

Short Memoir & Narrative Nonfiction
Samples

Jackie Goldman

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A Selection of short memoir pieces from my blog, highlighting emotional range, humor, and narrative precision. Each story explores memory, family, and connection, showcasing the craft, structure, and empathy that define my narrative nonfiction work.

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Blog Samples

Overheard at Ernie's Restaurant

In the 1990s on Manhattan's Upper West Side, few eateries attracted more customers for weekend brunch than Ernie's Restaurant. Upwards of three-hundred patrons crowded into its red-vinylled, Formica interior, talking loudly and animatedly about their jobs, promotions, and the latest clubs and concerts. Sitting at the table next to my boyfriend and I were two snowy-haired women who, I surmised, had followed their guidebook's ageist recommendation, and now found themselves gazing about at the chaotic scene in bewilderment, probably wishing they were anywhere else.

A waitress approached their table, young and smiling indulgently, as she plucked her notepad out of her black-pocketed apron and slid a pencil out from behind her ear.

"Do you ladies know what you want?"

The woman sitting adjacent to me drew her finger down the oversized, laminated menu and asked a few questions before placing her order. The waitress then turned to her friend and proffered the same helpful, indulgent smile, which immediately morphed into a look of concern when she saw the other woman's slack-faced, goggle-eyed expression. I found myself staring at her as well,

wondering if she might have had a minor stroke or at the very least be experiencing an ominous senior moment.

She quickly recovered herself, however, and shook her head, guffawing at her foolishness and straightening the napkin on her lap.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “It’s just that you remind me of someone I used to know when I was a girl. But it was years ago, in Poland before the war, and I was told she died.”

The waitress squinted at her with interest. Unexpectedly she asked, “What was her name?”

The woman told her, and the waitress said, “That was my grandmother.”

Overhearing this conversation, I felt the heat rush to my face and my eyes mist over, making everything blurry. Through this emotional haze, I heard the waitress explain that her grandmother had survived the war but had passed away recently, here in New York. A few more sentences were exchanged to verify that they were, indeed, speaking of the same woman, and then, it seemed, there was nothing left to say.

After a pause, the waitress said, “I’ll be right out with your coffees.”

Then she turned and walked away, and I sensed the cloud of incredulity and wonder that misted after her; that inner conversation between logic and spiritual knowing about the nature of the world and what links and pulls us together across time and continents.

Death by Meatloaf

I have no idea how my grandparents got on. He had a raucous sense of humor, but I can honestly say I don't have a single memory of my grandmother laughing, most certainly not at herself. On the contrary, my grandfather's attempts to tease her about her less than gourmet cooking skills were always met with tight-lipped admonishment. And so, the following memory stands out as both poignant and symbolic, and one that I have repeated to my children on more than one occasion, to their delight and amusement.

My grandfather was a pharmacist, and he and my grandmother owned a drugstore in Vancouver, Canada. In those days, drugstores were destination hangouts. Kids sat on freezer chests with sliding glass tops, eating popsicles and ice-creams while reading comic books. ("They'd pay for one, and at the end of the day, I'd find a half-dozen wrappers on the floor," my grandfather recounted, laughing.) He had his own recipe for face cream that all the women swore by, and my mother has fond memories of making it in the kitchen, using an electric mixing bowl and the blender to form the concoction, before spooning it into attractive jars for shelving.

It was also a place where, after work, husbands would stop by for a soda and conversation with my grandfather over the lunch counter before heading home to their wives and families. Since my grandfather worked late, my grandmother dropped off dinner before feeding my mother and uncle at home.

One night, a doctor from the community stopped by, and, after peeling off his

coat and sliding onto one of the stools, he sniffed the air appreciatively. “Is that meatloaf? It smells delicious.”

My grandfather shook his head sadly.

“Don’t eat that,” he said. “It’ll kill ’ya.”

The single doctor confirmed that my grandfather did not want the aromatic loaf before accepting it to take home for his dinner.

At this point in the telling, my grandfather could barely choke out the following line, as his glasses steamed up with tears, and he was laughing so hard his false front teeth slipped down.

His voice strangled with laughter, he finally managed to squeak out the punchline.

“The
next day, they found him dead in his office.”

No matter how many times I heard that story, it always made me laugh. Adding to the giggle-fest was my grandmother’s inevitable reply before stalking out of the room: “Dave, your teeth!”

Sports Day

My sister and I were the poor kids in an affluent community in Vancouver, Canada. My mother suffered from a compulsive cooking and baking disorder and so my grandmother often took care of us and picked us up from school most days.

One spring, the school decided they were going to have sports day at a local park. The teachers sent us home with permission slips and instructions for the parents to pick us up from the park after lunch, instead of from school.

I was terrible at sports, but I remember that day scoring a home run in kickball, even after the other kids taunted me, sure that I would send the red rubber sphere skidding somewhere south-east of home base. I also remember after lunch, our formidable math teacher, Mr. Rivers, asked to speak to me privately. I was shaking like a leaf, sure I was about to get in trouble. But all he said was, “I just want to tell you that I served hot dogs to this entire school, and the only ones to say thank-you were you and your sister.”

You never forget that stuff.

At the end of the big day, we stood on the sidewalk with the other kids as, one after another, they were picked up by mothers in shiny Mercedes with equally shiny, feathered hair and big, lipstick smiles. This was the seventies and there were no teachers with clipboards taking head counts. By the time we realized we were the only ones left, there wasn't an adult in sight.

We drifted back to the park just as a breeze picked up, rustling the grass and some colored paper in front of us.

“Money!” My sister exclaimed.

We ran after it and picked up the dollar bill. Then we spotted another and another. Shrieking, we chased after them until I think we had between five and eight dollars. That’s when my sister said we should stop “so some other poor kids can find it,” she said.

I’ll always remember the taste of the sweet, delicious, pink bubble gum ice-cream cone I bought with that money, slurping happily as we strolled back to school. There, my grandmother sat waiting for us in her green Valiant, her hair in curlers, a Matinee cigarette stuck to her bottom lip, as she carefully tore coupons from a supermarket flyer.

She looked up when she saw us and reached behind her to pull up the button. “Okay kids, hop in. There’s a sale on cantaloupe at the IGA.”