

Kaddish for Shirley
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By Neal Ross

“What is an old woman to you?” “An old woman.”
-- Cecil B. DeMille, “The Ten Commandments”

I like to think my grandmother died this week because she didn't want to deal with the Y2K problem.

Of course, that's not really what happened. But it sounds like something she'd do.

“She hasn't been able to figure out radio and TV yet, and why we don't get the same channels we got in New York,” my dad said Tuesday from his South Carolina home. “She thought the whole country revolved around New York, and the rest of the country was a foreign land.”

Still, I did manage to explain to her how the Internet worked. Although she didn't have much of a head for technology, her mind remained sharp to the last – and whenever I'd call (not frequently enough, from her perspective), we'd usually spend an hour or so chatting about world events, the Supreme Court, President Clinton's hate-fan club, and the decline of western civilization.

My grandmother was not what you'd call an exemplary woman, or even a notable one. She was fond of food, family, complaining, CNN, and – though priding herself for open-mindedness – could carry a grudge farther than Diogenes' search for an honest man.

As my aunt said Monday night, “She was a pain in the ass, but we loved her.”

Shirley Atkinson (née Wolfson) was born Jan. 5, 1907, and lived the greater part of her life in Brooklyn. Though non-observant herself, she was fiercely proud of her Jewish heritage in a way that always seemed to me uncomfortably nationalistic.

However, she came by it naturally. In the 1940s, when Shirley worked as a secretary for what was then the Gulf Refining Company (now British Petroleum), a hint of Jewishness could sometimes mean unemployability – even in New York.

Shirley's thickly New York-accented speech was liberally sprinkled with Yiddish words and phrases as she bustled – and later, hobbled – around the house.

So, when my father called me at 6 a.m. Monday to say “Grandma's dead,” I did what any nice Jewish boy would do – rolled out of bed, wrapped myself in prayer shawl and skullcap, and recited the Kaddish, or prayer for the dead.

I don't know why, exactly. While I have a huge soft spot for traditions, my transcendently existentialist agnosticism doesn't necessarily include the concept of a God that can be petitioned or supplicated – or of a soul that lives on after the mortal coil

shuffles off to Buffalo. But saying Kaddish for Shirley was like fulfilling an unspoken promise, even though she wasn't around to see it.

That's my opinion, anyway. Grandma was pretty unsentimental, and so are her descendants – my dad worked two jobs over the past year to pay for Shirley's increasing medical costs, and wanted to use her cremains to fertilize his begonia bushes. My stepmom talked him out of it, which I think is too bad – but then, I share my dad's – and granddad's – weird sense of humor. When Papa Larry died on April 1, 1977, we all thought he'd pop up the next day, shouting "Gotcha!" And we were all a little annoyed that he didn't.

In many ways, death is still a big taboo in this culture. We tend to hide it, tiptoe around it, pretty it up with "passed ons" and "dear departeds" to keep from facing the Awful Truth that we're *all* going to die eventually.

And that's not necessarily bad, although – not having died recently – I can't really say.

But speaking as a natural-born reporter, I think it's useful to have a final deadline, a nagging itch to DO SOMETHING before we can't. Otherwise, what's the point?

Requiescat in pace, Shirley. Maybe I'll see you around.