

## APPLESAUCE IN THE MEATLOAF

I did not expect to hear any laughter on Sunday August 27th. My mood was somber as I got into my car early that morning. I drove to a nearby parking lot where I would meet my friend L and transfer to her car for the rest of our short journey. We were going to the cemetery and neither of us wanted to go alone.

The day was the unveiling for my dear friend, Margie.

It was hard to believe she had been dead for a year. Not a day goes by that I do not think about her. 4 years older than me, she was the closest thing to a big sister I ever had. Margie taught me so much.

-How to walk with a cane. I use the one she gave me. She had two and said "Take mine; that way I'll always be walking with you".

-How to face life as I grow older. "Any day you wake up and open your eyes is a good day".

-How to be a friend. No matter how tired or sick she was, she always made you feel as if you were the most important person in the world. Her "hi" had a lilt and a joy to it unlike anything else.

-How to endure and more importantly, how to fight. In and out of rehab for three years, one illness after another, never ending setbacks, she fought until they wheeled her into the emergency operating room that final night.

The Rabbi and a few friends were there. She had just come home from rehab, where she worked so hard and regained mobility. We were so pleased. I would have more time with her. We would finally go to the Opera together. She waved goodbye from the gurney, gave her infectious smile and giggled. Prayers had been said. But no one thought it would be the end. In some ways, it was not. She is, and always will be, with me.

We arrived at the cemetery early. Not ready to face the short walk up the grassy hill, L and I remained in the car. We sat silently, afraid, I suppose, that if we began to talk, our carefully guarded emotions would get the best of us. Soon the others appeared. We joined them. A sea of stoic faces. And finally, the family: Margie's older sister, son, daughter and five grandchildren - teens - old enough to understand but young enough to unashamedly clutch their parents hands. The Rabbi began to speak. It was difficult for him. Margie had been an administrative assistant and tireless volunteer for more than 40 years at the synagogue she called her second home. They were good friends.

Slowly the group edged closer to each other and the memorial plaque that still lay covered, resting by her husband and parents. The quiet was broken. A few sobs, some murmured words, the prayers and heartfelt, short speech. And then, the moment when son and daughter knelt on the ground to remove the cloth, exposing a simple brass plate. Finality. Rest in Peace, Margie.

Some of us moved forward to place the traditional stones on the grave...I was here... I remember you. I brought a stone from my herb garden. Margie was a wonderful cook and loved to use the fresh herbs I brought her Spring through Fall. I knew she would like it.

And then, as if on cue, people began to talk. Comforting one another. Exchanging hugs, a kiss, a gentle hand, a tissue for the tears. It was time to go.

As is customary, the family hosted a brunch for the mourners. It was held at a delicatessen a few blocks from Margie's home. The restaurant had been open for 50 years. Margie was their first customer. She had a take out corn beef special two days before she died. The owner, his wife and most of the waitresses, almost the same age as she, were friends. They had catered her joyful occasions and meals for sitting Shiva. Now they shared their sorrow with us, as plates of lox and bagels, kippered salmon, whitefish, omelets and French toast were placed on 3 long tables.

How could we eat? And even harder, what would we say to one another?

I had forgotten one of life's secrets...you never know what will happen in the course of a day!

After the first cup of coffee was poured, the stories began. Tentatively at first. Charla, an old friend, started. "Who remembers how bossy Margie could be, she asked? Remember how she organized the synagogue's Meals On Wheels? 250 plates. 4 hours to do all the set up, cooking and getting the cars loaded. Margie barking orders like a Drill Sergeant. Irritating and shaming anyone who was not slicing, dicing or stirring fast enough or properly. Someone threatened to dump her in a pot and cook her! But they all came back every week. Probably scared not to!"

Lynn was next. " She was organized in the kitchen, but she could never remember where she put her keys, her important papers, her glasses or the book she was reading. We used to leave half an hour earlier than necessary whenever we went somewhere because she couldn't find something she needed! And then, when she finally found it,

she would hold it up, grinning sheepishly and say “I knew it was here”! It drove everybody crazy!

Shirley, 97 years old, remembered how Margie would always say “I have to elevate” meaning she had to put her feet up to avoid the constant blood clots. “I don't think she had to do it all the time. She did it to get out of doing things she didn't like”!

Janet remembered the Mah Jong games and the fierce competition between Margie and her dear friend Marlene, who died just a month before her. “It started with bickering, moved into nasty, and then accusing one another of some sort of illegitimate trick”. They had been playing together for 40 years!

Soon, stories flowed like a river on which we were White Water rafting. And they were no longer just about Margie. Instead, they were about all of us... Our shared heritage.

We remembered how it was growing up. Margie and several others grew up in Camden New Jersey. Many of us grew up in Philadelphia. Most of us were first or second generation children of Eastern European Jews. There was little money. We lived in row houses. Our parents were proud of these tiny places...they were the first in their family to own a home. And there were neighbors - everywhere! Community. We played hide and seek, hopscotch and stick ball in the street. And you had best be polite, say hello to everyone. If you did not, your Mother knew about it before you walked in the door!

We recalled fondly times spent sitting on the “stoop”- the 3 or 4 narrow steps leading to the front door. Children, parents, friends and family would gather to talk about the latest news, gossip and sometimes tell jokes. There was loud talking and lots of laughter. On hot summer nights, the youngsters were sent upstairs to take a cold shower, put on their bathrobes, and then sit outside again, taking advantage of the slightest bit of cool air that drifted over uncomfortably warm bodies. No air conditioning!

Inevitably, the conversation turned to food. Margie and many of her friends were excellent cooks and bakers. They shared recipes, keeping the best of the old family ones to themselves, and taste-tested. There was friendly competition and stories about who set the prettiest table, entertained the most people and had the best High Holidays or Seders. Margie was always at or near the top. It was not unusual for her to have 30 people at tables stretched from the dining room into the living room. Family, friends, friends of friends and anyone she heard did not have a place to go, Jews and non Jews, were welcomed. Even when she was quite sick, she found a way to maintain the tradition, making the best matzo ball soup, brisket, roasted vegetables, and home made

Gefilte fish (delicious, but something the non Jews never really understood or liked). Her table was set with her grandmother's best dishes, her mother's cut glass wine goblets and the crystal water glasses and serving pieces she and her husband brought home from Germany where they lived when he was in the Army.

The real prize winners though, were her Swedish meatballs and meatloaf. Non holiday fare, an invitation to dinner where they were served was a treasured treat. NO ONE knew the secret ingredients! Or so we thought.

"Margie claimed she made the best meatloaf, Rita said. But everyone knew I did. She added a bit of grape jelly - that was her secret! But what makes mine so special is a spoonful of applesauce". There were astonished looks and gasps from the women at the table. "You put applesauce in your meatloaf"? "Just a spoonful. It adds the right touch of sweetness to the onions, garlic, salt and pepper and parsley". Amazed, many at the table rolled their eyes and turned their noses up. But 2 said they might give it a try. It was almost sacrilegious! Hard to imagine something better than Margie's meatloaf.

When it was time to leave, there were tears, hugs and kisses, and surprisingly, laughter. Memories...sweet, gentle, silly and even a bit irreverent and bawdy, had sustained us.

I arrived home exhausted but unable to take a nap. I poured myself a cup of tea, seeking the warmth of it more than the desire for a drink. And I started to think. Somehow, I needed to make sense of the day. It was certainly more than just honoring a tradition.

What I learned is that we are our stories. The ones we share, embellished or abbreviated for effect. The ones we tell ourselves, real or fantasy. What we chose to tell, tells everything about us. All of them are tempered by experience, softened by the passage of time and viewed now, as we grow older, thru heavy glasses. What we remember from this day will likely be the stories we tell at the next unveiling. Will anyone have put applesauce in their meatloaf?

Carole Leskin