which he set on the coffee table and went foraging for more. When he'd found two other bottles he liked, he put them all together on the coffee table and went into the kitchen.

Uncle Jack just sat there staring into space. You could hear the aunts jiggling silverware and rustling saran wrap off things Sonya Rafelson had been baking that morning. By now the house smelled like Lestoil and pastry. If you tried, you could still catch a whiff of vomit, but you had to sniff really hard to find it. Uncle Lou walked out of the kitchen with a tray full of shot glasses and put them by the liquor. He poured a finger of something strong for Uncle Jack and one for himself.

“L’chiam,” they mumbled, which I thought was very strange since my mother was dead.

Finally, my father and Ronny returned home with Dan. My father looked around the living room perplexed, then he sat down on the couch and started to cry. “Why did this have to happen?”

“You tell me.” Uncle Jack pulled himself up from the recliner and left the room in disgust.

People visited for a whole week in the night time. Around sunset the men stood up in a circle in the living room and shook back and forth and prayed. It seemed to me my father Larry shook harder than any one. Any time some one came, the lady of the couple had a box with a cake or some cookies in it or a dish full of casserole. My aunts set the pastries out, but they put the casseroles in the refrigerator, and one or the other of them heated them up for our supper or lunch.

Some of the ladies – the wives of people my father knew from the bowling alley or Rothschild's or the Coffee And – had hair that looked like a blown-up balloon. They smelled like the perfume counter at Denholm's, and the husbands smelled like Dan and Ronny when they came home from the barber shop. They poured themselves shots of liquor with no ice, then touched glasses with my father and knocked their drinks back in one swallow. They pinched my cheeks and patted Danny and Ron on the shoulder and told us all how sorry they were. None of us said anything, except once in awhile Ron would stand up and smile and say, "It's really all right. She wasn't my mother."

As soon as they arrived, which was always after the praying, my aunts and my grandmother disappeared into the kitchen and didn't come out until they were gone. Other people came who knew my grandmother and my uncle Jack and aunt Sophie from when my mother was a little girl. Those people, the husbands and the wives, would grab me in their arms or look at me and shake their heads. "Just like her," they said about me. "Exactly like her," they told Dan about himself.

A week passed and then people stopped. Auntie Riva uncovered all the mirrors in the house while Auntie Sophie organized the leftover food. She wrapped everything in aluminum foil or wax paper, then wrote what each packet was on the outside with one of



my crayons and put it in the freezer. The aunts left together but not before they kissed me and Danny goodbye. To Ron they only said it. He nodded his head and seemed to understand that he was not loved as we were loved. He shrugged his shoulders as if he did not care.

The kidnappers came the next day. They arrived as we were sitting down to a breakfast of cold cereal and warm orange juice. My father sat at one end of the kitchen table in a corduroy bathrobe tied so that it drooped open and we could see his undershirt. His gold mezuzah nestled in his chest hair and he was smoking a cigarette. His eyes were red and he blew his nose over and over with the same dirty Kleenex. The kitchen, after one week, had begun to smell like its old self. By that I mean there was coffee in the air and cigarette smoke mixed with toast. On the table were our four glass bowls, four old shrimp cocktail glasses full of our juice, paper napkins, and silverware. Ron was sitting where my mother used to sit, to the left of my father. He was in his bathrobe, too, but his was tied up tight and he was wearing pajamas underneath. My brother Dan sat opposite me. He was moving his spoon around his cereal but he wasn't eating it. "Eat your breakfast," my father told him, but he pushed his bowl away.

I was holding the cereal bowl up to my mouth like a cup to drink the sugary dregs of milk and cereal when my grandmother and Uncle Jack arrived. They didn't ring the door bell; they just walked right in and shouted, "Hello!"

"In here," said my father, who pulled a new smoke out of his bathrobe pocket and lit it right off his last one. "Well, if it isn't Grandma Bronya and Uncle Jack. What a friggin surprise."

My grandmother stared at him in his open bathrobe, his cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and shook her head. Uncle Jack glanced down at his shoes. He looked more like himself today, in a pair of chinos, a tailored shirt, and a maroon mohair sweater. He looked more like he was going out to play golf than to steal us away.

“You know why we’re here,” my grandmother said

“I do,” my father said with a wink. “But I’m afraid I haven’t passed the word on to them. Kids,” he stood up abruptly, “get dressed and pack your bags. You’re being escorted by the Zelkinds to a more suitable childhood home.”

Ron got up before either Dan or me. “Not you, Ronny. You get to stay here with me, your unfit, addelepatad papa. They only want the two who have their own blood.” Ron sat back down. He looked disappointed. My grandmother frowned. She leaned over and took my hand. “Come, help Bubby pack a bag for you,” she whispered.

Uncle Jack turned to Danny. “I’ll help you, kid. Come on.”

We both looked over at my father. “You heard ‘em, Kiddies. Off you go,” which we did, each to the big bedroom we shared, each to fill an empty valise, matched, which Jack and Bronya had carried along.

In the end, we found ourselves dressed and lead by the hand – mine in Bronya’s, Dan in Uncle Jack’s – out the door and into the back seat of Uncle Jack’s sedan. My uncle swung our suitcases into the trunk. I was given a hard plastic doll to hold, and Dan sat with his arms crossed holding nothing. “It’s going to be fine, kids, much better, you’ll see,” our grandmother said from the front seat.

“Your grandmother’s right,” Uncle Jack said as he started the engine and we drove away. Ronny and my father stood in the doorway wearing their bathrobes. My

father's still hung open embarrassingly. Ronny waved. "Lucky ducks," I thought I heard him say. *Sure*, I thought, that hard doll up against my cheek, *lucky ducks, lucky ducks, lucky ducks.*