

STEVEN R BERGER

Ursula's Yahrtzeit Candle

sample chapters



Ursula's Yahrtzeit Candle

Steven R. Berger

© 2013

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	4
Chapter 2	8

Chapter 1

Fourscore and seven years. That may have been fine for a young country, but too long for most people. Especially herself, Ursula thought, as she moved hangers from right to left in a small closet. In her lifetime she had gone from an abundance of clothes in a large home, to just what could be crammed into a suitcase at four in the morning. Then only to the rags on her back. Providence smiled on her as her family struggled to make a new life in a strange country, and then good fortune rewarded them when they were finally able to immigrate to the United States. That led to a steady increase in her stepfather's prosperity. So their small house with its small closets was traded up to near the elegance and style the family enjoyed before. She married well. Had children. Closets got larger again, filled with nice clothes, many shoes, but not an overabundance of anything. She had learned that more is not always better. And now, at eighty-seven, it was a smaller closet to fit her diminutive needs. Some long skirts, blouses, a few dresses she never wore, a dozen pairs of pants, even a pair of jeans she was coaxed into buying by her daughter and granddaughter, but would not be seen dead in. Once fashionable shoes had given way to sensible flats, loafers and tennis shoes, which she had to admit, were her favorite.

* * *

Charles Stewart Gray would never be chosen for the romantic lead in a movie. More likely his ordinariness would make him a prime candidate for the CIA. Mid-forties, graying, thinning hair and a paunch from a lack of exercise. Complementing the entirely mundane ensemble, Chuck was exactly average height.

What he lacked in physical prowess, Chuck made up for in tenderness and devotion. However, tonight he had images of Felicia Tafoya imprinted on his psyche. He and June fondled one another as they had hundreds of times before. He caressed her the way a coat of varnish envelops a rare wood carving. Then he penetrated her like a piston in a well-oiled cylinder. Then, on her command, pumped her like a steam engine, held her arms down as he fucked and fucked and fucked.

Thoroughly spent, she murmured something about how she might not be able to sit down tomorrow; while he envisioned a pretty, small, brown body bejeweled with pearl-white drops of his semen.

* * *

Reuben Montanez was considering wearing the Dodgers jersey with his name on the back. It wasn't actually his name. It was the last name of one of the team's lesser known players from several years earlier, but it was the same as his. His brother had gotten it for Christmas a few years ago. When Reuben's brother died, the jersey, and Julian's other meager possessions, fell to Reuben. But the jersey was what he loved best. His friends would laugh if they knew that he washed the shirt himself by hand—in cold water—with Woolite—so it would, he hoped, last yet another year. He decided not to wear it tonight. He feared it might get torn, or soiled beyond his ability to clean it. And he just couldn't afford that, financially or emotionally.

* * *

Ursula decided on a matching top and bottom of "active separates," as the department stores called them. Her grandson called them "lady sweats," the kind Betty White wears in that sitcom. Pastel pink, white piping, comfortable over the Depends she would wear, just in case. The outfit went well with the white tennis shoes. An expensive-looking white knockoff purse and a string of pearls would make it look like she had money, if not on her person, then in some nearby ATM.

Ursula Frank took off her trifocals to pull on a light knit top with long sleeves. She replaced her glasses and tucked the top into her pink fleece pants when the phone rang. Must be 7:45, she thought as she answered. It was her daughter, Deborah. She called every night at 7:45. She said it was because she wanted to make sure she didn't interrupt her mother's dinner or her bedtime. Although Ursula appreciated Deborah's concern, she knew the timing was based on Deborah and Sam wanting to watch whatever was on TV in primetime, so she made

sure to keep her conversations to ten or twelve minutes.

This evening they talked about what everyone had for dinner, how the kids were doing now that school was back in session—her granddaughter was a senior in high school, her grandson a sophomore in college. If Deborah had just had one-third more kid and a dog, Ursula thought, she and Sam would have the perfect American family.

Ursula's son, Mike, or Moishe as it said on his birth certificate, only called once a week. His calls came on Sunday. The times varied by basketball and baseball season, and also by whether the Dodgers and the Lakers were playing at home or away. The schedule hadn't changed from her days in Sun City. Mike was divorced and, so far, had only produced a grandson, Justin, who was still in junior high and had dubbed Ursula's fleece outfits "lady sweats," a double entendre, he had proudly announced.

As this was Thursday, she could count on at least two days—and more likely, three—before Mike would call her. And nearly twenty-four hours before Deborah would check in.

* * *

Instead of the jersey, Reuben picked out a yellow and black checked shirt that was a size too big for him. The oversized shirt was part of the uniform, buttoned to the neck, short sleeves, hanging outside the baggy jeans his mother would never let him wear, if she were there to object. But his mother was working, as usual. It was nighttime, so she was behind the counter at the liquor store a few blocks away. If it was daytime, then she would be at the dry cleaning plant, inhaling toxic fumes as she purged soil, food, wine, sweat and other stains from the expensive fabrics of rich white folks.

Reuben barely remembered his father. He left when Reuben was about four. His brother Julian was eight then. He told Reuben exciting stories about their father when their mother was at work, which seemed like all the time. How smart he was, how brave he had been in Vietnam, how he was going to come back someday and buy a house for the boys and their mom, and everyone would be happy.

* * *

Ursula answered the phone cheerfully. She didn't want Deborah to think there was anything different about tonight. If Deborah had been listening closely, it might have dawned on her that Ursula was more upbeat than usual, but her attention was on the clock, instead of the conversation, caused her to overlook this subtle anomaly.

In truth, Ursula's mood had been declining gradually, but steadily, since about a month after arriving in the L.A. area. She had been cajoled into moving to the Southern California megalopolis by both her children, though Deborah was more of a driving force than Mike. After raising their children in California, Ursula and her second husband, Bernie, retired from the business they built together and moved to Sun City, Arizona. They lived there for nearly twenty years before Bernie reached for a bowl of artificial sweetener at breakfast and fell dead across the table, spilling his unsweetened decaf onto the vinyl floor of their two-bedroom bungalow.

It shouldn't have been a surprise, given what the doctors had been telling him, but one is always startled when it happens. Ursula had seen death before, but never so quick and peaceful. Bernie just laid there on the table, his head turned toward the wife he adored, his gray-blue eyes sparkling with love as his soul said good-bye.

* * *

It wasn't until Reuben was 12 that he accepted the fact that his father was never going to be coming back. There would be no nice house. The family would never be together. He wanted to be angry with his brother Julian for lying to him. But Julian had sacrificed so much. He worked all the way through high school to help

their mother. His teachers said he showed promise and should go to college. But there wasn't money or time for college. Julian could only get menial jobs, telling Reuben how this one or that one would grow into something big. But if something went wrong, or business was slow, it was always Julian who got blamed or laid off. From working the docks at the Central Market in downtown L.A. to hawking sodas at Dodger Stadium, Julian kept telling himself and his family that this was the job that would lead to a promotion, more money and a better life for them all.

* * *

Ursula envied Bernie now. She also envied Josef, her first husband, Art, her last boyfriend and Marty, a favored companion. All dead. Each seemed to have just suddenly left the room; Josef and Art went off to hospitals under their own steam, then laid down and died within a few days. Marty just went to sleep one night and never woke up. Even many of the women in her life, friends and relatives alike were able to escape their bodies and minds and set their souls free. But her body, painful and degenerating as it was, wouldn't quit. Neither would her mind. And, she now felt that she had a very real lapse in judgment when she finally acquiesced to her children's wishes and moved from Sun City to L.A.

"Mom, you'll be so much more comfortable here. The weather is more mild, we can visit you more often, take you places. You will be able to enjoy your grandchildren and watch them grow," Deborah pleaded and Mike quietly agreed.

"But dear," Ursula said, "I have friends here I've known for years. We play cards. Someone always has a car so we can shop, go to movies, have lunch. Really, I'm fine. Besides, you're busy working and raising your family, so is Mike. And the kids, they want to 'do their own thing,' as they say." Unfortunately, Deborah finally won out. But worse, Ursula was right.

* * *

Unfortunately, Julian Montanez was wrong about his dream of a better life for his family.

One sunny afternoon in the fifth inning of a game against the San Francisco Giants, Fernando Montanez was called up from the bench to replace the starting shortstop. In the next inning Montanez picked up a ground ball, threw it to first for an out. The first baseman then threw it back to Montanez who ran down the Giants' runner trying to make his way back to second base. It was a spectacular double play by Montanez. Julian was all smiles, bouncing so much he lost his footing and would have fallen down the steps if he hadn't put his hand on the shoulder of the man seated on the aisle. The man flinched and pushed Julian's arm yelling, "Get your filthy Mexican hands off me." Trying to regain his balance, Julian shifted his weight to his left leg before rocking back onto his right. By this time the man had gotten up and Julian's tray of sodas hit him in the hip. The man pulled back his right arm and threw a fist at Julian. Julian pulled his torso to the right and the man's fist went flying past Julian's head. The force of the attempted blow caused the man to fall forward into Julian, and both men went tumbling down the steps toward the Dodgers' dugout.

Even though no punches landed, both men looked like they had gone a round with Mike Tyson. Gashes and bruises abounded. Blood dripped from noses, lips and eye sockets.

When stadium security arrived, the man was shouting that Julian had attacked him for no reason. Julian tried to explain to security what had happened. Stadium security took each man to a separate room for questioning. They then turned Julian over to the L.A.P.D. who put him in a holding cell pending an arraignment. Julian asked to call his mother. An officer pointed to a pay phone on the wall. Julian removed a wad of singles and fives totaling \$38 dollars that was still in his trousers from selling sodas, then reached down to retrieve some coins. A large man with many tattoos saw the bills, took two strides across the cell, wrapped one massive arm around Julian's neck, jerked back, and removed the bills from his hand as Julian's lifeless body slumped toward the floor.

No one in the holding cell saw anything.

Chapter 2

Ursula took the elevator from the second floor of the two-story assisted-living facility to the lobby. “My son’s going to pick me up outside,” she told the Filipino woman at the front desk. “I’ll just wait for him by the palm tree.”

“You have a nice visit with your family, Ursula,” she said in a voice that belonged in a choir.

Ursula pressed the automatic opener pad for the glass double doors of the facility and passed through into the mild evening twilight. She placed one hand on the brick wall of a tall planter next to the entry, walked slowly along the planter and then moved to a handrail to help her go down the five steps to street level. She could have taken the wheelchair ramp, but it would take longer, and she was still able to manage steps, up or down, as long as there weren’t too many. She reached the palm tree that was just out of sight of the front desk at almost the same time as the cab she had called for earlier.

“Where to, ma’am?” the cabby asked.

Ursula handed him an address.

“Are you sure, ma’am? That’s a pretty rough part of town.”

“Oh yes, I know, but I’ll be fine. It’s a friend’s place and I’ve been there a hundred times,” she lied in her soft German accent.

“Okay, you’re the boss” he said, making an on-the-spot decision to keep this one off the books. His home wasn’t too much farther than the address she had given him. It was close to his normal quitting time, so if he called in and said he was done for the day, no one would suspect one last fare. He called in and told his dispatcher that the fare in the Valley was a no-show and that he was calling it a night. Then, without starting the meter, he pulled the brightly-colored taxi away from the curb.

As they drove through the thinning traffic toward downtown Los Angeles’ east side, the driver talked about the weather, sports, the smog, the subway, the tourists. A running commentary on life in L.A. designed to ingratiate his fare and increase his tip. Ursula reflexively ‘bummed’ and affirmed where appropriate without really listening.

Her mind was on the task at hand. The address she had written down was a house number she found on Google, a discipline she was taught by one of her grandsons. They had shown her how to find their home, to look down on it as if from a cloud. And, she used it to show them some of the places she had lived; she remembered the addresses or location of each; first Berlin, then Königsberg in Poland, and then the Free City of Danzig that was neither Poland nor Germany—and now known as Gdansk. Her last stop in Europe was Amsterdam, then on to Havana, New York, Los Angeles, Sun City and finally Encino. It was hard to tell whether they were more impressed with her computer skills or her world travels.

The address she gave the cabby was in the same neighborhood where the papers reported a lot of gang activity; gangs fighting over turf, members getting beaten up and shot, businesses being vandalized, even a body being found.

It was a desperate plan, but she wanted out, and this seemed like as good a way as any. She had heard of suicide by policeman, where some schmuck hurts or even kills innocent bystanders so the police will just shoot him dead. But she didn’t want to hurt anyone to accomplish her goals. She was already dying inside. Her body having more and more pain, her freedoms diminishing, and the fear that her mind would go before she did. She should have never left Sun City to come to this lonely place, she thought. The promises of more family lasted about two weeks. They gave way to, “We’ll do that soon, we’ve got lots of time to spend together now.”

Her plan was simple, at least to her. Get dropped off in this battle zone, walk around a bit looking like easy money, then get mugged. Maybe some gang ruffian would try to grab her purse. She would resist. Then maybe another gang member would hit her over the head. That's all it should take, she thought. Someone comes up from behind her with a pipe or a stick and cracks her head open like a soft-boiled egg.

Then the gang members would melt into the night, never to be seen or punished. Or, so what if they got caught. They're just a bunch of hooligans. They would deserve whatever punishment they got; for they certainly would be guilty of killing her, and undoubtedly, if you could believe the media, hundreds of other crimes.

End of sample chapters.

To purchase the complete ebook, go to

<http://stevenrberger.com/?dd-product=ursulas-yahrtzeit-candle>