

## MY DAD'S SHOES

*Alice Sheba*

I'm thinking of my Dad's shoes. Only he isn't wearing them because he died. I returned to his one bedroom apartment where he had lived with my mother in Washington Heights, in upper Manhattan, for twenty five years. My mother pre-deceased him by five years, and he adapted to taking care of his domestic chores better than I had anticipated. He actually enjoyed marketing and preparing his meals, and we swapped recipes as well as food bargains. My dad's independence was gratifying to us both.

My dad's nephew, Al, had invited him to his home in New Jersey on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. At noon Al phoned me. I could sense that something was wrong. He finally said, "I have some bad news. I came to the apartment to get your dad. I rang the doorbell for twenty minutes. I asked the super to help and he unlocked the door. I found Uncle Ben at the dining table, his arms crossed and his head down. He must have been taking a nap, but he didn't wake up."

After the necessary arrangements were made for the funeral it hit me, I'm an orphan. I always thought of orphans as young homeless children, not middle aged people with grown children. By saying "I'm an orphan," I felt like crying and laughing simultaneously. I was unprepared for the same experience when I had to dismantle dad's apartment.

I tried to think of who would appreciate and need the furniture, and I decided that new Russian immigrants would be not only appropriate but would have been consistent with my dad's wishes. I contacted my father's synagogue and they placed a notice on their bulletin board.

At the appointed day and time that I was at the apartment, two husky Russian women wearing babushkas covering their hair appeared. They eyed the booty and both women zeroed in on the dining table where my father died. Each grabbed an end of the table and started a tug of war, and wouldn't let go. I thought about King Solomon and the two women fighting over the one baby that each claimed was her own. The dining table had a division for leaves that would extend its size, and I half thought if I had an axe I could resolve the problem by threatening to split the table in half. Instead, I lured one of the women into the bedroom and offered her a chest of drawers and beds.

After the bedroom had been cleared with the help of more Russian immigrants, I was left in the empty room with dust balls and stray pages of unread newspapers on the floor. Under the papers were my dad's black, freshly polished shoes, pointing in different directions as if they couldn't decide if they were coming or going. I remembered the great care he took with all his shoes. First he cleaned them with saddle soap and a clean, damp rag. Then he would squeeze a tube of Meltonian neutral cream on to a dry rag to preserve the leather, and finally he would open the lid of the black or brown paste wax and apply it with a third cloth. And finally, he would brush the shoes with a wooden handled bristle brush.

It was the sight of my dad's shoes not knowing which way to go that started my tears flowing. I picked them up, caressed them, and had a hard time putting them in a box together with his clothes for the thrift shop.

Goodbyes are never easy, but after this ordeal, I felt relieved. What remain are remembrances of dad's compassion, love and charity. His unfilled shoes pointing in different directions so poignantly showed me the way.