

Shul in the Woods

by Gloria Lazar

Four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, my friend Michelle waits in the doorway as I negotiate with the hospital social worker about my mother's care and my status as her health care agent. As the only child of my remaining parent, who else would make these decisions? Yet the woman drones on about technicalities in the health care proxy, use of life-sustaining medications, and end-of-life directives. "Damned social workers," I remark bitterly, completely forgetting Michelle's professional work as school social worker and her M.S.W. degree in counseling. She gives me a strained smile and reminds me that my two sons and hers are already sitting in her car. By this time we should have been on the highway to beat the traffic so we could arrive at the synagogue retreat before the evening meal and service. I consider this retreat strictly a chore, an obligation to fulfill for my older son's B'Yahad program in Hebrew School.

How many apologies does one offer, how many reasons for a temper taut as a highwire? My father's death six months ago, my mother's rapid decline and nursing home admission, now hospitalization, my back injury and sciatic pain pulsing down the length of my leg? No sign reveals my history, years of helping elderly parents in failing health while raising two young sons. No badge identifies me a woman on the verge of mental disintegration. I am a loaded gun and I know it. *God, keep my finger off the trigger*, I think.

Rush hour on a Friday evening during foliage season, I-95 at a near standstill, Michelle's cell phone rings. Driving from Manhattan, our husbands have found an open route to the little town in Connecticut and announce they're only a half hour away from the Shabbat retreat. Now we we're told we've taken the long way. My spine tenses with annoyance, a Slinky ready to spring, but I keep my mouth shut. The boys play with their electronic gadgets

and laugh in the backseat, only asking, "How long until we're there?" at half hour intervals. Sweet boys, they know when to keep themselves occupied.

The last to arrive, we rush to the cabins assigned to us, wash our hands and put on warm sweaters and jackets. A cool mist descends on the trees and dirt paths leading to the dining hall. The group chants a few blessings and the meal is served: traditional roast chicken, kasha, vegetables, challahs shiny with egg glaze. Almost too tired to eat, I chew mechanically. After a few swallows I realize I'm eating fresh food, prepared with care, not the greasy chicken and dry potatoes I had expected.

After dinner we troop down another path to a glass-enclosed sanctuary, more sukkah than synagogue, circular seating with a simple wooden bimah and ark. My breathing takes on the rhythm of the melodies, the phrasing of the songs; the tension in my back subsides. My voice travels up the scale, floating on the legato of the high notes. I watch my husband, Ron, sink into his chair, the stress of the week receding visibly from his neck and shoulders, and I study the profiles of my sons, one dark, the other fair, the same outlines of cheek and cleft chin. If I were wearing a tallit, I would wrap it around us to bless this moment.

That night I sleep peacefully, dreamless for the first time in months, free from mourning one dead parent and worrying about the precarious state of another. At breakfast the next morning, fresh fruit, warm breads, French toast, I find my appetite. We gather for Shabbat services in the sanctuary, all of us reading sections aloud, stumbling together, chanting and singing. After lunch the adults study Torah and the children create spice boxes for Havdalah. The afternoon culminates in a family project to create a time capsule. Huddling together, the four of us put our wishes and predictions into a sealed capsule to be opened after the millennium. My sons will be firmly on their way to manhood. Where will Ron and I be, each of us hovering near the half century mark?

The day passes in the company of our friends, amid the towering pine trees, the silence of falling leaves more peaceful to me than any melody, more eloquent than any words. Although my mother's life might be ebbing as the season changes, I can do nothing more for her. I pray. I admire the vibrant carpet of leaves under the trees, the simple order of nature.

Standing in the woods as the light wanes, we chant Havdalah. I shiver from an abrupt change in temperature and wrap my arms around myself. My eyes focus on the first star, visible in the clear sky away from the city and the lights of suburbia. We chant the final blessing, "Sha-vu-a-tov, a gu-te voh." A good week, a week of peace. As we lose the daylight a trickle of hope runs through me, enough strength to face the week ahead.