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The Amazing Light Bulb Change

A Memoir

Joseph Mazur

(1949) MY BROTHER BARRY, runs ahead to the playground while I steadily kick a 7up bottle cap zigzag along the avenue, trying not to step on cracks. By the time I reach the playground Barry has already made a new friend. He is sharing a swing with a pretty girl. He stands on the swing, daringly pumping higher and higher into the late afternoon sunlight while the delighted little girl sits between his feet tightly holding the rubber-coated chains. I patiently wait for a turn.

I don't envy Barry. Just want to be more like him. Everything seems easy for him. He has thick, curly, black hair and a round face with wide eyes and a broad squint that brings his mouth closer to his eyes whenever he is deeply thinking. It seems to me that he is always deep in thought, but it is his hair I want. Mine is thin, straight and an ugly reddish brown – well, maybe not so ugly. Though he is not even four years older than I, he is in the sixth grade, I in first.

We spend lots of time with Civeta in her tiny apartment on the fourth floor of an unadorned tan brick building ever since the War, when our father was in Europe and our mother went off to work on Second Avenue in the commercial antiques neighborhood of Manhattan. Civeta's little efficiency apartment is bright, except for the dark, tiny entrance foyer off the kitchen. The foyer serves as an eating and general living room just big enough for a dining table that was always covered by a red shepherd's plaid oilcloth, and also a place to store two wooden boxes of seltzer bottles—one for the full, the other for empties. On Friday afternoons we hear the clanging bottles in the hallway—the seltzer man delivering Steinberg's seltzer to almost everyone on the floor. He rings the doorbell to bring ten or twelve full green bottles and take away the empties. He is a young husky man with thick black eyebrows and a sincere smile, a man with a German accent, a man who evidently enjoys his work.

"*Gut nochmitog Mrs. B.*," he says, smelling the Manischewitz barley and lima bean soup simmering in the kitchen, "*Hobn a gut shabbes. Zee you next veek.*"

"Gut shabbes," Civeta replies. She then turns to me, before the man is out the door. and says, "*A gezunt mentsh. 'Tis a nice man. 'Tis a gut man, but whither is he going? He dost not have education enough to do more than schlep around such heavy bottles. Oy, such heavy bottles.*"

The real living room, door-less, off the foyer, is used as a bedroom. There is a bureau in that room – or is it a dresser? On that bureau there is a pair of polished silver-plated candlesticks having four ornate legs cast as branches of grape vines with deep impressions of leaves accumulating built-up silver polish. A heavy, plain, white washing bowl and two-handled water pitcher sits beside those *Shabbes* candlesticks. Each morning Civeta recites a prayer for the washing of the hands, satisfying one of her many orthodox Jewish duties. But on Friday evenings, just before sundown, she covers her head with a black cotton shawl to light the *Shabbes* candles. As the room darkens, the flickering candlelight casts eerie waving shadows

onto the wall, the kind a two-handled water pitcher might project, in fantasy, to the mind of a seven-year-old.

Her bedroom window faces south, to a fire escape and to the stained glass of an imposing dome atop the Mount Eden Center, a synagogue across narrow East 173rd street. A potted spiny cactus plant lives in the brightness of that window. The kitchen window is brighter and, if I put my face at the very left edge, I can see Claremont Park beyond the corner of the dome. Barry spends nights at Civeta's while I am consigned to our uncle Yaacov's apartment just to the north because there is only one extra bed at Civeta's. (Yaacov is the Hebrew name equivalent of Jacob or Jack, pronounced Yak'ov.) Daytimes we are together. Civeta washes the breakfast pots and dishes with a brick of ivory kosher soap, then does the laundry in her tiny kitchen by hand rubbing soap-soaked clothes back and forth over her little tin washboard and hanging them out on a small wooden drying rack. There is the quiet noise of the refrigerator and the sound of someone vacuuming on the floor above her ceiling. The iceman comes with a single brick of ice in the grip of his ice tongs, dripping a minor trail of water drops from the front door to the kitchen. Chores done, Civeta reads aloud, practicing her English while brushing her long silver-gray hair. She is living in a private world, a world of fantasy, of dreams, a world of banished pasts, a world where history happens only in books. Time passes. When she leaves the house, she pins her hair up in front of a mirror on her bedroom wall and dons a small beige bonnet with a clump of imitation yellow daisies over a wide black netting as a touch of veil to cover her face. She registers for the same night-course in Shakespeare's tragedies, a course she already passed. Year after year she will take the same class in attempts to improve her English, often asking Barry how to pronounce words that are hostile to the tongue of a Polish-born Austrian. I am the only kid in the neighborhood with a grandmother who speaks using words like *alas*, *nay* and *hark* along with *oy*. When I do something wrong, she says, Oy heavy deed! But when I do something right it's Praise be widst you, the w pronounced as a v and r pronounced gutturally.

SHE TREATED ME as an adult and expected me to behave as one. Once, while brushing her long silver-gray hair in her bedroom mirror, she asked a question that absorbed me for days. It was a classic question, but neither she nor I knew that.

"I wonder," she began, still, as always, pronouncing her w's as v's, "why mirrors change left and right." She was as curious as she was vain.

"Why shouldn't they?" I asked.

"Maybe, but they don't change up and down. I don't see myself upside-down. So why should they change left and right?"

"Hmm."

This was a compelling question, even for a seven year old. I spent lots of time looking at myself in her mirror, wondering if her mirror were different than others. I reasoned why left and right were interchanged, but was also haunted by my grandmother's question of why up and down was not. It was days before I had a rough, unconvincing answer.

"Grandma," I said, the next time I saw her brushing her hair in her mirror, "I think I know why mirrors don't change up and down."

"Yes, *mine kinder*?"

"Up and down is different than right and left. I mean, you can't have a right and left until you know which way is up."

"What do you mean?" she asked with a hint of a laugh.

“I mean—if I’m an arrow pointing up, my tail is at my feet and my point at my head. But I can’t tell right or left without using the words *right* or *left*.”

“So what does that have to do with the mirror?”

At the time I wasn’t sure, but sensed that the mirror knew that up was fundamentally different from right or left. I experimented by drawing a big *L*, a big *R*, a big *U* and a big *D* on a piece of onionskin typing paper. First, I held it in front of me with the penciled side toward me, and then peeked at the paper from the other side, remembering where I was. The *L* and *R* reversed positions—the *L* appeared on the image’s right side, the *R* on the image’s left. But the *U* was still above the *D*. I demonstrated my little experiment to my grandmother, convinced that right and left is a different concept than up and down.

She took the paper, peeked at it from the side and said, “Yes the *R* is on the left side and the *L* is on the right side.” Then, she examined the paper as if she were a bank teller inspecting a suspicious hundred-dollar bill and said, “What happens if I look over the top of the paper like this?” And, keeping the paper straight up, she bent her head over the paper and said, “The top of my head is near the *D*; my mouth is near the *U*. *D* and *U* switched—just like *L* and *R*—no?”

Lying down on my grandmother’s soft bed while holding a small mother-of-pearl inlaid mirror, I put a band-aid on my left cheek, the cheek opposite her pillow, and looked at a mirror to see if up and down would reverse. It wouldn’t. In the mirror the pillow was still below the band-aid.

I couldn’t have known that I was somewhat right about the conceptual difference between up and right; after all, I was only seven, but somehow I believed that that difference had something to do with the reason why a mirror swaps right and left and not up and down. The question relentlessly bugged me as it likely did her; I wouldn’t know the real answer until years later.

Plenty of curious questions emerged from my grandmother’s unassuming intellectual energy. When she poured milk from a glass she asked why it ran down the side of a glass instead of pouring straight down. She couldn’t have known the answer and neither could I, but that didn’t stop her from asking. Once, when she was mixing soup in her blackened cast iron pot, she noticed that the swirl of the soup changed directions after she stopped stirring. “Why does this happen?” she called out, as if I knew. There were magic moments when she would call me to see something of illuminating wonder. One time, when she was cooling a hard-boiled egg in a glass of water under a faucet she called me to see that the egg would elevate when the water was turned on and fall when it was turned off. At another time, when she accidentally put her large kosher soap bar into a bowl of water sprinkled with pepper she noticed that the pepper seemed to run away from the soap.

Looking back, I see that she knew more about science than she’d let on, cleverly using some of nature’s principles to her advantage. Once, over my refusal to eat my morning oatmeal, she told me that all I had to do was eat the porridge around the edges of my bowl. She knew that the runny porridge would continually level off from the center of the bowl to make me lose my place around the circle. By the time I caught on to her little trick, the porridge level was down and eating porridge became a game.

And some of her questions were mathematical. At her bench by Claremont Park she repeatedly mused over the hexagonal paving stones.

“Look how they fit together so nicely,” she would say, not realizing that there is something mathematically special about six-sided paving stones.

I always thought she knew the answers and that she wanted me to explore more of the world. By such small moments of her curiosity she consequentially scattered germs of wonder for both my brother and me to identify. She never asked questions as if she were testing; she genuinely wanted to know the answers for herself, but she also knew that she was instilling curiosity by her vision of how to educate my young mind.

Questions that came from Civeta loomed so large in my mind that they would preoccupy me for minutes, hours and even days afterward. I wondered what she meant by fitting so nicely. Triangles fit nicely; squares do too. So I wondered what was so special about regular hexagons (six-sided figures with all sides equal) until I tried to draw pentagons (five sided figures) on a sheet of cardboard. At first, I couldn't even draw, with any realistic accuracy, a single pentagon to get all five sides the same size. *Why*, I wondered. Drawing reasonably good hexagons was easy. *Why not pentagons?* I tried and couldn't, until I found a picture of a pentagon in a magazine and traced it. When I tried to fit my tracings together in order to get the side of one pentagon to match the side on the next, something went wrong. *It was fortunate for Claremont Park*, I thought. *Had the designers of the park decided to use pentagons instead of hexagons, there would have been far more cracks for dandelions to grow in.* I tried my luck with seven-sided figures, then eight-sided figures and quickly came to realize that there are only three regular patterned figures—figures whose sides were all the same length—that would work, triangle, square and hexagon. *How did Civeta know?*

AFTER SUNDOWN, WHEN the Sabbath ended, the smell of sizzling butter invaded the little apartment as Civeta quickly scrambled eggs to give my brother and me the rare pleasure of eating crusts straight from a blackened cast-iron frying pan. For my eggs she sprinkled in a mixture of sugar and cinnamon because she knew I liked them that way. She would make herself a cup of Maxwell House coffee and put a dash of cinnamon on top for smell, a routine she brought from her few years in Vienna. Then, still in her tiny canary-yellow kitchen, she would roll dough out onto a board, fold it several times as if she were folding a towel, and cut the dough with a cleaver to form bent strips of noodles which would later be added to a thick chicken and vegetable soup, while a wooden radio in the other room stayed tuned to WNBC for the Supper Club Variety Show with Perry Como, the Shaffer Orchestra and competing bursts of static to be followed by The Answer Man.

Beside the radio was a photograph of my grandfather. I don't remember him. He died from emphysema before I was three, but I always saw him as he was in that picture, a tall man with a sad face, kind eyes half closed with fatigue and a full, long beard. Thick bushy eyebrows cover the roofs of his eyes. Two vertical wrinkles ran from the bridge of his nose to the top of his forehead, crossing the naturally horizontal wrinkles of deep thought that was probably caused by frequently raised eyebrows. In spite of the wrinkles, he looked too young to be dead.

"He smoked like a chimney," Civeta said when she saw me staring at his picture. "Like a chimney! Like a chimney!" Resentment was in her voice, as if she was angry that he died so young to leave her so dependant on her only son, Yaacov. Each time she repeated *like a chimney* her right arm raised and lowered as if she was pounding red meat with a mallet.

At 8:00, just when our uncle Yaacov came to take me to his place to sleep on his sofa, Civeta tuned the radio to The American Jewish Hour so Barry and she got to listen to Yiddish melodies in swing with the Barry Sisters, Sam Medoff and the Yiddish Swingtet.

Me? I was shipped to Yaacov's, where I felt alone on the dark side of the moon. Yaacov was a short man who walks with a casual shuffle and laughs with a forced giggle. He

ended every joke with a one-word question – *funny?* – and waited for an answer, which always preceded and followed his contrived laughs—though, I must admit, some of his jokes were actually funny. When he greeted someone his head listed enough to one side as if he was compensating for envisioning a tilted world. You wanted to straighten it, but it soon straightened itself. When he greeted me, he either pinched my cheek hard enough to leave a red mark and say something in Yiddish or kiss me with a chin of stubby whiskers. Either way, I got the feeling that he was looking at me as if I'd done something wrong, sinned perhaps or simply—as I had on many occasions—missed one of his many self-invented social manners. He kept an exceedingly tight home, insisting on unattainable discipline, camouflaged by smiles, repeated dry jokes ending with his embarrassing one-word question. His religious orthodoxy was so strict I was not permitted to play solitaire during the Sabbath in his apartment, which faced south and dwarfed Civeta's building across the street. The interior walls were painted black and fuchsia; the rooms furnished with color-coded furniture; the walls exhibited a parade of framed silkscreen cubist abstractions of faces. Above his purple couch was what he considered to be his masterpiece – a silk screened work showing, over a grey background, a pair of red lips surrounding a geometrically perfect set of bone white teeth sandwiched by quotation marks. Its title was *Once the Spoken Word is Spoken*. It was part of a series of abstract pieces he called "Communication." It was the cover to the German edition of one of his "how to" books on silk screening. Sabbath days in the apartment were so quiet one could hear the ticking of Yaacov's gold Bulova watch, which sat on the bookshelf until sundown.

DID MY BROTHER ever open any of Yaacov's books? I did. I opened *Design and Print Your Own Posters*, and cracked its binding. I took it from one of his immaculate, untouched bookshelves reserved for displaying the books he authored. The binding cracked from dryness. For months afterwards, I worried about what would happen to me if he should ever find out I opened the book without his permission and cracked its binding; didn't Yaacov's orthodox observance of the Sabbath give him first hand counsel with God and won't I surely be punished for my sin as soon as Yaacov gave the word or even just raised an eyebrow? The Barry Sisters played in Yaacov's house too. It was a lament about the little Jewish town in Poland that no longer exists—

*I remember when 20 years ago
I went to see the far and unknown world
My eyes were so full of tears
When I said goodbye to my family Belz.*

*The town of Belz my dearest Belz
The littlest town where my family and home was . . .*

That day in the park, when Barry was standing on that swing above his new pretty friend Suzie Marshall: that day is forever stuck in my memory. Suzie had curly blond hair and large blue eyes. Indisputably, a *goy*, a real *shiksa!* I'd seen her in our neighborhood many times, but had never enough courage to speak. On Friday afternoons, when my yeshiva schooling ended early, I would sit on a splintered wooden swing in Morton Park, a city-forsaken playground filled with uncommonly tall dandelion weeds, rusty slides and swings anchored in dangerously protruding concrete alongside the city aqueduct, waiting for Suzie to pass by on her way home from school. By swinging far above the high, untrimmed hedges separating the playground from

the path she walked home on, I would see Suzie. That's all I ever want to do—to see her. No intention of saying anything. After all, I was only seven and would have died had she or anyone else learned about my crush. Anyway, who was *I* that *she* would speak to me?

So imagine my surprise that day in Claremont Park, seeing my brother with Suzie. Opposite the swings was a wide and high set of monkey bars built from galvanized steel pipes fastened together with pipe fittings. I climbed to the highest bar to hang myself upside down using my bent knees as hooks and then had fleeting thoughts about why up was down and down up while watching grandma Civeta on the other side of the playground wall. Barry was still swinging as high as he could, but Suzie was gone. She was climbing to a bar just below my face. For a moment I forgot that I was hanging by my feet, but soon straightened and balanced myself, glancing now and then to see if Suzie was still watching, when I spotted my uncle Yaacov sitting next to Civeta. My cousin Arthur was nearby; I could always sense his portentous presence. Warnings would come in the form of cries from small children. First Suzie gave a yelp as she was pushed aside by someone who grabbed my leg to throw me off balance. Then I fell to the ground bumping my chin on one of the bars and cutting my elbow on a bare threaded end of a U-bolt. Lying on my back with the wind knocked out of me, I saw Suzie standing over me. Two women came rushing over.

“Are you okay?” one asked.

Holding back the tears, I felt a loose front tooth and didn't answer.

“Are you okay?” the woman repeated.

“Yes,” I answered, looking toward the top of the monkey bars for Arthur. In all this commotion, I felt alone. I felt as if I were alone on the dark side of the moon.

I left the playground hoping to go home with Civeta, knowing that I would be in danger at Yaacov's. If I feared anyone more than Yaacov, it was his son, my cousin Arthur. Just two years older than I, he once tossed me into that bed of pink and red roses that so finely clung to the stone wall between the gardens and playground of the park. Though I did nothing to trigger Arthur's rage, he pushed me down, again and again, as I cried in torture from the thorns that ripped at my skin. Those roses too share old memories of Claremont Park.

When the Cross Bronx Expressway construction demolished the northernmost side of Civeta's neighborhood and took down so many of the great sycamores that might have been saplings when Peter Stuyvesant was Governor of New Amsterdam it spared Yaacov's bleak, monolithic apartment building, just missed by the southbound breakdown lane. That dark redbrick building frightened me. Its basement had several dim door-less rooms lit by unfrosted low-wattage bulbs; one for laundry, containing a modern Bendix washing machine with a wringer on top for drying; one musty room with a mildewed ping-pong table; and one room filled with coal and soot that spread its choking smells into every other room. It was a spooky place where Arthur would go to play alone with his fireworks and blank bullets.

A week before falling from the monkey bars, I followed Arthur, who was carrying a box of bullets, to an incinerator hatch in his building. Arthur opened the hatch, saw sparks flying upward and threw down several bullets, waiting quietly with a roguish smile for the explosions. I had seen him do it before and knew what would happen – nothing; however, this time, I followed him to the basement and to a shadowy room near the incinerator itself. He placed a bullet on the concrete floor and, with the back end of a coal shovel, struck the bullet several times. Nothing happened. He then found a heavy cinderblock to drop directly onto the bullet. Still nothing happened. I was sure he knew I had followed him; when he saw me, he picked up the coal shovel and came toward me like a bronco from a rodeo gate. I was cornered between

him and the coal bin and, in my attempt to run, slipped on a chunk of coal. He put down the shovel, pinned me down with his knees on my belly and grabbed my throat in a serious attempt to strangle me. With one fortunate trace of energy left, I managed to wriggle free, get to my feet and run for my life.

I did not tell anyone about the incident until many years later when it was clear I would never see Arthur again.

Arthur didn't know that the heat of the fire quickly melted the lead alloy component so the casing lost its projectile mechanism. It's likely that he didn't know that a bullet has a primer, a copper casing at the back of its shell containing a small amount of shock-sensitive explosive (usually lead azide). For a bullet to explode, something must strike the primer with a quick bashing wallop. In a hot fire, the gunpowder would have ignited and burned itself out because the lead (the bullet component itself) would have melted and dislodged to no longer confine the gunpowder. The primer would melt before its shock-sensitive explosive could ignite. And since gunpowder is not shock-sensitive, Arthur could have thwacked the bullet with a sledgehammer a million times and nothing would have happened unless he created enough of a spark to ignite the gunpowder directly. He did not know that gunpowder (a mixture of potassium nitrate, charcoal and sulfur, providing carbon to burn and sulfur to instantly release carbon sulfates—the gas that propels the lead bullet) is not shock-sensitive. It will not ignite from a bang of a coal shovel. Now, had he known enough to hit the primer at the back side of the cartridge, say, with a nail, well . . .

From that particularly memorable day on, when I saw Suzie looking at Barry, with laughter and excitement, so adoringly; when I consciously compared his hair to mine; when I first became aware that he was spending safe, nurturing nights at Civeta's swinging with the Barry Sisters while I uncomfortable, frightening nights with Yaacov and Arthur, I should have sank my brother into my resentful jealousy. But I needed him to help raise our parents. Late in the afternoon of that haunting day, I ran away into a dark tunnel and came out the other side and soon found myself at the bottom of a steep serpentine hill that lead to the street of my parent's apartment.