BASSYA; A BIOGRAPHY

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Echoes of the past –
days and years
Of poverty and
childish laughter
Heartbreak – death
and many tears,
They come to me –
with such intensity
Begging and
demanding to be
remembered.

- by Bassya Bibel

Forward

Most all writings contain some bias -- and even more so when the writer's subject concerns something or someone close to her. Such is the case of this biography. It is a biography of my grandmother who I am close to, and who I love. That is the only bias impossible to remove. I do not set my grandmother on a pedestal to model myself after, nor do I place her below me to condemn. In this biography I present her as a woman with an interesting life. My only wish is, that when I am at her age, I will be as youthful as she.

As a Child in Russia

For many years before the revolution in Russia, the Jewish people comprised a large segment of small towns and villages much like the little town of Anatevka depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof.* Under the Czar, restrictions were placed on the Jewish people and on other minorities. These restrictions were enforced either by secret instructions to police advising repressive measures i.e., pogroms, or as legal public decisions, "Ukases" , of the Czar. But, somehow the Jews managed to practice what was denied; mainly the worship of their God, and the education of their children. At the turn of the century, there were seven thousand schools and educational institutions which produced many rabbinical and Hebrew scholars. Language, religion, and culture are essential to the survival of a nation. Russian Jewry was effective in preserving all three, even under the oppressive rule of the Czar. The Jews existed as a secular culture in Russia -- only a small percentage of the Jewish

population adopted the mode of life and culture of the majority of the Russian population. The life for the Jew in Russia was not an easy one. Most were poor, their life opportunities and goals were politically restricted, and they lived in constant fear of pogroms and evictions. However they found solace and strength in their religion, and they made the best of their situation.

Such is the world that my grandmother, Bassya Maltzer, was born into on January 17, 1908. She was born in Kopiegorod, a small town of about three thousand people, located in the southwest portion of Russia. Being in a small town the people were very close: ***"...the whole town was like one family. If there was a death in one family, the whole town mourned. If there was a wedding, the whole town danced at it."***

Among the Jews in the town, there was a definite class distinction which was based, not on money (most were poor), but on the occupation of the man in the family. The lower class included the butchers, the shoemakers, and the cabinet makers -- they were uneducated and the trades were passed from father to son. The upper class, to which Bassya's family belonged, was composed of the male scholars and their families. This distinction was first explained to Bassya when she was around nine years old. Her grandfather requested that she refrain from visiting Fanya, the butcher's daughter: "When you go into her house, the language they use in that house is not the language we use in ours. They are butchers! We Maltzers are the society -- not in money, but in dignity."

Bassya's grandfather was a very religious man, and a respected scholar -- the town's people turned to him for both spiritual, practical and financial assistance. He was president of the synagogue. Her father, Benzeon, by the age of nineteen, was a rabbi in a synagogue. However, being an idealist, he gave up his rabbinical position after one year, for he saw the hypocrisy of the people who came into the synagogue, and, instead of praying, gossiped among each other about business and personal problems. He then wanted to be a doctor, but being a Jew, this was impossible. So he studied and became a Certified Public Accountant for a sugar factory. He traveled all over Russia opening sugar refineries. However, he always remained an idealist and a scholar.

An interesting consequence of the scholarly life these upper class men led, was the roles their wives assumed. The real scholars spent the day in philosophical discussions -- which brought in little, if any, money. So if her husband was a true scholar, the wife was almost sure to be the mainstay, economically, of the house, and she did this by running shops or other such enterprises. Bassya recalls that her grandmother, Yochaved, ***"got up every day at 4:30 in the morning, baked her bread, washed the clothes, ironed, prepared breakfast. At 7:30, she was in her little grocery shop that she managed until 6:00 P.M. It was remarkable. My grandmother never complained of all the hard work. She accepted it as a matter of fact. She was a woman and this was a woman's job."*** The wife of the scholar was expected to provide for the family and do the housework, too. Life was easier for Bassya's mother, Meriam -- although her husband was a scholar, he also had a paying job. Meriam did not have to work -- she even had a maid. She had no education so she could not read. Since the women were called upon little in the religious ceremonies, they had little knowledge of their content, and so many were

distracted from religious devotion. Without housework or a job to fill her time and with no intellectual or religious outlets or worldly concerns to turn to, she filled her time with socializing: ***"She loved to dress beautiful, and she had a beautiful figure and wanted to display it. She had parties with men and woman, who used to compliment her. This was her world; this was her joy."***

The child, Bassya, was presented with two different roles: that of the knowledgeable, philosophical scholar who spent his life in lively debate, and that of the working or non-working wife who was oblivious to the world that existed outside of her four walls. Faced with these contrasting roles, Bassya chose to model herself after the men in her family. She respected their lives, and considered them meaningful, whereas she viewed the women as living a trivial, uninformed existence. So Bassya attempted to imitate these scholars. She sat and listened to their discussions. It was her father and grandfather who represented the life she wanted for herself, and it was around them that her life centered, as can be seen in the poems Bassya wrote much later:

I grew and I dreamed -
And silently listened
To what man had to say
Like a squirrel — I quietly
Gathered the wisdom I heard
And stored it away in my mind.

and:

From my grandfathers
I learned wisdom.
From my father, it seems
I have inherited his
Longings and his dreams.

Bassya was brought up, religiously, by her father and grandfathers. She went to the Jewish school, and when she was old enough, she started her education at the Russian public school. This was the general trend for Jewish girls in Russia at this time. Since 1860, more and more Jewish girls were sent to general schools, although limitations existed on admission to secondary and higher education. The Jewish parents felt that both Jewish and Russian educations were important. When she was eight years old, Bassya's father said to her, "Remember, education is the most beautiful thing you can achieve." Bassya always remembered this, and met her education with a serious desire to learn.

It was while she was attending the government school that she had her first truly bitter taste of anti-Semitism. She was an "A" student -- and that was her fault, for it brought attention to her and to her being Jewish. As a result, she was continuously called a "dirty Jew" by her Christian classmates. When she walked on the streets the little Christian boys, knowing that she was Jewish, would throw stones at her -- not because she did anything to them, but because she was Jewish. This treatment

hurt her deeply. But she grew up with it and the treatment was always trying to tell her: "You must be like other are."

Bassya also met bitterness in her home. The contrasts Bassya perceived as existing between her parents indeed existed and was the cause of an unhappy marriage, with Bassya in the middle. Her parents had nothing in common as far as interests, and this was the source of many disputes. From her bedroom, Bassya would hear them argue: ***"Because the quarrels were continuous, my father would warn her that if she did not stoop making him so unhappy he would commit suicide. And she would run into the bedroom and put compresses on her heart, saying that she was going to get a heart attack."*** These arguments deeply saddened Bassya. Her parents spoke of divorce, but decided against it because of their daughter and also because divorce was not acceptable in their family. Even at the time, Bassya realized that she would have been much happier to have lived with just one parent and be spared the exposure to their constant arguments.

Bassya was also learning that life outside the home, for the Jew in Russia, was not a good one. One windy day, ten Cossacks came riding on their horses into her town. Bassya had heard about pogroms -- that the soldiers would cut off women's fingers and then steal their rings, and that they had cut off the head of her father's close friend. On this particular day, as Bassya watched on, horrified, the soldiers chased an eighty-year-old Jewish woman down the street, and then walked over her with their horses until she died. As Bassya grew older, during the revolution, the gentiles in the town would point out a house to a soldier and say, "This house here has a Jew." The soldiers would then go into the house, and if they saw a young man, up to forty years old, they would grab him and send him off to war. Once, when she was eight years old, she was sitting listening to the older men talk when a neighbor ran in, instructing her father to hide, as the soldiers were pulling young men into the army. Instead of hiding, he crawled into his bed, and Bassya into hers, and they left the light burning low. This was all under the instruction of a highly respected visiting learned man. The soldiers came into the house and went into the bedroom. They saw Bassya's father but did not take him. Throughout her life, Bassya was puzzled as to the reasoning behind her father's lucky fate. Years later a psychologist explained to her that the soldiers figured that any young man would not be sleeping, but would be hiding somewhere. And so, once again, Bassya was impressed by the intellectual mind of a man -- in this case, the learned scholar who suggested the successful tactic to her father.

When Bassya was eleven years old her father died of typhus. He was thirty-three years old. And when he died, her world stopped. Her mother had always been busy with her own life -- it was from her father that she received love, and to her father that she bestowed love. So his absence left her very alone. She expressed this feeling in a later poem:

What a void
he left for me
When he died
at thirty three.
I walked around like
A stranger in a cold

and strange land -
With no one to really
care or understand.

Soon after her father's death, her father's brothers and sisters, who were living in California, sent for the family. Bassya's grandfather sold his brick house and sold whatever else he could part with. When they (Bassya, her three year old brother, her mother, her uncle, her grandfather, and his wife) were ready to leave, her grandfather put all of the money into a scarf and put it around her waist, under her dress. And so they set off on their long journey to America.

They reached the frozen river that separated Ukraine and Bassarabia. It was during the revolution and there were soldiers guarding each side, who were ordered to shoot anyone attempting to leave Russia. Bassya and her family waited until dark and then crossed the river, fearfully. Finally they reached the other side. When they arrived, Bassya screamed, ***"Grandfather, I lost the belt!"*** She was a thin child and it had slipped off. A girl crossing at the same time went back and was able to retrieve the money. Bassya asked not to carry the money anymore -- ***"the responsibility is something I can not take."*** The group then climbed into the back of a wagon, hiding under the straw, and were taken to a relative's inn in Bassarabia, where they stayed for eight months awaiting their passports. After this interval, they went to Antwerp and boarded the boat for the United States.

Bassya left Russia in 1920 at the age of twelve. She had grown up placing a high respect on the life that men led, and hoped to live such a life. She had heard "dirty Jew" for many years, and had learned to live as a second class citizen. She was also leaving a revolution behind in Russia -- one in which women would come out with a new status -- and going to a country where women had won the vote only after many years of struggle.

<u>In the United States</u>

The travelers arrived at Ellis Island, and all went on to San Francisco except for Bassya and her mother. They were detained at the island for six weeks -- Bassya's brother had died from measles during the trip across the Atlantic. Bassya was deeply affected by the loss of her younger brother: ***"There was God first, my father second, and my brother third. And I had lost my father and my little brother. And I lost God."*** At the age of twelve, Bassya, who had been brought up learning the importance of religion, cursed God and denied his existence.

Bassya and her mother then traveled the eight-and-a-half day train trip to San Francisco. When they arrived, they learned that the grandfather had died. The San Francisco relatives felt cheated -- they had only wanted the grandfather to come in the first place; they had sent for the others only at his request. Bassya felt their resentment and did everything she could, not to disappoint them further.

She started seventh grade at the public school knowing five languages, but not a word of English. She adopted an interpreter, Morry Rosen, who knew Russian, and the two became known in the school as the "Bolsheviky Sweethearts." With his

help, she was familiar with English within two months, and with this achievement behind her, she became thoroughly involved in her school work.

Most of all, she loved history because it taught her about democracy -- that everybody was equal: ***"All of a sudden a Jewish girl the little 'dirty Jew' became equal to all the people in the country. I was a person!"*** But soon after learning this, her joy nearly suffered disillusionment. Bassya, on noticing that a female classmate was stepping on another classmates bonnet, said, ***"Mary, you are stepping on Evelyn's little hat."*** Mary turned to Bassya, and said, "Mind your own business, you dirty Jew!" And Bassya did what she never would have done in Russia, for fear of being thrown out of school -- she slapped Mary. Both girls were sent to the principal's office, and Bassya explained to him that she had learned that she now lived in a democracy -- that she was equal to everyone else -- and because of this, nobody had the right to call her "dirty Jew." Mary was suspended from school for a month, and Bassya was renewed with faith in democracy: ***"I couldn't believe it! Here was democracy at work! It was beautiful!"***

When she was thirteen, she joined the Sunday School and became involved in a debate club. She was a successful debater and achieved confidence in her ability for verbal expression. At the age of fourteen, Bassya felt the need to express herself, and to fill the need she began writing short stories and poetry. And because she was doing something different, her family laughed at her. The jokes hurt her, but she continued writing.

A few months later someone informed her about a local dramatic group, the Yiddish Literary Dramatic Group. The first Yiddish production in America had been organized by a Russian Jew, Boris Tomashevsky, and its artistic and social prestige rose visibly when Maurice Schwartz, director and actor founded the Jewish Art Theatre in New York. Bassya went to the San Francisco group, and saying that she was eighteen was allowed to join. She played both leading and other roles in many plays. The group took their plays to Stockton, Sacramento, Petaluma, and Napa. Bassya loved the stage and remained with the group for nine years. In this group she found fulfillment, and once again she found God.

After graduation from high school, Bassya attended Heald's Business College, and there she learned bookkeeping and secretarial skills. Her relatives paid her tuition in hopes that she would "make good." At this same time, a cousin, Sol Friedman, was being very kind to her. He placed her on a pedestal, and truly loved her. Bassya was bewildered and flattered by his attention and, at the age of sixteen, she accepted an engagement ring.

Six months later, Bassya graduated from the college and found her first paying job at a ladies clothing store. Soon after, she became ill and lost this job. When she recovered, she found a job as an usherette at the Golden Gate Theatre. There she earned twenty dollars a week in wages and the same in tips. Bassya loved this job -- there were seven acts of vaudeville after the movies, and by the end of each week she had learned all of the songs and dances. After three weeks, the manager came to her saying "this is no job for you," and gave her a job doing secretarial work in his office. Missing the usherette work, she quit and answered an ad "Secretary, wanted evenings for attorney." She left after one evening when he tried to make love to

her, telling him that he should have advertised for a companion instead of a secretary. She then became a cashier and wrapper at the Emporium for fifteen dollars a week. During this time she was still involved with the Yiddish theatre.

Bassya and Sol were married in 1926 -- Bassya was eighteen years old. Sol remained kind and considerate and would look up to her on the stage. But she was not happy. They had a beautiful apartment, but she felt, much like Nora in Ibsen's play, that she was in a "doll's house." Bassya had nothing in common with him -- he was uneducated, he did not read books, she could not discuss things with him. She was in the same position in marriage that her father had found himself in. She thought that she would find fulfillment if she had a child and so she became pregnant.

In her seventh month of pregnancy she realized that she was in love with someone else -- Philip Bibel, who made the signs advertising the plays at the Yiddish Theatre. He was educated, talented, an idealist, and they had much to talk about. When her daughter Lila (my mother) was born on September 25, 1929, Bassya decided that she must get Phil out of her heart. They fought their love for two years and for two years she was miserable. She could not stop loving Phil, but she could not bear to hurt Sol, who was so kind to her. Finally, she and Phil decided to commit suicide in order to put an end to their problems. On the morning before their planned escape, Bassya's uncle noticed that she did not look well and, for the first time, she told someone of her love. Realizing that Bassya had married too hastily, her uncle went directly to Sol and told him the whole story. Sol agreed to give Bassya a divorce if she would allow him to keep Lila, their daughter, for one year. Bassya regretted leaving her daughter, but she felt that she had no other choice. She went to Reno for six weeks and got the divorce.

Divorce in the year 1931 was both a shock and disgrace to her family and to public sentiment. A collection of essays on divorce by distinguished authors, published in 1930 reveals the negative public attitude toward divorce: "Divorce is sordid and ugly ...a mortal ill," "divorce is inhuman," and "divorced people (are) more sedulously respectable and socially timid than the average human being." Bassya's family, with their religious beliefs, also condemned divorce. For the Talmud, the authoritative book of Jewish tradition, extrapolates the original creation and postulates that the original human was both male and female, and then God separated the two so that neither is complete without the other. Marriage is seen as a sacred relation: "A Jew without a wife lives without joy, blessing or good." Her relatives could not understand how Bassya could break this "sacred relation," especially with one so kind as Sol. As a result of their strong beliefs, many would not talk to Bassya for nineteen years. But Bassya had grown up in the middle of an unhappy marriage, wishing that her parents would divorce, and she did not want to provide Lila with the same unhealthy situation. She also valued the spiritual and philosophical aspects of life -- and she knew she could not find these valued ideals with Sol.

She married Philip Bibel in 1932 during the depression, and they left for New York.

New York

The newlyweds arrived in New York with all the dreams of the idealists that they were -- idealists with no money. Phil, having had experience as a journalist, felt that, with the many Jewish newspapers published in New York, he would find a journalist position. Such a position was not to be found, but he acquired employment in a chemical firm. While Bassya had been on the stage with the Yiddish group in San Francisco, the famous director, Maurice Schwartz, had seen her perform. Impressed with her work, he asked her if she would like to take a year to train under him. But she had been married to Sol at the time and could not accept his offer. However, he had promised her a paying job if she should ever come to New York. So, now that Bassya was in New York, she intended to contact him and start a career on the stage. But, like Phil, her hopes were not filled. A friend warned Phil that Mr. Schwartz had the reputation of sleeping with all the actresses. After hearing this, Phil refused to let Bassya see the director, and all of her dreams of acting vanished. At the time, Bassya was deeply disappointed, but in retrospect, her feelings are clarified: ***"I missed it at first. The truth is I missed it terribly -- that's why I began to write poetry (again). But my family has sufficed. You know it scares me to think I might not have had all of you if I had a career. Because, now, I have got more out of my children and grandchildren than any career can give."***

It was during the depression, and they were in need of money, so Bassya went out in search of a job. She found employment as a secretary at a Jewish Teaching Seminary, where she made five dollars a week. The work was enjoyable -- she and Phil were often able to attend the lectures given by visiting professors and writers. The streets of New York were filled with starving, penniless people and, although Bassya herself was poor, she often tried to help out the beggars with a dime.

After six months of working at the Seminary, Bassya was out of a job due to her replacement by the assistant director's daughter. Her next line of work was an assistant for a dentist where she also earned five dollars a week. She cleaned the instruments, took x-rays, and greeted the patients. Bassya loved her work -- like her father she had always dreamed of being a doctor. But the dentist always warned her that someday she might come into the office and see him hanging. His constant talk of suicide frightened Bassya and she quit. She then became a receptionist for a female agent who managed performers for a radio station. Although Bassya only earned three dollars a week, she was happy because she was close to the theatre again. The manager often gave her free tickets to shows, ballets, lectures, and concerts, which meant quite a lot to her and Phil.

Bassya loved life in New York. She and Phil lived in the midst of all the budding painters, poets and musicians. They found other idealists like themselves. But one thing was missing, and because of this she could not find total fulfillment -- she longed for her daughter. When her longing began to weaken her, she and Phil began saving their money so that they could return to San Francisco. In 1933, after only a year in New York, she and Phil returned to San Francisco.

Bassya found intellectual and spiritual fulfillment in New York. Although she earned depression wages, at least she had work. She was spared having to do

tedious assembly line work. And even though her dreams of the theatre had ended, she earned her wages through interesting and stimulating work.

Back in San Francisco

Bassya and Phil returned to San Francisco and brought Lila into their home. But instead of the expected elation, this brought Bassya great maternal disappointment, for Lila did not remember who Bassya was and felt uncomfortable with the strangers. Bassya was deeply hurt by this rejection and did everything she could to make Lila comfortable, but her efforts were to no avail. Lila returned to live with her father who, by this time, had remarried. Although Bassya was disappointed at having to give up her daughter again, she was pleased to see Sol remarried and happy, for she had always felt guilty for hurting him: ***"My only regret is that I had to hurt somebody on the way in my life."*** Lila continued to visit Bassya on weekends, and returned to live with her as a teenager.

So Bassya filled her time with other things. Phil opened a woodworking shop and she did secretarial and bookkeeping work there. She began studying for her citizenship test, learning the details of the constitution and of contemporary politics. After much preparation, she went to the Federal building and nervously waited for her name to be called. The judge asked the people before her just a few questions about the House of Representatives or the President and Bassya recited the answers to herself with confidence. Soon it was her turn -- but she was not asked a single question on the content of the constitution. It was 1939 and there was strong anti-Communist spirit and Bassya was questioned in this atmosphere: Did she believe in communism? Why didn't she? Why did she choose to live in America?... and so on. After lengthy questioning, Bassya was told to return the following week, along with the others, to hear the decisions. As she left the room, those who had heard her ordeal were shaking their heads sympathetically, and Bassya began to worry. But she returned the next week and stood along with the other three hundred fifty awaiting citizenship. Two men came forward and called her name and asked her to follow. She was sure it was to inform her that she was the only one in the large crowd who had not passed. Much to her surprise, she had been selected to be photographed for a newspaper article -- on those gaining citizenship on December 4, 1939. And Bassya was very proud: ***"I really and truly was proud to become an American citizen. I have traveled a lot, but there is no country like America, there really isn't. And I think we should keep on fighting for everything that is nice and good. Because, as a minority, there is no other place in the world where one can feel like a real human being."***

Bassya and Phil had two children, Bennett and Jan, who have both led successful lives. All of her children married and have had children of their own. Bassya did her work in the home, but also continued to work at Phil's shop, and today, at sixty-six years old, she continues her work there. Bassya has lived a life outside of the four walls of her home. She has traveled all over the world. She has published two books of poetry, and is in the process of publishing her third. She is very content with her life and with herself: ***"My life has worked out very nicely. And whenever my time will come to go, I feel that no one should be sad because, it is not how long a person lives, it is how a person lives."***

Ms. Bassya Maltzer Bibel has truly lived.

Bassya Today

Bassya sees herself as a modern woman: she was the first woman in her family to use lipstick, the first to wear pants, the first to perform on the stage, the first to take part in politics, discussion, and debate. Her desire and confidence to be a nonconforming woman seems to be the result of two things: her education and love for learning, and her cross identification with her father and the resulting respect for the man's world.

Bassya has always spoken out for justice. She has campaigned and done precinct work for many candidates and issues, and she has always both valued and exercised her right to vote. Although she and Phil usually vote the same, it is because they agree -- she decides entirely on her own. She marched at the moratorium walk in San Francisco in objection to the war in Vietnam. She has returned food brought to her by a waitress after noticing a sign expressing the restaurant's policy of refusing service to Blacks.

Her place in the home is one that she values and cherishes: ***"If I had to be reborn again, I would want to be born, definitely , a woman. Because there is so much beauty in womanhood, in motherhood. And a woman can make a home a castle -- a world within four walls -- a world within a world. You can still have the outside world, but you can always go back to your own little world."*** Although she enjoyed her role as a woman, she never allowed it to stifle her as so many suburban housewives have. She is continuously reading, writing poetry, participating in political discussions and attending lectures, symphonies, and concerts (including the Monterey Rock Festival). She is a living example of what one authoress has termed the "two-fold" life of Jewish women who reflect conditions of life about them, but who also have the "insular existence" of the Jewish home -- "an island complete unto itself; a life within a life."

Because Bassya finds outside fulfillment, she is often met with the hostility from other housewives that Betty Friedan proclaims is often directed toward the woman who finds her way out of the "housewife trap". Bassya acknowledges their feeling, but refuses to conform to their life styles of matronly dresses, dull hairstyles, Maj Jong, and cards all day long. Bassya find that many women also resent her because the men pay so much attention to her. She is attractive, dresses dramatically, and has kept her youth. Most of all, she has the confidence in herself as an intellectual equal of man -- quite an achievement for someone brought up in the attitudes prevalent in her generation and that of her parents. But Bassya will not change her behavior due to the shocked expressions on other women's faces: ***"If you know you aren't doing anything wrong, someone else's opinion shouldn't upset you because 'To thine own self be true,' Shakespeare said that many years ago and it is true."***

Even Bassya admits that she does not accept all of the "modern woman." She does not believe in young couples living together, and feels that, in most cases, premarital intercourse is not something all that beautiful. She is a frequent visitor to Broadway in San Francisco, but she feels that nudity on the stage has progressed to

the point of making sex ugly. She is strong in her sentiments that mixed marriages between Jews and gentiles create an unhealthy and awkward situation. And a wish she expresses contains sexist overtones: ***"I do pray that God be good enough to give me another ten years to see my granddaughters get married and my grandsons achieve whatever they are looking for."***

In looking at my grandmother's life, analytically, I would call her a modern woman, in that she is open minded to new ideas and experiences -- she does what is right for her without fear of what others will say. She is educated in both scholastics and in life. I would not include her in the Woman's Liberation Movement, but I would place her in her own category of Human Being Liberation. Her quest in life has been to seek knowledge and find spiritual fulfillment. And because she finds fulfillment in these areas, she is content as a woman and can find joy in her role as a mother, grandmother, and housewife. She has not allowed the feminine mystique to dominate her life because she realizes that there is a world outside of her home which values her participation. In fact she has never allowed anything to dominate her existence except love -- love for her family, for those around her, and for the beautiful world that exists in front of her eyes.

"I wanted to be a help to humanity -- to me that is the highest thing ever. I believe that, above all things, a person should have compassion. Because he is empty without compassion -- he is nothing."