

## Raised by Jews - Naomi Seidman -2010

Along with the cart of groceries, my mother wheels in the jangle and cold breath of the world. This kitchen is her stage, small but crowded with incident, with ingredient: flanken in butcher paper, barley, big brown potatoes, three kinds of beans.

Loose-skinned onions spill from their net, a hairy turnip tips its tail over the edge of the counter. And then, like a gun in the first act, out comes a cellophane bag of candy corn, brash seasonal cousin of licorice whips, sugar-coated peanuts. My mother sighs as she clears a space for the candy on the counter. This is one of those kitchens where you could *eat off the floor*. It could be a television commercial, except for the speckles on the beans, except for the thick lenses my mother peers through, except that no one in this picture is going to eat that candy corn. Look at the little girl sitting there, staring at the Technicolor sunset candy, her mouth hanging open (adenoids). Look at the long braid down my back, blouse buttoned up to my skinny neck. This is 1966, before Paskesz dreamed up kosher cotton candy. You know I've never tasted a candy corn, never eaten anything that particular shade of orange or with quite so many ingredients. So what's this woman doing, dangling the forbidden artificial colors of the New World before her cholentfed daughter?

My mother, having raised her captive audience, doesn't have to say a word. Impresario of the chopping block, she dices the onions with a virtuosity that in a better world would meet with drum rolls and applause. In this world I sit, swinging my legs to the rhythm of the knife and the bass line of the Frigidaire. The onions finally sizzling, my mother answers the kettle on the first ring and fills the glasses. For her baby she reserves the heel of the honey cake and a perfect white domino of sugar to go with her story. She breaks off a gooey piece and begins.

"You know what it is today, right?" she asks.

But I don't. What is it today?

"It's October, you know that it's October, no? Almost exactly fifteen years since I came here."

Having traveled over sea and land to this kitchen, my mother takes the long sip of sweet tea she knows she deserves.

"It wasn't easy for me, you can imagine, a new bride all alone in this country. Deddy was working hard, not just in the radio, he was traveling, giving speeches, Denver, Cincinnati, who knows where. A man like Deddy people wanted to hear, he had what to say about Israel, about the terrible things what happened in Europe. But it wasn't easy to get up and go to these places from one day to the next. Of course, he wasn't a well man then either."

Notice how we say his name, with two hard "d's," the word "dead" lurking in the silliness. Why? Who knows? But make no mistake — there's nothing silly about the man himself. His absence from this kitchen and the story is *important*. Everything my mother says about him has its own particular tang, served in every dish she cooks up like the recipes companies put out for their own products. She feeds her family pride in their father, slipping in a pinch of worry, peppered with a bite of resentment to which she's fully entitled.

"Only a short time I was here, maybe a month, two months. Let me see, I came right before Rosh Hashana and this was the end October, like today. I was by myself in this house where we lived in, in Queens. You remember. So I hear a knock. I don't know who could it be. In the whole Queens I don't know even one person. So I go to answer and I open a little the door and I see children, dressed up like Purim, but not really because they're not Esther and Mordechai, they're all in scary clothes. One is a ghost with a sheet, and one a cowboy, and one is... with the bones on his clothes."

"A skeleton?" I ask all those years ago, my voice hushed.

“Yes, a skeleton. You can imagine, I don’t know what to think, and they say something I don’t understand, ach, who knows what? It could be Chinese even. I didn’t speak too much English then. I was scared what to think they want, these little goyim.”

I gobble the honey cake to show my mother how to talk faster, so she gets past the scary part. This one I’ll get to hear the end, because the end is America. But my mother goes on almost killing me with the way she’s talking so slow, stopping every couple of words for a sip of tea while mine is still too hot.

“Then I see that they’re holding out big bags full of candy like I should take and now I understand — it’s Purim for the goyim. We have it in spring and they have it after Sukkes. I think I shouldn’t hurt their feelings, even though I know it isn’t kosher candy, so I put my hand in the bag and take a little and I put my hand in the other bag and take a little until I took from all the children, not to offend. And then I say a nice ‘Thank you very much’ and I close the door and first thing, I throw out all that *hazerei*.”

My mother rides her heavy Transylvanian accent on the “Thank you very much,” rolling the “r” like a slow train up a Carpathian slope, hamming up the part for her American daughter. And then she laughs, from the Olympian heights of her fifteen years of experience with the natives.

“So when I was in Waldbaum’s,” my mother continues, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, “I saw this junk and I thought maybe I should give back some of that candy I took that time. If they knock, we’ll have what to give.”

My mother turns back to the cholent, but that isn’t the end of the matter for me, since I have all the autumn afternoon to circle the candy, ruminating on its relation to food in general and corn in particular. No trick-or-treaters came that evening. Where would they come from, in that neighborhood? You could walk for a mile in any direction before you saw a pumpkin. The next day the candy is in the junk drawer, secure against assault in its protective cellophane armor. And there it sat, out of sight but not of mind, until April, when it was finally swept away in my mother’s pre-Passover assault. They say that we are what we eat, but maybe it’s also true that we are what we don’t eat.

Okay, no trick-or-treaters. But we *knew* about them. We *participated* in this great country, we heard of its customs, thrilled to its purple mountains’ majesty. How? Mostly, I think, the *Reader’s Digest*, which lived in the bathroom. “I am Joe’s Spleen.” Survivors of airplane disasters. Adopters of orphans from ravaged countries. We knew. But did they know us? They should, they should. And so it happened that I sent my mother’s story to the editor of “Life in these United States,” which paid the unimaginable sum of \$300. Working on the piece, I stumbled. How to explain? By the third draft, my mother was a non-denominational immigrant from “the Old Country,” grateful for the generosity of the New World. No Purim, no kosher. My mother, in this version, ate that candy and liked it. Looking up from my pad at the dining room table, I saw it unfold: She sat alone in that apartment, eating one candy corn at a time, licking her fingers between each bite.

I tried, reader. To have the story end the way I wanted it to end. To find some way to tell it. To cash in, if you want to look at it that way. One of those tries involved an M.A. thesis, called not “Life in These United States” or even “Death in That Europe” but rather “Varieties of Meaninglessness in Paul Celan and Nellie Sachs,” presented to the Department of Literature at the University of Indiana, Bloomington. This history of mine isn’t non-denominational anymore. Now it’s academic.

Like other university students, I sometimes get on a plane and go home for Christmas vacation. But where I’m going isn’t Christmas, and who could possibly think of Brooklyn in terms of vacation? Who else in this grand mid-December exodus has to do what I’m doing, changing from skinny black jeans to rumpled skirt in the redolent bathroom of the Eighteenth Avenue station? It doesn’t really feel like going home either, since my parents are living in a second-floor apartment I’ve seen only once before, the address buried somewhere in the suitcase I drag down the street, gloveless fingers frozen around the handle and the wind feeling me up under the skirt. The brick row-houses look on, uninvolved, unrecognizing.

I don't recognize them either. This block was Italian last time I was here, but now it's drowning in the Jewish overflow from Boro Park, the plaster Madonnas packed up and big wheels and strollers rolled in. Everywhere you look there's another windblown sukkah jammed into a driveway or perched on a porch. Then I see the last Italian holdout, staunch in the effort to combat cultural isolation, the last Christians in a world of Jews. The birth of the baby Jesus would not go unheralded. Every window shouts its joy, the pine tree lifts its twinkling branches in Yuletide wonder, radioactive-blue deer rhythmically genuflect toward the pavement, along the roof shining choir boys lift pious open-mouthed faces to the purple Brooklyn heavens. Santa Claus commands a view from the porch, waving a plastic hand up and down the street to the black hatters and pregnant housewives, to me. He could be a rabbi, a nice, fat Rabbi, I think, as I always do, and cheer up. What if Jews kept Christmas (kept! I think, observed! Not, for instance, "celebrated")? There would be laws about how tall the tree should be, where the angels and the pine cones should hang, the sharpness of the tree cutter's knife, the acceptability of burned-out bulbs. My father, at the ritual meal, would give an ingenious talk on the relationship between the red heifer, poinsettia, and the founding of the State of Israel. Reb Santa would stroke his beard thoughtfully, with feeling. The next two-family house is where I'm headed — I recognize the rusting deck chair on the upstairs porch from bungalow-colony summers.

My mother's face is confused when she opens the front door. Last time she saw me I had some hair. In the second before she recognizes me I see the face others see, the one not changed by love and watching. But then she beams and hugs me and my stiff arms go around her. Having broken her heart six or sixty times, having let my own shrivel to the size and density of an M&M, it's the least I can do. Up the steep flight of stairs, the apartment wears garish shades of sea-green, remnants of the Mediterranean culture we've displaced to New Jersey. My mother grumbles to my father: "I thought she was the delivery boy from Landau." My father laughs. My mother shakes her head to her Greek chorus: "Why does he encourage her?"

When I get out of the bath the glasses are on the dining room table, special treatment for the guest. This is where my father spends his time, now that he's home from wherever it is men disappear to, scribbling furiously on note pads at one end of the table. A black yarmulke, the kind candidates wear in synagogues, sits pointed and shiny on his bald head. He pays no attention to us, otherwise my mother wouldn't say the things she's saying. She keeps her eyes on the spoon clinking the inside of her glass.

"You know, I was thinking about those girls in the camp, the D.P. camp I told you about, where I met Deddy. He was already a busy man then, collecting the names of who was alive, who wasn't. He made a newspaper every day, one short list on one side, on the other side very long ones. You should see how they waited for that paper every morning. Like hot latkes it went.

My mother clinks.

"The girls?" I prompt.

"The girls, the men, everyone wanted that paper. But I was saying about those girls, how they would look at me with big eyes. I was the only one with long hair. All the other girls were coming out of the camps and they looked at me like I don't know what. I wasn't a skeleton like them, even though I was plenty skinny. In Bucharest we weren't exactly living like a king. They would come over to touch my hair. Some of them asked why they didn't cut my hair. You know what they thought. I don't have to tell you."

She doesn't have to tell me. I rub my bristly scalp. My mother sighs and gets up, and then tries to remember where she was off to. "Come on. Just a short Scrabble and then we all go to sleep." But there's something I've been wanting to clear up.

"Ma, why do we call Deddy Deddy?"

My father raises his head and then goes back to his page.

My mother looks confused, “What *should* you call him?”

“I don’t know,” I shift uncomfortably. “*Tatty?*” Tatty was what most of the kids in the neighborhood called their fathers.

“No,” my mother shakes her head in disgust.

“Papa?”

“*Papa??*”

“Daddy?” I venture, feeling foolish. What a strange word, Daddy.

“But that is what we call him — Deddy.”

“Oh,” I say for as long as it takes me to comprehend.

“What?” asks my mother, staring at her puzzling daughter.

I shake my head. “Nothing,” and my heart gets a little runny at the edges. No, I conclude, I wasn’t adopted. Look at us. Could there ever have been any doubt? Under my mother’s kerchief (her wig perched now on its sightless Styrofoam head in the bedroom) and my jeans, we’re punched from the same mold: square jaw, round nose, squat peasant calves. What is it that separates us? Nothing as substantial as flesh. Nothing but a truncated vowel, the thud of a consonant. Who says that it’s the word, and not the way it’s pronounced, that’s the basic unit of meaning?

“Come on,” my mother says, giving up on me once and for all. “Scrabble.”

My mother, queen of the New York Times crossword puzzle, master of two-letter printers’ measurements and Vietnamese currency, turns the letters over to hide their secrets. We get to work. Halfway through her third turn the silence breaks. It takes a second to hear:

“‘Tis the season to be jolly,

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la.”

I walk out onto the porch to investigate, and then, suddenly, I’m angry. To hell with Reb Santa. I’m already talking as I lock the door behind me. “I can’t believe it — they have some kind of megaphone or trumpet pointed straight at us. And it’s after ten. Does this go on *every* night? I’m calling the police.”

My mother peers at the board, counting aloud. “I have 54. It’s your turn.” She puts her hand in the bag.

The wry look in my father’s eye travels straight to my gut. I see myself as he sees me, and it isn’t pretty. The crew cut, the Anti-Defamation League attitude, my American birth — but isn’t that his fault as much as mine, I want to whine. My mother finally catches what’s passing across the table and looks up, “Oh them, they don’t bother us.”

I snort. “What are you waiting for? A *pogrom?*” We fall into three separate silences. My mother is hurt silent, my father is shrewd silent, I’m defiant silent, but with a squeezed heart. Outside, the Christians hit a scratch and tell us to deck the, deck the, deck the. I turn, stumble into the back room, close the door and with the long practice of adolescence, fling myself on the bed and try to get miserable. But I can’t do it — something’s wrong. Am I too old? Is the room too neat? That’s it. My mother’s gotten into my things, books on the windowsill, clothes on the cabinet. I don’t like this, and then I remember why I don’t. I get up and pull the suitcase from under the bed, searching for a particular balledup sock. I find it alongside its sibling in the top drawer of the dresser, as flat and emptied as my own heart. My goodie-bag, my self-medication, having survived the drug-sniffing dogs and X-ray vision of Indianapolis International, had

fallen prey to my keened, sharp-nosed mother. I shut the light and lie down, waiting for the neighbors to pull the plug, my galumphing heart to settle down, my parents to give themselves over to sleep.

Finally, I tiptoe into the quiet kitchen. By the glow of the nightlight I open the junk drawer, the mother lode, where all good things come to rest. Purple-gold buds of Humboldt's finest glint through the zip-loc baggie, nestled among rusty hardware and out-of-date Jewish Home for the Aged calendars. The refrigerator shifts gears, a radiator hisses. Outside the F train hurtles toward Coney Island, a garbage can rattling after it down the empty street. I close the drawer and sit down, uncannily alert, thinking about what it would feel like to expand my lungs with enough smoke to fill the space in this kitchen, until the walls come close as a warm blanket, until the house fits like a glove, like a shell, like a home.

"One day, my true family would figure out where I was being held captive and bring me home."

Forty-seventh Street, between Fifteenth and Sixteenth Avenues, is the teeming Jewish heart of Boro Park in Brooklyn, bursting with kids in strollers, or hanging onto them, or pushing them; kids on big wheels and bicycles, on the stoops and leaning out the windows. Now, the pale-brick houses are packed together and built all the way out to the sidewalk, but when I was growing up on the block there were still some nice old-fashioned houses set back from the street, with glassed-in porches and driveways and big backyards where dilapidated *sukkahs* sagged year-round.

There must have been ten or twelve girls more or less my age on the block, but they were different from me, brash girls from enormous families (there were only four of us children) whose tall fathers and blond-wigged mothers had been born right here in America. A bachelor lived in the attic apartment, an oldish-youngish man whose pale-red eyelashes disappeared in the light. Next door, in the basement of the apartment building, was the super you called to relight the pilot light on *shabbes* if it had gone out. In the grocery on Sixteenth Avenue, the grocer pulled down boxes from the top shelf with a long stick that had a claw on the end. Across the avenue were the shadowy, crowded aisles of Mrs. Greenstein's toy store.

Mrs. Greenstein had been in my mother's class in the Beis Yakov seminary in Czernowicz before the war, but that didn't stop my mother from once making my brother and me march right back to her store and tell Mrs. Greenstein to take back the beebie gun she had sold us, since it wasn't coming into the house.

When I turned five, I started Beis Yakov myself, a squat beige-brick elementary school on Fourteenth Avenue where we sang a song about Sara Schnirer, who in a little town in Poland (actually, Krakow) took the stones her enemies threw at her and said, "From these stones will I build a school to teach girls Torah." Our backyard shared a fence with the main synagogue of the Bobover Hasidim, where once, in pursuit of a stray ball that had bounced down the concrete stairs of the basement of the shul, I stumbled into a steamy room filled with naked men, their shaven heads bare, shouting "*a maydl, a maydl.*" This fleeting and confused vision confirmed my suspicion that there was a hell that lurked just underneath the surface of our lives. Later, the pizza stores on Thirteenth Avenue opened, one after another — Amnon's, Tel Aviv, Masada — and we had our first taste of falafel, which my father jokingly called "*ploppl*," turning the exotic Middle Eastern spices into something Yiddish and familiar. These landmarks constituted the known limits of the world, beyond which lay dragons: Italian, across Sixtieth Street, and Puerto Rican, under the elevated subway tracks.

That there were Jews who weren't *frum*, Orthodox, was an unsubstantiated but intriguing rumor. Evidence of its truth turned up in my own house one afternoon when I was ten or so, in the form of three previously undisclosed cousins, sons of my Uncle Bushy, who was actually my father's *Amerikaner* cousin. The boys stood in our front hall, no doubt over their protests, huddled stiffly together against the strangeness pressing in on them. Shiny bar-mitzvah yarmulkes, the folds still visible, perched on three thick heads of hair. The middle one, Barry, was perfect: sun-streaked hair down to broad shoulders, blue eyes and dark lashes against a tan acquired in circumstances outside my own experience. And what did they see when they looked at me? A blue skirt down past my knees, glasses, a braid. I was probably staring. Did they see *me*? Did they know that inside the blouse buttoned up to my neck, inside my scratchy tights, the blood surged with sudden lust and yearning?

What *did* I want so badly? Sometimes I thought it was Barry, but sometimes it seemed to me that it must be God, calling me for some special purpose beyond the ordinary pieties that occupied my life. For months at a time, I davened myself into a frenzy on the roof of the school or tried desperately to improve my character, to stop biting my nails on *shabbes*, to stop telling *loshn harah*, gossip, about girls in my class, to dedicate my life to being good. There must have been more, too, because I remember the principal of my school calling me into his office to inform me that I couldn't possibly be a prophet (What had I told him? What had he heard?), since prophecy had ceased among Israeli with the Destruction of the Temple.

But these zealous periods alternated with equally intense fits of agnosticism and alienation. I harbored the suspicion, all through sixth grade, that I was the subject of a secret experiment, in which a whole community had been recruited to perform the elaborate play that was Orthodox Judaism. The point of this exercise was to see whether repetition and unanimity alone could make someone — me, that is — believe the most incredible untruths. It wasn't God watching from behind some one-way mirror, but rather invisible scientists in lab coats. There was no way to resist the whole charade altogether, but it was important to signal as often as I could — if only for my own dignity— that I wasn't completely fooled.

The other side of my paranoia, my fear of being surrounded by spies and automatons, was the hope that somewhere beyond the streets of Boro Park were the real people, the people I should by all rights be part of. The library gave me a glimpse of them: Nancy Drew dressing for her prom, twirling for her fathers' approval, and the tomboy Georgie brushing down her pony; the whole crew of girl detectives camping under the stars. I lived in an apartment with the people who thought they were my parents, even though they were too old to be anyone's parents, and they spoke English with thick accents, and my room had a curtain instead of a door, but one day, my true family would figure out where I was being held captive and bring me home. Night after night I listened for the sound of an emissary from that world, the roar of an

approaching motorcycle, the tink of a pebble on the windowpane, a soft call, the door as it creaked open and then shut again, finally, behind me. My own jeans were hidden behind the schoolbooks on my shelf; on Sunday afternoons, I perfected the quick-change from skirt to pants, and (less happily) back again, behind odorous pillars on subway platforms. On Friday evenings after the meal, when there was nowhere else to go, I would wait until the *shabbes* clock had ticked off and the lights gone out and write furiously and blindly in a notebook, as if I could scribble my way out of the suffocating darkness.

I began to look around for chinks in the walls that enclosed me, the tracks of others who had broken through earlier. There was, first of all, Uncle Bushy himself, who had apparently shared a childhood with my Orthodox uncles Motl and Anshel, but somehow emerged from it a Conservative rabbi with his trio of sturdy Jewish goyim. There were darker rumors, too, that the twin granddaughters of a great Torah sage (even now, the old taboo keeps me from sullyng his name) had posed in a magazine, stark naked; that a daughter of Rabbi H. had married her professor, an Indian, no less. In my mother's hushed conversations with her sisters and friends, these scandals were tragic not only because they tore a family apart, but also because they saddled that family with a stigma that could never be made right. To leave when there were other children to be married off — this was a sign of the cruelest indifference to the brothers and sisters whose chances for a decent match were forever ruined. And when the girls in my class repeated these stories, they had another force; for us, the bearers of chaste Jewish blood, rumors of girls who had strayed were pieces of the puzzle of sex we were always trying to reconstruct, evidence of some provocative, terrifying power that was neither entirely inside nor outside us. For me, and maybe a few others, these scandals were also the signposts I was watching for, the arrows that marked the exit.

Conservative rabbis and Playboy bunnies. Like the signs on restroom doors, it was clear which of these was for boys and which for girls. A boy might conceivably become an *apikores*, a heretic, but transgression in a girl could only mean something sexual. The first few steps of the Beis Yakov girl gone bad were visible enough: I knew girls who sneaked out of camp to meet boys at pizza stores in the Catskills, who wore their denim skirts over the knee and hung posters of David Cassidy inside their closet doors. They were “bums,” the term we used for the nail-polished and boy-crazy among us. I chose my friends from among these circles, but I myself aspired to something more dignified, something that signaled intellectual force rather than bodily weakness. I was a philosopher, I hoped, not a whore. At *shabbes* lunch, I would harass my parents by asking how they could bless the wine “after Auschwitz.” My brother, caught in the turmoil of his own adolescence, would cover his ears and yell “*Shah! Apikores!*” Once, when he demanded that my parents throw me out of the house, my father asked him, softly, who it was that was paying the rent.

A generation or so earlier, the crisis might have been addressed through a rebbe or matchmaker. My parents turned instead to Jewish Family Services, where we were assigned family therapy with a staff psychologist, a burly Orthodox man with the circumspect, businesslike manner of a diamond merchant. When he asked each of us why we were there, my brother sullenly responded: “Because my sister’s a bum.” There was something curiously cheering for me in his straightforwardness.

The office lay in the shadow of the elevated tracks of the B train, and every few minutes a train would rumble by a few feet from the office window and the session would come to an awkward pause, since my father was hard of hearing. In fits and starts, though, we were beginning to learn the ritualized gestures of family therapy, the parallel airing of grievances, the alternating deference and complaint, tears and outrage, when the entire exercise was abruptly terminated. The psychologist opened our third session with the announcement that he would not be continuing to work with us, since “the main problem your family has is that you all want Naomi to be *frum* and she doesn’t want to be.” As far as he could see, he continued, that was a theological issue, not a psychological one. There would be no charge for this last session, he added, and he wished us all the best. It would be another year or two before I made my break, but those words, I think, were what finally set me free.

It wasn't until I was a graduate student at Berkeley that I finally discovered that my own break with tradition was itself part of a tradition, amply recorded in the first, dusty generations of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. For the other students, these nineteenth-century narratives were almost unreadable, with their gothic descriptions of cruel *melamdim* and overbearing mothers-in-law and their archaic prose style (as it turned out, this was the exactly the sort of old-fashioned Hebrew my own education had prepared me for!). For me, this literature of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, was full of glamour and adventure: forbidden books hidden in the pages of the Talmud, heretical ideas discussed in heated whispers, the ritual of a Friday night smoke in the garret of a fellow free-thinker, the divorce from a marriage arranged by mercenary parents, the move to a big city. I sensed a community of fellow outsiders in these long-dead men. In their bitter stories, I found language and shape for the hole in the middle of my own life.

But it was only a partial camaraderie. After all, I never belonged to an underground cell, never read Chernishevsky on free love or Marx on class warfare. My own story, it seemed to me, lacked collective resonance, historical shape, intellectual substance, the conviction of revolution. I left the traditional world not with a wave of heretics, but against a tide of once-secular Jews who had "returned" to "Torah-true Judaism," repackaged as the antidote to the hollow successes of the American-Jewish middle-class. The damning indictments of traditional Jewish life as depicted in Haskalah literature had themselves become historical curios, relics of an outmoded and forgotten past. Where would such Jewish rage come from, after the Nazis had done their work? The parents I left sleeping in their beds when I slipped out the door had seen that destruction, and the home I left behind was their bid to salvage something from the ruin. Whatever the accounts had been between those nineteenth-century parents and their rebellious children, surely the debts had shifted under the pressure of the history that had intervened.

My dreams of escape had always ended, in the hazy tradition of the American road movie, with the roar of an engine, in a blast of exhaust. But what was there, exactly, beyond that, in the vast indifference of the American continent that opened up before me? The Hebrew and Yiddish writers I read in graduate school had left the traditional world for the capitalized ideals of their time: Enlightenment, Freedom, Literature, Socialism, Palestine. The biggest thing in my life, it sometimes seemed, was what I had left behind.

In those first heady days after I left home, it was transgression that spiced every bite I tasted, every step I took, riding the subway on Saturday — a whole new day of the week, a whole new city was mine — or eating a *treif*, street-corner shish kebab. Even now, twenty years later, carrying a heavy bag of groceries home to my family, the Berkeley dusk is ripe with the expectancy of *erev shabbes*, as if my childhood, a clock I'd long ago packed away and forgotten, nevertheless, continued to tick. Everything comes down to a before and an after, between which there is no commerce, no common language; but just because this is so, I live always in both. My father, craning his craggy neck to knot his necktie in the mirror, would catch my eye and say, "Old age, what a strange thing to happen to a little boy." Stranger still, my father is gone, and I have a little boy now whom I call "*tatele*," little father. He bears his grandfather's name, Hillel, the way secular American Jews carry the impossible names of an earlier generation, as a middle name, tucked between his two public names like a recessive gene, a secret message. He has a cousin Hillel born the same night as he was, my brother's ninth. They've never met.

Every summer, though, we fly into the sweltering city to visit my mother. She buzzes us in and stands at the top of the steep stairs beaming. She is smaller each time I see her, and I am larger. Every time, there's less excuse for what I've done. One of my two sisters allows her children to see me, and once each visit, they troop up the steps to meet their little cousin from California. The twins stand in their plaid school uniforms, turned in to each other like a pair of pigeon toes, staring at my son's improbably yellow curls under the oversized yarmulke I found in my father's nightstand drawer. I suppose I should know what they're thinking, but I don't.

e Buddha

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