

*L'Chaim and
Lamentations*



Stories by

CRAIG DARCH

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Sadie's Prayer

From her warm bed, Esther shuddered when she heard the clattering of a coffee cup placed onto a saucer. She couldn't help but think of the mess that always accompanied Sadie and fret over the growing pile of cake crumbs and the collection of crumpled napkins she knew would be strewn around the gray formica-topped kitchen table, not to mention the swirling cigarette smoke from Sadie's ever-present Lucky Strike. Sadie is such a slob, she thought bitterly, while turning her head from side to side to loosen her stiff neck. That half-wit must have been up most of the night again smoking and reading those communist books of hers. "Ach," she snorted, "I'm not even out of bed yet and already that Sadie Moskowitz is rubbing my nerves raw."

She pushed her woolen blanket to one side and slowly sat up, putting both feet on the cold wood floor. Her misshapen feet ached, but the dull pain faded as she remembered Sadie. Of all the roommates! I get stuck with an anarchist, a seventy-nine-year-old rabble-rouser. It's a miracle the FBI hasn't come to investigate what goes on

here. I'm just one raid away from jail. And I can thank that miserable housing agency—a Jewish one no less. Why would they match such opposites? She glared at Sadie's side of the room: the unmade bed with stacks of newspapers and magazines encircling it like a moat, the piles of clothes strewn on the floor, the gloomy poster darkening the whole room. Esther turned to gaze instead at her deceased husband, smiling from a framed photograph on her nightstand. "Oy, Max," she groaned, "where are you when I need you? You must be rolling over in your grave knowing how things have turned out for me."

Esther slipped on her white terry cloth robe and tied it tightly around her thin waist, took hold of her aluminum walker, shuffled across the room, breathed deeply, braced herself, and opened the bedroom door.

"Well, there she is already! It's sleeping beauty herself," cried Sadie Moskowitz, enthroned in her seat at the kitchen table. "Come sit with Sadie and have your cake and coffee. I'll even serve you this morning—proving I don't take serious your insults from last night."

Through the haze of cigarette smoke, Esther saw the crumbs from Sadie's breakfast scattered across the table and over the worn linoleum floor and spied a book emblazoned with the title, *Workers Revolt!*

Disgusted, Esther shook her head, waved the smoke away, and snorted, "Ach, another time I have to hear about workers' rights? What about my rights? All these months living with you and every morning it's communist books and crumb cake. With my Max it was always the *Forward*

and lox and bagels. Every morning for forty years it was the *Forward* and lox and bagels.”

“If you haven’t noticed, Esther, your Max is reading the newspaper and having his bagels someplace else this morning,” Sadie said dismissively. “Entenmann’s crumb cake with Sadie Moskowitz—that, my bourgeois friend, will just have to do.” She gestured to the chair across the table. “Here, sit. Don’t kvetch so much about your breakfast. I have been eating Entenmann’s over seventy years. It contains all the nutrients you need for normal activity. What, my ornery friend is planning on digging ditches this morning?”

Ignoring Sadie, Esther shivered, rubbed her bony arms vigorously, and moaned, “Again this morning that miser Stein has cut the heat. It’s a meat locker in here. May he and that numbskull wife of his rot in their heated apartment.”

“Enough already, Esther, with the death wishes. And this from the pious one who believes in You-Know-Who.”

“Don’t tell me *enough*. And I’ve told you, stop with the You-Know-Who business. It’s a dangerous thing to talk like a heretic. Anyway, I’ve been inside Stein’s apartment. It’s the Bahamas in there. And in here we get Siberia.” Esther’s breathing suddenly became erratic; she placed both hands on her chest and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

“Esther, relax or it will be the hyperventilation again. I’ll talk to Stein and remind him the two flowers in the Garden of Eden need just a little heat to bloom.” She slid a piping hot cup of coffee toward Esther. “Here, this

will warm you. Anyway, it's not just Stein, it's your poor circulation; that's why you're always cold. You need to be more active like me, not sit on your *tuchas* so much . . .”

“It's not my circulation,” cried Esther. “Not enough activity? And this coming from Sadie Moskowitz, the Queen of Sheba, who doesn't even lift her little finger around here. I'll give you activity. Just who do you think keeps this apartment clean? And who, may I ask, puts dinner on the table on a budget of pennies? Ach, I can't win with you. That cheapskate Stein turns down the heat and when I freeze you accuse me of poor circulation. What, now the know-it-all Sadie Moskowitz is a doctor?”

Esther pushed her walker to the side and lowered herself into a kitchen chair, crossed her legs, and shook her head as she watched Sadie slice a thin piece of coffee cake.

“Why such a small piece of Entenmann's?” screeched Esther. “Who can live on such a tiny portion? I've hardly the strength to lift my fork. What, you're trying to send me to my grave? And, may I ask, were you so stingy with yourself this morning? Am I the one to suffer because of our financial predicament, an eighty-year-old widow? A stingy rabble-rouser, that's what you are.” As she spoke, Esther brushed the cake crumbs on her side of the table into a neat pile with her stiff, blue-veined hand.

“There is no winning with you,” countered Sadie. “First you don't want coffee cake—only lox and bagels are good enough for Miss Fancy Pants. Now, after all your complaining, you want a bigger piece. Your Max must have suffered two lifetimes from your meshuga behavior.

The poor man must have pleaded with You-Know-Who for an early departure and then danced to his grave for a little peace.”

“You leave my Max out of this. You’re nothing but a communist and a heretic,” spat Esther, her taut face twisted with anger.

Both sat stiffly and eyed each other warily across the table.

Sadie finally broke the impasse, “Let’s not quarrel. For once, let’s be civil to one another . . . So Esther, did you sleep last night?”

“Who can sleep in such a place? Like a lunatic you’re up all night making noise and filling everywhere with smoke. From the aggravation my heart palpitations get worse by the second. It’s no wonder I’m always on the verge of collapse. It’s just a matter of seconds before I’m rushed to the hospital and put on cardiac life support. It will be a gift from God if I live out the day.”

Impervious, Sadie cried raspily, “Not slept? I looked in on you. Like a corpse you were. Not once did you move, just wheezing and snoring the whole night. Such sleep should happen to me. Anyway, my testy friend who thinks she will exit this world in a matter of seconds, for your information, do you know that today we celebrate our anniversary?”

“Anniversary? What, Max and I have an anniversary?” Esther asked, her eyes suddenly vacant.

“No, Esther, your Max is dead for twenty years, remember? Again, it’s one of your thinking spells, and so early in

the morning. It's *our* anniversary. It's to the day one year since we are roommates."

"One year? It feels like forty years wandering in the desert." Esther raised her eyes, clear and lively again, to the ceiling and groaned, "Oy, Max, how much longer do I have to suffer till I join you?"

Sadie waved dismissively at Esther. "For once leave your Max alone. Why spoil his peaceful breakfast? Anyway, what do you know about suffering? Sadie Moskowitz's education was the sweat shops and the picket lines in Brooklyn. For everything in my life I had to suffer. You were one of those fancy Barnard girls; everything was handed to you on a silver platter . . ."

"Oy, don't remind me," Esther sighed. "Those days are long gone. I can't tell you how I miss my life: the candle-lit dinners and dancing with my Max, every afternoon mah-jongg with the girls . . . Now look at me. All I have to my name are memories of my Max, a communist roommate making terrible plots, and more tsuris than Job. I'm telling you, old age has been a curse for me, Sadie. Each day begins lousy with aches and pains and ends even worse. Every night I ask God, who I know from personal experience happens to be hard of hearing, for what sins am I being punished? And, like always, never do I get so much as a hint, much less an answer. I can't tell you how lonely the nights are without my Max."

"Memories shmemoies. Stop so much with the memories. I'm up to my *pupik* with your memories. Lonely nights? Sadie Moskowitz could write a book on cold, lonely

nights.” She sighed wistfully. “Ah, but when I was young, it was different. I rarely wasted a night. Tell me, Esther, back then were you enthusiastic, too?”

“What enthusiastic? Again you talk goofy. Who can understand what you mean?”

“I mean with your Max. Were you enthusiastic in bed, you know, when he . . .”

“Such a thing to ask, and before lunch even!” choked Esther, her face flushed. “I never heard such talk in my life. The questions you ask. I would never think of my Max in that way; never. No lady would. I was taught not to talk about such things.”

“It’s not healthy, Esther, to keep everything bottled up inside. It’s a proven fact—such a thing can cause dangerous blockages in your system. That may be the source of your palpitations. Anyway, I was taught to speak my mind, and between you and me, Esther, I was enthusiastic with all my partners, every one of them. I tried to list them one night when I couldn’t sleep.” She leaned forward, displaying a gleam in her eye and a row of shiny, white false teeth, and whispered across the table, “Esther, there were more than I could remember . . .”

“Oy vey,” Esther cried. “Such shenanigans I have to hear about this morning, in my own apartment even.”

Sadie, oblivious to Esther’s protests, continued, “I can’t say any one of them was better than the next, at least from what I can remember . . . well, maybe Manny. He was what you might call . . . gifted. Oh, how I loved being the center of his attentions. But Manny was like all the

union men in those days; the only time a woman got his attention was in the bedroom. At the union hall women weren't respected; it was always, 'make a snack,' or 'clean up.' Always the men in charge, and Manny was the worst, constantly barking orders. I learned no man wants to share the spotlight. That's why I gave Manny his pink slip and dropped him like a hot knish. I asked myself, does Sadie Moskowitz need such tsuris just for the privilege of a few minutes under the wedding canopy?"

"Well," countered Esther, "did you ever consider maybe a spotlight should shine on only one person at a time?"

"But why should it always shine on the man? Anyway, my satisfied homemaker, what did marriage ever give you?"

"It gave me forty years of happiness with my Max, and for me that was enough. Now look what you did," Esther moaned, shaking her head. "You got me thinking about my Max again. Oy, how I still miss him. I can't believe it's been over twenty years since I buried my Max. Such a life! I can't remember from one second to the next, but I remember that day like it was yesterday because that day I died, too." She scooped up the last few crumbs on her plate and licked her fork clean.

"For someone so dead, Esther, you sure eat your fill of coffee cake."

"Ach, who can in this apartment have a normal conversation? It's always the kibitzing with you, Sadie . . ."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." Sadie leaned across the table. "Tell me, Sadie Moskowitz is all ears. What do you remember about that day?"

“Oy, do I remember! You’ve never seen such a funeral. So many came, even some of Max’s old employees. And you should have heard the stories they told about my Max. I’ll never forget them, no matter how bad my memory gets. Rabbi Cohen said if Max hadn’t lost everything in the Depression, he would have made a name for himself. Those were the rabbi’s exact words. And now look at what’s happened to me. Every day I sit in a shabby godforsaken apartment with a communist plotting who knows what kind of subversion,” she snapped as she drained the last swallow of coffee from her cup.

“Again, Esther, it’s the communist accusations with you. You’re as bad as that half-wit McCarthy was. But, because it’s our anniversary, I’ll ignore your insults. Anyway, I can tell you a thing or two about funerals. Sadie Moskowitz has attended her share. My last one was Manny’s. I hadn’t seen him in years, but one day I saw his obituary in the *Times*. He finagled his way to the top and had some fancy schmancy job in the Garment Union. Ach, when I think of the three years of my life I wasted with that no-goodnik, the miserable two-timer. And this, may I add, from the son of a rabbi from the old country, no less. I could tell you such things, Esther, about that womanizer. Anyway, all his girlfriends showed up. I think they wanted the satisfaction of seeing him in his grave. You’ve never seen such a joyous occasion. All the girlfriends left the cemetery beaming. I even heard a few mazel tovs on the way out. You’d have thought it was a bar mitzvah! Such a meshugener that man was. All those years Manny lecturing me

about liberating the worker and equal opportunity—I didn't know he meant equal opportunity for him to sleep with every woman he met . . .”

“Well, my Max was different. I never had a moment's worry about such things,” Esther gloated.

“Ach, like always, it's all about your Max.” Sadie lit a Lucky Strike, inhaled deeply, blew out a stream of smoke and began, “Your Max . . .”

Esther, suddenly preoccupied, didn't hear her roommate. She was twisting the wedding band on her finger. From the tangle of memories about Max, one pulls her away, and she finds herself standing in her apartment on Prospect Street waiting for him. The dinner table is beautifully set for his arrival. A silver tureen of hot matzo ball soup sits in the middle of the table next to a bowl of chopped liver; a mountain of sliced onions are heaped on a dish. A tender brisket made juicy and caramel-sweet by her secret ingredient, Coca-Cola, simmers in a pot on the counter, ready for serving. Two crystal wine glasses, filled to their brims, shimmer in the light. Suddenly there is a noise at the front door, and Max comes in and plops his camel hair overcoat and fedora on a chair. Without a word, Max takes her into his arms, and Esther squeezes back with all her might . . .

As though in a dream, more memories of Max rush at her. It's a wintry morning in Brooklyn. She and Max are strolling hand in hand down Pitkin Avenue. A frosty wind swirls around them and bites their faces. Icy snowflakes cover everything with a crusty, white blanket. “Let's stop at

Grabstein's for a pickled tongue on rye and an egg cream," she says, pressing herself against him to get warm . . .

" . . . Esther, are you listening to me?" Sadie called impatiently. "You didn't hear a word I said. Again it's the thinking spells. What am I going to do with you?"

Esther was still trembling with thoughts of her Max, and she could still feel the cold sting of the wind and snow on her hollow cheeks and the lingering taste of pickled tongue on rye in her mouth.

"Ach, what's to hear?" Esther spat. "Lectures by the heretic, Lefty Moskowitz."

"Oy vey, now I'm Lefty Moskowitz! It's one insult after another with you, Esther. But you're wrong about that heretic business. A heretic doesn't believe in You-Know-Who—I'm just not sure; the jury is still out. For this I need concrete proof, like a corned beef sandwich sitting in front of me. I see, I eat, I believe."

"I hate to be the one to remind you, Sadie, but at your advanced age you don't have much more time to settle accounts. But how can you if you don't pray once in a while?"

"About that, Esther, you're wrong. Sadie Moskowitz in her lifetime has done her share of praying. After I left that two-timer Manny, I prayed for him a heart attack. Oy, the praying I did. Everyday at the crack of dawn, like I was saying the morning blessings, I prayed. After lunch I whispered sweet prayers for revenge, and I prayed on picket lines holding protest signs—you try picketing and praying at the same time without hurting yourself, it's

not easy. Even on my knees before bed I prayed for that womanizer to experience chest pains. Like a rabbi I was for all my praying. Nobody on this earth prayed like Sadie Moskowitz prayed. I even gave You-Know-Who advice on the time and place to finish Manny off in case He was not so good with details and needed just a little nudge. And what did Sadie Moskowitz, the pious one, get for her trouble? I'll tell you what I got. Bupkes, I got! Until his heart attack *fifty years* later. And I ask you, Esther, this kind of service is proof?"

"You think just because you prayed once in a while you should get immediate action? For you it should be different than any other Jew? Ach, just look at me, I'm sitting with the eminent Rabbi Moskowitz who thinks she should have a direct line to God. If you haven't noticed already, Jews are chosen to be put on hold." Esther shook her head. "So, these are my golden years? For the short time I have left, I'm condemned to sit with a communist who prays for heart attacks. Huh, for me not one year has been golden, not one! Who could know getting old would bring such *tsuris*? This life is a curse."

"Esther, for once you're right. But don't think you've cornered the market on *tsuris*. Getting old has not exactly been a stroll in paradise for Sadie Moskowitz, either. It's just one day, the same day, over and over. And to top that, at night I just lie there, awake. I can't tell you the strange things that race through my mind late at night. I lie there thinking and shrinking. I am getting shorter by the day! How can a person shrink? And not only that, every day my

life gets smaller and smaller, just the four walls of this jail cell. This isn't a life, it's a death sentence! What I wouldn't give for something fun to break the monotony."

"Something fun? What, at your age you should have a party?" snorted Esther.

"Yes!" cried Sadie, her eyes at once lively behind her thick glasses. "Finally, Esther, you have a good idea! Yes, why not a party? Esther, Sadie Moskowitz has just decided. Today we will spend preparing for our anniversary celebration. And for such an occasion we must have something special for our dinner." Sadie thought for a moment, her forehead wrinkling, then said with wet lips, "Esther, it's been ages since you made your famous matzo ball soup. Can we have it tonight?"

Esther raised her gray eyebrows as she considered Sadie's request. Then she shrugged her narrow, stooped shoulders and said, "For once you ask nice. So, if it's matzo ball soup you want, I'll prepare matzo ball soup."

"Can you make the matzo balls small and crispy like last time?" Sadie added, an expectant smile lighting her face.

"Ach, why not? If it's crispy you want, I'll make crispy. But I need to stop at Karp's and pick up matzo meal, carrots, and chicken—and more prune juice; I'm suffering from the constipation again." She grimaced as she rubbed her stomach. "So, I'm warning you, Sadie, don't rush me like always."

Straightening in her seat so she was eye level with Sadie, Esther said with authority, "Now it's Esther Hirsh who's making a decision. So just listen for the first time

ever: we'll eat off mother's white linen and light candles and say the blessings. So maybe for once you can eat like a normal human being and not spill all over the place. And another thing, for the occasion, we'll dress nice, not the *shmattes* we usually wear." Her voice turned energetic, girlish. "And maybe even listen to some nice music, not the TV blaring like always."

"To have the pleasure of sipping your delicious matzo ball soup, Esther, I'll do anything you ask. And I'll even pick up a bottle of Manischewitz. We can have with our soup a glass of wine to celebrate our anniversary."

"For an anniversary such as ours," Esther sighed, "maybe the whole bottle will be necessary." She rose stiffly and reached to gather the cups and saucers as she did each morning, but Sadie nudged her away, collected the breakfast dishes into a neat stack, and said, "Go get dressed already. I'll clean up. Save your energy for the soup. You'll soon understand, Esther, you need a friend like me; you need Sadie Moskowitz."

"Like a pestilence I need you," Esther half smiled and slowly turned and shuffled off, her noisy walker leading the way.

A nervous grimace passed across her face as she worried whether she'd remember, once there, why she had gone to the bedroom in the first place. After a few more steps, she paused to catch her breath and, like an exhausted marathon runner, surveyed the distance to the bedroom. She groaned, closing her eyes. At once, it is 1925, a redolent spring evening, her beloved Max, young and dashing,

whirls her across a ballroom floor to the rhythm of Benny Goodman's band, her white chiffon dress billowing with each turn. She feels weightless in Max's arms, and her feet barely touch the gleaming parquet floor.

Then, in mid-song, the music is gone as quickly as one of Max's soft, unexpected kisses. The aroma of perfume is replaced by the musty smell of the shabby apartment. But before the inevitable longing took hold, Esther reassured herself that it would not be long before she would join Max and finish that dance, and once again everything would be just right.

"Esther, Esther," Sadie's booming voice filled the tiny apartment. "There you go again, daydreaming about Max, like always. I can tell by that faraway look . . ."

"Ach, now, among other things, the great Sadie Moskowitz is a mind reader," Esther scoffed, her eyes as soft as if she'd just awakened from a dream. She entered the bedroom and immediately tensed as she caught sight of the poster over Sadie's bed: the burning, predatory gaze of Karl Marx, his bushy gray beard and thick coarse hair framing a large, round face, his coal-black eyes following her around the room through the dust and shadows. Esther flinched under his exacting gaze and called out sharply to Sadie, "Every morning I have to be greeted by that communist and hear such talk from you, such meshuga talk. This I have to look forward to for the short time I have left on this earth."

"Enough about Karl Marx, Esther. Such complaining

causes wrinkles. Besides, you had your Max, let me have my Marx. Now get ready, or we'll never get out of this godforsaken apartment."

Esther shook her head, muttered out of the corner of her mouth about having to spend the rest of her life with a communist, and closed the bedroom door.

Sadie stood motionless for several moments and listened to the faint sounds of Esther dressing. She sighed and placed the cups and saucers into the sink. With two well-aimed swipes of her pudgy hand, she deftly brushed the cake crumbs from the table onto the floor and shrugged. So who will see? Anyway, Esther will sweep it up later; that girl loves to clean. And the activity will be good for her circulation. She leaned against the kitchen counter and thought of their anniversary celebration—finally, something to look forward to. She cocked her head to listen for sounds from the bedroom, but there was only silence.

Sadie called impatiently to the closed door, "Esther, come on already and stop the daydreaming. We're not getting any younger. Let's get out of here before You-Know-Who finds a reason to ruin our plans. And to show you Sadie Moskowitz is not a cheapskate, lunch will be my treat. Wear that blue turtleneck and bundle up. You could catch your death waiting for that bus of ours that's always late." Knowing Esther's dislike for being rushed, she added, "Just remember, Esther, before you get mad at me like always, you need a friend like Sadie Moskowitz."

Sadie tiptoed to a dusty table piled high with her books, carefully selected one from the bottom of the stack, opened

it, and drew twenty dollars from the middle pages. Convinced that would be enough for lunch and a nice bottle of Manischewitz, she kissed the book as though it was a sacred text and returned it to its place.

Suddenly, she was overcome with excitement about their day, but Sadie knew the feeling would last only a moment before worry about her Esther nagged again. She waved away a twinge of melancholy already beginning to burrow deep into her chest. Then she raised her face upward and, with half-closed eyes, spoke just loud enough to gain the attention of the Hard-of-Hearing-One:

“I’m not praying, mind you, because I’m not so sure I even believe in such with the *mishigas* and tsuris me and Esther have suffered in our lives. But just in case, maybe it’s not too much to ask this one time that you should not forget about Sadie Moskowitz and Esther Hirsh who live in Brooklyn on Fulton Avenue in Apartment 2E, and give us a few more good years without Esther’s thinking spells getting worse, and, if I can be blunt, finagle a little heat from that weasel Stein before I ring his neck. If you haven’t noticed already, Esther suffers terrible palpitations from the cold, as well as nervousness, headaches, indigestion accompanied by terrible gas, and frequent moodiness. And, by the way, just so you understand Sadie Moskowitz just a little, Esther thinks you’re hard of hearing, but do you know what I think? I think you hear exactly what you want to hear. So just in case you’re listening, I must ask one more thing. When the time comes for Esther to join her Max, could you make it my time, too, and ask them

to save just a little room for me? Because even up there with you and her Max, with all her peculiarities Esther will need a friend like Sadie Moskowitz.”

She sighed heavily from her effort. Her razor-sharp eyes became soft and dreamy and momentarily fell on the bedroom door. Then Sadie Moskowitz hurried to the closet, pulled out their winter coats, took her place at the kitchen table, and gently fluffed the thick fur of Esther's collar as she waited for her friend.