

SCHMALTZ

By Deborah Karczewski

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CAST: one male or female

I don't know how to mourn. All of the other people at Mrs. Levy's funeral seemed to know what to do, what to feel. Maybe there's something wrong with me. I don't know what to feel.

It's all so surreal. I feel like I'm living someone else's dream. **(looking upward)** Well, what do you know, Mrs. Levy; I did have a *feeling* after all. Chalk one up for Whitney. But this feeling is a non-feeling. I'm walking through the motions, but I can't seem to grasp what's happening to me inside. If I only knew how I was supposed to feel, I'd go ahead and try to feel it. **(groan)** This is so ... darn ... frustrating. Aha! Whitney experiences feeling number two: frustration.

Maybe it's so hard because everything happened so fast. Friday – Mrs. Levy's creative writing class – 9:00 am – as frustrating as ever. Frustrating! Nope, I already felt that one. It's a used emotion. Sunday – the school snow chain lady calls even though it's April. I can still hear her voice: **(Syrupy, nasal, and unemotional, SHE mimics a voice that speaks in constant questions.)** “Mrs. Moore? Oh, your mother's not home? Yes, well, may I leave a message? This is Mrs. Atkins from the school Snow and Emergency Alert Committee? Yes well, Principal Martin has asked us to inform the parents that Mrs. Levy died suddenly of a stroke? Being that she was a member of the ...Jewish persuasion, ...the funeral is scheduled for tomorrow? And since it's a school day, Principal Martin has arranged for a bus to take interested students to the funeral? However, the student must bring a letter of permission, signed by a parent or guardian? Thank you very much and have a good day!”

It was so bizarre. Monday – Mrs. Levy pushes my buttons as usual. I go home feeling all agitated and spend most of the weekend writing in my journal. Sunday night – the phone call from the lady of the perpetual question mark. Man, was she annoying. Annoying – is that an emotion? No, she was the annoying one. I guess that means *I* was feeling *annoyance*. Well anyway, Sunday I got the call, and then – BAM – today, Monday, was the funeral. At first I thought, “Whoa! What's the rush? What happened to the viewing? Give me time to get used to this!” But my

mom explained to me that every religion has its own customs, and that actually, this one was very natural and humane, maybe even more so than what we're used to. At any rate, one day Mrs. Levy is criticizing my writing once again ... and the next school day, I'm at her funeral, with absolutely no clue of how to feel.

It's like a bad joke when you think about it. I can still hear Mrs. Levy now: (**exaggerated intonation and impeccable diction**) "Whitney, you have an admirable sense of style, and your grammar and mechanics are flawless. But you need to develop a sense of self. Write about what you know – what you feel." What I feel? (**looking upward**) OK, you tell me Mrs. Levy. What exactly *do* I feel?

Other people knew what to feel. You could see it in their faces, in their behavior. You could hear it in their words. Most of my friends either looked shocked or miserable. Mrs. Levy's son was crying. It was so sad because he was such a huge man, but he was sobbing like a baby. I guess size has nothing to do with the anguish someone feels when he loses his mother. Am I feeling any anguish? (**SHE answers her rhetorical question with a confused shrug.**)

Her two little grandchildren were crying, too. I never thought of Mrs. Levy as a grandma. Weird. She was so proper. You know? She was as proper as those Shakespearean actors – but without the British accent. The funniest thing about the way Mrs. Levy spoke was that every now and then, in the middle of her perfect speech, she'd throw in some – what did she call it? – Oh yeah, "Yiddish." She'd say, "Why do you keep writing about damsels in distress and rock star marriages and volcanic disasters? Write about what you know. Write about how it feels to be a teenager. Write what's in your heart. Write what you *feel*. All the rest - it's just *schmaltz*."

"Schmaltz?" I asked. "What's schmaltz?"

"Chicken fat!" Mrs. Levy replied. "Oozing, dripping, oily, chicken fat!"

"Well, what about my story about the teenage girl who saved the baby rabbit from the talons of a giant Bald Eagle?"

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