

Green Half Dones

By William Rabinowitz

My own taste is for the half done pickles, green, crunchy. Sheila's is for well done garlic flavored ones, mushy and salty. I was about to spoon another heaping helping of the free coleslaw, super sweetened to induce a diabetic coma to counter the pickle when my cell phone rang. Last night Sheila had been called by her friend Bonnie, from up North, that a mutual friend in Florida had died that morning. Such is the case with death in the Jewish world. People may not know or speak to another person for years, because of this or that, but when someone dies, the phone tree grows far reaching tentacles, super fast.

"Sheila, Mike Goldberger died", Bonnie said.

Sheila's lips turned ashen as she gripped them tightly. "Are you sure?"

"Well no" Bonnie responded, "but I heard someone in Florida died. Let me call you back when I know more".

Florida is a state with 18,936,423 people, give or take 12,347 at any time. It is fairly certain, that somewhere in Florida, someone has died.

A few moments later, it was Bonnie again. "Mike died this morning".

"Do you know anything else?" Sheila asked. Bonnie said "no".

Our friends, Steve and Sue were flying in from up north to spend New Year's with us in Boynton. Since his knee surgery it has been a long period of painful healing and we all hoped a few days in the warmth of the sun exercising in our heated pool would do some good.

The next morning, I took Norman out for his poop walk. As usual he was thrilled to go out and even more thrilled to dump in the middle of some neighbors lawn so close to their bedroom window that I must have seemed like a peeping tom trying to pick up his present in the half light before they awoke.

We hurried to Ft. Lauderdale International, Norman in the front unless he was trying to get under my feet to control the accelerator. Sheila had to admonish him with a "No - Puppy" and pull back on his leash.

Steve and Sue were quietly waiting for us at the Southwest arrivals. They had arrived early, damn that Southwest - early again; formal greetings, informal greetings and kisses of welcome to Florida. Since we were so close to Miami, I asked if they minded a small detour.

"Where to?" they asked.

“West Miami- Mt. Nebo cemetery”, I cheerfully responded. Fortunately, they are used to my unusual quests.

“What’s there?” they asked.

“Meyer Lansky”, I said. “I just learn the alleged ‘Chairman of the Board of Murder Incorporated’ – the notorious, but never convicted mastermind of organized Crime finances during the 1930’s through the 1960’s was buried there. I want to see his gravesite, and then ride along Collins Ave. to the Imperial Condo to see where he lived and walked his Shih-Tzu, Bruiser”.

A small rolling of the eyes, but that is another story for another time.

Riding back from Miami along super overcrowded Rt. 95, the only artery getting people north and south along the Florida coast, I reminded Sheila to call Temple Torah and ask about Mike. He was a member there.

She opened her cell phone from AT&T, the Razor, the one that makes the wissing noise like someone is imitating a jet plane to pretend that the call will connect faster. It usually doesn’t. Information, for Temple Torah in Boynton Beach and a few minutes of elevator music, a flat voice came on, “Temple Torah”.

“I would like to ask about a member of the congregation that I understand died, his name was Mike Goldberger” Sheila asked.

“Hold please, let me connect you with the administrator for funeral services” came the response.

A long few moments pause and I heard Sheila leaving a message asking for a call back on my cell phone. The administrator was indisposed.

“Why my phone?” I asked.

“Because I want to turn mine off now, let’s go get lunch” was the answer.

There was no point in discussing the logic further. Steve wanted a nice corn beef sandwich on rye bread. For whatever reason he said he has had this salivating desire for a hot corned beef sandwich for weeks and he wanted one. So, off we went to Ben’s of New York Kosher restaurant on Rt. 441 complete with a kosher certificate in the window certifying kosher compliance according to the supervision of Rabbi Charles Freundlich. Everything served there was Hebrew National products. I often wondered if that ad meant the knives forks and plates as well. There are no milk products in the place since Jews are not permitted to mix meat and milk. That means no Reubens, Chicken Parmesan or milk shakes and hamburgers. Their busiest day is Saturday – the Sabbath. Employing a legal Talmudic fiction, the business is sold to a non-Jew on the Sabbath to get around the prohibition of a Jewish business being opened on the Sabbath. The very orthodox would never set foot in the place even if they did not eat there. They did not want their co-religionists even thinking they could do anything that looked wrong. For us, it was

Kosher enough. Ben's comes complete with Klezmer music being piped outside as you awaited a table adorned with the free pickles, coleslaw and an overpriced menu.

I was about to push another pile of coleslaw into my snack bowl when my Blackberry vibrated, then rang. Looking down at the number, I saw it was a Boynton Beach number. I abandoned my coleslaw and went outside to take the call.

"Hello" I said.

A woman's voice with a New York accent from the ether responded, "I received a call at Temple Torah to call this number. Who is this?" It was a strange interrogation from my simple "Hello". Ever since I got my Master's degree at the university I have been able to figure out most situations and this was no exception.

A little surprised perhaps but since Sheila had left her name, my number and the reason for the call, I responded to the aggrieved New York accent.

"My name is Bill Rabinowitz. My wife called about one of your Temple members whom we understand died today".

"Who is that," was the voice's dull response.

"Mike Goldberger" I said.

"Hold please" the voice responded.

Hold please? Was I going somewhere? Other than ordering lunch and hoping that the last bit of the coleslaw had not been consumed was the only place I might consider going.

A few minutes later the voice returned, "Yes he died".

"When is the funeral?" I asked.

"Hold please" was the answer.

I would have thought she should have had that information ready. Perhaps she was distracted. Perhaps she had a peanut butter sandwich stuck sticky side down on the video display of her computer. But I patiently waited again three minutes before she returned.

"The funeral service will be at 1:00pm at the Beth Israel memorial chapel on Jog Road. Do you know it?"

How well I knew that spot, I often looked at the chapel sitting next to that empty lot at the corner of Woolbright and Jog; hoping beyond hope for a nice Italian restaurant to be built next to Beth Israel so after mourning Uncle Harry mourners could have a nice canole or a fish and spaghetti dinner.

“O.K., where is the interment to be held?” I asked.

I should have known.

“Hold please” was the response. So I held again for an eternity.

“The Eternal Light cemetery on 441,” came the response.

Perhaps pushing my own credulity and temerity, I asked, “when is the Shiva?”

“When is the what?” she asked flatly.

“Shiva, I said, the service when we can pay our respects to the family at their home and eat cakes and cookies for life and cholesterol,” I said quickly regretting my sarcastic response.

“Hold please” she said. I should not have been sharp with her. This time it took her a good five minutes to get back to me.

“Shiva will be held at 6:00pm on Weds, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday”. “No wait”, she said. ”Not on Friday and I am not sure of Saturday and Sunday”.

Friday I understood. It was the Sabbath and there was no Shiva service on the Sabbath between sun down to after sun down Saturday night. The sun most certainly did not set before 6:00pm.

With that I said thank you and hung up. It had taken fifteen minutes and I was sure that the wife and our friends were considering my obituary for taking so long to answer a phone call.

I returned to where I had left off and finished scooping the coleslaw into my bowl before ordering my pastrami on rye, Russian dressing on the side.

We arrived home and I had to walk Norman again. I have gotten to know his dumping schedule pretty well. There is the morning dump before 9:00am but that is only a preliminary for the big one. I had better get him out before 1:00pm. The phone rang, it was Sheila’s father. He lives at the Grove, an over 55 active adult community with gated attendants keeping unwanted people out and the slightly forgetful in.

“You know Mike Goldberger”, he asked.

“Yes”, I responded.

“He lived in our community. He died” my father in law said.

”I know”, I said. “About his shiva”, I started to say but my father in law’s hearing is poor. I have grown tired yelling into the phone so he can understand. His dog, Georgie Boy, ate his hearing aids.

He said, "I don't know when it is but I will get back to you and hung up".

Norman and I returned from our second important walk of the day complete with doggy sample baggy in hand, about a half hour later. The phone rang again. It was my father in law.

Direct and to the point he said, "Mike's family will be sitting shiva Wednesday through Sunday but I don't know when. I read it on the community TV news channel". My father in law had sat watching the Grove's community TV news channel announcement scroll by for half an hour until it got to the who died part so he could tell me what he knew.

"Thank you" I yelled into the receiver.

Life in Boynton Beach seems only to have real meaning when Norman and I go out for our walks. We see the sun, the moon, the stars, the neighbors sleeping in their bedrooms. Norman does not care if I am embarrassed he does his business where he wants.