

A VISIT TO MY SISTER-IN-LAW
(with an unexpected end)

Sallie Miles is Fran's older sister. She is a very likeable person. At times she appears a bit scatterbrained and helpless, but she managed to raise three children, worked, knows Rochester politics, and has a group of loyal friends. As a youngster, Sallie was pretty, blonde, and everyone liked her. Fran insists that if she and Sallie were walking down the street and both fell down, people would rush to help Sallie, and ignore Fran, convinced that Fran could take care of herself. Within the family, Fran, the middle child, was given the most responsibility. Jerry, the younger brother, played ball with his friends, married young, and moved to California.

Sallie's husband, Larry Miles was a pleasant enough fellow. However, what struck me initially, was his habit of finishing my sentences for me. It may indicate how closely he was listening, but it was annoying, especially when he was wrong. Larry was an optician, or an optometrist, I am not sure which. I am also not sure what the difference is. Larry also had a good singing voice and had been part of a chorus in Rochester. Why they moved to Rochester, I have no idea. Most likely for a job. (I am sure I can get the answer to a lot of questions about Sallie, Larry, their children and Rochester, from Fran, but I have chosen not to ask her.)

About 15 years ago, Larry decided to leave Sallie for a woman he met in the chorus. (Not a chorus girl.) They left Rochester and moved to Brooklyn. Unfortunately, he made no provision for Sallie when he left. Larry died about five years ago, and because his second wife was wealthy, he was able to leave money for each of the three children.

The three children are very different from each other. What they have in common, as Fran observes, is that they have all remained in Rochester, close to their mother. Very few parents that I know have their children close by.

The oldest, Bruce, impressed me, right off the bat. I first met him before Fran and I married. He had come to Boston with a girl friend and was showing her the sights. He was still in college, and made it clear to me in our conversation (where he did not attempt to finish my sentences) that what he wanted out of life was to make money and have a good time. He was smart and (a word I don't remember having used before) brash. I also liked the fact that after Fran and I married, he called me uncle Jake.

Within a few years, he married Sue, bought a bar in downtown Rochester, had two boys, and bought another bar. Then came divorce, and another very pretty, very blonde young woman, Theresa. Bruce decided to move into the big time. He bought a fancy restaurant, overextended himself, and as a result of the recession, lost it and went into debt. His boys were doing well in school. He and Theresa now had a little girl, and Bruce started digging himself out of the hole, as he described it. From landscaping—grass cutting and snow shoveling—he is now “flipping houses.” He buys foreclosed homes, fixes them up (with a crew that he has assembled) and resells them.

Karen is a smart, pretty, petite young woman who was always a rebel. She finished college, married John, found work at a state school for troubled youngsters, and had a daughter. Within a few years it was discovered that the baby had leukemia. For the next several years, her life was centered around the treatment of her daughter, who recovered, Karen divorced John, found Angel who worked at the same facility, and she lives her life.

Steven, the youngest, completed college, met and married Rhonda, and found a job in the car loan department of a bank. Rhonda's mother has a successful store that sells used clothes, and Rhonda works with her. Rhonda came from a close-knit Italian family, and Steven was a welcome addition. They had a daughter, Nina, bought a house, and Rhonda is into martial arts and Steven is into the N Y Yankees. Where early on, when we visited Rochester, Fran and I would stay with Bruce, we now stay with Steven.

In the past, when we visited Rochester, we drove. These days, we fly. After months of planning for this trip, we made a reservation on an evening flight leaving Thursday, July 9, which would not require Fran to rush. Our flight was supposed to leave at 8:55 pm. At 7 am, I received a recorded call that said the flight would be delayed by a half hour. Then another call saying that it would leave as originally planned. Then another call that it would be late. We left the house with the understanding that it would be a half hour late. It was two hours late. It was nice having David drive us to the airport and pick us up.

I had asked Steven to pick us up in Rochester, because I did not want to drive to his house in the dark, and then to take me back to the airport in the morning to pick up a rental car. Rhonda did the picking up for which we were very grateful. We have a new routine when we fly. We request a wheelchair for Fran, and the people who push the wheelchairs are very thoughtful and solicitous, and obviously low paid. They seem always surprised and delighted when we tip them. Almost all are foreign born at Logan—Haitian and Albanian this time around. In Rochester, mostly African American. They push Fran and I push Fran's walker. Going through security is no better than before, but now we do not have to take off our shoes.

Fran and I have visited Rochester a number of times over the years, and I like the city. It has come on hard times. Neither Kodak nor Xerox nor Hickey Freeman are what they were. On several occasions, we extended our visit to include Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Toronto, and Canandaigua and the Finger Lakes. This visit was to spend time with Sallie and the family. No side trips. Still, I figured we would be able to get to the Eastman House, the Memorial Art Gallery, Lake Ontario, and maybe the Corn Hill Arts Festival taking place that weekend.

Sallie is now a resident of the Jewish Home, (“moishav zakeynim”) thanks to Steven who volunteers there from time to time. She has been failing over the past several years: her eyesight, her hearing, but most seriously, her diabetes, which caused her not to realize how hot the water was in her bathtub, resulting in the loss of several toes. The facility, and the care Sallie is receiving are excellent. She has a pleasant room, and everyone knows and likes her.

On Friday, I picked up a rental car, and we made our first visit to Sallie. The following morning, we returned and attended services with Sallie and a friend. It was a bit overwhelming to see a sanctuary filled with old people in wheelchairs. The Rabbi was wonderful, and had the words of the Siddur up on a screen, supplementing the specially prepared printed prayer book. Sallie expressed her disappointment to the Rabbi that there was no Kiddush following services. The Rabbi explained that it was because of the many dietary restrictions among the residents.

We returned to the Jewish Home for a big family get-together Chinese dinner in the Atrium of the facility, which Steven arranged. It was a great opportunity to catch up, and Fran distributed presents to everyone, including rings that lit up. Sallie, the matriarch, looked delighted. The Saturday Chinese dinner was such a success that Steven decided to follow it up with a Sunday afternoon barbeque at his house. This gave me the opportunity to go to the Memorial art Gallery in the morning while Fran slept. The barbeque was another winner. It was good to see everyone together.

Monday morning, our last day, I decided to do some more sightseeing. I drove up to Irondequoit and Lake Ontario, pleased how easily I was getting around with my GPS. As I started to return home, I drove into a narrow side street to make a U turn. I backed up, went forward, and as I started to back up again, the car went into drive instead of reverse, into the bushes of a home on the side street. I was horrified. Those few seconds will remain with me forever. I have a picture of a bright light flashing the instant the car went forward. I assume my foot shifted automatically to the brake as the car went forward, but too late.

I got out of the car and stared at the car's front end in the bushes. The woman living in the house got out and stared at me staring at the car. She asked if I was all right. I said no, considering what just happened. She said she will call 911. I said I was not hurt, just shaken. She called anyway.

Within a few minutes, a fire truck and a police car appeared. I had pulled the car back and saw that the fender had been damaged. The woman said that it was lucky that I had not hit her car or the house. Was I lucky! I was also lucky because I was not hurt, and the car was drivable.

Three EMT firemen proceeded to take my blood pressure, temperature, pulse, and asked me a bunch of questions, including whether I wanted to go to the hospital. The police officer asked for my driver's license, and the car rental papers, and proceeded to fill out an "Accident Information Exchange Form." I was told to give the form to the car rental agency. They could not have been nicer. It pays to be an old white man in these circumstances. I don't believe anyone asked if I had been drinking.

When the fire truck and police car left, I got back in the car, set the GPS for Steven's house, and made my way back to Rochester. It was not the kind of morning I had planned. In the afternoon, we returned to the Jewish Home, picked up Sallie and went

with her to the Eastman House. We were not aware that the museum was closed, but they were having a reception for seniors, complete with refreshments (strawberry short cake and lemonade) and a jazz band. It pays to be a senior.

Back to the Jewish Home, said goodbye to Sallie. Returned to Steven's, packed and said goodbye to Steven, Rhonda and Nina. Drove to the car rental return after filling up the gas tank, and returned the damaged car. Filled out a "Loss/Damage Detail Report." We then made our way to the terminal with the help of a wonderful wheelchair pusher named Mitchell.

While waiting to board the plane, I thought about the business of rental car insurance, which I never take. Maybe it is time to take it. However, I was told that my credit card company insures you, so it is not necessary. And your car insurance would also cover rental car accidents. But then your rate will go up. I am going the credit card insurance route. I notified them, gave them all the information, and am now waiting to see what happens.

Unasked is the question: Did the accident occur because I am getting too old? Reflexes getting slow? I do not believe so. It was an unfamiliar gear shift. It could happen to anyone. Still...I try no longer to drive at night. I am aware that there are rare times that my right foot can't find the accelerator or brake. Last year, instead of buying a new car, I leased one for two years. The reason: I suspect I will stop driving when the lease is up.

I am now planning a big auto trip in October. We will drive to Binghamton for Amira Stern-Zakha's Bat Mitzvah; then to Carlisle PA to visit my cousin Bobby and his family; then to David in Pittsburgh; then a leisurely drive back home. Happy Trails.

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