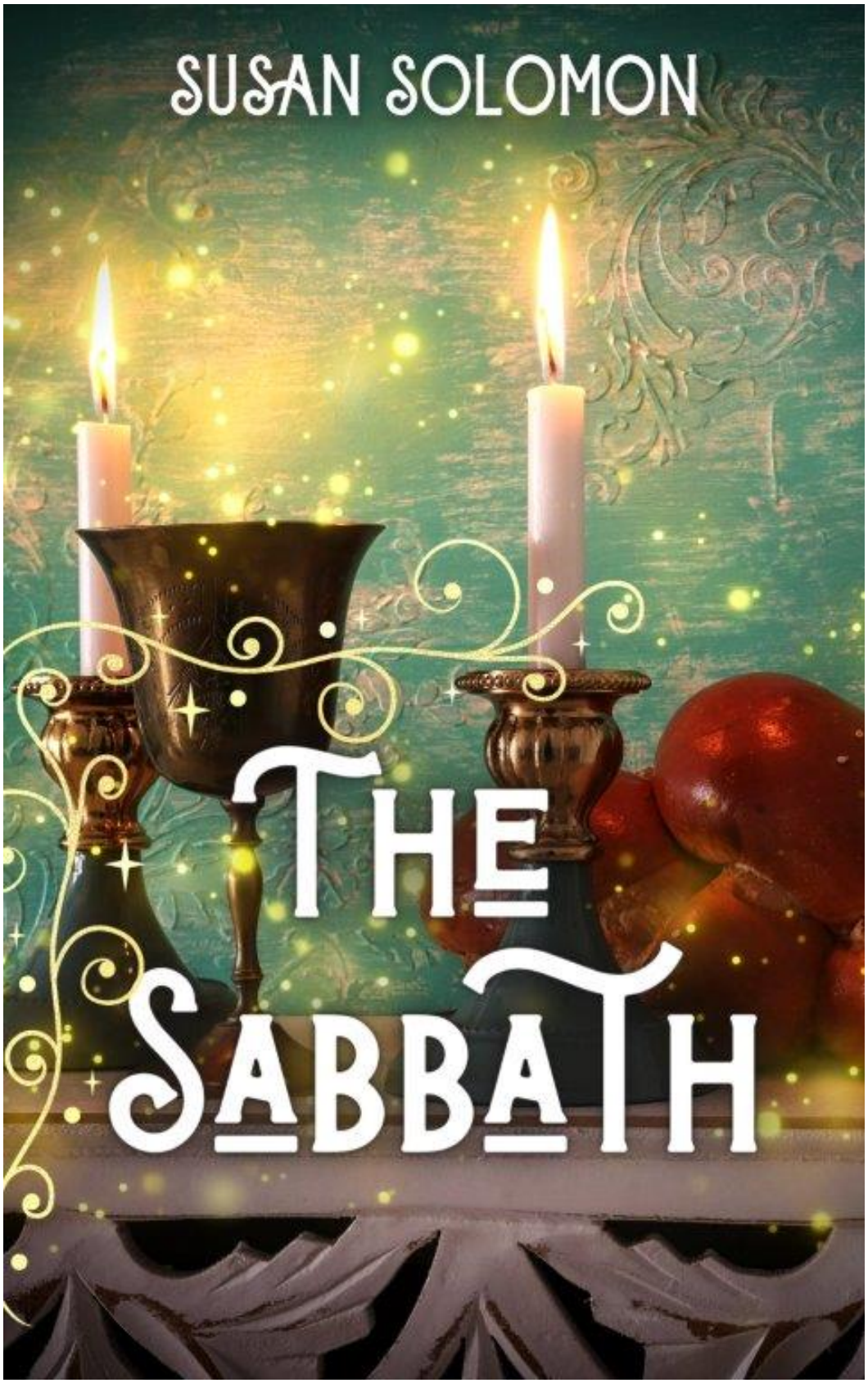
SUSAN SOLOMON
THE SABBATH

Sabbath

Susan Solomon

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Chapter One

“Damn, rush hour traffic’s brutal,” my father complained, though the words he actually used were a bit more colorful. Forehead wrinkled, he slammed his hand on the steering wheel.

For all the movement on it, the Belt Parkway to Brooklyn might as well have been a sculpture garden. Car engines revved next to us, in front of us, behind us. That September afternoon was unseasonably hot. As if the rubber had melted and fused to the pavement, tires tried fruitlessly to inch ahead. With no air-conditioning in our 1961 Buick Roadmaster, the windows were cranked down so that an ocean breeze could cool us. Except there was no breeze. The only relief from the monotony of an endless train of cars was a few billowing sails on the Atlantic Ocean beyond the wide sandbar that lined the road.

“Damn!” Dad leaned on the horn.

The smell of smoke from tailpipes drifted through my window. *Maybe the carbon monoxide would kill me*, I thought. Hoped. I wasn't looking forward to what loomed ahead.

Sabbath dinner with my grandparents. Boring. Instead of a night with my friends, I’d wind up watching television while my parents and grandparents talked about old people I didn’t know. If my prayer was answered, the traffic would annoy my father enough that he’d turn us around and head back home.

“Knock off the attitude,” Dad said.

I screwed up my face. How did he always know what I was thinking?

One day short of fifteen, I sulked in the back seat. My brother, four years younger, squirmed next to me, his hair Brillcreamed back, his shirttail pulled from his chinos.

"Get off me!" I hissed at him.

He reached for my hair.

"Ouch! Make him stop." I smacked his hand.

Without turning around, my mother said, "Robert, don't tease your sister."

My brother stuck his tongue out then tried to hug me. There was a bump when I shoved him against the door, as far from me as he could get and still be in the car.

"Stop it, Susan." My father eyed me in the rearview mirror.

Fine. Now it was my fault?

"Put your lip back in," my mother said. "What's the matter with you?"

Robert started acting up and I got blamed—what did she think was the matter?

"Can't you do something about this, Lou?" My mother leaned forward, as if that would propel us past the line of cars blocking our way. "Pull off at the next exit, and take side streets. We're going to be so late."

Dad stared straight ahead.

"Wouldn't be caught in this traffic if you'd have let me stay home," I muttered.

"Susan!" Dad said.

"What? It's Friday. All the kids are gonna be at Kathy's house. Not me. I'm gonna have dinner with Grandma and Grandpa."

I saw my father's shoulders tense. "Knock of the sarcasm." Reflected in the rearview mirror, his lips were as tight as the line of cars in front of us.

Mom touched his arm, then twisted to look at me over the back of her seat. "Grandma specifically asked to see you." In the silent language of mothers and daughters, her eyes added, *Please stop complaining.*

Three weeks ago my grandmother had been rushed to Downstate Medical Center, her lungs filled with fluid. Congestive heart failure, my parents had called it. That morning the doctor had signed her release.

"I can see her any time. Why'd it have to be tonight? Kathy's having a party."

"Because tomorrow's your birthday," Mom said. "She's afraid she might not be here for many more."

"Yeah, but..."

"That's enough, Susan!" Dad's voice, sounding like that of my high school's principal, warned that his patience had worn as thin

as his lips. His blue eyes were locked on the road ahead, searching for a break in the line of traffic. A clear space he could race into and get to his mother a moment sooner.

Chapter Two

Just before sundown, we arrived at the wood-frame house in Bensonhurst. It was faced with grey shingles—some cracked, others missing. It had stained parchment shades drawn down over the windows of the sun porch. An antique *mezuzah* was nailed to the doorframe, a decoration covered in Hebrew verses from the Torah.

It had been a gift from Grandma's father when she married in 1911 and left home to live among strangers in America. *So you never forget who you are,* he'd said when he put it in her hand. I didn't know if the man in a picture on my father's dresser had really said that, but that's the way Dad told the story. And he told it to me every time we went to Bensonhurst.

My grandparents' house was laid out like a railroad car, with one room leading to the next in a single file. The inside was heavy with furnishings my grandparents had brought with them from Russian Poland. Their house always smelled of a mixture of mint and antiseptic. But that night it was filled with a different aroma. Fresh baked challah. I smelled it as soon as I walked through the front door.

My mother sniffed twice. "Papa!" she scolded my grandfather. "Mama's supposed to be resting. Why'd you let her bake?"

Grandpa ran his laborer's hands through his tuft of white hair and then rubbed the stubble on his round chin. With a long-suffering sigh, he raised his eyes, as if asking God to explain the difficult woman he'd been married to for fifty years.

"Zat voman," he called her—*that woman*. "Zat voman," he said again, exasperation in his voice. "She wouldn't sit still a minute. '*We must have challah, Hymie,'* she says to me, like that says why she wouldn't sit."

We followed him into the living room. It was crowded with a sofa, wingback chairs, a china hutch, and a credenza. On each end table was a cut-glass bowl filled with coffee-flavored sucking candy.

Grandma's voice, insistent, commanding, floated in from the kitchen. "Shabbat without challah? A *shanda*!"—a *Yiddish* word that meant something between a crime and a sin.

Drying her hands on her apron, her backless slippers clopping on the floor, she shuffled into the room. Gaunt after her illness, Grandma's floral housecoat looked much too big for her. Her eyes were sunken and lined with dark rings. The blue in them was clouded behind thick glasses.

"Leban." She sighed my father's Hebrew name. Stretching on tiptoe, she brushed back his curly brown hair and kissed his forehead. She hugged my mother and brother then turned to me. "*Shenah maideleh*, my little one. Grown so much and so pretty. Let me look on you."

I fidgeted with the waistband of my dress. I was annoyed that I'd been forced to wear one just to have dinner in Brooklyn.

"My name's Susan, Grandma, not *Shenah*...whatever," I said. "And you saw me in the hospital two weeks ago."

Mom pinched my arm.

I shot a look at her. “Well, I haven’t grown up or gotten beautiful in two weeks.”

Hiding behind Dad, Robert snickered. He mimed pinching me with his thumb and forefinger.

My mother turned her back on us. “Come on, Mama.” She wrapped an arm around Grandma’s shoulders. “Let me help you in the kitchen.”

“Nah, nah, Jeannie.” Through her thick accent, it sounded as though she called my mother *Dzinny*. “The gefilte fish is made, challah’s in the oven. Everything’s done. Only the Shabbat candles to light.”

Again Grandma wiped her hands. I wondered if the dishwater on them ever dried.

“Gefilte fish? Papa, she’s supposed to be resting!” Mom spoke as if she were the parent. As if Grandma wasn’t in the room.

Shrugging, Grandpa looked again to God. *What could anyone do with zat voman?* he might have said had he not been in *zat voman’s* presence.

“When I visit her in the hospital yesterday, she says to me, ‘Hymie, don’t forget. Go to the fish store. Buy fresh and alive.’ Fish swimming in the bathtub all night. How could a person wash with fish in the bathtub?” my grandpa said.

Ignoring him, Grandma lifted a shade and peered through the window. “Sun’s down.” She twisted her neck to look at me. “*Shenah maideleh*, light the candles.”

I slipped behind my father.

Mom struck a match. “I’ll do it.”

“Nah, nah, Dzinny,” Grandma said. “Tonight Shoshona will light.” Shoshona was the Hebrew word for Susan.

My face scrunched, I whined, “No… Ma—”

Reaching behind my father, Grandma dragged me to her side. The woman had been ill. How did she have the strength to do that? “The prayer,” she instructed.

Again I looked to my mother for help. She pushed me toward the credenza where Grandma’s twin silver candlesticks waited.

“Do it already,” Robert complained.

Mom handed me a lit match. The wicks of the candles crackled from the flame. Rolling my eyes, I slurred the ancient Hebrew words that held no meaning in my world. *“Baruch… atah… adonai…* Can’t I say it in English?”

“The prayer, the way we always say it,” Grandma insisted.

“Why can’t Robert do this?” I wanted to smack the smirk off his face.

“It’s a woman’s right to thank God for giving us these candles to light,” Mom said. “You’re a woman now.”

Sighing, I started again. Might as well get it over with.

Her hand on my shoulder, Grandma corrected each slip I made.

“Ya, ya. Ist gut”—it’s good—she said when I was done. I didn’t return her hug.

Grandpa smiled and removed his hat. “A-men.”

“Can we eat now?” Robert moved toward the dining room.

Instead of discussing people and foreign places I didn’t know—which was something I *could* thank God for—talk through dinner was of Grandma’s condition.

His spoon raised above his bowl, Dad asked, “When do you see the doctor again?”

“Eat, Leban,” Grandma said. “Eat while the soup is hot.”

“Mama, Lou just wants know…”

“I go when I go. Papa will take me when it’s time.”

Grandpa shook his head. “Zat voman,” he mumbled, and stood to carve the chicken—clearly an easier task than cutting the stubbornness from his wife.

Robert pushed his plate aside. “I hate chicken.”

I elbowed him. “Shut up and eat it so we can get out of here.”

“Susan!” Dad said.

“I just told him to…”

Mom spoke over me. “Mama, I think I ought to go with you. I want to talk to the doctor, find out what we should do to take care of you.”

“We go at three o’clock tomorrow,” Grandpa told us before zat voman could stop him. His eyes flicking toward my father, he grinned.

Grandma grunted. She said little more until dinner was done and we’d cleaned the pots and dishes. Then she wiped her hands and pointed to the ancient Philco television in the living room. “You men go watch your cowboy pictures.” With her towel she shooed three generations from her kitchen.

I looked at my wristwatch. “Aren’t we going home?” I whispered to my mother.

She shook her head. Grabbing my shoulders, she pushed me toward the dinette table.

Grandma took my hand. “Come with me, s*henah maideleh…*”

“*Susan*, Grandma.”

“Ya, ya. *Maideleh*, come with me.”

Chapter Three

The kitchen was warm and smelled of roast chicken. We sat at the bare table on hard-backed chairs. Grandma placed relics of her past before us. A jade ring, faded sepia photographs, a cast-iron skillet she'd carried from Eastern Europe, a hand-sewn lace tablecloth. She spoke of my family's generations, of the people who'd given her these treasures.

"*Mein zeyde*," she said, stroking the gray bearded face in a picture. The man's arm rested on an anvil. His broad chest made his leather apron seem little more than a patch on his shirt.

"Your grandfather?" I felt drawn to his kind face.

"Ya, ya." She nodded. "He was…Dzinny, what's the word?"

"A blacksmith, Mama."

"Ach, such a man he was, *un edel…* gentle. And strong. Wise. Our village looked always to *mein zeyde*. And my *bubeh,* she couldn't wait, he should come home. See," Grandma pointed to the old woman with soft eyes who stood next to the man. "This is my *bubeh*. Emma. Such a *beryah…*"

"That means a wonderful wife," Mom explained.

The lines ringing Grandma's eyes faded when she smiled. "Always her house in order," she said. "Her table heavy with food that would make your mouth water. Six *kinder—*"

"Children," Mom translated.

“I know that.” I made a show of looking at my wrist.

Grandma covered my watch with her hand. “She taught them all to read and do sums.”

Trapped, unable to escape back to the twentieth century, I gave in. Pulling a photograph from the stack, I asked, “Who’s this?” The young woman in the picture looked defiantly at the camera.

Grandma closed her eyes, and her lips lifted in a wistful smile. “Shoshona,” she said. “*Zaydeh’s* sister.” She touched my cheek. “You was named to remember her. *Eingeshparht* she was—just like you.”

Mom laughed and looked squarely at me. “Stubborn.”

“I’m *not*!”

“Uh-huh,” Mom and Grandma said in unison.

“Just like Shoshona,” Grandma said. “To force her to do something was like trying to make a mule climb a ladder.” This was a Yiddish idiom my mother translated for me.

I didn’t want to climb any ladders. I just wanted to get home. I might still be able to get to Kathy’s house before her party ended.

Grandma glanced at Mom.

My mother nodded. “She’s old enough.”

Looking now at me, clutching the photograph to her chest, Grandma, said, “Shoshona lived near Livadia. The Tsar, he came to his palace there. His Easter, for us it’s *Pesach*. A Shabbat night. His

officers came to her village to move the Jews away, so the Tsar shouldn't have to look on us. What do they call it, Dzinny?"

"A pogrom."

I remembered learning in my high school history class that a pogrom was an organized attack on a particular religious or ethnic group. Historically they were most often against Jewish people.

"Ya, ya, pogrom." Anger burned in Grandma's eyes as she described horsemen thundering down dirt roads and into yards. Into houses. Swords slashing. Men, women, and children clutching what few possessions they could carry from their flaming homes.

"Shoshona said she wouldn't leave her home. Not even when those sons of the devil put torches to it." Grandma stopped and sighed, her eyes moist. It was as if she again saw her aunt disappear into the flames. "Like at Masada, a *pager*—"

"A martyr," Mom translated.

Nodding, Grandma took my hand and held tight to it. "This is who you come from, Shoshona. This is who you are."

* * *

The next afternoon, Mom and I took Grandma to the doctor. As we drove along Ocean Parkway, I leaned over the front seat. "Tell me more about Shoshona," I said. The woman had attached herself to my imagination. I'd been given her name. I was connected to her, to what she'd done.

Grandma laughed. "Come again on Shabbat. We talk more."

Chapter Four

A few years later, Grandma was gone. She hadn't died. Not yet. Alzheimer's had stolen her memory. I was old enough by then to understand the family she'd told me of on the many Sabbaths I'd sat beside her. The more she'd recalled, the more she'd showed me her relics during our after-dinner talks, and the more I wanted to learn more. "This is who you come from," she always began.

Now, as her memory faded, I would sit beside her on a hard-back chair in a kitchen that no longer smelled of challah and roast chicken. I would tell *her* of the family that made up her past. My past.

Grandma's stories remain with me, though each year her voice is less distinct in my mind. Still, I recall the sweet taste of her Sabbath challah. Still, I feel the velvet of her fingers tracing mine while she spoke of the people before me.

As a college student, that connection gave me the courage to take a long walk to Birmingham and spend a frenzied night in Chicago's Grant Park while politicians convened to decide my country's fate. It taught me to sing protest songs in Greenwich Village clubs, and chant *We shall not be moved* at countless sit-ins. It seems that my parents were right to name me after Grandma's Aunt Shoshona. *Eingeshparht*.

I've been thinking of this since last Friday. That afternoon, my daughter and son-in-law had driven from New Jersey for Sabbath dinner. As they came through the door to my Garden City home, I heard a whine from behind them.

“Ma, why’d I have to come tonight? The kids are all going to the movies.”

That was my 13-year-old granddaughter, Sarah. She was also named after Shoshona.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my kitchen. “I want to show you some photographs.”

On the sideboard in my living room were twin silver candlesticks handed down from Grandma. That night Sarah would recite the prayer to welcome the Sabbath.

About the Author

Formerly a Manhattan entertainment attorney and a contributing editor to the quarterly art magazine SunStorm Fine Art, Susan Lynn Solomon now lives in Niagara Falls, New York, the setting of many of her stories. She is the facilitator of the Just Buffalo Literary Center Writer's Critique Group.

Since 2007 her short stories on serious topics have appeared in numerous literary journals. These include "Abigail" Bender (awarded an Honorable Mention in a Writer's Journal short romance competition), "Ginger Man," "Elvira," "The Memory Tree," "Going Home," "Yesterday's Wings," "Smoker's Lament", and "Kaddish."