

“Glencoe Goyishe Wedding” was performed at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for the League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling, March, 2014, and the Northlands Storytelling Conference, April, 2013.

GLENCOE GOYISHE WEDDING

On a beautiful Spring afternoon in 1938, on the South side of Chicago in a cigar store with sawdust on the floor and a barrel of Kosher dill pickles in the corner, my father, Julius Eugene Ratner, brought his bride-to-be, Dorothea Bartram West home to meet his mother for the first time.

“Ma, meet Dolly. Dolly, meet my ma.”

“Oy, Julius, so beautiful. Look at this *punim*. Where did you get the curly hair? Are you Jewish?”

“She’s not Jewish, ma, she’s Episcopalian.”

“Episcopalian? Like the Queen of England?”

“Mrs. Ratner, it is so nice to finally meet you. And to me it doesn’t matter – Jewish, Episcopalian – in our hearts we’re all the same. And I love your son. This will be *my* family’s first mixed marriage.”

“Mixed marriage. Who’s going to marry the two of you, a Rabbi? One day I’ll take the grandson maybe you’ll make for me, to a Jewish temple, and the Rabbi will ask, ‘*Grandchild of Sara, are you a Jew?*’ And he’ll say, ‘Eh, not really, I’m just Jew-ish.’ It’s all right, you don’t need me at this wedding.”

“Ma, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t have the right dress.”

“We’ll buy you the right dress.”

“I went to a wedding once. And got married. *To your father*. Weddings are bad luck.”

“Mrs. Ratner, you must come to our wedding. I *want* you to come to our wedding.”

“Ma, We’ll dress you up. You’ll look gorgeous.”

(mimicking) *You’ll dress me up*, I’ll look like a cleaning woman. Go, marry your shikse goddess, eat Wonderbread, I’ll stay home and sit in the dark—“

My Grandmother Sara Soreson Ratner was a Russian-Jewish immigrant from the District of Minsk, the farm-village of *Snov* which is the Russian word for snow, and there was a lot of *Snov* back where she came from. In 1905 when Tsar Alexandar II otherwise known as Bloody Alexandar was making harder for Jews to live in Russia, my grandma and her older brothers Harry, Hyman, and Morris, contact a cousin named Epstein who lived in Chicago who agreed to sponsor them in the United States. So they boarded a steamer, sailed to America, settled in Chicago where her brothers became Epsteins, then became dentists, married nice Jewish women, and rented my grandmother Sara a cigar store on the South Side where Sara was married, had her three children, divorced, and sold cigars, ice cream, candy and Jewish dill pickles, to her friends and neighbors from Gallagher’s Saloon, Figone’s Italian Social club, St. Pancratius Polish Catholic church, and Crane Plumbing Company across the street.

“Ma, you’re being selfish—“

“Selfish?!? Eighteen hours I spent in labor with you, I nursed you, clothed you, bought you a violin—“

“Ma, you broke that violin over my head—“

“Because you wouldn’t practice.”

My grandmother stood behind the cash register tallying up the day's receipts. She slammed the drawer shut so hard that nickels and dimes scattered across the counter. "No. I can not go to this wedding."

Dolly took Sara's hand. "Mrs. Ratner, my generation doesn't care so much about appearances. Today Irish people marry Polish people, Episcopalians marry Jews. You, you're...a real person to me. I love this cigar store. I love your son. We need you up in Glencoe. Up there things tend to be a little bland, the favorite color is beige. Beige carpets, beige wallpaper..."

"Sounds nice. I like beige. Are there Jewish people up there?"

"Well, not very many. None, actually. That's why we want *you* to come to the wedding. And my *father* wants you to come. He wants to meet you. My mother died last year. My father is a widower. It'll break his heart if you don't come.

"He's an Episcopalian. He has a heart?"

"Ma, Dolly and I will buy you a beautiful formal gown—"

"Uh-huh. And new shoes?"

"Of course."

"And a nice purse and a new coat?"

"Sure."

"Where you gonna get the money for all this? Join Al Capone and be a gangster wid' a tommy gun?"

Just then Sarah's sister-in-law Esther Epstein walked in. "Oy veh ist mir, this must be the beautiful bride, Dolly. So nice to meet you, dear. I'm the sister-in-law to your new mother-in-law. Sara, have you decided what you are wearing to the wedding? Hmmm? If not, I'm going to take you shopping downtown to Marshall Fields. Very fancy."

“Fancy, schmancy. I go to a wedding, who’s gonna run the store? I don’t need no wedding, I need customers. (crying) Oh, sonny, why are you doing this to me? Why are you marrying this girl? You’re not gonna be Jewish anymore.”

“Ma, we’re not religious; you keep the *store* open on the Jewish Holidays.”

“I do not.”

“Ma, last month on Passover you made me stand guard by the front door, and every time a Jewish family walked by on the way temple I had to warn you, ‘Ma, the Jews are coming, turn off the lights.’”

“I wanted them to think I was closed. It’s a *shande* to be open during the Jewish holidays.”

“But when they passed by you turned the lights back on.”

“Eh, we need the business. Look, go, marry the rich girl. You don’t need me to be involved.”

“You’re my mother. You’re involved.”

(crying) “*Dof haben kinder.*”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means, *why did I have to have children.*”

“Ma, I’m your first born son.”

“Yes you are.”

“Do I make you happy?”

“Yes, you do.”

Did I graduate college, on a scholarship—“

“Yes you did.”

“So come to my wedding.”

“You’re marrying a shikse...from Glencoe.”

Well, after all that conversation, my Grandma Sara, single mother of three, from the Russian farm-town of Snov, took the streetcar with her sister-in-law Esther to busy downtown Chicago and went shopping at Marshal Field’s, the fanciest department store this side of New York City, and they bought Sarah a beautiful dress of cotton and lace, leather pumps, a matching hat, purse, and an elegant wool coat.

The day of my parents’ wedding was as nice a day as they could have hoped for – blue skies, big puffy white clouds over Lake Michigan. At twelve noon Aunt Esther and Uncle Hyman pulled up in front of the cigar store in a brand new 1938 Chrysler Imperial with whitewall tires, jump-seats, and shiny black fenders that wouldn’t quit.

Grandma Sara stared at the car. “Hyman. Tsk, tsk, tsk. I’m going riding in that?”

“Sister, would you prefer that I drive you in a vegetable truck?”

“I would prefer that you be quiet, Hyman. *Julius, Gerald, Anna, get your tuchuses out here and into your uncle’s Royal carriage; we’re going to a wedding.*”

My father and my uncle Gerry emerge wearing black tuxedos, my Aunt Ann, a lime-green silk brocade bridesmaid gown, and Sarah wore her brand new dress from Marshall Fields. They climbed into the Chrysler, Uncle Hyman lit up a big cigar, and they drove North on Lake Shore Drive. It was twenty-nine miles up to Glencoe, and the trip from the South Side of Chicago to the gently forested lanes of the North Shore took over an hour – enough time for Grandma Sara to work herself into a snit adjusting her stockings and pulling at her girdle and growing more nervous by the minute.

“Ma, quit wiggling round like that, you’re driving us nuts.”

“I’ll wiggle if I want to. I (struggling w. dress) *can’t get this dress to sit right...*”

“Ma, take a look, we’re here.”

Hyman Epstein’s Chrysler Imperial slowed to a stop at 780 Greenwood Avenue, Glencoe, Illinois.

“This is where Dolly lives, ma.”

“I don’t see no house. This is a forest.”

“On the other side of the trees, ma. That’s where I’m getting married.”

My dad’s younger brother Gerry hopped out of the car and adjusted his black bow tie. “Boy oh boy, Dolly’s dad must be rich. That is a mansion.”

Sitting grandly behind a grove of elm trees was the biggest house they had ever seen. It was a three story red brick colonial with dormer windows, French doors framed in forest green shutters, and a screen porch filled with flowers. Grandma Sara stared at the house. “In this house I could fit *ten* cigar stores.”

An attractive woman with brunette curls walked toward them. “Hello, Julius. Why this must be your mother. Well, how are you, Mrs. Ratner. I’m Dolly’s older sister, Caroline, the maid of honor. So good to finally meet you. My new brother-in-law here has told us a lot about you.”

“What’d he say?”

“Ma, let’s go in, we’ll meet everybody and get your corsage.” As they walked across the lawn flower arrangers and caterers hustled back and forth setting up tables and chairs.

A tall barrel-chested, man in an elegant black tuxedo appeared in the kitchen doorway. “All right kids, everybody out of the kitchen now, let these people do their work. Heh. They’re charging me enough for it. And I want these dogs in the house. Unless they’re part of the wedding party I want them in their little doggy beds. Julius. How are you? Welcome to the

show.” Ignoring the rest of the group the father of the bride, Oscar James West III, clapped my father on the shoulder. “You look like a million bucks, son. Say, am I paying for that tuxedo?”

“I hope you are,” said Grandma Sara.

Oscar wheeled around and looked at Sara. “Ahh, Madame, would you be so kind as to get us something to drink? Lemonade, maybe a splash of gin and bitters in it. We’ll be right here. Go along now.”

My Grandma Sara’s eyes widened. My dad looked embarrassed. “Uh, Oscar, this is my mother, Sara. Ma, this is Dolly’s father, Oscar James West.”

“Ho, ho, oh, my gosh. I’m so sorry. Sara, of course it’s you. Please forgive me. I learned my manners in a riding stable.

“Julius, what’d I tell you. I look like the maid.”

“C’mon old gal, let’s get you a lemonade, we’ll all feel better. Pardon me would you? I’m all a-tizzy today. My daughter’s getting married. To your son.” And with a grand gesture Oscar James West took Sara’s arm and ushered her into his house.

My grandmother stared at everything like it was the Chicago Art Institute.

“Very nice. Lots of beige. You own? Or you just rent?”

“My father built this house, Sara. I was born here, my daughters were born here. Lots of living done in this place. Have some lemonade.”

“Never touch the stuff. Makes the teeth rot.”

“So you’re Sara, mother of the groom. You look wonderful, I love that dress and all the fancy acoutrements. All that’s missing from the party now is the bride. Where is she? Did she run off with the gardener?”

“Daddy, behave, we’re starting.” Dolly’s sister Caroline was now dressed in her lime-green silk bridesmaid gown like my Aunt Ann and all the other bridesmaids who were gathering together on the lawn. Oscar James West escorted Sara to her seat and sat down beside her.

“Sara, that young man officiating. He’s a Unitarian.”

“Humph. Unitarian. They don’t believe in nothing.”

And the wedding ceremony began.

“Sara, may I ask you, would you happen to know, what’s that quilt they’re holding over their heads with those sticks?”

(Crying with joy) “It’s not a quilt, Oscar. It’s a *chuppah*. It’s a Jewish wedding tradition. It represents the home Dolly and Julius will build together.”

“From a quilt?”

“No, no. The *quilt* is symbolic, Oscar, it *symbolizes* the new home they’ll have.”

“Oh. Fascinating. Now what are they doing?”

“They’re going to break a glass together. It’s good luck. It’s *also* a tradition. I like this Unitarian. I think he’s Jewish.”

The minister wrapped a crystal wine goblet in a cloth napkin and placed it on the ground.

“As this ceremonial glass shatters, so may your *marriage* never break,” and Julius and Dolly stomped on the glass wrapped in cloth and shattered it into a thousand pieces.

“*Mazel Tov*,” whispered Sara.

“What did you say, Sara dear?”

“*Mazel Tov*--that’s Jewish for congratulations.”

“*Muzzle Tov? Muzzle Tov*. Sara, this is certainly more interesting than an Episcopalian wedding. Usually our people just stand there looking miserable.”

“We do some of that ourselves.”

The wedding ceremony was now over. My father and mother were now husband and wife. Silver trays of wine glasses appeared, and the crowd made its way to the long tables covered in white linen and flowers. Grandma Sara sat at the bridal table next to Oscar James West. Oscar put his hand gently on her shoulder, “Sara, your boy landed himself a good one.”

“Uh-huh. And so did she.”

“I propose a toast.” Oscar tapped his butter knife against his wine glass to quiet the crowd. “To the bride and groom - two beautiful young people, Jewish, Episcopalian, Unitarian, whatever you are, we love you and we welcome you into our family. *Mussle Tov*. Congratulations.”

Then Oscar turned to Sara. “And to the mother of the groom. This wonderful woman who drove up here from—(whispering) Where did you drive up from?”

“-The South Side. Of Chicago.”

“-The South Side, yes. Well, dear Sara, you have warmed the cockles of this old widower’s heart. You’ve brought life to this party. And I’ve learned so much from you in the short time I’ve known you. To you. Cheers. Your turn to make a speech now, dear.”

“Oy, I can’t...I don’t, oh all right.” Sara took a tiny sip of wine and rose to her feet. “I never thought I’d live to see a day like this. Oscar, your daughter is now my daughter-in-law. Such a beautiful couple, our new family; such beautiful people, our new friends. I...(crying) I don’t usually talk like this. This is all very nice. Thank you.” The crowd rose to their feet and applauded. And a sumptuous feast was served.

As they ate their supper Oscar took Sara’s hand, “ Sarah, dear, there’s so much more I’d like to know about you. Could I have your permission to call you?”

“Call me? Call me what?”

“Sara, I’m a lonely old widower, and you’re the most colorful thing that’s walked into my life in a long time. I’d like to call you on the telephone. For a date.”

“Telephone? We have a telephone. One of the few telephones on our block. Customers use it, they put a nickel in the cup. It adds up.”

“Good, then it’s a date?”

“Oy. I, I don’t have the right dress.”

“Ma, we’ll buy you the right dress.”

“Oh? Well, this...this could become expensive.”