

Having avoided London for so long
the un-civility of it,
from the moment you arrive
until the security personnel barking at you when you leave
the change in the neighborhood
Chareidi Golders Green,
unrecognizable Finchley
rude tourists
rude cab drivers
rude weather hiding the glorious sun for weeks on end
rude everything
this was not my old London.

Having avoided even transiting through Heathrow
the long lines in everything
the long walk to get anywhere
the implied racial profiling
transit anywhere in Europe, but avoid London!
yet now
because of family affairs
I have come back twice in 3 months.

And here
where the business of family affairs is conducted
around the ritual affairs,
the birthdays
the weddings
the sheva b'rachot
and the shul going...
it is sunny for a change
the mild spring air makes me breathless
the puffy clouds as in a picture postcard.
Here, beyond the formal invitations and locations
this is where family business takes place.
After all the pleasantries and catch ups
after you find out which school this child is attending
and what college this one got into,
somehow the past begins to seep in.

Family business then gets conducted and is all about memory
about reconstructing deep unconscious lost images
it is memory reconstruction boot camp
and its purpose for me,
is to find peace of mind at last
to dis-cover
the truth of the past

and why we are condemned to repeat it as we do.
For there is comfort in in such gnosis
hidden knowledge that can only surface
by the slip of the tongue
a comment here or there
and a reference that evokes an image in the mind.

There is healing in uncovering the ghosts
in seeing patterns in other family members
especially of previous generations
come seeping into my DNA
even though when younger I would mock it
calling it my "genetic prison-with no chance for parole"

In London, this must take place
I now realize
for all the places
the buildings,
the streets
the route to Edgware, Uncle Eric
or the cemetery; to see Nana and Dada
Finchley Road,
the Underground stations
the various lines
the black Northern Line
miserable
ancient and sooty.
In this physical landscape of grayness and blackness
lies memory.
The landscape of NW suburbia is necessary like props for a stage set.

My brother Eugene
who seems stronger than ever before
holds my hand firmly as we dance together
in the black circle of yeshiva guys
not interested in the pecking order of priority
but satisfied to be on the outer ring
unobserved, waiting for Michael
in the center to find him and drag him and I
into the center.
And for maybe the first time ever
I feel brotherly love in a physical way
just swaying to the singing with him
in this deep bond of blood.
there is little we need say
there is little to be said

we have gone through so much of life
and our memories are so entwined.

Here I meet Peter after so many years
we are so alike...
we look alike...
(people meet him all over thinking he is me.)
Here over lunch I discover we also think alike
feel the same way about love and life
authority and orthodoxy.
We both went west
settled with families
embedded in similar communities
and worry about our children's education first and foremost.
I get the first inkling that there is healing in this luncheon.
It feels good to talk with him deeply.
Genetics has thrown its dice as I realize
how first cousins emerged with similar tastes and thought patterns in most things
important.

Tony, another cousin whose gift of the gab expresses
those feelings I would have had
had I really known Dada
expressing all I should have known about him but did not
because of my parents wish to live in a more upscale neighborhood.
Tony teases me for wishing to unearth the Sargon's in India past
rightfully pointing out that his memory of Dad is more sacrosanct than any historical
facts that might emerge.
He forces me to engage the question as to why I wish so
to have this book of history written.
Is it sweet revenge on the Litvaks
who paraded their yichus to my family
some 33 years ago?
Or some desire to find greatness
at least in my genes
in my otherwise self-admitted medicority?

Cousin Michael, whose "*erhlichkeit*"
exposes us all for our lack of faith
and our dark sides
for he does not seem to exhibit any guile
as we watch his family grow
in our inability to swallow
the myths and stories of his chareidi Rabbis
bellowing to the newly weds
extracting the last ounce of joy from the celebration.

Uncle Eric, whose second Barmitzvah
prompts the most asked question this weekend
as to why he had no first ceremony in the first place
in an otherwise traditional Bombay neighborhood
where his other cousins like David underwent such initiation,
and many possible theories that amuse him
as we present them for his speculation, one after the other
(although he might really not know!
having blocked all memories of childhood trauma)

Aunty Becky, who still arouses my deep resentment
despite the hugs and kisses
for her duplicitous telling of stories of mother
that push the knife in deeper all the while
saying "bless her", "bless her"
as well as her passivity in protecting me from the sadistic headmaster.
Yet we are drawn to her
for her memories come pouring out despite the repeated disclaimers
that "its best to leave the past alone"!

Here is the gold mine of information
mixed with speculation of course.
Yet here, in this family cocoon,
Becky still speaks of reverence
of Shapiro the headmaster
that sadistic bastard who delighted in whacking me in front of my twin
and her transparent whitewashing of her silent part in all of this
her very silence in the face of this violence. Her fear of authority
that infects me too.
"I once told Shapiro that the boy he just bashed never did anything wrong"
as if,
as if
this would somehow alleviate her from the guilt of silence,
for surely she knows.

Eric speaks for the first time
to me of "lacking confidence" until age 40
unable to perform all the symphonies he knew
and could rattle off
prior to arriving in London
when he "lost all confidence-his musical voice"
Then slowly opening up to hear his own voice
in the music so late in life
after marriage

but-"never looking back"
"-only looking to the future as bright-"
this motto allowed him to survive
by blocking those memories of "no self-confidence"
so successfully he has now "forgotten" the negative.

Yet he is the very mirror image of all that trauma
having re-invented himself as the perfect gentleman
known for his kindness by children and colleagues alike.
I cannot follow this zaddik's path however,
I cannot let go of this violence
and abuse
I must confront they who abused me
and caused such a wasteland
in my soul. At least mentally.
I must finally have my psychological pound of flesh.

Eric's children and sons-in-law
speak glowingly of his being one of the 36 hidden righteous
and I fully endorse that.
But it is hard to speak to a zaddik a *lamed vavnik*
who has lost all resentment of the past.
My cousins Sharon and Michelle
remain silent
but their love is expressed in the mountains of food
over shabbat
soul food from India as taught at home.
Their silence and loving presence over shabbat
betrays Eric's loving fatherhood
his unconditional devoted loving of his daughters
and now his grandchildren
who know deep down that here is a well
of deep compassion that will always be there for them.
Never would he perpetrate what was done to him
never.

Uncle David, the successful physician
who is known for fixing all family problems
but frustratedly cannot fix his own daughter
who suffers for his archetypal physician/manager/ father image
yet who is so hospitable to my children...
I owe such a debt to him
for providing safe haven for them
from my critical family
as a resource who never criticized nor judged them.

In this matrix my family business is conducted
looking for scraps of genetic material
like strands of spiritual DNA scattered across that familiar landscape
only London can provide
being the final destination
as one by one the family moved its center of gravity
from Bombay.

My mother was the first
on a troop ship 1941
U-boat infested waters of the Atlantic
she was NOT going to give up on this scholarship
to the Royal College
and for the war years and few after
she struggled alone
in this gray of gray London
with the anxiety of Hitler's "doodlebugs"
whistling above in the night
hoping and praying for the whistle to continue.
My mother really was the courageous sibling
the scout, the trailblazer
and in her absence here
I feel the family dynamic as not complete.

In all of this Mum's absence is felt
her voice not present
she is reluctantly back home
unable to attend the festivities
having tried every ruse
knowing what she might be missing in this family business thing
which is good for me at least this once,
as I learn to see the clan in a different key-
minus the matriarch-
she-who motivated me to be who I am
and is lodged in my brain now,
as the inner *kritik*,
but also left scars in me.

I am so alert for a comment two generations later
a fact
a scrap
anything
that will connect me to this past
the correct DNA sequence

that will unlock
why I am so addicted to this or that
why my character defects chose this or that
or why I feel so drawn or repelled to this or that.
I am sure those answers lie right here though.

In this matrix
in London of all places
in this cloudy foggy twilight
I find the meanings and motivations
that sound familiar.

Around a table of Sargons at the wedding the conversation naturally veers towards
Dada the patriarch. He was such a towering figure (for good and bad)
so Eric naturally compares what he is hearing from the rabbis on the dais
to Dada's critique of the rabbinism and legalism
of the Iraqi Jews of Bombay
his flirtation with the Pauline revolution
that I have been drawn to for so many years
the real reason for Eric's non Barmitzvah
because of Dada is being ridiculed by Nana
to her family. (one of the possible explanations floating around this weekend!)

Dada thought everything through
from basic first principles
uncaring for ridicule and heresy
wherever it might take him
Old Testament and New if need be.
This is what I have been looking for
a truth beyond the historical facts!
I get an inkling as to what he must have written in his lost book.

I find in my cousins and uncles and aunts,
such resonances as if the DNA strands dance
to a distantly recognizable tune
Eric's latest work,
a tune I hardly recognize
yet sounds so familiar
I am drawn closer and closer
because I know
really know
in my body
this is real
this is a song

that my life dances to.

In his and my mother's body posture
one the viola the other the violin,
the flexed neck crouching over their fiddles
their gaze is always down
away from the listener
for they are transmitting holy sounds
for those who might understand the
years of toil and violence
of the "practice practice."
Here too I find some peace as I see the
previous generation having suffered too
at the hand of an invisible guiding muse
that mistakenly believed that the only ticket to survival
had to be the stick and the cane.

It is who I was
it is what must be
it is the genetic prison as I had always expressed
but the jailor has allowed me out for a while
to see the court documents and the testimony
that condemned me to this life
even though the judges
the Fates, have sentenced me long ago.
Old faces emerge from grammar school
passing me at the wedding
with a curious look
as if I do remind them of a little boy
so long ago
that naughty boy
with the olive skin-too dark for British Jews-
who played the piano
who was not immune from the usual hazing or bashing up.
Funny how after 48 years I see no changes in their personalities.

In this place of memories
things come to life
dreams appear
and fantasies materialize
here one can act out
without fear
since one has regressed to childhood.
which of course,
takes all the *juissance* out of it

so one becomes sober
for fear of missing another snippet of truth.

Family business is serious stuff
it has implications for dreams and soul
it is like a sacred kabbalistic text
for once studied,
alters your life forever
either way.

Most importantly I can return
to my life
afterwards
with some healing
some meaning
making my inner space a little larger
to hold this stuff
this past
making a little more sense of all of it
because of the resonances with other DNA bearers
who speak of this and that
snippets of this and that
which ring deep in the psyche,

And finally to feel
that I make a difference
by just being
part of this family
with my own stuff
despite my own stuff
despite Becky and Eric's admonitions
to "forget the past"
(which they too constantly refer to)
in order to survive
and stay sane.

Last of all
I idolize my twin who radiates light when she enters the room
and attracts the "Sargon women" around her
with her funny tales.
These very "Sargon women"
who represent the goddess image in my soul
who cannot become sullied no matter
how they pollute themselves ever.
They surround her

listening to her every word
as if she expresses the very incarnation
of their souls, not some funny anecdote!
As if she plays the genetic code in their souls like a viola.
As if Rochelle has inherited this quality of Mum's
to lead and be trailblazer.
But I only feel their love
of this pearl this flower
who gets more beautiful as time progresses
in contrast to my decay.

This is what I am leaving to come "home"
some 3000 miles
back to my life
as it is lived now.
The family has dispersed
the wedding and birthday party is over
and the business meeting has been adjourned.
But richer for the evocation
of memories
and the family talk conducted
here in London
not so hated as before
having yielded so much this time around.

Eric blesses me on friday night with
"peace, Julian, only peace"
from his heart that melts mine
as when he blessed his two girls
"may you continue to be just as you are"
such words from the family zaddik
shake mountains of pain
and threaten the heavens with their truth and healing.

So I might come back soon
to drink at this golden fountain
that yields so much nectar
an injection of peace-
of peace of mind
for my broken soul.