

# Fridays @ Jody's

a spiritual memoir by  
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# Part I

(1)

I am a living saint. A modern living *Jewish* saint, of course, but even with that caveat, who knew? Obviously, not you. You're not worshipping me, or gathering about with open-mouthed, drooling wonder. All I've managed to do, by way of proof of my divine nature, is to get you to open this book. You haven't even bought it yet, have you?

All right, so I may *not* be a living saint. Yet. I could be though. I might be. It's not a total lie since I don't believe living saints lie, and I have the potential to be a living saint. A little lie. They happen a lot, in case you haven't noticed.

I lived until I was fifty years old with a *little* lie, which was, as follows:

*All talk of spirits, ghosts, gods, and devils is New Age bullshit.*

The problem I had with New Age philosophy, in its young days, were the words and language. Horribly sweet, they tasted like a fistful of candy corn jammed into your mouth. I

wasn't alone in finding it to have a high degree of bullshit, although, admittedly, a slew of people with reasonable levels of intelligence were nevertheless sucked in.

I grew up Unitarian. Need I say more? Unitarianism is more like a political party than a religion. My memories of Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church consist almost entirely of linking arms, swaying slowly back and forth, and singing "We Shall Overcome" while weeping. I still sing "We Shall Overcome" and weep. I sang it the night Barack Obama won the election, and I wept. No shame in that. But weeping and singing "We Shall Overcome" has nothing to do with the New Age movement, or the spiritual movement, or even praying the *Hail Mary*, otherwise known as Catholicism.

I didn't know from praying.

That's my Jewish self speaking. From Unitarianism to an Orthodox conversion to Judaism: all in a life's work.

This is the story of my spiritual awakening, as those in the know are wont to call it. A spiritual memoir has a fine and exalted lineage, including *St. Augustine's Confession*, the *Letters of St. Paul*, and even, to my mind, *Anne Frank's Diary*.

"I still believe that people are really good at heart."

Under the circumstances, you might call that the single most spiritual statement of all time. Unless you're the type to quibble -- and I bet you are -- in which case you'd point out that Anne Frank was talking about *people*, not the One God or angels. So am I. When I talk about the divine, I'm talking about people, too. And most especially. Jesus did. ("For indeed, the Kingdom of God is within you." Luke 17:21)

That's the whole friggin' point.

You can't walk away now. You can't snap this book shut.

I have a story to tell, and it involves spirits, evil entities, angels, and weird stuff that has no rational explanation. Good stuff! Maybe, if you're lucky and very, very good, Santa will bring you weird stuff, too. But you'll have to read my story to see what happened.

Not *what happened* to me. *What happens* to you.

It's a dizzying circle of cause-and-effect. I read Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* and, sure enough, all Hell broke loose. I started living my own, unique *Seven Storey Mountain*. No kidding.

Here's the scoop: spiritual awakenings are a *disease*. They're catching, and the germs are passed by memoirs. I'm very sorry to report that you have already been exposed merely by reading these few pages. You've been infected. Sorry, sorry. There is no inoculation, no medication, no cure to help you. You can't go wash your hands and *pray*. Praying most definitely won't help. In fact, if you pray, well, you're basically done for, on your way to Life Everlasting.

Incubation is anywhere from immediate to thirty days. Do not be alarmed if tonight you dream you're Joan of Arc, or Francis of Assisi, or Moses. You, too, may be a living saint.

(2)

My father was a living saint, albeit an atheist. When he was thirty years old, with three children under the age of five, he went swimming in a public pool. Three months before the introduction of the Salk vaccine, he contracted polio.

Bummer.

Although you'd never know it from him. He didn't complain. Not once. He persevered, hauled himself on a toilet ASAP so that he'd be independent enough to go back to work, and proceeded to have a meaningful career, support his family, cook great food, create original gardens, move us to Kenya and back again, until he chose death at the age of eighty-four by ceasing to eat and refusing all medications.

To the end, an atheist with complete conviction that there is no God, no life after death, no Other Side. My first memory, at two years old, was of visiting him in the hospital. He was lying on a stretcher, his head turned to look down at me, smiling. Smiling! I got a yellow lollipop that looked like the sun.

His name, no joke, was King. Remind you of someone?

Needless to say, back then, I didn't believe in God. God was right here in front of me, lurching around our house on stiff legs by bouncing off walls and grabbing hold of furniture, or my Mom, or any one of us kids. We learned early to straighten our bodies, strong and taut, ready for him to land on a shoulder.

His disability wasn't as profound as it might have been. Neither confined to a wheelchair, nor wearing braces that locked at the knees, he used crutches and wore special supportive shoes that encased the ankles. For some reason, his socks had to be very thin and wool (that was to keep his feet warm), and he had a lifelong battle with athlete's foot.

We only saw his legs at the community swimming pool when he wore voluminous cotton swim trunks. His legs were slender as two new tree trunks, hairless, and with no muscle. The delicate feet were female and thin and pointed. Strangely elegant, reminding me even then of a ballerina's feet. As it happened, he loved ballet.

In public places, such as the pool, I don't remember being embarrassed by him. This may be because he seemed utterly unself-conscious and quite cheery. (Bouts with depression came in late middle-age.) Indeed, I was impressed by him, so much so that I assumed everyone else must be as well. He appeared to take cripplehood in stride, although *stride* was the one thing he didn't have.

I was proud of him. He made me feel special, just by my association with him. I was this man's daughter! How unique! Thus, *I* was unique, which was a desirable quality to me, even at the age of six.

His atheism only extended to the supernatural. Come lower, to the earth, and my father had gods to worship aplenty. First, there was music. I fell asleep every night to his three record albums -- that evening's listening -- stacked on the stereo system. Certain pieces, like *The Tales*

*of Hoffman*, I now understand he must have been obsessive about. Chopin was another essential, but his tastes grew wider and deeper when CD's came on the scene and retirement brought more disposable income.

Three years before his death, my older sister, Jean, asked my father when he would know it was time for him to die. His answer: "When I no longer want to listen to music." We thought it couldn't happen, that singular moment, but it did. In the end, he died with me sitting in the room late at night, my mother asleep in the matching twin bed, with Mozart playing. Given what I believe now -- never mind his own doubts about life after death -- I am sure that Mozart danced him to death, and beyond.

He also worshipped food, becoming in his retirement a careful and gifted cook. For my birthday most years, I always chose his fish chowder, which took days to make and involved gruesome fish heads and backbones mashed into a thick pulp at the bottom of a large pot. Because of being crippled, it was somehow agreed upon that he would never have to wash dishes. So, well, he didn't. They would stack high, soon resembling a strange and monstrous machine. Anyone who cooks correctly knows how pots and pans, measuring devices, tasting and stirring spoons, and knives, always seem to proliferate in an astonishing way. I didn't resent his Free Pass on washing dishes, but it's had a contradictory effect on me. To this day, I claim the dishes as long as I don't have to do the cooking.

A third god was politics. He earned a Master's in Poli Sci at the University of Chicago, quitting his Ph.d program when he realized that he had no interest in academia. Instead, not too much earlier than his run-in with the polio virus, he began a career in government service with the Bureau of the Budget -- he was permitted to swim in the then White House pool while he was still recovering from polio. As a kid, I didn't know much about his work, but you couldn't miss

his passion for the everyday politics evident in Washington, D.C. His newspaper reading, which could be accomplished while concurrently listening to classical music, went on endlessly.

Rather like dirty dishes.

Finally, there were gardens, and the birds they attracted. He would crawl in the dirt, planting seeds for the flowers my mother used in arrangements. This cutting garden had to be laid out in perfect straight rows, determined by wooden posts with strings stretched taut between. I found helping him outside, in what later became more elaborately designed formal gardens, tedious and anxiety-provoking. It was, to my mind, a ton of hard work, and he was both exacting and humorless about the effort required. Eventually, I understood the link between a garden and cooking. He might spy a cucumber growing on a farm, while driving along in his inevitable convertible, and he'd slam on the brakes, throw open the front door, grab his crutches, and disappear into the hot green growth until emerging, triumphant, waving a fat cucumber overhead while balancing precariously.

At that point in his life, he never fell down because he was graceful, having once been a natural athlete. When he was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome in his fifties, he did begin to fall. And, so, my sense of him as glorious also fell. It is a terrible thing to see one's father collapse, sprawling, often seriously hurting himself.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that it was during his last five years, when he was in a wheelchair, and then bedridden, that I discovered the Other Side, that place of gods, goddesses, saints, angels, and spirits. The only God I'd known, my own father, had faltered. And in his faltering, I was propelled from this earth, a place where gravity kept yanking on my Dad. I was a rocket ship, blasting off in defiance of gravity and earthly fathers, searching for that other Father. Though, all along, it was my mother guiding me.

My mother *here* on earth, as opposed to *there* (somewhere else on the Other Side), was one of the founders of the Unitarian Church we attended. “We” included Mom, me, my older sister, Jean, and my younger brother, George. “We” did *not* include my father, who would peek from around the Sunday *New York Times* and try not to laugh at us.

Mom’s religious or spiritual beliefs could only be called murky, at best. I don’t think she believed in God, especially since Unitarians seem to be allergic to the divine, whether in animal, mineral, or vegetable form. At the same time, she was all for ceremony. The children’s worship service, which met after Sunday School classes, was her special domain. She made it memorable.

An “altar” covered with a white linen cloth held two candles balanced on either side of a fresh flower arrangement she’d made herself. If flowers were out of season, she used ivy, holly, and other greens she found in the woods behind our house. She ended the service in the same way every week. Using her hands in gesture, cupping her ears, covering her heart, and opening them palms up, like a flower blossoming, she’d recite the E. Powell Davies prayer:

*“May we have ears to listen, hearts to feel, and hands that are ready to give.”*

I found her beautiful, but that beauty didn’t move me beyond her. Maybe, for me, that was the point. She was the stand-in for the Mother on the Other Side (or call it Heaven, if you have to, although I loathe the word *heaven*). When it’s Mother you’re contemplating, moving beyond is irrelevant.

I suppose.

Still, she -- my real mother -- didn’t understand, or have any curiosity about, the Other Side. She was firmly planted on this earth, swept into a worshipful stance with two aspects of her life: books and houses. The book thing was her fixation, expressed mostly through her

career as a children's librarian, and then as a professor of children's literature. About literature, she was brilliant, astute, generous, and a total snob.

Basically, if you weren't a person who loved to read, you really didn't cut it. This attitude was secure until a mere two years or so before her death. The change occurred because of the young man her granddaughter, Rachel, married. Rachel had a deep connection to my mother and was herself, it goes without saying, a voracious and sophisticated reader. When she brought Art, her boyfriend, to meet her grandparents, my mother had been warned ahead of time that despite his matriculation at Yale -- where he and Rachel met -- he was *not* a reader. Maybe Mom figured it had to do with Art's Chinese background (he moved to the USA when he was seven), but I think that was an excuse for her. All I know is that she loved Art. *Loved* him. For the first time, I saw my mother "forgive" a person who didn't read much.

I do have my own, outre, theory about the profound connection shared between Mom and Rachel. When Rachel was about twelve years old and visiting her grandparents in Florida, she, as usual, browsed their bookshelves and pulled out various books to read. One of them was Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, which she read in its entirety. And *that* was why she found the strange note left by her great-grandfather, Russell Skinner (my mother's father, with whom Mom was very close). It said:

*"Oct. 12, 1963. A beautiful day, sunny & warm, in the best tradition of Fall. Leaves turning. Am here to supervise children while Sister shops in Alexandria. I've been reading Don Juan at home and have reached the part where this note is inserted. Am now proceeding in this spiffy copy, much nicer than the paperback I've been reading in. Wonder when this insertion will be discovered & by whom. I can conceive of it not being found for many years, perhaps not*

*until one of my great grandchildren finds it; maybe Jody's oldest daughter....Love, Your Great-grandfather, Russell Skinner."*

(Amended to it was a note from my sister, Jean, saying, "*Sorry, granddaddy, but it was not that long. The date today is June 5, 1964. But I will not spoil your secret. May the next person to discover this have as much enjoyment as both of us. There is room still for more entries. Jean Carr*")

Rachel was "Jody's oldest daughter," so her discovery of these messages struck all of us as a bit eerie. Everyone else -- undoubtedly including Rachel -- left it at that. A funny, neat occurrence that might, at most, give you goose bumps.

Not me, especially as I began to open to the Other Side. I am convinced that my grandfather, Russell Skinner, has been reincarnated as my daughter, Rachel. His past self left her a message to find in her future self. In addition, I am equally convinced that my mother, who died in 2007, will be reincarnated as Rachel and Art's first-born child.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

My mother's passion for houses, their design and furnishings, found its culmination when our house -- a 1955 contemporary built outside Washington, D.C., one of the first houses constructed with vast stretches of glass -- was chosen to be included in *Better Homes & Gardens* because she decorated a modern house with early American antiques. The article, called "They Made Old Look New Again" got her a job offer as an interior decorator, which she chose not to pursue, despite the temptation.

Because of my father's disability, she was never able to indulge herself by moving into lots of different houses the way, for example, my grandmother did, whose great claim to fame

was to sell her Georgetown house to F. Scott Fitzgerald's daughter, Scotty. Instead, Mom lived vicariously through me. I loved houses, too, and I married a man who *also* loved houses. I moved and moved, and she, in essence, moved with me. Luckily, since she's coming back as her granddaughter's child, Rachel has the house bug, too.

In the last years of her life, as I was whirling through my spiritual awakening, I tried to talk to her about it. She was polite, if distant, and somewhat puzzled by the whole business. Then I hit on a way to "talk" about the subject surreptitiously. I read aloud to her from Anne Lamott's *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*, which is not only intelligent and well-written, but also funny. My mother adored those essays and I like to believe that a small attic window, long shut and frozen in place, was oiled and opened. Or maybe I'm full of shit.

She died the day before Mother's Day. We were all gathered around her bed (George and his wife, Sarah; Jean--a lesbian--and her wife, Este; Jean and Este's kids; me; my son, Daniel, and even Rachel via an open phone line because she was across the world, in Shanghai). Unconscious for hours, her breathing changed, deepened and slowed. Near the end, I began to speak to her in my head. I had no question that she heard me, especially because of what happened. I explained that while I understood her doubts about God and life after death, I was absolutely certain our souls live forever. I told her much more than I'd ever shared in person about how I'd learned to connect to the Other Side. I promised I would communicate with her, pass messages on if she wished, etc., I talked and talked, hoping to reassure her and, thus, to encourage her to let go. Finally, frustrated, I said, "All right, then, *don't go*. Whatever."

I looked down and began to read the book open in my lap.

The nurse across the room said, "She's gone."

Mom hasn't said *boo* to me since. Not a peep. Is she miffed because I don't actively grieve her loss? But look at those words: *grieve her loss*. What loss? She will come again, and I suspect this umpteenth coming (do you really believe Jesus only came once?) will arrive soon. I only hope I will be as good a grandmother to her as she was to my kids.

### (3)

The story of how St. Paul, or Paul of Tarsus, was blinded by a vision of Jesus begins with his fall from a horse.

I'm convinced that a fair percentage of the human race enjoys falling.. How else to explain why people mount thin strips of polished wood to their boots and hurdle down the sides of snow-covered mountains? Whenever someone hears a bit of my story, and their eyes widen with skepticism and the inevitable question, "Is she nuts?", I feel like pointing out that I'm not the one who's nuts. Not by a long shot. What about all of you out there who ski, climb mountains, jump out of airplanes, and -- dare I mention it-- play football?

Talk about *nuts*.

I've never fallen much because I'm risk-averse. See, I don't really enjoy pain. I can't imagine why you do. When I was a junior in high school and attending College du Lemman, a small Swiss boarding school, they arranged for a long winter week-end of skiing. I was only sixteen years old, and I liked how I looked in those skin-tight pants and my hand-knit sweater.

They told me I had to learn to ski, and my parents paid extra for this little holiday, so I figured I had no choice.

(Never assume you have no choice.)

The snow plow part went fine because I'd studied dance for many years. I was flexible and coordinated. It was so exhilarating to be out in the fresh air that I found myself smitten by my own bravery and skill. After a morning of lessons, we graduated to skiing down half the mountain.

Almost immediately, I was in deep doo-doo. This was a *mountain* and it ran, to my eyes, straight downhill. I came to the conclusion that skiing was foolish and stupid. Then I fell. Luckily, it was only a twisted ankle, not a break, but I remember being sprawled on the icy slope, snot running from my nose, and the pain so intense that I felt like vomiting.

And then there was the summer I spent learning French in Aix-en-Provence, when some local French teenagers took me climbing up *Sainte-Victoire*. They wanted to make the excursion *fun* (excuse me?), so they chose the hardest route up the mountain. I fell off the side of a cliff, and I'm sure I was caught by the French man below me only because I had the presence of mind to yell, "Aides-moi!" Obviously, despite climbing a mountain called Saint Victory, I hadn't yet achieved my full, living sainthood.

For many, many years, I didn't fall again. Then we had a party. You know the kind I mean. *A par-tee*. It was the house-warming we threw after having spent a ton of money and many months renovating a beautiful old Victorian in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. We invited everyone, had a full bar and bartender, catered a dinner of sweet little chicken pot pies, and even hired a sultry torch singer who undulated around the living room in a tight dress.

I don't know how many drinks I had that night. A lot. Near the end of the evening, the torch singer said she had a headache and I offered to get her some Tylenol from the master bathroom, which was all the way at the top of the house. (I wonder whether that was one of my stranger decorating ideas, though we sold the house not long after for a nice profit.) Clutching the white pills in my left hand, and -- apparently -- not holding onto the bannister, I began my descent from the third to the second floor. The stairs were many, narrow and extremely steep. I slipped on the top step and proceeded to bump in Winnie-the-Pooh fashion (bumpety, bumpety, bumpety, BUMP) on my tushy, all the way to the bottom.

At the second floor landing, I stood up, assessed the damage, and decided I was A-okay. No need to tell anyone that I'd fallen. I walked to the top of stairs, now leading from the second to first floors, *clutched* hold of the bannister, and walked sedately down. At the bottom, I found a sea of faces in the living room, mouths open in horror and eyes registering disbelief.

A chorus of voices sang out, "Are you all right?"

When I turned fifty years old, I traveled alone to Guana Island in the British Virgin Islands. One morning, I began a hike up a small mountain, without water or a way to contact anyone. Though it was mid-July and promised to get hot later, I figured I'd be up that mountain in no time. I was wrong. The climb was steeper and more difficult than I'd expected. I told myself it was good to be alone because I could stop every few minutes to catch my breath without feeling that I was holding back a partner. About three-quarters of the way up, I became so hot and tired that I knew I wasn't going to make it to the top. A trail sign pointed to a more direct route down the mountain and I started my descent, which proved to be even steeper and rougher than I expected.

I fell.

For the second time in my life, while hiking, I fell, but this time there was no French man waiting to catch me with open arms. In my shock and panic, I grabbed at a small bush/tree. It ripped out of the soil, uprooted, and I slammed into the earth, hitting my forehead and cutting a gash in my leg. I lay there for a few minutes, astounded that this had happened. I'm usually a careful person. How had I been so foolish as to let this occur? And how the heck was I going to get down that mountain and back to my hotel room?

There are times when pure grit is needed, and this was one of them. I turned around, certain that I wouldn't be able to manage the more dramatic descent, and headed back down my original path. Every two steps, I stopped and crouched low, fighting the dizziness that nearly overwhelmed me. The sun shone through the trees, dappling shadows that were harsh and hot. I made it to the bottom of the mountain and stepped out onto the dusty dirt road, which I needed to follow back to the hotel. It was deserted and merciless in the direct sun. I vomited and lay down along the road, unable to continue for twenty minutes or so. Ultimately, safely back in my room, I realized that I'd suffered a concussion.

Now, this was my *fiftieth* birthday, the one where I was scheduled to receive diamonds. I knew of one acquaintance whose husband had spent an entire year searching, from Israel to South Africa, for the perfect, albeit *gargantuan*, diamond for her fiftieth birthday. The absence of diamonds on *my* birthday was no fault of my husband's. We were officially separated, even though no one knew it except ourselves. I would move out sometime during the summer after our youngest child graduated from high school, when he would presumably have been accepted into his college of choice and the damage of divorce, though still weighty, wouldn't rock his world too much. That date was a year in the future.

(To relieve your considerable curiosity: yes, he did get into his college of choice, Yale. So sue me.)

The small resort on Guana Island didn't really seem like a resort. There were only a handful of guests at any time, and we ate communally at small, candle-lit tables on an old-fashioned veranda. My room was glorious, with an expansive marble floor, and massive double-doors opening to a patio perched high above the sea. The other people in residence were all married and, as a single woman, I wasn't a welcome addition to the fold. Or, maybe I was, by the men, which was why their wives looked right through me. I began to dread mealtimes.

With a concussion and the massive migraine that followed, I opted out of any interactions by simply staying in my room. It wasn't the most miserable time I'd ever had. I was reading some massive, silly mystery, despite the headache, and there was something about that marble floor that soothed me. My bare feet would slide over the elegant cool slabs, and, briefly, I seemed to sense that I had a future of some sort, though what it was, I didn't know. I also had a notebook with me, in which I was making notes and brainstorming about a new novel about a female rabbi. Don't ask me what happened to it.

Everything appeared to be unchanged when I returned home. I lived in the Lehigh Valley, which is about an hour's drive north-west of Philadelphia. Our house was a mock-Tudor, an architectural style I loathe, but which we'd bought and renovated because there was very little time to orchestrate our move from Chicago, and we just had to *do* it. And, wouldn't you know, I loved the house. It had an unusual, circular floor plan that was gracious and calming. Huge windows framed the view of a massive park at the rear of the house and some impressive acreage out front: three perfectly placed Japanese maples and a curving, circular

driveway. Circles, it seemed, were the form and structure of my life there. My study on the second floor had French doors leading to a tiny balcony, with vistas over the trees.

Decoratively, I'd been my most daring in that room, the study where I hoped to keep writing, and publishing, novels. I chose a deeply dark green-black color for the walls, matched by a carpet of the same rich hue. When the painters began the job, I took one look, snatched up the telephone, and called my mother in Florida.

"It's very, very, very *dark*," I said ominously.

"Don't do it!" she yelled.

"I'm doing it," I screamed, slamming down the phone.

Boy, did it look good.

I was not merely *at home* in that house; I was quite sure that the house was *at home* with me. We became instant friends. Even the challenge of ending a marriage, while not actually doing so, didn't interrupt the love and ease I felt there. Now, after my fiftieth birthday concussion, it was August. Sure, it was hot, but I rarely turned on the air-conditioning that had, admittedly, cost a lot of money to install in an old house. I opened all the windows and the French doors wide. As a notoriously tidy housekeeper, I kept the place clean and neat. No clutter. Nothing to interrupt the eye or disturb the senses. Birdsong and the rustle of trees floated inside, meandering around the circles. An odor of earth and trees rooted the house in the land.

Soon after my return, I went to the Allentown Public Library, as I did every ten days or so, and did my *thing* in the New Books section. After choosing a pile of the most recently published novels, I headed for the check-out counter, passing the cart with books ready to be

re-shelved. Sometimes I glanced at those books, but not often, since my arms were usually full. That day, *the day of all days*, I looked in the non-fiction section, where I seldom-to-never looked, and saw John Edwards' *One Last Time*, the story of his development and career as a medium who sees and talks to dead people.

Not an interest of mine, or not any more than for most of the public, who might have a minor curiosity about such shenanigans. This was before the influx of reality shows, and the programs -- both fiction and fact -- about mediums, talking to God, etc., I picked up the book. I glanced at the introduction. I added it to my pile of books and continued on to the Check-Out counter.

The rest, as they say, is history.

My mother fell so often when she was a young grandmother that one of my kids suggested writing a children's book entitled, "My Bubbe Falls In Holes." *Bubbe* is the Yiddish term for Grandmother, to which my mother took an inordinate liking even though she, herself, was Unitarian and only I, and my new family, were Jewish. Didn't matter. She was *Bubbe*, though other members of the Jewish community thought it odd she would appropriate such an inappropriate moniker.

Despite lecturing her about looking *down* as she walked, she just kept looking *up*, and falling into holes. Her injuries ranged from mild to severe. Admittedly, her falls took a toll and it's hard for me to find much of a silver lining in this tendency of hers. Old people do grow ever more unbalanced as they age, and their fear of falling -- a perfectly legitimate fear -- seems to perversely increase the odds that they *will* fall.

The truth is that it's never *fun* to fall, even if you're the type to relish risk and its attendant excitement though, strangely, it's a whole lotta fun to *watch* someone fall. The old

slipping on a banana peel scenario. We howl at movie scenes depicting human beings falling unexpectedly, especially if the person is full of grandeur or obvious self-importance. Very cool to witness the very cool get their *commupence*.

In the classic humorous scene, where a person *actually* falls, or metaphorically falls (think of Lucille Ball in the candy-making assembly line, when she's desperately stuffing more and more chocolates into her mouth: a "fall" in dignity and from rational human behavior), we find it hilarious to bear witness on another's collapse.

Sometimes, we're able to laugh at our *own* fall. When I was a Young Married Woman, my husband's family went on a bike ride in a Hilton Head, South Carolinian state park. My mother-in-law, Esther, was at the head of the riders, leading us, when -- unexpectedly -- she took a dramatic spill. Horrified, particularly since she didn't get up right away, we all hopped off our bikes and raced to her side, only to find her sprawled on the ground next to the bicycle, howling with laughter. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her face glowed red, and she hiccuped helplessly. Her kids, husband, and I -- the abhorred *shiksa* daughter-in-law (though I'd had an Orthodox conversion to Judaism, I was nevertheless deeply and hopelessly disliked by her) -- found her laughter catching. We bent double, gasping and weeping.

In one of those terrible surprises that the Universe sometimes delivers, Esther would be dead from a quick-acting stomach cancer just five years later. She was a woman of deep religious convictions, who studied Torah in the last weeks of her life, *and* a woman of spontaneous joy. Except for her hatred of me, I can think of no other ways in which she lacked a life attitude of compassion and generosity. I liked her a lot, which probably isn't a positive statement about me. I've suspected for some time that I can be rather too forgiving. I should have hated her in return; I am certain that this would have won her over because, then, she

could've respected me. Instead, I simply gave her *more* to hate, not less. Anyway, I can't see why she had to die. I guess there's never a good reason for death, and it's hopeless, not to say downright silly, to look for reasons.

On her deathbed, her children, husband, sons-in-law, and I, were present. After my husband arranged to have the morphine upped, so that she wouldn't suffer, she fell into a quiet sleep of unconsciousness. At a rare moment when no one else was next to her, I approached the bed and sat down. I stared at her face, stunned and disturbed that my enemy was going to die. It seemed horribly wrong. I would never win her own now. I'd failed at this important relationship, and I felt, personally, devastated by that failure.

Her breathing was, of course, a struggle. You could hear the fluid in her lungs, thick and deep, like a bell that's been wrapped in flannel to mute its sound. Tentatively, still scared she might snap at me, I reached out and stroked the hair back from her brow. In my mind, I spoke. "*It's okay, you can go now. Let go.*" Then I left her bedside, retreating to a far corner. Shortly after, she died.

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil, and "fell" from God's good graces, they were banished from the Garden of Eden and subjected to death. Can you, with me, see the humorous possibility in this scene? Consider it a joke! We are tempted and, *predictably*, we succumb to to the temptation.

And, oh my Lord, do we ever *fall*. It's the story of our lives, after all. Falling as toddlers, when we're just learning to walk, only to pick ourselves up and try again. If we're lucky, we may have a diaper to soften the landing, or we're well-fed enough that our butts provide sufficient padding. Even if the fall is sharp and painful -- as so often it is -- we fight to rise again. This is more than poignant. It is also, as the fall occurs, *funny*.

My opinion? The whole damn thing is a comedy sketch, structured with clear intent and purpose, to *be* funny. The tricky thing, as I am wont to know (she said ruefully), is that some comedy writers are more talented than others. Is my former mother-in-law, Esther, laughing as she dashes about on the Other Side?

You betcha.