

# FIRST PERSONAL

PRESENTING THE WINNER & FINALISTS OF TABLET'S FIRST PERSONAL ESSAY CONTEST

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<b>TABLET'S FIRST PERSONAL</b>	LIVE READING OF THE 5 SHORTLISTED ENTRIES
MONDAY, JULY 22 AT 7PM  LITTLEFIELD 635 SACKETT ST, BROOKLYN, NY 11217	HOSTED BY ELISA ALBERT

In the wake of Oct. 7, American Jewish writers found themselves blacklisted and demonized by literary institutions and publications, adding to a general sense of uneasiness and precarity in the country.

Tablet responded by launching its inaugural creative nonfiction competition, "First Personal," which invited writers to submit an essay on the theme of "Belonging." This was an effort to create a space where Jewish writers could find just that—a place of belonging—by coming together and sharing in each other's work.

More than 200 writers submitted essays—an extraordinary showcase of writing that arrived from every corner and crevice of North America, offering deeply felt and beautifully written accounts of Jewish life.

From those hundreds of submissions, we narrowed it down to five finalists. On July 22, we brought all five of the finalists—Amy Cook, Charles Kels, Kimberley Simon, Chanah Forster, and Kitty Hoffman—to New York City to read their work in front of a live audience at the Littlefield theater in Brooklyn. Our guest judge, Elisa Albert, crowned our winner.


It is with great pleasure that we present all five pieces below, beginning with the winning essay, "Flirting in Yiddish," by Kitty Hoffman.

### THE WINNER

## Flirting in Yiddish

BY KITTY HOFFMAN

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**V**ilst geyn tantsen?  
He invites me to dance, laughter in his eyes and that sardonic yearning that speaks to me of lost worlds, of self-mocking humor, of survival. *Mih ken lachen a bissel*, he promises. We can laugh a little, enjoy our vitality,

and briefly forget the tragedy that has brought us all together.

The 1980s marked the start of International Gatherings of Survivors and Second Generation, and we, the sons and daughters, are in Washington to honor our parents and their fellow remnants of a destroyed world. We wander bewildered among faces that remind

us of a home we never knew, faces that hope against hope to reclaim some buried but never fully forgotten dream of an unaccounted-for family member who might have survived, undiscovered for half a lifetime.

For the first time in our lives we're surrounded by those who are like us, who have the same Yiddish inflections. We're surrounded by people who remind us of our parents. It's only now, as we're among each other for the first time, that we realize how much we've missed each other all our lives.

Even as we dance, we have one foot in the world of our parents and grandparents, a world that was destroyed before our time, we who were born in DP camps and other temporary post-destruction places of transit, on the way to somewhere else, where new lives would begin.

There's an energy among us that's hard to define, a kind of proactive fervor; we circle each other, we who will forever be defined as children. Regardless of our personal romantic status, of whatever love and commitments we may have, here there's a resonance of life energy that we can't deny. Especially among those of us who haven't yet had children, the reproductive urge is unmistakable and undeniable. There are so many lives to replace, so many souls wanting to come back and finish their work. We're here because of a shared legacy of death; and yet the strongest feeling is of life, of an urge to life that is overpowering and even thrilling.

The cadences of Yiddish fill the hall, the corridors, the dining rooms. Yiddish, the language of the lost world. I've never been in a place where so many together were speaking this language, the language of my lonely childhood home, the language of my parents and their survivor friends. *Yiddish is mein mamaloshen*, my first language, the one I spoke as a kid, the language in which I am most myself. And it is strange to realize that I never felt fully a woman until, at the age of thirty-three, I am invited to dance in this language from a dead world.

“There are so many lives to replace, so many souls wanting to come back and finish their work.”

I remember being taught to read Yiddish in afternoon school, the teacher using the pictures of the boy and girl, the house and street, to guide us as we tried to make sense of the strange foreign letters. I had always found it easy to read in English. But these complicated dark letters that looked like pictures, that moved in the wrong direction, confused and frightened me. I saw them rarely; in the book from which my father read every spring while I sat absorbed in pictures of slaves building pyramids and Pharaoh's men cracking whips; in the letters above the wide double doors of the old *shul* where I glimpsed the men, wrapped in strange white shawls, chanting and swaying.

But mostly the letters made me think of tears, large dark curly tears that curved and marched and pointed along the page, with tiny little tears under them to mark their position. Like my mother's tears, when she covered her eyes and blessed the *yahrzeit* candles in memory of her dead, or when she locked herself in another room and thought that no one could hear her. I always knew when my mother had been crying, because I could see a far off look in her eyes, a softness in her face, that wasn't there at any other time. At those moments I knew that even though my mother seemed to be

with me in the room, she was really far away, across the world, in a time before my own.

He reaches his hand out, waiting for an answer with a slightly self-deprecating smile. All around us, people are dancing and laughing. He looks like those aging European men, those friends of my parents. He has the short stocky powerful build, the broad face and thick nose, the wiry, somewhat wild hair that hints at the energy barely contained by his intense gestures and rapid speech. Like me, he is North American, the product of a secular and optimistic culture. He is overachieving and successful by the world's standards, like so many of us children of survivors. And yet underneath, betrayed by a certain sadness around the eyes and a hint of yearning in the voice, is the knowledge of tragedy, the awareness of life's fragility, the understanding that all joy and beauty and love can be lost in an instant.

I'd resisted men like him all my life—men who reminded me of what I wanted to forget. My mother had often told me about the great love of her life. “Of course it wasn't your *tateh*,” she said, dismissing the very idea with a brief wave of her hand. “He was just the one who was there, after the war.”

My mother was always careful to explain herself, to make sure I understood what had been at stake. “Who had time to think about love, then; we all just had to make a new family.” She had her own way of saying it — a *nayeh fehmily* — in that weird combination of Yiddish and English she spoke in those days, when we'd only been in Canada a few years. “Who had time to think about love?” And anyway, all the ones my parents had loved had been killed, they had to make do with whoever was left, whoever they could find.



## PODCASTS



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I would sit in the kitchen with my mother, and she would tell me stories about the one she'd really loved. But where he was, what happened to him, whether my mother ever learned if he ended up alive or dead, these details were not the point of the story. The point was about the kind of love and romance that were only possible in her own girlhood, before the world showed its true colors. She never said so, but I understood that love and romance weren't really possible for me, either. They belonged to the kind of life that only *the innocent Canadians* could have, the ones *who didn't know what life was really like*. And so I gravitated to those "real Canadians," as she called them, hoping that their innocence would rub off on me, would cover the dark knowledge at my core.

But here was this guy of my own generation, talking to me in Yiddish. Flirting. Until this moment I had only seen sixty-year-olds, my parents and their friends, flirting in Yiddish. No

one younger used the language—only a handful of Hasidim who would never flirt, or at least not in public, and certainly not with anyone but their wife. These were the phrases of my childhood, of my parents and their lost world, the language I had to leave behind if I were to make a new life in a new place. And yet today they were touching my woman's heart in a new way, a part of my heart that I'd learned to keep hidden, that had no place to reveal itself. I could feel a soft fluttering in my chest, an odd combination of excitement, fear, and sadness. A memory of life yearning inside the knowledge of destruction.

Sometimes I imagine I'm back there again, talking Yiddish. Answering the man with the long-forgotten features who evoked the vanished world. Trying to picture a different life trajectory. What if I'd followed the language of my secret heart, allowed myself to respond to the cadences of ghosts? At the time it seemed like the past, a step back into

a world that was no longer, that could not be. And yet, I felt most alive in the stirrings of that moment, felt that the familiar words I heard and answered were unmediated experience, language echoing the energy of life.

I imagine the uninflected letters—the powerful letters of creation—floating in the air above us. I see the black letters rising, colliding with the ashes, watched over by the spirits who have no resting place. My partner and I dance below.

But in fact I declined the offer years ago. Played at the flirtation a bit, but continued on my path of make-believe, the performance of a modern Jewish life—a life in English. I left the deepest reality behind, in fleeting moments of flirting in Yiddish. ■

*Kitty Hoffman is completing a book about her medieval ancestor, who was the father of European kabbalah, and her childhood among Holocaust survivors.*

FINALIST

# Days of Consequence

BY AMY COOK

Just after Yom Kippur, a friend of mine lost his husband of thirty-seven years. They had, some time before, retired to the beach, enjoying the blossoming of their grandchildren and the luxury afforded with the blessings of time. The latter was something they had always been fine-tuned to; Rick had lived with HIV since before he and John met. He endured four *decades* of survival, including more than a dozen years before the life-saving protease inhibitors appeared on the market. His death, at seventy-nine, brought a shul full of mourners to the Upper West Side. He had collected life.

When I met Rick and John in 1998, I was a dizzy, teenage mess that my father dragged to his chorus rehearsal. Years before I sang with the Gay Men's Chorus myself (as one of the first female singers), I was treated by its members like family. An anomaly, at first—a curiosity—but soon enough as a kid sister or doted-upon daughter. Invited to parties, brunches, and piano bars. Taught to turn pages at Carnegie Hall. I was not just along for the ride, but a valued friend. My father, who sang Tenor 2, was known as Joe for a while, and then, later, as "Amy's dad."

John and Rick were no exception in their generosity. John was delicate, outgoing, and kind, and the most

beautiful drag queen I had ever seen. He was a father himself, and he met me where I was—an often immature place that we both enjoyed inhabiting. From time to time, Rick, the non-singer, would accompany John to a Chorus event, and I got to see firsthand what their commitment looked like: steady, patient, determined and unbending. They were leaders in the gay synagogue, and role models for fellow parents. Over the years, they sought every legal relationship protection there was, eager to partake of the rights afforded to straight couples. And eager to show each other off. They were deeply in love.

The day of Rick's memorial, we had been invited to participate in song. The Plaza Jewish Community Chapel was a short walk from home, and the mid-October morning gave no hint of the coming winter. Chorus tradition, in times of great grief, is to gather together (alumni and members both) and sing "Love Lives On," a song written for the film "Harry

and the Hendersons.” It would be a strange choice if the lyrics were not so harrowing: they speak of a bond that transcends the ache of loss, something the members of the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus, formed in the early years of the AIDS crisis, have never been far from. It’s a song I have sung too many times.

The day of the memorial, October 10th, was three short days following the terror attacks in Israel. More than a thousand Jews were dead, and hundreds of others taken hostage. Innocent people ripped from their beds. Parents cut down in front of helpless, screaming children. Young adults slaughtered while dancing in the desert at sunrise. It was the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the end of the Holocaust, almost eighty years prior. And it was not so unlike the pogroms my own great-grandmother had fled; she was only sixteen.

I had not, for three days, shed one tear. I felt far removed from the terrorist acts; I even felt anger at an Israeli government I blamed for all sorts of malfeasance. How had Israel missed the warning signs? What sort of colossal security failure had led to this disaster? And where would the country go from here? One of the prayers at the memorial was *Oseh Shalom*, the Hebrew call to peace. The words are stunning, in Hebrew and English, and our chorus joined the congregation in a moment of reverence:

*Oseh shalom bimromav  
Hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu  
V’al kol Yisrael V’imru: amen.*

*May the one who creates peace  
on high bring peace to us and to  
all Israel. And we say: Amen.*

After the eulogies, it was nearing the end of the service, and nearing the chorus’ time to perform. I smoothed the creases in my dress and checked my tights for runs. I gently folded the memorial program and placed it where I had been sitting.

We stood in the front corner and

“After twenty-five years of Chorus events, I was not unaccustomed to being the only woman in a crowd of towering and good-smelling men.”

my knees began to shake. After twenty-five years of Chorus events, I was not unaccustomed to being the only woman in a crowd of towering and good-smelling men. In that moment, though, I felt small, eager, and helpless, wanting fervently to return even some of the love that these men had shown to me.

I wished for my notes to be clear and melodic; I wanted my harmonies to be somewhat correct. I was fully prepared—knew my part perfectly, when to “ooh” and “ahh” and when to remain silent. But none of that mattered once John rose up to sing with us.

He’d been sitting front and center, but now he came forward, dragging the rabbi behind him. They sat in the corner of the row, holding on to one another, and for a few minutes, it was just the two of them and the twenty of us. We were intimately alone, and there was no outside world. No attack in Israel. No hostages. No war. John, who had given this gift of song to dozens of lost men over the decades, now gave this final requiem to his husband. After all of the years of caretaking and wedding planning, child-rearing and family merriment—there was nothing left to do but sing. But if I sang a single note on key, I will never know. I wept with no concern. There was so much loss, and no

way to make it go away. Life crept back in.

And in that moment, I recalled something I had been taught at summer camp as a kid. We were sitting in the open-air amphitheater that overlooked the lake—I was twelve or thirteen. The counselors had us stand for the Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer recited by those who had lost loved ones. This was not something I was accustomed to. At home, in our Conservative synagogue, you only stood for the kaddish if you, yourself, were in the days and months of mourning, or observing a *yahrzeit*. My mother stood on the anniversary of her father’s death, but even her children were not supposed to stand. We were too removed from the immediacy of the bereavement. “We all stand,” the camp counselor said, “because of the six million Jews lost during the war. Many of them were complete families, who had no one to say the kaddish for them once they were stolen. In your whole lives as Jews, you will never be able to say the Mourner’s Kaddish six million times. So, every time you hear it, you should stand up. Represent someone who cannot stand for themselves.”

But Rick’s was a name I knew, one that carried the feeling of belonging, the perfect harmony of blended sound, and the knowledge that we are never alone. I thought of Rick, and of John, and of the families in Israel. And we sang as one.

Our love lives on. Amen. ■

*Amy Cook is an editorial assistant for the literary magazine CRAFT. Her essays and poems have been featured in more than two dozen literary journals, magazines and anthologies, including Anti-Heroine Chic and the Los Angeles Review.*

## COMMUNITY

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# How Do You Do It?

BY CHANAH FORSTER

**H**ow do you do it?" I look over to see the familiar face of Mrs. Shmerling, a young mother of four, whose little girl is in the same play group as my 3-year-old Nachum and 18-month-old Dovi. She asks the same question I've been asking myself all morning: how do I do it? How could it be that I gave birth only two weeks ago and I'm already out doing the normal routine?

I'm walking up the hill to playgroup. It is 8:45 on a typical Brooklyn morning in the fall and, as usual, Troy Avenue is alive with honking New Yorkers stuck in wall-to-wall traffic. The air carries the stink of an early morning garbage run, and my face is red with exertion. I stoically push my stroller, trying to look like I belong.

My new-born baby, Yitzchak, is asleep in the strap-on carrier attached to my chest. My hands are numb from the effort of pushing my other two children in the heavy double stroller. I just want to go home with my two-week-old infant and sleep.

I am so tired that I have to juggle Mrs. Shmerling's words around in my mind before I can even try to answer and I conclude that her question—*How do you do it?*—means one thing to me and, as with just about everything else in our lives, something different to her.

To the surprise of everyone I grew up with, I became Orthodox in my twenties, got married, and quickly had three children. I never expected to be a mother, much less to be pushing this double stroller up a hill in Chasidic Brooklyn alongside so many other stroller-pushing women. I am submerged in a world of stay-at-home moms, and I feel like a stranger in a strange land. It's a universe I am

trying desperately to acclimate to, this foreign scene where everything is so normal. To them.

"Well," I say to Mrs. Shmerling, "I make first things first!" The words fly out of my mouth. I am trying to be cute, which usually covers all the bases when I feel I just can't deal with something. But I am so mentally and emotionally exhausted that my words are sharp. "I throw on my clothing in the morning, and then I scream and yell until everyone is out the door!"

I didn't mean to say this. Not to worry, though; she's long gone before I can even consider how I might have sounded to her.

I stop to breathe, missing the "walk" light a few times before I can continue the hike up the street. I make myself busy adjusting the children's stroller. I'm sure I appear like any other mother fussing over my children—though I do not feel like any other mother. I hand a little sandwich bag of crackers to each boy, while kissing their beautiful faces. I look down into my infant's sleeping face—he is a gift, sleeping sweetly on me. I feel an instinctual surge of maternal tenderness wash over the bitterness of this shlep.

The thing that keeps me going is that I know I'm heading in the right direction. I know eventually I'll feel like a capable adult, though I wish more than anything that I didn't have to do this alone. When I became religious, in many ways I left my parents behind. Now I feel like a ship at sea, totally untethered from my origins; I have no parents to turn to, no grandparents, no relatives. I've returned to the way of life that my ancestors lived long before my great grandparents were born. I feel deeply alone, and wonder if my husband will even be able to leave work and make it home for dinner tonight.

I start pushing the stroller once

more. How the hell *do* I do it? How does anybody?

I sniff hard as I walk, tears blurring my vision. I look like a mess but am trying to control myself, putting one foot in front of the next. I clear my throat and press a tissue I found in the stroller's hood to my eyes.

"Here, let me help you with that," a voice says. It's Mrs. Shmerling again. She's in front of me on the steps to the porch and has picked up the front of my stroller.

I suddenly picture Mrs. Shmerling as a young girl, pushing her neighbor's carriage, rocking a baby to sleep in her apartment building hallway. Here she is at 15-years-old, innocent eyes sincerely listening to the "little sister" she's taken on for a chesed program in school. At 19, her beautiful face shines proudly under her wedding veil, as she marries into the Rabbinic dynasty she always knew she'd marry into.

How different from my own life. I was experimenting with stealing cigarettes from my mother's purse by age 10. Then I was hanging out with boys by age 13, and at the helm of my long search for G-d in a yoga ashram by age 20. Images of myself as the powerful yoga teacher I'd been in my early twenties swim before my eyes.

I am so jealous of the clarity of Mrs. Schmerling's life's path and so grateful for the ease with which she is helping me that I can't stop the hot tear from falling off my nose. "Thank you," I manage to pout.

"Any time." She smiles.

Nachum bolts out of the stroller and runs to the basement where the playroom is, but Dovi is waiting for me to unbuckle him and remove his jacket.

I hand Dovi off to his teacher, Morah Gila, who leads him to the small mountain of Legos in the center of the room. I carefully unbuckle Yitzchak from my sweaty chest and place him into the reclining stroller seat, then tuck his swaddled body neatly under the blanket.

I make my way to the bathroom and let tears of exhaustion pour out. An unbidden conversation with Morah Gila begins in my mind:

"Of course you are tired!" I imagine

her telling me. “You need someone to help you!”

How can you do everything by yourself? Where is your mother? You’ve just had your third baby in three years!”

I imagine Morah Gila insinuating that I’ve been irresponsible for having so many kids, for getting married, for assuming a religious lifestyle when I am so terribly inexperienced. I feel like she’s judging me for learning on the job, but I am, of course, learning on the job. How else would I learn?

I wish my mother could come and help me, but she’s too far away, and she wouldn’t know how to help. She only had one child and she doesn’t understand the life I’ve stepped into.

“Your husband?” I imagine Morah Gila asking. “Where is he?”

“Back at work,” I respond. “As usual.” I’m crying heavily now. And so is Yitzchak; I can hear him in the stroller on the other side of the bathroom door.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Chanah? Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, thanks. I’ll be right there.” I splash one more handful of water on my face and then straighten to look in the mirror, noticing for the first time the room I am in. The walls are painted to look like marble tiles. The shower curtain is tied back with a silky tasseled rope. Even the toilet plunger is in a matching plastic holder. I am stunned at the thoughtfulness expended for this

small room; even the bathroom here is filled with wisdom and maturity.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Chanah?”

I emerge from the bathroom with my shirt wet and bangs damp. “Thank you, Morah.”

She glances at me, “Go on home and rest now, Mommy,” she says.

I direct the stroller down Morah Gila’s stairs with firm hands, the outside air soothing the storm inside of me. As the crying inside the stroller dwindles into sleep, I make my way home. ■

*Chanah Forster, wife and mother of seven children, resides in Kingston, PA, where she teaches creative writing and English for middle schoolers.*

FINALIST

# House of God

BY CHARLES GRANT KELS

When I went to boot camp in the summer of 2002, the attacks of September 11th were still an open wound. America was at war, and for the first time since our grandparents’ generation, we were fighting not to protect South Koreans or Kuwaitis or ethnic Albanians, let alone for amorphous geopolitical principles or even cynical motivations like cheap oil. The homeland (then a new-sounding term) had been attacked, and as far as those of us lugging Sharpie-initialed duffel bags to the Florida panhandle were concerned, this was a fight to defend our country and our loved ones. This was a war to save ourselves.

For a lowly cadet embarking upon basic training, a rite of passage long dramatized and parodied past the point of cliché, the realness of this moment was part rallying cry and part cause for

trepidation. When the commanding officer crowed “In the spirit of 9/11,” we quickly learned to incant in unison the final recorded words of Todd Beamer, hero of Flight 93: “Let’s roll!” Yet having signed my ROTC scholarship commitment at a time when the nation’s biggest problem seemed to be hanging chads in Broward County, I had to wonder what, exactly, I had gotten myself into.

At the airport, drill sergeants swarmed the luggage carousel and began screaming at us to load onto the buses parked outside. Civilian travelers in the terminal stared slack-jawed, perhaps wondering whether the draft had been reinstated and their number was up. As the buses—packed with nearly indistinguishable shorn and shocked cadets sitting two abreast—departed for base, a perfectly starched sergeant standing in the aisle told us to take a good look at the Piggly Wiggly out the window. It was the last piece of civilization we would see all summer, and he

now owned us until we spotted it again heading the opposite direction.

The day of arrival was termed Training Day Zero, a particularly deflating reminder that it didn’t even count toward the purgatorial tally. Early on I managed to learn several important lessons, most of them the hard way. The first was that cadets never speak unless spoken to, and were limited to five prescribed responses:

“Yes, Sir/Ma’am.”

“No, Sir/Ma’am.”

“Sir/Ma’am, may I ask a question?”

“Sir/Ma’am, may I make a statement?”

“Sir/Ma’am, I do not know but I will find out.”

But the final option was really a trick. It invariably prompted the follow-up, “Oh yeah *cadet*, how you gonna find out?” So the five available responses were in fact four.

Second, calling a female drill sergeant “Sir” was a big mistake, no matter how understandable the confusion. It inevitably led to on-the-spot discipline called—in language doubtless unacceptable today—“gender-benders,” an intricate calisthenic routine performed to the cadence of “You’re-not-a-Sir, you’re-a-Ma’am, not-a-Sir, Ma’am! One!” and repeated in sets of ten commensurate with the transgression.

Lastly, I discovered that the yelling never stopped and would never stop until I either quit or graduated. The drill instructors screamed themselves hoarse from reveille to taps, and then again during their surprise visits to our bunks. Meals were timed to six minutes on the stopwatch and required “squaring the corners” with our utensils from plate to mouth, all while a red-faced trainer showered spittle into our faces.

From a recruit’s perspective, the Global War on Terrorism seemed to be largely a matter of raising the decibel levels. I’m not sure that our training cohort went to the firing range more than previous encampments, or that we learned any unique survival or combat skills. But by all accounts, the nonstop screaming was ratcheted up to mold us into twenty-first century warriors—and I’m here to report that our cadre was fully prepared to yell the enemy into submission.

Except for one hour per week.

When the first Sunday arrived, Major Scudder—a missileer with a bald scalp and thick glasses who had *literally* spent the Cold War underground in various silos—called us to attention. Resembling a human projectile in his flight suit, he announced that we were going to church to beg for spiritual salvation (since none was forthcoming from him) and directed us to choose one of two lines, Protestant or Catholic. “Unless you’re an atheist,” he smirked, “in which case I’ll find something for you to do.”

I was no atheist, especially under those conditions, and had no intention of finding out what extracurricular activities Major Scudder had in mind. I had been raised to cherish my Jewish heritage while not making too big a show of it, often finding myself in a *kehila* of one. Explaining to incredulous teachers that my religion’s holiest days demanded absences at the outset of each school year had taught me to walk the tightrope of being proud but inconspicuous, and I intuitively understood why my grandfather, while devout, had anglicized the family surname upon completing his own basic training sixty years before I followed in his footsteps. Not looking for trouble, I randomly

“I was already back in line hoping to go unnoticed, and probably willing at that point to partake in any denomination’s religious customs as a fair price for anonymity.”

queued up in the Catholic group and marched in formation to the chapel.

There I witnessed an incredible scene that instantly validated my choice. As we took our places in the pews, the officer-in-charge began barking orders and an earnest military chaplain came rushing down the aisle. “There is no yelling here,” he admonished. “This is a House of God.”

The offending officer, although senior to the priest, was immediately chastened. The chaplain possessed something bigger than rank: moral authority.

As we assembled outside after mass, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder and looked up to see the priest. “My son,” he said with concern, “I noticed that you did not kneel or take communion.”

“Sir, may I make a statement?”

The chaplain looked at me quizzically. “Of course.”

“Sir, I’m Jewish.”

“Hmm,” he said. “That’s a problem.”

“Sir, may I ask a question?” Encountering another puzzled expression, I continued. “Sir, is the problem that I’m Jewish?”

“Why, certainly not!” he laughed. Then he raised a thoughtful forefinger to his lips. “The problem is we’re not ministering to your spiritual needs.”

It was news to me that I was entitled to spiritual needs or to any expectation

that they be met, but the priest seemed undaunted. He walked over to confer with my leadership who, now safely outside the confines of the church, had resumed their frenetic screaming.

I heard nothing more for a week, which in that environment felt like a lifetime. On Sunday Major Scudder again ordered us to church. I was already back in line hoping to go unnoticed, and probably willing at that point to partake in any denomination’s religious customs as a fair price for anonymity.

Then I heard, “Except Kels, you hang back.”

Oh no.

As the rest of the cadets departed, Major Scudder motioned for me to follow him and briskly led me over to a small building adjacent to the chapel. He opened the door to a muggy classroom with a whirring stand-up fan and three folding metal chairs, two of which were occupied by a casually dressed civilian couple, probably in their mid-50s. “This is Major and Mrs. Rosenblatt... retired,” Major Scudder said dryly. “See you in an hour.”

The Rosenblatts smiled warmly and offered me a yarmulke, tallit, and sidur. Major Rosenblatt was gangly with a shock of unruly hair and a perpetually bemused expression. He seemed to find everything slightly humorous, especially the fact that I was at boot camp and he wasn’t. His general take on life mirrored the “Seinfeld” quip about marathons—great fun if you’re not the one running.

Mrs. Rosenblatt was a picture of Gulf Coast leisure, with oversize sunglasses bouncing atop voluminous brown curls, reading glasses dangling around her neck, and bronzed extremities protruding from her sunbelt uniform of khaki shorts and a tank top. She exuded sympathy, except for when she shot the Major a look letting him know she didn’t find his latest jest particularly

## SPORTS

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funny. The presence of a Jewish mother in this place felt like divine intervention itself.

That first meeting, we stumbled through a truncated Shabbat service, albeit a day late in the calendar. I emerged squinting into the blazing July sun, somewhat disoriented at having shared so familiar a ritual against such an unfamiliar backdrop. My gratitude to the Rosenblatts was tempered only by a creeping guilt for my spotty post-Bar Mitzvah attendance at synagogue.

To my amazement, the Rosenblatts visited me every Sunday that summer, and I spent the intervening 167 hours between our sessions looking forward to that precious period of fellowship. As time passed, the need to conduct

our informal Shabbat services dissipated, and we would spend most of those Sunday mornings talking—about their family and mine, and about their travels and experiences during Major Rosenblatt’s career. There was also the afternoon that Mrs. Rosenblatt smuggled in some fried chicken and biscuits from the legendary PoFolks restaurant chain, which I devoured and then promptly vomited at the obstacle course in 100-degree heat. Mrs. Rosenblatt, who had struck up a correspondence with my mother, kept that story confidential.

My meetings with the Rosenblatts saw me through to graduation. At our ceremony, as we marched around the parade field, the commandant ordered,

“Eyes right!” I swiveled my head and saw, high up in the stands, that the Rosenblatts had shown up, performing one last mitzvah on my behalf.

The ensuing decades have blessed me with my own family and military career, but I don’t think I’ve ever found a place to connect to my Jewish identity more intimately than that dilapidated classroom abutting a military chapel. It turns out there was something this cadet didn’t know but ended up finding out. ■

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FINALIST

# Saturday Night Chai

BY KIM SIMON

She was standing with her father in the entrance of the Chinese restaurant, wearing basketball shorts and a shirt two sizes too big, her dark hair tucked behind her ears like an afterthought. She looked up from twirling the knob of the old candy dispenser as I sat down beside her, a few Skittles trickling out and hitting my shoe before she could catch them.

She giggled and turned to face me, and then her eyes lit up with a spark of surprise. “Is that a chai you’re wearing?” she asked, pointing to my neck. My

fingers tapped the tiny charm that always rested at my clavicle. “It is!” I said, in the shortest exhale of astonishment. “How do you know that?”

The little girl nudged her dad to get his attention, reaching up to put her hands on either side of his face. “Dad! This lady is wearing a chai!” she yelled, joy and recognition tumbling out as she pointed at me.

There was no synagogue that I knew of in this college town. No Jewish sororities to party with, no nice Jewish boys to date, no other students to complain with me about a test scheduled during Passover. There was no home that mirrored mine, and definitely no one who could point out a chai. The little girl sank her elbow into my side as she talked. “Are you Jewish?” she asked. “Because we’re Jewish too!”

Her smile was like a mirror, a deep breath of hopeful connection. She reached up to touch my necklace as if I was something precious in a

museum. “I’m Sarah and I’m seven. My mom is Jewish, my dad is Jewish... this is him right here...my brothers are Jewish, and you’re Jewish! What’s your name? You should come over to our house! Have you met my mom?” Now Sarah’s dad was trying to politely distract her so that I could leave with my brown bag of orange chicken and egg rolls, but Sarah wouldn’t look away. I couldn’t either.

I was hungry in the way that most college students are: a little lonely, a little terrible at cooking for myself, a little self-absorbed and a little in a hurry to get back to whatever was more important than waiting for take out at a Chinese restaurant on a Saturday night. Except there was nothing for me to get back to. My best friend – my anchor – had graduated already, and for the first time I was living alone.

Sarah was still talking. “My mom would really like to meet you! Will you come over sometime? I think you should give my dad your number!” Sarah’s dad turned the same shade of red as the vinyl bench we were sitting on. “I don’t need her number,” he loud-whispered back to her. “That would be inappropriate.” He turned to me. “She’s really friendly...I’m sorry. But it’s nice to meet you. You said you go to school here? My wife would probably love

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your number if you babysit. I'm happy to pass it along to her." I scrawled my information on a restaurant napkin, and Sarah skipped as she walked me to the door. "Bye Miss Chai Necklace! I'll see you at my house soon!"

My little blue house had a '50s style high-top dining table with matching barstools and a sleek leather sofa that let me pretend I was more sophisticated than I was. I had carefully curated this facade of perfection to mask the groggy, unexpected depths of my depression. I was sleeping for hours after the sun came up, then staring at the darkness outside my window until the sun rose again. I only went to class if I could find a parking spot, which was rarely, and only left the house if my shirt matched my nail polish matched my lipstick matched my shoes. When I could put myself together and paint myself on, I'd allow an hour or two out in the world. To a restaurant for takeout, and then back to my sofa. To a coffee shop where I'd pretend to study, and then back to my sofa. To a bar with a friend, and then back to my sofa.

Until Sarah's mom called. Just like Sarah said she would.

Dina was a woman who spoke in gestures, her New York-to-California accent punctuating each sentence like a row of exclamation points. After a quick phone call and some dead end Jewish Geography, I found myself in their living room. Sarah and her little brother each pulled me in a different direction, and every direction was familiar. The mezuzah on the door frame. The chanukiah tucked inside the living room armoire. The detailed notes left on the kitchen counter by a Jewish mother who simply wanted to make sure that I had the emergency contact number of every single neighbor, plus the doctor just in case. As my mother had. As her mother had.

Dina's Star of David necklace twinkled in the light as she walked to the car, promising they'd be home from date night by 10. As I watched them pull from the driveway, I wondered if I'd have sparkly jewelry and a husband with a warm smile when I became a mom. For a minute, I could peer out

from behind the fog of fear and loneliness and see further than the view from the sofa in my little blue house.

I could see as far back as the summer, when I sat beneath the trees as a camp counselor with 7-year-olds seated beside me, their voices just like Sarah's. I'd cover their hands in mine as we laughed and clapped to "Not by Might, Not by Power," our legs sticking together in the July heat. As their giggles lifted toward the sky on Shabbat and their hands grabbed for a piece of challah, my campers made me feel a part of something bigger than just my own family. It was the first time Judaism offered me more than just holidays and history, these children filling my black and white concepts with the primary colors of their joy. And when each summer ended, the song leader with the long flowing hair and gentle voice gathered all of us camp counselors in a circle. We wrapped sweaty, suntanned arms around each other, as she sang to us the Debbie Friedman blessing that Jewish mothers everywhere wrap their teenagers in, before releasing us back into the world.

*"L'chi lach, to a land that I will show you*

*Leich l'cha, to a place you do not know*

*L'chi lach, on your journey I will bless you*

*And (you shall be a blessing) l'chi lach*

*And (you shall be a blessing) l'chi lach*

*And (you shall be a blessing)*

*l'chi lach"*

But summer ends, and friends move on, and young people disperse to their own college towns at the edges of the country. Each of us became a little less known, a little more othered, a little hesitant to wear a chai in a small town with no synagogues.

Until Sarah found me.

Every Saturday night, Sarah and her brother reminded me what it meant to be part of a Jewish family. They needed a big sister—and I needed someone to laugh with me when I cooked a frozen pizza in the oven with the cardboard still attached to the bottom. They told me who they wanted to be. They told me who they *were*. They whispered

what they were afraid of, grabbing my hand and asking me to stay. And after I tucked Sarah and her brother into bed, I'd sit under a blanket on Dina's living room couch and pretend that I was home with my own mom. That I was a little less cloaked in sadness, and a little more connected to life.

Sarah and her family were magnets, and I was drawn to them because their Jewish joy felt like home. But no family is without pain. What looked like perfection to a twenty-one year old dreaming of her own babies and balconies and book clubs, was a family with fractures that their Jewish mother was trying frantically to patch. I wasn't the only one unraveling. But every Saturday night, we wove ourselves together with the promise of being fully seen. I would spend a little more time in the world, and Sarah and her family would share a little more of their world with me.

It wasn't until I became a mother myself, greeting our beloved babysitter at the door with a toddler in my arms and curlers still in my hair, that I realized perhaps I had given a gift to Sarah's mom, too. The enormous and beautiful blessing that is Jewish motherhood can be all-consuming. Sarah had found a lifeline for her mom, sitting on that vinyl bench in the Chinese restaurant. She thought I was saving them, but she didn't know that they were saving me.

My youngest son is 10 now, and wears a Star of David necklace on the outside of his shirt. "Mom, am I the only Jewish kid in my school?" he asks, as he folds himself into the car one afternoon. He tells me about a little girl who passed him in the hallway today, and said, "I like your necklace." He runs his fingers over the star. "She said it *twice*, though, Mom. I think she must've been Jewish, like me." ■

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