

The Award

It happened fifty years ago, the incident with the rugelach.

A cool May evening, sweater weather in the small mining town of Eveleth, Minnesota. Mark Godowsky, then ten years old, mounted the steps leading to his second-floor apartment, his footfalls echoing in the empty stairwell. He expected his mother Liba would be waiting for him and frowning at his late arrival. He opened the door.

She did not frown. Instead, she beamed at him from her high-backed beige chair. Her dark eyes sparkled under thick brows and a few strands of auburn hair dangled from her *sheitel*, the traditional cap she wore. As she jumped up and patted him on the shoulder, her ankle-length brown dress swirled around large hips.

“I’m so happy,” she said. She clapped her hands.

“Why, Mama?” Mark asked. He was glad to hear she was happy, but he wished she wouldn’t wear that cap. No one else’s mother wore such a thing. He removed his sweater and stuffed it onto a shelf in the closet.

“O, do you know?” She called him Malachi, his given name, the Polish name he despised. Everyone at school called him Mark.

“Know what?” He turned to face her.

“They choose you student of the year. Out of all fourth grade students, they choose you, our Malachi.” Her voice was high-pitched with excitement.

“Yes, they told me yesterday.”

“Why you not tell us? Such wonderful news.”

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“How did you find out?” He had wanted to keep it from her until after the award ceremony. Then he would tell her and his father too. Student of the year was a great honor. He wanted them to be proud of him, but not at school.

“A letter today. From Mr. Weber, the principal. Come sit and I tell you.” She motioned to a chair. Mark sank into its faded flowered upholstery, his shoulders thin inside a white button-down shirt and his short brown curls falling on his forehead. His dark trousers, a little too short due a recent growth spurt, crawled up his legs.

“He invites us to school,” said Liba, “to see you get the award. A week from Thursday. 7 pm. I burst with pride.”

“You don’t have to come to school, Mama.” At school, she would call him Malachi. She would show up in her clunky shoes and knit cap.

“What kind of talk is that? Of course we come. We bring the twins.”

“You don’t need to,” Mark said. He sank further into the chair.

“Papa, he closes the store,” Liba said, and Mark knew he was doomed.

“Papa never closes the store, except on Yom Kippur,” he said.

“For you, my angel of God, he closes the store. How do you say – wild horses? couldn’t run with us away.”

“Couldn’t keep us away.”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep us away. There, now I remember. Oh, English, too hard.” She laughed. “But I learn. Every day I learn.”

“I can get the award without you.” Mark said.

“We go. I make a new dress to wear,” Liba said. “Maybe a blue one. What do you think?”

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“It’s too much trouble for you.” He looked down at his feet, which he tapped on the worn carpet.

“Trouble, you don’t know from trouble. When I come to America, I thought to have trouble, but not this. This is good trouble. This kind of trouble I dream about. And Papa, too.” She picked up her knitting and took a few stitches, the clacking of her wooden needles the only sound in the room. She was knitting another pair of bloomers. No one else’s mother knit her own bloomers. “You are not home for supper tonight. Again.”

“Ricky and I played baseball at his house. Then his father came home and played catch with us. He’s teaching me to pitch and I’m getting pretty good at it. Maybe I can be on a baseball team next year.” Mark loved baseball. He followed the Chicago Cubs.

“I cook your favorite, noodle kugel with lots of raisins and apples,” Liba said. She raised her eyes to Malachi.

“It’s not my favorite. Not any more. Besides, Mrs. Whitson made pot roast for supper.”

“Is that your favorite now? Pot roast?”

“I don’t know, Mama.” He shrugged. “I like noodle kugel, too.”

“I have some left over. I get it for you.” She pushed herself forward in the chair.

“I’m not hungry.” Mark said.

Liba slumped backward and took a few more stitches in her bloomers. The radiator hissed, and far away, a dog barked. “Why you never invite Ricky here after school? I make rugelach for you. You love my rugelach. Ricky, too.”

“At Ricky’s we had Lorna Doones and Dr. Pepper.”

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“Ach, Malachi. I don’t know what it is, these Lorna Doones,” Liba shook her head. “Dr. Pepper, yes. But not Lorna Doones.”

“You don’t know about Lorna Doones?” His mother was probably the only one in Eveleth who didn’t know about them.

“No.”

“They’re cookies, Mama. You buy them at Franklin’s.”

“What kind of name is that for a cookie? And why buy cookies when I can make them myself?” She dropped her knitting into a large basket at her feet.

“They’re good. Better than rugelach,” Mark said.

“Nothing better than rugelach. Your grandma’s recipe. I bring some to the school for the awards, so everyone can taste them.”

Mark leaned forward and clasped his hands in his lap. “No one else will bring cookies. Please Mama, don’t bring rugelach. The kids won’t like them.”

“I suppose they like Lorna Doones, like you do.”

“Yes, they like modern things, American things.”

“We’ll see. You may be student of the year, but you don’t know everything in this world.”

“I’m going to sleep, Mama.” Mark stood and shuffled toward the bedroom. “Tell Papa good night for me when he comes home from the store.”

“Don’t wake Gussie and Aaron.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t forget to pray the *she’ma*. Like I taught you.”

“I won’t forget.” He hadn’t said the *she’ma* in years.

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“*Shlaffen guzent*. I am proud of you, so proud.” She stood to give him a hug and Mark embraced her. He remembered that embrace. He was glad for it. As he turned to go into the bedroom, he saw his mother sitting under a circle of light from the table lamp. Her eyes on her work, she wrapped dark gray strands of yarn around her fingers to form one perfect stitch after another.

On the evening of the awards ceremony, Mark stood with his family outside the auditorium, waiting for the doors to open. They were the first to arrive.

“We didn’t have to get here this early,” he said. He shifted his weight from one leg to another. His father Jacob had bought him new trousers.

“We want to be in time,” Liba said, smiling. “We don’t care if we wait.” Clad in a new dark blue dress, its long sleeves loose around her wrists, she carried a gold-rimmed china platter full of neatly stacked rugelach.

The twins, five years old and dressed in their Shabbos clothes, chased one other, ducking behind hedges and scampering through flowerbeds.

“Gussie! Aaron! Come over here. No running at Malachi’s school,” Jacob said. Jacob, always concerned with appearances, taught good manners to his children at every opportunity. The twins straggled toward him, and he took their little hands in his big ones. A few birds twittered in the elm trees. The wind picked up while Mark stood, wishing the ceremony were over, wishing his mother had not brought rugelach.

When the doors at last opened, Mark led his family inside and showed them seats near the back.

“We want to sit in front, to see better,” Liba said. “Can we sit in front?”

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“No, Mama,” Mark said, desperate to keep them hidden.

“Why not?” Liba asked.

“We see from here, Liba,” Jacob said. He perched on a wooden seat and pointed to the high ceiling. “Beautiful,” he said, as Gussie scrambled up on his lap and Aaron sat beside him.

“I want to be in front,” Liba said, still standing. An undercurrent of voices rose and fell as students and their families filed in.

Miss Woodward, Mark’s teacher, tall, thin, and blonde, walked toward them. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Godowsky. You have such a fine son, an excellent student,” she said.

“Thank you, Miss Woodward,” Jacob said.

“And you’ve brought cookies?” asked Miss Woodward, her lips bright red.

“Rugelach,” said Liba.

“Ru-ge-lach? Is that how you say it? Rugelach? How nice. I’ll put them on the table in the foyer, for afterwards. They look delicious.” She took the platter from Liba and, walking against the crowd, disappeared out the swinging doors. Mark’s face reddened as he contemplated his mother’s rugelach where everyone could see it.

““They will love the rugelach,” Liba said. “Better than Lorna Doones.” She paused and surveyed the room, which was filling quickly. “Can we sit in front? Other people sit in front.”

“No, Mama,” Mark said, “There aren’t enough seats in front. Not any more.” He couldn’t bear to lead them down the aisle. All the kids would notice his mother’s

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shapeless dress and his father's second-hand clothing. "I'm sorry, but I need to go now, and don't forget to call me Mark. I'm Mark at school, not Malachi."

"Here Liba, sit here, next to me," Jacob said, and Liba lowered herself to the seat, put her pocketbook in her lap, and with pursed lips, settled in.

Mark left them. He hurried to the front of the auditorium and walked through a side door, which led to a hallway. His stomach churning and his arms pumping, he navigated a ramp to the foyer. His mother's rugelach lay on the snack table, in the midst of Lorna Doones and other store-bought goodies. Mark glanced over his shoulders and seeing no one in the room, he grabbed two handfuls of the offending pastries and looked for a trashcan. He searched the corners of the room, peered under the table, walked outside. There was no trashcan in sight. How could this be? What could he do? He dropped the rugelach behind a hedge outside. Back and forth he went, grabbing rugelach from the platter, rushing outside and leaving the rugelach behind the hedge. He clutched the last batch when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hi Mark," Ricky said as he entered the room. Mark jerked around, his hands behind the table.

"Are you ready for your big night?" asked Ricky's mother, Natalie.

Mark sucked in his breath and his legs stiffened rendering him immobile. He stuffed the rugelach in his pockets.

"Yes, I suppose I'm ready," he said as he rushed to join his fellow award winners. At first, the pastries held together, but as he sat in his chair onstage, he felt them crumble in his pockets.

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The ceremony was short. The president of the school board welcomed everyone, the school orchestra played “My Country Tis of Thee” and “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” and then, one at a time, the winners from each grade stepped forward. Mr. Weber said a few words about each one. “Mark Godowsky from the fourth grade is especially good at math. In his spare time, he likes to play baseball. We are so proud of you, Mark,” he said and presented Mark with a plaque and a dictionary. Everyone clapped, while Mark, his pockets unnaturally large, avoided looking at his parents.

But he couldn’t avoid them after the ceremony. They stood at the snack table, smiling and helping themselves to punch and cookies. They waved when they saw him.

“Look, Malachi, the rugelach is gone. I told you they love it.” Liba pointed to her empty china platter before ladling some punch into a glass cup and handing it to Aaron.

“Be careful, *boychik*. Don’t spill,” she said.

“This punch is wonderful. Cherry red,” Jacob said.

“Not so wonderful on your shirt. *Oy*, Jacob, you make a mess.” Liba took a handkerchief from her pocketbook and wiped his collar.

“Just a *bisl*,” said Jacob.

“Such a ceremony. Let me see your plaque, Malachi,” Liba said.

“Mark.” He handed it to her.

She read it silently, fingering each word. “I burst with pride,” she said. She showed it to Gussie and Aaron, who seemed more interested in the punch and cookies. “I hang it on a wall so everyone can see.”

“Can we go home, now?” Mark asked.

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“I’ll finish my punch first,” said Jacob. “Your mother looks beautiful in her new dress, no?”

“I want to go home,” said Mark.

Ricky and his parents approached Mark and his family.

“Congratulations,” said Ricky’s father, Leon, extending his hand to Jacob. Leon wore a crisp suit and dark tie. His shirt sparkled white.

“Thank you,” said Jacob. His big hand, with uneven fingernails, protruded from the slightly ragged cuff of his best shirt.

“We think the world of your son, Mrs. Godowsky,” said Natalie. She cocked her head, but her dark hair, which lay in perfect curls at her shoulders, did not move. “Would you like a cookie?”

“I eat plenty. But why not more?” Liba took three and gobbled them down.

“These Lorna Doones are good, but not like rugelach.”

“Rugelach?” Natalie arched her thin eyebrows.

“Yes, you try some? On the platter there, but they all gone now.” She smiled.

“Homemade.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance.”

“I bring you some. You like raisins, chocolate, or apricots? Maybe all three? I bring you all three.”

“Thank you. I’ll look forward to it,” said Natalie and she and Leon turned to speak to some of the other parents.

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Mark cringed. He imagined his mother with her knit cap and loose dress, knocking on Ricky's door with a platter full of rugelach. "Mama, let's go home now," he said.

"We meet Mr. Weber," Liba said. "Malachi, you introduce us."

"Call me Mark."

"Introduce us, Mark," Jacob said, eyeing Liba. He set his punch glass on the table and put his arm around Mark, who squirmed away.

"Did you have to wear your *tzit-tzit*, Papa?" he asked, motioning toward the white fringes that hung from Jacob's waist. "Couldn't you have left them at home, just once? Or at least tuck them in, so no one can see them And Mama, can't you take off your *sheitel*?"

"God commands and we obey," Jacob said.

"You don't even know the words to 'My Country Tis of Thee.'" Mark clenched his fists.

"Yes I do," said Liba. "I learn in night school. But what is a 'tis of thee? What is a pilgrim's pride? If you so smart, you tell me that."

"I'm going over to talk to Ricky." Mark strode toward his friend. He saw a trashcan in the center of the room. How he had missed it before? The janitor must have brought it in after the ceremony. He walked to the trashcan, not caring whether his mother's eyes followed him. He put his hands in his pockets, and a handful at a time, dropped the crumbs of rugelach into the bin.

Later that night, Mark tromped home with his family. Gussie carried his trophy and his dictionary, and Aaron held his hand. Liba and Jacob followed behind. Had his

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mother seen him get rid of the rugelach? He didn't know. In the years following, as he graduated from college, married, and fathered three children, she never mentioned it. And Mark was too ashamed to ask.

Now, he pulled up to his mother's Los Angeles home. She had followed him to the west coast after Jacob's death ten years earlier, and nearly every day, Mark took time off from his dental practice to have lunch with her. He offered to bring in sandwiches but she insisted on fixing a homemade meal. Sitting in the car, he listened to the end of "You Light Up My Life" before he turned off the engine and set the brake. As he walked between purple and red petunias that lined the flagstone pathway to his mother's front door, he wondered what delicious food she'd prepared for him.