

Hubris and Hemlock

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Can friendship save a life?

Chapter 1: A Name for a Night

A creak from across the hall made her breath catch in her throat.

What was that?

Inching her chin up, she cast her eyes around, head stock still. She held her breath until her chest began to burn. Inhaling bit by bit, she stood to survey the jail cell sized room -her favorite in the house. Easily defended for a rock climber who fit in spaces only children dared to go.

Just a squirrel.

Nanyehi's cheeks puffed out as she exhaled and deflated. *Well, I guess the Ides of March never lose their hold.* She wondered what her Cherokee ancestors would think of her, jumping at noises. *Well, my Black ancestors say it's foolish to rush in where angels fear to tread.* She folded her legs into Indian style, sitting in her hamaca while retrieving the package, beside her Songs of Freedom on the folding table. She finally finished upwrapping her new Siddur Birkat Shalom, thumbing through the table of contents. *Egalitarian language? Interesting. I'll bet they're having a field day with the frummies.* The crack of a stick snapping in the yard below made her stomach clench. *The kitchen door! The corn bread!!*

Another minute of frozen silence. Everything smelled normal, and a glance at the timer showed 10

minutes left before she needed to check the oven. A shriek as little David, Shmueli in hot pursuit, cut through the yard toward the Cohen home. *Noisy today; Must be getting their costumes ready.* Another try at reading. No dice. Senses refusing to budge from Red Alert, she put down the siddur, cursing herself. Twenty years and still having to fight down the bile every other minute. And the burning ... down there. This hadn't happened in high school, much. The homework and part-time jobs had kept back some of the muck, the memories of being pinnioned like Jerry under Tom's paw. The image of 5 cartoon claws brought a laugh that lifted some of the pressure from her chest. Deep breathing helped a bit, but a break would be better. Something requiring real concentration.

Tip-toeing down the stairs, she cast a furtive glance out the front window at Park Hts avenue. Kids were already starting to deliver Shalach Manos packages. Maybe an hour to climb and then shower and change before Mike gets home. Purim was more important to him than Pesach! *Fine, as long as someone else does the driving. Taking a nap would still be healthier.*

The front and kitchen doors were dead bolted, windows closed and locked. Closing the basement door, she flipped the lock, and tiptoed to her section of the basement with the climbing wall. *Better keep an ear out for Marie.* Rechecking her watch while tying her hair back, she noted that the delivery was already 5 minutes late. Her head tipped up in a half chuckle and beginnings of a smile, anticipating the always noisy arrival of her mentor and “partner in crime.” At least her entrances never startled you. Looking up the wall, her old dancing handkerchief, brilliant white tucked into the highest handhold, beckoned to her like an old friend. Tilting a greeting to her other partner in crime, she gave a half-nod to her dance leading prop. *Sorry, no Kalamatianos today. But maybe a hug from Talie.* There ought to be just enough time to reach the 5th or 6th level before she gets here, knowing Marie. Her foot instinctively found the first hold, a tiny crevice where she could just wedge her left big toe, lunging her full body length upward, right fingers curling around a hold just below the first 'biner. Mike hated that she didn't tie in before starting her climbs, but at home

she refused to follow all of the annoying safety rules she taught her beginners. Here at least, she had enough privacy to concentrate, and plenty of padding if she fell. She was also agile enough to get away with climbing stunts that made her flight instructor husband nervous enough to wish he were back in his Piper Cub. *At least my students don't get sick planning their landing setups.* She shook her head, laughing again at the thought of Mike claiming to be a better instructor than she was. His insistence on following every rule to the letter was a good rule of thumb, but his lack of flexibility often extended well beyond reason, in her opinion. Insisting, for example, that his student remain in the traffic pattern when the poor guy was already nervous turning downwind was a mistake that she noticed long before Mike did, that day as an observer in the third seat. If this was how Mike taught all of his students, it was no wonder so few of them managed to solo. Tying a chalk bag on her waist, she noted that her hands were starting to sweat. Perfect time to take a breathing pause. Just reaching the belay line where she'd left it dangling, she pulled it through her 'biner, finally attaching herself 'safely' as Mike would have it. A wave of warm air seemed to pass over her, despite the entirely closed environment. Her jaw began to feel tired as she fumbled with the knot, and she looked up, perched on two foot-holds, still half in free climb mode. *I'm clenching my teeth again. God. I hate being tied down to so many unnecessary rules.* But Mike was right about the higher levels, especially when she was tired. Better safe than sorry. She went back to tying-in to her harness.

-Ahowwooooouuu!

A loud cackling laugh followed the howl that had interrupted her as she finished tying the figure-8 follow-through and re-checking the carabiners. That howl was unusual even for Marie, this time of day. Nanyehi's twinkling eyes betrayed the scowl on her face, changing it to a smirk. Just wait until those climbing lessons got far enough along, and see why she is howling then! She had the sudden guilty thought that Mike might not be the only one to torture his students from time to time, even if not intentionally.

-Nan, hon, where are you? You got the place locked up tighter than a drum, as usual!

The voice echoed as if her head was pointed up toward the stairs. Marie must have come in through the kitchen door with her key, since she was now knocking on the basement door. She had probably guessed Nanyehi's location from the lack of usual quick response.

-Come in Marie. I'll be right down.

-No, no, Hon, you take your Aaaahhhhhhggg!!

Nanyehi rappelled down the wall at top speed, easy since it was not very far, kicking the wall once to land with her right toe kissing the hem of a floor-length pink tutu while her left knee bent to catch all of her weight, shifting from the toe to the back of her heel into a Cat-Stance that changed Marie's wide-eyed grimace to a smile.

-How the hell do you manage to do that?!

The strawberry blonde bent down to examine the lace of her costume, straightening with an index finger wagging down at Nanyehi's nose:

-You know I hate it when you come tearing down that wall like that! Hon you might just get flatter than you already are one day doing that s-

-Ok, ok, not so loud, we're both fine, and-

-Aw no! No, no no! You want loud, keep doing that, I will give you loud!

Nanyehi thought the windows might begin to shake -Ok, next time-

-Next time you want to fly down into the ground, you go flying with that so-called spouse of yours,

but not when I am anywhere nearby!

This time Nanyehi was sure that the windows were shaking: upstairs. -Ok, (she raised both hands in mock surrender), I give, I give, Uncle, Uncle! I will do my almost level best not to rapell down the wall again until after our next lesson. Her mouth curved up into a smirk that Satan himself would be proud of.

-I hate it when you get that look. Don't you make me do that on the rocks, do not try it, no Ma'am!

Nanyehi raised her left eyebrow, her smirk changing to a warmer smile.

-Not to worry, I only torture the advanced students. You got some time yet. Love your costume, by the way. But, Is it warm enough for that outfit? We might walk outside a bit (*if Mike gets his way*). And, um, well, you, a ballerina? This time the quirked eyebrow was accompanied by a down-tilt of the head, as she gave Marie her 'Really?' look.

Marie's response was not the sound of a voice laughing but the vibration, a bit like a baby elephant, of Marie hefting her body through the air in what only she would describe as a tour-jetté. Not only did the windows shake, but the walls, the door and even the kitchen floor shook. So did the kitchen counter, as a glass fell down.

-Hey, hon, you didn't even cringe, that's great! You're making progress! And it's not even jacket weather outside for me, but you better take one, just in case. A good breeze might come along and try to blow you away!

Nanyehi glowered her best 'Yeah, Right.' look.

-Thanks. Now you can help me make progress with sweeping up the broken glass while I try on my

costume. Who, or what, did you make me, and how much do I owe you for our costumes?

-How many times do I have to tell you hon, your costume is good for at least our first climbing lesson. Now, who are you? I often ask myself that question. Which name does that women go by today? Is it a climbing day, or is it a Jewish day? Did I ever tell you the story of how “No Mocassins” got her name?

-Marie, who am I?!

-That I cannot tell you, but who I am making you for tonight, that, I can tell you. She broadcast a grin so wide it was infectious.

-Ok? Nanyehi rotated her hand, nodding her encouragement in an impatient gesture that only encouraged Marie to show more of her tea-stained teeth. Nanyehi began to tap a foot, arms folded. Marie didn't budge. After another ten seconds, Marie finally consented to end the torture.

-Tonight, you have a third identity. You are Captain Kathryn Janeway, newly in command of the Intrepid-class starship *USS Voyager*, in the year 2371!

Marie fairly beamed her pleasure. Nanyehi was a bit more dubious. Not having seen the new Star Trek, she wasn't sure if she even liked this lady captain, let alone knowing how to act like her. Nevertheless, it was a nice thought on the part of her friend.

-Cool. And Mike?

-Don't sound so suspicious! Mike's, well, let's just say the look on his face will be worth a thousand words, and the photo-graph will be Pe-re-cious!!

-Oh Lord. Ok, what are you going to do to Mike? Tell me now before he gets home.

-Sorry hon.

-Oh come on.

Marie raised her fingers to her lips, making a sewing her lips shut motion.

-You will have to learn to wait missy. Oh yeah, and we need to figure out which weekend we can both make it out to Great Falls. She paused, looking like a puppy that had just wet the carpet. Nanyehi almost regretted insisting on the popular climbing spot. *She'll like it. Just has to be a day when the Potomac is low.* For a nature lover, Marie's reluctance was puzzling.

-If that's still where you insist on my first lesson in Purgatory taking place. Let's make a hot chocolate while we wait for your worse half to get home.

-No chocolate until I see Mike's costume. *Why the hell can't these two get along? At least they both like Purim. Too bad I don't.* -For all I know, you made him a cave man!

-Hon, I wish I had thought of that, that is a very good idea! Might have saved me some work, you know he kind of already looks like one already.

-Marie!

-Well he is hairy, and short, and with those long arms all he needs is a club to complete the ensemble.

-Marie. The tone in Nanyehi's voice was like a mother wolf growling at her wayward cubs.

-Ok, ok your costumes are upstairs. Why don't you ever turn on the lights on these stairs?

-Oh, sorry. I know my way perfectly around the house without the lights. Here, let me flip the light on.

Nanyehi led the way up the basement stairs into the kitchen, closing and locking the door behind them. Her impressive Captain Janeway costume came with equally impressive imitations of phaser, tricorder and communicator.

-Wow, Marie you have outdone yourself. This is incredible. Ok, let's see Mike's costume.

Marie revealed short trussed trousers, a wide red sash, a white peasant shirt, and a colorful sleeveless vest with no ties. A pair of heavy boots and a large white handkerchief completed the

costume.

-Is he Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian or what Marie? And Mike doesn't know anything-

-That's right hon, he does not know anything. Before Nanyehi could protest, Marie continued -and he needs to learn. A little flexibility, run to see dolphins, a little dance, you following me now?

-Oh, no.

-Oh, yes. He's Zorba the Greek!

Now Nanyehi wanted to put extra cayenne in the hot chocolate.

Chapter 2: Halloween in the Springtime

The front door opened and in sauntered Mike. Nanyehi had to admit that Marie was right about the hair. Mike was probably the only man in Pikesville with hair as long as hers. She braced herself as he looked left toward the back wall, location of her famous Comfie Corner, spotted her, then raced toward her, skittered to a halt inches from her nose and proceeded to bounce up and down on his toes like a small child, holding his arms out, left hand grasping a large paper bag, while all five fingers of his right hand scrunched the air.

-Nanyehilaaa!! He devoured her face with a smile that could light up all of Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

-I got the Shalach Manot for the Cohens! He brandished a bottle of Schnaps that would have frightened Andre the Giant. Then he looked right toward the kitchen, saw Marie, and his smile diminished, but could still light up a few square blocks. He stopped bouncing with a thud that made Nanyehi wonder if his heels had left a dent in the floor.

-Hi Marie.

-Hi Mike.

The smiles on both of their faces melted entirely. Nanyehi thought they looked like a couple of ferrel cats meeting on neutral territory.

-Nan and I were just about to get our calendars out and schedule my first climbing lesson. Nanyehi saw Marie's eyebrows knit together, her mentor's typical sign of avoiding something. But would Mike notice it?

-Oh, ok, no problem. I'll let you ladies plot while I clear some space in the car out for the three of us. He spun on his heel, striding toward the door.

-Um, Dear?

Mike stopped on a dime, but turned slower than wading through molassas in January, looking back over his right shoulder at her as if awaiting a death sentence.

-Hum, Nans?

-Weren't we going to walk to the Megilah reading, Dear?

-But the Glen Avenue shul is too far to walk, especially after Rabbi D's shul, and Temple Sinai, oh and then-

-Oh, no. Please, no shul hopping this year. Especially if you're planning on L'Chayims? Walking to the closest shul is safer and more fun. *I just hope it doesn't rain.*

-But what if it rains?

Oh, how did I know he'd say that, for crying out loud? -We have large umbrellas, Dear.

-Large enough for Marie?

-Look who's talking, hair-brain. Your wife may weigh less than my cat, hon, but you weigh more than a horse!

Nanyehi had to admit that his low forehead and hair down to his waist did give him something of a troglodite appearance.

-I'm big-boned! Mike was starting to get red in the face.

-And wide across! Marie illustrated her retort by measuring three feet across with her hands.

-Ok you two, enough!

-She called me a horse's-

-No, hon, that was the last time we were here. AND YOU JUST CALLED ME FAT!

For someone who knew her, Marie's eyes betrayed the hurt that Mike's comment had done.

Nanyehi could see the daggers in the look Marie threw Mike. For everyone else, the rattling windows told the tale.

-DAI!

Mike froze solid, seeming to react on instinct to the Hebrew stop-word from his childhood. Marie snapped her head up in shock. *She's never heard me raise my voice until now. In all these years.*

Both looked like wayward children being scolded by an exasperated parent.

-Thank you. Now, I would like us to put all of the Shalach Manot packages into three baskets, which I already have set out in the kitchen, and Mike and I have to change into our costumes.

-Wait a minute. Our costumes? What do you mean our costumes? I am not wearing a costume to shul. And I did not pay for one anyway.

-Marie very graciously offered to make you a costume for tonight, since this is your favorite

holiday, and it's the first time she will be coming with us to hear the Megilah reading.

The suspicious look on Mike's face did not bode well, in Nanyehi's opinion.

-Let's see this costume first.

Nanyehi took a deep breath, then led the way into the kitchen where Marie had left the costumes.

The look on Mike's face was all the response she needed.

-Forget it! I am not playing some simple villager from-

-Zorba was a great man! He was a leader, hon, get your facts straight.

-Zorba the Greek? No! I do not dance! And I am not walking around in that. Next time, ask me before you make me a costume. I never dress up for Purim, Nans you know that. And it's getting late. I'll get everything into the car while you two change and schedule or whatever, and-

-I'd really prefer to walk, Mike. Come on, it's the first time Marie will be along to see the Purim Schtick. We'll be more relaxed on foot than driving, and costumes are more fun.

-You two can walk if you want, I am going to drive.

-Oh come on. Dear, would you think about this from-

-This is obviously not your best thinking moment. Now, I am putting the neighbor's Shalach Manot in the car, and starting at the Glen Avenue shul and working my way up toward Seven Mile Market. That way if you decide to walk, you'll have an idea where I might be. Nu?

Marie, whose presence Nanyehi had nearly forgotten, took her by the hand, marching toward the kitchen before half-turning toward Mike:

-We two are going to walk, in our costumes.

Turning back to Nanyehi, -Come on hon, let's get you into your costume while you tell me what this Shalak Mahno-ot stuff is. My calendar is next to your costume over on the kitchen counter.

The slamming of the front door made Nanyehi jump higher than usual.

-That'd be your nerves, hon. Let's make ourselves a nice nice cup of tea before we go. Do we have time, Nan?

Nanyehi began to wonder if there was time, but time to do what? Time to go where? Time to escape the crushing weight that always seemed to be stalking her, ready to reapply itself to her chest, settle itself like lead weights in her legs and like chains on her arms? Time to mourn, time to die? Die well, die with honor?

-Nan, Hon? Nanyehi?

Marie's voice sounded worried, but why? She looked up into a pair of worried blue eyes. Then she realized that she'd been holding her breath, and her teeth hurt.

-Earth to Nan, this is earth calling Nan, come in Nan.

-Sorry Marie. I guess I spaced out a bit.

Marie ushered her over to a chair and sat her down at the table, plopping both calendars in front of her. She willed herself to exhale, letting her breath out while Marie filled the kettle. *I've been working on this for years, why am I suddenly starting to panic again now, damn it?*

-You've been doing that more and more lately, hon.

Damn, does this woman read my thoughts?! -Sorry-

-No, hon, don't be sorry, it's ok. Just try to relax more. You need to learn to relax! I'll make us a cup of green tea, what time do we need to be there, oh, and where is There?

-Ah, ok. The closest synagogue is Temple Sinai, about a 15 minute walk for you.

-What, are you saying I walk slow, girl?

-Um, yes. Compared to me anyway.

Marie's laugh made Nanyehi's entire body twitch.

-Nan, everybody walks slow compared to you. Don't give me that look, hon, I'm just saying.

Nanyehi glanced at the clock on the wall. -About an hour. And with Jewish Standard Time, a good hour at least.

Marie's cackle as she stood to pour the tea nearly knocked Nanyehi out of her chair. -Every single group says the same thing! It must be Ethnic Standard Time, hon!

-Hmm, I'm not so sure about that, Marie. Remind me to tell you about the nine Yekies and a Chasid one day.

-Nine who and a what, hon?

-Nevermind, another day. Right now I need to tell you about Purim Schtick and the Purim Schpeels. It'll be too noisy to explain everything once we get there.

Marie's eyes lit up at a chance to make as much noise as she liked without being shushed.

-Ok, Purim means lots, like the Lotto, and we read the story of how this holiday came about from the Book of Esther, called the Megilah of Esther.

-As in 'the whole megilah?'

-You got it. And we read the whole megillah, so since it takes a while, people do funny things to

keep the kids interested. And the adults. That is called schtick, well, schtick is silly stuff any time of the year, actually.

-Speaking of time, hon, let's get my first lesson down on paper before I change my mind.

By the time they found a weekend when one was not making wedding dresses and the other was not cleaning for Passover, there was barely enough time to get Nanyehi into her Captain Janeway costume.

-Oh, Marie, here is your Shalach Manot package. Don't worry, you'll hear about that too, near the end of the Megillah.

-Do you have the whole thing memorized, child?!

-Um, yeah, well, actually it's hard not to memorize it. You'll see.

-Ok, let me see this Sent by Hand package you are giving me. Nice wrapping, by the way.

-Oh just open the package already Marie!

-Patience, Grasshopper. I like admiring the wrapping paper, especially this nice little note you wrote with it.

Marie examined each item, stopping at the Fair Trade Chocolate with a questioning look.

-I just heard about it myself. I'll explain on the way.

Raising both eyebrows, she hoped Marie would remember Fair Trade after tonight's drinks. They packed the remaining packages with an extra umbrella, just in case. The sun was beginning to set as Nanyehi locked the front door. Traffic on Park Hts avenue was lighter than usual, which she found reassuring.

-Ok hon, I thought I heard a different word, like eel. There won't be any snakes there, will there?

Marie's eyes widened.

-No, no, not to worry, Marie! Unless someone brings a fake snake or spider just to scare people,

there will be no animals to run away from, except for some of the noisier little kids, maybe.

She made a mental note not to tell Marie about the kids who'd chased her home last year with mock Tarantullas.

-Whew, ok, hon so what are these speels?

-Purim Schpeels are the skits that people write to perform between readings of each chapter of the Megilah. Some of them are really good, with folks singing too. You'll see. Temple Sinai is a pretty interesting bunch, more politically free than most shuls, so the schpeels are better, at least to me.

A sudden noise in the yard across street startled both women. Nanyehi took a deep breath as she unclenched her fists; the fight or flight response obviously did not recognize fleeing birds.

-Hon, that even scared me. I hope no one comes in with some scary Dracula costume or some such nonsense. You told me sometime back that this is your worse half's favorite holiday, but not yours; so which holiday is your favorite? You keep seeming to wiggle out of answering every time I ask you that question since you converted. Why is that, missy?

-Oh I don't know that I could say really, Marie. It almost feels, guilty, to have a favorite. This is not my birth culture so I don't feel right claiming one over another. But I do enjoy Shavuot, Pentacost by the New Testament, the most.

-What do you do then, you never talk about Shevu-ot.

-Oh, here come the Cohens,

-Your new neighbors from across the street?

-Yep. They might be headed our way on their first stop.

The kids ran up to the two women before the parents arrived, sharing Macaroons and explaining

their costumes. And sparing Nanyehi the need to tell Marie about her favorite holiday.

She couldn't tell even Marie the real reason Shavuot was her favorite holiday. And in any case, studying Torah all night really was fun, sort of like a giant slumber party for grown-ups, except that if she didn't want to sleep, she didn't have to.

Chapter 3: Memories Uncovered

The ladies enjoyed the Megilah reading, or at least Marie seemed to enjoy the festivities. The large pink-head in a small pink tutu was a hit, and a relief. Her jokes and stories kept all eyes away from the somersaults Nanyehi made every time the name Haman was read.

-Nan, hon, why do you keep covering your ears?

-Oh, Naamah does that every year. Hi, I'm Ari Levi, a member here.

-Nice to meet you hon, I'm Marie. An old friend of Nan's. What did you call her, just now? Naam?

-Naamah, it means nice. She never told you her Jewish name?

His glance in her direction told Nanyehi that her loyalty to the Jewish community was in question.

Or was it her imagination?

-Oh, hon, I probably would have forgotten it, she tells me so much about being Jewish. I finally had to come see all this for myself. Did she ever tell you the story about our visit to-

Marie's story was drowned out by the start of chapter 7, fortunately for all. Nanyehi noted that this was the only time she was ever glad to hear that name, the third word in this chapter, without even time to settle in to the melody of the chant. Or prepare for the uproar. Nevertheless, this was still

her favorite chapter. The chapter where they victim becomes the hero, where Esther turns the tables, albeit using guile. What other choice did Esther have? *What choice do I have, but to be the sweet Naamah?* What would Marie think? Mike had given Nanyehi a family, stability, but not much connection emotionally. That was the place in Nanyehi's life that Marie filled. But Marie seemed to think Nanyehi was good and nice.

-Hon, Marie had once told her, -there is no guile in you.

Marie had said that looking at Nanyehi with what seemed to her to be a sort of pity, as if being a liar could be a good thing. *But I am hiding a bigger secret, worse than any liar you know, my good friend. Far longer than our nearly ten year friendship.* And if she knew, Nanyehi was sure, Marie would have fled.

The raucous stamping and clapping of another “Haman” being shouted down brought Naamah back to the Megillah reading, with which Marie was apparently delighted.

Why people's love, especially that of the kids, for drowning out that name went so far above and beyond the call of commandment was beyond Nanyehi. A nice quiet errasure, or simple “H.” would suffice, far better in fact, as far as her nerves were concerned.

As Haman was being impaled, her thoughts turned back to Mike. Hopefully he'd left the car parked already, and continued on foot, as he had last year around chapter 6. At least he'd fulfilled the Mitzvah of not being able to distinguish the names of Mordechai and Haman, even if a bit too early to have completed the commandment of hearing the entire Megillah reading. In any case, he usually also attended the morning reading with the neighbors. There was at least something to be said for the frummies, anyway.

The walk back to the house was a welcome rest for Nanyehi's shattered nerves.

-Do you want to crash here, Marie? I really don't want you going home by yourself with all the drunks out tonight.

-I know how to avoid the drunks, don't you worry Miss Mother Hen.

Marie erupted into a chicken squawk complete with a dance that included flailing arms and head-bobs. Just as Nanyehi, who was doubled over squealing with laughter, caught her breath, the kitchen door opened, and Mike stumbled in. Then he froze. The look on his face seemed comparable to that of a bank robber trapped in the vault. He raised his hands as if to show he was unarmed. Something was amiss. Nanyehi had the sudden impression of being back in Kung Fu class after accidentally hitting a classmate too hard.

-Nan, hon, it's ok. You're safe hon, it's just Mike. Not that I wouldn't like to stun him with a phaser once in a while myself, mind you. But it is just for show, of course. Stand down from Red Alert, Captain Janeway?

The smile on Marie's face contrasted sharply with the grimace on Mike's. For a moment Nanyehi wondered if she had tried to fire the toy phaser in her hand. *In my hand? Since when?*

-I'm not shicker, Ma'am, we just had a little L'Chaim! He smiled like a five-year old boy eating baklavah. -I brought Shalach M'not from the Cohens! He displayed a large bag decorated with the handprints of three small children. -And I'm sorry I didn't go with you to Sinai. Will you forgive me, Naamahla, my Naamahla?

-Of course I do!

The boyish look of innocence and relief moved Nanyehi across the kitchen and into the arms of her swaying spouse, who wrapped her into a bear hug, and looking up, took two stammering strides toward Marie to include her in the hug as well. The result was that all three adults ended up on the

floor like a group of toddlers running bag-races.

The next morning it was Mike who made the tea: Earl Grey for Nanyehi, and green tea for Marie.

He might not be the most emotionally intelligent spouse in the world, but Nanyehi had to admit that he certainly loved her, and he did try to show it, however ineptly at times. He was a good man, and that was saying a lot in this world.

-Can I drop you off at school, hon? I have a dress to deliver down on St. Paul Street, so you're right on my way. Save you waiting around for that bus you insist on taking. Then I am off to the airport!

-Right, it's today you go! Do you need any help with the baggage?

-Not at all, hon. It's all loaded in the car and ready to go! I am making so much money on these Mardi Gras dresses that they are paying me to fly them down myself, and with a helper too! Plus, if I drop you off at the school, I'll have a straight shot up the road to BWI. No missing my flight this time!

Marie was positively bursting with pride. Nanyehi was also proud of her friend's hard work and success. The warmer than usual early spring morning was already bringing out the mosquitoes.

Nanyehi waved two away before closing the car door as gently as she could.

-Remember to take some bug repellent with you down there. I am going to miss you for the next four weeks.

-Don't you worry, hon, I'll be back in time to file taxes.

-Right, just in time for the first Seder.

-You mean the big huge dinner with Mike's family, the one with the dried crackers?

-It's called Matzah, Marie. Yes, that big huge dinner.

Once Marie remembered that Easter Sunday was going to fall just after the start of an entire week

where she could have the their usual apple turnovers to herself, she had whooped a cry of joy that shook the car into the next lane. Then, apparently feeling guilty, she began discussing ways to make apple turnovers using Matzah-meal. The next four weeks passed quietly.

Mike helped more than usual with the cleaning for Passover, apparently contrite over his refusal of Marie's Purim gift. Nanyehi took advantage of the rainy season to try another para-medical course for her re-certification. She didn't entirely hate teaching gym and health education, but she didn't enjoy it either. She still thought of herself as an EMT. Why on earth had the smell of blood made her so ill that last call? She had been called to attend a domestic dispute where the wife had been badly cut by her husband. While treating the woman as police arrested the man, the radio had been playing loudly enough to be heard throughout the house. And that song had begun. With that song, she had been overcome by the smell of blood, and rendered unable to continue emergency intervention. With that song and her weakness, she had been rendered useless, dishonored.

Why did that song still bring bile to her throat, especially since last fall?

What a horrific film they had gone to see that fall, all together. Several friends had invited them to see it as a group outing. Mike had a check-flight that evening, so he couldn't make it. So much the better. He probably would've been the first one out the door.

Everyone but Nanyehi had walked out of the theater. Even Marie. It was Christmas before she stopped spying on her from the corner of her eye when she seemed to think Nanyehi wasn't looking. *But the film, horrible as it was, had one thing right: No matter how much you want to root for the underdog, help the vulnerable on principle, you admire the strong, though you hate to admit it. We are all animals, born predators.*

But that had nothing to do with the song, nothing to do with what had happened. Why did the fear, the cramps, and above all that sick nauseous feeling, refuse to go away? She did all of the work, the meditation, the positive thinking, the affirmations, even the detox diets and herbal teas. But the memories remained. Sometimes a smell, a man's sweat, or old socks. Sometimes when a shadow fell over her. Always when that acursed song played. But until now she'd managed to control it. So why now all of a sudden, had things changed? What happened? Was it the movie, the violence, the memories of pain, of shame, of powerlessness? Why now? Why was she again so helpless?

Of course!

It was 3am, and Nanyehi was wide awake.

The movie was in the fall. It was a double anniversary. I was 5, and I was 15. now I am 35.

And they had both started to happen in autumn.

That was over twenty years ago. Down there still hurts.

Chapter 4: Passing Into Action

The cleaning and the taxes were done, as were preparations for the first Seder with Mike's family. It wasn't only the weather that was chillier than usual that year. The problems that had led Nanyehi to change jobs also led them to criticize her. Not only was she not really Jewish, in their eyes, but she also had nervous problems. This did not make her look forward to a holiday that made her feel even more of an outsider than usual. The second Seder, which she and Mike usually ate with

friends at the Jewish Community Center, was more welcoming, being organized as a community event, particularly important for those who had no family with whom to celebrate the holiday.

Marie's return from her four week working vacation down south, late of course, gave Nanyehi a feeling of being back in the presence of a familiar face, even if it was often a bit too in her face for comfort.

-Hon, he should have done ALL of the cleaning for this Pass-Over! It is his holiday, you know.

The way he treats you, he should be getting passed over, by you!

-He loves me, she met her friend's skeptical look with a wide-eyed vigorous nod of her head, -he does, he just has a hard time showing feelings sometimes. And it is my holiday, too, Marie. I accepted this when I chose to cast my lot, remember Purim-

-Yeah, the lotto holiday! Halloween in the spring! That was a hoot!

-Glad you liked it. Nan cringed inwardly at the memory of so much noise in one night. -I figured you would. Anyway, I promised that his people would be my people before I even met the guy, so it is also my holiday, thank you very much.

-That's all well and good but still, if his family is not nice to you, hon, then you should not be rolling out the welcome mat. Especially when you already have the word Welcome written on your back.

-What?! Marie!

Marie rolled her eyes. -Well I'm just saying.

Nanyehi rolled her eyes back in what she hoped would be a strong feminist gesture. Marie merely cackled in response.

-Oh, for crying out loud! The cackling got even louder. *What exactly am I supposed to do?*

Fortunately, flying was not one of Marie's favorite activities. This spared Nanyehi the pain of not being able to invite Marie to come flying with them when Mike's student pilots had to cancel. This

happened fairly frequently in the unpredictable weather of the Mid-Atlantic springtime. When the last days of Passover coincided with Spring Break, she and Mike sometimes rented a Cessna 172 for a hop up or down the East Coast.

-Hey Naamala, Mike popped his head in the kitchen door, causing her to scatter matzah crumbs across the kitchen counter.

-Dear, her voice trembled embarrassingly, -please knock before coming in from the yard like that, would you? Mike gave her an exasperated. *What do I have to do to get him to understand?*

-If you feel like going flying, it's IFR weather with turbulence most of the day, most likely. The winds aloft are too strong for any of today's students, so I had to cancel all my classes today.

-No wind shear? I know you know how to handle it, but-

-No, probably no wind shear, none reported anyway. We can stay in the practice area if you want, just go for a quick hour or two under the hood.

-Can I log IFR time before I solo? If I ever solo?

She had no ambitions toward becoming a private pilot, but it made Mike happy to sign off on her log book anyway.

-Sure you can. So it's a go? He grinned that impish grin that made her happy to feel that she could at least be the source of happiness for one other person in this world.

-Damn straight! Let's go! She noted a bit of surprise in the bend of his head as he smirked at her. Apparently he hadn't expected such a spirited response. *You'll find I'm full of surprises, Master Jedi.*

When they got to the air field she was taken a bit aback.

-You still fly out of PG Airpark? I thought they'd closed it down years ago. I hope you don't make your students land here?

-Hey, if they can land here, they can land anywhere. They'll be the best damned pilots in the galaxy!

-But will they stay good friends? Mike, have you considered that the last couple of students you lost may have left because of this field? It's like trying to land in the middle of a postage stamp that is pasted inside a coffee mug!

-Do you want to fly or what, Naamah?

She raised her hands in mock surrender, drawing a nod of approval from her frowning husband.

She reminded herself that he did have good qualities, even if they did not often show.

-I think I remember all of the pre-flight checklist, if you want to go behind me with the clipboard?

-Cool.

At least he admires my accursed photographic memory.

Just before the run-up, after entering the time in her log book, Mike handed off flight responsibility.

-You have the plane.

She felt a rush of pride she hadn't felt in a long while as she responded,

-I have the plane.

As she rotated the nose off of the runway, temporarily the Pilot in Command, she noted that she had forgotten how much she loved the rush of takeoff. How long had it been since she'd been flying?

There never seemed to be much time between his student pilots and her climbing students taking most of their weekends and school break times. The wooded area below the traffic pattern and emergency landing area seemed to have diminished, with more houses than the last time she'd flown. Arriving at the practice area, even this seemed less green, more built up with what seemed

to be industrial areas. *A bit like the build-up of harshness in our lives.*

-Ok, how many flight maneuvers do you remember? Power-off stalls and slow flight for sure?

-Yup, I think practicing stall recovery and coordinated turns might not be a bad idea. I think I remember how to do both, but I was never good at either, and it has been a while.

They agreed on those and few more maneuvers before a sudden clearing of the weather allowed them to consider moving on to power-on stalls. After climbing to 6000 feet, Mike decided to put some music on while they practiced.

-But is that allowed? What about listening for traffic in the area? She hated it when he got so overconfident. She was pretty sure that Federal Aviation Regs prohibited music in the cockpit.

-Look, who is the pilot here, you or me?

She rolled her eyes at his egregious side-stepping of what she knew was a legitimate question. Why did he behave this way? This was exactly what Marie hated about him, and what bothered Nanyehi most was that she wasn't wrong.

He put the music on, almost with an air of gloating. Why was he so selfish sometimes? Did he do it on purpose, or did he simply not see how other people felt?

-Now watch this hammerhead stall. I have four steps any student pilot can learn to do the fastest stall recovery possible.

Mike seemed not to notice her discomfort. *I am dying from lack of kindness. If I told anyone, it would sound melodramatic. Unfortunately, it is the truth. My spouse has no understanding and appears not to care.*

As the nose of the Piper Cub dove left, leaving the rudder and tail stabilizer hanging for what seemed to be the longest split second in her life, the song began playing. *Oh no, not that song, why-* her stomach heaved and she clenched her teeth to keep her breakfast down. Nanyehi had never been airsick in her life, but now she was uncontrollably nauseated, unable to breathe, and sweating profusely although she never sweated even when others ran for the air conditioning. Mike, on the other hand, seemed perfectly fine, chattering away as he ran through the steps of controlling a power-on stall. The weight on her chest became unbearable, and her arms felt completely immobilized. She wanted desperately to run, kick, scream, flail her legs and arms, but she felt paralyzed. The pain in her chest suddenly had company. Down there began to hurt as it had not hurt in twenty years. She squeezed her eyes shut as tears streamed down her cheeks, trying to block out the face she had fled so many years ago. The smell of ammonia became overpowering.

-Nans, Nans! Nanyehi! *Why is he shouting at me, what did I do wrong this time?*

-Please Sir, I need to finish taking her pulse. She's in mild shock, it was a panic attack, from the look of it. But I need to finish examining her.

-Ma'am, please look at me. Can you tell me your name?

The uniform was the same one she had worn until her failure, the para-medical uniform. Different area, thankfully, so this EMT did not know her. She opened her mouth to answer his question, but no sound would come out. Instead, she crumpled into a ball as her teeth clamped shut, struggling to take a full breath. *Why the hell?* Her eyes squeezed themselves shut. She could hear the EMT talking to Mike, but they both sounded as if they were underwater. What was going on? Then she felt the burning in her chest. Realizing that she must be holding her breath, she placed her tongue at the roof of her mouth and began to inhale from her diaphragm, working her way up to the top of her chest, then exhaling slowly, finally beginning to watch her breath. After repeating this three times, the weights began to fall away from her chest, arms and legs. She sat up slowly, opening her eyes

again. Mike was crouched in front of her, a look of anguish on his face. She seemed to be sitting in the open doorway of an ambulance, with two para-medics looking from her to Mike, apparently undecided as to what should be done with her.

-Where are we, why are we on the ground, what happened?

-You stopped breathing and your eyes glazed over so I called in a MayDay and landed. The ambulance came right to the airfield, but they didn't want to take you to the hospital.

Mike shot a look that could have killed one of the para-medics.

-They were right, Mike. It's just a panic attack. There is nothing they can do at the hospital for me.

-Just a panic attack?! You passed out, you were definitely not breathing, you looked like you were about to cross death's doorstep without saying goodbye first. As he whined that last word, he began to cry, crushing Nan to his chest in an embrace that threatened to reduce her lungs to powder.

The para-medics took their leave after re-checking Nan to be sure that her vitals were returning to normal, leaving them standing on the taxiway where the ambulance had come out to answer Mike's MayDay. His emergency call had been routed to the hospital nearest the practice area, which was not in Baltimore. Now they could either fly back or put Nan in a taxi all the way back to Pikesville.

-Do you think you are ok to fly back with me, Nan?

-I think so. Yeah, I'll be fine.

She wasn't. On the flight back, Mike had the controls the whole way, but she still felt unsafe.

Looking down toward the ground made the nausea even worse. By the time they arrived at PG, the airfield was getting dark, and so were her thoughts. All she could think of was staying firmly on the ground, or under it.

-I guess we should take oxygen with us next time we go flying, huh Nans?

What?! Was this his way of trying to make her feel better, or did he really have no idea what had just happened? Any normal person would have asked why the panic attack had occurred and what could be done to prevent it from happening again. This idiot was making bad jokes about it.

Unbelievable.

-There might not be a next time, Mike. Right now I feel like I never want to leave the ground again. Did you not notice that I was feeling sick the entire return flight?

The blank look on his face appeared to mean “No.”

-You did not listen to me when I said I did not want you to put that music on before all this started.

-You didn't say you did not want to hear the music, you asked about the FARs and other air traffic, like I am an incompetent pilot.

He was starting to turn red in the face now.

-Nu?

Now he expected her to apologize? She knew that when he was like this there was no way to reason with him, and she needed to save her energy to finish pulling herself together before he pushed her further into crisis. If only he would listen, or better yet, start asking how to help her! Isn't that what spouses were supposed to do for each other, instead of making each other feel worse?

-Nevermind, she said, resigned.

-I can't deal. I need to get some sleep.

-Ok.

Mike's blank acquiescence infuriated her even further. With a help-mate like this, who needs enemies? Maybe it really would be easier in the grave. There seemed to be no end to these

damnable panic attacks and the constant fear, even after working on the problem for twenty years now. What was the point? Why keep trying if there was no real solution? Why keep wasting all of your energy for nothing?

Thankfully, Mike chose to sleep on the couch that night.

The next morning he was already gone when she came to the kitchen. *Not even a frickin note.*

-For crying out loud.

She decided to go for a climb to celebrate the last day of Pesach (*at least by the Reform movement*), as Mike was now referring to Passover after a week spent with his family. Passover ended later traditionally, but Mike and his family, like many non orthodox Jews, opted to observe the calendar calculations and drop the additional days for most holidays. This led to difficulties with some of her students, who wanted to claim more days off, legitimately, but were seen as taking advantage by others.

She felt a mild trembling as she stepped onto the landing in the kitchen, closing the basement door behind her. The butterflies in her stomach were odd, but likely just a leftover from yesterday's panic attack. *Fall into formation you lazy twits, or I'll turn your kids into silkworms!* Feeling a bit more in control, she put aside her nerves and descended the stairs as lightly as possible, cringing at every creak in the wooden boards. Looking up at the climbing wall, she was hit with the instant desire to projectile vomit on her beautiful white hankkerchief. Part of her wondered how vomit could arrive all the way up there, while the other part of her mind screamed *Breath, damn it!*

Why did she need to breathe?

Reaching up to touch her harness, she saw her hand trembling, then felt the pain in her chest. As she counted her breaths, forcing her diaphragm to move, it became clear: she was also afraid to

climb. *I need a hot chocolate. I think I would prefer hemlock.*

Just as she arrived back in the kitchen, after an arduous climb up the basement stairs, the phone rang.

-Hi, Marie. Yeah, come on over. *Oh, no. How the... I can't give her her climbing lesson like this.*

She spotted the jar of apple seeds a Greek friend had given her. Instead of planting roses like the other Greek neighbors, Stathis planted apple trees. Told about Nan's ability to kill any plant she touched, he had insisted on giving her an entire jar with precise instructions on how and where to plant them. Apparently he prided himself not only on his ability as a folk dance instructor, for which he was renowned, but also as a green thumb miracle worker. *To get me to grow apples, "it'll take a miracle" Max!* She wondered how many people knew that apple seeds had enough cyanide to kill a person? Better to keep them out of sight for a while, until I figure out how to stop having loser thoughts like this. *All I need is for everyone to go on about how tragic it is for me to have taken the coward's way out at my fricking funeral.* She felt a knot form in her stomach, like a belt hitting her bottom, as it hit her that she was beginning to talk like a sailor again, following the family habit. What passed for her family.

The knock at the door saved her from further suffocating thoughts of the past.

After explaining the previous day's events to Marie, she mentioned a book, *The Courage to Heal*, which she had worked through before writing her Covey Mission Statement.

-Well that's a good start hon, but you need to figure out how to beat this PTSD thing.

-But I'm not a combat veteran. I seem to have childhood shock, not Shell Shock.

-Same thing hon. One of my clients is a servicewoman, from back in the WAVES, and she had a book with her when she came in to get measured, came out in '92 but the author is working on an update due in a couple of years, about how PTSD is not just for war vets. Even mentions that kids with bad upbringings can have something she calls Complex PTSD. I'll find that book for you. In

the meantime, you call me every morning, missy. Ok?

-Come on, Marie, I am not a child anymore. And how do you know I had a bad upbringing?

-You must think I got cotton in my brain girl. You think I don't hear you drop back into your little accent when you get pissed off, and start saying words like 'Frickin-A' and such. Then you go back to trying to be all nice and sweet, little miss Naamah, and the Welcome on your back gets a little brighter. Don't you try that stuff with me miss Nan, I know better. I may not know exactly what, but something happened to you, and hiding it won't do you any good, child. You should know that.

Nan felt her stomach begin to heave. *Shit.* No one had ever come so close. How had Marie seen that much? Who else was seeing what Marie could see? What about her principal, the guidance counselors? Was this why she had been de-assigned from her EMT duties? Did the other paramedics see it, too? *Oh, shit.*

-Nan, hon, are you ok?

Marie seemed satisfied with the stuffy head bob Nan threw in her direction, making Nan heave an internal sigh of relief which she hoped the large blond missed.

-You sit here while I make the hot chocolate, hon. I'll put a bit of tumeric in it to keep your immune system up. Then we can think of some nice creative ways to let your subconscious out to play. I heard somewhere that writing poems or stories or plays can help get this stuff out of you. Maybe you should try writing a play. Let yourself run wild, and nobody ever has to know the real story.

But as they sipped their chocolates, writing was not on Nanyehi's mind. The hot liquid glided sweet over her tongue, leaving a gagging bitterness at the back of her throat.

This is the first time I have ever had to hide poison from myself! This was something even Marie should not find out about.

Chapter 5: Politely Poisoned

Deciding to write as a way of working through her fears was one thing. Sitting down to write was a bigger rock to climb. The time it had taken her to get Mike to set aside a small office of her own upstairs now seemed wasted in her restless inability to concentrate. The weather ruled out Great Falls today, but maybe that was a good thing. Hard to write with dozens of belayers gawking at her from the VA side. Especially after her last climbing attempt, interrupted by Marie's fortuitous arrival. Or not.

Marie's idea was a little different from the usual talk-you-to-death and spend lots of money in the process therapy ideas. *At least her idea will keep me from wasting lots of money on a useless shrink.* On the other hand, Marie's idea was not exactly easy to implement. Write something creative about something you'd really Really rather fricking forget. *Hmm, I guess that must be yet another sign that my bleeping subconscious is not going to let me forget, if Marie is right about the bad language.* She did have to admit that she was catching herself using sailor language more and more often these days. Count on Marie to notice something like that, as usual. Nan grimaced at the thought of what else her friend might have noticed, the old fear gnawing at her like an ulcer.

Ok, let's do this thing. She was also talking to herself more and more often, she noticed. Her great grand-mother used to say that it was when you started to give answers to yourself that you had a real problem. She hoped that was not going to be her problem soon. Mental hospitals in the US were still not known for being terribly humane.

At least the last two days of Pesach fell on Shabat and Sunday. That gave her some time to rest up and pull herself together before school on Monday. Mike was still holding her at a distance,

apparently now under the impression that the entire panic attack was her fault, and that she was somehow simply refusing to 'get over it' and get back to normal. Not that Mike had ever seemed to notice, as she hated to admit. Marie said it over and over again. Mike seemed to be among the tiny minority of people who simply did not notice the frequency with which Nanyehi jumped at noises. This made it easier to avoid having to deal with the discomfort that inevitably arose when friends picked up on her constant nervous surveillance of the surroundings, but it also meant that Mike never tried to get close to her emotionally. They enjoyed each other's company when all was going well, but sharing almost nothing of their thoughts or feelings.

Emotional spaces were dark areas she tended to avoid when possible. Until now.

Now, she no longer had the luxury of avoiding those dark places where she never allowed herself to walk. Now she would have to venture into those places of her own free will, or it seemed that she would be forced to go there whether she wanted to or not, and not at the most opportune moments for her. In fact, it was beginning to seem that her subconscious was going to pick the absolute worse moments to show its ugly backside. Time to take back the initiative.

Like it or not, it was time to climb.

Armed with a small notepad, a spare chalk bag, several pens and an extra sack of dried cayenned mango slices, she descended the stairs. Writing she'd read, and climbing she knew from experience, were hungry work. Mike would have had a fit if he could see how bright the lighting was set down here, but she felt lacking in sunlight today. *At least the rain won't get my paper wet.*

Now, how to start this thing, and in what vein?

A few ideas came to mind right away:

“I had decided to explore being fat. The other option was hemlock.” Maybe not a bad start. She fought down the mild nausea that started to knot her stomach as she climbed into her harness. Forcing herself to focus on her writing, she scribbled “Play” on her notepad, followed by the first phrase that came into her increasingly fuzzy head:

“Protagonist asks himself (in British accent): How many different ways can you come up with to kill yourself ... and fail? Clearly, one must have to be an American to be that stupid.”

That was a bit worrisome even to her.

She tried to take her usual jump up to the first level, missing the handhold and banging her knee against the wall. She landed on the mat with a thud that would have impressed Marie. *I guess I don't get to make any more baby elephant jokes for a while. I'll bet the whole damned neighborhood heard that.*

Her cheeks felt hot and her hands began to tremble so violently that she could not hold the notepad still. She tucked it back into the spare chalk bag and began counting her breaths, visualizing the in and out from diaphragm to nose and back again.

Feeling calmer, she congratulated herself on having learned to make herself relax. The voice of Jedi master Yoda came to her, “Control, you must learn control!” and she giggled: *at least I have not dropped R2D2 from the top of a cliff!*

Feeling inspired with confidence now, she touched the wall, then felt hit with another idea which demanded to be written down: she scribbled on the next page: “Play idea “2: Lady goes to Marriage Counselor:

-My husband is immature; Doctor, how would you suggest I deal with him?

-Hemlock, Madam.

-Pardon me, Doctor?

-My name. My name is Hemlock.”

Giggling even harder now, she decided that this might not be such a bad idea after all. Now, what was it Marie had told her she needed to do, some kind of creative release of her fears, write off the top of her head, let her subconscious come out to play? For writing a play, she needed a working title: Politely Poisoned. That would do. Ok, creative release of fears, how the heck do you do that? Her mind became a blank, darker than the blackest void she had ever imagined. Realizing that her hands were cold, she stamped her feet, stymied at her sudden lack of ideas, and also at the fact that she was still on the mat. Hadn't she started to climb a few minutes ago? She must have gotten distracted writing down some of these crazy ideas. Marie's out-there-ness must be contagious. *Ok, so I need to be creative and write about my fears.* Still nothing came to mind. Maybe being up in the air, where she always felt more free, that would help. She began to ponder while checking the first handhold.

What am I afraid of?

Raising one foot to the first easy foothold, a cramp lanced through her gut, slamming her back onto the mat. What the? Her entire body began to shake, but why? Furious with her body's refusal to obey her orders, she grunted out a battle cry, commanding every fiber of her being to get in line. Reaching again for the handhold, her fingers refused to close around the peg. A wave of heat enveloped her body, her face so hot it felt like the time she'd thrown eight logs into the fireplace and then had to open all of the windows. Her bare foot arced in a convulsion that forced her to withdraw from the foothold. *Damn it!* Teeth clenched, she jumped at the second lowest handhold, levering her body up the wall to the second level, leaving her harness partially caught on the handhold below her. Working the harness loose and securing it around her waist required sufficient concentration to calm her breathing, focused on the delicate task at hand.

She remembered the last question she had left off pondering, rocking back as if a gust of wind had blast her full in the face: what was she afraid of, really? Did she really want to know? Why had she spent so much energy for all of these years trying not to remember? Not to remember what? A face appeared in the corner of her vision, causing her to drop the notebook she had been pulling out of the chalk bag. That nixed writing the play for the moment. Probably better to concentrate on climbing for a bit anyway, to work past this nervousness and clear her head.

Then she remembered that she needed to clip in with her primary carabiner. Not a good moment to do that, but not the worst either. She was only a few feet up right now, and didn't feel the need for her backup 'biner yet.

Thumbing the 'biner lock as usual, instead of lightly sliding over the harness and closing in the catch, it let go, -Fuaaaaagh!! , squishing her thumb with the force of a mousetrap. The nausea she felt this time was from the pain in her hand, but it transmitted itself down to her stomach just the same. Her foot slid off of the toehold, slick with sweat that she could not imagine possible for a foot or leg, and landed on the handhold below, pulling her body downward in a diagonal stretch that caught her by surprise and unprepared. She reached out instinctively with her left hand, right hand flailing in mid-air with the useless thumb still demanding attention. The jolt of catching herself left-handed slung her body around into an awkward and unfamiliar position, stretching aching ligaments that would certainly complain tomorrow. Meanwhile, her right hand continued screaming its distress, thumb throbbing.

Great, this will be em-fricking-barrasing.

As recovery efforts went, neither the play nor the climb seemed to be having much success at the moment.

Just as she was considering her position on the second level, still shaking like a leaf, and barely clinging to her handholds, she heard the front door open upstairs. *Damn, Mike's home!* He absolutely could not see her like this. He would be furious, and that would make her feel even worse. Bad enough that she still had not been able to explain the whys and wherefores of the panic attack in the Piper Cub. Not that he seemed to care, really. His only concern appeared to be the fact that she was, at least for the moment, not able to go flying with him for the foreseeable future. Mike, as far as she could tell, had apparently decided that she did not want to go flying with him anymore, for reasons both inexplicable and clearly selfish, thus making her a bad wife and a menace to good society. He also had a habit of assuming he was right. This did not bode well for their relationship. For some reason, Mike refused to understand this.

And now he was heading into the kitchen, just above the basement stairs. *Good grief.*

-Nans, are you home?

She could not fathom why he always had to ask such a stupid question. If the shoes were in the doorway, then obviously she was home! Or did he do that just to get a response? Maybe he felt a need to force her to say she was home so that he would feel reassured that she was not ignoring him, for some reason. But why couldn't he wait until he got to within speaking distance, like a normal human being, instead of shouting across the house?

Her anger helped her focus on moving her hands and feet, descending little by little just to the first level, then almost to the floor. It was not enough.

Mike appeared just as she was shakily lowering herself from the last handhold to the floor.

-What are you doing! Nans, you don't have your harness tied in. You don't even have your 'biners clipped on.

He stared at her as if she had just sprouted two heads.

-I...

Nan's face began to burn as if splashed with sulphuric acid, her body descending into a wave of heat, trembling feverishly. As she collapsed on the mat, Mike ran forward to catch her.

-What exactly were you thinking Nan? You know better than to climb untied in like that! What do you want to have an accident or something? You want to fall and injure yourself so I will have to take care of you or something? You want to have a breakdown like those Shoah survivors who have nervous breakdowns and pretend to be mental cases so everybody else will give them pity and attention. Is that it?

Her outrage overcame her prudence:

-You absolute moron! Mike, only a buffoon with no sense of justice, compassion or even human dignity would ever dare to say something like that to his wife! How many years have I worked saving people's lives, taking care of everyone else, making sure I would not be a burden on you, on my family, or on society? You know I hate asking for help unless I really need it, so how on this god forsaken earth do you even imagine that I would want anyone's pity, attention, or care-taking?

-Then what were you doing climbing completely unattached like that, and you are supposed to be afraid to go flying with me now?

-Wha- do you love me or do you hate me? If you want to make me feel worse, then this is exactly how to do it!

-Why were you climbing untied Nans?

-I forgot to hook in. I climb this wall all the time, I was distracted, and I forgot. What do you

want?

-So nu, what had you so distracted?

-Marie suggested that I try writing a play-

-What, you took an idea from 'Out There' Marie!?

-something creative to get rid of the fears buried in my sub-conscious mind. She read that that is what causes panic attacks like what happened up there.

-Oh, and now "let's tell another story" Marie is supposed to be some kind of expert on overcoming hidden psychological traumas?! You've got to be kidding me. Write a play? My mother could do better than that!

-Your mother has never even noticed the problem!

-My mother is a psychologist, so if she never noticed it, that's because there is no problem! It must all be in your mind. And you should be more appreciative of my mother, since she accepted you as part of the family.

-Your mother treats me like like a stupid child.

-Since when?

-She has always been condescending toward me, and that is part of the problem. You know that, but you never want to talk about it, or even admit that there is a problem. Ignoring it doesn't make it go away. It just gets buried with everything else to fester.

-And writing a play is supposed to help solve the problem?

-I already told you, some experts wrote about it. Creative writing apparently brings out problems buried in the sub-conscious mind.

She had to admit that the idea of writing a play to get over things she would rather forget did seem a bit whacked out, actually.

-Which experts? Did it never occur to you that experts can always be wrong? Sometimes what's buried is better left there!

-And you know this from what source of expertise, Mike?

-Common sense, nu? Ancient history, water under the bridge, forgiven and forgotten? Over and done with, a long long time ago!

-Yeah, and in a galaxy far, far away, but it can still strike back!

-Ok jedi, go figure out why your subconscious suddenly decided to stop flying with me.

-What, what are you talking about?

-You know what I'm talking about. This air phobia stunt. It's phony balony.

-You cannot believe that.

-Oh, yeah, then why can't you beat this thing.

The very same question she had been asking herself, for years now. Why could she not beat this fear, these memories, this shame of being ... whoever she was?

-Nu?

Mike looked at her with a blank face, reminding her of the mask over an executioner's head.

Nanyehi was too exhausted to speak, and had no answers to give even if she had had the energy.

-Yeah, right.

He turned on his heel, mounting the stairs as she shook with fury.

How dare he. He had lived such a comfortable life, never worried for money, always had a roof over his head, never hungry. How dare he accuse her of being weak, when he himself had never really had to be strong. Never had to just keep going, never search for reasons to keep living.

Damn him.

She was not weak, damn him. She was going to beat this thing, no matter how long it took.

Chapter 6: Losing Her Stories

Nanyehi had lost track of counting the Omer again, as she did every year. This year the 49 days of the Omer fell mostly in May, staying around the mid-70's, good climbing weather. With Lag B'Omer coming up soon, it might not be a bad idea to try climbing outdoors rather than in the basement. The fresh air and scenic beauty of Great Falls had always made her feel a certain calm, for a while, after each climb there.

And it would show Mike that she was not weak.

What should she tell Marie? Obviously Mike was going to let the cat out of the bag at some point. He was furious that she had taken the risk of writing about her buried feelings in the first place, let alone that it was "Out There" Marie's suggestion. Even though her psychologist mother-in-law had no interest in noticing Nan's real emotional state, Mike was determined to make it the crux of the issue between them. The lack of physical intimacy had been a fact for years, but he had never seemed sufficiently bothered by this to bother with having a real conversation about it. Aside from his occasional complaints about her drawing away when he hugged her too tightly (this was his normal reaction to what she had to admit Marie was right to indignantly ask why he did not ask or try to talk about the real problem), he seemed happy enough to content himself with their one shared passion: flying. And now, they did not even have that to hold them together.

She decided not to tell Marie yet. If she could get out to Great Falls and have one good climb, without trying to write anything or think about the past, her feelings, buried memories, or other hidden monsters, she would be ok, and everything would be back to normal. Problem solved.

The weather was in her favor, a bit drizzly, with rain clouds threatening to raise the level of the Potomac just above that of the tolerance for beginning kayakers. She would have to watch out for the Park Rangers, but that was fairly easy most days. With the weather like this there would not be many climbers out anyway. Good time to have some privacy on the cliffs. She tied her safety lines and top carabiners, doubled to be certain and with a belay-line just in case someone came along to check, even though on this part of the Falls she didn't need a belayer. It was a climb she had taught dozens of times to her intermediate students.

She hiked down to the rocks, finding her lines and clipping in to start her climb. So far so good, no muss, no fuss, no worries. She was definitely going to beat this panic problem on her own. As she always had.

She began looking for a foothold a few inches from the ground, as she taught her students. She sighed in mild frustration. These climbing shoes were decent, but nothing beat climbing barefoot. Finding a toe-hold, she looked up to find a hand-hold.

Then she began to shake. *This is nothing, nothing to be afraid of, come on.* She felt for a hold as her left hand froze, glued to the rock face as if her entire left arm were numb.

Then she noticed it.

In fact, her entire left arm was numb.

She put it out of her mind while her right index finger found a crack in the rock. She pressed her

weight into the cliff, spreading her right hand against the clammy rock face, forcing her body upward in the familiar motion that always comforted her. She finally began to feel as if she were making progress again, moving forward under her own initiative.

She forced herself to smile, hoping that that sensation would catch on to the rest of her body and brighten up her mood. She had finally begun to get going, to solving the problem!

Excellent!

She knew she could conquer the panic if she just got back on the horse again, got over the fear. No point in pestering people with stupid worries about things that she had long since forgotten, and needed to stay that way.

See, I am starting to feel better. Maybe this positive thinking stuff actually did work. She did not normally hold by that Fake it 'till you make it business, but in this case, maybe it takes one to know one. If she could not stop imagining old enemies coming to get her in the night, then whistling while you work, or in this case, smiling while you climb, might do the trick. Where had that thought come from?

A breeze brought the scent of wet pine needles, and something else. Her nostrils widened to catch the smell, half familiar, half nauseating. It was the smell of sweat and stale cigarettes.

Where the hell-

her question died in a choking cough. Where had that smell possibly come from? There was no one nearby. She began to wonder if she was not starting to lose her mind.

What could possibly have made her think she smelled that horrible smoke from...

Then the shaking began again. In earnest, this time.

She had no idea how far she had already climbed up the rock face. Her hands both began to tremble, refusing to grip the hand-holds she'd just found. Her foot, already tiring in a tenuous toe-

hold, took all of her weight, while the other leg swung out in empty space. There were more than enough holds to easily find a perch on this part of the cliff, she knew, as she had free-climbed this face more than once in order to help out a stuck student climber. Now it seemed that she was stuck, and in embarrassing need of help. Though her conscious mind knew that she was safe, and had only to take hold of the rock and climb down a relatively short distance, her arms refused to budge, while her legs continued to flail, out of her well-trained control.

As her brain sank into a fog of confusion, she heard herself, in the back of her own mind, screaming orders: *“Grab that fricking wall! Reach out! Take that hand-hold!”*

But her body refused to obey.

She began to imagine falling through the air, softly landing on the rocks, and bouncing into the water below. She wondered what color the water would be, whether they would find her body out in the ocean, or somewhere along the Cheseapeake.

The smell of cigarettes came back, overwhelming this time. She could not breath, and began to gasp for air. Her guttes and legs began to hurt, but not from running or climbing. She saw the belt, felt the leather strap hitting her skin, and then the burning, down there. By the time the tears came, she was completely paralyzed.

-... diabetic? Ma'am, are you diabetic?

Why is there a helmet on my head? Am I in a war zone?

The drumming on the top of her head became louder, like the shower turned on full blast. That explained it, it was raining! But who kept asking if she was diabetic? She wasn't that old yet, was

she? Why did she not remember what year she was born? Why did it matter?

-Ma'am, can you hear me?

-Um, yes. What?

Why was she so confused and where was she? She had decided to go climbing, had started to climb in fact, and was ... she realized with a jolt in her stomach that she was still tied in to the rock face, now wearing a hard hat, which in fact she ought to have been wearing all along. She was hanging, clipped in to both her safety line and the belay line, both of which were also clamped in a vice-grip in her hands, which were both a bloodless white from holding both lines so tightly. Only beginners grabbed both lines at the same time that way, to stop their belayers from lowering them too quickly when they got scared. Why was she doing this, and why was a rescue climber hanging next to her on his own belay line, looking as if she had just broken off part of the cliff-face without calling "Rock." The rescue climber, clearly not a Park Service Ranger, was looking at her as if she had completely lost her wits.

-Ma'am, you were hanging from your lines here, completely spaced out. I had to climb up here and clip in so I could get your attention without risking a fall. Are you ok?

-Um, I think so.

-Can you lower yourself back down, ma'am? You are only about 10 feet off the ground. If you let go of your belay line, I can descend and belay you down, if you want.

-No, that's ok, I can... Nan looked down to see how far her anchor was, and was abruptly hit with vertigo so strongly that she fell against the rock face, gripping the two hand-holds and left toe crevice that her experienced limbs found instantly. Her stomach heaved what was left of her latest meal down to the base of the rock.

-Ok, let me go down and belay you, then call an ambulance, ma'am. You are not well. You have vertigo, at the very least, and maybe worse for all I know. Stay right there and do not move until I call up and tell you to. I will say that I have you on belay, and when you are ready, you take this rope -he vibrated her belay line -and lower yourself down slowly. I will have the other end of this

rope in my hands down below, so you will not fall. Ok?

She nodded weakly, afraid to open her eyes long enough to look into the face of the good samaritan who was already rapidly rappelling down the rock face to clip into her anchor and belay her down to safety. She dimly hoped that she had not vomitted on her belay line.

-Ok, ma'am?

The voice seemed to come from the very depths of hell, her rescuer sounded so far below her.

-Yes.

-Ma'am.

Apparently he had not heard her. She tried louder this time, -Yes.

-Ok, I have you on belay. Try to push off from the rock face, but take your time. Are you ready to go on belay?

The words came out automatically now, as her hands to the belay line of their own accord, from muscle memory.

-On Belay.

Her feet began the familiar movements by themselves, pulling her the short distance down the rock and landing lightly, knees flexed, without her conscious thought.

-I see you do have climbing experience. Looks like you must have had a panic attack or just gotten a new case of vertigo, ma'am. Do you think you might have an inner ear infection, have you been to the doctor lately? A lot of conditions can mess up your climbing pretty suddenly. By the way, you should not drive like this. Do you want me to call an ambulance, or is there someone who can come out to get you?

-No, thank you, I have a cellular phone in my car. I can call my husband, thank you. You were very kind to help, and I am sorry to have taken so much of your time.

-No trouble at all ma'am.

As he left, Nanyehi was relieved to realize her luck. She knew most of the experienced climbers who came out to Great Falls on a regular basis, and did not even want to contemplate what might

happen if any of them found out about this, let alone her students.

Her students. How was she going to tell Marie that their lesson needed to be cancelled?

It was a shaky and slow but ok drive back from Great Falls. The rain and the fact that students would all be studying for final exams helped keep the roads less busy than usual for a Sunday. Final exams might also help her. Even though they were pretty easy to correct, she did have her gym and health/physical education classes final exams to correct and grades to assign. That could at least be used as an interim excuse to put off her lesson with Marie for a while. Just until she could figure out how to deal with these damnable panic attacks, which seemed to be getting worse by the day. Not being able to fly with Mike for a while was bad enough. She would figure it out and they could get back to flying together, even if it took a while, no harm no foul. But her climbing was another story. If it came out that she was having panic attacks on intermediate level climbs, her side career as a climbing instructor, and therefore the hobby that gave her life meaning, was over. If that happened, well, that just was not going to happen. Period. First, she would have to deal with Marie, and then the climbing, and then the flying. Maybe this bringing out her hidden emotions was not such a good idea after all, like Mike said. Given that these last two panic attacks had been even worse than the one with Mike, it seemed that trying to creatively let out your fears only made them worse. Maybe it had just been the song, and thinking about that movie back last fall that got it started. If she just avoided thinking about those memories, then maybe she could stop doing this space cadet thing and get herself squared away. No point in thinking about the past anyway. Like Mike said, it was past history.

As she parked the Saturn and collected her climbing gear, she noticed the front door curtains pulled back, and the lights on. Mike had a student soloing today so he would be back late. She saw the shock of blonde hair looking out the window as she walked up through the yard. Marie was hand-

sewing a large feather into a beaded band in the kitchen when she walked in. Nanyehi took a deep breath, steeling herself to deliver the bad news.

-I am so sorry Marie, but I need to postpone our climbing lesson.

-Oh, and I was really looking forward to it. Why do you need to postpone it, is everything alright hon?

Here it comes: -Well, I let myself get behind the eight ball and I am way behind on correcting my final exams. Then I still need to do my grading and call a few parents, so I just don't have time.

Can we reschedule the lesson for, say, in another three weeks?

-That's a pretty lame excuse, hon. You have never needed three weeks to correct your gym students papers before, and now all of a sudden you need to cancel our first climbing lesson because it's grading season? Something is not right here. Marie dropped the feather, wagging her finger in the air as if she were about to start telling one of her more reproachful stories. Then Mike walked in.

-Mike, what happened?

Nanyehi regretted her question almost before it was out of her mouth. Mike never liked to talk when he had had a bad day, and this looked like a doosey.

-Hon, you look like one of your students dug a hole in the ground.

The look Mike shot Marie would have killed a yellow canary. -He almost did. He porpoised!

-Oh no! Is he ok? Your insurance must cover things like this, right Mike?

-Wait a minute, hon, what is porpoised?

-It's when a pilot over-controls on landing and ends up doing a dolphin onto the runway, lands upside down basically.

Marie gasped.

-No, he's ok, just landed on his head when he unbuckled his seatbelt, since he was sitting upside down, the putz.

-And how about the instructor, hon, no words for the wise there?

-Look, you. You've already done enough damage so you can just leave, Marie.

-What? Nan hon, what is your stupider half talking about now?

-Nan's recently had two panic attacks, Marie, and they were both because of you!

Nanyehi silently thanked her lucky stars that she had not let them call Mike today at Great Falls. If he knew he would certainly try to stop her from climbing ever again.

Marie snapped her head back as if Mike had punched her in the face.

-Nan, hon, why did you not tell me about this? Is that why you cancelled our climbing lesson?

-Yeah, Nans, tell her how her bright idea nearly broke your leg!

Glaring at Marie -Nans took your informed advice to write a play up in the air, but not clipped in!

The beaded band hit the floor.

-Are you out of your mind, hon? You tried to write the play up in the air, while tied into a harness with ropes all around you?

-But you know that is where I do my best thinking, Marie. You and Mike have both said so dozens of times so how could I not have thought to try to do my writing up there? It's not like I have ever done something like this before, so how in the heck was I supposed to know not to write the play up in my climbing area? It seemed like a logical idea to me.

-It seemed like a good idea at the time. Famous last words. Of putzes,

Both women glared at him.

Then Marie glared at her:

-But you had to be somewhere safe, where you would not feel like you could be hurt, or reminded of being or having been hurt. That should have been obvious.

-How could that have been obvious, Marie? You are the one doing all of this psychological reading, not me. And besides, I thought I did feel safe when climbing. I am the one who teaches everyone else to be safe while climbing, remember?

-Yeah, right, the one who does not even clip in, nu?

-Oh shut up, Mike! You are the reason she is in this mess in the first place!

--Me?!

-Yes you, ya useless cad! You are the dolt who let her feel alone and abandoned her to try this stupid climb in the first place. If you had been there for her like you should have been, none of this would have happened you idiot!

-Ok wait, hang on a minute, he hasn't been that bad of a husband, he has never hurt me, he is doing the best he can.

-Hon, wake up and smell the coffee!

-No you wake up, Marie you putz! I told you to leave, and I meant it. Now please, get out of my house. Right now.

Nanyehi froze, unable to utter a word as her best friend stared down her husband, who slowly raised his arm, pointing toward the door. His other arm was held out toward Marie, palm upturned as he waited for her to give him her set of keys to the house.

Watching Marie walk out the front door was like losing her history, and her family; again.

Losing Marie was worse yet than the panic attacks. Especially on Memorial Day. Since the time she had been an EMT and first begun to get sick at the sight of blood, Marie had been there for her. No one else had stuck around to help, or even to listen. The years of their friendship had been cemented by Marie's stories, always useful, and mostly to the point. Every story had a reason to be told, and only to be told at that time and in that place. And every story, during those dark days for Nanyehi, as she was only known at that time, came with a dress to sew. Or for Nan, as Marie had always called her in any case, every story came with a small accessory to sew. Something simple enough that Nan could help, using her relatively limited sewing skills (and everyone in the entire world had limited sewing skills compared to Marie -that woman could sew as well as Nan's 5xGreatGrandmother from Charleston, South Carolina who had saved enough money from her dress-making to buy her freedom!). She would sit for hours next to Marie in her dress shop, sewing the lining on a hat, or starting the inside of a pocket on a skirt, which Marie would finish later. Nan always wondered if Marie did not secretly undo and re-sew Nan's terrible work when Nan had left the shop.

Those sewing sessions nearly always went with a story. First Marie would ask how Nan was doing and whether she had remembered to eat. And people called Nan the mother Hen! Marie was like the mother that Nan had always needed. Nan managed to get herself through college by working hard, earning a few scholarships and keeping her part-time job from High School. But her passion for nursing and medical studies had died when she saw her first elderly patient, when she had worked nights as an orderly in a local hospital. Everyone avoided the poor woman, calling her “the fasting lady” behind her back. It soon became clear that all she needed was company: she ate well, as long as a sympathetic person was there while she ate. Nan was disheartened to learn that the woman had died before she could finish her studies that semester and return to keep her company while she worked. That had convinced her to become a para-med, rather than a nurse or doctor. She finished her bachelor's degree in pre-medical studies, but decided to take the training for a position as an EMT instead of continuing with the practical studies of nursing or medicine. At least

as an EMT should could see the lives she would be saving, and not get attached to the patients in longer-term care. Nan also found that the adreneline rush of emergency calls made it easier to focus on her work.

And then she had begun to freeze up on calls. It had started with the call for a domestic dispute, which the police always treated with a sort of disdain, sometimes even leaving the para-medics to break up arguments while attempting to treat patients still under threat, or while being threatened as they worked on the victim. That call where the wife was bleeding profusely had at least ensured that the police had removed the husband before Nan and her team had arrived. The house had been a disaster area, with broken furniture and windows, music blasting, and the smell of everything from “loveboat” to Camels and old Jack Daniels. The smell of blood was the strongest of all. And not only fresh blood, but the unmistakabl smell of blood that had been spilled long before today. One look at the victim confirmed it: This was not the first time that she had been cut open, just the first time someone had made enough noise not to get away with it.

And Marie had been tthere that evening, or rather that morning, at 4am when Nan had gotten home. Mike was asleep, and dead to the world. Nan had collapsed on the couch, unable to think of anyone to talk with except for Marie. At 4 in the morning, Marie had picked up the phone on the first ring. Instead of demanding what in the heck she was doing calling at,that hour, Marie had asked -What happenend, what's wrong, hon?

Nan had not spoken a word, and had not needed to. The hour and the fact that she had called were enough to alert Marie's intuition. Ten minutes later, Marie was at the door, softly tapping on the window. She had risked bringing her favorite pin-cushion (bright pink, of course!) and extra needle and thread just in case Nan wanted to sew as she talked. But in fact, Nan did not want to talk at all. They had sipped green tea in the kitchen. The smell of blood seemed to linger, and as soon as Mike was awake upstairs, Nan went down to the basement to take yet another shower. Marie had waited

in the kitchen, even preparing a light breakfast for Mike. Marie had been like a protective sibling, and now she was gone. Nan hoped that standing by Mike had been the right thing to do. The rain continued to pelt the windows, announcing an early summer storm, and a grey start to the coming week. Hopefully the weather would clear up before the beginning of June. Shavuot was the one holiday that Nan actually looked forward to, but this year she would not have Marie to argue with, after staying up to study into the wee hours of the morning. Nan had always been the first person to arrive on that morning of Shavuot, after 5 cups of coffee that night, to greet Marie in her shop before opening for her customers. Not this year.

All this had been her fault. Her fault for letting Marie harrangue Mike everytime she saw him, her fault for being a wuss and getting sick at the sight of blood, worse than the old woman who never ate unless someone gave her constant attention. Maybe that was what she had, here. Was the point of these panic attacks just to get herself more attention, first from Marie and now from Mike? Had she let Marie spoil her by coddling her, instead of standing on her own two feet like a grown woman and dealing with it? And of course Marie gets to be the hero, just like the heroes in those stupid stories, always knowing what to do, always saying do this do that, drink this, don't drink that. And she had eaten it up, taken it all, just like a little kid: "mommy take care of me" instead of taking care of herself. She had even let this woman come between her and her husband, a good man who had been nice enough to take her on as his wife even with all this baggage, and look how she had repaid him. Mike was right, Marie was meshugenah, nuts, and needed to stay far away from both of them.

Instead of letting that "out there" shiksa Marie tell her what to do, Nan should have been being more appreciative of her mother-in-law, as Mike pointed out. After all, the lady was a mental health professional, so if she had not noticed a problem, there must not be a problem in the first place. If Mike's family felt that she should be more Jewish, maybe they were right. They were the ones who had lived their entire lives this way, so they should know better than her. And who was she,

anyway, just some mixed mut with no family to speak of, so-called part Cherokee, and all mixed up as they had told her for years. They were right, it was time to get her head screwed on, straighten up and fly right. Starting with who the heck she was, she was Jewish, damn it. Oops, not exactly what a nice Jewish girl would say, was it? Ok, time to stop hanging around with oddballs, and start working on keeping those promises she had made to the Jewish community: to learn to be Jewish, and to live a Jewish life. It was time to put her Yiddishe Cap on and accept her new identity. Her Jewish identity.

But what was her Jewish identity? Mike's family was Reform, so they did not seem to take much seriously in the way of holidays except for Passover, oops, Pesach, and of course the High Holidays, which everyone took seriously. Even Mike kept both days of Rosh HaShannah, when his family had always ignored the second day of every other holiday, deriding the frummies for being overly rigid in their observances. But what gave them the right to tell everyone else how to deal with their own consciences, and especially their own observances? And even worse, what if the frummies were right? There was no denying that the People of Israel had not survived for five thousand years just on lox and bagels. Cultural Judaism was important, true, but culture did not a people make, or did it? She had not been born into the religion, but Mike said that his family accepted her, she just had to stop being so up tight about her identity problems. She was Jewish, a Yid, been to the mikveh, welcome to the tribe. So now what, or nu, as he would say. Clearly it was time to start being more in line with her promises, and do what she had to do. If that meant getting rid of her old name and her old non-Jewish identity, so be it. What good had her family name and blood done for her anyway? But no half-stepping. Right was right, and if she was going to become as culturally Jewish as she had tried to be observantly Jewish, within certain limits for Mike's sake, then it was time to do it to it. All the way. No more Nanyehi, no more eating during the so called

minor fast days, no more driving on Shabat, oops, Shobos, and no more pretending to be Goyishe when we were around the goyim. Non-Jews had the right to be themselves, so she had the right and responsibility, as a convert in particular, to stand up for her Jewish identity, as she had promised to stand with the people of Israel, the Jewish people. Time to show that she had the courage of her convictions, and that she, Naamah, could put her money where her mouth was, having cast her lot with the Jewish people. Time for her to be who she had promised to be, and not who her useless family and former friends wanted her to be. She would show them that she did not have the word “Welcome” written on her back, like Judith, Deborah, Ruth and Huldah. She would be all Jewish, all the time. She would help justice to roll like a mighty stream, presenting a pleasant face to all, but not keeping company with bad people or with bad friends. She would do as the Chafetz Chaim taught, and set an example of kindness and ahavah, in the Jewish way. In the sweet and pleasant way of Naamah.

Chapter 8: Naamah

So now she would be Naamah everywhere and to everyone. “Change your name, change your Mazal” they said. Actually not so different from her Cherokee ancestors habit of changing names. *Heck, even my African-American great grandfather had multiple names.* Now it was time to put that saying to the test. She was going to get off of her jumpy little touchas and work on making this name change start changing her luck. Right now. But being Naamah didn't have to mean being only sweet, comforting and syrupy to everyone. No welcome mats on her back anymore. But who was Naamah, anyway? “Ve achot Tuval-cain, Naamah.” So her namesake was apparently the sister

of the guy who invented musical instruments? The first guy to play music, in that case. Supposedly the wife of Noah, also a comforter, at least in theory. Still, as identities go, that didn't give her much to go on. How does one go about figuring who she is? How to be really Jewish? Put a tichle on her head and wear long skirts? Learn Yiddish? At least that might make Mike's family happier with her, maybe. But the over-covering would certainly not go over well. Popping out grandkids on the other hand would probably be received pretty well, though she was still not ready to perpetrate that act of treason on the world.

Which reminded her that she had not been to the mikveh since the day before her wedding. Even that had been a superfluity to Mike, but his mother had insisted on it. It was a tradition that had to be observed, and without admitting it, Naamah had also been glad to go to the mikveh. The only other time she had been to the ritual bathhouse was for her conversion ceremony. She did not like the feeling of being a phony, having only gone to the place where married women went every month, just to become part of the group when others got to go for more legitimate reasons, or at least so it felt to Naamah. She understood somewhere in a logical part of her mind that this feeling of not belonging had nothing to do with the mikveh, yet the feeling refused to go away. She grimaced, trying to brush aside the thought that Mike may have been right regarding his mother. Naamah's feeling of not being accepted probably was just her imagination. Maybe learning Yiddish would bring her closer to the family. Someone said that there was a new class starting up at the Glen Avenue shul, being taught by a lady Torah teacher, on the Bereshit commentaries of Nechamah Leibowitz. Apparently Leibowitz was popular with women in the Baal Tshuvah. Naamah decided it was time to start her life as a Baalat Teshuvah, returning to the principles she had agreed to accept, this time more completely and studiously. If a person not born Jewish could return to being Jewish, that was. She would see.

-Chag Sameach.

She tried the usual Hebrew holiday greeting, wondering how it would be taken by the man whose long curls were still dancing from side to side, so suddenly had he stopped when he saw her. This was the shul closest to her house, rather than Glen Avenue, which was a long walk when you'd been up studying all night. She also wanted to satisfy her curiosity about the frum shul that she had never been to, just around the corner from her house.

-Gut Yon Tif.

The look of concerned suspicion from the man in the doorway was mitigated by his smile when she returned his Yiddish greeting with her own "Good Yom Tov" in a mixture of English and Yiddish that showed her understanding, but non origin. She wondered if his insistence on Yiddish was merely cultural habit, or also mild hostility toward the adoption of Israeli Hebrew by the Reform movement and some Conservative Movement Jews.

Given his attentive searching of her face, he might also have assumed that she was Sephardic, but have been too polite to ask.

A new melody, rising and falling, sounded from the closed doors: "ushemo echad."

She felt drawn in by the chanted prayer before she opened the sanctuary door. Or what would have been the sanctuary in a Reform Temple. Here in the small shul, the very orthodox version of a synagogue was nearly a replica of what the Ashkenazim called a schtiepl. Those tiny one room houses of worship were centers of both study and prayer, and sometimes even hotels when unexpected guests came to town. The frummies seemed to want to preserve that atmosphere even

today. Her Sephardic friends, on the other hand, spoke a version of old Castilian that Cervantes would have preferred to modern versions of Spanish, and they also seemed to prefer their synagogues a bit larger and brighter. So did Naamah, but there was not much choice here in Baltimore. The few non-Ashkenazim who kept traditional observances were more closed to converts than the frummies. In any case, she felt pulled by the calming softness of the niggunim, chanted slowly, building in the mostly baritone ranges and rising up through the tenor until finally reaching the volume that filled the entire building. At that point the women joined in, if there were any women in attendance. Many sfarim lining the shelves had titles in beautifully curved leather bindings, imprinted letters beckoning to her hands. She caressed the spine of the nearest book, the rightmost letter the largest, a Samech, moving to the left, tracing the curves of the letters to the end of the spine. Then a feh, then a resh, Sefer, book. Of course. Many books began with the word Sefer, but really meant The book of... Sefer HaBrachot, in this case, or The Book of Blessings. She had memorized many blessings over the years, some of which Mike made fun of her for saying on occasion. Particularly on occasions like when Marie's overly oily fried chicken had given her diarrhea, and she had said the bathroom blessing the next day, relieved to have all of her various body parts opening and closing in the proper fashion again.

The man had not offered to shake hands, which did not surprise her. That he had still not introduced himself, did surprise her. He continued to observe her from the edge of the men's section, seemingly bemused to see her surprise at the lack of women. The mechitza was at least low enough here to allow a decent view from the women's side of that barrier. Returning to the doorway, he appeared to be waiting for her, like a guard. Maybe he was the caretaker?

-Was that the end of Mincha, or is it already Maariv?

-We don't daven Mincha/Maariv at the same time here, this is Maariv, nearly done, in fact.

-Already? You guys pray fast.

-The Maariv regulars are usually in a hurry to get home. Today is a bit different, but you seem to

be more modern, so maybe you don't know. Shavuous is special, a little different in the food department. Everyone wants to get home and finish up the fleishigs tonight. The meat, before the all milchigs, dairy, for tommorrow.

-Yes, I know, blintzes.

He nodded his acknowledgement, but the look he gave her indicated that she too ought to be home cooking dinner, rather than in shul bothering the men. She noted the absence of other women as the men walking out of the shul threw her bemused looks, holding her talit as if she had really intended to wear a prayer shawl in their presence. Then she remembered that the orthodox women did not have the habit of wearing the talit.

-Are women invited to the Tikkun Leil?

-Everyone is welcome, of course.

But his tone said that some were more welcome than others. That reminded her of a comment by a friend to the effect that if you were not a Talmid Chacham, someone who knew all of the Torah by heart, what were you doing at the all night study session in the first place? His candid talk of the elitism in certain Rabbinical circles had initially astonished her. Now she would see for herself.

-Do you know anyone here? Some of the ladies have a Malvah Malkah that my wife goes to on Saturday afternoons. That would probably be more comfortable for you.

Ignoring his condescending question, she decided to risk the offensive:

-Are you the Shamash, by any chance?

Now it was his turn to look surprised.

-I notice that everyone else is gone and I don't want to keep you waiting if you are in a hurry to lock up the shul.

She nodded at his mild look of approval, turned on her heel and threw back the traditional

-Gut Yon Tiff

as she stomped out the door. Obviously that was not where she would spend this night studying

Torah. Nor using their mikveh, either, by the look of things.

-But Nans, we always go Shul hopping on Shavuot.

Was it her imagination, or was Mike being more obstinant than usual, today? Well, even a stopped clock being right twice a day, she would have to be firm: no more doormat! She straightened up her back as if the word Welcome had left grooves in her spine,

-No, Mike, YOU go shul hopping, generally from Sinai to Glen, and then home. I prefer to stay in one shul and actually learn something tonight.

-But Nanyehile-

-Naamah, if you don't mind.

-But you know we don't do this frum stuff, why Naamah all the time all of a sudden. What, did my mother call you and say something?

As he raised his voice, the hairs on the back of her neck began to stand up. Forcing herself to take a breath, she worked to force the butterflies in her stomach back into formation. A Greek phalanx would be good right about now. Who was it anyway, Sparta, that invented the Phalanx? Of course the bloody Romans would try to take credit for it. But what have the Romans ever done for us, anyway? Well, apart from the roads, and the aquaducts, and... Why the hell was her husband tapping her shoulder with a look that might have made Jack Nicholson proud?

-Nans, hello, earth to Nans, ok, Naamah! What are you giving me the silent treatment now? You've suddenly gone and decided to become mamish frum, and do the whole Hebrew name thing all the time now? You're going to speak only Yiddish from now on or something, nu?

-Mike,

she sighed, suddenly bone-deep weary, hearing the strains of "Motherless Child" somewhere in her

mind,

-do the words Dan LeChaf Zechut mean anything to you?

The blank look on his face boomed a resounding No.

She sighed again. How did she managed to know more about Judaism than half the people born into this religion of The Book?

-Don't be ridiculous, please. I was just thinking of something else and I didn't hear you. And besides, you know that if I were being mamish frum I would not be standing close enough for you to touch me.

Actually, she realized, Mike might not have known that. Only the most frum families practiced that level of Taharas ha Mishpachah. For Mike, family purity was showering every day.

-You didn't hear me? Standing right next to you, talking to you? Nu? What did you suddenly take a short trip to Mars, or go off on a holy vision of the Baal Shem Tov? Don't tell me you're going to start teaching Torah like Beruriah or something.

-Where do you know from Beruriah?

-And since when do you say where do you know from anything?

The force of his last shout knocked her back as if he had punched her in the face. What was this really all about? It was so difficult to get him to talk about his emotions, let alone open up and talk about what he really wanted, underneath it all.

-Ok, fine, Mike, we can go to one shul first, and then end the night at Sinai. How does that sound?

-It sounds like I get to spend Yom Tov by myself because my wife wants to impress everybody with how frum she is.

-Mike, what exactly do you want from me?

-Going flying would be a great start, and a hug or two might be even better.

-We talked about this before the wedding, Mike! You promised me that it would not be a problem, remember? All of that 'all I want is your love' business, and how we would work through any problems? Remember that?

-That was when you would still kiss me. And you don't anymore, nu?

-You know it's more complicated than that, Mike. And you never wanted to figure out why this... happened the way things happened. If you don't want to talk about these issues, to get to the bottom of things, then what do you expect will happen?

-I expect that you will at least put up with a little kiss once in a while from the one who loves you.

-Love, Mike?

-Yes, love, you know, ahavah?

As he looked into her eyes suddenly, he stepped closer to her. The smell of amonia seemed to envelop her. Her stomach began churning like a butter mill, bringing the bile up to her throat. Just then she felt an overwhelming desire to take a long hot shower. She stepped back 3 rapid paces, a bitter taste in her mouth. Love! What did he know about love? Would he die for her?

-Yes, love. Love for the promises that we both made.

He looked wounded and sceptical. -Nu?

-And I haven't been to the mikveh since the wedding.

His blank look turned to fury. He was starting to get it, she saw. They had been kept apart the entire day before the wedding, as his mother's every other word, to Mike's chagrin, had been 'Mikveh.'

-You mean to tell me that we won't even be able to hold hands for two weeks out of every month?

Even the crazies don't do that!

-Don't you think you're exaggerating a little bit, Mike? I just need to go to the mikveh. Until then we just can't touch. Not a big deal. And the frummies are not crazy, just doing their best to follow the Torah as they see it. And maybe they are not wrong. How do we know.

-How can you justify not having even a little kiss on the cheek for half of the year, that is not a loving marriage.

-Well Mike, you know they say that Cookin Lasts, Kissin Don't.

-Who says that?

-My great grandmother, among other people!

-I never heard it.

He said this as if to say that any saying that came from People of Color could not possibly be right or useful.

-And what does that have to do with us, here and now? You won't even get close enough to me to sit in the second seat, so we can't go flying together?

-Ok, I will show you how we can figure this out. Right now, let's go flying!

Mike's jaw hit the floor.

-You want to go flying right now? It's barely three hours before the Tikkun!

-It's 7 now and the tikkun starts at 11, so if we grab a sandwich on the way out the door we can both eat in the car on the way out to PG and be up and back in time. I haven't gone night flying before, so this will be a new experience.

-So what makes you think you won't space out and panic again, like you did the last time you went up with me?

-Maybe you won't be doing hammerhead stalls without asking me first?

-Oh, so it's my fault now, is it?

-That's not what I said, Mike.

-Fine, we'll go flying, but if you have another panic attack, that is it. No more flying, and no more of this frum stuff either.

-Meaning what, exactly?

-Nu, what do you think? You won't kiss me, you won't even touch me and now I can't even go shul hopping. Mazel toy, you got the baalabusta schtick down perfectly. Dai! Enough of this being frum nonsense. Either we fly together or we don't fly at all!

Mike stomped up the stairs to change clothes, and Naamah let out the breath she did not know she had been holding, wiping away a tear she had not felt leak from her eye. *Damn it.* Feeling the cramps in her stomach, she pulled a piece of leftover matzah from the box in the cupboard to eat with a bit of humus before they left. *As they say, Take care of your health, you can always hang yourself later;* Not wanting to eat despite the cramps, she had loaded tiny bit of humus onto a bit of matzah the size of a quarter. *Hanging seems a rather messy way to die.* She thought poison would probably be cleaner.

It was clear for her that Mike did not want to understand anything. Going flying would change nothing, but she still had to try.

Chapter 9: Purely Frum

Driving to PG Airpark without touching was easy given the bucket seats. No attention had to be paid to the problem until they reached the hangar. Emotionally and physically exhausted, Naamah was unable to pull the Piper Cub onto the taxiway by herself. When Mike offered to help, putting

his hands around hers, she pulled away, wondering if he had done it on purpose. He recoiled as if insulted, and walk away shaking his head. She walked off the flightline in tears as he, apparently unaware, pulled the low-wing onto the parking area to run through the pre-flight checklist. *I guess I won't get to do any flying tonight, but I forgot my log book anyway.* Hoping he didn't notice, she did not want yet another reason to argue. This was such a small airfield that the guys in the hangar would tell everyone else and soon everyone would know. Bad enough they had come out her on such short notice with little time to spend in the air. Someone was bound to notice that. Too bad they didn't have the Chaffetz Chaim to explain the ills of gossip to them.

-What, I can't even touch your hand to move my plane, now? Sheesh, this is meshugas!

-This is tsnius.

-This is what? I haven't heard that word since my grandmother of blessed memory died. Don't tell me you plan to start wearing a sheitle now?

-A what?! I said don't touch my hand until I have been to the mikveh. That has nothing whatsoever to do with wearing a sheitle?! I hate wigs, why would I start wearing one now?

-You said tsnius, that's what she always said when she put her sheitle on, nu?

-Mike, that was a custom in one little village-

-Ah, no, not just one little village, thank you, and there are still lots of women today who wear them. I hope you are not about to become one of them!

-No, Mike, you ditz!

-You meant to say yutz.

-Thank you, you yutz. Tsnius is the entire set of mitzvot around being modest, both for men and for women.

-Oh, no, I am not going to start wearing peyas.

-No, it's just about going to the mikveh and dressing and behaving modestly. Kind of like having a

Jewish name and a normal name.

-I think we started to use the goyeshe name after the Holocaust, Nans.

She glared at him, but held off saying Naamah this time. Her significant look directed him to explain the use of non-Jewish names after the war, with an eyebrow quirked.

-It seemed safer to be less obviously Jewish and more American, nu? Pretty obvious.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head at his tone.

-It is also just plain old modesty, using a name like the people around you, not to draw attention to yourself. Tsnius includes modesty in speech, like not using vulgar language-

-Damn it!

Her right eyebrow looked at him, awaiting an explanation for the interruption. He had been checking the oil as they talked.

-I closed the cowling on my hand.

-Right. Very funny.

-No really, it was an accident, Naamah. Happy? I used your Jewish name. Now can we please have some Shalom Bayit and stop this not even touching hands meshugas?

-If you want peace in the house, then try having some respect for me, and ask your mother if it is meshugas or not, the Family Purity laws. She was the one who insisted on the mikveh, remember?

-That was then, this is now. Don't be ridiculous, Nans, er, Naamah.

He said her Jewish name with a grimace that might have come after eating the bitter herb on Pesach rather than something pleasant. She was almost surprised he didn't spit after saying her name now.

She stood by while he finished the pre-flight and then climbed into the left seat, waiting for him to do the run-up. He looked at her, waiting for her to hand him her flightlog book. Responding to his questioning look, her lip began to tremble,

-I thought there would be no time to log and since it is a night flight, I couldn't log it anyway.

He shook his head and reved the engine. As the vibration of the motor increased, the noise in her head seemed to grow louder with the noise of the engine. After the two magnetos were checked individually and together, Mike throttled down to idle, but Naamah still heard the engine as if it were on full. She looked at the tachometer to reassure herself, 2000 rpms, no more, just idle. Why was this noise in her head so loud?

Was it something outside, or was it her?

The usual thrill of take-off was inverted, this time, with her chest collapsing rather than swelling with pride, and her stomach feeling as if there were an egg-beater struggling to come out through her mouth. Since her stomach was again empty after the bit of humus, the nausea concerned her less than the pair of knees she felt crushing her shoulder blades into her rib-cage. The noise in her head became the guttural order repeated louder each time:

“Do not question me!”

The burning in her face was drowned out by the pains across her hamstrings, which was in turn consumed by the pain down there.

When she opened her eyes, her head was nestled against something soft that smelled familiar. It was the sweater she had knitted for Mike. Her legs were craddled in his arms, like a small child, as he carried her somewhere. She raised her head in time to see the car.

-How are you, Nans? Do you want anything?

He nodded toward the trunk, where they always stashed water and snacks for the in-frequent but devastating MD ice-storms. What she wanted more than anything was just to stop, and rest.

Forever. She was exhausted from the battle, fought since she had been 16 years old, with the desire to just die and get it overwith. But if that was the coward's way out, then she would keep fighting until she had earned her right to breathe oxygen, and to die like a man. She damned herself again for being born a woman.

-Nans? Are you ok?

She did not know what to say, how to respond. No, she was not ok, but telling him that might do more harm than good. He was looking at her, waiting for a response. She nodded her head once, pushing away dark thoughts while taking deep breaths to keep away the tears that threatened to betray her.

-So now it seems the only time I can touch you is when you space out?

He had tried to caress her hair, and she had pulled away, seeing only his hand above her head just as she had opened her eyes. It was not in fact at all related to her new boundaries for observing the Family Purity laws, but rather a knee jerk reaction, jumping away from what seemed instinctively to her a threat -a hand raised above her head poised to strike her. It had actually been just the same old damnable PTSD startle reaction, but that irritated Mike, too. So Taharas haMishpachah made at least a possibly legitimate reason for her to avoid his touching her without warning. She had tried to politely remind him, but he seemed not to care. He sneered at her as he stood to walk away, making her feel even more abandoned than ever. If her spouse, of all people, did not care how she felt, refusing even to respect her feelings, let alone her logical reasons for what she was doing, then who would? How could she expect anyone else in this world to care about her if even the person who had promised to care about and for her did not do so?

He walked back into the room, looking down at her, visibly angry at what he clearly took as a rejection on her part. Why could he not understand what was happening to her? Was it not obvious that she was suffering, and doing the best she could not to let it spill over to him? Could he not see that his glowering at her only made her feel worse? She could not afford to let that take her thoughts where it was starting to lead her.

-Are you alright to go to the Tikkun Leil Shavout at Sinai? We can stay there the whole night or I can leave to visit a couple of other shuls and come back to get you later if you want.

His look implied that he preferred the second option, so she agreed to that. She would have preferred to go to the shul closest to the house, so that she could walk home if she felt like it, but she did not have the energy to argue with Mike. In any case, it was obvious that he was not going to agree to observing even a minimum of family purity, at least as defined by the orthodox. For him anything frum was out of the question. No matter how much it meant to Naamah.

Naamah began to wonder if this was the best course of action, becoming frum. Was this going to strengthen her relationship with Mike's family? Her family of origin... that was a whole other can of worms. She had been left to fend for herself as a child, with all of the attendant abuses that could be expected. She had never understood why neither of her parents had been able to protect their only child together. Her first three years, from the stories she'd been told, had been peppered with strife and financial difficulty. Then her mother had taken her up north, leaving her father and a tumultuous marriage for a new place and life. Things got more interesting from there, in the Chinese sense. But that was all twenty years behind her. Besides, Marie was more like what family was supposed to be, and she wasn't even the same blood. Marie had been there for her like an older sister. And like an older sister, Marie hadn't liked Mike. But Marie was a friend, and it would never

do to impose on a friend, so a lot of what Naamah felt, she couldn't even share with Marie. That wall led to difficulties in her friendship with Marie from time to time. She had met Mike while doing the one thing that held them together, and they had become good friends. At a difficult point in her life, he had invited her to come live with him, promising that he wanted nothing from her but her trust. He had been the only person to offer to marry her, accepting her background. She had been proud that their shared values, rather than sex or material things, had brought them together. But after nearly three years of marriage, she was beginning to wonder how shared their values really were.

Mike's family was known for their active participation in causes related to early childhood, poverty prevention, and anti-discrimination. These were all values that fit within both Nanyehi's framework of values which she brought from the African-American community, and the Jewish communal framework. The frum community was known for being the most tight-knit network of groups within the Jewish community, yet in principle, the value sets were the same. In practice, she began to wonder if shedding her own identity as part of the Black community might cost her values that were important to her, like having her own voice within the community, and the ability to make decisions on her own initiative that could contradict the opinion of her rabbi. If women could not even wear the traditional prayer shawl, preventing them from making the associated brachot, then there were prayers that women effectively could not say. These familiar objections to frum ways of doing things only make her more curious to find out why women would stay in such a position, yet she feared losing herself. There were times that she needed the reassuring hugs that Mike enjoyed giving her, and it seemed now that Mike, though he would never admit it, needed those hugs too. Forbidding such contact two weeks of each month might sponsor more dialogue between them, but so far the dialogue was only hurtful. Perhaps with time they could learn to be more patient and considerate toward each other.

Chapter 10: Life as Spicy Hot Chocolate

The late afternoon storms of July in Baltimore had swept away the tiredness of the night's study, but Shavuot remained on Nanyehi's mind. Mike had left her at Sinai, in the company of the Cohen's who had left at midnight to check on their kids. Various study sessions had discussed topics from zero interest loans as a means of Tikkun Olam to community building as a way of ending discrimination for all minorities. She had enjoyed the sessions, glad to have stayed in one spot long enough to follow some friends through several sessions and continue the common thread in each session. Mike preferred to hop from shul to shul, missing the depth of connection. This thought made her feel sad for Mike and for herself.

After Baltimore weather, news channel 4 began to show a report on the Children of Chernobyl. Nine years after the explosion, the first generation of kids born near the radioactive zone were not doing well at all. The images shown in the report made her glad that she had put a stop to Mike's habit of eating dinner with the evening news in front of the table. She was sure that if they had been eating, she would have lost a large part of the meal in front of Mike. A glance stolen in his direction verified that he was as absorbed in the broadcast as a starving child by the sight of food. And many of these children looked as bad or worse than the images she still shuddered to recall from the famine in Ethiopia. The violence in her digestive tract began to move up to her respiratory tract. She willed herself to breathe, concentrating on watching each breath move in and out, and working to relax all of the muscles in her body. Her stomach muscles were refusing to cooperate. When her head began to swim, she took it as a signal to head to the bathroom post haste, just to be

sure things stayed under control. Mike barely seemed to glance at her as she left the room. Why he seemed to enjoy watching such a horrific broadcast, and then not doing anything to change the situation or help the people shown in the segment, remained a mystery to Naamah. She supposed that donations or letters or some form of aid was the logical reason and response to such broadcasts, but Mike never actually did anything, as far as she knew.

For an instant, on the surface, she wondered why she was reacting the way she did. She was a trained para-medic, used to seeing the horrors of this world. She should not be so affected by a simple broadcast of the reality of the world on the evening news. It made no sense. Deep down, Naamah knew why she responded to those kinds of news segments that way. Seeing the horrors in the world merely reminded her of the horrors she had lived in her own childhood, and of the fear and secrecy with which she had lived from the age of 6. She already knew then, at that tender age, that the world was not as it should be, that grownups were to be obeyed, and that there were things you were not to tell anyone. She had known already, by the age of 16, that for many people, the world was not necessarily a place worth living in. She had long felt herself one of those people. Given the state of the world, and her place in it, she saw no reason that she should continue to take up space and compete for the dwindling resources of a world that she could probably not make any less unjust than it already was.

Her thoughts seemed to refuse to order themselves into a less ominous position. Just then, the phone rang, startling Naamah and drawing a severe look from Mike. She blushed, more from anger at his refusal to understand than embarrassment at having jumped at another shadow. She crossed the living room to pick up the receiver.

-Hello? The voice on the other end was familiar and both welcome and unwelcome at the same time. How did 'Not another story' Marie managed to do it? The woman seemed to have a knack for

calling just when her thoughts were darkest.

-Hey, hon, I just called to see if you were ok.

Naamah tried to avoid giving away the caller, but Mike had already heard the voice on the phone.

Marie's voice was impossible to miss even with the evening news on. He shot a murderous glance at Naamah, and left the room.

That was the real problem. Marie was the closest thing, besides Mike, who gave Naamah family by marriage, to a family. Though they detested each other, she needed them both.

She set out the cornbread, which she knew would draw a critical comment from Mike, not being the usual traditional challah, the braided egg-braided bread that Mike associated with a proper Friday night meal from his youth. *If he wants challah he can bake it himself!* She had only had time to make cornbread and a fancier version than the weekday succotash for tonight. The EMT refresher course she had been taking over the summer was drawing to a close shortly, and she was still having difficulty overcoming the feelings of vertigo at the smell of blood. Even soaking the kosher salted meat was enough these days to send her retching to the loo. Mike had commented that succotash and cornbread were hardly Jewish foods, particularly for the Sabbath day, but for her, both were comfort foods, equal in quality and relaxation only to her spicy hot chocolates. He also thought those were a bit odd for someone who wanted to be Jewish, but at least it was less foreign than succotash. As she put the candles on the table and arranged her scarf to cover her head for the Sabbath candle blessing, she wondered if he had ever met any observant Jews from the South. Having finished chanting the blessing, her favorite part of the week, she felt calmer, and ready to face the tumult of services and kiddush on a Friday night at their temple. If she was lucky, they might even pick up a dinner guest or two, though Mike was not in an especially hospitable mood

today, from what she could see. Having someone to invite over to share the meal would do them both good, in her opinion.

She had no appetite, trying to hide her tears as she picked at her dinner. She could not say why, but she felt a sudden dread of being touched that had nothing to do with the mikveh. Just then out of the corner of her eye she saw a shape moving toward her head, menacing, making her stomach clench even harder. She jumped as she looked up to the right before realizing that it was Mike's hand, trying to caress her face. She regretted that it was too late to say anything, as her husband had apparently taken her startled recoil as a rejection, yet again. As she tried to find the words to explain, he scowled and stalked away.

The Three Weeks always seemed to intensify the hot weather, though Naamah usually liked hot weather. She supposed it was appropriate that even Mother Nature should collaborate in mourning for the Second Temple. And now, she couldn't even climb to cope with the pain. With the panic attacks hitting her every time she considered leaving the ground, she was starting to despair of ever feeling the sense of freedom she so loved when she had taken off, or reached the summit of a rock face.

She had finally begun to see a therapist again, despite her misgivings and Mike's outright hostility to the idea. When she had seen therapists in the past, they had always pronounced her either fine, or better as long as she was able to shower, wear clean clothes, and get herself to the appointment on time. Mike did have in his favor, even Marie admitted, that this low expectation was both insulting and insufficient. Considering that she still jumped every time a bus passed the house, Naamah had to admit that he was right. What she couldn't understand was his hostility to her getting treatment.

His mother was recused from seeing her, as a relative, just as were certain members of their temple. That meant paying for a shrink, as he put it. She only hoped that she didn't have to tell the shrink about her plans to finish her days as she chose, rather than by random hazard. Most therapists did not look well on long-term suicidal intentions.

Naamah was nervous, walking into the hall. Even though the Tahara training was hosted in a local Reform temple, the rabbi teaching the burial preparation procedures was a bearded gentleman with peyes and a black hat. He reminded her of the older gentleman who had walked right up to her at the kiddush after services in Rabbi D's shul one Shabbat and asked her “You're dark, are you Sephardic, or are you a geiress?” she had been shocked at the rupture of normal protocol, since it was generally not considered polite to ask if one was a convert, and even in the Reform community, no one would dare comment on her olive skin complexion.

The tahara training was not nearly so harrowing as she had expected it would be. There was no blood, no cadaver, and not even a mock morgue to practice in. the training was mostly theoretical, with questions on practical aspects of lifting and turning the bodies of women in particular, for the ladies section of the Chevrah Kadisha. The women's burial society was perhaps one of the more egalitarian parts of frum life, from what Naamah could see, mostly because men were prohibited from preparing or even being in the same room with female cadavers, out of respect for the dead. Due to the lack of women with both strong arms and strong stomachs, the ladies burial society needed women to volunteer fairly urgently. When the sign-up sheet became available, Naamah put her name and number on the list, primarily just to sit guard duty for the recently dead, but also in case of urgent need of trained volunteers to perform Tahara. She was not at all sure whether she was ready to do the preparation of the body for burial, but there was a definite need, and she

intended to do her best to do her part to contribute to filling the needs of the community. She only hoped that she could find a way to fill her own emotional needs in the process, before it became too late.

She sipped again, savoring the drink. *Odd, or perhaps not.* Contemplating her death, planning it brings out the importance of the smallest things. Her daily treat, right now just the right temperature, slowed the painful process. She was dying by degrees. Each day of loneliness, another step closer. Each task completed, uploaded for the record, another nail.

Sipping again, she paused. There is the cayenne, now the ginger. The lingering mild sweetness of the cinnamon and soymilk, the last hint of vanilla. Mid-tongue salty strengthening of the remnants of nutmeg, pegging and drying together upper and lower palates, while the olive oil lingered, smooth and comforting on her lips. The chocolate now, as always, toward the end was gathering at the bottom of her glass mug, creating a grating silt of spices, a bit like life itself.

The spices, refusing to meld together, needed frequent stirring as they constantly separated. As human beings constantly separated, tenuously held together by their mutual needs, more frequently quarreling and splitting according to their own tastes.

Who would've thought, "Quien Hubiera Dicho," ever, of my hot chocolate as a metaphor for life? And if I keep talking to myself, they may put me in a mental hospital before I finally find a useful way to incinerate myself.

She wondered if anyone would find her desire to save the Chevrah Kadisha the trouble of doing tahara for her ironic, given that she was now a member of the society.

Chapter 11: Performing Tahara

The prohibition on music and parties at least meant that there would be less noise during The Three Weeks, which was a relief for Naamah. Mike, on the other hand, rather than mourning the destruction of the second Temple, mourned the lack of air conditioning. At least they were saving on electric bills.

Naamah was glad that the 4th of July had fallen just before the start of the Three Weeks, since she had been in no mood to argue with Mike about the importance of not holding a backyard barbecue during the traditional period when Jews remember the humiliating forced end of sacrifices by the Romans. The sticky weather had increased Mike's irritation with Naamah's insistence on trying the frum lifestyle.

-Just until the High Holidays. If you really can't stand it, then I will go back to the Reform way of doing things.

-You mean the normal way of doing things. It's the crazies who are not normal.

-Mike, would you please stop calling them that? They are just doing what they think is right by Halachah.

-Their idea of Halachah is crazy! Frum women are almost as restricted as women in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini! Have you been to Mea Shearim, have you been to Crown Heights?

Naamah hesitated, looking down at her feet. She was pretty sure that Mea Shearim was a very frum

neighborhood in Jerusalem, but had never been to Crown Heights. This part of Jewish culture had escaped her.

-Nu?

-No, you might be right. I have heard about a bus stop being burned down in Jerusalem, and that there are a lot of well, opposing sects in Crown Heights.

-That's one way to put it. You'd better be careful before you go off wanting to join the frummies. They don't let their women do anything but have babies. At least in Reform Judaism you get to think about what you do. Not them. It's all what their Rebbi says.

-But I'm not following a Rebbi! Not all frummies are chasidim, Mike!

The look Mike had shot her said that he did not think any of her opinions on the Jewish community held water, so she decided to end the conversation.

-I need to run up to Seven Mile Market for some eggs, do you want anything while I am out?

-Yeah, an appointment to have your head examined, you'll go right past an Ericksonian psychoanalyst on your way up there!

-Your mother was an Ericksonian psychoanalyst, Mike. Where have you seen this office?

-There's a big sign up in the front yard, big house with a huge old oak tree a couple of blocks before you get to Seven Mile Market, how have you missed it? And my mother's retired-

Fortunately, the phone rang. *How am I supposed to deal with my issues and his at the same time?*

She really missed Marie, no matter how much Mike hated her. She picked up the phone with a sigh.

-Hello?

-Hello, this is Ari Levi.

-Oh, Hi Ari, how are you?

-Fine, fine, Baruch HaShem. And you?

-Fine, Baruch HaShem, thank you, what can I do for you, Ari?

-Well you know Mrs. Kahn, olav ha shalom, just passed yesterday, no?

-Ah, no, I hadn't heard, I'm sorry. May you be comforted...

-No, no, I'm not part of the family. I'm coordinating the shomerim, and since you are on this list of late-night guardians, and we are a bit short for the rotation, so I was wondering if you would have time to be a shomeret for 4 hours tonight, the 8-midnight watch? The funeral home is just down the street.

-Sure, no problem.

-Thanks so much.

She barely heard his final words on the phone as she responded mechanically, the butterflies already starting to form in her stomach. This would be her first time sitting alone in a room with a cadaver, the Meit, awaiting burial. She hoped she would not be too nervous.

She arrived with her copy of Asimov's Short Stories, which drew more than one hostile look as she sat waiting to take her seat in the next room, where the Meit would be awaiting preparation for tomorrow's funeral.

-Hello, Naamah, good to see you.

-Likewise, Ari . I am glad to be able to help.

He looked nervous, for some reason. She wondered if they were going to ask her to leave, maybe someone really was offended by her reading Asimov, a very observant family member, perhaps?

-Ah, you know, I know you just finished the Tahara training, and it might be a little soon, but we

can't find enough ladies to do Tahara for Mrs. Kahn. Would you be willing to step in to help?

There will be two other ladies who have done this before, so you'll be in good hands, just follow their lead. The brachot are posted on the walls, and the plastic coveralls and gloves are all here, so if it's ok with you, it would be a mechaiah, and a big mitzvah-

-Of course, I signed up and trained, I want to help. Yes, of course I will.

He looked her in the eye, a worried, but he also seemed between a rock and a hard place.

-Thank you.

Naamah had been ushered to the door of the room where the body lay covered. A short woman, hair covered with a neon blue plastic cap, smiled from the other side of the door.

-Come in Naamah, don't be afraid.

Naamah ordered the butterflies in her stomach back into formation before blinking a smile.

-Ordinarily we prefer to have four members to perform Tahara, but tonight we were very short of volunteers, and so we will have to make do, but we can do this just as we are. There is a lift if we need to use the harness and lift to move her, but she did not weigh very much, so in fact just two of us should be able to do all of the turning and lifting. There is a technique to it, don't worry.

Naamah began to worry.

-We did not get any actual physical practice, manakins, anything like that.

-Oh, don't worry, we'll do fine.

The reassuring smile of the woman in charge of tonight's Tahara team was meant to calm Naamah, but it didn't. Deep breathing was difficult in the sanitized room, which smelled of death and chemical cleaners.

They used only water, washing the Meit from head to toe after removing the bedclothes and diaper in which she had been sent to the morgue. The Rabbi had warned, during training, that hospitals often send bodies in a poor state of cleanliness, but that Hospice care patients were generally more well cared for. That appeared to be the case for the 97 year old Mrs. Kahn. She was so clean that the washing was easy. Still, removing the diaper frightened Naamah.

Although the Meit was diapered, she had still been loved, that much was clear. She could tell from the finger nail polish on Mrs. Kahn long fingers. Her thoughts turned toward her own inevitable death: *I refuse to die in a diaper.*

But someone had loved this woman enough to paint her fingernails so beautifully that the women preparing the body were unable to remove the nail polish.

Naamah could not believe that they were unable to remove the fingernail polish. Had someone used an enamel coating to protect the polished nails? That someone would take such pains for a woman who had been entirely invalid moved Naamah to reconsider her own ideas of old age. She had always been determined to die by her own hand, at a time and in a place of her own choosing. To live at the mercy of others for her physical needs was a thought too frightening to bear. Maybe it was her warrior ancestors, or maybe just another attempt to not be a burden, but the thought of allowing herself to come to that level of vulnerability was unbearable.

But why? If others could live in a state of utter dependence, yet clearly loved by someone, why refuse the idea that that same love was also a possibility for her? Why must she, Naamah or Nanyehi, whichever she was, be the only person subject to a lack of love, that kind of love that she saw in evidence before her. But Mrs. Kahn had had a family, and that was something that Naamah lacked. The question was how to build family, if it was possible?

Having done their best to shoot the water in buckets down the metal table along the length of the Meit, they gently used clean towels to dry her and then slip the standard burial garments on without moving the trunk or legs.

Naamah had learned in training that the legs act as a pump, thus making it imperative to keep the torso and legs still to avoid leaking once the Meit had been placed in the coffin. She'd also made a mental note during the training to get out and walk every day. After all, if the legs were a pump, then simply walking was probably the best way to keep the digestive and eliminatory system clear.

She found herself returning to that same thought again and again. Someone had loved this woman, who had been too old to repay the love shown to her, yet still loved this woman enough to paint her fingernails painstakingly and with craftsman like artistry.

Could life be worth living if someone loved me that much? She flinched, realizing what that meant.

-Ok, well, that was a job.

The Tahara team leader was puffing as if she'd just finished running a marathon. Lifting the Meit into the coffin had been difficult, and now they were putting the finishing touches on the work after sprinkling sand from Eretz Israel and placing the lid on the coffin. They stood together to ask the forgiveness for any errors they might have committed while preparing her body, and wished Mrs. Kahn well on her journey to Olam HaBa. Though Naamah was unsure how she felt about the existence of a personal Creator, let alone that of a World To Come, she was moved with gratitude for having been able to help fulfill a task that the community and the family of Mrs. Kahn needed to be done. For the first time in her life, Naamah felt a very personal gratitude toward someone whom she had never known. She wondered if anyone would ever feel such gratitude toward her. Could life be worth the pain, given the chance to fill a role where one was needed both to give and maybe even to receive?

When Naamah got home she wanted to take five showers and a hot bath, followed by another shower. After two showers and changing into clean clothes, she discovered that she was both exhausted and hungry.

Opening the fridge, she pulled out the humus, placing the last of the leftover matzot onto a plate. As she opened the lid on the humus, the round plastic box leapt out of her hands, landing oddly right side up across the kitchen, as she retched. There was nothing in her stomach, but that didn't stop the smell of humus from making her stomach contract, from all the way on the other side of the kitchen. Clutching her sides, she slid to the kitchen floor, face bathed in tears, struggling to catch her breath.

The cold of the kitchen floor helped her remember her body, slowly counting each exhalation. She felt bombarded by proofs of her uselessness, that she would always be alone. Of course she would. Why on earth would anyone bother to paint her fingernails, who would care enough? She had no family, so the best she could hope for was to make what contribution she could while she was here, and go out gracefully once she could no longer function on her own. Then again, what was there that she could do that no one else could do?

I am completely redundant in this world.

If no one was irreplaceable, then no one was truly needed, so what was the point in waiting around? Her eyes fell on the carving knife hanging from the magnetic knifeshelf.

The image of her pulling the blade smoothly through her vein from palm to elbow sent a wave of relief through her body, relaxing her. As she stood to grasp the knife, she collided with the countertop. The pain and adrenaline shock were like icewater: *I need to hide these knives, and the rat poison.* She could not afford to have another moment of temptation like that.

Naamah realized that she no longer had a choice.

I have to tell him, and he has to understand.

There was no longer any way around it. As difficult as it would be, she could no longer put off telling him. The temptation was mounting to end her useless life, particularly when Mike yelled at her. Up to this point, she had been able to control her bouts of feeling like it was time to end things by sheer force of will, and refusal to have people talk badly about her at her funeral. She often reminded herself that while she was able to contribute to society it was her duty and obligation to do so. The fact that suicide was illegal also came to mind, but the punishment for successfully committing the act seemed insignificant.

The problem was that her belief systems, both her nominally Christian family of origin, and the Jewish community, prohibited suicide. As an EMT, she had hoped to arrange some way of dying heroically, but that was out too until she could get her para-medical license back. She felt overcome by a wave of fatigue. Why wouldn't they just let her rest and be done with it already?

Naamah began to cry, bone weary of fending off the usual suicidal thoughts. She could no longer manage to keep these temptations at bay on her own. She was getting too tired, too weary of life and too afraid of finishing her life alone. She had to cut through her own resistance, a lifetime of protecting herself by keeping her feelings to herself, and tell the one person who had pledged to stand by her for better or for worse. It seemed an impossible task, but she had to find a way. *He has to understand.* She would have to be the one to make it happen. If she did not find a way to make Mike understand the gravity of this situation, she knew that she would be blamed for not finding a way to solve her problem, and she would be blamed for her own death. It might not be fair, but that was life.

Chapter 12: No Stories, No Glory

The dog days of August had begun, with the odd evening thunderstorm, unfortunately coinciding with the last half of The Nine Days. Naamah was not about to follow the restriction on bathing in this weather.

-Thank you! At least now you're starting to abandon some of that ZEAL of the convert, as in the zealots still mourning the loss of a Temple 2000 years ago!

-Mike!

She nearly dropped her Birkat Shalom. Plunking back down on the sofa, she thumbed through Pesukei D'Zimrah, mourning Mike's insistence on sleeping in Saturday mornings and then rushing to shul just in time for the Torah reading. He peaked over her shoulder to see what she was looking at, then cocked a bushy eyebrow at her. So he knew the order of service after all. She nodded a half smile. He shot her a look that could have silenced a small child in full tantrum mode.

-”Well you are being a bit overzealous.” Mike's squealing imitation of his mother's voice provoked a chuckle that almost settled Naamah's stomach.

Why bother telling Mike about the constant temptation: She'd tried before. He had made it clear that he wanted to hear nothing about her suicidal fantasies. Besides, she had the discipline to keep the temptation at bay. *I'm fine as long as I have useful work to do.* Still...

I'll bet Marie has a heroic success story for beating suicidal feelings.

Where was “Oh, no, not another story!” Marie right now, anyway? She would have to stop by the dress shop sometime when Mike was too busy to notice. Summer was usually unpredictable in the afternoons for his student pilots, but mornings should be safe for her to visit Marie just until the High Holidays in the Fall. She couldn't afford to let go of the only substitute for family she had really ever had. Especially just days before the most depressing day on the Jewish calendar.

Naamah arrived early at the center for the exam. She wondered what horrific scenario they were going to throw at them this time. A para-medic here in Baltimore City had to be ready for anything from drug overdoses to shotgun wounds and any emergency in between. She'd worked hard since her failure, and was confident that she was ready for anything.

'Long as they aren't taking pock-shots at us while we do our job!

Apparently there was a new tradition of playing music in the background during the tests; another distraction.

-Ok, you will be in teams of two for this exam, randomly assigned from your fellow candidates.

Fair enough. She just hoped the guy she got paired up with was competent.

Her number was called, and she stepped up to the door along with a burly bearded guy with a round red face. As the door leading outside to the simulated emergency theatre opened, the melody that greeted her, blared from a loudspeaker, made her step back as if she had been sucker-punched in the gut. Some fool thought this song would help EMT test-takers relax. Not her.

-Are you ok?

The guy she'd been partnered with had noticed her reaction, partly because she had nearly slammed him backward. She drew the deepest breath she could, straightened to her full height and looked him in the eye:

-I'm fine, thanks. Sorry, I just stumbled in the doorway.

His forehead wrinkled, then he nodded and stepped through the door.

-Oh, no.

She closed her face in a mask of what she hoped simulated professional indifference. The simulated emergency, as it turned out, was the unexpected delivery, likely premature, of an infant to an apparently drunken woman suddenly gone into labor, which meant the infant would also have to be monitored for emergency treatment during transport.

The smell of blood mingled with urine, sweat and feces hit her all at once. Then she heard it.

She clamped her lips shut and tried not to retch. She touched the wrist of the simulated patient, who reacted by screaming in Naamah's face.

The woman's screams merged with the booming lyrics. A vice grip clamped around Naamah's chest, and her cheeks caught fire. As the simulated patient screamed and flailed her arms, one of the trembling hands flew up at Naamah, catching her full in the face. Naamah's nose became a swamp.

The smell of blood clashed with the pain across her legs and backside. Then the pain down there made itself known. Naamah found the false patient touching her wrist, rather than the other way around. Why? Then she saw it: she was floating above...herself.

When Naamah woke up, she saw white all around her. She looked up and saw a TV mounted on the wall in front of her. Oh great. A hospital. But what kind of hospital, and where? She sat up and beckoned to the first nurse she saw walking by, intending to ask where she was. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Naamah's face crumpled in frustration as she realized that she was in tears, with no idea why. The nurse held up an index finger, handed her some tissues, and trotted off up the hall. By the time a young man wearing a stethoscope around his neck appeared by her bedside, she had managed to stop crying.

-Mrs. Goldstein?

She nodded, hoping she looked calm and collected.

-You had a severe panic attack during the EMT exam. You went into foetal position and were brought here for observation.

She held her head in her hands, then looked up at him. When she said nothing, he continued,

-Have you experienced any sort of trauma in the past year?

Naamah felt her stomach heave at the same instant that her chest made a convulsive thump, as if she had just taken an upper cut to the solar plexus from an invisible opponent. Trauma? Every time Mike yelled at her. She could not tell this stranger, a man armed with the ability consigne her to the depths of hospitalization.

The burning spread, and she wrapped her legs together as she clutched her sides, arms clenching her stomach, pulling her breasts in like pancakes. Couldn't she just disappear?

-Ma'am?

The voice sounded like it was under water.

She raised her head, opening her mouth to respond, say yes, tell him her name, anything; she knew he was waiting for a reason to put her away, and she had to look normal, like a good person.

She tried again to open her mouth, but her throat caught on something, the air tasting wrong. Her mouth clamped shut. Her eyes flooded as her chest caved in. Dimly she heard a male voice intone

the words

“Ma'am, you will be hospitalized for two days...” and then the noise in her head became too loud to hear anything. What could matter anyway, after such a sentence?

A familiar voice woke Naamah up. Someone was whispering, or trying to whisper, but it sounded more like a penny whistle.

-Nan, hon, are you awake?

Aha. That explained the loud braying sound that passed for a whisper. The idea brought a smile to Naamah's parched lips, wondering who would dare to say such a thing to Marie “Oh, not another story!” Blazer. She jumped. What on earth was that deafening, caught, caught caught? Oh, right.

-Marie, stop your caughing, you crow, people are trying to die here. You'll wake them up before they can finish the job.

-Excuse me, hon? Caughing? I don't know which is worse, that I sound like a bird that eats dead flesh or that you think people come to the hospital to die.

-You heard that? *Oh, shit, outside voice.*

-Yeah, hon, outside voice, remember?

How does she do that?!

-Now I know I should have brought you some fried chicken and corn bread. You need some comfort food, girlie!

-I can't eat chicken, Marie, it's The Nine Days.

-Yeah, they must be right, you finally have lost your hold on reality. And a hospital, for your information, is where you come to get better, not to die. If I hear you talk about finishing the job one more time, Missy, I will kill you myself!

The smile on Marie's face shined so brightly that Naamah felt warmed, for an instant. Then she felt cold again, all over. It was better than feeling the burning down there. That burning almost never left her, now.

-You never met my great great grandfather, did you?

-Uh, I ain't that old, hon.

-And you weren't from VA either. He said that folks die in hospitals.

-I remember that! You said your indian ancestor that everyone considered a crazy drunken sailor got sick.

-Yeah, you remember!

-Of course I do, hon! He had some great stories, that one, you said it was your adoptive great grandmother who told you all about him, wasn't it, the lady who had my name?

-Exactly!

Naamah beamed with pleasure, even forgetting the pain for a moment.

-He was crazy, hon!

-Naamah went rigid. What?

-Hon, anyone who is so ill that the family wants him to see a doctor, but then turns around and says he ain't goin to die in no white man's hospital has got to be a little crazy, at least. Dying outside of the hospital hurts! And if your family loves you, maybe you ought to take it on board, and try to live instead of thinking about yourself and your selfish wants cause you want to die, even if everyone else loves you and would like to get to spend a little bit more time with you!

-Hospitals are death sentences. You lie in a bed like a corpse and people ignore you.

-That's not true, Hon. You know that, how much time have you spent with people in hospitals?

Remember the fasting lady?

-Marie, no one gives a damn that you've given your time to folks others ignored, given away your last apple, your vacation money. No one follows your example, or even cares.

-Nan, you live in the world as it should be instead of as it is. You want to save the world, but you

can't. And you can't escape it. You have to deal with it, hon.

Naamah's face fell.

-But Marie that is what I have been trying to do, for years now!

-No, hon, you climb, you fly, you work, and you try to find heroic ways to get yourself killed.

-What?

-Being a para-medic is not about saving people's hon, it's about sacrificing yourself.

Naamah flinched.

-And how exactly do you know that?

Marie's tone softened.

-I have seen you holding it in all these years. I have never seen you relaxed except for when you were in control of the situation. You don't trust anybody, hon, not even me. And that has got to hurt. You can't control everything, so not everything is your fault, and you don't have to save the world.

-Wait a minute, I did try to deal with it!

A nurse passing by sent a severe look in their direction. Naamah hung her head. Now she was becoming a problem instead of solving them.

-I wrote that play you suggested, and that's when all these damned panic attacks began.

-No, hon, you had this thing long before the play, long before this spring even. You just keep trying to run away from it, but it always catches up with you. You need to read this book. It just came out three years ago, and the research is right up to date.

Marie handed her a solid but slim volume. The textured paperback binding felt reassuring, but she wasn't so sure about the contents. She frowned, raising her left eyebrow. *I see the trauma, but the recovery, not so much.* Marie crossed her arms and tilted her head.

-Marie, it doesn't seem to be very useful. I did try working on this like you-

-You did NOT do what she said you had to do before you start working on those memories, hon.

Naamah was starting to get really frustrated now.

-What is it that I should have done first?

-Have a trusted person to talk to and a safe space financially, emotionally and physically so you can re-set your memories someplace safe. And you don't trust anybody,

Marie's fat index finger and blue eyes cornered Naamah, -so you can't even get started.

Those words washed over Naamah like a bucket of ice water.

Then, Mike sauntered into the room.

He was carrying flowers. Naamah hated flowers. She tried to force a smile in his direction.

Marie frowned.

Mike's eyes fell on Marie and his face fell into a snarl. His hairline almost touched his eyebrows.

Apparently feeling the look, possibly a bit like a psychic hammer to the back of her head, Naamah thought, Marie turned in time to see Mike uncurling his lip. He puffed his chest out:

-I brought flowers for the wounded para-medical! The best red roses!

He snorted at Marie.

Naamah's chest caved in as she shook her head. Her husband was waving the expensive flowers in Marie's face.

-Mike, did I ever tell you the story of how "No Moccasins" got her name?

Now he looked more perplexed than haughty. -No.

-Good, hon! Pull up a seat and let me tell you how to cure your hubris, my furry-faced friend.

Mike's face turned pink, red, violet and purple in less than 2 seconds.

-First of all, I am not your friend! And second, don't call me hon!

-I call everybody hon, hon, but I can make an exception for you!

-You can leave now!

His voice boomed across the room. The bed grated against the floor as Naamah jumped. A nurse

walked in, worry etched on her face. Marie stood to leave, fury scrawled on hers.

After Marie left, the room seemed colder. Mike sat down in the seat Marie had just vacated.

Naamah tried to sit up a bit straighter, and failed.

-The doctor told me that you had a severe panic attack during the EMT exam, probably brought on by the smell of blood and, eh, excrement, combined with all of the noise, that and the fact that one of the examiners managed to hit you in the face. He said that sometimes the para-medical candidates have chest pains and other symptoms that mimic a heart attack. Those test situations are way out of line! I think they take things completely overboard, and that woman that hit you, she ought to be sued! Just wait-

-No, Mike, they have to do that.

It took all of the energy she had to sit up and face her outraged husband, who seemed determined to make someone pay for embarrassing his spouse so publicly.

-No, no, no. Do you know they had real blood all over the place at the testing site, and even-

-Sir, could you quiet down please? A male nurse was standing in the doorway holding a tray with steam rising.

Naamah's bile was also rising.

-Ah, sorry.

Mike muttered the apology, face turning red from hairline down to his 5-o'clock shadow. The nurse entered the room, placed the tray on the table beside Naamah, and made a sign to her, holding up one finger.

-Mrs. Goldstein, I just need to check your pulse right quick. Is that ok?

He seemed a nice guy, this nurse. His warm hand, the color of a brown paper bag, felt comforting as he pressed the pulse spot on her wrist. She wondered why they didn't have equipment to do this.

Unless there was a specific reason that he had been sent to do this manually? He smiled a short reassuring look, gesturing toward the tray before taking his leave with a quick nod that revealed the

wavy curls on the top of his head, a bit like that of her cousin Darnell. Where was Darnell, anyway?

-Um, sorry.

She stopped him with a jerk of her head that she hoped didn't look impertinant. He waited, looking comfortable and solid, with a question in his eyes that gave her an even more upset stomach. His glance darted from her to Mike and back again.

-Do you know how long I have to stay here? Can I go home now?

She squeaked out those last two words in the voice of a 5 year old who has no home to go to. Her throat closed up, fire spreading from her stomach up to her eyebrows.

Mike cut in:

-The doctor said that because your reaction had been much more severe than the usual reactions they see here sometimes, that test is really overboard, no para-medic should have to go through all that to get re-certified, so they want you to stay overnight for observation.

The nurse was standing in the doorway frowning at Mike.

-The doctor says I can come get you tomorrow, honey. He moved to hover over Naamah, tilting his chin up and raising his eyebrows toward the nurse, jerking his head toward the door. The nurse turned on his heel and left the room. She felt a suffocating heat emanating from Mike. Her stomach threatened to reenact the storming of the Bastille.

- Mike, you never call me honey.

She recoiled from his arms. He threw himself back down into the chair. The look he sent her could have lit a small campfire.

-Nans, sometimes you have to talk like them.

-Them?

A small warmth began to spread through her lips, tightening against her teeth.

-The Shv, er, Black people.

Now her face erupted in flames.

-Have you forgotten that I AM one of THEM, Mike?

-No, Nanela, you are not Black, look at you, you look Israeli. Besides, you're Jewish now. Here, why don't you eat something, before your food gets cold.

She sighed, backing away. He pushed the tray in her face.

-I'm not hungry.

He loaded some of the meatloaf onto the spork, flying it toward her face as if she were a toddler.

His smile made her want to lose the battle she was waging with her upper G. I. tract.

-Thanks, I really have no appetite.

Reddening under his unshaven areas, he planted the spork in the mashed potatoes and smacked the tray back onto the table beside her bed.

-Ok, I'll see you tomorrow.

As he stomped out of the room, her sense of relief competed with her feeling of loneliness. What was the point of trying?

The drive home was quiet, if not peaceful. As Mike parked his Camaro, he turned to Naamah.

-Why don't you sleep in my room tonight?

-I don't know, Mike...

The tears welling up in her eyes must have been invisible to Mike. He had no reaction.

-Nu? The seconds passed. -What's wrong, Nans?

-This last time... She choked up.

-What does blood and shit have to do with me? His face went purple, the veins standing out on either side of his neck. Naamah recoiled in the passenger seat, trapped against the door.

Mke brought his face close to hers:

-You can wash a dead body but not sleep next to me? This whole panic thing is just an excuse. You don't want anything to do with me. I'm leaving. The words stung Naamah like a slap in the face.

Chapter 13: Dance or Die

She opened the kitchen window, but not a breeze was stirring as the Cohen kids ran through the yard. Shmueli stopped to wave up at her from the hedgerow in the front of the yard. He whispered in the ear of his little brother, who gave a serious nod before turning and running toward his house, hopping over her hedges on the way. She was just about to call a warning to him when he stopped short, inches from the edge of the sidewalk. He glanced back at her with a smirk, then looked both ways before crossing Park Heights avenue. His older brother grinned as she looked back at him, tilting his head with a wriggle of the eyebrows that meant to apologize for his younger brother's exhuberance. They all knew that she was a worry-wart, and liked to ham it up sometimes.

-Hi, Mrs. Goldstein.

The boy smiled as he dropped his arm and trotted up to the window.

-Hi Shmueli.

The smell of sweat and freshly turned soil wafted in through the screen.

-Would you like me to trim your hedges Mrs Goldstein? I'll be happy to trim them for free this month if you want. You haven't been smiling as much this summer as last year.

She hid her face while muttering that she would be happy to pay him, as she turned to search for money. *From the mouths of babes.* She thought of the irony as she searched for her handkerchief. She had wiped the tears away by the time she got to the kitchen door with the money and a hug for him. Such a nice boy. She would have liked to adopt a child. She turned toward the living room,

pausing to cast one last longing glance at the drawer where the knives were hidden before turning her head back toward the living room, then dragging her feet in that direction.

Settling onto the futon in Indian style, she picked up the copy of Herman that Marie had given her back in the hospital. It would not likely be easy reading, but maybe Marie was right. If she had missed something, it was well past time to get it right. And maybe she could even convince Mike that she was not some kind of faker just looking for attention, or in this case, trying to escape attention. She had tried to tell Mike that her therapist had strongly advised her not to climb, fly, or do anything else that would put her up in the air, even though that was ordinarily where she most loved to be. But he would hear none of it. The only therapist whose opinion he took seriously was his mother.

Noting a sharp pain in her gut, she put the book down. Why was there a burning sensation from within her stomach that refused to obey orders and go the heck away?

When it's your stomach, that burning from within is called hunger.

Her stomach was empty since the night before, so it was high time to eat something. But what?

It was 4th of August, and the 8th of Av, the day before Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, or the ancient Babylonian month, really. She wondered if it was as hot in the ancient Near East in summer as it was here. The weather was cooperating with the intent of the mourning period, haze and humidity doubling the depressive atmosphere. What had it been like for the tribes deported from their hilly homeland? -And what did they eat for breakfast?

The Babylonian Exile had created the rabbinical Jewish culture of today. The exile from her cultural homeland had created Naamah. She didn't even know who she had been before her conversion. All things to all people. It was exhausting. Like the period of the Judges, when “there

was no King in Israel” and everyone did as he saw fit. Only she never knew what it was that she wanted to see fit to do for herself.

An hour later, she was doubled over with cramps. She really had to eat something. But she just couldn't think of anything. The nausea was almost non-stop these days, unless she did something difficult enough to distract her completely.

-I need comfort food, and that means grits!

Time to call Marie.

Making a decision is a dance. In this case, Naamah realized she was dancing around whether to tell Mike, or even Marie, what the real problem was. But the problem was that her real problem might not actually have a solution. In that case, why bother to tell anyone? But not telling anyone was killing her.

This was one case where the dance really did fit the decision. Whether to tell one, both, or neither was a two-edged sword, kind of like the zembekiko. The decision-dance was a knife fight. Make the wrong choice, and you might well die.

Picking up the phone, she dialed the first 6 digits of the number at Marie's dress shop. Then she put the phone back on the hook. What if Mike came home early, or if she was disturbing Marie? It was pretty silly to call Marie just to help her fix something to eat, wasn't it? What had happened to that standing on her own two feet and no longer being a doormat? Ok, so what did she want to eat that was easy to fix? A nice Turkish breakfast of peynir, ekmek zeytin came to mind. Feta cheese, bread and olives, just as Israeli as any other part of the Mediterranean, so that would go over well if

Mike came home. Not exactly the nice familiar grits and eggs with kosher fake bacon breakfast that she was craving, but at least no cooking was required.

Why the hell is my hand trembling?

Her face crumpled when she realized that it was not only her hand that was trembling. Her entire body was like a leaf blowing in the wind.

She must have waited too long to eat, *nitwit self*. Well, if she was too shaky to cook, at least the Mediterranean breakfast was appropriate for the summer heat.

-Now where are the olives. I hope we have some nice Kalamatas, even if they are from Cyprus.

She knew her mother-in-law's bias against Cypriot olives, which she always suspected of competing with Israeli olives. *Better to sell olives than guns*. Besides, what did all the Israeli couples getting married in Cyprus eat?

Wandering into the living room, she realized that if she did not focus, she would never eat, and never get anything else done today, like reading the rest of the chapter in that damned book.

Turning to go back to the kitchen, she spotted her Greek dance cd with her favorite Kalamatianos. *I wonder how a Pan-Hellenic dance could have spread from one island to all of the myriad villages of Greece? Then again, how big is the island of Kalamata? And where is Kalamata?*

Her stomach rumbled loud enough to drown out the kids playing in the street. Ok, it was definitely time to eat the first thing she could put her fingers on.

She marched at the quick step into the kitchen, opening the fridge and pulling out the olives and humus. Black olives, but better than nothing. She popped one into her mouth straight from the box, standing in the open refrigerator doorway. If anyone caught her like this there'd be hell to pay.

Wait a minute, this is my kitchen! Why was she still as nervous as a 12 year old at the thought of making a mistake, especially at home of all places?

Taking the olives and humus to the table, she pulled up a chair and dug another olive into the humus.

Feeling the tangy olive and chick pea glide down her throat, she felt better already. Tipping a dash of cayenne pepper into her humus on the next olive, she savoured the burn in her mouth, feeling a clean tingling heat rising up into her ears as the next bite slid down into her stomach. She began to feel a sense of calm, relief, and sudden certainty that the world would be ok, after all. Sighing as if she had just escaped a water moccasin, she jumped up, knocking her chair over. Picking it up with one hand as she plopped the humus on the table with the other hand, and skipped into the living room. That cd of Greek dance music was calling to her like a lover in the springtime, hiding behind the garden wall. She upset the cd rack in her rush to get the disc out, rattling it into the player as she cranked the volume button all the way to the right. The first song was an instrumental Kalamatiano that she used to teach her friends, the ones who already knew how to do most of the Israeli folk dances, so it was fairly fast. When the music started, she tripped over her feet, stumbling into the couch, and falling on the floor.

What the!

That had never happened before. She wondered if this sudden torpidity had anything to do with being hungry. Then she wondered if she should tell her therapist. But she still had to decide whether to tell Mike or even Marie about the real trouble behind all of these stupid panic attacks. And why couldn't she even put her feet in the right places now, for crying out loud? It was a simple 8/13 time step that any child in Greece could do! People complemented her, Greek people, on how well she danced their dances, even asking if she was Greek, so she knew that she was competent in this one area, at least. Yet here she was, unable to put one foot in front of the blinking other!

-I am an idiot!

This was ridiculous. She couldn't make a single decision, and she couldn't even dance a single simple dance. It was high time to put a stop to this stupidity once and for all.

She turned, her face set in a mask of grim determination. Her teeth were clenched so tightly that

her jaw already ached. *This may not be the best idea I've had lately, but by God I'm going to frickin do this anyway.* She shoved away the niggling pest in the back of her mind that warned her that this was not going to solve anything. She was sick of being miserably unhappy. No one seemed to be able to tell her how to stop these flipping panic attacks, let alone how to solve the real problem. It wasn't so much that she was unhappy, as that she was tired of fighting off the growing temptation simply to go ahead and die. Well, if Helen Keller believed that happiness was to be had through fidelity to a worthy purpose, she could think of no more worthy a purpose at this moment than to break past that cotton-picking height barrier and climb her frickin wall!

She strode to the basement door and jerked it open, rumbling down the stairs without bothering close the door behind her. Flipping the first light switch, she skittered to a halt in front of her rock wall, and hopped up to the first easy hand-hold, kicking off her flip-flops as she levered her body up she caught the second hand-hold and touched two foot-holds like a cat hopping up to its favorite perch.

The alarm bells in her head got louder.

This free-climb was abso-fricking-lutely insane. She knew that, but she just didn't give a damn.

The world was an inherently unsafe place. Not because of the IRA putting bombs in trash cans, but because of fear. *I refuse to continue to live in fear.*

She had just reached the second level. Then she slipped.

The heel-swing she did to compensate for that slip came just a split-second too late, jerked out into thin air by tired muscles, sleep deprived since the start of the panic attacks in the spring. Off balance, her right hand lost the hand-hold, missing her grab for the easy hold next to it. It was unbelievable. *This can't be happening.*

The easiest free climb in the world, and she had failed it.

When she woke up, she was sprawled on the floor, her head facing the wall.

Her right heel was facing the ceiling.

Pain is clarifying. Seeing the break that was once her ankle, Naamah realized several things very clearly. The first was that there was no way she would be able to get up the stairs without help.

The second was that Mike was going to be beside himself with rage. At her. And she couldn't really blame him. Not only had she done something "Baltimore"-ly stupid.

She had also failed to warn him of the real problem behind these damnable panic attacks. Even if he did not want to hear it. As "Out There" Marie would say, "Wishing doesn't make it so." There was no longer any choice. She had to tell them. Both of them.

She heard the Camaro pull into the driveway. Her stomach did a cartwheel worthy of Evil Kenivel.

-Nans? Nanela?

He must have seen both the hallway and basement doors ajar.

-What, are you in the basement? His footsteps pounded across the ceiling.

-Down here, Mike.

The look on Mike's face was not one that Naamah wanted to remember, at all. He had flown back up the stairs as if storming the gates of hell.

When the para-medics arrived he disappeared.

The same nurse who had taken her pulse during her earlier stay in the hospital checked her in, remembering many of her details. She was surprised.

The stay was not long, this time. Her insurance did not cover more than the basic care, so she had no choice but to call Mike to come get her after the cast was finished. She was too embarrassed to call Marie, and she needed to talk with him anyway, like it or not. Her life depended on it.

-Mike?

His knuckles turned even whiter than they had been on the steering wheel. The muscle in his jawbone twitched.

-What?

She clenched her teeth to stop the tears. Swallowing, she took a breath.

-Well? He glared while she fought down the heat in her throat.

-Nu?

She forced her diaphragm to move.

-I need... We need to talk.

-No, Naamah.

The way he spat out her name, she was surprised he did not add Yemach Shemo. Another deep breath.

-Yes, Mike. I need to explain why I tried to climb the wall today, and why I need you to...

-Well?

-I need you to understand.

-Oh, I understand, all right. You just want an excuse not to work, and you get lots of attention along the way.

The jabbing in her stomach shouted louder than Mike. He had hit the mark on at least one thing: she did not like her job. She had difficulty disciplining her classes, and often found herself in

tears. But now it was time to fight, not lay down and be steam-rolled, again.

-No, I do not want special attention, and yes, I do want to work, but-

He slammed the breaks on, squealing the tires as he pulled brutally over to the shoulder of I95North. As other cars blared their indignance.

When he turned his face toward her, the breath caught in her throat as if he had clamped his hand around her windpipe. His face was purple, the veins in his forehead having joined those in his jaw and neck, forming one swollen mass of flesh, pulsating with an odor that made her gag. He turned back toward the road, yelling at the passing drivers.

She recoiled from him. Then came the knees pressing into the back of her chest, pushing her ribcage into her throat. *This is only a memory, I just have to breathe.* The therapist had told her to form a safe-space in her mind, and go there when she began to feel afraid. Despite the fact that Mike had never hit her, she felt very much afraid.

She began to hiccup, but managed to take a breath. Turning to face Mike, she imagined a wall between them that would allow sound to pass, but nothing else.

She opened her mouth to speak; only a squeak emerged.

-Nu? His face finally began to relax, going back to a more normal shade of pink. She took another deep breath, relaxing her fingers, which had been curled into fists.

-Mike, I had to climb that wall to prove that I could do something.

-Oh, yeah, you sure proved that. You proved that you could fall on your touchas. Did you think I didn't see that, huh?

-No! I didn't try to hide it. I just forgot to tie in!

-You forgot to tie in?! You teach climbing and you FORGOT TO TIE IN?!

She cringed, curling into the passenger seat as he leaned over the shifter, looming over her like

Godzilla. Her tears stung her face as she shook her head.

-No, I did not think to tie in.

-Damned right you didn't think you putz!

Her shock was enough to overcome her fear. Now her trembling was from rage.

He suddenly straightend up to his full seated height and looked down at her.

-Well, what was it that was so important that you had to tell me, huh?

She forced the words out:

-I climbed because if I cannot dance, can't climb, can't save lives, then I see no reason to live.

-What, suicide? You're threatening me?! That is it! I'm giving you a Get!!

Chapter 14: Stories of Hubris

A Get. It sank in like Brutus' knife.

The phone rang. *Let the answering maching get it.*

She changed her mind as she cringed, launching herself the two steps to the phone just to interrupt the cackle.

-Hi, hon, I'm glad you saved me from having to leave you a message, what took you so long to get to the phone?

-I, um...

She choked on the excuse she had been about to give. Obviously she couldn't be chopping vegetables for dinner on the start of Tisha B'Av, even if Marie didn't yet know that. She would pick

it up.

-Are you ok, hon? Where is Mike? Has he done anything to you?

-No! But, he...

-That pig has hurt you! I'm coming to get you. Dont' you move I'll be right there!

Before she could say anything, the phone line went dead in her hand. *Oh, no.* Then her stomach began doing cartwheels. Marie might be like family, but the idea of talking about a Get terrified her. Easier to just die.

She shot a glance across the kitchen table, no more than a blur in the darkness, to the empty knife rack. The knives waited patiently in the drawer below. She hadn't told Mike why, when he'd groused about not finding the chopping knife. Mike was, or had been, the only friend that Nanyehi had ever trusted. Even above Marie, her adopted family.

Though she trusted Marie more than anyone else in her life, she had never told Marie things about herself that she had entrusted to Mike. Marie undoubtedly suspected without being told. But Mike had offered her the security of marriage, an official way to become family, conditioned only upon her trust. Or that was what he had said before they got married.

She had been so happy, so relieved, so grateful that someone would accept her despite the constant jumpiness that Marie often pointed out. Once, Marie had tried to explain how Nan's jumpiness made her nervous, too, but it only made Nan feel even more ashamed.

Mike, on the other hand, after she'd confided to him that she often felt afraid, (*he never notices my feelings, but that actually makes it easier*) had become more protective, pulling her into bone-crushing hugs which he undoubtedly meant to make her feel loved, safe and reassured. And they did, until his smell changed. Then she felt more small, nauseous, and excrable than ever.

-Why in the hell was I born a women?

She looked down, thinking to have addressed that question to the kitchen table. But she was really addressing the question to her chopping knife. That knife had a soul, she was sure.

-In fact, why in the hell was I born at all? What in the frickin 32 hells of Dante did I do before I was born to deserve this? *What's 32 divided by 9, anyway?*

The table did not seem to have answer. Who was she kidding, it was her chopping knife that had no answer. Tali, on the other hand, just might give her a reply. The image of her large white talit, the prayer shawl she had taken 6 weeks to finish, between sewing the long blue atara across the top, and tying the four fringes in the corners just so, with all the patience she could muster. Every morning she seemed to ignore that talit, despite the fact that her beautiful soft talit, whom a friend at shul had dubbed Tali, most certainly did have a soul, and lots of opinions to go with it.

-Was I a serial killer, a rapist, the secret right hand man of Hitler or something in my last lifetime? What exactly did I to deserve this?

-Nothing, hon.

Naamah twitched even though she knew the voice behind that assertion. She threw a confirming look across the kitchen. Marie flipped on the light, placing a large duffel bag by the door.

-You did not do a single cotton-picking thing to deserve being mistreated. And don't try to deny it, because you were obviously mistreated at some time very early in your life. And no, it was not your fault, whatever it was, hon. You just got dealt a crappy hand, and now you have to play that hand the best way you can.

-But, how-

-The back door was unlocked.

-Unlocked?

That jerk! Mike had left the door unlocked with her like this? Alone in the house?

-Ah, when did you break your leg?

Marie gave her a look that stated louder than words the conviction that something was not right, and that it had to be Mike's fault.

-Um, I was climbing. *Why does the look on Marie's face say that she doesn't believe me?*

Marie crossed the kitchen and sat down next to Naamah. Marie took Naamah's hand, then looked her dead in the eyes, seeming to measure her. The trembling that had started in her gut spread to her entire body. It was no use trying to hide anything from this woman.

-Aren't you not supposed to be climbing, hon?

When Naamah hung her head like a child caught playing with matches, Marie continued:

-Tell me, hon, what's going on?

-He... suddenly she felt like hot coals were being piled on her face.

-Mike?

She nodded, -Mike, he... she drew a deep breath, then expelled the words: -wants a divorce.

-Hallelujah!!

Naamah nearly fell out of her chair.

-What?!

-I said-

-I know what you said, Marie! Why are you happy!? What, do you want me to come move in with you, be your sewing assistant, wash your dishes?

-Hon, that hurts. You know I don't need a sewing assistant and I don't want you doing my dishes.

-Well I can't work at the school like this, they already told me my kids were out of control, and now that I've failed my EMT re-cert, I cannot go back to being a para-medic. I'm fricking useless!

Naamah made a vast effort not to cry. There was only one reason she could think of to keep living.

-At least I was able to make one person on this planet happy by my existence, and now that isn't even true. He says I just want an excuse to stay away from him.

-And what am I, chopped liver?

-No, but he married me. You are like my sister, but you can't be there day and night for me. He promised to do that for me if I just trusted him.

-Oh, really? And did he promise this out of the goodness of his heart, Saint Mike, or was it because he wanted to have sex with you?

-No! He said he was happy just for me to trust him! He said he didn't need to have sex with me!

-Really, and so, you are still a virgin, I take it?

-Marie!!

-No, he happily accepted to rescue the damsel in distress, and accept the reward of the knight in shining armor! You know that when the hero saves the world, he always gets the girl!

Naamah looked down at the table. It was true that Mike had been delighted, the few times they had made love. She had not enjoyed it, but she had tried her best to make him happy, to show her trust. She had hoped that after a while she would come to like it.

She couldn't. Eventually Mike had noticed. All her guilty feelings couldn't make her enjoy physical contact with him.

-Look, hon. You don't owe him anything but the trust that you promised him. If he loved you like he said, he would not have accepted your body without knowing your mind.

Naamah had to admit that she felt the same way. Mike had always treated her more like a pet than a wife. Proud of her exotic beauty, he had sent wedding photos to all and sundry. But he never sought to understand her feelings. And now, she needed his understanding.

-Did I ever tell you the story of how "No Mocassins" got her name?

-Why do you want to tell me that story?

-Because it is the story of how a man should treat his wife.

Naamah was all ears.

-To make a long story short, a man, let's say he was Cherokee, got captured by a rival band of Indians, let's call them Iroquois. After three days tied up in their camp, he figured all of his folks had counted him for dead. Then that night, he saw his little wife sneaking in to rescue him. Later, he noticed she was barefoot. She cut him down, got him home, and nursed him back to health. When he got around to asking, it turned out that she had left her mocassins a way up another trail to lead the enemy in the wrong direction, so she could rescue him. And she never told anyone. Neither did he, at her request. When she died, he finally told the whole band why he called her No Mocassins. Before they lit her pyre the next day, there was a whole pile of mocassins underneath.

Does Mike respect you, every day?

-Well...

-No! Why do you think I never liked him, hon? He loves you the way he loves his airplane.

-That is not true!

Marie looked her dead in the eye.

-Are you sure, hon? Does he love you for saving lives, or for your curly hair? Think about it, now.

Marie glanced out the window as the sound of the Camaro passed by.

-Speak of the devil and he will appear. I'll call you in a few hours, I think I should leave now. When you decide you are ready, you know I have a guest room, hon.

Headlights appeared, and then darkened.

She jumped as the door slammed. Marie was leaving out the other door, post-haste.

Thinking of Mike reminded her of a lover years before.

-Why do you always look like that when we're outside, caray?

-Look like what when we are outside? Why are you upset? What's wrong?

“Caray” was a mild swear word that Mexicans employed to show irritation, but Rosario seemed to be irritated with her all of the time. Maybe switching back into Spanish would appease her.

-Quieres comer algo? If you want to eat at the Lebanese place tonight, I will treat.

Her eyes darted off to the left at a passing bus.

-No.

Her stomach had flopped when she saw the flash in Rosario's eyes. Caught scanning the plaza again. This avenue was broad enough, leading from an intersection of 5 major roads, that anyone could approach them unseen from the side streets. Shorter by only half a head, but unused to walking as fast, Rosario had had to break into a trot to keep up with her. The frown deepened Rosario's perceptive face. Trying to change the subject hadn't worked, either.

-You always do that! Why do you keep looking around as if the migra was after you? I am here, I will protect you!

Nanyehi had tried to suppress the sceptical look she had started to level at her girlfriend. Being caught by The migra, or immigration and naturalization service, was Rosario's greatest fear. And part of why they were together. She had met Rosario, an energetic immigrant without papers, in the Latino community and been impressed with her energy and interest in intercultural issues. Their favorite films to share were films that showed the problems between various communities, and especially problems of women in the Latino community. It was a difficult challenge to protect women who were at the mercy of the system and of the men in their lives.

Rosario could not protect her; had never asked why she was so jumpy. Rosario's only question, every other day, was "quando vamos a estar juntas?" as if they were not already together.

-Y quando vamos-

-Ya basta, Rosario. Last time I checked, we were together. We are together right now, watching this movie.

-You know what I mean.

The lecherous look in Rosario's eyes had confirmed it. She couldn't get away from that stupid sex thing, even with a woman. So much for women being more sensitive.

When she had finally broken up with Rosario, after several tumultuous months of trying to relax enough to give herself to this insistent woman, Rosario had not been kind about it:

-You are very difficult. You know, you should be grateful that I would accept you. After all, who is going to have you with your background?

My background?

Whether Rosario had been referring to her mixed racial background, which was often a subject of contention when they talked about Rosario's insistence that Black people were lazy, or to the constant jumping at noises and surveillance of the territory, Nanyehi had no longer cared. Like Mike, whom she had already met, but never imagined marrying, Rosario had promised to be a protector for Nanyehi, but had turned out to be more dangerous emotionally than simply being alone.

Mike walked into the kitchen, throwing a hostile look at Naamah.

-I'm going out to eat with my family.

-You told them?

-I told my mother, but she wants to keep it quiet, avoid all the lashon harah. People gossip, and we don't need to air the family laundry in public. I brought you a burger.

A burger? -Thanks.

Mike seemed to think that her thanks were not enthusiastic enough, judging by the look on his face.

He must have forgotten that it's Tisha B'Av, or maybe, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he thought that having a broken leg exempted her from fasting. Either way, his glare in her direction as he stomped out the door told her more than any words could have said.

Chapter 15: Stories of Hemlock

Two weeks later, Naamah had convinced herself that the hamburger had been an oversight. Mike certainly meant well, or he wouldn't have bothered getting her the burger in the first place. Still, the hamburger had gone uneaten. Not so much because it had been the second scariest fast day on the Jewish calendar, but because of the nausea. She had sat in stunned silence, looking at the package on the kitchen table, the smell of the meat wafting temptingly up at her.

The phrase, *I'd rather have hemlock*, had stolen into her thoughts like a cat burglar making himself at home.

She dragged her thoughts back to the hamburger. He couldn't have gotten it at Seven Mile Market, only two hours after the first reading of Eichah. Since that night, she'd been sleeping on the couch, *just to avoid the stairs, of course*. At least that put off the argument about not touching Mike, if it was still an issue.

His mother might have made him change his mind about the Get, but not about Naamah's being frum. He'd made it quite clear that as far as he was concerned, she had no right to become anything resembling orthodox. As far as Naamah was concerned, the orthodox at least understood a thing or two about the cycle of healthy human feelings. Mike judging by his ignorance of The Nine Days, did not.

Naamah thought of Marie's story of No Mocassins as she hobbled to the pantry to get the dried baby lima beans. *I'm starting to look like a one mocassin now!*

She wished she had the inventiveness that brave woman had had. She needed it to figure out what to do now. *Except that I am Jewish now, all Jewish, not part Cherokee, mestiza or even Black.* And it was now the month of Elul. The most important month on the Jewish calendar for relationships in need of fixing. She opened the refrigerator in search of the corn on the cob.

Everyone was starting to visit or call friends, relatives and sometimes even acquaintances or colleagues, asking forgiveness for any wrongs done over the past year. Several of the more observant neighbors, and Ari Levi from the Chevrah Kadishah had come by the house just yesterday to thank her again for helping with Mrs. Kahn, so early in the month of Elul. She closed the fridge and hopped on one foot to the table, letting 4 ears of mildly dried yellow corn fall to the table. Just then, a knock came at the door. A small head was bouncing up and down on the porch.

-Come on in, Shmueli.

The young boy's smile lit up the dark kitchen. It almost erased the worry lines drawn across Naamah's forehead.

He bounded into the kitchen carrying a package with a note from his mother. What a nice family. Naamah's eyes began to tear. People had stopped by both to fulfill the mitzvah of bikkur cholim, since Naamah was considered ill due to her broken leg, and to ask her forgiveness if she had felt slighted in any way over the past year.

The note asked if Naamah needed anything other than the honey, which was the neighbor's gift for the New Year. It added that Mrs. Cohen hoped to stop by this afternoon. She glanced over at Shmueli, who beamed up at her, sensing his importance as the mashliach, or messenger.

-Shmueli, please tell your Imma that I would be very happy to see her this afternoon.

-Ok, Morah Naamah!

He jetisoned himself out the doorway, turning back to catch the screen door a split-second before it banged shut. The little devil shot a grin at Naamah, turning to run home and deliver the news to his mother. She felt guilty that the kids still called her morah, now that she would no longer be teaching.

Sighing, she sat down heavily in the chair. Naamah returned to the yellow corn, a gift from Marie on condition of making succotach for her. Shucking the first ear, she set the husks to one side hoping to find a nice salmon before Rosh HaShanah. It was relaxing to bake fish in the fresh corn husks, especially when Marie was over to share them. It hit her that Mike's mother had not yet called with her annual request for forgiveness. That was unusual, since she was generally the first person to call in Elul.

She probably thinks I should be asking her for forgiveness and begging her son not to divorce me!

But what on earth was she supposed to do to get rid of these damned disabling panic attacks?

Frustrated again by the situation, she looked up to the cabinet where she had hidden the cyanide. It had been years since they had had a rat problem, and Mike had forgotten to get rid of the leftover poison. *It would probably be faster than the apple seeds.* Putting the intruding thought out in the cold, she used one crutch to stand, lifting the other to open the cabinet door and push the poison to the back of the cupboard, out of view. Where she had already hidden the apple seeds. The knives would have to be next. Just in case.

It was becoming too tempting. On the up side, it could be considered polite of her to save Mike's mom from having to ask get a translation of the ketubah. As an educated convert, her bride price had been non-standard. Would it matter when she was gone? In any case, it was Marie, having stood in for Naamah's estranged mother, who had kept the Ketubah after the wedding. And she clearly believed Mike to be the spawn of the Evil Impulse.

She felt the days getting shorter. Less hope, except for Nelson Mandela. *Oh wait, that was last year.* Usually the day after Labour Day was busy, nervous, but ok. The new school year and the

new Jewish year made for a busy fall. But now she couldn't even teach gym. Maybe those comments last year about being distracted at work had also had something to do with it, but she was sure that the EMT recertification would solve those problems. Besides, getting her para-medical licence back would have meant she could save lives again, instead of wasting her life playing babysitter for a bunch of rambunctious children. *Damn it!* Now she was really wasting her life. She couldn't save people, couldn't teach school, couldn't teach her climbing students, hell she couldn't even climb now. She was a complete waste of oxygen!

-Hey, hon!

-Yeeeeooooooooowwww!!

Naamah had jumped so high she had hit her casted foot when she landed. How did that woman manage to surprise her like that? Naamah gritted her teeth so tightly her face turned white.

-Oh, sorry hon, are you alright? Marie was looking really worried. Naamah forced out a breath, waiting for the pain to pass.

-Isn't it back to school time, Marie, shouldn't you be making First Dance dresses or something like that?

-It might be back to school time for everyone else, hon, but not for you! Nan, hon, now you have the time to watch my favorite show, the new Star Trek:Voyager and find out all about your Jewish Halloween namesake, Captain Catherine Janeway!

A sudden downpour began pounding on the roof.

Just what I needed, to waste more time watching TV. At least that'd make it easier to ignore this rain. TV, that was it.

-I don't have a tv, Marie. Mike moved it into the bedroom upstairs.

-Why, so you would knit him socks to keep his feet warm?

Nan looked up at Marie, confused. Socks?

-Now that he won't have your back to walk on.

Naamah's half smile crumpled into a dishrag.

-Nah, hon, what's wrong, you don't look happy? Is it because that clod wants to divorce you? Don't worry, you'll find someone better in no time.

-I don't want someone better, I just want someone who loves me, that's all.

-But he doesn't love You, hon, he loves your curls. What happened last time you cut your hair?

-That was an accident, Marie, my hand slipped with the scissors.

-No matter how short you cut your hair, hon, no man who loves you would have called you a sheared sheep!! That is not love, that is possession, and you can do much better than that, girl!

-No, I can't do better than that, Marie.

She shook her head, tears dripping into the corn husks on the table. She shoved them aside, then took a swipe at her eye, spreading corn silk over half her face. Marie was waiting, looking more intently into her eyes than Naamah had ever seen her do before. She wondered if there was a worm on her face. Marie had a horror of those green worms, so she always tried to finish getting the corn shucked and tied up before Marie sat to the table. Shucking corn and snapping string beans with grandma...

A drumming sound pulled her from her reverie. Who was playing Little Drummer Boy on her kitchen table? She opened her eyes to see Marie's baby blues, just inches from own almond browns. It was Marie's stubby fingers that were drumming on the table.

-Back among us hon?

Naamah nodded a shaky affirmation.

-Now tell me what the problem is, and I mean the real problem, hon, not the noises and jumpiness, not the panic attacks, and not even the smell of blood. I want the real problem, girl, not all those

cover-ups you wear like Cheryl Tieggs wears Cover Girl.

-Cover Girl? But I don't wear lipstick!

-I know, maybe you should try it, your lips are always dry. No eye shadow, though, you got those purple marks on your eyelids that make you look like you ran into a fence when you were little!

-I did run into a fence, but not when I was little, thank you! I was 12.

-You know hon, most people call that little. I'll bet you were still knee-high to a grasshopper when you were 12 years old, girl!

-Twelve years old is not little.

-You always have seemed to want to be old before your time, hon. What, were you 17 going on 31?

How the hell does she do that?!

-When did I tell you about that? It was my first office job!

Remembering the adult who had accosted her, accusing her of being too serious, Naamah thought back to all of the years in school, classmates accusing her of being distant, aloof, arrogant. They seemed to think that it was their parties, gossip and loveboat or maybe their Jolt soda she was avoiding. It wasn't. It was their judgement. Not of her highwaters, her frumpy clothing, not even of her contempt for their talk of sex. She feared their judgement of her thoughts. The thoughts she could not share to this day, even with Marie.

She yanked off another corn husk, tossing it away from Marie. *It would be so much easier to die, and fertilize the earth like this corn cob. At least then I'd be doing something useful.*

-Ah, erm!

She jumped, startled by Marie's booming voice.

-Hello, earth to Nan, earth calling Nan, come in Nan.

Marie waved 5 pink fingers in front of Naamah's recoiling face. The crick in her neck told Naamah it was time to breath again.

-What, DAMN YOU, hon, is the real problem?

She caught half a breath and dropped her corn cob at the same time.

What did Marie just say?

Marie was drumming her fingers and tapping her foot, drilling those blue eyes so deep she was leaving almond peels where Naamah's face used to be. Naamah burst into tears. She couldn't hurt her best friend by telling her something so cruel. Wanting to die meant wanting to leave everyone behind, to desert, flee like a rat from a sinking ship. Wanting to die meant accusing Marie of not being a good friend. How could Nan do that? When she looked up to take a breath, Marie was holding a out a handkerchief to her. Waiting.

-Well, hon? And I want the truth, no half-stepping, no sugar-coating. We've been friends too long for that buulll-sheeeit.

God, when did she start talking like this? I am really a bad influence.

-And don't you go thinking it's your fault I'm talking like this, hon. Don't you find yet another sin to hang on your back. You spend too much time already flagellating yourself, just like those monks who walk-

-Ok! For crying out loud, Marie-

-No, hon, you're the one crying, and I can't stand to see you do it. You have to learn to trust someone and do it now, cause I think it's starting to kill you. Accident my foot, that broken leg is nothing but a sign of things to come, and I want to know what. I'm standing by you, so if a rock is about to fall on our heads, you better tell me now.

Standing by me? Really? Naamah was afraid to hope for that much.

-Out with it, missy!

Naamah drew a deep breath, still wiping her face, tightening her stomach muscles to steel herself for the next abandonment.

-I keep wanting to die, Marie. I know it's wrong, and logically it's even stupid, but I feel like I have

nothing left to live for. I can't save lives, I can't teach, I can't climb, and I can't even fly with Mike. She was braced for Marie to run disgusted from the room, and that wasn't even the worst of her secrets.

-Aoooouuuuuwww!

Marie's cackle really did knock her out of her chair this time, combined with the slap on the back the large-boned blond had delivered to an unbalanced Naamah. Picking her up with only one arm, Marie had deposited her back in the chair while dusting her off with the other arm.

-You need to put some meat on your bones, girl! So is that what this is all about hon, saving the world?

-Well what other point is there to living if I can't do something useful. At least you, Naamah pointed a corn husk toward Marie,

-get to make people happy, making useful things they want to wear.

Marie sighed:

-The grass is always greener.

Marie slapped an unshucked ear of corn into Naamah's shocked hand. The cackle made her toss it an inch into the air before catching it again. Marie nodded a compliment to her quick reflexes.

-Did I ever tell you, I think it was a friend named Cat, I'll have to introduce you two sometime, who first read me the story based on this poem by...

While Marie searched for the name of the poet or storyteller, Naamah was searching for an escape route.

-Oh, no, not another story, Marie, please!

-Hush up, girl, this is no story. It was a long poem of a silly woman, kind of like you, who was always trying to save the world.

Marie tapped the table twice for emphasis.

-In the end of the poem, just about the last verse, she says something like: I finally marched on, or strode off, somewhat like that.

Naamah tugged on the silk, pulling half of the husk down the ear in her hand. Marie paused, pointed one finger to her left eyebrow, which she had never been able to arch the way Naamah did habitually, then continued:

-Determined to save the only person I could save...

Marie straightened her back lifted her chin and inched her face forward, locking eyes with Naamah:

-Myself.

Naamah noticed that she was holding her breath. Lowering the half-shucked ear, she also noticed that she was trembling. But why?

-Uh huh. I thought so, Hon.

Now Naamah was confused as well as worried. Marie thought what? Of course. She was a waste of space and deserved to die. Maybe Marie would help her sew Tali into a nice burial shroud so she could make a fire pit in the back yard and just roll herself in. That would be a good clean way to die.

A bottle of aspirin beforehand would help with the pain, since she wasn't nearly as well-trained as her so-called Red ancestors. But their culture appreciated feeding the sacred fire. One of the things Lt. Timberlake just couldn't understand. But it made perfect sense to her, or at least to the part of her that was still Nanyehi. *Why bother surviving if you can't live with yourself and – what was that tapping?*

-Hon, Nan, hon?

Naamah looked up.

-Sorry. I'm sorry I...

-No you don't hon, don't you dare go feeling sorry for yourself.

-What?! I was trying to apologize-

-No, hon, you were busy feeling like no one loves you and you can't save the world, so why bother?
Am I right? No, don't answer, I know I'm right. I've been doing your homework, hon!

Now Naamah was stunned. No one had ever accused her of not doing her work, ever.

-I read that book before I gave it to you hon, you know, that Trauma and Recovery, and then I read up on this PTSD thing, and then I read that it usually comes from being in wars, but also comes from being born in the wrong family. And that the girls from those families usually either die young, have lots of babies, or try to save the world. You are in that last-

(she pointed a stubby right index finger at Naamah in perfect imitation of a Drag Queen)

- category, but I am here to tell you something. And you are going to listen.

She took the corn cob, husk and all, out of Naamah's hand.

-With your full attention. Close your mouth hon, before a fly goes in it. And open up your ears.

You are not responsible for me, you are not responsible for Mike, you are not responsible for saving anyone. What you are responsible for, missy, is Your Self. You are the only person in this world who has to take care of you, and that is your responsibility. And you are trying to shirk it.

Naamah gasped in outrage. Marie continued, wagging the corn cob at Naamah?

-Oh poor me, I have no family, nobody loves me, no one took care of me, blah blah blah. All that may be true, but you got to play the hand you were dealt, even if it is a crap hand. And some of your cards were definitely crap. But let me tell you something else, missy. You got a few aces in that hand, too. You got a strong healthy body, with likety-split quick reflexes. That's your first ace, and your second one, is your mind. You got a mind sharper than almost anyone I know, Black, White, Red or Jew. Even as smart as an Asian girl I knew. You're smart, but you lack one thing.

Naamah's left eyebrow arched, waiting.

-Balls.

Balls? Naamah nearly fell over. Marie never talked like this. She must be really pissed off at her.

Naamah hung her head lower than a cat who'd missed the litter box.

-Yes, hon, balls. You need to scrub that W-E-L-C-O-M-E right off of your back! Until you do, you will be the world's doormat, and nothing to yourself. When you learn to use those muscles of yours to straighten up your spine and take care of yourself instead of everybody else, then you will know. Stop being a victim and start being responsible. Save yourself first. Then maybe you can help someone else. Ok, hon?

-OK, what?

The door slammed, shaking the windows. Great. Mike had just shown up.

-What's SHE doing here?

Mike was glowering at Naamah, pointedly ignoring Marie, who cleared her throat, evidently preparing to demonstrate her advice to Naamah. Marie stood, rising up like a mother bear defending her cubs.

-SHE wants to know why you moved the television out of the living room and up stairs, where your wife with the broken leg cannot sit and relax to watch it.

Mike's face went from red to purple.

-This Shiksa needs to leave my house right now! Naamah, either you tell her, or I call the police.

Naamah was stunned speechless. Marie seemed furious. Her strawberry blond hair had turned fire engine red, matching her face.

-I was just leaving.

Leaning closer to Naamah, softly, but in a tone of voice that could have melted ice, she added:

-You'll have to pick up the phone and call me next time you want to see me, hon.

As Marie stepped out into an afternoon drizzle, Mike stepped closer to the table, reaching for one of the ears of corn. His frown reminded Naamah how much he disliked succotash. Too bad it was her favorite dish.

-Alright, so what gives? What was she telling you to do?

Naamah looked up at his face, still pink, his jaw muscles working as if he were chewing on a piece of gristle. She opened her mouth, but a cough welled up from the bottom of her throat that brought tears to her eyes. He began tapping his foot on the floor, snorting like a bull about to charge.

-Nu?

-I don't want to live, Mike.

She had blurted it out so quickly that at first she thought he had not heard. He had a perplexed look on his face, which quickly turned to anger.

-Oh, wonderful! Now you want to manipulate me into staying together. What, you want I should buy you a separate house, too, so you can have your privacy and your own TV set? Dai!

Naamah was too wiped out to do any more than let the tears roll down her cheeks, her shoulders slumped over the pile of corn husks.

-Oh, right, go ahead and cry now! That'll help. As if the corn and beans wasn't already enough!

I'm a Yid, not a wild indian!

He stormed out of the kitchen, slamming the outside door behind him, sending a glass crashing to the floor. Just then, the lights of another car turned up their driveway. She heard the last voice on earth that she needed to hear right now. It was apparently sympathizing with the booming voice further up the driveway. Mike's mother opened the door, stepping gingerly around the broken glass.

-I brought some chicken soup with keneidelach for Mike, but he's eating with us, so you can have it, in case you decide not to hang yourself.

Behind his mother, Mike tossed his head back and snorted. Mrs. Cohen appeared in the doorway just as he and his mother were leaving. Naamah thought she saw an expression of shock, wiped away before she could be sure, on her neighbor's face. They both turned to greet the newcomer, forced smiles waltzing across all three faces.

-I hope I'm not intruding, I sent Shmueli over earlier.

-Oh, thank you, Mrs. Cohen, we were just running out to do some shopping before the market closes. Thank you for visiting with our Naamahla, you're very kind.

-No, no, of course.

-Have a good day.

The neighbor continued into the kitchen doorway as Mike moved to join his mother. Just then, Shmueli's head appeared and disappeared through the kitchen door window. *He must have jumped the hedge row.* Naamah's suspicion was confirmed when the child came bounding over to his mother:

-Imma, imma, Davi fell and -

Before the boy could get another word out, his mother took off, picking up her long skirt and trotting back across to her house, shouting an apology over her shoulder.

Mother and son nodded curt acknowledgements as Shmueli looked on. Mike sauntered toward the Camaro, turning to open the driver's side door. Naamah thought she saw his mother jerk her head toward the kitchen door. Shmueli was still standing there in the yard.

-Love you, Naamahla.

Right.

His mother's back was still to Nan, but she could see the smile melting from Mike's face as he dropped into the driver's seat. *He only loves my kosher shrimp fried rice.* The Get would be delivered on the grounds of ingratitude, by the look of it. Her face crumpled as she closed the kitchen door. *Time to get this overwith.* She had no one left: no family, no real friends, and soon no spouse, so it seemed like the right time. A good clean close to the year 5755.

She would finish it with succotash, and hot chocolate. *It is finally here.* Her eyes rose to the cupboard where the cyanide was hidden. *I promised myself this day would come, and now that it's here, I am afraid. But I refuse to live this way.* She thought hemlock would have been more classical.

Chapter 16: Days of Fear

The knock on the screen door brought her back to the present. Shmueli had been standing there awhile, it seemed, by the look on his face. She was glad that what she needed was still up in the

cabinet, too high for the dear boy to reach. She hobbled around the broken glass, reaching for the broom.

-Hang on a minute, Shmueli, let me sweep this mess up.

-Oh, no, Morah Naamah, please let me do it. I get to help a cholah and even make the brachah!

Since when am I so ill I'm a cholah?! Then again, maybe house-bound qualified, why not?

-So, there's an extra blessing now for sweeping up the floor? What, you want more mitzvah points?

She smiled at the kid's enthusiastic head bob, amused at the idea of points for prayers.

-That, and my father might give me a bit of gelt for recycling the glass. Oh, please, Morah, Naamah, bevakashah?

-Ok, ok, you win Shmueli.

Naamah surrendered the broom with one hand, leaning on a crutch with the other hand to hobble back to the table, followed by the anxious look of the neighbor's son. The kid was obviously on track to be a mother rooster, if such a thing existed.

While Shmueli swept, his blond curls flopping around his head while he sent bits of glass fleeing in the general direction of the doorway, Naamah went back to shucking the corn. The blond head swivelled in her direction, sweeping motions freezing for an instant:

-What's that going to be, a cholent? You use corn instead of potatoes?

-No, Shmueli, this is going to become Succotach, once I finish soaking the beans and get the bell peppers chopped.

-Oh,

He seemed perplexed, then worried.

-You keep kosher, right, Morah Naamah?

-I keep OU kosher, not Chalav Israel, but Conservodox kosher, if you know what that means?

-I know what that means, Morah Naamah: your family has three sets of plates, michig, fleishig, and treif!

Her ear of corn went flying across the room as Naamah doubled over with a belly laugh she hadn't

had in months. *Yep, from the mouths of babes, alright!*

His mother would probably be horrified if she'd heard that.

The poor boy went red from ear to ear.

-Sorry, that's what my Tatty says.

Naamah grimaced as she thought of the arguments they must have if Mr. Cohen dared to say that out loud about Mike's family. Mrs. Cohen was a polite and neighborly woman, observant, but more progressive than her husband in many areas.

-Can I taste your dish?

-Of course you can, Shmueli, if that's ok with your Imma and Tatty. *Ok, good thing I didn't start already. Tali in the firepit is definitely a better idea, but where?*

-Can I help you fix it? I like to help cook!

What a dear nice child. Maybe having kids wasn't so bad, if you could know that they would not suffer in life. *But then, life is suffering.*

-I know how to do that.

She looked up at the boy, now holding the dustpan full of glass, looking at her sadly.

-Sorry, Shmueli, what were you saying?

He looked at her with the same look in his eyes as the time he had told her about his grandmother, now senile, in the hospital. This did not make her feel better.

-I know how to do that.

He pointed with his free hand to the ear of corn she was shucking.

-Can I help, after I finish this?

-Sure, Shmueli, of course you can. I'll be glad to have your company. You can even tell me what you've learned from this week's Parashah, if you want.

-Betach!

He beamed her a grin that could have lit a bonfire. The blond curls lept in the air, somehow

managing to keep the glass on the dustpan without moving an inch. *This kid would make an excellent fencer!*

She wondered if his parents would accept the gift of fencing equipment for their son. Still wide-eyed at the feat of coordination, she watched as the lithe 9 year old dashed out the screen door, without letting it bang shut, racing across the yard.

Wow. She had to smile in admiration and admit that the world could indeed be a wonderful place. If you had the right people around you.

He was back before she looked up. When had he come back into the kitchen, and how had he managed to glide right up to her without her noticing? She forced a smile at the suddenly nervous looking boy in front of her. Not his fault that she was so ... She handed him an ear of corn to start shucking, and looked around to sort the beans and make space to chop the peppers. The peppers, they needed chopping. Good thing someone was here, to ward off the temptation.

-Shmueli, my helper, you are a mechaiyah! I couldn't possibly get this done without you!

-Why, does your leg hurt? I can wash the peppers for you too, if you want. Imma doesn't let me use the big knife yet, but I know how to cut vegetables!

-I'm sure you do, Shmueli, but you let me do the chopping, please, ok?

-Ok, Morah Naamah.

-Then if you want we can have some hot chocolate -are you allowed to drink the kosher soy milk from 7 Mile Market?

He looked around conspiratorially, then leaned over to whisper in her ear:

-My Imma says I can drink O U drinks from 7 Mile Market outside of the house, if I don't tell Tatty.

-Perfect! It'll be our secret if you want: and you can check all the hechshers yourself, just like a Rav!

They grinned at each other while they worked on the sucotash, looking forward to the reward of hot

chocolate once the beans were on to cook. Naamah noted that she'd have to let Shmueli decide how much cayenne and ginger to put into today's mix.

The knock at the door came just as they were adding the corn to the beans, which were nearly done cooking. The smell of lima beans and corn was starting to create the smell that Naamah remembered from her childhood, making sucotash with her great grandmother. Shmueli jumped up from the table to greet his mother, unlatching the screen door. Naamah jumped slightly to see that it was already dark outside. She ought to have sent Shmueli home, but hadn't noticed anything.

-Hi, Shmueli said he'd be helping you with some chores here, so I let him out of his chores at home, but now it's time for dinner.

Mrs. Cohen lowered her voice, as if she felt guilty.

-I noticed that Mike is not home, so if you'd like to eat with us, you're more than welcome. There's always an extra place set for orchim, especially neighbors.

-Come eat with us Morah Naamah, please! I didn't get to finish telling you about the parashah!

She felt exhausted, but how could she turn down an invitation like that?

-Thank you, that's very kind of you.

-Oh, not at all. Chachnasas orchim is our favorite mitzvah, right Shmueli?

-And Morah Naamah is our favorite orachat!

Naamah felt her face catch fire from chin to forehead, and across both cheeks, as if crossing herself the way she had been taught before she could remember, in Sunday school. She pushed down the thought.

By the time she and Shmueli had crossed Park Heights Avenue, he had finished telling her about the rest of the parashah and started in on his shofar blowing practice for the end of the morning prayers.

-I can even join in sometimes with everyone after shachris at Rabbi D.'s shul!

-I know! Morah Naamah! Since you can't get around with your leg, maybe I can come and blow the shofar for you after shul in the mornings!

She wondered how early they finished their morning services. His mother looked horrified. Naamah realized that Mrs. Cohen was afraid her son had just put Naamah on the spot, despite meaning well.

-What time do they finish davening shachris? I like being up when the sun comes up.

She hoped that was early enough not to embarrass Mrs. Cohen. A stolen glance seemed to confirm that that time would be early enough. She'd seen Shmueli walk to school from his house, so he must come home for breakfast after davening. He was looking up pleadingly at his mother. Naamah decided that she'd have to offer to help make up for the chores he had not done while helping her make the succotash.

-Oh, don't worry, he finishes early enough to come blow shofar for you and then eat breakfast, with plenty of time to get to school.

Why did they all seemed to be relieved?

The dinner had passed awkwardly. No one wanted to ask why Naamah was eating across the street, when her husband was eating with his family. They talked a bit of Torah, schmoozed a bit about broken bones, Jewish food, other ethnic foods, and how Naamah should be out of that cast in time for the High Holidays. She tried to respond politely, but it all seemed to wash over her. Her appetite seemed to have been washed away with the rain that had started earlier in the day. Now everything seemed too murky to follow.

Sometimes she caught one parent or the other observing her out of the corner of an eye. She felt

like a failure, even at keeping up conversation at a simple dinner. When it was over, she was glad to hobble back home, more exhausted than before the meal, but glad to be too tired to think.

Mike made himself scarce over the next two weeks, leaving Naamah to her own devices most of the time in the house. He brought groceries every four or five days, brusquely asking her what she wanted him to buy, and marching back out. The looks he gave her made her feel like a stray cat. She had the impression that he felt that she ought to be out catching mice to earn her keep.

-I'm going with my parents for the High Holidays, so you can go be with the frummies if you want.

-Now you tell me? There's not enough time to buy tickets! Did you get me any tickets?

-No. You want to be frum, nu? You go to your shul.

Then he had walked out.

The melody kept running through her head over and over again. "Hiney Lo Yanum ve Lo Yishan, Shomer Israel." If the Guardian of Israel did not sleep, at least she had company. She had gotten no sleep that night, jumping at every passing bus and car while worrying about where to go for Rosh HaShannah, if that was even going to be possible now. *How could he abandon me like this? Isn't this why we are married, to be there for each other?* Especially during these family holiday seasons.

Would she even be able to walk to shul for Yom Kippur?

The tap at the front door cleared her bleary eyes in a heartbeat, yanking her head toward the door while jerking her right elbow up into the air in search of a weapon.

-Morah Naamah?

Of course, it was little Shmueli.

Why couldn't she stop being on guard all the damned time? It was probably being alone in the house with this cast. She'd be more calm after Rosh HaShanah, if the damned thing came off when the doctor expected.

She flipped the light on and waved so the kid could see her, forcing her tired abdominals to tighten and lever up on her good leg, hobbling to unlock the door. The sunrise was a striking orange against the cloudy skyline. She imagined that she could see the outline of Fort McHenry.

She was seeing little Shmueli's shofar, as he proudly displayed his readiness to help her fulfil the mitzvah of hearing the sound every morning of Elul, in preparation for a holiday she might not be able to celebrate. No Jew in the world would neglect these holidays. No real Jew. What was she, anyway?

-Do I make the brachah before or after, uh, can I make the brachah?

-Yup!

(The kid beamed like a ray of sunshine in August)

Then she remembered the RAMBAM's ruling: even slaves, children and women can blow the shofar to help others fulfill the requirement to hear the sound during the month of Elul. Whether she was in fact required, was another question. Time based commandments did not apply to women with children, but she had no kids, so she had time to fulfill those commandments.

She jumped at the squeak of the first Tekia, exhaling so that Shmueli wouldn't notice. When he finished, she picked up the Birkat Shalom on the coffeetable, flipping through for the morning prayers.

-That's your siddur?

Clearly he had never seen any frum person with a loosleaf bound prayerbook, let alone with drawings of upside-down trees and cupped hands.

-Yep, from a Chavurah up in Boston.

-Like a chevrotah? My Tatty has a chevrotah, they learn Mishna together.

Somehow, she thought explaining Chavurat Shalom might be a bit more difficult than she had energy for at the moment. Their version of Hippy Judaism was a world away from his. The tap at the door saved her the trouble. Mrs. Cohen had arrived to shoo her son off to school, and Naamah wanted to take the opportunity to ask about high holiday tickets at their shul.

-Ok, Shmueli, run off now before you are late for the Ner bus.

As he trotted off toward the street, Naamah turned toward her neighbor, just catching a glimpse of something in her eyes, too quickly turning away from the Siddur on the table. The shadow across the neighbor's face became a smile. Naamah knew that the women's prayer group was not looked well upon in certain circles. She needed to find some place to daven, even if it was an unfamiliar shul. She had argued with Mike about paying the membership that included High Holiday tickets, but he had wanted to wait and shop around, keeping the flexibility to go to his parents temple if he wanted to visit them for the holidays.

Her stomach began to churn. Now she was paying the price for his lack of commitment, in more ways than one. She absolutely could not put this off any longer. Opening her mouth, her well-formed question turned into a squeak.

-Um, could I ask you a quick question?

-Of course.

Naamah swallowed.

-Would you know of a shul where I could still buy High Holiday tickets? I know it's late, but...

She left the question hanging, afraid of the response. After a moment's hesitation, Mrs. Cohen replied, somewhat cautiously:

-R. D's shul and R. G's shul, and also the Glen avenue shul, I think, all have free High Holiday services. You could walk with us, if you need help.

Her neighbor patted Naamah's shoulder. Naamah's stomach reacted by convulsing. She stumbled against the doorway, using all of her strength to stand upright, clutching her side with her free hand, the other hand clutching the door frame. Mrs. Cohen touched and kissed the mezuzah, then helped Naamah into the living room.

-Let me get you a glass of water, Naamahla.

Her neighbor trotted through the hall to the kitchen, reappearing with a glass of water. As the neighbor sat beside Naamah, the dam burst. Her tears joined with the source of that water, seeking to connect. Naamah looked up, meeting the raised eyebrows of her neighbor, whom she was certain she was disturbing.

-I'm sorry, I-

Another squeak came out, her throat and face on fire. Mrs. Cohen patted her on the hand, tsking.

-No, I'm sorry. I think you and Mike are having some troubles, no?

Naamah nodded her head, unable to form words even in her mind, let alone past her lips. Her neighbor seemed to understand, for the moment. But will she stay? Naamah was afraid to speak, even to move. A fear of being alone covered her like a sack of wet burlap, leaving her shivering. She began to have even more trouble breathing, her chest pressed down by wet stones. A hand on her shoulder, warm and protective, lifted the stones bit by bit, giving her air. It was her neighbor, still sitting beside her on the couch. She'd been covered with a comforter. *So now she knows.* The pillow and her pajamas had been under the comforter, from the nights before, spent on the couch.

-Don't worry, Naamah. Every couple goes through some time of trouble, and comes out the other side with Shalom Bayit. You two will make up, and you'll have peace in your home again, you'll see. Just trust in HaShem. I'll get my husband to talk to Mike. Meanwhile, you come eat by us for Rosh HaShannah, nu?

Naamah was so grateful to get a word out, nodding her head as vigorously as she could while keeping the tears at bay.

-Ok, don't worry, we'll get this sorted out. Bein ish l'ishto, ve talmud torah keneged kulam, nu? The men will talk amongst themselves, they'll learn some Torah together, they'll work it out. My husband, he'll make peace between you and Mike. Just like HaShem, who makes peace up there and down here. Don't worry. You'll eat by us, we'll walk you home, it'll be fine.

The neighbor patted Naamah's hand again.

-Don't worry.

But Naamah couldn't help worrying. She even worried that if she stopped worrying, it would all get worse. It always did.

The time dragged by, with Naamah racking her brains for ways to find a family that would accept her as a member, a younger sister, or even as a servant. Finally, the knock came at her door.

Shmueli had arrived to carry her basket of apples, the easiest thing to contribute without worrying about the hechsher (the OU might not catch problems in the processing of the honey, who knew?).

She was walking more easily now, but still with a limp, now that the cast was finally off. Mike had spent the weeks at his parents house.

-Morah Naamah?

Damn!

How long had he been standing there? They crossed the darkening street, entering the warm and brightly lit home to the effervescent greetings of parents and little Davi. Naamah could see that they were making every effort to cheer her flagging spirits. She tried to feel better, or at least pretend.

Their smiles only made her feel like sinking into the deepest hole and covering herself with a millstone. Her false smile gave her the feeling of being a cannibal at a banquet. The flesh she wanted was not human, but rather belonging. The flesh of her flesh she had thought to have when she married Mike, and felt betrayed. No reconciliation with Mike would make her belong to his family. The years had already proven that.

-Morah Naamah?

The high clear voice of Shmueli brought her back to the meal. She looked at him, forcing her lips into what she hoped was an upward curve.

-Would you like a green apple or a red apple?

He was holding up two contrasting apple slices for her inspection, ready to dip one into the honey.

-I'll take the red, please?

For the color of my ancestors whose blood- She stopped the thought in its tracks. Where on earth had that come from? She really was going crazy.

It was finally time.

-To a sweet

(Naamah swivelled her head toward the sound)

-New Year!

Shmueli's pure soprano contrasted with the bitter baritone of her thoughts. How could the coming year possibly be a sweet one, unless it ended her miserable existence?

-Is your family Sephardic, or Mizrahi, Naamah?

She blinked. Mr. Cohen had barely spoken to her during the meal until just then.

-Our family is Ashkenazi.

-No, I mean your birth family, your parents.

Naamah sighed, choking down the lump in her throat.

-Neither, actually.

She paused, not knowing how to continue. Normally these sorts of questions weren't asked in polite company.

-So you are a convert?

How did I know he was going to ask that?!

-Uh, yes.

A pin dropping would have sounded like an explosion.

-By which Rav, here in Baltimore, or up in New York?

-Temple Sinai.

That would be the death knell of this relationship. She had intended to ask about re-converting with an orthodox rabbi, but Mike would not hear of it. But that would mean...

-It's ok,

Her hostess cut in to come to the rescue.

-The wine is all mevushal, and the apples have all been peeled.

Naamah wondered what could possibly keep boiled wine from being offered to pagan gods. The meal ended soon after. Not soon enough for Naamah. There was obviously no longer any question of Shmueli or any other member of his family eating with Naamah, and her other suspicion was

confirmed when an excuse came up preventing Shmueli from coming over to blow shofar for her during the coming 10 days until Yom Kippur. They did not consider her Jewish. Would they even still be walking to shul together tomorrow morning?

The rest of the meal, and the shuffle across the street to her house, were all a blur.

After sending Shmueli back across the street to go to bed, Mrs. Cohen looked Naamah in the eye:

-I'm not sure that our values are the same, Naamah. The 70 nations each have a different path to Torah.

Were goyim prohibited from committing suicide? *It's still considered self-murder.* Was her neighbor trying to save an entire world by saving her? *Am I that transparent?*

Mrs. Cohen took her hand, not even moving when Naamah jumped. *She feels sorry for me.*

Naamah felt revulsion for herself.

-I am so so tired... I just want rest. I can't even teach!

Their eyes locked. A single tear spilled out of her neighbor's eye. Naamah imagined that tear floating to her own face, touching the groove just above her lips, where the arch-angel Gabriel touches nearly newborns. What did she have left to remember?

-We all die some time. Most of us want to contribute before that happens. Some have children, others teach, and others lead by example. Die too early, you get to do none of that. It's your choice.

-G'mar Katimah Tovah.

Naamah appreciated her neighbor's politeness. Mrs. Cohen could wish even a non-Jew a good inscription. Naamah had chosen to stand with the Jewish people. But they did not stand with her.

She felt as alone as Choni HaMagel.

The morning of the first day of Rosh HaShannah dawned in a carpet of cloud and rain that even the city rats avoided. Naamah had been up all night re-checking her will. She was bone tired, but clear-minded. She had finally decided.

All that was left to do was to make sure Marie got her Greek dance and re-enactment costumes. She couldn't trust Mike to do that, obviously. Too bad those two didn't get along. She'd always hoped that they could become friends.

She managed to walk smoothly into the kitchen. All that was left was to figure out how to divi-up her things without arousing suspicions. Her books would be appreciated by the library, she could count on Mike's family for that. Marie would appreciate her sewing or weaving things.

She was anxious to get the rat-poison and the aspirin down, start the bath. If she mixed it with a strong hot chocolate, she should be able to keep it all down. Opening her veins in the hot water with the aspirin should be sure, in case the cyanide was not strong enough (she weighed 110 pounds, while even the biggest city rat only weighed maybe 7 pounds, so there might not be enough poison left).

She set out the cyanide, aspirin, two of Mike's razors, and a plastic cup in the bathroom beside the tub. She started mixing the chocolate spices while thinking of what to tell Marie. She couldn't leave her things out in this rain, and she couldn't risk Marie finding the poison in the bathroom. The kitchen was safe, as long as she could get her in and out in a hurry. But how?

The SNCC recordings! She would tell Marie that there was a SNCC reunion going on right now, and that she needed her to take the records and some other things to the meeting. Say, down at the

Inner Harbor. That way she could throw everything at Marie and shoo her out faster than a fly.

Marie would never be able to resist adding a new Civil Rights Era story or two to her collection.

She bundled the package, regretting that her dance handkerchief was still at the top of her climbing wall. The embroidery on the corners was solid, matching the material itself. Greek dance memories almost brought a smile to her face. She found tears dripping down instead.

The weight on her chest became unbearable. The room began to burn, starting with her cheeks and ending down there.

As the faces reappeared, she clenched her teeth.

I was too weak to kill you, then.

The second face loomed over her. She began to cough, gasping for air.

Damn!

Why hadn't she killed herself back then! What she should have done years ago.

Now she could finally rest.

What was it she had to do, call? Marie.

She picked up the phone, her fingers punching the numbers automatically.

She wiped a tear from the number pad, then felt a stabbing in her gut. She slammed the phone back down. Marie, Mike, his family, the neighbors, even the people at Temple, they were all the same.

No one was really there for her, never.

She felt like a hot coal had been forced down her throat. The burning engulfed her now, as if the belt across her backside were red hot, and being applied to her entire body. *Why am I always alone?!* But that was how it was. She had survived, worked hard, done her duty, and always been alone.

Except with Marie.

The memory of time spent sewing together, embroidering her Greek dance handkerchief, listening to yet another one of Marie's stories, forced a snort, then a breath. *Nan*. That was what Marie called her.

-Fight, hon!

Where had that voice come from? She uncurled herself from the floor, jerking her head around, then coming up to sit Indian style.

-FIGHT!

She was certain she'd heard Marie's voice. She was equally certain she was alone.

Or was she?

She began trembling all over.

It wasn't fair. Her work, her effort, all for nothing.

People would call her coward, quitter, bilger. Troubled. Weak willed, sick.

Damn you all!

She had put herself in harms way for others, pushed through her fears and fatigue time and time again. As the floodgates of tears opened, she recalled Marie and that cackling laugh.

Marie had always had a story for her, even when she disagreed. If only she could really trust her.

Wasn't that Marie's big complaint? Had she ever really tried to trust her?

If not now, when?

Chapter 17: Days of Awe

She picked up the phone again, this time with a new plan. She would fight: and trust.

Drawing a deep breath, she dialed Marie's number, digit by digit, her slender fingers shaking.

How the hell would she explain this?

She had always only had herself. Disconnected. There were connections, logically. Somewhere. But how to make them real when they were not with her in person? A restlessness jarred her, her nerves jangling together despite the dead still air.

She felt as if she were back in the fencing salle. This time it was the entire community that she was being refused. Even the one who promised to stand by her.

She had wanted to fence epee, but girls only fenced foil.

-Attack, Attack!

She preferred counter-attacks.

How could she use that now to fight off this desire to murder herself?

Marie had said she must trust. The only person she could imagine trusting was Marie. No more escape.

The voice shook Nanyehi from her thoughts:

-Marie's Dresses, Good Morning, hon.

It was her telephone voice for the shop. Nan shook her head: how did Marie get away with calling all of her customers "hon?" She had no idea what to say.

-Hello?

-Uh, sorry Marie.

-Nan, hon!

She nearly dropped the phone. That was not Marie's shop phone voice.

-Are you alright, hon? You don't sound good. You need me to come over?

-Well, I know it's a working day for you-

-Don't you even go there girl, I will be right over, don't you move, and that is an order, Missy!

-Ok.

She sat down on the couch, bone weary.

When Marie arrived, soaked and expressing surprise that Naamah wasn't in shul, Naamah had confessed. Trouble trusting, feeling abandoned, even to wanting to die. The reasons would have to wait.

-Did you ever tell Mike any of this, hon?

-I tried, but...

Her energy gave out every time she thought of him.

-I know, hon, or I think I know. You can't trust someone who barks at you. That dog just might bite.

Naamah nodded:

-Sometimes I'm afraid he will.

Marie looked at her, hard: -Has he hit you?

-No, Marie, never!

Marie looked skeptical. -Hon, you look to nervous for him not to have touched you.

-Ok, he did shake me a couple of times, but that's all.

Now Marie looked ready to storm a citadel.

-But he apologized and it never happened again.

-That dog needs a muzzle.

-It was a long time ago, Marie.

Marie shook her head: -If you say so hon.

She had to tell Mike, but how? Nothing she could say would change things. He had gone from being a friend to being a stranger she hardly knew. The Mike she had agreed to marry had been gentle and reassuring. She had married someone she thought she could grow old with, and discovered an alpha male who flaunted his wife when all was well, but pouted when she fell ill, which was more and more often. These past six months had simply put the last nail in the coffin.

Marie was probably right, a Get might be the only solution.

-Look, hon, I brought some fried chicken over, I had a little extra with me for my lunch, you know, in case a homeless person came by the shop, so there's more than enough for the two of us. Let me get your trefoil plates out -

-The Treif plates, Marie, the glass ones.

-Right, the glass plates, and we'll eat some of this crunchy fried chicken, how does that sound?

Wait, don't tell me you aint hungry, cause you sure enough need some meat on them bones. And I can hear your stomach rumbling.

It was true, her stomach was growling. She was even starting to salivate at the thought of some of Marie's fantastic fried chicken, made just like Nan's adoptive great grandmother had made.

As they were spreading the rubber table-cloth, Mike walked in. He wasn't alone. Mike's mother poked her head in, sniffing the air. Her head snapped straight toward the fried chicken that Naamah had just sunk her teeth into.

-Treif on Rosh HaShannah. Well, at least you're eating. And I just finished convincing your husband not to give you a Get.

Marie looked as if she were about to pop an artery. Naamah piped up before Marie could explode:

-And why shouldn't he give me a Get?

His mother looked like she'd just been slapped in the face.

-Well, you're no spring chicken, you know.

-And neither is your son, hon!

Oops, there she blows.

-Who is this shiksa?

She seemed to have just noticed Marie.

-Get out of my house, and this time, DON'T COME BACK!

Marie's face turned fire engine red.

Naamah stood, facing the doorway. She whispered:

-If Marie goes, I go.

Mike and his mother's jaws dropping open at the same time.

Marie licked an index finger, painting the number 2 in the air over her head, jabbing an exclamation point.

-Y'all had better close your mouths before the flies get in, hon and son.

Naamah finally understood:

-You thought I was trying to be dramatic?

She took a slow breath and lowered herself onto the couch.

-Why should I stay with Mike if he doesn't love me for who I am?

-I do love you, what, you want I should genuflect to you?

Marie nodded her head up and down three times before Naamah could get a word out.

-No, I expect you to speak to me like a friend who cares about me, like you did before we got married.

-Well, there was more to talk about before we got married.

-Well, hon, you'll have more to talk about after you are no longer married.

-Shut up Marie.

-Don't...

Everyone looked at Naamah in surprise.

-Please don't tell Marie to shut up, Mike.

He stared at her.

-I feel like you don't care about me, Mike.

-I care, of course I care about you, why do you think I'm standing here?

Marie put her finger to her temple, in her favorite Dumb Blonde imitation, then giggled, adding:

-I don't know, to get your trophy back, maybe?

Both Mike and Naamah looked at Marie at the same time, crying:

-Hey!!

-Touché, hon and son.

-I am not a trophy!

-Oh really? Hon, why do you let him steamroller you, and until tonight you never say anything?

And you, Siiirr, why have you never asked your wife why she has these panic attacks? Do you even know the real problem?

If only you knew, Marie. But Naamah could only handle divulging one secret at a time.

-And what problem would that be, huh Naamah?

-First of all, Mike, your wife don't even want to live anymore.

-I ASKED NAAMAH!

Naamah jumped. She felt like she was hearing a foreign language. Then it hit her:

-Call me Nanyehi.

Everyone turned to stare at her. Mike recovered first.

-Oh, that again. Keep the name games to yourself.

-Give me the Get, Mike.

Now his mother looked outraged. Mike's face turned beet red.

-This is REDICULOUS. I gotta go to the bathroom.

Mike stomped down the hall, throwing his coat on the couch, just missing Nanyehi. *I forgot to...*

She remembered at the same moment that they all heard it:

-NANS!!

Mike's voice had come out like the squeal of a dying mouse. He reappeared in the living room, his face milk white.

-You...

-She tried to tell you, ya moron. Your wife has been trying to tell you but you wouldn't listen.

-Marie,

Nanyehi held up one hand, looking at her friend, too tired to speak. Marie got the message. She walked over to the couch, sitting beside Nanyehi.

-Mike, I need for all of us to be open about this. I haven't trusted you enough to talk about the panic attacks because you attack me every time I try to explain the problem. And it's not really you, it's me that's the problem,

-No, hon, you have a problem, but you are Not THE problem.

-Ok, professor.

Turning back to Mike, Nanyehi continued:

-Mike, I need you to be like you were before we got married, my good friend. Someone I could talk to. And I need you to accept Marie, my only family.

-I'm your family now!

-Then act like it, and treat me with some love, please.

While she paused to breath, Marie sang 6 notes: "a little respect." Nanyehi looked up.

-I need you to stop yelling at...

Her last word was choked by tears.

Mike looked down at the floor. Marie put an arm around Nanyehi's shoulders. She looked at Marie, giving her a nod. Straightening her shoulders as she looked up at Mike and his mother, she said:

-I need two things. First, Mike, I need to feel that you love me, even if I can't go flying with you. I want to fly together, but right now I can't. We have to find something else we can do together at least until I conquer this heights phobia. Can you do that, Mike? Do you love me enough?

-Of course he does, Naamahla, sorry, Nanyehila. That's why I convinced him not to give you the Get!

Nanyehi gaped at her mother-in-law.

-I know my son. He loves you. He has a hard time showing those feelings.

Mike's mother sat down on the other side of Nanyehi as she and Marie scooted over to make room.

-You are a daughter to me, and I ask your forgiveness for my words earlier. I was wrong not to ask your side of the story, not to Dan leChaf Zechut,

looking at Marie, she translated:

-not to have judged on the side of merit, for my daughter in law. I was wrong. I won't do it again.

Nanyehi pursed her lips.

Her mother in law opened her arms:

-Call me Imma?

-Todah Rabah, Imma.

To Marie's quizzical look, Nanyehi translated:

-Thank you, Mother.

Mike interrupted with a gruff question:

-Ok, so what do I have to do, practically speaking? I love you, I respect you, that doesn't show?

Marie interrupted with a resounding -NO!

Mike glared, then continued:

-So, what do I have to do?

Marie jumped to her feet, pointing at him:

-You have to be here for her. I mean really be there for her. No "putz," no yelling, and by God if you ever shake her again-

-That will not happen again, will it, Mike?

Mike's mother was glaring at him. He looked down at his shoes.

-No.

Marie took a step forward:

-It better not!

Nanyehi touched Marie's shoulder

-Uh, Marie, maybe I should take it from here?

Marie nodded, and sat back down, puffing like a champion boxer.

-Mike, I'll keep my promise to stand with the Jewish people. I need you to stand with me. If not, then it would be better for us to be just friends, not spouses.

-But I do...

Were those tears in his eyes?

-I do stand with you, I do love you. I do respect you. I will do better by you.

Marie jumped to her feet again:

-You better, mister, or I will-

-Marie...

-Sorry hon.

Nanyehi drew a deep breath.

-Ok, so I need a plan...

DEAR Readers: does this chapter hold your interest? This is the climax of the story, so if it needs fixing, better for me to do so in the 3rd draft rather than polishing a story line that does not work (as a story, or for one or more characters??). I would love to hear your feedback.

Thanks for reading. ShiraDest, 23.3.12016 HE, 35135 Chantepie

Chapter 18: Life

They had created a plan, the four of them, forging a new family for Nanyehi based on trust and force of will. They had agreed to take long walks with her, each one day per week, and all together on Saturdays, talking and listening to each of them. She also started working on a master's degree in investigative journalism, an interest she had been keeping to herself for some time. *And if I specialize in child protection, I might find another way to save lives.*

The sewing and cornbread continued, and the succotash and spicy hot chocolate increased. Nanyehi began a program of jogging and regular Greek folk dancing, with the certainty that one day soon, she would climb up her wall and get her handkerchief.