

TELL ME SOMETHING

by Edward Schwarzschild

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Family Diamond is Edward Schwarzschild's second work of fiction, and like his first novel, Responsible Men, it is set in Philadelphia and is about family life. The book begins and ends with Milly



Edward Schwarzschild,
author of
The Family Diamond



In one way or another, I'm always writing for my bubba. I can still picture her during her last years, sitting on her couch in Riddle Village Retirement Community, out on the edge of Philadelphia. She's become blind in her old age and, as usual, she holds her briefcase-sized tape player on her lap. Her eyes are closed and there are old-school puffy black headphones covering her ears. She's listening to yet another book on tape.

Before walking over to say hello, I can close my eyes, too, and it's easy for me to picture her at other times in her life. I'm fortunate that she started a family when she was young. She gave birth to my mother when she was twenty-two, and my mother followed her example, giving birth to me when she was twenty-three, so I began to know Bubba when she was still a vibrant young woman. It was Bubba who taught me to swim and bowl and play blackjack. Year after year, Bubba orga-

Diamond, the plucky, wise matriarch who influences everyone she meets. Which made us wonder: Who among Schwarzschild's own family has influenced him the most as a writer?

nized almost every major family event, and during every occasion, she told me stories about our history, our city, our friends, and our family.

Those stories grow out from one basic narrative. A young man flees the Russian army in the 1890s and comes to Philadelphia and walks the streets looking for work. He's been trained as a kosher butcher but the only job he can find is as a peddler. He meets a young woman who also fled Russia and they fall in love and marry and work and work and work and have five children, two boys and three girls, and Bubba is the youngest. These children become doctors and lawyers and teachers and secretaries and spread out all across the city. Many of the stories featured poverty and heartbreak and sickness and bankruptcy, but in the end they were stories of triumph, of adversity overcome.

I want to say that Bubba's own story line was also triumphant,

THE FAMILY DIAMOND
by Edward Schwarzschild
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-410-3
Trade Paper Original
Publication: September 2007

and on most levels it was—she created and nurtured a growing family, and nothing was ever more important to her than that. But over the years her body failed her. Still, she was stubborn to the end, determined to do as much as she could. To give just one example, in her late seventies, she wanted to go white-water rafting in Colorado, even though by then her left eye had already stopped working. She couldn't understand our hesitation. "I'll be fine," she said. "You don't have to worry about me." We almost believed her—she was always very convincing—but that was one of the rare times she didn't get her way.

Back at Riddle Village, I walk over to where she's sitting on the couch. I touch her hand, sit beside her, kiss her cheek, and she opens her sightless hazel eyes. She takes off the headphones and moves the tape player onto the coffee table. Then she starts to talk. Her voice has become raspy and she wheezes a little with every breath, a constant reminder that she's the last of her siblings still alive. Sometimes it sounds to me as if her brothers and sisters are all trying to speak through her. Maybe those voices fighting for space inside her are part of what makes it more difficult for her to breathe. In any case, she opens the conversation the same way she always does. "Tell me something," she says.

I can't refuse. I tell her everything I can, about my life, my work, my girlfriend.

But she wants more. For her—forever our family gardener, baker, canner, chef, seamstress, pianist, bowler, swimmer, cyclist,

knitter, mah-jongg maven, school district secretary, matriarch, and Bubba—actions have always spoken much louder than words. "When will the book be finished?" she asks. "And where are my great-grandchildren?"

I assure her that I'm working on everything as best I can. I tell her it's my job to give her something to look forward to. Then

I mention a story that's giving me trouble. There's always a story giving me trouble.

She leans forward, rests a hand on my knee, and says, "I bet the characters will take over. They'll tell you what to put down on the page. At least that's what I've heard from other writers. Hasn't

that happened for you yet?"

"No," I answer, "not yet."

But then, later, after I leave, I eventually return to my desk and I can feel Bubba's voice pushing my writing forward. She's there, by my side, whispering and wheezing words of encouragement. And that encouragement never seems to stop. Bubba died five years ago while she was traveling in California, but I swear I can hear her voice whenever I sit down in my study. "Tell me something," she says.

I still can't refuse. I tell her everything.

"When will the next book be finished?" she wants to know, as usual.

"It's finally done," I say. "And, guess what, it's dedicated to you."

"That's nice," she says. "But where are my great-grandchildren?"

"I'm working on that," I promise. ■

"It was Bubba who taught me to swim and bowl and play blackjack."

—EDWARD
SCHWARZSCHILD

