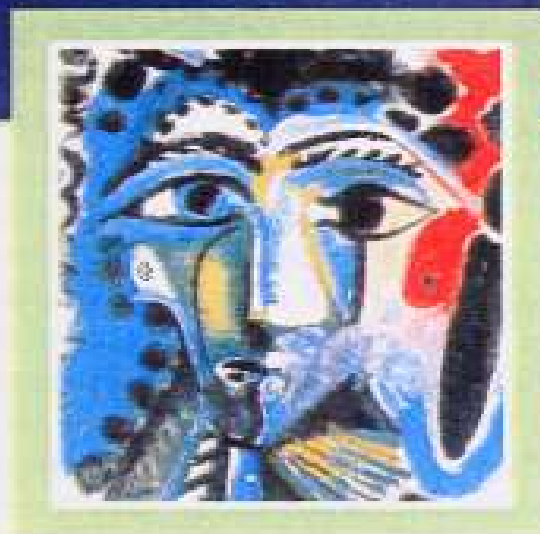


IRVIN D. YALOM

Author of the National Bestseller *Love's Executioner*



MOMMA

and the MEANING

of LIFE

TALES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

To Saul Spiro, psychiatrist, poet, artist.

With gratitude for our forty years offriendship—forty years of sharing life, books, the creative enterprise, and unwavering skepticism about the meaning of the whole shebang.

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usk. Perhaps I am dying. Sinister shapes surround my bed: cardiac monitors, oxygen canisters, dripping intravenous bottles, coils of plastic tubing—the entrails of death. Closing my lids, I glide into darkness.

But then, springing from my bed, I dart out of the hospital room smack into the bright, sunlit Glen Echo Amusement park where, decades past, I spent many summer Sundays. I hear carousel music. I breathe in the moist caramelized fragrance of sticky popcorn and apples. And I walk straight ahead—not hesitating at the Polar Bear Frozen Custard stand or the double dip roller coaster or the Ferris wheel—to take my place in the ticket line for the House of Horrors. My fare paid, I wait as the next cart swivels around the corner and clanks to a halt in front of me. After stepping in and pulling down the guard rail to lock myself

snugly into place, I take one last look about me—and there, in the midst of a small group of onlookers, I see her.

I wave with both arms and call, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Momma! Momma!" Just then the cart lurches forward and strikes the double doors, which swing open to reveal a black gaping maw. I lean back as far as I can and, before being swallowed by the darkness, call again, "Momma! How'd I do, Momma? How'd I do?"

Even as I lift my head from the pillow and try to shake off the dream, the words clot in my throat: "How'd I do, Momma? Momma, how'd I do?"

But Momma is six feet under. Stone-cold dead for ten years now in a plain pine casket in an Anacostia cemetery outside of Washington, D.C. What is left of her? Only bones, I guess. No doubt the microbes have polished off every scrap of flesh. Maybe some strands of thin gray hair, maybe some glistening streaks of cartilage cling to the ends of larger bones, the femur and the tibia. And, oh yes, the ring. Nestled somewhere in bone dust must be the thin, silver filigree wedding ring my father bought on Hester Street shortly after they arrived in New York, steerage class, from the Russian shtetl half a world away.

Yes, long gone. Ten years. Croaked and decayed. Nothing but hair, cartilage, bones, a silver filigree wedding ring. And her image lurking in my memories and dreams.

Why do I wave to Momma in my dream? I stopped waving years ago. How many? Maybe decades. Perhaps it was that afternoon over half a century ago, when I was eight and she took me to the Sylvan, the neighborhood movie theater around the corner from my father's store. Though there were many empty seats, she plunked herself down next to one of the neighborhood toughs, a boy a year older than I. "That seat's saved, lady," he growled.

"Yeah, yeah! Saved!" my mother replied contemptuously, as she made herself comfortable. "He's saving seats, the big shot!" she announced to everyone in earshot.

I tried to vanish into the maroon velvet seat cushion. Later, in

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the darkened theater, I summoned courage, turned my head around slowly. There he was, now sitting a few rows back next to his friend. No mistake, they were glaring and pointing at me. One of them shook his fist, mouthed, "Later!"

Momma ruined the Sylvan theater for me. It was now enemy territory. Off limits, at least in daylight. If I wanted to keep up with the Saturday serial—Buck Rogers, Batman, The Green Hornet, The Phantom, —I had to arrive after the show started, take my seat in the darkness, at the very rear of the theater, as close to an escape door as possible, and depart just before the lights went on again. In my neighborhood, nothing took precedence over avoiding the major calamity of being beaten up. To be punched—not hard to imagine: a bop on the chin, and that's it. Or slugged, slapped, kicked, cut—same thing. But, beaten up—ohmygod. Where does beaten up end? What's left of you? Beaten-up boys are out of the game, forever pinned with the "got beat up" label.

And waving to Momma? Why would I wave now when, year after year, I lived with her on terms of unbroken enmity? She was vain, controlling, intrusive, suspicious, spiteful, highly opinionated, and abysmally ignorant (but intelligent—even I could see that). Never, not once, do I remember sharing a warm moment with her. Never once did I take pride in her or think, I'm so glad she's my Momma. She had a poison tongue and a spiteful word about everyone—except my father and sister.

I loved my Aunt Hannah, my father's sister. Her sweetness, her unceasing warmth, her grilled hot dogs wrapped in crisp bologna slices, her incomparable strudel (its recipe forever lost to me, as her son will not send it to me—but that's another story). Most of all I loved Hannah on Sundays. On that day her delicatessen near the Washington, D.C., Navy Yard was closed, and she put free games on the pinball machine and let me play for hours. She never objected to my putting small wads of paper under the front legs of the machine to slow up the pinballs' descent so I could run up higher scores. My adoration of Hannah sent my Momma into a frenzy of spiteful attacks on her sister-in-

law. Momma had her Hannah litany: Hannah's poverty, her aversion to working in the store, her poor business sense, her cloddish husband, her

lack of pride and ready acceptance of all hand-me-downs.

Momma's speech was abominable, her English heavily accented and larded with Yiddish terms. She never came to my school for parents' day or for PTA meetings. Thank God! I cringed at the thought of introducing my friends to her. I fought with Momma, defied her, screamed at her, avoided her, and, finally, in my mid-adolescence, stopped speaking to her altogether.

The great puzzle of my childhood was, How does Daddy put up with her? I remember wonderful moments on Sunday mornings when he and I played chess, and he gaily sang along with records of Russian or Jewish music, his head swaying in time to the melody. Sooner or later, the morning air was shattered by Momma's voice screeching from upstairs: "Gevalt, Gevalt, enough! Vay iz mir, enough music, enough noise!" Without a word my father would rise, turn off the phonograph, and resume our chess game in silence. How many times I prayed, Please, Dad, please, just this once, punch her out!

So why wave? And why ask, at the very end of my life, "How'd I do, Momma?" Can it be—and the possibility staggers me—that I have been conducting my entire life with this lamentable woman as my primary audience? All my life I have sought to escape, to climb away from my past—the shtetl, the steerage, the ghetto, the tallis, the chanting, the black gabardine, the grocery store. All my life I have stretched for liberation and growth. Can it be that I have escaped neither my past nor my mother?

Those friends who have had lovely, gracious, supportive mothers—how I envy them. And how odd that they are not bound to their mothers, neither phoning, visiting, dreaming, nor even thinking about them frequently. Whereas I have to purge my mother from my mind many times a day and even now, ten years after her death, often reflexively reach for a phone to call

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her.

Oh, I can understand all this intellectually. I have given lectures on the phenomenon. I explain to my patients that abused children often find it hard to disentangle themselves from their dysfunctional families, whereas children grow away from good loving parents with far less conflict. After all, isn't that the task of a good parent, to enable the child to leave home?

I understand it, but I don't like it. I don't like my mother visiting me every day. I hate it that she has so insinuated herself into the interstices of my mind that I can never root her out. And, most of all, I hate that, at the end of my life, I feel compelled to ask, "How'd I do, Momma?"

I think of the overstuffed chair in her Washington, D.C., retirement home. It partially blocked the entrance to her apartment and was flanked by sentinel tables stacked with at least one copy, sometimes more, of each of the books I had written. What with over a dozen books and an additional two dozen foreign language translations, the stacks teetered dangerously. All it would take, I often imagined, is one middling respectable earth tremor to bury her up to her nose under the books of her only son.

Whenever I visited, I would find her stationed in that chair, with two or three of my books in her lap. She weighed them, smelled them, caressed them—everything but read them. She was too blind. But even before her vision failed, she could not have comprehended them: her only education had been in a naturalization class to become a United States citizen.

I am a writer. And Momma can't read. Still, I turn to her for the meaning of my life's work, To be measured how? On the odor, the sheer heft of my books? The cover design, the slick dry-grease Teflon feel of the jacket covers? All my painstaking research, my leaps of inspiration, my fastidious searching for the correct thought, the elusive graceful sentence: these she never knew.

The meaning of life? The meaning of my life. The very books stacked and swaying on Momma's table contain pretentious responses to such questions. "We are meaning-seeking creatures,"

I write, "who must deal with the inconvenience of being hurled into a universe that intrinsically has no meaning." And then to avoid nihilism, I

explain, we must embark on a double task. First, we invent or discover a life-meaning project sturdy enough to support a life. Next, we must contrive to forget our act of invention and persuade ourselves that we have not invented, but discovered, the life-meaning project—that it has an independent "out there" existence.

Though I feign accepting without judgment each person's solution, I secretly stratify them into brass, silver, and gold. Some people are goaded throughout life by a vision of vindictive triumph; some, swaddled in despair, dream only of peace, detachment, and freedom from pain; some dedicate their lives to success, opulence, power, truth; others search for self-transcendence and immerse themselves in a cause or another being—a loved one or a divine essence; still others find their meaning in creativity.

Art is needed, Nietzsche said, lest we perish from the truth. Thus I have aimed for the golden path. I have tried to turn my entire life, all my experiences, all my imaginings, into some smoldering inner compost heap and out of it to bring into the world, from time to time, something new and beautiful.

But the dream says otherwise. The dream insists that my life strivings have had another end: how I appear in the eyes of my blind Momma.

This dream indictment has power: too much power to ignore; too disturbing to forget. But dreams are, I have learned, neither inscrutable nor immutable. For most of my life I have been a dream tinkerer. I have learned how to tame dreams, to take them apart, to put them together. I know how to squeeze out dream secrets.

And so, letting my head fall back upon my pillow, I drift off, rewinding the dream reel back to the cart in the House of Horrors.

The cart stops with a jerk, slamming me against the guard rail. A moment later, it's reversing direction and slowly backing up

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through the swinging doors and out again into the Glen Echo sunlight.

"Momma, Momma!" I call, both arms waving. "How'd I do?"

She hears me. I see her plowing her way through the crowd, flinging people to right and left. "Oyvin, vot a question," she says, unlocking the guard rail and pulling me out of the cart.

I look at her. She seems about fifty or sixty, is strong and stocky, and is effortlessly carrying a bulging, embroidered, wooden-handled shopping bag. She is homely but does not know it, and walks with her chin raised, as though she were beautiful. I notice the familiar folds of flesh hanging from her upper arm and the stockings bunched and tied just above her knees. She gives me me a big wet kiss. I feign affection.

"You did good. Who could ask for more? All those books. You made me proud. If only your father were here to see."

"What do you mean I did good, Momma? How do you know? You can't read what I've written—your vision, I mean."

"I know what I know. Look at these books." She opens the shopping bag, removes two of my books and begins to fondle them tenderly. "Big books. Beautiful books."

I feel unnerved by her handling my books. "It's what's in the books that's important. Maybe they just contain nonsense."

"Oyvin, don't talk narishkeit —foolishness. Beautiful books!"

"Carrying around that bag of books all the time, Momma, even in Glen Echo? You're making a shrine of them. Don't you think—"

"Everybody knows about you. The whole world. My hairdresser tells me her daughter studies your books in school."

"Your hairdresser? That's it, the final test?"

"Everybody. I tell everybody. Why shouldn't I?"

"Momma, don't you have anything better to do? What about spending your Sunday with your friends: Hannah, Gertie, Luba, Dorothy, Sam, your brother Simon? What are you doing here at Glen Echo, anyway?"

"You ashamed I should be here? You were always ashamed.

"Where else should I be?"

"I only mean we're both all grown up. I'm over sixty years old. Maybe it's time we should each have our own private dreams."

"Always ashamed of me."

"I didn't say that. You don't listen to me."

"Always thought I was stupid. Always thought I didn't understand anything."

"I didn't say that. I always said you didn't know everything. It's just the way you—the way you—"

"The way I what? Go ahead. You started—say it—I know what you're going to say."

"What am I going to say?"

"No, Oyvin, you say it. If I tell you, you'll change it."

"It's the way you don't listen to me. The way you talk about things you don't know anything about."

"Listen to you? I don't listen to you? Tell me, Oyvin, you listen to me? Do you know about me?"

"You're right, Momma. Neither of us has been good at listening to the other."

"Not me, Oyvin, I listened good. I listened to the silence every night when I came home from the store and you don't bother to come upstairs from your