

**Between the Raindrops**

by

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Submitted to the Department of Creative Writing  
School of Humanities  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College  
State University of New York

April, 2024

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## Intro

Most kids grow up with fairytales as bedtime stories.

They hear about the heroic knight who always manages to save the princess, the evil witch who must be defeated by the power of good, and the never failing promise of happily ever after.

When I first started working on my senior project, I thought I would write about one of these fairytales. My vision was of a twist on the classic story of king Arthur and the sword in the stone, only this time told through the lens of Guinevere. I was excited. Ready to provide the world with a new take on a classic bedtime tale.

As I began to write, though, something felt wrong. I couldn't connect with anything I was writing, and I wasn't sure how I wanted the story to end. For some reason, happily ever after seemed incredibly wrong, to the point where it felt like a betrayal. It took me a long time to understand why I felt this way, but once I did, I realized I would never be able to continue with this as my senior project. Because I didn't grow up with those kinds of stories.

Many people are surprised when I tell them what accounts drifted over my childhood. They can't accept the normalcy of warnings, constant pressure and fear of a time past returning. For them, this is not something to be expected in our modern world. Yet this is the way so many of my friends and I were raised.

From a very young age, to the point where I can't even remember the first time I learned of it, I was told over and over again of the atrocities committed against my family. I was told to always eat when I had the chance, because the Jews who overate were the ones that lasted longer. I was warned to always keep a bag packed at the door, because I'd never know when it was time to flee until it was too late. I was told to always choose my words wisely, because I'd never know when they'd be my last.

These words were my normal. They were my friends' normal. And yet, none of us truly understood what they meant until about six months ago.

After the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust on October 7, antisemitism flew to new heights around the world. I, as a person who almost never experienced antisemitism beforehand, began facing it nearly every day. I lost almost all of my friends to conspiracy theories about Jews, and heard everyday about another person I knew being affected by

antisemitism. Across different spectrums, my friends and I began to realize that our families' warnings were becoming our reality. Within days, decades of generational trauma were unleashed upon us in full force.

In the days following October 7, my fifteen year old sister spoke to our cousin, thirteen, as she hid in a bomb shelter fearing for her life. She told us she was scared. Now my sister texts me, saying the same thing. When a Jewish boy went missing in our neighborhood she asked if she should hide. Every day she checks the news to ensure that she'll be safe on her walk home from school. A fifteen year old girl, whose only concern should be about what classmate she likes, now fears for her life any time she simply walks outside.

I believe there's something to be discovered about the impact our predecessors' experiences have on Jews today. Many can go their whole lives without understanding just how much their lives are touched by the past until one event opens the floodgates. The hiddenness of Jewish trauma and the unwillingness of many to explore it is hardly ever discussed, and I believe that in order to understand the terror many Jews are experiencing at the moment we must first realize what led to it.

Additionally, there is a severe lack of understanding about the Jewish experience and identity. Many believe that Judaism is simply a religion, but this erases the distinct genetic profile of Jews around the world. There is also an extremely prevalent attempt to erase Jewish history, whether that be how Judaism came to be or the thousands of years of persecution Jews have faced, My project will address these misconceptions and erasures through stories and essays detailing diverse Jewish voices and experiences.

In recent years I began to study Jewish history and literature much more closely than I ever had before, and upon reading Yiddish fairytales I realized why the words "happily ever after" felt so wrong to me when I began my senior project. None of the stories I read had happy endings—quite the opposite, in fact. In one example, "Tsu Shpet", a shepherdess becomes obsessed with the idea of rescuing a knight whose heart has turned to stone. She visits him again and again, each time asking for his love, and is denied every time. Eventually she becomes filled with rage toward the knight, and tells him just how much she despises him. Miraculously this softens his heart and he begs her to love him, but it's too late. The final words of the story are "there was no place now for romance." At first I was confused by the pessimism so prevalent in

each of these stories, but it didn't take long for me to realize that they were simply reflecting the dangerous and often fatal reality of the authors.

This collection, currently titled *Between the Raindrops*, will contain several short stories attempting to capture aspects of the Jewish experience. Just as Judaism is a diverse melting pot, full of unique stories that challenge the idea of "happily ever after" like "Tsu Shpet", so too will be my senior project. I will draw a picture of what it might be like growing up in a Jewish community, with stories like "Behind You" detailing the surroundings of the average Jewish child when antisemitism is rising, and show the world that was never depicted in anything I saw outside my own world growing up. I will also include stories tackling the different expectations that are within certain Jewish communities with stories like "Ezeh Yofi" and perhaps even "Service".

*Between the Raindrops* will be a mixture of many different stories, reflecting the many aspects of Jewish life, but it will always be tied together by the common thread of the Jewish experience. Whether it's by tackling traditional roles in society, generational trauma, or somewhere in between, these stories will aim towards providing the analysis and representation that seems to have been missing from the mainstream media for an incredibly long time. It's taken me a long time to understand what I need to be doing. For the past month and a half I've felt helpless and completely abandoned, but now I understand that it's my responsibility to turn that pain into something productive. I want to create something that not only spreads awareness on the many aspects of Jewish identity and history, but also shows my Jewish family that they're not alone.

Tuesday, 4:13 pm

“Let’s go, everyone! You know the drill.”

The school’s halls flooded with uniformed boys and girls, ranging from new teens to near adults. Teachers lined the walls, eyes darting across the hallway in order to account for everyone.

A sea of black, white, and green pushed towards the double doors leading outside, exposing them all to the pure white of freshly fallen snow. It would have been serene had it not been for the red and blue flashing across the otherwise pristine image.

The school stood tall above the students and faculty as they spread across the main lawn. Teenage boys took off their kippot and began flinging them at one another as if they were frisbees. Girls rolled their eyes at them and turned away to hide their creeping smiles. Students expressed their quiet relief at their tests being postponed. Teachers said nothing, but kept alert and wary of all passersby.

Deafening bells began to echo throughout the area. The teens hardly noticed, having grown accustomed to the church sitting across from their school, with its copper bells and marble statues on full display, but the teachers swayed uncomfortably to the backdrop of the patterned rings.

As the students continued playing games, one girl disrupting the snow to make angels, a boy stood to the side. He watched the massive bells at the top of the church dance above the snow, untouched, and wondered why he’d never seen similar moments to this one across the street. He wondered if the churchgoers had ever experienced the flood of colors to which the school was so accustomed.

This was not the first time the students had been forced to leave their school. It had happened dozens of times in the past, many from the last year alone. Every time they left their classrooms, the boy looked across the street, expecting churchgoers to be close behind. Every time the church stayed quiet.

He listened to the chimes of the bells, melodic as they poured over the neighborhood. He imagined his mother listening to them at home as she prepared food for dinner. Perhaps his sister was listening as she rode her bike home from school.

He wondered if this was the church extending a hand to the school, offering them something to lean on as they waited outside in the cold. Perhaps they knew that one day it could be them outdoors, so accustomed that they played on the ground until it was safe to go back in. Perhaps this was their way of saying “we’re with you. We may not be there now, but we will be in the future.” The thought comforted him, quieting the echoes in his chest screaming that he and his friends were alone.

Still, the mahogany doors stayed shut, and within moments the bells had quieted.

## The Cosmopolitan Kitchen

Pots hissing. The steady tick, tock of the clock on the yellowing wall. A melody emerging and filling the room as Savta's favorite radio show returns from break.

The deep tones and fast paced sentences in a language I can't understand flood into the tiny kitchen, filling every crevice. I don't know why Savta listens to this show. She misses most of it, anyway, with the program starting long before she wakes up in the morning. My father once said it's the last talk show available in her original language on her rundown radio.

I try to distinguish between the proclamations but they're foreign to me. The speakers seem to trip over their words as they rush through their segment. Spouts of unfamiliar noises and phrases fill my ears, and I'm not sure whether I dislike the way they sound or if I just can't understand them. Maybe I'd like them better if I knew what they were saying. Or maybe it would make things worse.

Savta is washing her hands by the sink, humming the tune playing softly somewhere beneath the hosts' voices. Somehow she can make out which song it is.

"Savta," I start. "Why do you listen to that show?"

Savta thinks, then shrugs. "It reminds me of where I'm from," she says. "It's nice."

I think for a moment. "Savta," I start.

"Yes?"

"Why do we live in America?"

Savta comes up to the table where I'm sitting and grabs a fistful of flour, dusting it across the surface like the first snow of winter settling on the ground. She then looks at me and smiles, and presses a finger to my nose. I grin, knowing that there is now an imprint of my Savta's thumb on my face.

"You like living here, no?" she asked.

I nod.

"Well, then there's your answer."

She grabs a metal bowl from the kitchen counter and hauls it over with some difficulty. Atop it is a worn out dish towel, covering the interior of the container. She pulls at it with some



flourish and reveals a heap of dough sitting inside. I watch in amazement, but something still irks me.

“My classmates’ families came to America because there was a lot of money. Why don’t we have money?”

Savta frowns and places her hands on the dough. “We have some money,” she says slowly.

“Well whenever I ask my dad for a present he says to wait another time.”

“You don’t think you have enough presents?”

“Definitely not.”

Savta smiles at me and begins to recite Hafrashat Challah. “Brauch atah Ad-nai el-heinu, melech haolam, l’hafrish challah min ha’isa.” She grabs a fistful of dough and drags it out until it separates from the rest inside the bowl. Tendrils reach out from where the dough had been connected. Gradually they retreat back to where they first formed.

I watch as Savta’s lips move rapidly, silently speeding through the rest of the prayer. A silver chain is wrapped around her neck, a magen david resting at its tip. Though it appears normal now, I know that should Savta need it the necklace will expand into four butterfly-like shapes. She refuses to wear a necklace without a similar feature.

“Savta,” I start again as she wraps the severed ball of dough in tin foil.

“Yes, kapara?”

“Why don’t we have any family heirlooms?”

Savta opens the oven door. I brace for the rush of heat that fills the room. She places the ball on the edge of the top rack and shuts the door as she heads back to me.

“We didn’t have anything nice to pass down,” she says finally.

“But Tommy Hildricks’ family has a bunch of heirlooms. They even have plain things like notebooks and pictures. Why don’t we have that?”

“You ask many good questions, bubbeleh,” Savta answers. I wonder if I can hear a tinge of sadness in her voice. “Maybe you can pass down heirlooms to your children.”

“I will,” I say proudly. “I’m going to give everything in my house to my kids. That way they’ll know they had a family with tons of cool stuff, and I’ll tell them about it.”

Savta chuckles softly and reaches out to ruffle my hair. I duck, not wanting to get flour all over myself, and her smile fades. A wave of guilt crashes over me.

She reaches over to the radio and twists one of the knobs attached to it. Gradually the foreign language dies out, leaving us to hear only the soft whir of the oven as it rises to Savta's desired temperature.

She moves her attention back to the challah dough and empties it out onto the table. I scooch closer to get a better look. Just as Savta begins to separate the dough into different piles, she pauses.

"You know, my mother used to do this with me every week," she says slowly. "Just like how I'm doing with you."

I look up. "Really?"

Savta nods. "Really. She would make very long strands for her braids. You want to see how?"

I nod excitedly.

Savta takes one of the pieces of dough and stretches it out so it resembles a piece of string, then slaps it against the table. I jump in surprise, my body instinctively recoiling from the banging noise. She does it again and again, eventually forcing me to cover my ears. Once I open my tightly shut eyes, though, I see the strand of challah before me, at least three times as long as it had been just seconds ago. A grin creeps its way onto my face.

"Wow!" I exclaim.

Savta nods, smiling. "You want to see how I do it?"

"Yeah!"

She takes the edges of the dough in her hands and begins flicking it as if it's a jump rope. My eyes follow it as it wraps around and around the air, extending right before me.

"It took many years for me to know how my mother did this," she says as she twists the dough. "So I made my own way. This one is much easier."

"Can I try?" are the first words out of my mouth.

She nods with a quick "mhm" and hands the dough over to me. I take it in my hands and begin spinning, but instead of the dough cooperating with my movements it begins to spiral out of control. Before I know it, it's stuck itself all over my arms and the table.

I look up at Savta, expecting disappointment. Instead she begins to laugh.

"Oy, nebach," she says, wiping a tear from her eye. "Looks like you have a long way to go!"

Feeling the bubbles of laughter rise up my throat, I concede and release them into the air. The two of us giggle for a long time, holding our stomachs so we don't double over.

A few minutes later we're back at it.

"It took me many tries to get this right," Savta says as she stretches the dough once more. I, carrying my own version of the glutenous string, follow suit, eyes carefully examining each of her movements. "My Ima used to say that I should play jump rope more with my friends so I'd have practice."

"What happened to your ima?"

Savta falls quiet, still focused on her portion of the dough. I watch her hands continue to work on lengthening the strand and wonder why this is the reaction every time I ask her or my dad about her mother. She begins to think for a very long time.

"She's still with me," Savta says finally. I'm surprised to hear this new answer. "Every time I make this dough I think of her, and I know her hands guide me along the way. She is always here."

She looks up at me and smiles, her eyes glossy. I smile back uncertainly and continue stretching out the dough.

I wonder what my Savta Raba's hands would look like working this dough. Savta's are tan and wrinkled, with bright blue veins running along them. Mine are smooth and pale with the exception of a few tiny freckles. Would Savta Raba's be a mix of the two of us, or would she be more like Savta's? What if hers were more like mine?

With the strands finished, Savta began to braid. She placed four strands together and pinched the tops so they were connected.

"You see, buba, you want to take the strand to the right and put it over, then under, then over. Again and again. Understand?"

I nod and take my turn. I gently place the rightmost strand in my hand and pull it over the one to its left. The pinched top tugs at this, threatening to sever the ties between the four strands, but I don't let it. Carefully I guide the strand under, then over the last two, keeping the connection intact.

"You did it!" Savta exclaimed. I throw my hands up in celebration and we hug, a cacophony of flour raining down on us from the impact of our bodies coming together.

"Can you put the radio show back on, Savta?" I ask.

She smiles and nods. “Of course, kapara.”

Within moments the music and words of another language flood back into the room. This time I listen with an open mind, trying to hear what my Savta does so clearly.

We continue to braid the challah, finishing four loaves. I sit back and admire our handiwork, then look at my Savta, still in the midst of another loaf. I hesitate.

“Can I give this recipe to my kids, Savta?”

“Of course, kapara. Of course.”

## Behind You

“It’s not a big deal!”

“It so is!”

“You’re overreacting.”

“Uh, let’s check facts.” Perri unzipped her wallet and pulled out a credit card boasting the name DAVID TENENBAUM. “First Emily invited the whole grade to her birthday party except for me. Then she told me that she still wanted to be friends.” She took a step forward as the man in front of her walked further down the line. “*Then* she stole the answers to my geometry homework and Mr. Levy told me I was a cheater,” she said. “I don’t know, that seems like a pretty big deal to me.”

Dawn shook her head and pulled a wad of crumpled cash out of her pocket as they edged closer to the metal counter. Behind it a man spun a sphere of dough around his fingers, widening it until it was larger than his head. He couldn’t have been older than twenty three, but to Perri and Dawn he was ancient. As he moved the dough bits began to trickle down over his fingers, but he didn’t notice. His eyes were glued to the television screen casting light over the otherwise dim shop.

“It’s not like she didn’t invite you to her bat mitzvah,” Dawn offered. “It was just another birthday party.”

“No one invites every single person they know minus one to *just another party*,” Perri grumbled.

The two girls neared the counter and peaked over the steel. Their heads just barely made it above the surface.

“Excuse me,” Perri called to the man. She and Dawn had made a silent agreement months ago that whenever they would walk to a restaurant together she’d order for them both. Her voice had the ability to travel throughout any room, no matter the size, whereas Dawn often cracked under the pressure of crowded areas.

The man seemed to be functioning on autopilot, spreading sauce as his eyes were a distance away from the pie.

“Uhh, excuse me,” she repeated. Finally the man turned his attention to her. “Can we get five slices to stay?” She turned to Dawn. “Five is good, right?”

“There’s only two of us,” her friend answered.

“Yeah, and I’m starving.”

Dawn opened her mouth to respond, then seemed to think better of it and looked away.

“Five slices coming up,” the man mumbled as he went back to work, though his eyes didn’t move.

“What’s his deal?” Perri muttered. Dawn shrugged.

The two made their way over to the cashier, stopping a couple of feet away as they waited on line. Before them two women were whispering frantically.

“Have you gotten a hold of them yet?” one asked.

“They’re not picking up,” the other said.

Perri squinted at the two and recognized the one who had spoken first as Ori Leightner, one of her mother’s good friends.

“They’re probably just sleeping, right?” Ori asked, her voice muffled as she simultaneously chewed her nail. The habit had become infamous in Perri’s house after her mother had discovered a graveyard of torn nails beneath their couch while they were cleaning for Pesach. “I mean it’s pretty late over there.”

“Ori, chayim sheli, lama at choshevet shehem yishenim? Yesh ractot masbiv!” her friend responded, shaking her head as she tore through her Instagram feed. Perri peeked over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of what looked like fireworks in an otherwise pitch black sky.

“I know, I know,” Ori said quietly.

“You know, I’m pretty sure I might have heard Emily talking about you the other day now that I think about it,” Dawn said, pulling Perri back from her daze.

“What? What did she say?”

“Uh, something about a shopping trip—”

“Seriously?” Perri scoffed and threw up her hands. “I went on one shopping trip to Green Acres without her. ONE! You’d think she could let it go by now but no!”

Dawn shrugged. “Well you’re also holding a grudge against her, so that should make you even, right?”

Perri gasped and turned to Dawn. “Wait... you don’t think...”

“What?”

“She didn’t invite me to her bat mitzvah because of the shopping trip! Oh, it all makes sense!”

“Next please.”

The two girls moved up in line, edging closer to the TV screen. A newscaster’s voice filled Perri’s ears, but she hardly listened.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that,” she continued ranting. “Of course she’d exclude me for something so stupid.”

Dawn sighed and took out her wallet, counting the few bills inside. “I think maybe if you both just talked to each other instead of fighting in private this wouldn’t be as big of an issue—”

“Wait.” Perri stopped in her tracks. “Have you been talking to Emily behind my back?”

“Uh—”

Before she could answer, a loud boom echoed in the girls’ ears.

“What was that?” Dawn asked, her voice trembling.

Perri covered her ears and looked around. The shop seemed normal. Its metal counters were still intact and the HotWheels cars taped to the beam in the middle of the store were still on full display. Ori and her friend continued talking in front of them, though their eyes were facing upwards now.

“It’s just the tv, darling,” an older man answered Dawn from behind the counter. His eyes shone bright despite the white hairs on his chin, and he wore a black shirt with a pin that read “always noshing”. While his full name was Michael Katz, he was known throughout the town as Pizza Mike. He’d owned the shop Dawn and Perri went to every day longer than they’d been alive. A picture of him and Perri’s dad hung on the wall of the store, along with several photos of past classes from her school down the road. He pointed towards the screen, where Ori and her friend were staring.

“Not to worry, dears,” he continued. “Come and I’ll take your order.”

The two girls made their way up to the counter and placed their cards before them, each taking their turn to pay. As Michael ran them through the machine a woman came out from the back room and placed her phone by the cash register.

“No luck?” Michael asked.

“They’re okay,” she said as if releasing a deep breath. Michael smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, I’m glad,” he said softly.

“Me too,” she responded. “But Evyatar isn’t home.”

Michael’s smile immediately faded.

“Oh, I think I see a table!”

Perri snapped out of her daze and turned to Dawn, who was pointing off in the distance. Sure enough, two teenage boys had just vacated their table, taking their trays with them. Despite their courteousness in this regard, the rest of the table was left with various pieces of trash.

“Come on, let’s grab it!”

The girls snatched their cards as soon as Michael placed them down, then raced to the table just as more teens from their school walked in. They arrived just in time.

“Yes!” Dawn pumped her fist and set her bag down. Perri followed suit, though her mind was reeling. “Ugh, doesn’t anyone teach boys to clean up after themselves?” She looked up at Perri and frowned. “What?”

“What?” You mean you were just going to drop that bombshell on me and expect me to ignore it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Perri, I think you’re both just being dramatic. It’s just a party.”

“Bat Mitzvah.”

“Fine, and a shopping trip. You’re both overreacting!”

Perri crossed her arms and huffed. Her sulking was interrupted by a man rushing past her, his arm crashing against her back.

“Ow!” she cried out. She turned to glare at the man but he had already rushed out of the store, phone to his ear. He fumbled around for his keys as he spoke into the phone and eventually managed to get into his silver car. Within seconds it had sped away from its parking spot. A blue van gingerly pulled in to replace it.

“What is happening?” she grumbled as she massaged her back. “I thought you and I were friends!”

Dawn groaned. “We are friends!” she insisted. “It’s not my fault that Emily thinks we’re friends, too! What am I supposed to do, turn her down?”

“Yes! That’s what one of my friends would do!”

“Order number eighteen!” a voice called from the front of the shop.



Perri, casting one extra glare at Dawn for good measure, got up to retrieve the pizzas. As she returned she dropped the slices on the table and slumped in her seat, raising a plate to her face.

“This is the worst day of my life,” she mumbled, then took a bite.

## The Antisemite's Jew

To be a Jew is to be too white, but not white enough.

To be a Jew is to be too ambitious, but not contribute enough to society.

To be a Jew is to be too aggressive, but also too weak.

To be a Jew is to be a capitalist, but also a communist.

To be a Jew is to push the right's agenda, but also the left's.

To be a Jew is to be too religious, but also too secular.

To be a Jew is to be racist, but also too cosmopolitan.

To be a Jew is to be too isolated, but also an infiltrator.

To be a Jew is to never be persecuted, but all incidents are deserved.

## Ezeh Yofi

The challah dough felt smooth beneath her fingers.

Shana picked it up and flattened it against her palms, taking great care to avoid seeing the faint ring indentation on her finger. She dropped the dough on the counter and began to press it down, spreading it across the surface. Mini geysers sprang up, dusting the so far untouched dough facing the ceiling with sprinklings of flour.

Shana carefully took the now divided strands and began tying them together.

“This is it,” she whispered to herself. “This is the week.”

Eight strands. It had never been done in the Lieberman household... until today. She grabbed the two outermost strands and switched their positions, drawing them parallel to each other at the top. From there it was just a matter of replacing them. Take the leftmost strand, pull it down. Bring one from the right to take its place. Take the right most strand, pull it down. Bring one from the left to take its place. Over and over and over and...

Shana took a step back and examined the braid. Something was off. Where had she left off with the strands? She couldn't remember.

“Fuck,” she muttered. She scrunched the braid up and smashed it into a ball in her hands, pushing until she felt weak. She'd have to try again now.

Ding dong.

Shana looked up. It was 12:00. Way too early for Dov and Noa to be home from school, and they had their own keys into the house. Tovah was probably still unpacking her apartment, so that left... who?

Since Shana's divorce it had been rare for them to have guests over. She'd had enough trouble preparing the house when she was married, but the thought of doing it alone scared her to death. The most excitement to grace the Lieberman house since the divorce was when Shana learned a new braid pattern or when Tovah would visit. Never a guest.

Shana set the ball of dough, faint indentations of what once were braids still visible, on the counter and walked to the main entrance of her house. She examined the flour and scrapings of dough still stuck to her fingers, then looked at the doorknob. Sighing, she set about using her elbows to turn it, and after several tries succeeded.

It was as if she'd released a tornado from its cage. As soon as the door unlocked, in burst Rena Beck, her enormous black bushy hair only adding to the gravitas of her entrance. She carried an extravagant leather purse with gold detailing, which she promptly dumped on the side table by the front door. Two family photos fell overboard in the process, crashing to the floor. In her other hand she held an ornate dish covered in plastic wrap.

Rena turned and grinned. She had a smile that overtook her entire face and could light up a cavern. Unfortunately for Shana it usually meant something less than positive.

"Shana, darling!" she exclaimed. "How are you dear?"

Shana opened her mouth to answer when Rena looked at her hands and feigned shock.

"Oh, did I interrupt you making challah, honey? I'm so sorry, I just assumed you made it in advance like everyone else!"

"Well, I would have, but--"

Rena waved her hand, already moving on to the kitchen. "I brought my world famous rugelach. I figured you could use it since you don't cook all that much these days. I know you've been busy with your..." she placed the dish on the kitchen counter and turned to Shana.

"Whatever you're doing nowadays. What is that again?"

"I--"

"Oh, never mind, dear, I'm sure it's just fascinating but I can't seem to come up with the time to listen. You know how hectic things can get in my house before Shabbat, especially with all the people I host." Rena ran a finger along the counter and held it up to her face to inspect it. She frowned and moved to the fridge, examining a certificate of excellence awarded to Noa Lieberman that had been pressed to the door. "Have you hosted anyone recently, Shana?"

Shana shrugged, fidgeting with her hands. "Well, not recently, but--"

Rena straightened and turned, her face alight with pity. "Oh, that's too bad, dear, you really should! Although I suppose you'd have to find a more... capable home in order to fit your guests. I mean, really, Shana, are you sure this was the best house on the market?" She waved her hands around, looking at what many would have considered an average kitchen. "You know I could have helped you with your search," she said. "My husband--you know my husband, Zev--he's an excellent realtor."

Shana sighed, having heard this a million times before. "I think I did okay on the house hunting, Rena, especially considering the budget Ari left me with."

Rena's face softened. "Oh, yes, Ari! Oh, I do miss him. How is he? Have you spoken to him recently?"

Shana stiffened at the mention of her ex-husband. The details of their divorce hadn't been publicized, due to much effort on Shana's part, but that didn't stop Rena from prying. In fact, it might have encouraged her.

"I can't say that I have, Rena," was all she responded.

"And how are the kids throughout all of this? How's Tovah?"

Shana brightened at the mention of her daughter. Finally, an easy question. "Tovah's doing well," she began. "She's really loving her new place—"

"You know," Rena interrupted. Shana silently cursed herself for allowing herself to hope for any productive discussion. "I met the most amazing man last week. I would have loved to set Tovah up with him."

Shana sighed and walked back towards the challah dough. "Tovah's married, Rena. You know that."

"Oh, I do, I just think they would have been such a nice match. He's a rabbi, you know. Rabbi Yosef?"

Shana looked up. "The new rabbi at Beth Shalom?"

Rena nodded excitedly. "We just had him over for dinner last Shabbos. Oh, he was wonderful. Truly, such a mensch."

Shana turned her attention back to the dough. "Well, Tovah seems very happy with Moshe, so—"

"Oh, is she still doing that thing where she wants to go to business school?" Rena shook her head and clicked her tongue in disapproval. "Isn't that a bit ambitious of her? Besides, if she was going to become a Jewish stereotype wouldn't medical school be the better option?"

"Rena, I don't think—"

"Ooh, and what about Dov? Has he started dating yet or is he still on the fence about those things? Really, Shana, you'll have to get a grip with that one, he's just too much trouble!"

Shana shut her eyes tightly and took a deep breath, centering herself. She turned to Rena, who had been looking through the fridge.

“Rena,” she began, “I can’t believe I forgot to mention this but I’m actually having guests over tonight and I need to prepare.”

Rena blinked. “You’re having guests... here? Who?”

“Um...” Shana stammered, heart racing. “Rabbi... Yosef. Yep. Rabbi Yosef.”

“Rabbi Yosef is coming here?”

“Mhm. So I’ll need time to get ready.” With that Shana turned and started to head towards the door, praying that Rena would follow. To her surprise, she did. As she stopped by the front door she saw a bewildered Rena trailing in her footsteps.

“Well...” Rena began. She placed her hands on Shana’s shoulders and plastered a smile on her face. “That’s great, Shana! Look at you, finally entertaining. I’m sure you’ll find a way to clean all this...” she gestured widely around the house, which Shana had just cleaned hours before. “...up. You’ll let me know how it goes, won’t you?”

Shana smiled and nodded. “Of course.” She grabbed Rena’s bag and placed it in her arms, then opened the door wide for her to leave.

The woman began to take a step through the entrance, then faltered and looked at Shana. “Oh, you know what? I’m going to be at the shul a little early tomorrow. Maybe I’ll speak with Rabbi Yosef and ask him about it.”

Shana’s smile immediately faded. “Oh, Rena, you don’t need to do that—”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, Shana! Besides, don’t you want an honest review of the meal? He certainly won’t give it to you.” Rena placed her bag on her shoulder and stepped back into the entryway. She raised a hand to the mezuzah on the wall and pressed her fingers against it, then kissed them. “Alright, bye, dear! Let me know if you need anything—”

Shana shut the door before she could finish and leaned against it, her heart pounding. After a few seconds she took out her phone and dialed a number.

“Hello, Rabbi Yosef?” she asked as the line picked up. “Hi, this is Shana Lieberman. I’m sorry to bother you, but... are you doing anything tonight?”

Noa always hated the bell that signified the end of class. Perhaps it was the painful ringing noise, perhaps it was the indication that school was over and she’d have to head back home. Regardless, she despised it, and today was no different.

As she exited the Har Sinai Yeshiva, she opened her phone to see a wall of text messages from Shana, who had been labeled “Ima” in her phone.

"Are you on your way home yet?"

"We're hosting Rabbi Yosef from Beth Shalom tonight."

"Probably gonna invite Tovah and Moshe too."

"And the Goldbergs."

"No fuck the Goldbergs they're going to the Feldmans."

"Don't tell Dov I said fuck."

She shook her head and looked around the crowd of students exiting the building. Why was this always on her?

Eventually she spotted a familiar head in the crowd, sporting a kippah that read “Tovah’s Bat Mitzvah 2012”. She raced down the stairs and pushed past several of her classmates, ignoring their dirty looks. Once she had gotten close enough, she slowed down to what might have been perceived as a casual pace and walked up to the boy’s side.

“So mom’s making us have guests over for dinner tonight,” she began. “Can you believe it?”

The boy jumped and stared at her. “Jeez, you’re gonna give me a heart attack someday!”

“Oh, come on, Dov, don’t be so dramatic.” Noa fixed him with a serious look. “You’re gonna have to help me make the food.”

Dov watched as a rabbi exited the school and got into his car. As soon as his head disappeared beneath the roof, he removed the kippah from his head and continued walking. Noa hurried after him.

“Actually. I’m spending time with friends.”

Noa frowned. “What friends? You don’t have any friends.”

“You don’t need to know all of my friends. That’s not an obligation that comes with siblinghood.”

Dov began to quicken his pace. Noa, having shorter legs, began to speed walk beside him, struggling to keep up.

“Dov, I can’t take care of everything myself,” she said through labored breaths. “I mean maybe if I had a few days but Ima just sprung this on me!”

Dov continued moving. Noa narrowed her eyes.

“You know what?” she said. “I’m just gonna take your silence as an ‘I’m sorry for being a giant asswipe, Noa, please tell me what I can do to help you’ and fill you in on what’s happening today.”

Dov paused in his tracks and looked back at her. “Who says ‘asswipe?’” he asked in confusion.

Noa, with no time to waste, hurried up to him. “Here’s what I’m thinking. We’re gonna sweep and mop the floors first, then dust the cabinets, clean the silverware, find that fancy tablecloth that Ima and Aba got for their wedding--I think it’s in the garage, so we’ll have to bring a vacuum for the cobwebs. Then for dinner I’m thinking we’ll pick up some gefilte fish from the store on the way home, serve some chicken and brisket for the main course, and--”

Dov groaned in exasperation and pulled her to the side. “Noa, stop! Why is it such a big deal that I don’t want to sit around in a suffocating dress shirt while everyone pushes marriage onto me?”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Tovah and Moshe are coming to this, aren’t they?”

“I think so, but I don’t see how that’s--”

“There you go. Ima always tries to find the smallest excuse to bring them over so they can show me how great their marriage is. I’m sick of it. Everything is just a setup so Ima can ask when I’m gonna start shidduch dating, and this time I’m not falling for it.”

He released his hold on her and continued to walk away from the school. This time Noa stayed behind, crossing her arms.

“So that’s it?” she asked.

Dov stopped. Without turning around, he responded, “is that not enough?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “Why are you so against the whole shidduch thing anyway?”

He turned around, blood boiling. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe because it always ends in a terrible marriage? Look at Ima and Aba!”

Noa paused. The two had rarely spoken about the divorce. It was a sore spot at best. “That was one divorce, and Aba was... complicated.”

“He was a dick.”

Noa winced. He wasn’t wrong, and yet she felt a surge of anger course through her veins. “And you’re so much better? Why do you have to go against everything our family cares about?”



“I’m not–”

“You are.” She moved so that she was standing before her brother, looking him in the eye. He seemed surprised to see her this way. “You use your phone on shabbos, you barely daven, and last week I even caught you trying takis out in the parking lot with your friends. This isn't a death sentence, Dov, it's just getting a head start on your life, why is that such a problem for you?”

Dov stood quiet for a moment. He watched two teens kissing just outside the school, their hands running up and down one another. A rabbi came and began to scold them, and within a moment’s notice the two were running away, laughing.

“I just don’t see what the big deal is,” he said finally. “I can still date people and have kids, can’t I?”

“Oh, so you're having kids out of wedlock now? Are you trying to give Ima a heart attack?”

He waved her away and shoved past her, continuing to walk home. “Jesus, I don’t need to listen to you. I’m sorry I’m not the perfect Jewish child that you are.”

“I’m not–”

“You are.” he turned around to face her, still walking. “Not saying that’s a bad thing, but it’s just not me. Have fun with Tovah and Moshe tonight. I’m sure you’ll have a great time.”

With that he quickened his pace, leaving Noa on the side of the road as the crowd of students descended upon her.

Tovah stepped over a box of packed belongings and looked around the room. It had been three weeks since she’d moved in with Moshe, and yet the apartment still looked exactly the way it had been when they’d first arrived. She sighed and grabbed the cup of coffee she’d left on the counter before sitting down on the couch—perhaps the one thing they’d unpacked aside from their bed.

She began to take a sip, then wrinkled her nose and set the cup down on the floor.

“Fuck,” she muttered to herself.

The front door burst open and Moshe rushed inside. His scraggly body made it difficult for him not to trip over the many boxes in his path, and when he went tumbling to the floor his glasses flew off in the process.

“Tovah?” he cried out from the floor. “Tovah, I’m here!”

Tovah rose to her feet and rushed to his side. She grabbed his glasses from beneath the couch and gently placed them on his face. “I’m here,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

He sat up and took her hands. “I came as soon as I could. Is it…”

Tovah hesitated, then nodded.

Moshe’s face flushed. His mouth agape, he slowly began to nod as he took it all in.

“Okay… okay.”

Tovah watched his expression carefully, reading every glimpse of a sign into how he was taking this. “Are you okay?” she asked cautiously.

He paused, then turned back to her and nodded. “I’m okay. Are you?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer. Finally she stood up.

“Of course I’m okay,” she forced herself to say. “I mean… we’re having a baby! It’s good news.”

Moshe, adjusting his glasses, followed her. “Well, yeah, but last week you didn’t seem so sure. What changed?”

“Nothing!” she said quickly.

He raised an eyebrow, then took her hands. “Hey,” he said, leading her to the couch. “You know I love you… and I want you to be happy. And with that being said… I think the best thing we can do is… talk about our options.”

Tovah could hear her heart pounding in her ears. She feigned a smile. “What options?”

Moshe frowned. “Come on, Tovah. You and I both know we’re not ready for a kid.”

She shrugged. “Well, clearly we are because this happened. So.”

“That doesn’t make it the end of the discussion! Look, no one will judge us for looking at our options…” he trailed off as she shot him a dirty look. “What?”

“Everyone will judge. You know that.”

“Okay then we can tell just a few people… like your mom—”

“My mom?” Tovah laughed incredulously and walked past him. “Do you realize how much that woman gossips? It's basically all she can do on Shabbat! Half the town will know about this pregnancy by Monday!”

Moshe threw his hands up in defeat. “Okay, so we don't need to tell anyone until we come to a decision. We still have time, right?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. Maybe if she squeezed tight enough there wouldn't be any more pregnancy to deal with. “Yeah,” she muttered. “Some time.”

Moshe watched her sadly. The two had just been married four months ago, having waited until Tovah had graduated college. They'd had so many plans, now disrupted by this tiny thing that wasn't even breathing yet.

“We're gonna be okay,” he said finally.

“Yeah. I know.”

“But we should discuss—”

“No.”

Tovah began to walk towards the kitchen, taking her coffee cup with her. Moshe watched her go, staying put.

“Tovah, do you really think we can afford this baby?” he asked. “Because, newsflash, we can't!”

“So I'll get another job!” she cried. “And you can get that raise you've been wanting.”

Moshe sighed. “It's still not enough,” he said quietly.

The two stood in silence for a long time, each staring at each other, daring the other to speak first. Finally Moshe broke the quiet.

“All I want is for you to be happy,” he said. “I don't see how we're going to be able to have a baby while you're in business school—”

“I'm not going to business school, Moshe.”

He paused. “What?”

“You're already getting your masters, there's just no room for me to go back to campus. Especially with a baby.”

Moshe walked up to her side. “It doesn't have to be this way. This is why we should talk about our options—”

“Just stop it, Moshe!” she cried out. He recoiled, shocked. A sob bubbled up in her throat and she pushed it down, swiping at her nose to keep it from running. She looked away from him. “This is just... what you do. We got married--that was step one. We have an apartment--step two. Now we're having a baby--step three. There's no step for business school or fulfilling dead aspirations, it's just not a thing that happens. It's not a bullet point or a step or a phase, it's just... not.”

Silence. After a few seconds she couldn't take the quiet any longer and looked up at him. To her surprise, he was staring straight at her.

“Do you want this baby?” he asked softly.

“My mother--”

“No, Tovah. Do you want this baby?”

She said nothing.

He took a step back. “Well, there you go.”

A low ringing began to fill the room. Tovah reached for her pocket and pulled out her phone.

“Don't answer it,” Moshe warned.

She pressed accept and held it to her ear. “Hi, Ima,” she said, her voice monotone. Moshe ran his hands through his hair in exasperation. “Oh, that sounds great. Yeah we'll be there.”

She hung up the phone and tossed it carelessly onto the couch, heading towards the fridge.

“My mom invited us for dinner tonight,” she said over her shoulder. “I need a drink.”

“Thank you for meeting me here.”

Dov placed his hands on his knees, uncomfortably swaying his feet on the barstool. A girl his age sat across from him, straightening a stack of papers. Her brown hair was straight and pinned back neatly, forcing him to wonder if he should have sprayed his curly black hair before coming to the mall to meet her.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “How long were you waiting here, by the way? I thought I was getting here early.”

“Forty five minutes,” she answered promptly. “I find it's best to be prepared.”

She straightened the papers one more time before squinting at him. He unconsciously straightened his posture, almost mimicking her proper seating. When Avi had told him about someone being interested in him he hadn't imagined this. He warily eyes the crucifix necklace around her neck.

"You are Dov Lieberman, correct?" She asked. Dov nodded.

"And you're Olivia?"

She nodded. "Did Avi mention what we would be meeting about today?"

"He said a little bit," Dov started. Before he could finish Olivia had slid the papers in front of him. He took one glance at the first page and looked up at her. "Relationship contract?" he asked.

She nodded. "I've been achieving straight A's since first grade, played violin for twelve years, have thirty-six college credits ready to be transferred to the university of my choice, and am currently on track to become valedictorian of my class this year."

Dov shook his head. He didn't need more people setting expectations for him.

"But now I want to do more," Olivia continued. "And I need your help to do it."

"What do you need me for?" he asked, leaning back on the seat. He felt the empty air behind him and grabbed at the barstool for balance, having forgotten where they were sitting for a moment. Luckily Olivia didn't seem to notice. She was off in her own world, thinking.

"I want a teenage experience. And not just going to the movies every now and then. I want to know it all." Her eyes shone with excitement as she explained. "Of course, I'd prefer to stay within a safe distance within any actual danger. I was told you'd be the perfect person to help me do that."

Dov frowned, then began to read the pages before him. "Mr. Lieberman agrees to sneak Ms. Miller out of her home for a date at least once every two weeks for the duration of the relationship." He looked up.

Olivia nodded. "You'll find it's relatively standard."

He continued. "Mr. Lieberman also agrees to update his wardrobe in order to reflect a more rebellious lifestyle than he may already be pursuing. Example: leather jacket. Mr. Lieberman will be compensated and/or reimbursed for these efforts."

"I tried to be mindful of your needs as well."

He sat back. "This is crazy," he said.

“You’ll be fairly compensated for your time, of course,” she said, eyeing his reaction. Her eyes displayed a fierce intensity that stirred a deep fear within him.

Dov looked around the mall, trying to escape from Olivia’s magnetic gaze. As his eyes swept the floor, they landed on Noa exiting a store across the hall.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” he groaned.

Noa’s eyes locked with his and she stopped in her tracks. “Dov?”

He sighed and turned to Olivia. “Sorry, I’ll be right back.”

Olivia frowned. “Oh, uh... okay. Hurry back.”

He feigned a reassuring smile, then turned to Noa and walked towards her. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

Noa jumped at his harsh tone and gathered up the bags in her hands. “I was just getting food for tonight!” she explained. She looked over his shoulder towards Olivia and cocked her head to the side. “Is this the group of friends you were telling me about?”

“It was set up by a friend, and it’s none of your business,” he hissed.

Noa furrowed her brow in confusion, then her eyes widened and she gasped. “You’re on a date!”

Dov’s heart jumped in his throat and he grabbed Noa’s arm. “It’s not–no–”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to date anybody,” she said, the wheels turning inside her head.

He shook his head. “I said I didn’t want to get married, not that I didn’t want to date. There’s a difference.”

“Okay... Well, you know she’s not Jewish, right? She wears one of those necklaces that look like a T.”

“You mean a cross? That’s probably because she’s Catholic, Noa.”

Noa was silent for a few seconds, then she slapped him on the arm. He looked down at the impacted area, too shocked to feel the sting.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed.

“You are trying to give Ima a heart attack!” she said. “Are you crazy? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking neither of you were going to know, and you wouldn’t slap me if you found out!”

Noa raised her chin in defiance. “Well, you thought wrong.”

He rubbed his arm and watched as she began to leave. “Wait, Noa!” he called.

Noa, keeping her back turned to him, said, “you know, Dov? If you really didn’t want to come you could have just not showed up. You didn’t need to disappoint the family any more than you already have.”

With that, she walked away. Dov stood still for a few moments, his mind reeling.

He turned and walked back to Olivia, who was biting her nails in anticipation. Upon seeing him returning, she sat up straight.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked.

Shana stretched her fingers out towards the flames before her, watching how the shadows danced along her fingers. She waved her arms around them three times, then covered her eyes with her hands. Beside her, Noa did the same. They were both dressed in modest dresses, having taken care to cover their knees and elbows.

Outside the sky had turned a deep purple as the sun began to set, casting multicolored rays across the sky. The living room had been set up to focus on the two candlesticks before the women, so that the main lightsource was the flames flickering against the dark.

“... lihadlik ner shel Shabbat,” the two said as they concluded their prayers.

Dov, laying on the couch in a dress shirt and pants, clapped slowly. “Congratulations, only fifteen minutes late this time. A new record.” His voice strained as he tried sitting up, then fell back against the couch.

Shana turned to Noa and kissed her forehead. “Good shabbos,” she said softly.

“Good shabbos,” Noa replied.

Shana walked over to Dov and bent down. “Good sha—”

Before she could finish, a knock sounded at the door. The three Liebermans looked at each other, then headed to the front entrance.

Shana opened the door to reveal Olivia wearing a dark blue dress that hugged her knees.

“Good shabbos,” Olivia said, smiling brightly.

Noa’s eyes widened, then she turned to glare at Dov. He smiled pleasantly and walked so he was by Olivia’s side.

“Ima,” he said to Shana, “this is my girlfriend, Olivia.”

Shana looked between the two, shocked. Noa’s jaw dropped.

“Your... I... what?” Shana stammered.

“We met in school. She just transferred this year.”

“You’re Jewish?” Noa asked, eyes narrowed.

Dov stared her down. “Yes, she is,” he said through strained teeth.

Noa scoffed and looked at Shana, whose face was indiscernible. She looked between Noa and Dov, then Dov and Olivia, before breaking out into a smile.

“This is great!” She said finally.

“What?” Noa exclaimed.

Olivia stepped into the house, kissing the mezuzah as she entered. Noa and Dov, momentarily forgetting their feud, looked at each other, bewildered, as Shana shut the door.

“Dov told me you were having an important dinner tonight and invited me,” Olivia said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it is,” Shana said, smiling brightly. Noa, seeing this, softened slightly, though her anger towards Dov remained. “You said you’re new to Dov’s school? Where did you move from?”

“Tennessee,” Olivia answered promptly.

“Huh,” Shana said. “I don’t know of many Jews from Tennessee.”

Noa raised her eyebrows and looked at Olivia.

“Oh, there aren’t,” she said quickly. “That’s why we moved here.”

“You must have some interesting stories, then.”

Dov cut in. “Oh, she does, but we should probably save those for the table.”

Shana clapped her hands together. “Oh, you’re probably right.”

Another knock sounded at the door.

“That must be the rabbi,” Shana said. “Dov, why don’t you and Olivia go sit in the living room while we wait for all the guests to arrive?”

Dov nodded. “Will do.”

Dov and Olivia walked to the living room, Shana watching them all the way.

“I can’t believe today’s the day,” she murmured to herself. Noa, having stayed in the room, shook her head and began to leave.



“I can’t believe it either,” she said.

As soon as Dov entered the living room he poked his head out to see if Shana was watching. She had turned her attention to the front door, preparing herself by shaking out her hands. He shook his head, all too familiar with his mother’s psych up routine, and turned to Olivia.

“She’s definitely onto you,” he said. “You’re going to have to step up your game if you ever want to make it past my mom.”

Olivia smoothed out her dress. “I’m trying my best, okay?” she said. “You didn’t exactly give me a whole lot of time to prepare. I need at least four hours to properly research and create a binder.”

Dov made a face of utter disbelief. “Binders? What are you talking about? Just… listen. I’ll help you. Just sit quietly for the most part and try to give one word answers. My mom hates that so she’ll give up quickly. And, no matter what, do not try to say anything with the chuh sound in it.”

“The huh sound?”

Dov nodded. “Exactly. Let’s not try that tonight.” He tapped the side of his head as he thought for more material. “Ah,” he said. “So most of the meal is just eating but there are a few traps that you’ll have to look out for. The biggest one is the challah. Before you can eat it you have to wash your hands in the kitchen, and you can’t talk until after you’ve eaten the bread. Then there’s the whole thing with Shalom Aleichem, but you probably won’t be forced to sing it.”

“Hold on,” Olivia said. “Do you have a notepad I can use?”

He shook his head. “Focus! You have to remember not to use your phone or anything muktza. That’s a dead giveaway.”

“And what’s… muk-tza?”

Dov began to speak, then thought better of it. “You know what? It would be easier if you just assumed everything was and I’ll tell you what’s okay to do.”

“Can’t I just say that I’m not religious?” she asked. “At least then it’ll make sense that I don’t know all about your traditions.”

Dov snorted. “Are you kidding? That’s even worse than you saying you’re not Jewish!”

Shana, having finished shaking her hands, opened the door, a bright smile plastered on her face.

“Rabbi Yosef—” she began, then faltered as Tovah and Moshe entered. “Oh, Tovah and Moshe, how are you two?”

Moshe raised his eyebrows as he entered. “Oh, we’re doing just dandy.”

Tovah walked in behind him, though she paused to hug Shana. “We’re doing fine,” she said. “Thanks, Ima.”

Shana shut the door behind them. “We’re just waiting on Rabbi Yosef now. Why don’t you two go wait in the living room with Dov? There’s someone he’ll want you to meet.” She smiled excitedly.

Tovah squinted at the strange buildup, but shrugged. “Okay…” she said.

Dov, having poked his head out of the door, walked back inside. “We’ve gotta move,” he said to Olivia. “Come on. I need to show you some stuff in the kitchen anyway.”

“Okay…” Olivia followed him out of the room just as Tovah and Moshe entered.

Moshe looked around. “Huh,” he said. “He must have gone to the bathroom or something.”

“Mhm,” Tovah said, walking around slowly. She turned to face Moshe. “So when are we telling my mom about the baby?”

Moshe furrowed his brow. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“I thought… never? Didn’t we agree this isn’t happening?”

Tovah shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“You said you didn’t want it.”

“I never said anything, you just put words in my mouth.”

Moshe sighed and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Are we really going to do this again?” he asked.

“Do what?” Tovah countered. “Have a completely one sided conversation and end up going with what you want?”

“Fine!” he said. “You want to keep the baby? Do it. Let's see how long it takes us to fall into financial ruin. How many years do you want to bet? Two? Three?”

Tovah opened her mouth to respond but was interrupted by another knock at the door, followed by a scream of “he’s here!”

Everyone in the house gathered around the door, eager to see the man on the other side. Shana opened the door to reveal Rabbi Yosef, a young man wearing a large black coat (slightly too large for his size) and an off brand Borsalino hat. He stumbled back at the sight of so many people, but quickly recovered and smiled at them all.

“Rabbi Yosef,” Shana said. “Shabbat shalom. Welcome to our home.”

She moved away from the door to allow him entry. He nodded and kissed the mezuzah on the doorframe.

“Wow,” he said, looking around. “You have a lovely home.”

Dov scoffed. “Wait until you see the rest of it.”

Noa elbowed him in the ribs. He let out a defeated breath and crumbled to the floor.

Shana quickly turned back to Rabbi Yosef.

“Let’s eat, shall we?”

Everyone had arrived at the dinner table. Tovah and Moshe sat on one side, looking straight ahead rather than at each other. Noa, Dov, and Olivia sat on another, each one having a silent conversation with the next. At the head of the table was Shana, and to her right sat Rabbi Yosef.

Shana looked down at the kiddush cup before her and felt her heart race. She turned to Rabbi Yosef.

“Rabbi Yosef,” she began, “would you like to lead kiddush this evening?”

He grinned and stood. “Absolutely.” With that he took the glass of wine in his hand and held it aloft, reciting the prayer associated with it.

“... mikadesh hashabbat,” he finished.

“Amen,” everyone answered.

One by one tiny kiddush cups resembling the one in the rabbi’s hand were passed down to each member at the table. Olivia looked at Dov for approval only to see that he had already downed his cup. Shrugging, she took a sip herself. Only Tovah’s cup remained full.

“What’s the matter, Tovah?” Shana asked. “Do you not like the wine I got for you?”

“Oh, uh—” Tovah smiled and shook her head. “No, it’s perfect.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t taken a sip.”

Moshe stepped in. “We’re actually trying out a cleanse this week—”

“No, that was last week,” Tovah interrupted, casting him a side glance. “We’re done now.” Moshe furrowed his brow, then shook his head in disbelief as she tossed back the contents of her cup.

“See?” she said. “All good. Thanks, Ima.”

Moshe frowned and looked away. Tovah watched his expression then looked at Shana. “Actually, can I get another cup?” she asked.

“Absolutely.” Shana poured more wine into Tovah’s cup, which she almost immediately downed. “I’m glad the wine’s good. I got it special for tonight.”

Rabbi Yosef looked up. “You didn’t need to do that—”

“I wanted to!” Shana sat back down. “I’m just so glad you were able to come, Rabbi, especially on such short notice.”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “It was no problem. I was honored to receive the invitation. I’ve been trying to spend more time with the families in this neighborhood, and it doesn’t hurt that it gives me more experience.”

“More experience?” Noa asked.

He nodded. “Well, I’ve only been a rabbi for a few weeks now. I need more time on the job if I’m going to figure out what type of rabbinic style I’ll be using.”

Olivia glanced around uneasily. “Rabbinic style?”

Rabbi Yosef grinned and nodded. “Oh yeah! See, I’ve noticed that a lot of great rabbis have certain styles they like to use.” He began to list them out on his fingers. “There’s the hip rabbi who can relate to the teens at shul, the knowledgeable rabbi that can give an hour-long lecture on a yes or no question... I mean, the list goes on.”

Dov set down his kiddush cup. “Well I think we'd all appreciate it if you didn't try to be either of those,” he said.

“Maybe I'll be the comedic rabbi,” Rabbi Yosef said thoughtfully. “I've been working on some jokes to tell tomorrow at shul.”

Moshe swallowed. “That sounds... promising.”

“Rabbi Yosef,” Shana began, desperate to change the subject. “Have you met Dov's new girlfriend?”

“New girlfriend?” Tovah wondered aloud.

Olivia looked at Dov uneasily. He nodded. “Yep. I have a girlfriend now. And she's right here, so... yeah.”

Moshe nodded. “Well, mazal tov, Dov.”

Noa pushed her chair back, creating a loud screeching noise that drew everyone's eyes to her. She looked over at Olivia. “So Olivia,” she said, “that's a pretty name. Where did you get it from?”

Olivia shrugged. “Oh, you know, same as everyone. Out of a name book.”

Noa smiled. “That's so interesting, you know, because most Jews name their kids after their relatives. And Olivia is definitely not a Jewish name.”

Dov opened his mouth to speak, but Olivia was quicker.

“Olivia is actually my English name,” she said. “My Hebrew name is Batya. After my grandmother.”

Shana raised a hand to her chest. “That's beautiful.”

Noa rolled her eyes and sat back in her chair. Olivia leaned over to Dov and whispered, “I always like to be prepared.”

“Well, on that note,” Shana began, “I think it's about time we go wash for challah.”

Moshe stood up. “Great idea.” He grabbed Tovah's arm and led her to the kitchen.

Once inside, he released her arm.

“What the hell, Moshe?” she asked as she massaged where he had gripped her.

“What were you thinking?”

“What?”

“What do you mean what, Tovah?” he covered his face. “You had two full cups of wine!”

She paused. “Right, but they were small cups.”

He gawked at her. “What are you trying to do, cause a–” His eyes widened with realization.

Tovah frowned. “What?”

He crossed his arms. “Tovah. Just admit it. You don’t want the baby.”

Her eyes widened and she looked over at the dining room table, within view from the kitchen. She looked back at Moshe.

“Lower your voice!” she snapped.

“Why, are you afraid that your mom will make you keep it?”

She stared at him, speechless, then pushed past him and walked over to the sink. “You are unbelievable.”

“I’m just trying to have a conversation with you! What, we can’t talk about the biggest thing that’s ever happened to us?”

Tovah took a rinsing cup from the counter and filled it up with water, pouring it out three times on each of her hands. She turned to Moshe and made a zipping motion over her lips. He rolled his eyes.

“Great,” he said. “So you’re using washing as an excuse not to talk to me now? That’s real mature.”

She threw the towel at him and exited the room, leaving him alone. He shook his head in disbelief and followed suit after washing his hands.

Within moments, Noa, Dov, and Olivia entered. Immediately Noa slapped Dov on the arm.

“Ow!” he cried out, rubbing his arm. “Again? What is wrong with you today?”

“What’s the matter with you?” She asked. “Are you trying to ruin our lives? Why would you bring her–” she jabbed a finger at Olivia. “--to this dinner? Get a Jewish girl to solve your shidduch problems, not this shiksa!”

Olivia shrugged. “I think I’m doing pretty well, for what it’s worth.”

“Agreed,” Dov said.

Noa edged closer to her brother until they were eye to eye. She stood on her toes so they were level. “Listen to me very carefully,” she whispered. “You are going to quit screwing around with this. Stop letting your girlfriend answer questions, don’t question the rabbi’s judgment, and

leave me out of whatever lies you end up weaving. Otherwise everyone at that table will know about your Catholic friend by the end of the night.”

With that, she washed her hands and exited the room.

After everyone returned to their seats, Rabbi Yosef took hold of the challah.

“... Hamotzei lechem min ha'aretz,” he recited.

“Amen,” everyone repeated.

He uncovered the challah, revealing two unevenly braided loaves. Shana bit her lip in embarrassment. Instead of saying anything, Rabbi Yosef cut the loaves into pieces and passed them around the table. Dov grabbed the plate before Noa could take any challah and passed it on. He took a bite and grinned.

“Isn't this great, all of us talking?” he asked, staring directly at Noa. She glared back.

“I love talking,” Rabbi Yosef said. “Though not too much talking, am I right?”

Moshe glanced at Tovah. “Yeah, communication is great. Isn't it, Tovah?”

She rolled her eyes and took another bite of her challah in response. “Is there any more wine?” she asked. Moshe shook his head in distress as Shana poured more into her cup.

Dov leaned over to Noa. “Try playing that Catholic card of yours now,” he whispered in her ear. She lunged for the challah in his hand, but he pulled it away just in time.

Shana sighed contentedly. “You know, we really should have meals like this more often.”

Rabbi Yosef looked up. “Do you not usually have meals like this?”

She thought for a moment, weighing different answers in her head. “Well... we used to. Things have just been a bit hectic since the divorce.”

Tovah, Noa, and Dov looked at each other from across the table. Tovah downed her latest glass of wine, having upgraded to a larger cup. Noa began playing with the tablecloth.

“I'm so sorry,” Rabbi Yosef said. “I had no idea.”

Shana smiled sadly. “Why would you? It's not the most conventional thing in the world.” she gestured toward Tovah. “I'm just glad Tovah was able to find a good husband, Baruch Hashem.”

Tovah looked up. “Hmm? Oh. Yeah. Super blessed.” She began to reach for the bottle of wine, but Moshe grabbed it before she could.

Shana frowned. “Moshe, what’s going on? She can make her own decisions.”

Tovah smirked, her head airy. “Yeah, Moshe,” she said. “I’m smart enough to know what’s best.”

She grabbed the bottle back and began to pour it into her glass. Moshe shook his head and stood up.

“Tovah’s pregnant!” He announced. Tovah dropped the bottle on the table.

Shana shot up to her feet. “Are you serious?” She asked, her eyes shiny with tears.

Tovah looked at her mother, close to sobbing, and slumped over in defeat. “Yeah, we are,” she said.

Shana rushed over and pulled her into a hug.

“Mazal tov!” Rabbi Yosef exclaimed.

“Wow, I thought it would take at least a couple of years,” Dov said.

“Wait,” Shana said, slightly pulling away. “Why were you drinking wine if you knew?”

Tovah was quiet, but she could feel a lump rising in her throat. “Because... I don’t want the baby,” she said finally, her voice shaking.

The room fell quiet. Shana shook her head and embraced Tovah once more.

“It’ll be okay,” she said quietly.

Noa, seeing that Dov was distracted, grabbed the piece of challah from his plate and shoved it into her mouth.

“Dov is dating a Catholic!” She yelled. Everyone in the room turned to stare at her. “Olivia isn’t Jewish!” She sat down in her chair. “Ugh, it feels so good to talk again!”

Shana looked at Dov. “You’re dating a goy?”

Dov shrugged, unsure of what else to do.

Rabbi Yosef looked around. “Goy vey, am I right?” he said. No one laughed. He looked down at his feet.

Shana looked around the table. At Tovah and Moshe, exchanging a quiet conversation with nothing but their eyes. At Rabbi Yosef, attempting to keep all of his focus on the challah before him. At Dov and Noa, each staring intently at her to read her reaction. Noa, in eager anticipation. Dov, drawn back with the intention of appearing stoic, though the fear in his eyes betrayed him.



She pushed back her chair and stood up. “Shalom aleichem,” she began to sing.  
“Malachei hashareit...”

Tovah stood up. “Malachei elyon,” she joined in. Moshe stood up beside her and took her hand in his. She nodded at him.

“Mimelech malchei ham'lachim,” Rabbi Yosef continued. Shana cast a grateful look his way.

“HaKadosh Baruch Hu,” Noa said as she stood. She turned to Dov, who had remained seated. He hesitated, then rose to his feet. Olivia joined him, nodding along nervously.

The family continued to sing, their voices carrying around the house as each of them looked their neighbor in the eye. What started out as an awkward song slowly morphed into a powerful melody as their voices grew louder and smiles crept onto their lips.

“Bar'chuni l'shalom, malachei hashalom, malachei elyon. Mimelech malchei ham'lachim HaKadosh Baruch Hu.”

## The Jobar

The sand spread beneath her feet as she ran. Tiny infernos rose up to greet her, enemies distracting from the true adversary. Shouts in Arabic followed her labored breaths, hysterical voices carrying over the vast desert.

Levyia lifted her bag from her side, her trembling hands struggling to work the clasp.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she cursed as she wrenched open the top of the bag. Finally, it came apart and revealed the equipment inside. Rows of lenses shone up at her, reflecting the desert sun. Levyia shut her eyes tightly and sent a silent thank you to whoever was watching over her. She grabbed a lens, popped the cover off of the camera strapped to her chest, and attached the two with a satisfying *click* as she raced toward the rows of buildings ahead.

“Stop! Come back!” The harsh language tripped over Levyia’s ears, and her mind raced to translate. No, she wouldn’t go back. Not until she’d done what she needed to.

Her destination was closer now. As it neared, Levyia scooped up her camera, ducked into the nearest entrance to the maze of buildings and hid beneath a small car, so low to the ground that, despite her laying on her stomach, her back touched the bottom. She schooled her labored breaths and waited, agonized, for the guards to reach her. Stomping boots neared, and she heard the frantic “where did she go?” delivered in the foreign tongue.

“That way,” a man answered.

Levyia’s eyes darted around the area, searching for something—anything—that could help her should she be discovered. Next to her a litter of glass decorated the stone floor, though the pieces were minuscule, not unlike the sand she’d traipsed through in order to get there. Still, it was the only thing within the vicinity. With trepidation she scooped up a handful of the rainbow pellets and held them ready.

Footsteps neared. She heard the maneuvering of metal as a soldier adjusted his gun. The smell of leather filled her nose as boots stepped close by.

Levyia’s heart pounded, leaping up and down between her throat and chest. Why did she take this mission, she wondered. Why couldn’t she just be a normal travel photographer like her friends had advised?

The boots continued, circling as the soldier looked around the street. As Levyia watched, they disappeared around the corner.

She stayed silent for a few seconds, not daring to move a muscle. Still, she knew the soldier would be back, and might not leave any stone—or car—unturned this time. With great struggle, her back scraping against the car and her stomach on glass, she crawled out into the open. She looked at the glass in her hand, which she had not yet released, and squinted. The colors displayed in the crystals were not reflections as she'd previously believed. The pigment was ingrained in the pellets themselves. With quickening breaths, she looked around at the surrounding buildings. It couldn't be.

But it was.

Nestled in between two buildings before her was an opening, small enough that one would not notice it upon a first glance. The salmon colored walls, ending in marble railings, were exactly as had been described to her.

Levya took a deep breath, steeling herself, then slowly rose to her feet. She cast a quick glance toward the corner the guard had turned, then slipped into the crevice.

As she brushed the glass shards from her clothes, she noticed the marble beneath her, designed as multiple diamonds neatly aligned with and inside one another. She raised her eyes and took in her surroundings.

The walls were exactly as they'd appeared from the outside, however here they bore arches that created the illusion of windows. Hebrew writing accompanied lanterns hung along the borders of the courtyard. A tree sat in the center, its thin branches extending out towards a doorway that was almost entirely dark, with the mysterious exception of multiple flickering lights. Specters of life.

She was here. She'd finally made it to the Jobar synagogue.

It took a long time for Levya to break from her dazed stupor, but eventually she found her thoughts again and began taking photos, careful to ensure that her flash was not enabled. She peered through her lens and pressed down, capturing moments in time. Closeups of the writing. The branches reaching toward the entryway, as if they were hoping to run after someone. Levya would have continued forever if she wasn't worried about the amount of film she had.

Eventually she steeled herself and made her way through the entrance. She remained vigilant, ready for any altercation, but upon her arrival she found no one inside the synagogue.

Instead, she found a dazzling array of light.

Across the large room, lanterns and multicolored chandeliers hung, leaving no space uncovered. Their rainbow light strewn across the room, dancing along the walls. Rows of peeling stone pillars upheld the lofty ceiling. Red couches and rugs covered the room with intricate patterns, something Levya had never seen in a synagogue before. Instead of pews facing in one direction, the area seemed conversational. She might have thought it was a living room had it not been for the *bimah* in the center.

The raised platform of stone stood in the middle of the room, a detailed blue fence surrounding it. A large lectern, or *amud* as she knew it, was placed inside.

The synagogue was slowly fading, with the fabric on the couches ripped and covered in dust. Broken glass crunched beneath Levya's feet as she made her way through the prayer space. When she looked up, she could see that a few of the overhead lanterns had been smashed. Random papers and trash was strewn across the floor, more plentiful in some areas over others, but it didn't matter. The beauty was so overwhelming that the stench of discarded waste barely bothered her.

Upon arriving in Syria Levya had known she wouldn't be allowed to visit this beautiful testament to history. Her passport may not have screamed Jew, but her name was plastered all over social media, tied to various projects related to Jewish spaces. She'd been sure from the start that if she wanted to see the Jobar synagogue she'd have to run for it.

As Levya took in her surroundings and attempted to steady her hands as she took photos, she found something stir inside her. The rustling of the branches outside seemed to resonate in her stomach. An eerie sensation filled her, like millions of bodiless eyes were staring down at her. The presence of a community, though nowhere to be seen, echoed in her bones. She wondered what they might think of her mission, documenting what once was their livelihood.

Shuffling feet sounded nearby, wrenching Levya from her trance. She looked around for a place to hide, but the openness of the synagogue's floor betrayed her. Running her hands through her hair for comfort, she crouched behind the *bimah* and prayed it would protect her.

The shuffling continued, like bristles against pavement. As Levya listened for the sound of metal as she'd heard before, she began to wonder. It almost sounded as if someone was sweeping.

Slowly she raised her head above the *bimah*, cautiously examining the room. A few steps away from her was a bearded man with a broom in his hand.

“What are you doing here?” he asked in Arabic, his old voice shaky in the large, abandoned room.

Levy’s heart raced, pounding in her ears. She mustered up her courage and stood, preparing to make a run for it.

“I’m a reporter,” she answered in the same language. “I came here to document this place. Who are you?”

The old man looked her up and down, studying her every feature. His eyebrows furrowed, he looked confused more than anything. Slowly, she began to back away.

“I take care of this place,” he finally said after a long, torturous silence.

Levy stopped in her tracks. “You what?”

“I’ve been coming here for twenty years now. My father did it even longer before me.” The man looked at the garbage scattered on the floor behind her. “Did you do this?” he asked, pointing the edge of the broom towards her.

She shook her head, though her mind was whirring. All these years, she’d thought the synagogue had been abandoned.

The man sighed. “Lousy kids, always coming here and leaving a mess for me to clean...” he continued muttering as he made his way past Levy, saying words she couldn’t quite understand with her limited Arabic.

“Why do you come here?” she asked.

The man stopped and turned around to face her. His face reflected the rays of light shining from the chandeliers. Red, blue, and yellow crossed his eyes and formed a mask over his nose. The moving colors made him appear ethereal.

“Years ago, when I was a young boy,” he said slowly, “there were many people living in Syria. They were different, but kind. They used to come here every week. Over time less and less showed, until it was completely empty.”

Levy felt her body tense as years of history swept through her brain. She knew exactly the period he was speaking of.

“My father decided that such a place should be preserved,” the man continued. “He had been here once before and told me about its beauty. For years he protected it from vandals and rebels, people with no respect for culture. Now I do the same thing.” He gestured towards the

trash on the floor. “Still, I’m an old man. Kids often manage to sneak through. After me there’ll be no one left.”

Levyia felt her chest boiling, millions of bubbles rising up to consume her. She stepped forward.

“I’m one of the people you’re speaking of,” she said, hoping her emotions shone through her broken Arabic. “My parents fled here years before I was born.”

If the man was surprised, he didn’t show it. His face remained as stoic as it had been throughout their conversation.

“You’d better move quickly, child,” he said. “Capture this time before it’s gone. It goes by faster than you would believe.”

The man turned and began to brush the broom back and forth across the floor. Levyia, hands shaking, slowly lifted her camera and snapped a picture, halting the moment in time and freezing it for future use. She examined the photo, capturing the man mid sweep. He appeared frail in his posture, but his hands were firm on the broom. It was an astonishing image.

When she looked up from her screen, the man was gone.

Schooling her disappointment, Levyia positioned her camera in front of her right eye and continued snapping photos, trying to quiet the voices inside her head. The history that demanded to be told and the weight of the world on her shoulders. The click of the shutter provided some relief, a constant presence that she could rely on. As she positioned herself closer to the *amud*, she noticed a layer of dust uprooted itself and flew away.

A loud crash sounded from outside and Levyia jumped to her feet. Her heart pounded so loud she could hardly hear anything else, but still the stomping of heavy boots neared.

She grabbed her bag and began fishing through it, searching for something, anything that could help her right now. She looked around the room, like a creature in a mouse trap, panicking with no way out. The old man had left, and she wasn’t sure if he’d be of any help if he was still in the room.

Without warning, several men stormed the synagogue and instantly surrounded Levyia, guns raised high. They yelled commands at the top of their lungs, making it impossible for her to understand. Still it became clear when one of the men reached out and grabbed her camera from her hands. The others looked on with disgust, as if it was questionable to want to document such a place. She wondered what the old man would have thought had he seen this affair.

As Levya looked around, she realized these weren't soldiers. The men were young, in civilian clothes. Only a few of them held guns, their legs spaced unevenly in a stance that even she could recognize was improper. Still, she kept her hands up, drinking in every detail as the glass above her twinkled.

The men grabbed her bag and emptied it out onto the floor. Several pieces of equipment shattered, joining the multicolored shards that had already been broken. Her own mark upon the historical stage. They grabbed it all and laughed proudly. Within moments, the men were gone, and Levya was left with nothing but an empty bag.

Still, a smile crept up on her lips.

As their hoots and cheers faded in the open air, Levya reached inside her pouch and pulled at a camouflaged tab, revealing a false bottom hiding her digital frame. She lifted it from the bag and examined the screen, boasting the many pictures she'd taken from that day.

She grinned and shoved it back into the bag. History would still be told, and she had the power to do it.

Dear Maya

September 1st, 7:03 a.m.

Dear Maya,

I don't know why I'm bothering to write this. It's just some stupid project assigned by a therapist who got her degree out of a take one bin.

Maybe that was a bit harsh. Still, it's not like a couple of words on a page are going to cure every single thing that's wrong with me. I can't imagine much is gonna happen aside from a large pen stain on the side of my hand and a newfound depression after evaluating literally every decision I've ever made.

I guess Emily's gonna read this no matter what I think. Might as well get it over with.

Let's start off with the fact that I have no idea who I am anymore.

Wait, no, that's a cliché. I know who I am, obviously.

Maya Leiberman, seventeen, daughter of Avi and Bracha, grade A basic bitch...

I mean that. Other people might have something unique about them. They have to. Meanwhile, I get the same classic plain bagel (nothing on it, of course) every morning because G-d forbid I try anything new. My test scores are average, I'm not good at any sports or cool activity that makes me stand out from the crowd. In fact, the only thing I can possibly count on to prove that I'm not just like everyone else is the fact that I'm Jewish. Did you know that Jews make up only .2% of Utah's population? Now you do.

Well, you already did since you're me...

Wow, this is harder than I thought it would be. Let's just move on.

In the past there was pressure to be just like everyone else. You have to conform to society, know your place, never question your role in this great chasm of responsibility. Now, however, we've totally swung in the opposite direction. Everyone has to be different, unique... special. You're not worth anything if you're too similar to the person next to you or across the hall or even thousands of miles away.



Unfortunately the one saving grace for my predictable personality has lost its applicability since our move to San Diego. There's still a relatively small Jewish community there (verified by my parents' excruciatingly long search for a synagogue), but when you look at California's population as a whole it's clear that I've lost my value.

I guess I still have some value. Growing up I learned to be proud of my heritage, because what else can you do when your community has been targeted countless times throughout history?

"We've gotten this far in life," my parents would tell me. "Everyone wanted us dead, but we survived."

Which is basically the idea behind every Jewish holiday ever.

Passover—yay, we weren't completely wiped out by the Egyptians!

Chanukah—yay, we weren't killed by the Greeks!

Yom Ha'atzmaut—yay, we have a state so no one can expel us again!

I know not *everyone* is against us. Of course there are people who don't hate Jews, and of course I won't be beaten to death if I walk down the street wearing the star of David around my neck.

But then I hear the stories.

How my mother was chased with knives when she was only ten.

How a man was beaten to death just because he wore a kippah.

How when going to a southern state for vacation my friend was asked where her horns were.

And it begs the question—how can I be proud of my religion when so many people want to hurt us? And even outside of hurting us—having no understanding of who we are?

I've seen the Jewish characters on TV. At first I was excited to see my religion represented in some of my favorite shows—*New Girl*, *Will and Grace*, etcetera. But then I noticed—Judaism almost never comes up for these characters aside from the occasional joke. They eat cheeseburgers and bacon, they overuse the sound "ch" because of course that's what all Jews sound like, but the worst thing—the *worst* thing I've ever seen was when two Jewish characters from two different shows used a word that you're never supposed to say in vain, just for the sake of a joke.

I get it. People don't understand or even know about the fact that it's one of the highest sins in Judaism to say G-d's name in vain. But couldn't the writers have done the tiniest amount of research? Clearly they know what the word is and what it means, so why the hell wouldn't they know how wrong it is to say it? What is so different about Judaism that people are able to make so many jokes and no one bats an eye?

But of course, I can't ask that. No, I'd just be enforcing the stereotype that all Jewish women do is complain.

I guess I'm already doing that by writing all of this.

Anyway, I've been going to Hebrew school for most of my life. Ten years dedicated to Torah and long skirts and watching boys get away with everything while the girls are supposed to sit still and be quiet.

Today it all changes.

Today I go to public school.

It wasn't my choice. After all the craziness last year I had a meeting with my parents and the school board, where they deemed me "unfit to pursue the private school lifestyle", whatever the hell that means. The meeting ended with my mom calling the board idiots and storming out, but eventually she realized that this was the best thing. When a job offer from California came rolling into my dad's inbox, my parents decided to take the change one step further.

Shit, is it 7:15 already? I guess the first ending is going to be the awkwardest. How can I end this off in a way that'll make Emily happy?

"Always remember to be kind to yourself and focus on the positive."

Ugh. Such bullshit.

Sincerely,  
Me

I twirl the pen in my hand for a few seconds before finally allowing myself to be satisfied with the letter. I swing my legs over the side of my bed, one of the only objects we'd managed to get into the house so far, and shove the notebook into my bag.

Half empty boxes clutter the hallways outside, and I nearly trip over one as I walk into the kitchen. My mom sits at the table, phone in hand.

“Hey honey,” she says without looking up.

I wave halfheartedly, a gesture that goes unseen, and all but sprint to the coffeemaker, one of the first items to have been unpacked. Out of the corner of my eye I see my mother smirk.

“Rough night?” she asks.

“Rough life,” I respond.

She frowns. “Did you take your medication last night?”

I nod and grab a mug from one of the boxes on the floor. It reads **Maya’s Bat Mitzvah 2017**, and is a souvenir from a night of uncomfortable dresses and endless mandatory dances. I roll my eyes at the memory and pour the steaming liquid into it. “How can I forget when you texted eight times to remind me? You know, you could have just walked up the stairs to my room and told me in person.”

She shrugs. “My job is to test these phones and make sure they work. Are you saying you don’t want me to do my job?”

Stumped for an answer, I merely take a sip from the cup. I’m saved from the awkward response I surely would have used by a crash of metal in the hallway.

“Shit!” my dad’s voice echoes through the empty house.

My mom barely looks up from her phone as she says, “you okay?”

“Oh yeah, I just love stubbing my toe on a two ton box of god knows what,” he mutters as he makes his way into the kitchen. My family isn’t incredibly religious—compared to my grandparents and cousins we might as well be gentiles—so my father never feels the need to grow out his beard or wear tzitzit. He does, however, wear a kippah, though today it’s not on his head. When he sees me he draws up short.

“Hey, monkey, I thought you were at school,” he says.

I raise my cup to him in acknowledgement. “I’m about to go, I just needed a quick boost.”

He nods and seems to hesitate before saying, “you know what? I’ll drive you. Get in the car and I’ll meet you there.”

I set my cup down on the counter and grab my bag, and as I do I see the uneasy glance my parents give each other. Deciding not to dwell on it, I make my way outside to the car.

“When’s your next appointment with Emily?”

“Next week.”

“Are you excited?”

I look up from where I’d been leaning against one of the car’s windows. “Excited for therapy?”

My dad doesn’t seem to know what to say to that and instead focuses on the road.

I sigh and nod. “Yeah, I’m super excited,” I say halfheartedly.

He brightens. “Good. That’s good...”

We fall into silence. I watch as we pass by storefronts and apartment buildings, all contributing to the grayish hue of the city. I wonder if any of my classmates live there.

“Did you hear about what happened to the Levys?” My dad asks.

I shut my eyes. “What happened?”

“Someone drew a bunch of swastikas on their gate. The police are looking into it but I don’t think they’re going to find anything.”

I look over at him. “Do you have a google alert on antisemitism?”

He shrugs. “Noah texted me. Besides, it’s never bad to be overly cautious.”

“I don’t think it’s being cautious when you’re obsessing over something that didn’t happen to you.”

My dad frowns and pulls over to the side of the road, a few hundred feet from my school. I unbuckle myself and begin to get out of the car when he stops me.

“Monkey, look at me.”

I do.

He smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “You know I love you, right?” I start to speak but he interrupts. “I’m trying my best to keep us safe. Sometimes staying informed about what’s happening is the only way to do that. You understand that, don’t you?”

At a loss for words, I nod.

He relaxes and pulls me into a hug. “Please be careful, sweetie. I love you more than life itself.”

I feel a sting behind my eyes and pull away before he can see that I’m tearing up.

“I love you too, dad,” I whisper.

The school is bigger than any other that I've been to in my entire life. It looms over me, its intimidating structure contradicting the welcome signs out front. Cheerleaders jump and wave as I enter, and I marvel at their shockingly short skirts.

Half aware of what I'm doing, I tuck my necklace under my shirt.

The building is guarded by an ID system. I'd received mine in the mail a few days ago and attached it to my bag, but when it's my turn to scan it the string I'd tied to it gets trapped in one of the straps. The security guard watches boredly as I fumble with the bag, and I feel heat rush to my face as the line behind me gets longer with each minute.

"Sorry," I say, but my voice comes out barely above a whisper, rendering it meaningless as no one is able to hear me. All too fast, a line begins to form behind me.

Finally I shove the bag off of my shoulders and tap it to the screen. It flashes green and I breathe a sigh of relief as the security guard waves me along.

I give a halfhearted wave to the crowd of waiting students and hurry along to my first class. I pass the many halls, plastered with posters boasting equality and acceptance of all people regardless of their orientation, religion, or nationality.

For some reason I feel nothing as I walk past it. These parades, posters, words of acceptance... they're all disguises. It's easy to lie and say you accept someone when you don't have to actually do anything about it.

As I near the end of the hallway I notice with a rapidly increasing heartbeat that the room numbers around me stop at 110. My schedule says my class is in 113.

I look around, panicked as I see the halls emptying of students, all somehow aware of where to go.

"Shit, shit, shit," I whisper to myself, then swallow as a teacher gives me a dirty look. I give a sheepish smile and run past, frantically scanning each room as I rush by.

This hallway ended at 110, so the next one must continue on, right?

Wrong.

As I round the corner I see the number 140 staring at me and start.

*What the hell?*

"Hey, are you okay?"

I turn to see a person watching me. Their hair is bubble gum pink, severely contrasting their tanned skin and dark eyes.

“Umm...” I hesitate, unsure whether or not to lie and pretend that I’m a secure girl who knows exactly what she’s doing but for some reason chooses to stand in the hallway like an idiot.

“Hello?”

I snap out of my dazed state and return to reality. “Oh, um, yeah, I’m okay,” I lie.

They raise an eyebrow. “Really? Because you just stood there for a solid minute sweating bullets.”

I gulp. “Well, um, I’m just a little... lost.”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

I pause. “Well... yeah. I don’t know where to go. It’s embarrassing.”

They laugh. It’s a musical sound. “Hey, I’ve never seen you before in my life so I’m gonna assume you’re new. Obviously you aren’t going to know where to go, this place is confusing as hell.”

“I just... I don’t know, I was hoping it would be easier than this.”

“Well, trust me, it’s not. I mean I got around fine my first year but that’s just because I’m pretty amazing if I do say so myself.” They toss their hair back and grin.

I try to push back my jealousy, but it only returns stronger. How can they be so confident and cocky? Aren’t they worried at all about what other people might think?

They seem to take my silence as an excuse to continue talking. “Come on,” they say. “I’ll help you find your room. What number is it?”

“One thirteen,” I say.

“Awesome, that’s right by the vending machines.”

“You guys have vending machines here?”

“Of course. This place might be a shithole but we’re not barbaric.”

As we walk down the halls I try to keep from staring at the person’s hair. At my past school no one was allowed to dye their hair--the school thought it would be too “temptatious” for the boys.

“Like what you see?” the person asks without looking at me.

I jump, startled. “What? N-no, I was just... why did you dye your hair like that?”

They shrug. “I don’t know. Pisses my mom off. She already hates me for changing my name so what’s one more reason for her to disown me?”

“What is your name?”

“Skylar. They/them pronouns, by the way.”

I furrow my brow. “They/them pronouns?”

Skylar stops in their tracks and looks at me. “Do you not know what that is?”

“Am I supposed to?”

“I mean, considering the fact that eighty percent of this school is either gay or trans I’d say so.”

My jaw drops. “Eighty percent?”

Skylar smiles. “They just don’t know it yet,” they say teasingly.

Despite myself, and the fact that I’m mostly clueless as to what they’re saying, I smile.

We stop at room 113. Skylar leans against the wall. “Here we are,” they say.

I nod. “Thanks,” I say, “for helping me.”

They shrug, and I could have sworn I saw their cheeks redden. “Hey, no problem. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Okay.”

September 1st, 7:46 a.m.

Dear Maya,

It’s weird to think about the differences between these two schools.

On the one hand, I don’t think I’ll miss getting yelled at for dozing off during the morning prayer or hearing countless Jewish acapella parodies to generic pop songs. On the other, though, I find myself tearing up as I struggle through the crowd of people surging through the hallways as we all head to our next class. My grade in Hebrew school was made up of exactly thirty people, so fighting through the sea of students is enough of a struggle to make my heart feel like it’s about to collapse. I’m surprised to find that I also miss being in a school where everyone knows about our religion and are free to talk about it.

I’m sitting in History now. It’s shocking to hear about stuff that has nothing to do with Judaism or the Holocaust. We learned general history in my old school, but it was never the main focus. Something always related back to Judaism and attempted genocide.

The teacher was pretty forgiving of my tardiness since it's the first day, but I can't say the same for myself. When I came into the class everyone was already seated, so all the attention was averted to me.

My legs still haven't stopped shaking.

Emily said to write whenever I'm anxious, so I guess now is as good a time as ever. Geez, by the end of today I'll have enough letters for the next five sessions.

Anyway, remember to breathe, blah blah blah.

Sincerely,

Me

When I near the cafeteria for lunch I'm shocked at the striking resemblance it has to all the movies I'd seen growing up. The large room is complete with lunch ladies behind counters serving some weird form of meatballs, circular tables with connecting stools, and a large fathead of the school mascot.

I half expect someone to jump up and start singing songs from High School Musical.

Now for the cliché don't know where to sit trope.

Right as I'm about to reenact it, though, I spot a flash of pink and a hand waving toward me. Skylar is sitting at one of the tables, accompanied by a group of three boys that I haven't met yet.

Honestly, there are so many people at this school that I don't think I'll meet even ten percent of them by the time I graduate.

"Yo newbie!" Skylar calls. "Get your ass over here!"

As I hesitantly make my way over I hear one of the boys saying "did you really just say yo?"

Skylar snorts. "You've got a problem with that, Ryan?"

"It's not 2005 so yes, yes I do." He shoves a forkful of meat into his mouth and chokes as Skylar hits him in the shoulder. They look over at me and smile.

"Hey, how was class?" they ask brightly.

"It was..." I think back to the teacher calling out students and laughing along as they joked about the subject, something that never would have happened at my old school. "Good," I finish lamely.



“Imagine liking class,” one of the boys mutters.

“Alex, quit bothering newbie. She doesn’t need any more issues at this backwards school.” Skylar frowns and turns to me. “Speaking of which, I should probably learn your name. What is it?”

“Maya,” I say.

“Maya,” they repeat. “That’s a nice name.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” One of the boys asks. Skylar, who had just taken a sip of their drink, spits it back into the cup and straightens.

“Right!” they exclaim. “Maya, this is Peter.” They gesture to the boy who had just spoken. He salutes, receiving an eye roll from Skylar. They move on. “Then there’s Alex and Ryan.” The two wave to me and I return the gesture.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, then turn to Skylar. “I’m sorry I made you late to class.”

Skylar shrugs. “Hey, don’t worry about it. I wasn’t gonna go anyway.”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. “Really? It’s the first day…”

“Eh, who cares about grades?”

“Teachers, colleges, job recruiters,” Alex says.

“Okay whatever, so maybe *some* people care.” Skylar rolls their eyes. “But when you’ve got this mug,” they gesture to their face, “you don’t need grades.”

“Right,” Ryan replies. “Well, have fun stripping to pay for your bastard son.”

Skylar frowns but brushes it off. “Well, anyway Maya, what do you have for lunch?”

I open my bag and stop in my tracks, having completely forgotten about the hastily prepared sandwich I’d made last night. It’s comprised of leftovers from Shabbat, so it’s basically just challah and some lukewarm gefilte fish.

Of course I hadn’t thought this through.

“You know, I’m not actually hungry,” I say quickly.

“Oh come on,” Skylar says. “You have to eat *something*.”

“No, I’m really okay—”

“Well if you’re not gonna eat it do you mind if I have some?” Peter asks and leans over the table. “I’ve got the appetite of a lion and a stomach to match.”

The group groans in disapproval but Peter shrugs it off.

“I don’t…” I swallow and give in, bracing myself before removing the bag’s contents.

The group is silent for a moment.

“What is that crap?” Alex asks.

“Um...” I think of how to explain. Would they even know what challah is, let alone gefilte fish? “It’s bread. And fish.”

“My dad’s a fisherman and that’s no fish I ever saw,” Peter says.

“It’s not technically fish,” I stammer. “It’s kind of... Well, it’s basically just garbage that we put together and call fish.”

“We?” Skylar asks.

“Oh, um...” I hesitate. “You know. Jews.”

To my surprise, the awkward silence never arrives. In fact, the group doesn’t even seem to care.

“I didn’t know you’re Jewish,” Skyler says.

“Well, to be fair we did just meet.”

Their eyes light up. “Oh, you’ve got some sass!”

“Newbie’s got an attitude,” Ryan says through a mouthful of food.

I smile nervously, my heart racing. With some hesitation, I take out the Jewish star from beneath my shirt to show them. They marvel at the design and tell me it’s nice.

*It’s nice.*

“So tell me,” Skylar says. “Is there like a female version of circumcision or do you guys just get off scot free?”

“Skylar, what the fuck was that question?” Alex asks.

“I’m curious!” They protest. “I’ve never met a Jewish person!”

“Dude, you live in California, of course you’ve met a Jewish person,” Peter says.

Skylar raises an eyebrow. “Oh, so you’re gonna bash on me for saying yo but you get to say dude? Real nice.”

“I’m a guy, I’m allowed to say that stuff,” he boasts.

“Sexist.”

“Pig.”

Skylar straightens. “I just mean I’ve never really talked to someone who’s Jewish. This is new for me.”

I wonder if they realize how new this is for me too.

“How would female circumcision even work?” Ryan asks. “There’s nothing to cut off,” he pauses, then looks at me. “Is there?”

“Uh...”

“Don’t ask her that you perv,” Skylar says.

“You’re the one who asked first!”

“You’re a guy, you’re not allowed to ask those kinds of questions, whereas I am,” they retort.

He snorts and returns to his food.

“Well to answer your question,” I say slowly, “no, there is no female version.”

“Damn you guys got the better end of the deal,” Alex says.

I smile. “Yeah, I’m pretty lucky.”

We continue to talk. The group asks some questions, but they never resort to bullying or rudeness. It’s just... curiosity.

September 1st, 4:03 p.m.

Dear Maya,

Skylar gave me their number after lunch.

I don’t know why that small gesture means so much to me, but it does. I think they might add me to a group chat. *A real group chat.*

Dad picked me up from school at around 3:10. When I told him about what had happened I could have sworn I saw tears in his eyes. I’ve never been directly bullied for my culture, so I can’t imagine what this would mean to someone who was. Mom even gave me a hug.

Yeah, it’s still bad. I’m still going to hear about antisemitism and I don’t expect it to completely stop any time soon. Still... spending time with Skylar and their friends today felt incredible. No one’s ever shown such an interest in my religion before, and when I told them about different holidays and rules they actually paid attention and asked me more questions.

I know I’m different. I know that some people will continue to ask where my horns are, or why my nose isn’t as big as other Jews, but at the same time there are people with a genuine interest in me, not just for my religion but for who I am individually.

For once in my life, I actually feel... normal.

It's nice.

Sincerely,

Me

## Service

“Are you sure this is okay?”

“I told you, June, it’s fine.”

June fidgeted with her blue dress and looked around the room, filled with simply a couch and a vanity table. It seemed like a needlessly lavish waiting room. Two doors sat across from each other. “I don’t know,” she said nervously, “I still feel like I should have worn black.”

Adam took her hand and kissed it. “You’ll be okay. I guarantee no one inside will be dressed in black. It’s not the same as Christian funerals.”

June nodded, seeming to take this as a comfort. To her Adam was an expert in this, a novice in the art of Jewish funerals. In truth, he’d only ever seen one on television.

Here he was, the son of the man being buried, and he knew nothing of their customs. His father had never once mentioned being Jewish throughout his entire childhood. Now all of a sudden he found his faith on his deathbed?

“What are you thinking?” June asked.

“Nothing,” he said. He didn’t need to bother her with the details.

“Come on, Adam,” she said, sitting next to him. “You can talk to me.”

“I just...” he sighed. “Why couldn’t he share this part of himself with me? The one who cared about things? In fact, why couldn’t he have shared anything about himself at all?” He dragged his feet against the carpet. “The guy lands on his deathbed and suddenly becomes God’s messenger. He never mentioned Judaism when I was growing up.”

June thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Maybe he just never mentioned it to you.”

One of the doors opened and a young woman—Dina, Adam remembered—entered. She smiled, though it carried a certain weight to it.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

June straightened her dress once more and looked towards Adam, who nodded. Dina turned and opened the door further, revealing several people waiting outside. They rushed in like a wave to the shore, and just as Adam had suspected, not one of them wore black. A sea of reds, purples, and blues flooded the room. He felt a small wave of reassurance at his correct assumption. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad...

Before he could figure out what was happening, though, the waves had crashed upon him, all shaking his hand and sharing their condolences.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Your father was a dear friend of mine.”

“What a great tragedy this is!”

“Baruch Dayan Emet.”

“He was ripped from us all too soon.”

Adam nodded at each of these, pretending to know and care who the people sharing them were. He looked over at June, who seemed to be doing the same, though with much more effort and precision. How was she so good at this? He tried to will her to turn around, to send her some form of comfort through locked eyes, but she stayed focused on her conversation with a woman holding her hand.

“Are you Adam Turner?”

He turned to see a man with gray hair standing before him. He frowned. “Uh, yes. I am,” he said.

The man’s eyes sparked with recognition. “Oh, I thought that was you! I used to live on your street when you were growing up.”

Adam racked his brain but came up with nothing. He tried to summon a similar light to his eyes, something that would assure this man that he knew him, but there was no way to tell if he was successful. “Oh, of course,” he said slowly.

The man shook his hand and cast his eyes toward the floor. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said. “May your father’s memory be a blessing.”

“Thanks.”

“I remember speaking to your father often.” the man said. “He was a good man. Helped me out with many things.”

Adam raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?” he asked. The man looked confused and he backtracked. “Uh, I mean... yeah. He helped a lot of people.”

The man, still clearly perplexed, nodded. “Well, I should head inside,” he said. “My deepest condolences once again.”

Adam shook his hand once again and the man walked through the door opposite to the one he'd entered through. As the door began to shut behind him, Adam caught a glimpse of rows of seats, and people sitting down.

One by one, everyone filed into the separate room, leaving Adam and June alone. He released a breath that he hadn't known he'd been holding.

"How was that?" June asked. "Different from other funerals?"

Adam hesitated, then shook his head. "Pretty similar. I just... it's hot in here, isn't it?"

June shook her head. "I don't think so..."

= Dina reentered and clasped her hands together.

"Ready?" she asked again. "I'll be there with you the entire time."

June looked at Adam for confirmation. He considered what was beyond those doors. The sight that awaited him. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't sure what that sight would be.

"Adam?" June asked.

He looked over at her and she extended her hand. He took it in his, hoping she didn't realize how sweaty his palms were.

"I'm with you the entire time," she whispered.

Adam nodded. Dina turned and opened the door.

The connected room was completely white, with pillars framing the surrounding walls. Rows and rows of seats filled the area, and to Adam's surprise they were mostly full. People he hadn't thought about in years watched him with teary eyes, and there were many that he hadn't known at all.

The room was elegant. Simple. Everything he'd imagine his father would have hated. But then again, what did he know at this point?

Dina guided them to the right, leading them right up to the casket. His breath caught in his throat.

Draped in a white cloth, it was oddly beautiful in its simplicity. He watches as the edges of the cloth rustled with the wind created by his movement. He wondered what the funeral participants were thinking of this. Did they expect him to collapse on the casket and break down into tears? He felt a strange urge to reach out and touch it, but the feeling behind the urge wasn't grief. He wasn't sure what it was. Out of the corner of his eye he saw June staring down at it, her face unreadable.

Here they were. Two strangers playing dress up and make believe at another stranger's funeral. Adam didn't know this man. He may have met someone with a similar name, but it wasn't the person laying before him. The man he'd known was a ghost. The sickly remnants of someone who had been broken beyond repair.

This man, however... Adam turned and looked at the members in attendance. Blowing their noses, wiping away their tears.

This man was alive.

Dina moved in front of them, a pair of scissors in hand. She addressed the seated attendees. "We will now perform Kriah." Her voice carried across the room, though she did not raise it.

She turned to Adam and took hold of his jacket. He'd chosen a light one for this moment, an older article of clothing he'd never plan on wearing again, but he still tensed at the touch. Dina gave him a small look of confirmation, then pressed down on the scissors. Within a few seconds it was over, and a small tear had formed on the front. She released her hold on him and he looked down at the rip.

Fascinating, wasn't it, he wondered to himself. So much effort to put into mourning someone, and yet the funeral organizers couldn't even ensure it was the right person. Or perhaps it was his fault, for not finding the man these people so clearly knew and loved. Perhaps if he'd put more effort into his time with him...

But what good was putting effort into a locked door and an unrelentlessly distant father?

Dina looked up at him. "With this cut we symbolize that you have entered your period of mourning."

Adam touched the tear and looked out at the crowd. They watched him, and he couldn't help but feel like he should be doing something. Performing, maybe. Did they expect him to say something about his father? If so, which one? The one they knew or the one he did? The one who invited people over for dinner or the one who left him to pick at expired scraps from the bottom shelf of the fridge? The one who rescued kittens or the one who couldn't even clean his own house, let alone a litter box?

Everyone seemed to have an expectation for him. Like he should start bawling and throwing himself over the casket, begging his father's body to return to him. Like he should say



a few words about what a great person his father had been. Like he should dedicate his first born son as his father's namesake, here and now.

But he didn't do any of that. He just kept his fingers on the tear, feeling the loose fabric as one question ran through his mind over and over again. A question that had been in his head ever since he'd heard of his father's passing. One that came back and forth like the ocean, crashing against his mind and threatening to drown it.

Mourning what?

## Lights

The first time I met Mrs. Schwartz was when I served her an eviction notice. Well, I never ended up serving it. Most of the cases I'd dealt with beforehand were divorce filings and restraining orders, so how was I supposed to know how to deal with a sweet elderly woman? I was prepared for screaming and thrown purses, not baked goods and anecdotes.

When I knocked on her door a shuddery voice assured me she was on her way, but it took about three minutes for Mrs. Schwartz to get around to letting me in. She was an old woman, her face slightly sunken into her bones, but she had a smile that aged her back thirty years. Before I was able to speak a word she had invited me inside, trudging off with the promise of serving me tea. I ended up leaving with a bag of homemade cookies and the eviction papers still in my briefcase.

During my next attempt Mrs. Schwartz told me about her grandchildren. She spoke about her youngest's recent bar mitzvah and how she wished she could have gone, and when she asked if I was Jewish I informed her that my mother had been, but not my father. Mrs. Schwartz simply smiled and said, "if your mother was Jewish, then you are too." Before I could answer she'd moved on, mumbling about some old book she'd lost.

The third time I was there I asked Mrs. Schwartz why she didn't go live with one of her children. She didn't answer me for a while, but when she did it was with a small smile and watering eyes. She told me she would, but she wasn't able to get down her front step. When she asked if I had children I told her I had a son I wasn't allowed to see, and she told me I must know how hard it is to be away from one's family.

I stopped trying to deliver the notice after that. I don't remember what excuse I gave to buy myself more time with her.

Mrs. Schwartz once asked me why I never wore a yarmulke. I told her I wasn't religious. She told me that was nonsense and gave me a challah she'd baked for the weekend. As she handed it to me her sleeve rolled back and I noticed faded ink spread along her wrist.

One day when I entered her apartment she asked me to help her with a lighter; her fingers were too shaky to push and hold the trigger. I did as she asked and watched as she lit the first

four candles on a silver menorah she'd placed on her windowsill. I didn't speak as she recited Ma'oz Tzor. Mrs. Schwartz invited me to join her but I stayed back from the light of the flames; I hadn't known it was Hanukkah.

She invited me over for dinner the next day, promising latkes and sufganiyot, just the way her mother once made them in Germany. I actually got excited... I haven't had latkes since I was a boy. I bought her a bottle of wine that a saleswoman referred to as "worth quite a few pennies" and arrived ten minutes early, but when I knocked on her door I was met with silence.

Last night I lit a candle in her honor. Somehow, even in death, Mrs. Schwartz got me to celebrate Hanukkah, no matter how small that way might have been. I guess she's forcing another tradition out of me today.