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After Uncle Charles died, a deep chasm opened up in the family that threatened to swallow us whole. My mother, whose resolute cheerfulness had sustained us like a weight-bearing wall, was now oddly preoccupied, even glum. And my father, whose thirst for lively conversation once seemed insatiable, had become withdrawn, impatient, and short-tempered. But it was Aunt Bella who changed the most—to the point that I barely recognized her anymore. Bella had always been slightly moody and prone to emotional flare-ups. But when her husband Charles died, she retreated into a world of her own. As if she had entered a room with no exit.

Uncle Charles was only thirty-nine when he died. But as long as I can remember, I thought of him as old. Perhaps it was the way he pulled back his shoulders too far like he was standing at attention. Or maybe it was his European attire—polished onyx cufflinks, embroidered handkerchiefs, and cravats bound so tightly around his neck that they made his head look as though it were detached from his body. His death occurred in the middle of the summer, while my sisters and I were away at overnight camp in Quebec: I was

working as a counsellor and they were there as campers. My parents didn't mention Charles' death in any of their letters to us. Perhaps they thought it would spoil our summer. Yet how could they not tell us? After all, Charles and Bella lived next door and were almost like second parents to me and my two younger sisters, Julia and Jan. I was particularly steamed about it. At seventeen, I was the oldest child in the family and surely should have been told.

When we returned to Toronto in late August, Father gathered us together around the dining room table that evening to make the announcement. Uncle Charles, he said, had suffered a massive heart attack and died shortly thereafter. It had been too late to save him. There was nothing anyone could have done.

Aunt Bella, who was visiting at the time, suddenly cut in. "It's all my fault," she cried as she paced around the room, weeping into her sleeve. Though Bella was my father's sister, it was Mother who rushed to console her.

"Don't be foolish, Bella. You can't blame yourself. You know that Charles had been ill for some time."

"You don't understand. It's still my doing."

"Bella. That's enough. There are children here. Let's leave this for another time." My jaw tightened. Why was Mother scolding Bella? Couldn't she see that she was still in shock? Bella was only thirty-eight, far too young to be a widow. I rushed to my aunt's side and put my arm around her hunched shoulders, rubbing my cheek against her damp brown hair. If Mother refused to comfort her, then I would.

Besides, I was still incensed that by not telling me about Charles' death until the end of the summer, my parents had excluded me from both the funeral and the *shiva*. Didn't anyone realize that losing Uncle Charles was a blow to me as well?

After her sobbing subsided, I helped Bella gather her belongings and escorted her next door. I offered to come in, but she murmured something about being able to take care of herself. Closing

the wood-framed screen door, I crossed the lawn and returned to our house, which was almost a carbon copy of Bella's: a mock-Tudor built of russet-brown bricks with a steep dormer roof and a lone red maple set onto a narrow plot of patchy grass. Since it was a mild night, I sat down on the porch step and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my pocket. My parents disapproved of my smoking so I knew not to go inside. I didn't care. I was in no mood to talk to them anyway. I lit up and exhaled into the cool night air. The combination of the tobacco and the late August breeze helped soothe my blazing head.

I couldn't believe that Uncle Charles was gone. He was still so vivid in my mind. As I recalled his bashful smile hidden beneath his finely groomed moustache, a rush of tears began streaming down my cheeks. Most people didn't realize how gentle he had been. I knew him in a way that was different from how others saw him. Like the way he persisted in calling me Zsu-Zsu, a childhood nickname that everyone else had dropped in favour of Suzy. And the way he liked to quiz me on what I'd learned in Hebrew school when I was younger, playfully trying to trick me by mispronouncing the words. I also remembered how he brought home gifts for my sisters and me after being away on business trips—paper-dolls, bat-a-ball sets, and later, coloured pencils and mystery novels. He never made a show of his gift-giving. He waved away our thanks as if it offended him to hear them. But you could see by the tiny glint in his cloud-grey eyes that it gave him pleasure. Since he and Bella were never able to have kids of their own, all their affection was poured onto us. And I secretly knew that, being the oldest, I was their favourite.

I spent a lot of time at their home when I was younger. During my visits, Bella did most of the talking. In her throaty voice that still bore traces of European diction, she regaled us with story after story, popping open new ones like bottles of champagne. She often recounted tales of her childhood in Budapest, where she and my

father had spent their earliest years, before escaping with their parents to Canada in early '44, just as the Nazis were about to invade.

Unlike Bella, however, Uncle Charles never spoke about his European childhood. Except for once. I was twelve years old, standing in the kitchen pouring a glass of milk, my unruly hair pulled off my forehead by a thick plastic hairband. I was humming a tune I'd heard on the radio when Uncle Charles walked in, then stopped abruptly.

"Manya," he said, his voice choked.

"Who?" I asked.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Uncle Charles shook his head rapidly. "Nothing. It's nothing—Just someone I used to know—when I was a child." His lips tightened and his eyes turned to stone; I knew not to ask anything further. Years earlier, I once heard Mother mention that Charles had arrived in Canada just after the war with no family, no money, and no belongings. It didn't make sense to me then. But at age twelve, I glimpsed it briefly in the hollows of his eyes: he was a man whose past had died, along with everyone else who'd been part of it.

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All of a sudden, a voice bellowed, "Suzy, what's that smell out there? Is that smoke?" It was Father, hovering on the inside of the screen door like a shadow.

"It's nothing," I said, wiping my wet cheeks with the back of my wrist. I flung my cigarette on the ground. Who cared? I had just lit a third one and the nicotine tasted putrid anyhow.

"Why are you sitting alone in the dark?" Father asked.

"Can't I have any privacy? Why does everyone treat me like a child?"

Hearing my father's footsteps recede, I pulled another cigarette from the pack. But before I could flick the match to light it, the sudden shriek of an ambulance siren made me jump up and drop the

pack on the ground. The sound grew so loud that I ran to the side of the road to see if it was coming this way. To my surprise, it was speeding down my street—sirens howling, lights flashing—and screeched to a stop directly in front of Bella’s house. Two medics jumped out and dashed toward Bella’s front door.

No. Dear God. Don’t let this happen. I can’t lose Bella too.