



Saul Bellow: 'Something to Remember Me By'



IN 1990, when Saul Bellow was 75 years old, he wrote the story “Something to Remember Me By” in the form of an elderly father’s legacy to his only child: The author’s dedication “to my children and grandchildren” comes after the story’s title page, and the fictional son is addressed within the story itself. Bellow was by then America’s most decorated writer, winner of three National Book Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, France’s Croix de Chevalier for Arts and Letters, several Jewish distinctions including the B’nai Brith Jewish Heritage Award, and, among many more honors to come, the 1976 Nobel Prize in Literature. In bestselling novels such as *Herzog*, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, and *Humboldt’s Gift*, he had developed a way of writing fiction from his own point of view, through narrators who seem to be a version of himself.

So he does in this story, details of which correspond to certain

events in his life. This does not mean that the narrator *is* the author, but that he invites us to associate the two. The story begins:

When there is too much going on, more than you can bear, you may choose to assume that nothing in particular is happening, that your life is going round and round like a turntable. Then one day you are aware that what you took to be a turntable, smooth, flat and even, was in fact a whirlpool, a vortex. My first knowledge of the hidden work of uneventful days goes back to February 1933. The exact date won’t matter much to you. I like to think, however, that you, my only child, will want to hear about this hidden work as it relates to me. When you were a small boy you were keen on family history. You will quickly understand that I couldn’t tell a child what I am about to tell you now. You don’t talk about death and vortices to a kid, not nowadays. In my time my parents didn’t hesitate to speak of death and the dying. What they seldom mentioned was sex. We’ve got it the other way around.

Understanding “the hidden work of uneventful days” (a wonderful phrase) begins that morning as the narrator-father—then a boy, a high-school senior—is about to leave for school. After a breakfast of porridge, toast, and tea, he stops in his mother’s sickroom, bending over her to say, “It’s Louie, going to school.” Coming home after school on his way to work, he looks in again to see whether his mother might be awake. “During her last days,” the now-aged Louie informs us, “she was heavily sedated and rarely said anything.” Though he tells us he was an indifferent student, Louie was also very mindful of whatever was going on around him. “Now that she could no longer sit up to have it washed, my mother’s hair was cut short. This made her face more slender, and her lips were sober. Her breathing was dry and hard, obstructed.” He observes her well enough to know that he would not have her for much longer.

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father is about to describe occur without warning. Fiction frames its initiation stories around events that decisively transform and teach. In fact, Louie casts his account of this day as an ethical will, a document that bequeaths values rather than valuables. Ethical wills have a distinguished role in Jewish tradition. They derive from Jacob's deathbed directives to his sons in the Book of Genesis and have taken a great many forms through the centuries, from the punitive chidings of the 12th-century philosopher Samuel Ibn Tibbon to the delightful story-filled notebooks of Glikl of Hameln five centuries later. Louie follows in this tradition, writing this transformative tale as a bequest to his son — and Bellow, through him, leaves it to us. What does the adult author think is crucial for his son to know?

The day of the story begins like any other winter school day in 1933 Chicago — “grimly ordinary.” When Louie goes out, he sees two small men with rifles firing at pigeons, “Depression hunters and their city game,” securing their food when the police are out of sight. Louie is a bookish boy: Had he not had an afterschool job, he would have been attending the Senior Discussion Club, whose subject that day was “Von Hindenburg's choice of Hitler to form a new government.” This is the first hint of the story's Jewish context: Who else but Jewish boys in a Chicago high school would be tracking these events in Europe? Louie also notices the cracks in the frozen snow still visible where he and his girlfriend Stephanie had been necking the previous night, his hands under her raccoon coat, “adolescents kissing without restraint.” Like all Bellow's protagonists, Louie lives intensely and really knows how to express himself.

Louie has an afterschool job delivering wreaths and bouquets to all parts of the city. Behrens the florist pays him 50 cents for the afternoon; with tips, he could earn as much as a dollar. The delivery that day was going to take one hour each way, so this was to be his only trip. He stuffs his reading material — “the remains of a book, the cover gone, the pages held together by binder's thread

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and flakes of glue” — into his pocket because he needs both hands to protect his lilies in the crowded streetcar. How distinctly he recalls arriving at his destination, pressing the apartment button and being buzzed in to find the door open on the second floor with coats piled everywhere, galoshes along the walls, and mourners drinking! “All whiskey in those days was bootleg, of course.” Everyone lets the boy through the crowded passageway, and in the empty room behind it lies a girl in a coffin, “older than Stephanie . . . all buoyancy gone.”

After having left his mother back home, he had not expected to find an already dead person, much less a girl comparable to the one he was kissing the night before. “On the drainboard of the sink was a baked ham with sliced bread around the platter, a jar of French's mustard and wooden tongue-depressors to spread it. I saw and I saw and I saw.” As if to make the point that there is no escaping reality, the dead girl's mother refuses the florist's offer to let her put it on credit and sternly gives him five dollars plus a 50-cent tip.

At this point, his work done, the boy ought to go home, but he is not quite ready. He returns briefly to his book to look up the passage he had been reading the previous night (probably after the tryst with Stephanie). When that doesn't still his restlessness,

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he decides to drop in on his brother-in-law, whose dentistry office is in the neighborhood. Finding no one there, he enters the connecting office of a doctor (or quack?) who is conducting an early version of the kind of sexual research that William Masters and Virginia Johnson later made famous. A naked woman, this one very much alive, is lying on the examining table, attached to some apparatus. The doctor being nowhere around, the boy gallantly helps her undo the straps.



There follows the adventure that any horny 17-year-old might have imagined for himself—albeit with a different outcome. It would be unfair to spoil that episode for prospective readers. Men’s sexual humiliation is a universal staple of comedy, and the grown Louie is at the right distance from these events to appreciate their humor. Enough to say that at the hands of that woman he becomes the victim of an expert confidence game and is himself left stark naked. Forced to rummage for stray pieces of clothing to shield himself against the cold, he finds more women’s clothing than men’s and must make his way home in this getup. Failing to locate his brother-in-law in the local drugstore or speakeasy he frequents, he must resort to pleading for carfare since all his money is gone—along with the book and the sheepskin coat his mother had bought him. Of these, the book he had picked up from a second-hand bin with its front half missing was irreplaceable, for it may have held the

wisdom he was after. Lost as well are his dignity and innocence instead of the virginity he was hoping to offer up.

The Depression had made it worth stealing even a boy’s worn boots and clothing. Indeed, the story keeps deepening our awareness of that historical moment—Hitler’s investiture in the background—while seeming only to pursue the boy’s misadventures in Chicago. Before giving Louie his carfare, the bartender has him escort in return one of the drunks who cannot make it home on his own, and this exposes the boy to a kind of misery he would otherwise not have known from delivering flowers. The drunk’s two little girls help put their father to bed, but they need Louie to cook the pork chops in the greased skillet waiting on the stove.

“All that my upbringing held in horror geysered up, my throat filling with it, my guts griping.” Since the elderly Louie is now writing to his son, he does not have to explain to him that he comes from a traditional Jewish family with pronounced Jewish values. At the beginning, Jewishness had just been part of the atmosphere, but as the boy is exposed to this forbidding part of the non-Jewish world where no one else lives by the same rules, the difference takes hold of him physically. The ham he merely observes on the mourners’ sideboard; the forbidden pork he is obliged to cook turns his stomach—but instead of that tired phrase, Bellow gives us so much more.

Louie seems never to have blamed those who fail him in his plight:

For that matter, I had no sympathy for myself. I confessed that I had it coming, a high-minded Jewish schoolboy, too high-and-mighty to be Orthodox and with his eye on a special destiny. At home, inside the house, an archaic rule; outside, the facts of life. The facts of life were having their turn.

Once he is worked over, he realizes what he risked in straying from home, but it is too late. Having endured ridicule, irony, and a full hour of shame on the streetcar, he faces the reckoning that

truly matters. “My mother, with whom I might never speak again, used to say that I had a line of pride straight down the bridge of my nose, a foolish stripe that she could see. I had no way of anticipating what her death would signify.” What it signifies is that no one will ever again envelop him in that same discerning affection.

The conclusion of the story holds everything in the balance. Will he come home too late? Will he meet with the same ridicule on the inside as on the outside? By the time he imagines and then executes his homecoming, the reassuringly flat turntable of days has become the whirlpool. When he gets off the streetcar for the final stretch home, he remembers that Jews cover the mirrors when someone dies, so he dutifully avoids his reflection in the shopwindows. What lies behind this practice, he wonders: “Will the soul of your dead be reflected in a looking glass, or is this custom a check to the vanity of the living?”

Here is one of my favorite endings in Jewish literature:

I ran home, approached by the back alley, made no noise on the wooden backstairs, reached for the top of the partition, placed my foot on the white porcelain doorknob, went over the top without noise, and dropped down on our porch. I didn't follow the plan I had laid for avoiding my father. There were people sitting at the kitchen table. I went straight in. My father rose from his chair and hurried toward me. His fist was ready. I took off my tam or woolen beret and when he hit me on the head the blow filled me with gratitude. If my mother had already died, he would have embraced me instead.

Millennia of Jewish civilization are stored in that father's blow. A grown young man had no right getting himself into trouble when he ought to have been assuming his filial responsibilities. He is about to pay the price: The day has shown him what lies ahead. Yet if maternal protection is about to be withdrawn, something harder remains. He would not have welcomed his father's

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punishment unless his whole sense of himself had been formed by that chastisement, whose source is the divinely inspired Law of Moses as transmitted from parent to child. It seems clear from the way that he wants to instruct his only child that Louie has not raised *him* with the same moral authority.



One yet unmentioned thread in this story is mysteriously shrouded in the boy's never-to-be-recovered book. Because Louie's book is missing its front part, we are not told who wrote the sentences he quotes from it about the human form being “the most perfect form to be found on earth,” hence obviously not meant for dissolution when the body dies. The book's author is certain that Nature would never condone such waste! “Where, then, is the world from which the human form comes?” This same boy who is eager to be led into worldly temptation apparently also wants assurance of life's higher dimension.

The quoted passage appears in a lecture Rudolf Steiner delivered about anthroposophy, a theory that intrigued Bellow, though he never became an acolyte of the movement. Steiner's belief that

our human intellect can have contact with spiritual worlds appealed to Bellow in just the way that the adolescent in this story entertains these ideas in preparation for the loss of his mother. They also figure in the novel *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow's homage to his late friend, the poet and writer Delmore Schwartz. Had he wanted us to think about anthroposophy itself, Bellow would have led us to it directly instead of having half the book torn away. All he wants from it is what he gives us here — a spiritual corrective.

The grown Louie writes: “You, my only child, are only too familiar with my lifelong absorption in or craze *for further worlds*” (my emphasis). I stress those words because Bellow himself integrates so many areas of life and thought into his fiction that it is easy to overlook his reach for transcendence. This lifelong absorption began for him in childhood when he recited the daily morning prayers with his father and brothers. In adolescence, he began exploring the subject eclectically in books. He did not bring the subject into his fiction until he was already the “great American writer.” Nor, to my knowledge, did he ever ascribe this belief in an afterlife to any Jewish or formal religious source. It always remained semi-obscured, as it does here, while forming an indispensable part of his legacy.

In addressing his son, Louie thinks him “too well educated, respectably rational” to believe, as he himself does, in the continuum of spirit and nature. Recounting how carelessly he had treated *his* inheritance, Louie is under no illusions about the next generation. But Bellow the writer did not succumb to cynicism, about either literature or life. Like Louie, he thinks that by honestly conveying what is most important, how all parts of life hold together and include the ineffable, his disclosure can help to actively perpetuate civilization.

An ethical will does not flatter its intended beneficiaries but tries to leave them something they may otherwise be missing. Modern man cannot bring down another set of commandments from the mountaintop, and Bellow could not become a rabbinic

authority. His “Louie” reveals himself as the Jewish boy who had to go out into the world to learn to value the deathless love of his mother and the steadying hand of his father. If he could not be that father, he could at least show that ready fist. *