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Objects of Love and Regret

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A BROOKLYN STORY

Richard Rabinowitz

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For Beverly

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INTRODUCTION

Objects at Hand, Objects in Memory

Our lives are a dance with history. Most of us dance first as a family, then later as a couple, or as a town or nation. Often we follow the choreography of others, sometimes we add a step or two of our own. History—the experience of those who came before us—is within us and around us, inescapable. Remembered, recorded or not, forgotten, retrieved or not, we rent rooms in History's house for a time, and then we are gone.

When my mother died in November 2015, midway through her 100th year, I was resigned to her loss, but I hated that she was gone. As always, I was the designated family eulogist. It was not a tragic occasion. Sarah Schwartz Rabinowitz's eventful life came to an uncomfortable but not terribly painful final year. She remained in her own home, evading hospital wards and the assisted (which she called "assistant") living places she despised. She was accompanied by round-the-clock attendants (whom she doggedly taught to cook and eat healthier meals) and by the visits of her children and neighbors. Her funeral in Brooklyn gathered grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and the friends of her children. She had outlived almost all of her contemporaries in Florida.

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I thought I knew her, and my eulogy began in a relaxed voice. Mom had no great public accomplishments to trumpet. Perhaps her most amazing achievement was to share the matrimonial state with my father for seventy-two years. He was often difficult. I joked that not only had I nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize several times, but that I had suggested to the committee in Oslo that they rename the award for Sarah Rabinowitz. From the podium, I recounted my mother's various excellences—her talents as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a friend, and a neighbor. But the longer I spoke the more uncertain I became. Not to doubt her virtues but to wonder whether I was asking the right question. *Who was Sarah for herself? What did she want out of life? How would she have characterized herself?* And where did she find that strength, as a new American, without much schooling or guidance from elders or from peers more experienced in New York, to navigate and then to anchor the transition of her whole family—parents, husband, siblings, and children—in this difficult place, and during some of the worst moments in our nation's history, the Depression and World War II? *Did I really know her, or did I simply take her presence in my life for granted?*

All through the week of sitting *shiva,* the seven-day period of mourning for Jews, our family and friends shared affectionate stories of Sarah. But my questions gnawed at me. As I struggled to find the logic of her long-lived purposefulness, I joined my sister, Beverly, in Florida, where we emptied out Mom's drawers and cabinets over the following week. In her kitchen drawer, I rediscovered a wooden-handled bottle opener, its original green paint worn by many years of use. It felt familiar, as if I was shaking hands with an old friend. My index finger pressed on the prying hook, my thumb under the lifting point, and my other fingers embraced the wood shaft. It was warm in my palm. Holding it in my hand, I recalled the story Mom had told me, thirty-odd years before, of purchasing

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it on a Friday afternoon at a pushcart in the Blake Avenue outdoor market in Brooklyn. Sarah, just turning eighteen, was coming home from a week of work at a garment factory. She wanted a little something to bring home as a Shabbos-eve present for her mother. "Your *bubbe* [grandmother]," she added, beginning to tear up, "always worked so hard. Twenty cents, it cost me. The man wanted twenty-five."

The story was a puzzle, and I could not stop thinking about it. What kind of a present is a bottle opener? Why was it such a poignant memory in her life? What did it say about these two women? I always knew that Mom was extremely close to her mother. This story was a typical one of hers, inflected with a little pride *(I was a considerate daughter; it was with money I had earned myself; I knew it was the sort of thing that Mama would appreciate)* and a lot of pain and guilt *(I owed everything to her; I couldn't do enough to overcome the difficulties of her making a new home in America, given her frailties; I miss her still).*

After we had closed up Mom's apartment, I took the green-handled opener home with me to Brooklyn. It would be one of the tchotchkes on my desk, along with a Jackie Robinson baseball card, a ceramic whale (I am a devoted Melvillean), and a postcard depicting Michel de Montaigne's tower in southwest France. It sat there for a week or two. One afternoon, when the late winter sun seemed to spotlight the blade of the opener, I noticed that it bore a faint inscription. It read, ".. LUND CO. PAT. NOV. 7 '33. MADE IN U.S.A." I did the newly normal thing and went right to Google. I learned it was a collector's item, with similar ones available on eBay. One blogger described it as the best tool he ever owned.

More important, I discovered that the opener had been made by the Edlund Company of Burlington, Vermont, still in business, and that it was designed by the owner, Henry J. Edlund. In ten minutes, computer searches on Ancestry and the US Patent Office brought

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to light the arc of Henry Edlund's whole life. A Swedish lad, arriving at age seventeen in New York in 1891, Edlund had chalked up more than a half-dozen patents in his lifetime, become a naturalized citizen, married, joined the business elite of Burlington in his late forties, and died in 1937. I was thrilled to discover that the patent date of the bottle opener, November 7, 1933, dovetailed so closely with my mother's purchase, which must have been in the spring of 1934.

Over the next few weeks, I had what can only be called a "history high." I was intoxicated by discovering more and more about the bottle opener, its particular history, and its place in the history of the country to which my bubbe Shenka and my mother came in 1928. From a table in a study at the 42nd Street research division of the New York Public Library, I learned that Edlund's was only one of dozens of American companies patenting and producing housewares that were transforming the American kitchen and household life. I scoured a whole decade of *House Furnishing Journal,* the trade magazine of the gadgets business. I talked with former owners and engineers to understand the technically innovative manufacturing process employed by Edlund. I discovered that my little bottle opener was perhaps included in a 1938 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art on "Useful Household Objects under $5.00."

A local historian in Vermont helped me identify the individual metalworker on Henry Edlund's shop floor, Adelard Charette, who was most likely responsible for turning out my opener. I traced Charette's family history to a tiny village in Quebec and tracked the emigration of many of its people to New England mill towns like Burlington. I traveled to Vermont and met Charette's grandson at the family home, there to discover that Adelard's woodworking table still occupied a prominent place in the basement almost a century after he acquired it.

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Exhilarating as this Vermont excursion was in itself, every discovery also added sound, color, and light to my image of Shenka and Sarah's new American world. Like most of us, I had visualized my family through the narrow lens of domestic life—sitting around the dinner table, doing chores, packed into a car setting out on vacation. My immersion in a Vermont family's story enriched my idea of the Schwartzes and Rabinowitzes as Americans. My family were actors in a much larger story—the transformation of the American economy, social system, politics, and material culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Like the Charettes, my family—my grandparents Dovid and Shenka Schwartz, my mother, Sarah, and my uncles Sam and Isaac—were factory workers and consumers, producing and purchasing in the same national marketplace. They voted in the same presidential elections and for members of the same national legislature. Each family was tightly bound to its immigrant community. Each experienced similar processes of feeling excluded and included by the way America privileged longer-settled elites and marginalized its nonwhite populations.

I kept returning with new thoughts to the tale Mom told about purchasing the bottle opener. Telling the story had brought Mom to tears. It brought her to a painful rendering of the whole arc of my bubbe's "hard" life. This was obviously no trivial event. Why was it so memorable?

Strange as it sounds, Sarah had honored her mother—with a kitchen implement. She could easily have used a moment during lunchtime in the Garment District to buy a scarf, a blouse, or a piece of jewelry to bring as a present. This mother-daughter relationship, it was obvious, was rooted in the kitchen, in their love of that part of their life. And then, she could have brought it home on a Tuesday. Why choose the most sacred moment of the week, when employment and school and play were suspended for the Jewish Sabbath?

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And, why, if Shabbos is a *family* event, did Sarah buy a present for her mother? She was just as deeply attached to her father and brothers. And what else was in Sarah's mind? She must already have known that the opener would enable them to buy and use more nationally produced and distributed ingredients, packaged in bottles and cans. Did she feel that she would be even more "American" if her household could own these icons of the new world, these embodiments of the well designed, the modern, and the convenient? And yet, she would not yield her hardheadedness to this enthusiasm. Recall that Sarah had haggled over the price with the pushcart man.

As I examined the many dimensions of this moment, I hoped that it might unlock an understanding of Sarah's singularity. That had become my mission. Hers was a history braided of three strands—the "American story," exploring how she adapted herself and her world to the opportunities and dangers of a new country, the "Schwartz story," explaining how she grew from dependent daughter into the solid foundation for everyone around her, and finally, the third, "Sarah's own story," tracing her inward pilgrimage through a thicket of fears toward the peace, beauty, and order she craved. Parallel to hers, of course, was a similarly multifaceted "Dave Rabinowitz story."

I had prepared for this project by a half-century's professional career inventing new history museums and curating exhibitions in every corner of the United States, most of them focusing on the everyday lives of ordinary people—tenement dwellers on New York's Lower East Side, Chinese-American salmon butchers in Puget Sound, enslaved families on Louisiana cotton plantations, and other dramatic examples of Americans swept up in the tides of history. My quest was the microhistory of these lives, the sensory, immediate, tangible, material, intimate, and local dimensions of their experience. I looked for the marks of history on the most minute textures of

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everyday life. Others could undertake the biographies of the great and the famous, and especially of those who left voluminous diaries and stacks of correspondence. I sought out personal narratives written with pots and pans in a kitchen, with tools on the shop floor, rather than with pen and ink in a library.

I was always interested in people like my mother and grandmother, who expressed their creativity with skills other than literacy, public leadership, or financial ambition. But I had never examined my own family history so intently. I started hunting for everything I could find about the family and especially about the years before I was born—citizenship papers, ship manifests, census returns, wedding photographs, and family snapshots. I mapped the migrations of family members from Europe to New York and located their places of residence and work in the metropolitan area. In midnight phone calls, I bothered my cousins for memories. Most important, I enlisted the help of my sister, who is eight years older than I. She can vividly recall my maternal grandparents, who lived one floor above my parents in the same apartment building in the East New York section of Brooklyn. Beverly and I shared what we knew about the lives of our parents and grandparents—at work and at home, with family and friends, in the realms of politics and religion.

No standard narrative can satisfactorily account for the diversity of the more than two million Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America. Some, like Barney and Eva Rabinowitz, my father's parents, came from cities like Odesa on the Black Sea, the second-largest port in the Russian Empire. Others, like Dovid and Shenka Schwartz and my mother herself, emigrated from a small *shtetl* (or market town) in rural Poland. The Rabinowitzes arrived around 1905, the Schwartzes some twenty years later—each, therefore, to a radically different America and New York City. Barney Rabinowitz was barely

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literate and totally dismissive of religion and politics. Shenka and Dovid Schwartz, my maternal grandparents, even without much schooling, read avidly and argued about everything. Barney brought his skills as a cooper and always found work repairing barrels for the herring trade between New York and the North Sea. Dovid Schwartz, however, never stopped struggling to stitch together weeks of employment as a presser in the garment trade. His wife, Shenka, was a superb *balabusta* (homemaker) who cast a cold eye on American capitalism and the exploitation of the working class. Eva Rabinowitz, by contrast, had commerce in her blood and spent decades peddling all sorts of merchandise on city streets and in tenement hallways.

That's a lot of diversity, just in my own family. The search for a *typical* life history is fruitless. But once I had settled on a basic timeline and framework for the family's history, my questions were quite ordinary. What was my parents' childhood like? How did they meet and decide to get married? What kind of work provided the family's livelihood at different moments? How was my family affected by major public events—the passage of immigration restrictions in the 1920s, the Depression, the New Deal, World War II, the postwar economic boom, the urban unrest, civil rights agitation, and countercultural rebellion of the 1960s, the inflation shocks of the 1970s, and so on? You might ask the same questions about your own family.

My answers to these questions, I knew, could only come by researching and imagining, in as much detail as possible, the actualities of their everyday lives, moment by moment. That green-handled bottle opener magically pried open more than a beer bottle. It brought me into the tenement kitchen of my grandparents in the East New York section of Brooklyn in 1934. It invited me to sit down for their Shabbos dinner and encouraged me to eavesdrop on the conversation of family members. I became totally absorbed in the minutiae of that evening. Where did Bubbe obtain the ingredients

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for the meal? How did five years in the United States alter how and what she prepared? How much of the traditional Jewish ritual did they perform? What else did they talk about? Politics? The weather? School?

Beverly is gifted with our mother's memory for sensory details, for atmospherics as well as actions and attitudes. A witness at many meals like that, she can remember every piece of furniture and every dish on the table. My contribution was to recall each person's turn of phrase and habits of mind—my Uncle Isaac's chuckle and warm sympathy (once he could identify the underdog in the story), my Uncle Sam's darker cynicism and gibes, the warm smile of my *zayde* (grandfather). I set out with a passion to research and document the setting for the story. I tracked down photos of my grandparents' apartment building in the New York City Municipal Archives. From my work at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum I knew how the apartment's rooms were laid out and furnished. From other memoirs and public reports, as well as family stories, I could make educated guesses about my grandfather's and mother's work in the garment industry and my uncles' schoolwork, politics, and social interests. Beverly and I constantly worked back and forth from the stories we had heard, the elements of daily life that we observed during our childhoods, and the gleanings of my library research, in order to construct a narrative true to all the evidence.

As I might have predicted, given my museum work, I realized that it was the "stuff" around them, the concrete, material circumstances of their ordinary lives, that held the key to their personal stories. It was the consistent way they interacted with objects, with time and space, and with one another that illuminated their fundamental characters. Stories attach themselves to objects. Touch something you have known for a lifetime. Hold it in your hand or in front of your eyes for an uncomfortably long moment. Ask some

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questions: when was it acquired? How was it used, and by whom? What did it replace? Why has it survived so long? Soon the answers will pour out of it, recollections of events and people almost forgotten or intensely remembered.

The object-story of the bottle opener became my model. Nothing in the written record of my family seemed to elucidate the powerful bond between my mother and my grandmother so well as that gift of the kitchen gadget. As I went back and forth over the family's century-long experience in Europe and America, I searched for other objects and places that might cast light on equally important stories. Each chapter of this book is built around an object-story.

My chosen objects, though often less important in themselves, revealed aspects of life that lay beneath the surface of day-to-day existence. The first present that my father bought for my mother, a bottle of French perfume, taught me how fiercely each of them resisted the stigma of poverty during the Depression. The whistle that the mailman blew when delivering a letter from the War Department in World War II laid bare the raw fear of Mom's life on the Home Front. The aluminum and plastic folding chairs that Dad stashed in the car trunk on outings to state parks spoke of how my family detached itself from city life in the prosperous postwar period.

Objects remind us of the centrality of work in our lives: employment outside the home; the labor of keeping house, raising children, and sustaining the well-being of family members; the unpaid and reciprocal efforts we make for others in our community; and our exertions to fulfill our civic responsibilities. Intellectuals like me tend nowadays to focus more on the preoccupations of our fellow citizens than on their occupations. We are always surveying opinions, tracing ideas, and defining identities. We commonly underestimate the deep currents of thought activated in the process of

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work, thoughts embedded in action and not in argument. We often fail to explore objects as if they are dense continents of skill—of brawn as well as brain, of hand as well as eye, of performance as well as intention and design.

Objects like these are props in a drama. They evoke actions, and actions speak louder than words. Actions recalled to mind become stories, and stories fix the flow of time. They become the building blocks of life histories. Focusing on such objects has allowed me to slow down and capture more precisely the lineaments of my history. Recovering and retelling a story is like projecting a slow-motion film. I am eager to see every element of every scene, who is stage center and who in the background, how long life's moments actually take. I'm less interested in the object in and of itself, as a curator or art historian might be. I want to watch how people pick something up, what they call it, how they handle and use it, how it calls upon skills possessed and still being developed, how it comes to play a role in the habits of home life, and how it is stored or discarded. Here is a bowl for mixing cake batter. It calls to mind the rituals of my return from school to enjoy Mom's baked goodies and a tall glass of milk. That in turn helps me understand much about my relationship with her. Here is a card table covered with green oilcloth, originally a wedding present to my parents fifteen years earlier. I can precisely remember a day in 1950 when I was five and watched my father dexterously wield his tack hammer to fasten that cover for the table and its chairs. The tack hammer is gone, Dad's toolbox is gone, but the table became a repository of memories. I did my homework there for all of my school years. I typed my college senior essay on it. Over fifty years later my grandchildren string beads, draw new subway maps, play board games, and spill milk on it. The oil and sweat of five generations of fingertips now mingle with that ancient table covering. The objects in my family story do

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not dwell in glass museum cases. They have interacted with the motions and emotions of my family's history and left their residue in the physical world and in memory.

A thousand barely remembered objects once shared our family space. (I've always had a crazy compulsion to imagine them as animate beings.) As I reconstruct their starring moments in this century-long saga, such things bring back to mind the succession of our surroundings over time. Sometimes, as with the bottle opener, the artifact was a fellow emigrant with the family, moved from one closet or drawer to a packing crate and then to a closet or drawer in another residence. At other times, the object was replaced in the new setting by something pristine, using a newfangled material and technology (plastic, aluminum, electronics, pressed concrete). One after another, these objects reveal how we migrated, redefining who were neighbors and who were strangers, what lay close by and what was remote, what was comforting and what was threatening.

We are feeling creatures, and the things around us also become objects of affection and repulsion. Our emotional lives reverberate with and against their surfaces. The subjective world emerges in its encounter with our objective realities. (The two are ultimately one, I believe.) Tell me the story of an acquisition you cherish, and I will plumb the deepest struggles of your heart. Tell me what thing most reminds you of your loved ones, and I will sketch out the geography of your life's journey. Sit with me in a quiet place that has meaning for you, and memories will swarm around us. You will remember stories long unspoken. Objects become touchstones of love, and their loss leaves us with lifelong regret. All I have now of my mother's kitchen, where I found so much love and so much sustenance, is a worn bottle opener. It has to suffice. It has to be passed along to my grandchildren, along with its stories.

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The objects I have selected are not precious heirlooms, nor perfect mementoes of the turning points in our family's century-long American journey. Many reflect instances of affection, others moments of pain. But as I learned, affection may be coupled with dependency and pain with liberation. These objects are not unique to my family. At a dinner recently, a friend pulled out his own grandmother's Edlund bottle opener, stamped with the name of a Buffalo, New York, brewery, which evidently distributed it in a promotional campaign. In this book I chose objects that connected me to family stories or to patterns of life that characterized distinct moments in the Schwartz-Rabinowitz family experience. As twentieth-century things, produced in vast multitudes, these objects—and these patterns of life—overlapped with those of many contemporaries. And yet my parents' lives were always particular, singular, distinctive. Their lives were not exactly typical of any group—Jews, immigrants, New Yorkers, or anyone else. Similarly, their experience could not be shoehorned into a psychological or sociological abstraction like "alienation," "trauma," or "gentrification." They did not follow the expected scripts, and their lives cannot be fully explained as an example of some broader phenomenon.

I learned much about my family in this process. I collected lots of facts and lots of stories. But each was not an end in itself. As I worked, I saw the links over time between very disparate objects, experiences, and stories. Slowly I began to see how my mother constructed a whole life with these objects, one after another. I saw the continuity of her skills, of her temperament, of her energy and her fatigue, of the way she confronted and overcame perilous moments. A pattern to her personality had been created. She was the same person as a resourceful eight-year-old, the eldest of three children, as she would be a quarter-century later in nursing her mother, and

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a decade after that in fighting for a new community library. In a similar way, in Dave Rabinowitz's own story, I could comprehend "the long war" of my father's distrustful life and not just its episodic battles. The zest he mustered in selling newspapers on the street before his seventh birthday could also be found in his fierce drive to find work in his twenties or to capitalize on his quick success in the jewelry business two decades after that. In each case, he had also to deal with an inevitable letdown, admitting failure and moving forward after a necessary surrender.

The life course of each of my parents, I learned, was set in motion by difficult childhoods. By their late teenage years, their characters were well established, their goals and missions set, and their individual purposes propelled them forward. By then, Sarah Schwartz had fixed on a dream of overseeing a clean, quiet home of her own, safe from threats of physical violence (of her Polish youth) and economic want (of Depression-era New York)—a home in which she could cherish and repay her mother's devotion with love for her own children. Dave Rabinowitz, unforgivingly hurt by a father given to gambling and physical abuse, saw himself as a heroic, loyal, but ultimately solitary and wary provider for his family.

If we turned the life stories of Sarah and Dave Rabinowitz into an opera, the first act would feature solo arias depicting their wounds but also their fierce determination to succeed. Inclined to love but prey to fears, they were both strong-willed, thick-skinned people. Their second act, played out on the stage of their early married years, would include a duet of contrasting vocal lines, representing crosscurrents of emotional testing in the face of economic privation and wartime anxiety. Scarred by his failure to clinch a stable income until he latched onto a World War II shipyard job at age 28, Dave simply could not swallow his bad luck or learn from his

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mistakes. It never occurred to him that he had failed to find an angel, a rabbi, a mentor—whatever you want to call someone who smooths your path forward. Or that he needed to settle into one trade or another, one sphere of business activity, rather than bits of a dozen. He fumed and sputtered, but he never gave up, never stopped working hard every day. By contrast, diminutive Sarah assumed greater and greater responsibility—for her parents, barely able to function in the American context; for her brothers, just coming of age; for her young children's physical needs; and for her husband's unstable temperament. Her omnicompetence met all these demands, but left her exhausted and emotionally fractured when, at age 32, she lost her mother to cancer. Dave denied the possibility of privation, while Sarah's skills during the 1930s and 1940s masked it as sufficiency. By cultivating a sense of style in her personal manner and dress as well as in her frugal housekeeping, she refused to feel sorry for herself. Though ordinary life in a noisy, untidy tenement was discouraging, she embraced her ordinary household labors as if they were holy.

Their third act was happier, and then more painful. Now possessed of a small but comfortable private house in East New York, Brooklyn, they were able to join a peer group of like-minded souls and keep hooligans, creditors, and nosy neighbors away. Public life in the McCarthyite era was repressive and sometimes downright terrifying, but home life, filled with new and shiny acquisitions and leisure-time pleasures, became more peaceful. Sarah and Dave created harmonious duets and humorous *recitatives* with their peers. The duets of this third act, however, never quite harmonized as choral anthems. Friendship was not the same as mutuality. In the end, each neighbor family was singing its own tune. Amicable relationships in a lower-middle-class neighborhood could not constitute an effective

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communal resistance to the urban turmoil of the 1960s, when corrupt and misguided government and business actors shredded the social fabric of the Rabinowitzes' street. Sarah and Dave were dispossessed of their home, their most cherished possession. They were once again rootless refugees—this time for nearly a decade.

In the fourth act, Beverly and I have grown up and created, in widely separated corners of the country, homes that looked and felt quite different from the East New York we came from. Mom and Dad retired to Florida, to a toothpaste-white condominium village of 8,500 apartments. In a place stripped clean of memories and mementoes, they started to construct a new life—this time without the scaffolding of work and family responsibilities. They thrived, sustained in large measure by government programs like Social Security, Medicare, tax exemptions, and real estate protections. In the healthy Florida sun, they lived remarkably long lives—Dad to age 94, Mom to 99. They shopped, they cooked, they forged new friendships, they welcomed family visits, and they endured, blessedly without much drama. They sang solo arias again, one after another. Oddly enough, Dave now became the hermit, cherishing his domestic quiet, needing no one but the woman he had loved for seventy-two years. In retirement, Sarah was now the roving ambassador, doing her charitable work, dispensing the wisdom of a community elder.

As a history of twentieth-century America, seen through the lens of a single family, and as a history of personal life set within the transformations of an eventful century, *Objects of Love and Regret* demonstrates how public and private lives constantly intersect. Sarah would have laughed at the idea that she was a philosopher, a historian, or even a "domestic engineer." But, in her organization of days and rooms, of ingredients and implements, of loyalties and interdependencies, in her striving to attain a satisfactory product for the labor of a minute

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or an hour, she enacted almost a full century's worth of philosophical principles and of ways of living and remembering.

As I have untwisted and rewound the strands of my parents' and grandparents' lives, seeing them alone and together, over time and in many places, their tenancy on earth leads me to meditate on the biggest questions—free will and fate, time and space, self and society. Any human life, every human life, is endlessly fascinating.