

A Useful Life
Chapter 1
Sarah, July 1997

I was sure that whoever designed the stylized eagle logo on the corner of the envelope meant it to be non-threatening, maybe even a little friendly: a rounded square with the scales of justice in the bottom center, something like an olive branch on the left and the outline of a wing on the right, giving just the hint of a bird. But all those symbols in one compact line drawing telegraphed “government,” and the return address below removed any question: “Internal Revenue Service.”

The envelope was addressed to both of us, my late husband and me, which in itself was not unusual. Over the previous six months I’d moved all the financial accounts into my name and notified most other correspondents to change their records, but every week a few items still straggled through with his name on them.

I turned sideways in the pool chair to cast a shadow over the blinding white of the letter, sunscreen making a set of oily fingerprints on the margins. “Notice of Audit. Richard L. and Sarah Z. Weil.”

Why had I allowed the mail carrier to press the stack of letters into my hands as I got into the car? I could have asked him to walk the rest of the way to the house and drop it in the mailbox, but that hadn’t occurred to me. Instead I’d accepted it and put it in my pool bag. Now I couldn’t give it back.

If only I could hand the letter to Richard. As a lump began to form in my throat at the thought, I tried to slow down my breathing and think calmly. I’d been having imaginary

dialogues with him when these unfamiliar situations arose. If Richard were here, what would he say?

“Let the accountant deal with it,” he would have said, waving his hand as he went back to the newspaper. He always had people to “deal with” things. I’d gradually been finding out who those people were—the stock broker, the manager of the rental properties we owned near the university. They always thought I should know more than I did about Richard’s business dealings, and the accountant was likely to assume the same, but what other choice did I have? There was some consolation in thinking about reversing our roles. Had I died first and left him to figure out which hardware store stocked the nonstandard lightbulbs for the living room fixture or who would put us on the top of the list for air conditioner repairs during a heat wave, I was sure he would be equally helpless.

I refolded the letter, leaned my head back and closed my eyes. In December, after the funeral, the business of being a new widow had taken up much of my time. There were casseroles and phone calls and lawyers and insurance companies. There was so much going on I stopped my volunteer job, reading for the blind, and dropped out of my book clubs. Then, in the spring, everyone else had gone back to their lives, and I didn’t know what mine was anymore. For the first time in twenty-five years I was accountable to no one.

When the neighborhood pool opened Memorial Day weekend, I staked out a chair near the lap lanes, in the corner of the fenced-in patio. I began spending every day there, between my old life and whatever was to come next. On the cusp of my fiftieth birthday, I had entered a second adolescence, spending lazy days in the sun, swimming laps and reading novels, nestled in the cloak of invisibility that bookish teens and widows share. I had thought I was finally settling in, feeling a lightness, a calm, and now this.

“How are you? I was so sorry to hear about your husband,” a voice said. I opened my eyes and recognized the woman, but could not remember her name.

I shrugged. In six months I still hadn't come up with a good response to these vapid expressions of condolence from near-strangers. Wasn't there a statute of limitations on this particular social obligation? They made assumptions about what it would be like, having your husband die, but it was all projection. Nobody could understand someone else's loss. I was still trying to understand it myself.

“What's Jake doing this summer?” she asked. I didn't think she even knew Jake. Her son had been a friend of my older son Sam's when they were young teens, until something had happened—I'd lost track of what it was—that caused her to forbid her son associating with him. Apparently the ban was still in effect, even after more than ten years.

“He has an internship in New York.” And then there was a catch in my voice as I gave the answer to the question she hadn't asked: “Sam's on the West Coast.” Or at least he was the last I knew. I cleared my throat and then rummaged through my bag for a tissue. The IRS letter fell to the wet concrete and stuck there. The woman and I both reached for it at the same time, but she pulled back when she saw I'd retrieved it. The sight of the soggy eagle made my lip begin to quiver.

The woman backed away. Half-smiling and nodding, she said, “Well, it was nice seeing you. I'm meeting my daughter-in-law and grandson over at the baby pool.”

I watched her hurry across the cement deck to join the mothers of toddlers in the fenced-in baby pool area. They were carefree, their children splashing contentedly in the shallow water. I had not been one of them. I remembered only anxiety, watching Sam as he eyed the gate, waiting for his chance to escape each time it opened.

In the main pool, the shallow end was filled with elementary school aged kids throwing balls to each other and trying underwater handstands. Two girls were throwing coins into the water and retrieving them as seriously as if they were a Spanish galleon's treasure. Jake had been more like those girls: content to stay within the boundaries we set for him.

I dried off the letter on my beach towel the best I could and packed it in my bag with the rest of my things, leaving my chair for someone who could enjoy the afternoon.

I bit my lip as our accountant, Ron Liebeskind, read the letter, rubbing the top of his bald head. He'd been able to see me that afternoon.

"Can they do this?" My voice cracked as I spoke. "I mean, if Richard's not here to explain?"

"Yes. I'm afraid both parties are responsible for a joint return."

I thought about all the tax returns I'd signed during the twenty-five years of our marriage, the mortgage papers, the various legal documents Richard had put in front of me. I'd never imagined a moment like this, sitting in an office without him, having to defend something he'd assured me I didn't need to understand.

"What am I going to do? Richard handled the taxes. I don't know anything." A dark thought crept into my consciousness and unveiled itself. Before I could stop myself, I asked, "Did he do something wrong? Did he cheat on our taxes?"

Ron blinked and raised his eyebrows. "Of course not! I'm sure it's something technical, a misunderstanding. Richard would never have done anything dishonest."

I shook my head. "No. He wouldn't have. I don't know why I said that."

He set the paper on his desk. "I'm sure it will be fine. I'll get it straightened out."

“Thank you so much.” I realized my fingers were hurting, so I released my grip on the wooden armrests. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“You’ll need to begin with bringing me your records for...” He glanced down. “1994.”

“But...don’t *you* have our tax records?”

He shook his head. “I have a copy of the return, but I gave everything else back to Richard. I’m sure he knew to keep it.”

This was not my department. I managed the family calendar, took care of the house, bought the birthday gifts. I had never been in charge of tax records and had no idea what Richard would have done with them. I didn’t remember having run across them when I cleared out his office. I felt tears coming.

Ron pulled several tissues from a box behind his desk and handed them to me. “I know this is upsetting. Can I get you some water or something?” he asked, his brow creased.

I shook my head. “Why 1994? Why now?”

He looked at the letter again. “I’ll know better when I look at the records. It’s going to be fine. Trust me. I’ve been through this many times.”

I nodded and took the tissue box Ron offered me. I had no choice--I had to trust Ron, but I’d had far more reason to trust Richard, and now the IRS was after me. What if I had to come up with back taxes and penalties? Could they take my house? I had two more years of Jake’s college tuition to pay.

I stood up. “How soon can we get this over with? After I find the records, I mean.”

“The audit appointment is the first week of September. Drop off the files as soon as you find them so I can look everything over.”

I wasn’t sure I could wait that long for a resolution. Richard would have known how to

make it go away faster, but I did not know how to be Richard, and it didn't appear that Ron did either.

All the way home I alternated between crying and cursing. My few months of peace seemed to be at an end.

The shredder's motor sounded like a car starter on a cold morning as documents descended, five sheets at a time, into its waiting teeth. When the rollers pulled the paper down into the metal cutters, there was a crinkling, tearing noise, after which thin ribbons appeared at the bottom and dropped into the bin. I periodically emptied the shreds into a giant black garbage bag, which had assumed a satisfying fluffiness. I was humming along, wishing I'd known the pleasure of shredding before.

When I had gone up to the attic to look for the tax records and encountered a sea of cardboard boxes, I nearly turned around and ran back down the stairs. What could the IRS do to me that would be worse than searching through all this? It wasn't until I'd called Ron to ask how long I needed to keep financial records that I gave myself permission to pull the machine out and plug it in.

If Richard had any organizational scheme for the cartons crammed into that area, I wasn't able to see it. This was a man who insisted I arrange his shirts in the closet according to color, and yet he had abandoned our attic to chaos.

Some of the boxes were labeled with marker; at least Richard had done me that favor. "Taxes 1980-1982," was near the front. On the one hand, it meant the more recent years were probably up here somewhere, but it also meant they were outnumbered by ancient ones.

I paused occasionally to follow the paper trail of our lives—brokerage statements

showing the purchase of stock in a company that had gone bankrupt soon after, receipts from a charity that had been destroyed by embezzlement. I cringed, realizing for the first time how often our trust was misplaced and how I had deferred to Richard on all these decisions. I hadn't thought of him as infallible, exactly, but I now began to see how I'd overlooked his mistakes.

I opened a box of Jake and Sam's elementary school papers I had given to Richard to put up here. A stick-figure drawing made me smile. Sam drew it in kindergarten of the four of us, showing Richard almost as tall as our house, Sam hugging a soccer ball and his baby brother Jake in my arms clutching a balloon. Everyone was smiling, even the house. I sighed, wishing Sam could have stayed on that trajectory. There was another box of Jake's papers all the way through high school, but nothing for Sam past about fifth grade.

Farther back I found a similar box containing Richard's own early schoolwork. As much as I wanted to feel some connection to Richard as a child, some glimpse of his vulnerable, humble beginning, I was unable to. They were just yellowed papers.

I knew Richard had not liked getting rid of things, but I hadn't concerned myself with where it was all ending up. I was now his archivist, creating his memorial by selecting which artifacts to save. How should I curate his life? If I kept bank and brokerage statements, he would be the sum of those numbers. If it were artwork or poetry I rescued from the shredder, he would be remembered as someone entirely different. This was the first time I had wielded such power in our relationship.

The ringing phone sent me cursing down the stairs, arriving in the kitchen out of breath. When I told Jake I was going through old papers in the attic, there was a pause on the line.

"Can you wait to get rid of things until I can come home?"

"Jake, I don't think there's anything up there you'd be interested in..."

“How would you know what I might be interested in?” His voice had a sudden edge to it.

“I’m sorry—I had no idea this would bother you. It’s mostly tax and financial records.

When you come home at the end of the summer you can look through whatever’s left.”

“It hasn’t even been a year since he died. Why are you in such a hurry to erase him?” He paused. “When we talk, you never mention him. It’s like he never even existed.”

I *had* been avoiding talking about Richard. Until the audit notice, I had started to notice a peacefulness in his absence, which seemed more like relief than mourning, and it made me feel guilty. It wasn’t as if we’d spent much time together in the past few years. During the day he was at his office, and in the evenings he closed himself in his study with work he’d brought home. I was on standby in case he needed something. More than his physical absence, I noticed the absence of his expectations.

“I’m not trying to erase him.” I caught myself sighing and lifted the receiver away from my mouth.

“Well, what’s the hurry then? You suddenly need the extra space?”

Jake was supervising me, just like Richard. Before I could stop myself from retaliating, I said, “So, how about you? Have you been saying *kaddish* for your father every day? You’re supposed to be doing that for a year.”

“Luckily my non-Jewish mother is here to remind me how to be a Jew. No, I haven’t said *kaddish* every day. I’m sure Sam hasn’t either. Which reminds me of why I called. Sam phoned me collect last night.”

I felt my pulse quicken. “Did he say where he was?”

“Nope. And I didn’t want to know. He just wanted money, so I hung up on him. I don’t even know how he got my phone number.”

It had been close to a year since I'd heard from Sam. He'd called needing his birth certificate, so I'd sent it to an auto repair shop in Oakland, the first mailing address I'd had for him in a long time. He'd cashed in the ticket I'd sent him to come home for Richard's funeral and subsequent letters had come back marked "Not at this address."

It didn't make sense he would call Jake and not me. Now that Richard was gone, I thought Sam would come home. There was no reason for him to stay away anymore.

"I shouldn't even have accepted the charges for the call," Jake said. "I won't next time."

"Please, if he calls again, tell him to call me." I took a deep breath.

"Whatever, Mom. I have to go." I could picture Jake rolling his eyes.

"Wait...I need to ask you something. The piano tuner called yesterday. Dad had a standing appointment every six months." I took a deep breath. "Should I keep it tuned? What do you think?"

"Mom, I haven't played that piano since I was twelve. I don't know what to tell you."

"I guess I'll keep the appointment. I don't want to ruin the piano." I hesitated a moment. "In case you want it someday."

I hung up the phone and sat on the sofa, leaning my head back to rest it on the top of the cushion. The crack on the ceiling that radiated outward from the center light fixture had lengthened since the last time I had looked up.

Did Jake think this was easy for me? He accused me of forgetting Richard, of trying to wipe out his memory, but dozens of times each day I was confronted with something that reminded me, for the first time in my life, I had nobody to depend on. Whatever the flaws were in our relationship, he was my buffer against the outside world.

Which reminded me, I still needed to find those tax files. I rolled myself off the sofa.

Back up the stairs, I started in again, although I was losing my enthusiasm for destruction after my conversation with Jake. Like an archaeologist, I dug through the layers, into history, into the unknown. Some of these boxes were from my mother-in-law's house, which Richard had cleared out when she'd died. He'd had to coordinate with the children of his stepfather to make sure he didn't take anything that belonged to Stanley.

Louis Weil's fatal heart attack had come when Richard was seventeen, so I never knew him. I only knew Stanley, the high school sweetheart his mother had married just before I met Richard. Stanley seemed nice enough, but I had the feeling Richard had gotten used to being the man in her mother's life and resented being replaced.

It was the family's fatal weakness—bad hearts. Even though Richard had been aggressive about diet and exercise, he had managed to squeeze just fifty-five years of use out of his heart—only three years more than his father had.

I hoped my sons had not inherited those genes from the Weil side of the family. Jake had Richard's perfectionism and intolerance for weakness in others. The only trait of Sam's that connected him with Richard was the head of curly red hair.

Off to the side of the storage area, almost completely under the eaves, I spotted a box marked "Taxes 1993-1996." Hallelujah. As I slid it toward the door I saw it had been obscuring an antique-looking wooden crate bearing the trademark of a brand of liquor I had never heard of. Was it a stash of 100-year-old scotch or something more prosaic?

This would be no job for the idly curious. The top of the crate was affixed with several thick nails that looked new. My inner Nancy Drew urging me on, I lugged the crate downstairs and retrieved the hammer from the toolbox. Wedging the end of the claw under the loosest edge of the top I put all my weight against the handle of the hammer. The nail came slowly, squeaking

against the wood. I pulled up the rest of the nails and removed the lid.

The box was not full—there were at least three inches of empty space. On top was a brown heap of something made of a stiff fabric, like canvas, but coarser. It made an unexpected thud when I placed it on the table. Finding an opening, I reached inside and felt nothing. Then I saw that it had straps and was a sort of rucksack, worn, dirty, and disintegrating. Moving my hands around the bottom outside, I felt that something small and heavy was anchored inside the lining. Something metal like a coin, or, no, thicker, maybe several coins. I reached inside and worked my fingers around the lump until I was able to move it through a hole in the fabric. It was a small bundle of burlap, tied with a piece of waxed twine. I untied the twine and inside were ten five-dollar gold pieces dated between 1856 and 1859. I rewrapped the coins and set them aside with the backpack.

I reached back into the box and pulled out a book that appeared to be a bible, printed in Hebrew and German, with a name in front I had trouble deciphering, but finally decided might be Samuel Baum. Underneath it was a large, fairly new-looking manila envelope with something stiff and heavy in it. I opened the metal clasp and pulled out a stack of eight-by-ten sepia photographs with rigid cardboard backing.

There was a photo of a Victorian house, circa 1880s, the interior and exterior of a grocery store, and a series of family portraits from before 1900. There were names penciled on the backs of some of the photographs, but most were blank. One couple was “Bertie & Simon,” another “Eva & Henry,” no last names. I had never seen any of these people before.

I thought of Richard’s ancestors in the framed photographs at my mother-in-law’s house. They had long beards, long coats, and hats, their Eastern European eyes gazing out from a remote time and place, one that had been long-since destroyed. For me, that was a strange and

exotic past.

The pictures in my hand now, though, were familiar. They could have come from any family album in my hometown of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. Straw hats and handlebar mustaches, goatees and hoop skirts, these were all styles I'd seen in my American history books and my own family photos. These people were not strange and exotic, but I knew they weren't my family.

I searched my memory for any small impression of the Weils, but there was not a trace. Jake had once been assigned a family tree project for Hebrew school and the Weil side had been left nearly blank. Richard claimed his father had no relatives.

Another envelope contained a few brown and brittle newspaper clippings. An obituary was entitled "A Useful Life Ended: Richard Weil Dead at 46." Not my Richard, but another one who had died a century before. I covered my mouth with my hand, a million questions racing through my mind. Why would Richard have pretended not to know about his father's family? Had he known all along or just when he cleaned out his mother's house? Or had he never looked in this box? The article had appeared in the middle of the page and the margins had been cut off, leaving no clue to the date and city. There were obituaries of two other men, Henry Wallach and David Kahn, also using that phrase, "a useful life ended." It was a strange formula, describing a life as "useful" instead of "happy" or "successful," the adjectives we were accustomed to.

An old Photostat, brittle, but still legible was under the clippings. It was the outline of a family tree—a set of parents and their seven children. There were no dates, but below one of the children was written "my grandmother" and below another one of the children, Louis, was written "your grandfather," but no indication of who "your" and "my" referred to. At the top of the sheet, the parents' last name was clear: Weil. I recognized Louis as my father-in-law's first

name, but this Photostat was several decades old, so if this Louis was someone's grandfather, it had to have been several generations ago. And was my husband's ancestor Richard, or Louis?

Out of seven children, surely there were some relatives still living somewhere. What had happened to all of them?

Under the letters was another small stack of photographs. About halfway through the stack, I stopped dead. Looking out at me from a sepia-tone was my son Sam's face—ten years older, with a mustache, the nose a bit larger, the hair darker, and wearing clothes from around the time of the Civil War, but still his face.

There was no name on the back, just the imprint on the front of the photographer's name and the city: Memphis.

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