Graduation Day

BY JEANNETTE URBAS

Ce texte raconte les tensions présentes entre une fille de la deuxième génération et sa mère immigrante.

Everyone hoped the weather would be fine for graduation. In May of 1939 the 128 girls graduating from Royal Victoria College with a Bachelor's Degree in Arts and Sciences would receive their diplomas indoors but there was to be a reception on the lawn afterwards, weather permitting. A blue and white tent had been set up on the campus in case of rain but how much more exciting to sit on folding-chairs outdoors, the sun shining on gowns and hoods achieved after years of concentration and study!

The weather was the least of my problems. I was graduating with high honours in English and French Literature and could have won a scholarship to graduate school but I didn't even try. I couldn't stand in front of my mother for a second time, asking for permission to go on studying, though all my professors agreed that was what I ought to do. Would she have answered again, as she did after I won my scholarship in Baron Byng High School: "Do what you think is best"? Or would she have put her foot down, insisting: "Enough! This time you go to work"? I couldn't imagine my mother being firm about anything. Worn out by years of struggle after my father's death, she seemed to have retreated into the mists of indecision, leaving more and more responsibility to me, not deliberately, almost without thinking about it.

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Last year, for example, she neglected to go house-hunting, though the landlord had given us notice to move by the first of May. I came home from school to find that the new tenants had moved in on top of us and all our possessions were piled up in one and a half rooms. My mother stood, wringing her hands as if she couldn't understand how it had happened. I had a final exam in Old English the next day and had to make sleeping arrangements for us—the beds were laden with household utensils and bits of small furniture. Then, after the exam, I would go with her to find a new home among the few undesirable flats that were still available.

I lost my temper and began to berate the woman who had moved in with her family, yelling empty threats and accusations. She eyed me coldly, while four little sobbing children clung to her skirts on one side of the room. On the other stood my mother, with my three little sisters, equally terrified, holding on to her desperately. There was something sadly ludicrous in these two parallel scenes and I suddenly stopped shouting.

I stayed up all night at my friend Bayla's house, memorizing old forms of English, swallowing declensions and grammar rules, like bitter pills. I did well in the exam but the moment I walked out of the room I forgot everything I had crammed into my agitated head the night before.

I didn't do so well with housing. In the late afternoon we settled on a flat on Saint-Dominique Street, the best we could find. It had a long, dreary hall with the other rooms opening off it, except for the kitchen which met it at the end. The bathroom was dark but it had a fairly new bathtub, which was an improvement over the last one. However, when the cold weather set it, it was almost impossible to take a bath because the room was so cold; we might as well have been bathing outdoors. We were still in that flat and I was ready to graduate.

The problem with my graduation was that I didn't know what to do. Other girls had parents and brothers and sisters who were planning to attend, but I had no one. That is, I had and I hadn't. My brother wished me well and even hinted that he might buy me a graduation present but he couldn't afford to lose a day's pay. He was two years younger than myself and already working in an ice-cream parlour. "Y'see, I really want to come but the boss wouldn't like it."

I saw, but I didn't want to graduate alone, to kneel before the Chancellor and be pronounced a Bachelor of Arts, without at least one pair of eyes watching and applauding in appreciation. If only my sisters were older! Even Etta was not quite ten and would probably be bored by the whole event; I'd have to entertain her when I wanted to be with my friends and teachers.

There was, of course, my mother. She should have been first on the list

but I deliberately left her for last. A mother was more than enough, especially one who had sacrificed so much for her children. Without her permission, I could never have gone to McGill; the graduation was as much her triumph as mine. She ought to be there. But I was afraid, of what I was not quite sure.

My mother looked foreign. Despite the many years she had lived in Canada, she still had the immigrant's timidity and air of insecurity. She looked as if she had wandered into this graduation by mistake.

The simplest solution would have been to boycott the graduation altogether, as my friend, Hester, intended to do. She dismissed it as "a bourgeois demonstration of class superiority." I, unfortunately, had no such Marxist qualms of conscience and I wanted to be there.

A perfect day dawned for the ceremony. The sun shone brightly and the air turned balmy, so unlike our usual Montreal weather. On a day like this, I thought, nothing could possibly go wrong.

"Momma," I reminded my mother, "you're coming to my graduation today. You'll see me get my diploma."

I helped her into her good dress, a light blue rayon that matched the colour of her eyes, and watched her as she carefully put on some lipstick.

"You look nice, Momma," I said, and I meant it.

We debated about taking a sweater, then decided on a light-weight one, which she could carry on her arm if it was too hot. She wanted me to stay beside her all the time. I explained that I had to sit with my class but I could still see her and wave from my seat. Then, after the ceremony, I would join her for the rest of the afternoon. She was apprehensive because she seldom went out and, when she did, it was never more than a few blocks from home.

By the time we walked through the Roderick Gates, many of the guests had already arrived. Here and there I spotted friends from my class. They were all dressed up and so were their parents. The women wore hats, with elaborate cloth flowers for decoration, and gloves. Many sported tailored suits, with blouses in contrasting colours, and expensive jewellery on their lapels. The men added dignity in conservative, well-cut jackets, and white shirts with starched collars and cuffs.

My mouth turned dry with anxiety. I hadn't anticipated this sharp difference between my mother and the other parents. I wanted to turn around and go home before anyone recognized me. I looked at my mother and saw the same desire in her uncertain gaze. I took her arm and said without conviction: "It'll be all right. You'll see."

People milled around us, exchanging greetings in high, excited voices, performing introductions, extending congratulations. I felt strangely out of place, even more alone than in the early days at McGill when I had no one to talk to and no one to share experiences with. In the last two years I thought I had closed the gap between university and home but I saw now that it was still there. Even the parents of girls of more moderate means were light years ahead of my mother in style of dress and appearance.

It was more than just appearance, however, more than the fact that they had been to the beauty parlour the day before. My mother was not fashionably dressed but she was presentable. Her hair was not impeccably groomed but it was neat and tidy.

Then it dawned on me. My mother looked foreign. She did not belong. Despite the many years she had lived in Canada, she still had the immigrant's timidity and air of insecurity. She couldn't understand much of what was being said and looked bewildered, as if she had wandered into this graduation by mistake. To make matters worse, she began to speak to me in Yiddish: *"Vu gait men? Vos tut men du?"* I squeezed her arm by way of reassurance but I was too mortified to answer her in Yiddish.

"Good to see you, Jenny," said a pleasant male voice beside me. I wished the grass would part and the earth open wide enough to swallow me from sight. It was my favourite teacher, Dr. Flees, who had been especially disappointed when I decided not to go to graduate school.

"Thank you, Dr. Flees," I answered, as I shook his hand. He was a man of medium height, brown all over. His head was bald in the middle but on either side there were evenly matched fringes of brown hair; his keen, sympathetic eyes were a darker brown. He wore a loose-fitting, slightly crumpled suit of brown tweed and his tie was light brown with deeper brown diagonal stripes. There was an uncomfortable pause. I realized he was waiting to be introduced.

My cheeks flushed. "Sir, this is my mother, Mrs. Koren." He shook my mother's hand with great cordiality.

"I'm delighted to make the acquaintance of my star pupil's mother. You must be proud of her, as I am. A brilliant student, with such rare promise. I only regret that she is so firm in her decision not to go on with her studies."

"My mother only understands a little English," I explained apologetically. "She's from the Old Country." Somehow the Old Country sounded more distinguished than Russia or Poland.

"Oh." Professor Flees hesitated. "What language does she speak?"

"Yiddish," I answered defensively. Would he label it, as had so many others, a bastard language, invented by the common people, hardly a language at all. Whenever I filled out application forms which asked: What

languages do you speak? Write? I always put down French and English but never mentioned Yiddish.

"Yiddish?" With one hand he patted the bald spot on his head. "I wonder if it has a literature and, if it does, is it translated into English?"

I had just completed a course in comparative literature with Professor Flees and was relieved to see the whole matter taking an academic turn.

"See you later," and he darted off into the crowd, like a big, brown dog.

At least it hadn't been M. Poirot, my French teacher, who had just as high an opinion of me but who was supercilious and critical at the best of times. I could just imagine him raising his thin eyebrows deprecatingly and thinking privately: "Ah! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!"

I steered my mother to the edge of the crowd where we could appear to be mingling without doing so. I had looked forward to this day as if it were my own coming-out party and now the party was a failure before it had even begun. After much debate I bought a new dress for the occasion, a white eyelet cotton with ruffles round the neck and sleeves, dainty and feminine, unlike the plain skirts and blouses I usually wore. I began to regret the impulse that had made me squander my money for no good purpose. "What a pretty dress, Jenny! You look nice and so you should on a day that does you so much honour!"

When I became uneasy because I had been gone too long, I took a circuitous path to find my mother. She was waiting in the same place where I had left her, alone, patient as she had always been.

It was Martha Bruyten,—kind, gentle Martha who was an average student and always put me on a pedestal because my marks were so high. She hugged me with enthusiasm.

"My mother," I indicated and Martha seized her hand, pressing it hard. "You must be so proud of her, Mrs. Koren. As we all are today."

I translated what Martha said. My mother's face brightened as the words became intelligible to her, as understanding dissipated her isolation. Then Martha spotted her parents in the distance."Oh, there's Mum and Dad! I really must go!" I watched her enviously as she hastened to greet a tall, distinguished-looking man in a neat grey suit, with a nondescript but presentable woman by his side.

At last it was time to enter the auditorium. I carefully selected a seat for my mother, not too far from the stage but not too close. I sat next to her for a few minutes. When it was time to go, she clung to me and begged me to stay. "Sh-h," I pleaded in embarrassment, for in this well-regulated, socially correct group it took little to draw attention to oneself and I dreaded nothing more than the curious gaze of strangers. I felt exposed, as if I were walking through a department store in my slip.

"I'll be sitting over there, not far away. You'll see me go up on the stage when it's my turn and after the last person has gone up, I'll come back to you." I joined my class and sat down next to Martha in a seat she had been saving for me. The hall was filled almost to capacity, noisy with the chatter of voices, tense with the not unpleasant strain of expectation. I looked back at my mother to make sure she was all right. She seemed terribly alone, like a small abandoned island far from shore.

I did keep my promise to seek her out right after the ceremony. I opened the long red tube in which my new diploma lay and unrolled the parchment before her mystified eyes. I pointed out my name and ran my fingers over the red seal and the signatures that made it official.

I was not so faithful to the other promise I had made, of keeping her company during the reception. I installed her in a chair, again on the fringe of the group, and brought her a cup of tea with a slice of lemon, which I knew she enjoyed. Then I made my way through clusters of people to select a plate of sandwiches and cakes. I kept reminding myself to check the fillings of the sandwiches to make sure there was no ham or shrimp, which were not kosher. Cucumber and cream cheese, egg salad, these looked all right. I was not so sure about the petits fours. My mother would be dubious about them, too, hiding under pastel icing, with tiny flowers of contrasting colours in the centre. *"Goyishe macholem,"* she called them. Gentile delicacies.

When I returned, she looked suspiciously at the sandwiches. She was not accustomed to white bread with the crusts trimmed off.

At home she always bought dark rye bread or light rye with caraway seeds from the Jewish bakery where the loaves of bread, freshly baked, stood unwrapped on open shelves. If you were lucky, you could buy the bread hot from the oven at the back of the store and bring it home still warm to the kitchen table. *"Siz nisht trafe?"* she asked guardedly; never in her life had she touched any but kosher food. Despite my reassurances, she only crumbled the bread abstractedly in her fingers.

From time to time I dashed off, visited animatedly with this one and that, responded to introductions and convinced myself that I was having a good time. It was easy to make it appear as if I had been accidentally separated from my mother. I was free to mingle with my professors, also. I could banter in French with M. Poirot so that even this hard taskmaster came to acknowledge my merit: *"Bien fait, ma petite! Tu as bien fait, comme d'habitude. Félicitations!"*

When I became uneasy because I had been gone too long, I took a circuitous path to find my mother. She was always there, waiting, in the same place where I had left her, alone, staring in front of her, patient as she

had always been where her children's wishes were concerned. As the afternoon wore on, however, she became tired. Remorse struck me when I saw how her cheeks and mouth sagged and her body slumped uncomfortably in the folding-chair where she had sat for so long that it seemed to have become a part of her.

Still, I whispered urgently: "Once more, Momma. Only one more time." I ran off to say good-bye to classmates I would not see for a long time, perhaps never, despite our protestations of undying friendship. We said to one another: "See you soon. Keep in touch, won't you? We won't forget." But time and new responsibilities eroded our good intentions.

When we arrived home, my mother and I were both exhausted. I persuaded her to lie down; there was still plenty of time to prepare supper. Then I decided to go for a walk.

I left the house and began to breathe more freely. For a moment I thought of returning to McGill; some of the participants might still be there. Then I gave up the idea. An extreme restlessness directed my steps to Fletcher's Field where I could at least be soothed by open space and a wide expanse of sky. I walked through the field, crossed Park Avenue and sat down at the foot of the stone monument dedicated to the soldiers who died for their country in the War of 1914–1918.

I gazed abstractedly at the sculpted figures in heroic poses, comforted by the warmth of the stone heated by the sun's rays. I tried to persuade myself that the day had not turned out badly after all. It was not the fiasco it could have been. But as I sat there, beside the new green leaves on the bushes, I knew it was not so.

Shame rose up in me, hot and searing. I had denied my mother. I had been too weak to stand up and announce to everyone: "Here is my mother. I'm proud of her. Without her I would not be here today."

Instead of proclaiming my mother's nobility and selflessness, I had gone over to their side, viewed her through their eyes. I had judged her by their standards and found her wanting: poorly dressed, foreign, inarticulate. What right had they to judge her? Were they so much better themselves? They were the keepers of the keys to convention, arbiters of the average, worshippers of the mould from which they had been poured. All her suffering and hard work counted for nothing, they were ready to cast her aside.

Then I realized it was no use blaming others. The denial had been mine; the shame, too. I could not even ask for forgiveness. My mother was too innocent, too trusting, to perceive that there was anything to forgive.

On the horizon the sky took on an orange tinge as the sun began to set. Delicate clouds of pale green and mauve hovered in the clear air, which was turning cooler for it was still only May. I shivered but was reluctant to leave. Out of the air and the clouds emerged a forgotten image of a little girl, desperately afraid and clinging to her mother's dress for dear life, her mother who represented safety, a secure haven from the unknown.

I saw myself on the first day of kindergarten at Bancroft School 15 years ago. Fear made me wet my pants and my new patent leather shoes. The shame of it! But that shame was nothing compared to what I experienced now. In those days I loved Yiddish, the language of my mother, the language of love.

I had travelled a long path in the intervening years and each step had taken me forward but also backward, further and further away from my mother. I wanted, oh, I wanted to be that child again, anguished by uncertainty but fortified by the purity of intention.

I shivered in the chill evening air and stood up, cramped and stiff. I had the impression I had lost something of great value, a diamond of unusual size and splendour, which had somehow slipped out of its setting. I stooped to hunt for it, separating the blades of grass with my fingers, searching, till I remembered I had lost it, not here on Mount Royal Mountain, but in the deeper grasses of the McGill Campus. Quickly the sun sank below the horizon, dimming the light of the world.

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