

Booing Death
Excerpts

© 2013 Pamela Sackett

Pamela Sackett

Booing Death

with
Shpilkes*
& Rhyme

**Yiddish for nervous energy*



SEATTLE

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Ashes To Ashes

*Let's put our ashes on the table
in their big plush red velvet bag
we've got empty spice jars in the cupboard
for each one, I'll give you a nice tag*

*I mixed mom and dad after breakfast
before our sib meeting time
mom's ashes were a bit chunky
dad's were incredibly fine*

*let's put our ashes on the table
and dole some out for us to take
let's help ourselves, before we go
to mom's traditional coffee cake*

*let's put our ashes on the table
cremation technology has sure changed since mom's day
do you want to caravan to the cemetery
I'll lead the way.*

My husband's family is not like mine. To say they are well-adjusted is an understatement, but does that mean *my* family is equilibrium-challenged?

Yes!

I try not to fall prey to comparisons, but I need a frame of reference; and when *my* parents died, there was no order, no plan, no coping. There was, in a word, chaos, torment, profound lack of resolve.

My husband's family seems to be immune to these phenomena. Is it their Unitarian/Methodist/one-for-all-all-for-one protocol? Are their brains different? Do they lack persecution and perfectionism in their genetic history? Well, if they don't lack it, it's gotten washed out, because I've never seen them argue or blame or disagree or voice a serious grievance; no one raises their voice,

no one undemocratically seizes focus; discrepancies never turn into conflicts; conflicts never turn into overt and covert wars, like in my family, that go on for years.

And there were no ashes in my family. Everyone is plopped, whole, into the ground. Though, granted, the act is unmentionably reminiscent, I don't, theoretically, disagree with cremation, it's just I don't really want to see the ashes or interact with them on a kitchen table and I am, certainly, not going to make a cozy mental space for the idea of doggy-bagging my own portion and taking them home.

The first time I met my husband's parents and one of his four siblings, there were ashes on the table but they were in a tray at the end of a cigarette. I was relieved because, at that long-ago time, I smoked. My husband never smoked, so when I got to his parents' house and saw his dad making granola, cigarette in hand, and his divorced brother, sitting at the table, cigarette in hand, I felt relieved. My husband's devoted mother was "under the weather," so I didn't meet her that night, nor did I meet his other two very up-standing brothers or his awe-inspiring sister, the ash organizer.

I enjoyed convening with my husband's father and brother that night in my husband's family home and for numerous nights there to come. It never occurred to me I would one day see a bag filled with mom's and dad's own bodies' ashes on that same table where we flicked cigarette ashes and roared heartily; where we discussed the world into the wee hours; where, one Mother's Day, many moons ago, we opened a bottle of wine to toast our decision to marry, a decision made that very Mother's Day. It never occurred to me I'd see their ashes, much less be invited to help dole them out on that iconic table where my husband and I broke bread with his huge multi-generation, multi-century American family, on and off, through years of our mostly blissful mixed marriage.

The gathering at the graveside—where the ashes were entombed—was altogether harmonious. Oh, there were some tears and some deeply touching letters—parsed out for readings—from mom and dad’s courtship and pregnancy days and from the days of my husband’s mom’s premature death, but I couldn’t detect even just a hint of wretchedness or a speck of mangled agony like in my family, where both seemingly innate emotional states are my sister’s and mine to enjoy in perpetuity.

My endearing dad-in-law possessed whatever the opposite of entitlement is. He was a man of quiet, constant gratitude and unconditional love. And by the sound of the letter, gently read by one of my husband’s brothers, the letter he wrote his out-of-state in-laws about his wife’s untimely illness and sudden death in July of 1988, he seemed to be filled with an abundance of heavenly acceptance in equal proportion to his earthly composure.

My father’s letters, I vaguely recall, were adoring and humorous but they were difficult to read because, though he was a general contractor by profession, he had the handwriting of a prescribing physician. The only letters I found when my mother departed were ones she decided not to send me. I wouldn’t want to see those read in public before or after anyone’s death, but I can tell you neither acceptance nor gratitude were extended on any of those pages.

The imperturbability in my husband’s family stands out, to me, like a sore thumb. It’s a painful reminder of just how far I must go to emulate and effectively internalize what I consider to be a model stance in life, for life and around death, a stance which I can’t come anywhere near even approaching with anywhere near the gracefulness or elegant simplicity with which my husband and his noble family of origin are undeniably endowed.

Still, I cannot help but ask: what is wrong with them?!