

WHO WILL TAKE MAMA?

Esther Rosenberg

I was once young and proud. I had a husband who loved me. There was honesty and devotion between us. Our life together was as bright as a golden sunrise that lights up the sky with the most beautiful colours and gives you hope that the new-born day will make your fondest wishes come true. But all this beauty is a thing of the past now.

I am a widow of many years. It seemed when my husband passed away he took my heart with him and left me empty, floating in the air. I can't find anything to help me stand firmly on my two feet again.

My husband Don and I raised a family of eight fine children, three daughters and five sons. We had our ups and downs during our lifetime. It was not easy to feed and clothe eight children during the Depression times. Don used to work late into the night to make a few dollars more. Even then, it was impossible to make ends meet. I never knew how to saw a piece of wood, but I found out that necessity is the best teacher. No one could afford to buy new clothes. I started to alter all our things plus earn some money by taking in sewing from the neighbourhood. The extra few dollars I made helped us keep our heads above water and survive a most critical time in our lives.

After a few very hard years our country started to pick up and things were getting better for everybody, including us. Don was a college man with a masters degree, and he got a very good position with a good firm. He loved the work. It was in the field he had studied for so many years. He had just graduated in 1929 when the crash occurred. Naturally, his diploma meant nothing. He took whatever work he was able to get in order to support his family the best way he could.

We married while Don was still in school. His family was very angry, but he didn't listen to them. We were married in 1921, a small but happy wedding. I didn't have much of a family, no parents. I lost them when I was very young. I had a few cousins and friends. Don's family didn't come, but a lot of his

school friends came. The crowd was small but the celebration was great.

Monika was born in 1922 and the next year came twin boys. What happiness every child brought us, for we both loved children. After another year came Ruthie and Sandy, twin girls. It was not too easy with the twins, but I was young and strong and was never discouraged by hard work. Don and I always wanted a large family. Since I was an only child, I promised myself when I married that I was going to have at least ten children, and Don agreed. After the twins, Ruthie and Sandy, I had my three boys, one each year. By 1929 my family was complete. I remember each child brought his own special joy with him.

Don worked in school and the money that he made went to our support, but it was not enough. One of my cousins who was quite well off offered us some money. We said we would take the money only on the condition that when Don was able we would make good on the loan and pay it all back. This was the only way we would accept the money. My dear cousin agreed and we took the money from her. It helped us live until Don got his chance with this great firm. They liked him very much.

Don was a hard worker and had a pleasant attitude toward all his fellow workers. After a while we were able to buy a big house; with eight youngsters we really needed it, and with Don doing so well we could afford it. The very first thing we did was to pay back the money we had borrowed from our cousin. We will remember the help she gave us when we were in dire need.

One late afternoon, I got a phone call from Don's office telling me that Don had suffered a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. The blood in my veins turned into ice. I jotted down the address and name of the hospital, jumped into my car, and drove like a maniac, with my heart pounding in my breast like a time bomb, to the hospital. When I finally got there, I was ushered by a very sympathetic nurse in to see Don. He was under an oxygen tent and I could see that

his face looked as white as death. I called his name. His eyelids fluttered for a moment and he opened his eyes and looked straight at my tear-stained face. I think he knew he was dying, and I saw great concern and worry in his sad eyes. He seemed to be saying to me, "Mama, what will happen to you? Where will you be?" After a while he closed his eyes and never opened them again. The doctors shook their heads and told me they had tried their best, but he did not respond. Suddenly I just keeled over. I felt an enormous pain grip my stomach. It was like a flaming torch that consumed me.

The next thing I felt was the sharp jab of a needle in my arm. I opened my eyes and saw all my children and grandchildren trying very hard to comfort me.

There are no words that can describe the anguish I went through when I saw my loved one put into a grave. Mounds of dark earth were being shoved on him. I cried out, "Stop! That's enough! How will he be able to breathe? Do you want to suffocate him?" Later, I realized I must have been out of my mind to think like that.

Don was dead. He felt nothing any more. No one can ever hurt him, but I knew that there would come a time in my life when I would be hurt. Without my beloved husband to take care of me, my life meant nothing to me for a long time. I was left alone in my big house. I wandered from room to room with a great pain in my heart, picking up the pictures that we had taken during our lifetime. There was one that was very special to me. It was from a trip we took with our children to Canada. One of the boys snapped it. Don was smiling. He held me like he would never let go of me. I yelled to the picture, "Why did you let go of me? Why didn't you take me with you? I belong with you after so many years of being together. How will I live without you? Everywhere I look, I see you. You come to me every night and with the dawn you fade away."

My children urged me to sell the house. It was too big a place for me to live in alone. I was not young any more, and it was a burden physically and financially. I agreed to sell and had in mind to get something smaller for myself, but the girls wouldn't hear of me living alone. Monika, my first-born, said she wanted me to live with her. Ruthie and Sandy wanted me too, but I chose Monika. The people who bought the house liked the way it was decorated and furnished. They asked if they could buy it with the furniture. We all agreed it was a good idea. I took a few personal things and left my happy home. My heart was broken once again when I walked out of my home for the last time. I got a lot of money for the house and furniture but nothing could compensate for the beautiful memories I left behind there.

I went and divided all my assets amongst all my children equally, not realizing that in one thoughtless deed I gave away my independence. At the time, I was not very old. I was able to care for myself and even helped Monika too. I know Monika loved me, at

least I want to believe she did. Her husband Peter is an entirely different story. He seldom spoke to me. He treated me like an old object in the house that he would like to get rid of but had to tolerate because his wife still wanted it. Monika started to complain that every Sunday when the children would come to see me she was busy all day cooking and serving.

I was in the den watching television, the only entertainment I had. All the children were in the dining room thinking I was asleep. I heard Peter say, "Why don't some of you take her? You all got the same amount of money. Why is it only Monika and I?" I heard Ruthie and Sandy say, "We would love Mama to come to us but George (Ruthie's husband) and James (Sandy's husband) don't agree and we can't go against their will." The boys were quiet. They didn't say a word. They let their wives talk. I heard a heated argument go on for a long time between them.

My heart was heavy with pain. I thought to myself, no one wants me now. How sweet they all were when I handed out the money. I was so upset that I really fell asleep and hoped never to wake up.

I started dreaming. I saw Don coming toward me. I ran into his arms and he kissed away my tears. It was a beautiful spot. Giant trees covered the whole area. We walked hand in hand like we always did. There were little clouds hanging so low that we could almost touch them with our hands. We talked about many things, of the love we had for each other and of the love and happiness our children had brought us during the years. As we talked about our children my whole life passed before my eyes. I was once more the young mother caring and loving my children more than my own life. I recalled the first step each one of them took, and every word they spoke was to me a glittering pearl added to the golden string of my eight angels. That's what Don and I called them, "our angels." I saw them all grow up into fine men and women. We recalled the happy times we had at their graduations, the joy when they found nice positions, and the weddings, one after the other. Don and I helped them with down payments on their homes, and if any of them were ever in debt it was Don and I who helped them out. The assistance never came from their spouses' side of the family. After all those long years they never forgave Don. They carried their grudge to their graves.

We still walked on. We saw birds feeding their young. While Don was near me the whole world seemed at peace. Suddenly an evil wind started to blow. Don held me and we clung to each other. We saw a tiny bird fall from a nest. We heard the mother cry out. She came down, picked up her precious baby bird with her beak, and took it back to the nest to nurse it back to health again. Don said to me, "Mona dear, doesn't this bring back memories of when one of our little ones was sick and how we sat up nights and did everything in our power to nurse him or her, as the case might have been, back to health again? The same as this mother bird is doing now."

I started to wake up. I became very angry. Why did G-d show me paradise and then toss me back to hell-on-earth once more? The house was still as death. Nothing moved. I put on the light. The blow felt good. I found a note that said "Goodbye, Mom. You were fast asleep and we didn't want to wake up. See you next Sunday."

Being left alone was nothing new to me. Since I lost Don, I was always alone. I never got to go anywhere. When the weather was nice I would sit outside, and if it was cold I was near the television. That was my life from day to day. I would think that amongst eight children there would be at least one who would say, "Mom, would you like to come for a ride with us? The weather is beautiful and we know how you love nature and what the changing of the seasons means to you. We still remember when you and Dad took us all to the country to see the trees change their dress from green to all shades of yellow and gold and from crimson to deep red." What a heavenly sight it always was to Don and me.

As you grow old, each day means so much more because you don't know what the next day will bring. Even if you are old, your heart and mind are still young and you long to get away to some place for a few hours to be lifted out of that constant rut. There is nothing for me to do but hope some miracle will happen and I will inherit a large sum of money. Then all at once I will have eight homes to choose from. I am sure they will all want me, even my five daughters-in-law who, in the argument over who will take Mama, screamed the loudest. Now, as I sat, so many thoughts keep crowding my mind. There was one in particular that persisted to repeat itself over and over again.

Who will take Mama?
Who will it be?
All of us love her
I'm sure you'll agree.

And here Monika chimed in,

I'll call a meeting
I'll gather the clan
I want this thing settled
as soon as I can
Amongst eight children
there should be at least one.
Why must it always be a daughter?
Why can't it sometimes be a son?
What will happen when she will
get older and become a care?
I know we must find her a home
But the question is where.
Wonderful Mama, we love her so
Isn't it dreadful she has no
place to go.
Who will warm her with love
now that she is old?
I hope someone will take her
out of the cold.

Bitter tears started to flow down my cheeks. I just couldn't stop. All the misery that was pent up in me gave way like a broken dam.

After I had my cry I was somewhat relieved. I thought I should have something to eat. There was plenty of food in the fridge but my mind was not on eating. I kept on wondering what they had decided to do with me.

You might think that I hated them for treating me like this, but I couldn't. They are my children and I loved every one of them, from the oldest to the youngest. It was just my misfortune that Don went so quickly and left me alone.

My thoughts took me back to a warm summer evening. We told the children to climb into the van and we drove away into the sunset. Soon we saw the sky turn dark, and after a while millions of golden stars appeared and lit up the sky with glitter like it was studded with a myriad of diamonds; the golden face of a full moon smiled down at us. Those were the things that Don and I loved so much, and this is what I miss in my dreary life.

I tried very hard to keep what I had overheard to myself. I didn't want Monika to know that I was not asleep and that I heard what went on. I knew I would be treading on thin ice if I had asked about the outcome of the argument.

I am constantly worried about what they have decided to do with me. I pray to G-d that they won't send me to one of those homes, for I have seen those places and what goes on there. I can tell you, it's just like a living death sentence. That's what can happen to you if you are left alone and without money. There is nothing left for me, only the hope that a miracle will happen and bring a little happiness into my dreary life.

Meanwhile, Monika said nothing to me. She treats me the same as she did for all the years that I stayed with her. All I can say is I hope she had a change of heart. Then I thought, after all is said and done, your children will think it over. They will recall the love you gave them and how they were always free to come to you for advice and protection and their hearts will become softer, their feelings of love for you will be rekindled, and I know that "blood is thicker than water." I never want to lose the hope that one of these days my "ship will come in," and the miracle that gave me hope for so long will occur someday, somehow.

Esther Rosenberg, a 75 year old who has just written a book "on her whole life," lives in Dix Hills, N. Y. Her book concerns her experiences as a child in war-torn Europe and her steerage journey to the new land of America. She has also written numerous short stories.