

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

BY JOHN MCINERNEY

TIME: SPRING, 1974. **PLACE:** SYRACUSE, NEW YORK. **SETTING:** THE LIVING ROOM OF A MIDDLE CLASS HOME. A Middle-Aged Man is pacing back and forth restlessly. After a beat or two, the stage right door opens, and a slightly older looking woman enters.

EVELYN (THE WOMAN)

Isn't she here yet?

TOM (THE MAN)

No, she called from the airport, and she wants to go to the funeral home first. I said I could understand that, and so I sent Pete to pick her up and take her there. I wanted to talk to you before we saw her.

EVELYN

Well, I'm as shocked as you are. Oh, I figured Ralph had a lady friend --- all those weekend trips, first to Elmira, and then to Long Island --- maybe more than one lady friend. That was nobody's business but his. But a wife we've never met or even heard of? And she inherits everything he leaves behind? Why did he keep this from us, from his own sister and brother? That I don't understand at all.

TOM

Rebecca Liberman. That sounds as if she's Jewish.

EVELYN

Yes, obviously. By the way, what did Pete say about this? What does my "real cool" nephew think about his new aunt?

TOM

Oh, you know Pete. He doesn't like to let anybody know what he's really thinking. But I know he believed he was Ralph's favorite relative. I wonder what he thinks now. What about your girls?

EVELYN

Them! Suddenly their bachelor uncle is a man of mystery. They're snickering away between themselves.

At this point, the stage right door opens, and two people enter. First, a 20 something young man (Pete), who ushers in another older woman (Rebecca). She seems to be in her mid fifties, and her rather stylish clothes and bearing make her impressive looking. Just now, however, she has been crying, and she is dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. For a moment she just looks at Evelyn and Tom, and they stare at her, while Tom says, "Uh, Hello, I'm Tom, Ralph's brother, and this is my sister Evelyn." Then Rebecca's face crumples with tears, and she looks as if she will collapse. All she can say is "I ... I'm sorry." Tom and Pete help her into a nearby chair. Tom then sits in another chair nearby, and Evelyn pulls a chair closer to their chairs. Young Pete retreats to the background and remains standing. After a moment, Rebecca composes herself and says:

REBECCA

Please forgive me. This has been such a terrible shock, and then to see Ralph in that casket ... It was just too much for me.

TOM

Yes, it's been a shock for all of us. They called us from the Carrier plant and told us about the heart attack, and that he was gone. And ... and then they told us that they had already notified you as his next of kin, his wife. That startled us all over again. You see, we never knew anything about you, uh, nothing at all.

REBECCA

Oh, I'm sorry. That was a terrible way for you to ... to find out about me. *(She opens her purse and draws out an official looking document and hands it to Tom, saying as she does so:)* I brought our marriage license with me. I hope it will help you understand what ... what happened to Ralph and me.

Tom opens the document and quickly scans the contents, and then looks up at Rebecca, and he seems surprised as he says:

TOM

This is dated April 4, 1942, from North Carolina!

REBECCA

Yes. Ralph was stationed there back then. He'd been drafted. World War II, of course. We ... We had been seeing each other for about a year before war was declared, and one weekend I flew down there to see him. We loved each other

very much, and when he told me he might be sent overseas very soon, I told him I wanted us to get married right then and there. A justice of the peace did it for us the next day. That's what often happened in those days.

TOM

But why did you keep it a secret, even after the war?

REBECCA

Because it was the 1940s, and I was Jewish, and he was a Protestant Christian.

TOM

You mean you both were **that** afraid of what people might say?

REBECCA

No, we were afraid of what our marriage would do to our families. You see, my mother had carried me as an infant on her back all the way across Russia on foot to escape persecution of the Jews, and my father was a well loved rabbi. They would have felt betrayed by my marriage, and they would have been forced to disown me. The grief from that would have literally killed them, I believed. And Ralph told me that his family would be very much opposed too.

TOM

Oh, I think he was all wrong about that. Our parents weren't prejudiced against Jews. I never heard them say anything like that.

EVELYN

No, Tom. I'm afraid Ralph was right. Oh, they would probably not have had a negative word to say about Rebecca herself, but their families and friends would have been absolutely opposed, and Rebecca and Ralph, and probably our parents too, would have been quietly ostracized. They would have hated being outcasts.

EVELYN

So you had to keep your secret as long as the old people in your families were alive. That must have been hard.

REBECCA

Yes, especially in the mid 1950s when I took a teaching job in Elmira. Ralph drove down from Syracuse nearly every weekend to visit me. Of course he couldn't sleep in my apartment. If people gossiped about me, a supposedly unmarried teacher, having a man as an overnight guest, it could have cost me my job in those days. So for years he slept on the couch in the den at our friends, the McGinleys' house.

EVELYN

Didn't you ever have the chance to ... to live as husband and wife?

REBECCA

Now and then, as often as we dared, we would drive off secretly to some resort area and check in as husband and wife and stay for a few days.

TOM

That sounds so, I don't know, deceptive or sneaking. Didn't it bother you?

REBECCA

Well, maybe it should have, but we knew we weren't doing anything we didn't have the right to do, so we were just grateful to be together. Actually, during those Elmira years, we were, believe it or not, almost contented, until the early 1960s. That's when I got a new job as a school superintendent in Long Island, and then, not long after that, "the old people" as you called them, passed away. Well, quite understandably, Ralph thought the time had come to live openly as man and wife. After all, the really important family obstacles were gone, and besides the drive from Syracuse to Long Island was much longer than the drive to Elmira.

EVELYN

So what stopped you?

REBECCA

Well, for one thing, he wanted me to come back to Syracuse to live with him, and that meant I would have to give up my superintendent job, and maybe work only as a substitute teacher at first in Syracuse.

TOM

I ... I can see how that would be a big sacrifice for you, but, forgive me for saying this, didn't you feel that you owed as much to Ralph, after all the things he had done for you, all that travelling and sleeping on couches and so on?

REBECCA

Well, at the time, I told myself, and Ralph, that it would be a mistake to give up my more generous retirement pension. That would eventually benefit both of us, I said. So I asked him to move down to Long Island when we went public about being married. He wasn't enthusiastic about doing that, and so we just kept postponing any decision. The truth was that we were now two people living different lives in different worlds, and we were pretty "set in our ways," as they used to say. But now I think I was wrong. I should have just agreed to live in Syracuse with my husband.

EVELYN

No, Rebecca, I don't agree. I don't think you should have given up your job to come back here to Syracuse. I'm sure women school superintendents were very rare then, and there still aren't very many of them. That means you did outstanding work to earn that position. And just suppose Ralph had had a big executive job at Carrier, and you asked him to give it up and move to Long Island to work as a part time carpenter. People would have called you crazy.

TOM

Listen to the Libber here.

REBECCA

Well I haven't made up my mind about women's lib, really. I just know that in the last year or two, I began to think differently about a lot of things, including Ralph and me. I realized that our tastes and likes and dislikes were now coming closer together, not drifting apart. I saw that he was beginning to enjoy going to Broadway shows with me, and just last month I found him reading one of the "serious" biographies I had on my bookshelves. Then I realized I was now watching Syracuse University basketball games on TV almost as enthusiastically as he was, and that I was really enjoying cooking his favorite meals and fussing over his clothes.

TOM

That is sort of ironic, and very interesting, but how did it affect the "Will we live together or apart" decision?

REBECCA

We began talking again about living together as a married couple ... after we retired. And now, both of us were flexible about where and how. I don't know

what we would have finally decided, but we were having fun considering lots of options. It felt like a fresh start for us. I'm so sorry that's all gone now. *(She tears up again briefly, but then regains control, and says:)* Tom, Evelyn, oh and Pete too: I've been trying to help you understand what life was like for your brother and me. I hope you can believe that I loved him very much, even if I was never the kind of wife he expected and deserved.

Tom and Evelyn look at each other, and then Tom says:

TOM

I ... I mean we, thank you, Rebecca, for being so honest with us. I think we do understand things much better now.

EVELYN

And I want you to know I believe Ralph was a lucky man to have had you for his wife. And as far as I'm concerned you are part of our family now, right Tom?

TOM

Yes, absolutely.

PETE

And that goes for me too, ... Aunt Rebecca!

REBECCA

Oh, thank you, thank you with all my heart. You've all been so kind to me. And Tom and Evelyn, I have to tell you: Pete is a gem. He put me at ease right away when we met at the airport, and at the funeral home, when I thought I was going to faint, he held me up and talked gently to me. His kindness reminded me very much of his uncle, but Pete's life is all ahead of him. If you don't mind my asking, Pete, where are you headed?

PETE

To law school, I hope. I'm going to work for a few years before applying, so I can save enough money to shrink some of the debt I'll run up.

REBECCA

No. That plan isn't good enough for my nephew. I will use money from Ralph's estate --- I'm sure he would want that --- and add more myself, so you can start

applying to law schools as soon as you want.

TOM

Oh now, Rebecca, don't think you have to do anything like that!

PETE

That's right, Aunt Rebecca. Really.

REBECCA

But I do have to do this. Everything in me tells me so.

EVELYN

Honey, I know you think this will ease your grief a little, but think it over for awhile.

REBECCA

No, nothing will ease my grief, not for a long time. And the fierce regret will never leave me. I told you what happened, and why, but I know Ralph's life didn't need to end the way it did. I could have made it different at so many points in those years. I really could have been braver, less selfish, more loving, wiser. Now that old verse will always haunt me: "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: it might have been."

THE END