

## TITLE PAGE

<b>Title</b>	Two Short Stories: “Red Bird Rising” and “The Fifth Day”
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## SYNOPSIS

This submission contains two stories that are excerpted from a longer manuscript of interconnected short stories, each told from the viewpoint of a different woman. The women's stories are all interwoven: each main character tells her own distinct story, yet all of them are somehow linked to the others – they are sisters, neighbors, in-laws, friends. As readers delve into each woman's personal story, they will recognize elements of the others in the book.

“Red Bird Rising” follows a woman who, throughout her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, is beholden to the strict rules and regulations of her Hasidic upbringing. Becca ends up leaving the community, and her early marriage, only to find herself ostracized and faced with unimaginable condemnation from her family and the rabbis. Becca ultimately finds some measure of happiness with a newfound love, but must still grapple with the cruel censure of her formidable father.

In “The Fifth Day,” a young mother struggles with the daily demands of domesticity. Yonina is overwhelmed by the basic needs of her children, her husband, her home. Steeped in a watery world, she finds refuge in the specificity and structure of religious rituals in the days leading up to the Jewish High Holy Days. Allegorically invoking the biblical tale of the Great Flood, “The Fifth Day” tells the story of a woman whose hold on the corporeal world becomes increasingly tenuous as she immerses herself in ritualistic behaviors that ultimately serve to separate her from the substance of reality.

## Red Bird Rising

Becca drops her announcement into the conversation casually. “So... I met someone and it’s looking pretty serious so far.”

She is sitting at a long table in the party room of the Hasidic *shteeble* near her childhood home, the small synagogue that her parents, creatures of habit that they are, still attend: her father prays in the old *shul* three times a day but also likes to schmooze politics and business with the men; her mother attends services on Shabbos and holidays and finds some measure of peace murmuring psalms from her tattered *Tehillim*. Becca is surrounded by the smells of her youth: the tang of *gefilte* fish, the must of yellowing tomes and the mildew of unwashed woolen prayer shawls, and by the hubbub of family members and their various extensions: sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces, nephews. Her parents. They are gathered to celebrate the *bris* of Becca’s sister’s first grandson. (Becca still has difficulty wrapping her head around the fact that she is, at age thirty-two, attending the circumcision feast of her *great-nephew*!)

Becca believes she’d murmured her news privately to the sister sitting nearest her, and so is taken aback by the silence that greets her pronouncement. Becca’s father eyes her mistrustfully.

“Nu, Rivky. So who’s the latest catch this time?” He insists on calling her by the name he’d bestowed upon her at birth, on these increasingly rare occasions when he deems the exchange important enough to actually address his daughter directly, without shifting his eyes uncomfortably away from the unholy *ervah* that is Becca’s uncovered hair, her bare elbows. The impurity that is his daughter. “Is he even Jewish?”

During the course of the evening Becca's family learns her new boyfriend's name (Paul); what he does for a living (attorney); that yes, he most certainly is Jewish *even* with a name like that (*and* the grandson of Auschwitz survivors – because that little nugget tends to seal in authenticity like nothing else); that they met on JDate, and yes, that means she dates online which means on a computer, yes *exactly* that kind of crazy *meshugas*; that he'd grown up strictly Orthodox *frum* and attended yeshiva just like Becca, and now no longer considers himself observant.

Just like Becca.

The family is unprepared for this last revelation. It is one of those glaring truths of which everyone is acutely aware but works really hard to ignore.

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Some weeks later.

Becca answers her youngest sister's call apprehensively. The caller ID flashes "Sara Leah" but she knows her other three sisters are conferencing in. The group call begins as an intervention of sorts.

"Bec, we're calling because we all agree" (something new there, Becca muses) "that you're intent on making Mommy and Tatty ill." (Nothing new there. Surprise, surprise.)

The sisters all begin to talk over one another. Becca, pacing in the galley kitchen of the apartment she shares with her new fiancé Paul and her two-nights-a-week-and-every-other-weekend son Ari, puts the call on speaker and lets Paul listen in. It's easier than trying to find the words to explain her family's dysfunction, the unclouded contempt that erupts from them when faced with the agnosticism of one of their own. Their voices are jumbled, and all four are

shouting over one another in a loud bid to be heard first. Angry fragments filter through the speakerphone: "...*frumkeit* means nothing..." "...not observant, unbelievable..." "...what about Ari..." "...what kind of example for your son..." "...a *shiksa* now..." "...marrying a *goy*..." "...killing us slowly..." "...a *shanda*, shameful..." and so on.

The message becomes clear: Becca is self-centered and arrogant. Becca is difficult and ungrateful. Becca is a terrible daughter and an even worse mother who thinks of no one but herself. Becca must surely be on drugs because why else would she behave this way. Becca is responsible for their parents' anxiety, high blood pressure and cholesterol. Becca is to blame for the inordinate amount of time their mother spends on a therapist's couch and for the startling amount of silver in their father's beard. Becca is single-handedly hammering the final nail into his coffin.

"We thought you should know how we all feel. And just so this doesn't come as a surprise, we thought it only right to tell you that Tatty called each of us separately and forbade us to come to your wedding."

In a remote recess of Becca's reeling brain she is able to think, *Forbade you? Are you nine or are you all married women with husbands and kids and mortgages?* Actually, scratch the mortgage part – all her sisters are still dependent on their father's financial support because their husbands are "learning," i.e., warming a bench in a yeshiva for young married men, and not making a living, and their families are hard pressed to make ends meet on a teacher's or secretary's salary. So yes, it actually makes perfect sense to Becca that each sister has branded herself Tatty's champion and waves his banner furiously before the charge.

And in a separate corner of her mind lurks her ultimate fear: *Now that Paul's seen my hideous skeletons, he'll run for the hills.*

Years of practice have made Becca adept at compartmentalizing her thoughts and keeping them hidden deep.

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Some weeks later.

Becca is called in for a parent-teacher conference. It is an unusual time for a conference, given that her middle-school son is nearing the end of a remarkably productive school year, all things considered. This is a golden son, a hard-fought-and-lost son, a son who'd been unceremoniously dropped back into Becca's life by his indifferent father who'd swiftly lost interest in the daily grind of parenting. A son who remains the epicenter of his mother's existence. This is Ari, whose response to Becca's cautious coming-out of the religion closet had been a flustered, "You mean like, you eat like, pork and stuff?" and "You mean, like you drive on Shabbos, like in a car? Things like that?" He'd briefly mulled over this new version of his mother before regaining his composure, then hugged her and said, "I've never seen you as happy as you are with Paul. So that's the most important thing to me, Ma. That you're happy." This is Ari, whose teacher now wishes to speak most urgently with Becca.

Rabbi Goldblatt is waiting for her in the yeshiva's office, surrounded by black-hatted teenage boys all talking with their hands, all talking at once, ritual fringed *tzitzis* swaying from their belts. He shoos them out of the room and waves her into a chair opposite him.

"I hope you don't mind the hasty nature of this meeting, Rebecca – may I call you Rebecca? ...As I mentioned on the phone, there is no need to worry about Ari, he's doing just fine. He's not aware that I've called you in." He hesitates.

Becca's anxiety trickles down her back into the waistband of her skirt. She manages a cautious half smile. "Please. I'm listening."

Rabbi Goldblatt seems a decent sort. This past year, all of their interactions on behalf of her boy had revealed a sympathetic person whose emotional intelligence, to Becca's surprise and relief, consistently matched his scholarly aptitude. Today, however, the rabbi seems discomfited.

"Someone came to visit me recently. Umm, this is awkward to say the least." He clears his throat. "It was your father. Ari's grandfather." Becca feels her windpipe closing. Rabbi Goldblatt continues haltingly.

"He seemed to think it his urgent duty to warn me. To warn me that Ari's continued exposure to you, his mother, would be catastrophic for the boy's spiritual health." He stops, catching Becca's eye. She believes she sees compassion brimming in him.

"It was a highly unusual conversation. Quite difficult. But I imagine it's far more difficult for you to hear this than it was for me. Shall I continue?"

Becca nods silently, adrift. She listens as if from a distance.

"Your father told me things I had no right to hear. Things about you. Things...I did not need to know. He felt he was safeguarding his grandchild by exposing you, or should I say branding you as an unfit mother. He...well, he believes you're corrupting your son. He said your home is not kosher, and – actually he said quite vociferously that... that you blatantly desecrate – that you're *mechalel* Shabbos..." Rabbi Goldblatt exhales quickly, clearly unsettled by his role in this particular play.

"Listen, Rebecca. I know you as Ari's mother. You've always shown yourself to be a *mensch*, a good person, a good mother... even so, it's none of my business, you see? I'm not the

judge of you. But your father is telling us... telling everyone that you're marrying a man who's practically a *shaygetz* and that it's my duty, my duty as Ari's *rebbe* and *mechanech*, as his spiritual advisor, to ensure that you don't corrupt the boy further."

Rabbi Goldblatt's forehead is shiny with sweat, with the effort of playing referee in the midst of a melee. "Your father," he resumes loudly, "is portraying his own daughter as a *shiksa* who doesn't deserve to raise her own son! I'm sorry, but none of this is my business, first of all, and second of all," the rabbi pauses, the energy gone from him. "I just – I just think you deserve to know what's going on behind your back."

Maybe his voice trails off or maybe Becca stops listening. Between one heartbeat and the next Becca feels the blood drain from her cheeks; breathing is something she suddenly needs to remember how to do. Clouds of *déjà vu* settle in her memory. Her father, she is forced to admit, is indeed capable of such cruelty. Her father, her Tevye, who rails against the rebellion of a daughter. Her father, her not-Tevye, her father who is unable to eventually come around, like Tevye, to tolerate what he cannot control. In the name of God, religion, and faith Becca's father takes no prisoners.

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Some years earlier.

Becca is not Becca yet. She is still Rivky, still a slender eight, still eleven and whip-smart, still a coltish fourteen, still fearful of her father, of rabbis, of Yom Kippur the awesome Day of Judgment, of enumerating all the myriad sins of the year that's passed and *klopping al chayt*, beating her chest with a closed fist as she recites rivers of tears in *shul*, her youthful back bent to the sorrow and guilt of one much, much older and hardened to the world.

She is still Rivky, she is twenty-two, and she is leaving her young husband. She wants to explore the outside and change her name and wear blue jeans and fling the *shaitel* from her head and grow her own hair back and inhabit the world fully, and the only way to do this is through divorce. Rivky expects an angry husband, a husband who will marshal the resources of family and community to keep her home, keep her covered, keep her hidden, keep her obedient. But she is unprepared for the summons to her father's office. She is unprepared to be peppered with questions, with accusations, from bearded big-bellied men sitting, watching, hovering from their seats in a semi-circle as Rivky, unprepared, stands before them, trembling and terrified and stripped naked in front of the questions, the questions, the insinuations of slut, the censure, the sins.

Rivky floats away from her body, her body that stands like a target. She watches herself from afar.

"Where did you go late at night last week? Who were you with?" Rivky worries a thread at her hem and sees her skirt unraveling, unraveling, until there is no more skirt...

"Do you go to the movies in secret? Do you check out filthy *goyish* books from the library?" Rivky breathes in the light as the sleeves of her jacket slip off her arms...

"Do you spoil your holy body with *treif* food from *treif* restaurants?" Rivky's *shaitel*, made of someone else's hair, slides back from her head, exposing the uneven shaved stubble on her scalp, and drops whispering to the floor...

"Do you corrupt your soul with indecent *goyish* music? Do you turn on the lights on Shabbos?" Rivky watches her blouse fall from her shoulders and gather in soft folds at her feet...

“Do you dip in the *mikvah* after you menstruate to be permitted to your husband? As the Torah commands?” Rivky’s opaque tights are suddenly sheer, showing her legs...

“Are you a lesbian? Are you an adulteress? Have you had forbidden relations outside of the sanctity of your marriage?” Rivky’s bra and panties are visible to all the men in the room. She is undressed, she is visible, to all the men in the room.

And so the bearded men, her father’s friends, her father sitting amongst them, decide that Rivky is unfit to mother her toddler son, because every month she insists on wearing tampons while going for her Shabbos walks which, her concerned husband worries, could be construed as carrying, which could be interpreted as violating the laws of the holy Sabbath. They consider her unfit because she was once seen stepping out of a McDonald’s (*a McDonald’s!!!*) with a cup of coffee, which could only mean she was blatantly flouting the laws of *kashrus*. They deem her unfit because she’d recently attended a nursery school orientation for her son, after which the *menahel* hastily phoned her father to say he was very sorry to do this to a man who is such a pillar of the community, BUT. Your daughter, the mother of the little boy Ari, does not belong in our school. The young woman is immodest, her wig is long. The young woman stands out, her skirts are modish. The young woman is noticeable, indecorous, visible.

The tribunal of bearded men is not yet done with Rivky. They decide as well that she must leave the community and that it is best for Rivky’s husband to raise the boy. Never mind that each of these men has a separate feud, over money or *shul* politics, with Rivky’s husband. Still. He is the one best suited, they believe, to raise Ari up as a respectable member of the Hasidic community. Much like themselves.

Rivky loves to read Victorian novels and in this pursuit often bumps up against phrases that describe various ways one may suffer from, or actually die of, a broken heart. In this

moment, listening to the panel of rabbis sitting in judgment of her, deciding her fate – in this moment, facing the loss of her child, her family, her friends, all of life as she knows it – only in this moment does Rivky understand “broken heart.” She pushes the shame and the rage and the humiliation down, down into a deep place where she will try to forget, and be forgiven.

It is decided. Rivky becomes outcast.

Rivky becomes Becca.

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*Becoming Becca means leave-taking, means reinventing, means self-immolating. Becca means to fight her way out of her rigid, glistening chrysalis. She digests the worm that is her self and from the soup she pulls her eyes, newly sighted, and wings, antennae. Becoming Becca means flying, means running, means rounding corner after cutting corner, means slamming. Slamming doors that shut fast on the past and open up to poetry and song. She wrenches words from somewhere deep. Words explode onto her page, words burst from her lips. Words buried in vaults, words hidden in hollows of shame, words that air the soil of secrets to the cleansing light of day. Words that reignite her mother’s distress, her father’s wrath, her sisters’ rage, disappointment and dishonor all around. Becca writes lyrics to rap songs, staccato punches that reverberate with anger, sorrow, truth. She writes poems of anguish and celebration. She slams in dark dodgy East Village basements. She writes torch songs that fuse the fiction of her imagination and the reality of her torn, almost beautiful life. She sings in Bowery lounges that stink of beer and the press of flesh. She sings, she tests her brand new wings. She writes. She writes like she’s running out of time, like she’s Alexander Hamilton reimagining her country from ground-zero up. Becca builds a world. She puts the pieces of the broken one back together. She is mother. She is partner. She is nightingale. She is red bird rising, leaving ashes at her feet.*

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Sometime here and now.

Becca knows enough about fetal ultrasounds to note the absence of a tiny heartbeat. She is almost seven weeks pregnant, or she was, until this morning's bloody flush in the toilet. The doctor explains to Becca and Paul about gestational sacs and embryonic poles and fetal viability and then schedules a D&C. He leaves and softly closes the door to the examination room to give them space to begin the grieving process. It is three months before their wedding; it is Ari's twelfth birthday; it is the day after Yom Kippur.

Becca thinks that the timing of her miscarriage, exactly a year before her son's *bar mitzvah* and directly following the Day of Atonement, is significant. She is wracked with grief and guilt. She begins to venture down the rabbit hole. Maybe her family is right. Maybe she truly is unfit for motherhood. See, she cannot even sustain a viable pregnancy after leaving her roots behind. Maybe she is indeed uprooted, unmoored, a waif in the wind at the mercy of the elements, with no Torah, no tradition, to anchor her. Becca resolves to visit her father to make amends, but she is paralyzed by fear. She is in no shape to be in the same room as her father, let alone confront him. Paul steps up.

“Why don't I meet with him? You know, man to man. I can make him see how special you are, I can convince him that he's missing out on his own family...”

Becca starts to interrupt him – “He'll eat you alive!” but Paul calms her.

“I don't have a history with him like you do. He doesn't affect me the same way. I'm sure he'll come around to me.” Becca is comforted by this proposal. Paul is good in the living room, like Jerry Maguire; he has a gift for getting people to buy what he's selling. She is heartened by the notion that Paul's natural dignity, his reasonable lawyer's mien, his cool head, will prevail.

Within a few days, Paul meets with his future father-in-law in Becca's childhood living room. They talk. (Or, as Paul recounts to Becca afterward, Tatty talks and Paul takes a beating.) To every one of Paul's explanations of misunderstanding, to each of his protestations of innocence, to all of his avowals of Becca's virtue, her *gutzkeit*, Becca's father puts forth arguments of ancient Talmudic law, imagining justice being meted out as if they are living in the Second Temple era, as if Paul is actually a Gentile and not, in fact, a Jew born and bred.

"If we were living during the time of the *Beis Hamikdosh*, do you know Rivky would be sentenced to death by *skilah*! Yes, stoning – don't look so shocked. Because she's like the Gemara describes, a *ben soyrer umoyreh*, a rebellious child. Doesn't heed her parents' discipline. And because she's *mechalel Shabbes*. And as her father, I would be responsible for being the first to push her off the cliff!"

"You know Paul, you seem like a nice person, but – maybe not such a good *yid*, you know... And for the life of me I can't understand why you would want to marry Rivky – but in any event I'm not permitted to allow you sit at my *Shabbes* table, because then the wine would be considered *yayin nesech*, tainted, contaminated."

Paul notices he is being lectured. He is highly educated in Talmudic law from his own yeshiva days and recognizes the fallacies inherent in the arguments so passionately put to him by Becca's father. But this is beside the point.

Eventually the Holocaust makes an appearance and wraps up the session. "It's not enough about our families – Rivky's grandparents, my aunts and uncles and cousins... It's not enough how we suffered at the hands of the Nazis? People **died** because they refused to give up *Shabbes*, my parents in the camps didn't give themselves a *heter*, an exemption, to eat *treif*, they didn't allow themselves to make excuses to eat non-kosher...and they had the biggest excuse of

all! And my own daughter? Who I had such high hopes for? *Mein eigene tochter*, she turns her back. Such *beeshes* heaped on our heads... Such humiliation. Mommy and I can't talk to our neighbors, we *mamesh* can't even walk in the street..."

And practically in the same breath: "But I'm always ready to forgive her. I'm waiting for Rivky to come to her senses and leave all this foolishness – all these *shtisim* behind. Tell her I'm waiting for her to come back and be part of the *mishpucha* again. **If** she behaves the way she's supposed to, the way she was taught. She knows – she was raised in my house! She knows exactly what needs to be done. The basics. Nu, *genik shoyt mit di narishkeit*. This madness has gone on long enough. Tell her I'm waiting."

At this last, Paul silently thanks whatever angel of a filter he possesses for not allowing the news of Becca's miscarriage (and of course, her illicit pre-marital pregnancy) to escape him today. But this is beside the point as well. The point is Becca and Paul now recognize they must sever ties with her delusional parent if they intend to fashion a healthy life for themselves and their future family.

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Some weeks before Becca marries Paul.

Becca glances at the handwritten sign in Hebrew and Yiddish announcing this is a house of mourning. She gently eases open the door to the women's entrance and steps inside. Her old friend Ruchi, now a prominent rabbi's wife herself, sits in a low chair close to the ground, her head bound with a black satin *tichel* wrapped tightly, revealing the one-inch band of synthetic hair that is her *shpitzel*, her blouse torn at the neck to reveal a modest black shell. Ruchi is surrounded by her mother the *rebbetzin* and her sisters, all sitting in similar low chairs. All their

blouses are torn. All their heads are bound. There is a steady murmur of women's voices, women who are there to comfort the bereaved among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, as the traditional blessing says.

Becca and Ruchi have a long history of laughter, secrets, tears, and hushed whispers. Back when Becca still answered to Rivky and Ruchi's close-shaven scalp still sprouted brunette strands, the two were inseparable on summer nights out on Ruchi's parents' back porch. Their favorite game was "What If," a rich springboard for their delirious girlish fantasies and dreams. "What If" encompassed boys, periods, high school, *goyim*, parents, clothes, music, hair and weddings and marriage (specifically, the cost-benefit ratio of the freedom of marriage to the requisite post-ceremony shearing of the *kallah's* bridal hair). Many a moonlit night they passed in pursuit of these faraway notions. Ruchi remains one of the precious few who loves Rivky and Becca equally, as if they are the same person. Ruchi loves Becca without looking over her shoulder to worry who's watching them walk together down the street. Ruchi loves Becca regardless of her bare head, her exposed arms, the obvious immodesty of her wardrobe. Ruchi is able to love Becca even though their paths have diverged because Ruchi possesses an extraordinary and uncommon sense of self, a self that was forged together with Becca in the fires of adolescence and stoked into a pillar of strength by a father capable of loving her. Now, Becca returns to the friend she never lost, as radically different from each other as they appear, to console Ruchi as she sits *shiva* for her father.

While he was alive Ruchi's father had been the *rav* of the little *shul* on the corner, the very *shul* where the family now sits *shiva* for their lost father, where the congregation mourns their lost leader. Every year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Rivky/Becca would feel transformed from her insides out, listening to the *rav* pour his soul into the *davening*, his prayers,

she imagined vividly, rending the heavens, bypassing the angels, landing directly at Hashem's throne. The *rav* was the only human being she'd ever known who could lift her *neshama*, her soul, out of its earthly confines and allow her spirit to soar. The High Holy Days in Ruchi's father's *shteeble* were, for Rivky back then, the height of religious ecstasy. There was no sin she could commit that would not be forgiven, no good will she could not achieve.

But that was then.

Now, Ruchi implores Becca with tears of love for her gone father, for her precious friend: "Becca. It's time to make amends with your father. He won't be around forever. Take a look around you – we are sitting *shiva* for a man we thought had so much more time. Time will cheat you, Becca. Forgive him."

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Ruchi's words, their weight. Her pale tear-streaked skin and puffy pink eyes. Her sudden orphan status. All of it, swirling around in the vortex of Becca's head. She begins to see her father, mortal and limited and not forever for this earth. She imagines him, still and silent and stone-cold, the lone inhabitant of a plain pine box. Her heart skips; she catches a breath. Becca forgets, briefly, his stance on the status of her sinner's soul. She discounts, fleetingly, the cruelty of his discipline. She ignores, for the moment, his intractability. Becca scours the very depths of her conscience, her spirit, her perceptions of a daughter's fidelity. After some emotional wrangling with Paul – who, after all, had been on the receiving end of a mere fraction of the whole, and admittedly tries his very best to appreciate the enormity of his fiancée's misgivings, her ambiguity, her doubt – after arguing and shouting about pride and family and death and ego and being right and the thickness of blood, Becca ultimately secures Paul's blessing and she finds herself, two weeks before their wedding day, at the entrance to the *shteeble* where her

father prays. The men's entrance. She swallows a steadying breath and pushes open the door to face a wall of white fringed *talleisim*, swaying and murmuring. Becca searches the front of the room and notices her father's distinctive stoop, shrouded, swaying, his face obscured by the ceremonial silver *atara* wrapped across his forehead, the hum in the room and the rhythm of his swinging prayer shawl almost hypnotic in the stifling heat of the old *beis medrash*.

Becca gathers her courage. Her voice rings out: "Tatty!"

An abrupt hush. Dozens of *tallis*-draped men turn to stare in shock at the intrusion, at the woman in their sacrosanct midst. At the front of the room, directly facing the ark containing the holy Torah scrolls, a stooped figure swathed in a yellowing prayer shawl straightens perceptibly. Tatty tosses his *tallis* imperially over his shoulder and stands like a crowned king, the embroidered silver *atara* loosely framing the top of his head, the black box of his phylacteries strapped regally to his forehead, the second box of *tefillin* wrapped tightly around his left bicep, the straps digging deep into his left forearm, marking him indelibly as a man, an observant man, a man of God. Becca, habitually relegated to the world of women across the *mechitzah*, the opaque divider that separates the sexes, has rarely, if ever, witnessed the glory that is her father in prayer. She gasps at the sight of this king. All it takes is this moment and his silent scowl, and Becca's resolute intentions threaten to fall away; she is in danger of shrinking back into the little girl she'd fitfully outgrown, the little girl at the mercy of a hostile world. She is in danger of becoming once again the wayward, dissolute, impossible daughter, the intrusion, the disturbance in her father's carefully ordered, regulated kingdom.

He opens his mouth to rebuke her. He speaks, but the words that spill from him, white-tipped with rage, crash against the sheer rock face that is the backbone of his daughter. And Becca - Becca listens, she listens, finally she listens and she heeds, after years of being told,

admonished, scolded to listen, listen to elders, listen to men, listen and obey, listen, follow, observe and heed heed heed the words thrown at her, finally Becca listens to her father and what she hears sounds like a eulogy for a girl named Rivky whose small corpse lies battered, dashed from the cliff.

Tatty speaks, but Becca looks past him, past his harsh words, past his glare, past the anger he spits in her direction. She looks past the crowd of gaping men swathed in traditional prayer shawls, past the men wrapped in the suffocation of ancient things, past the men murmuring their astonishment, their strangled displeasure, past the overheated, overwrought, smothering room lined with antique tomes and threadbare *siddurim*, worn prayer books that had seen their share of human misery...Becca looks further, ahead, past the motes of dust swimming in banners of sudden sunlight and sees the room renewed, rows of chairs now seated with elegant wedding guests, the fashionable women chattering, glittering, the tuxedoed men smiling, nodding, the dust motes sprouting colored wings like fluttering butterflies. She sees her mother, for years torn into atoms of anguish between her husband and child, their twinned tenaciousness. Becca sees her mother there in the new room, dressed in funereal black yes, her rheumy eyes rimmed with the ghosts of many tears, yes, all of that yes, but *there*, there leaning on her grandson Ari's shoulder, waiting to embrace her daughter as Becca stands, beatific, with her new husband Paul under the *chuppah*, luminous in white beneath the marriage canopy. Becca looks past, and peers closely at her future.

She believes she can see the faint flicker of flaming red wings shimmering at her back.

## The Fifth Day

*...And God created...every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind...And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. (Genesis 1:20-23)*

### THE FIRST DAY

Yonina slams the bathroom door shut behind her, turns on the faucet full blast, and crumples to the floor, sobbing silently, her eyes and nose leaking, her shoulders heaving. She hears a soft rapping at the door, a persistent sound that intensifies in pace and volume as she resolutely ignores it. She listens to the rush of water filling the sink.

Finally: "Mommy? Mommy! Are you in there? Mommy! Mommy, Shua kicked me and he also said I'm a fat baby! He's so mean. MOMMY!"

Yonina breathes deeply a few times, shuddering and trembling, in an effort to calm herself. Her youngest son's plaintive voice across the flimsy barrier of the bathroom door stabs at her. She is a bundle of frayed nerve endings, raw and exposed.

"Mommy! I keep calling you, Mommy! Why don't you answer me? MOMMY, I need you!"

Yonina's mind flashes to the sign she'd scribbled some weeks ago and scotch-taped to the bathroom door, a sign, though written in haste and through a film of tears, she'd taken care to decorate with colored highlighters to make it more visually appealing to her school-age children, a sign she'd posted on this very door when she found herself in a similar state, besieged by the sensory assault of her young children and the overwhelming battery of their wants and needs that greeted her at home every day. The sign reads:

*If this door is LOCKED, DON'T BOTHER:*

1. *calling me*
  2. *screaming/shouting/yelling*
  3. *knocking*
  4. *pounding/rattling the door*
  5. *trying to get my attention*
- YOU WILL BE IGNORED.*

- *The Management (aka Mommy)*

“Mommy? I know you’re in there because I’m peeking and I can see your feet through the bottom of the door, Mommy! MOMMY!”

“READ THE SIGN!” Yonina barks at her child through the locked door, “read the sign read the SIGN!!!” She rants until she is breathless.

There is a quiet sniffing pause from outside. Then, her son’s tremulous five-year-old voice: “But...but I don’t know how to read!” And a fresh torrent of wails is unleashed.

Yonina gathers her guilt and her mother’s love and what feels like the last shred of her sanity and unlocks the bathroom door. She hugs Ben and dries all the tears, his as well as her own. She speaks softly in her little boy’s ear, her arms still wrapping him tightly.

“You’re right, Ben. Silly Mommy. Of course you can’t read the sign, not yet anyway. But you will. You will, someday very soon. You’ll know how to read...and you’ll know loads of other important things. Soon enough you’ll know.”

She squeezes him again, tight enough for both of them to understand that, at least for the moment, Yonina is whole again. They head to the kitchen where Ben’s brothers, Shua and Hanoch, are doing their weekend homework while munching on rainbow-colored wafers that Shua, who’d

recently turned eight, had saved from a classmate's birthday party. Yonina feels a familiar flare in her chest.

“Again with the nosh?! How many times have I told you boys?! How. Many. Times. Am I talking to the walls? I guess I'm talking to the walls. I prepare a snack plate for you every day. Every day! And every day you come home and head straight for the junk food, when your snack plate is sitting right in front of you, calling your name!”

Her eldest son Hanoch, at eleven precociously poised and articulate, doesn't seem to notice his mother's flushed cheeks and glittering eyes. He says calmly, “Ma, how can you expect us to eat that gross stuff Dad brings home from the shop? Really. We *have* tried it, you know. At your insistence. But seriously, it's not gonna happen.”

The “gross stuff” Hanoch refers to is a cornucopia of choice delicacies from the appetizing shop Yonina owns with her husband, Noah, who'd inherited the family business from his great-grandfather, who'd built the place on the Lower East Side in 1922. Old Adam Gottlieb had intended to grow the business from a pushcart into an empire, but unfortunately his dream tripped and fell and ended up as a dingy storefront on Orchard Street, off of Rivington, with great barrels of pickles and olives on the sidewalk out front and essence of onion and smoked fish wafting out to greet passers-by. As generations of men in the family would say, in the telling of their origin story, “*a mensch tracht, un Gott lacht*” which is essentially the self-deprecating Yiddish version of “the best laid plans of mice and men...” But with God in the mix, laughing. Of course.

Yonina contemplates the platter of appetizing selections set out on her kitchen counter: pickled herring, golden-edged smoked sable, slices of rosy Nova lox folded like petals, small bowls of olives and mini gherkins just begging to be sampled. She reflexively swallows the stream of saliva that threatens to flood her mouth. Yonina tries to view the platter from her sons' point of

view. She can see the appeal that crunchy wafers loaded with processed sugar can have over the briny abundance she so carefully prepares for her children each day as an afternoon snack.

“Ma, it’s ok, calm down. A tiny bit of sugar once in a while – *even* before dinner – won’t kill us. I promise.” Hanoch smiles encouragingly at his mother while Shua nods his disheveled head vigorously.

“Yeah. What he said. That’s right,” Shua’s enthusiastic concurrence with his idol of an older brother is muffled by a mouthful of wafer crumbs.

Yonina sighs, resigned. “And you, young man,” she directs a half-hearted reprimand to her middle child, “why’d you kick your little brother and call him names?” But the fight’s gone from her, replaced by a weariness so profound she can hear the hollow sound of it echoing beneath her ribs. She can hear another echo as well, the echo of advice from all the parenting magazines and mom blogs and educational studies she diligently reads, the echo of her complete and utter failure to follow what she considers simple and realistic guidelines for raising children. *Set expectations. Follow through. Be consistent. If you threaten, make sure you deliver. If they whine, stand your ground.* Or something to that effect. But probably with more PC language. She often feels like her eleven-year-old is parenting *her*, and not the other way around, and when her mind wanders down this path she thinks of Wordsworth, how the poet declares that the child is father of the man, and Yonina believes that the poet has a point, at least the way things are playing out in her family, and she thinks of how the poet’s heart leaps up at the mere sight of a rainbow, and Yonina wonders what that might feel like, for a heart to leap up at the sight of a rainbow, which in her tradition – the Jewish tradition, the Biblical tradition – is the promise of hope.

They hear a shuffling at the front door and the boys are off like a shot to greet their father after work.

“Whoa! Easy there, tigers!” Noah chucks one under the chin, slaps the other playfully on the back, ruffles the little one’s hair; they chirp and chatter up at him.

Yonina, observing their exchange from the hallway, marvels at the man she’d married, at his capacity to be unfailingly, unfathomably, energized in the presence of his sons, whereas she finds herself, surrounded by those very same sons, only enervated. She often daydreams about daughters, about unicorns, ruffles, and rainbows – because surely she’d have a sparkly life, the stuff of fairytales, had her boys been born girls. Noah enfolds his children in a great bear hug, laughing and fending them off as they scramble like cubs around his legs, almost tripping him as he enters the apartment. They may not want to eat his food, but they don’t seem to mind the salty, fishy odors that cling to his clothes. His wife, however, certainly does mind. She minds a lot. Yonina, who was raised as a secular Jew and assumed the mantle of religious observance with her marriage to Noah, spends hours doing laps at the local Jewish Community Center, taking advantage of the pool’s separate swimming schedule designed to meet the needs of the Orthodox community. A champion swimmer since her high school days, Yonina much prefers the chemical tang of chlorine to the saline that seeps into her husband’s very person. She loves him but refuses his advances until he’s showered and lathered himself free from the trappings of his day. Not for Yonina the brine and the vinegar, the cure of olives and the ferment of sauerkraut. It’s one thing to slice smoked fish and serve it, quite another to live in what she increasingly, alarmingly, feels is a vat of vinegar soup.

They live above the shop. Gottlieb Appetizing occupies the ground floor, the storefront opening onto the street, and Noah and his young family live on the second floor of the old walk-up building. Noah is unaffected by the briny odors permeating their apartment from below. He is unbothered by the dank interior, the dripping faucets and the leaky ceilings, the persistent mold of

the worn carpets that, in Yonina's view, seem to have absorbed an entire saltwater ecosystem. Noah is comfortable among pickled and preserved things.

## THE SECOND DAY

Over a roasted chicken and potatoes dinner on Monday, Noah announces that tonight he is taking the family *kaparos shlugn* in Brooklyn, ahead of Thursday evening's advent of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

"Whaddya think, kiddos? It'll be fun. Just be careful not to be in the wrong place when those chickens decide to poop! That stuff is pretty nasty, and I'm not sure Mommy will want to wash your hair all night!" The boys erupt in whoops of laughter, shoving each other under the table and making loud, clucking noises. Noah locks eyes with his wife above the tousled heads of their sons. Yonina absently rubs her right shoulder.

In the past few years they were able to perform this ritual on a neighboring street corner, but the old-time Hasidic purveyors of this traditional practice who pitch their tents in various Lower East Side alleyways each September are becoming increasingly rare. Hence Brooklyn, that stronghold of old things, where men still dress in long black caftans and fur hats like eighteenth century Polish aristocrats, and women still *kasher* freshly slaughtered poultry with heaps of coarse salt until the blood runs clear. In Brooklyn you can still find bearded men with swinging sidelocks willing to whirl a chicken around your head to soak up your sins, then slaughter that same chicken according to the law of Moses so you can drop it into a pot for soup on the Sabbath, both you and the chicken now purged of sin.

Yonina's dread rises in her throat at her husband's declaration. She has difficulty swallowing. She is reminded of what happened last year, how the youngish, inexperienced apprentice to the rabbi struggled to hold the bird aloft, gripping its feet and the delicate bones anchoring its wings, but the chicken that was to serve as her *kaparah*, her expiation, thrashed free from his grasp in a ferocious flurry of feathers and fluff, and as it scrambled and squawked away its sharp claw pierced her shoulder and drew droplets of blood in the shape of wings. No matter. They found a different chicken, one not so fiercely intent on saving itself. She watched from beneath downcast eyes as the rabbi, holding the chicken high, circled her kerchiefed head three times, intoning the customary prayer substituting this fowl for her transgressions, and she thought, as she thinks every year in the stall with the chickens and the droppings and the screeches and the squawks, *there but for the grace of God go I.*

Yonina pushes her panic down into a deep place where it hides, and numbly watches Noah hustle the boys to finish dinner. Clear the table. Quit shoving. Quiet down. Put on jackets. Eventually, the unruly squabbling exhausts itself and the family heads out to Brooklyn for an appointment with the chickens.

### THE THIRD DAY

The season of High Holy Days is one rich with ritual and tradition. During this time of year the Gottliebs take their children to the river for *tashlich*, the ceremonial casting off of sins, a custom typically observed on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. They'd missed their opportunity on the holiday last week, however, having had to deal with Yonina's baffling fit of near-paralysis during afternoon prayers in *shul*. Immersed in the *mussaf* devotions as she was, she suddenly found her mind slipping, overtaken by strange, dream-like thoughts and odd, fantastical notions. In her

imagination, the printed Hebrew letters in her *machzor* began to lift off the page, swirling up to heaven like birds, forming words she could read but not understand, and the winged letters were fire-tinged, spitting flames so vividly real she could feel the singe on her eyelids. This vision – similar to the brief, startling bouts of silent hysteria she’d experienced intermittently in college, delirious secrets she’d shared with no one – shocked Yonina into a state of stunned weakness. The import of this happening in the holy synagogue, of all places, held deep meaning for her; it frightened and simultaneously thrilled her. Eventually, she was able to make it home from *shul*, slowly and with a feeble spirit, leaning heavily on the shoulders of her husband and eldest son, whom she’d managed to convince of her fatigue and exhaustion. Yonina recovered her equilibrium by morning, her family none the wiser about her mind’s feverish inner workings.

And so because of the Rosh Hashanah drama the week prior, Tuesday becomes the day for *tashlich*. Yonina and her sons walk down to the East River with their prayer books and a Ziploc bag filled with crusts of day-old bread. Yonina insists on packing a small disposable container filled with olives and pickles as well, and smoked salmon, and a few sardines, and some crackers. Just in case someone gets hungry. She shepherds her children in front of her, swatting away errant taxicabs and oblivious pedestrians, a mother hen protecting her chicks. They reach the riverbank and begin to pray. They murmur some words of supplication and cast their myriad sins, along with the symbolic hunks of bread, into the lazy current, into a place of forgetting, and watch them float gently by, the bread and the sins. After some spiritual reflection on her part, and some not-so-spiritual tussling on the part of the kids (“Stop pushing me!” “I’m not pushing you!” “Oh yes, you are!” “Ma, Shua’s pushing!” “Mommy, they’re fighting again...” “If you boys don’t shut it down this instant so help me God I swear I’ll dive into this revolting river right now just to save myself from all your nonsense!” – a threat that resolves the issue immediately), they head home. Yonina

leads the way, her boys in tow. As they cross the footbridge spanning the Harlem River Drive the heavens open up all at once, the corpulent clouds, grim and roiling, release their wet weight, and the family is drenched in a downpour. Ben clutches close to his mother while Hanoach and Shua shout gleefully, splashing and stamping their feet in the sudden puddles.

“Nice day, isn’t it?” Hanoach initiates the old routine, lifting his face to the sky and opening his mouth wide to catch the plop of raindrops.

“Nice day for a *duck!*” Shua hollers back, and all three children quack loudly in delight.

In one imaginative instant Yonina is transformed into the intrepid Mrs. Mallard of the beloved children’s story that had comforted her during her lonely college years outside of Boston, flapping her wrists and honking disapprovingly at motorists, clearing a path for her precious ducklings on the busy, wet urban street. In this moment, her own *Make Way for Ducklings* moment, Yonina feels strong, motherly. She has encouraged her children to wash their sins away in the river; she believes her attentive care will keep her family safe from the perils of this temporal world, and specifically from New York City Uber drivers.

#### THE FOURTH DAY

The following day’s chaos, however, only serves to prove to Yonina just how fleeting her maternal triumphs truly are. It is Wednesday, the day she teaches Mommy & Me swim classes at the JCC. As is her habit, she heads early to the pool to swim her laps before the school of toddlers arrives, before she must meet her own children’s bus. A lifeguard for most of her adult life and captain of the swim team in college, Yonina swims like she was born to it. She welcomes the solitary stretch of artificial blue water, plastic balls bobbing on ropes cordoning her off from the

world, latex cap pulled into a tight hug over her wiry brunette curls, over the reverberating echoes reaching her ears, dark goggles guarding her pink, chlorine-kissed eyes. She enjoys her weightlessness in water, her buoyancy. Her daily swim is the splendid thing that allows Yonina to stay rooted to her children, that gives her the gift of firmament, of functioning. After class, hair still dripping and eyes still stinging, she sits on the wide stoop of her apartment building, waiting for the school bus to squeeze open its doors and dispense her offspring like so much tumbled laundry.

The boys barrel off the school bus in a tangle of backpacks, baseball gloves, and shouts. Hanoch, scribbling down an answer to the last math problem on his homework page while crossing to the curb, disdains to look where he's going and trips over his sneakers. He lands flat on the sidewalk, which Shua then immediately takes as an invitation to jump, with a flying leap, onto his older brother. The one on the ground yowls, the one on top bounces that much harder, and the five-year-old runs into the street, chasing the windblown math sheet. Yonina watches Ben dash after his brother's paper. With an instinctive gasp she reaches for him. Her hand grasps the hood of his sweatshirt, pulling him back to safety. Hanoch's math homework, less lucky, gets crushed beneath the tires of the departing school bus. They are home less than four minutes, and already Yonina can feel the familiar prick of anxiety behind her eyelids, but she has taught herself, over the years, to blink rapidly to keep the tears where they belong. With dry cheeks and a brittle voice that hide the adrenaline pounding through her veins, she summons her children up off the sidewalk and into the apartment.

Inside, arguments. Whining. Rinse and repeat. "How come we never have anything decent to eat..." "I'm hungry..." "What's for dinner..." "Grilled salmon *again!*? Ugh..." "I left my library

book at school...” “When’s Dad coming home...” “No, I want Daddy to do my project with me...”  
“Daddy knows how to fix it...”

Yonina agrees. Daddy does indeed know how to fix it. Whatever *it* may be, Noah always seems to know how to make things right, how to smooth the ragged edges, how to calm the hectic tempest. She shivers slightly in anticipation of being intimate with her husband that night, after two weeks of enforced ritual abstinence. Yonina does her best to settle the children into their after-school routine of snacks, homework and playtime, then heads for the bathroom to begin the lengthy, complex cleansing preparations required for immersion in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath. Tonight, although she locks the door on her quotidian life, Yonina doesn’t collapse as she has done so often, weeping, her fragile psyche flailing, her jangly nerves shredded. Tonight, her time in the bathroom is spent following the prescribed checklist she has painstakingly adhered to, month after month, since her first immersion a dozen years ago as a young bride. She scrupulously scrubs, soaks, combs, clips, snips, washes, removes from her body any and all material, organic or otherwise, that might be considered an impediment to a complete immersion, anything that might, God forbid, render her impure and her husband subject to some hazy but severe penalty for the transgression of lying with his wife while she is unclean. She sits so long in the warm bath her skin is practically preserved. Yonina feels blessed that her boisterous boys are quiet enough, for once, to let her soak. She feels blessed that her irregular menstrual cycle has timed itself perfectly this month, her period coming after an interminable 40 days, allowing her the opportunity to submerge in the consecrated waters of the *mikveh* just before tomorrow’s onset of the holiest day of the year. She notices the steady, relentless trickle of the faucet and, for once, she is unbothered.

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The top of Yonina's head breaks the water cleanly. Rising up, arms crossed lightly across her breasts, she murmurs a blessing under her breath about the sanctity of immersion. The woman watching her atop the seven stairs throws a startled glance at the wing-shaped scar on Yonina's right shoulder before responding with an echoing "Amen!"

Yonina takes a quick breath and plunges beneath the water again, crouching her naked body all the way down so that every strand of her dark curly hair, covered lightly by a square of netting, is submerged. When she surfaces again she notes the gentle silence in the room, punctuated by the soft splashing ripples her body creates. It's traditional, encouraged, for women to take this time for personal prayer or meditation, some spiritual thought. Yonina wonders when it was that she became comfortable with a stranger watching her pray, naked. Every month. The attendant's gaze barely registers anymore. Dipping in the *mikveh*, Yonina can feel an etherealness embracing her, lifting her, so that she almost believes she is incorporeal; she can breathe in the water, she can soar in the air.

"Kosher!" The attendant's voice bounces off the tiled walls, jarring Yonina out of her brief reverie. She dips a third time and emerges airy, her bones hollow, her soul pure, her body available for intimacy with her husband.

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It is a special, spiritual time of year. Otherworldly. Some might say magical. Yonina imagines it's possible, during the Days of Awe, to touch the divine, to transcend the physics of the material world, to rise above the pettiness of her damp home with the moldy carpet, the dripping shower, the faucet that insists on plink plinking into the rusted sink. She imagines it's possible to

rise above her physical body, her eyes that leak tears for no apparent reason, her back that buckles beneath the weight of an unseen albatross, her shoulders and arms that cleave the water, knifelike, in the swimming pool as if searching for the fins that should naturally be there.

## THE FIFTH DAY

Thursday. The eve of Yom Kippur. Most observant families spend the day together, eating a festive meal in preparation for the grueling fast to come. Yonina shops; she cooks. She slices fruit and dices vegetables; she sears and sautées. She sets out the braided challah loaves and prepares the holiday candles. When Noah and the boys return home from the *shacharit* morning prayers, dressed in their holiday finery, they sit down to eat the traditional *seudah*, but Yonina, silent, leaves the table, drifts out of the apartment, and heads uptown to Central Park.

She sits with the swans at the lake, marveling at their grace, their love-shaped necks, their downy purity; she visits the penguins in the zoo and senses an odd kinship with the waddling birds who eat herring and guard their babies so vigilantly. It gives her great comfort to observe these species of waterfowl who mate for life. They remind her of a line in *Our Town*, the Thornton Wilder play she'd studied in high school, a play she'd hated at fifteen but eventually grew to appreciate for the grounded, old-fashioned wisdom it offers: *people are meant to go through life two by two. 'Tain't natural to be lonesome...*

Yonina thinks of her husband, his charm and easygoing laugh, his endearing habit of murmuring her nickname, “Little Dove,” while making love, his keen eyes that see her and yet miss so much of her. In Noah’s embrace she rarely feels lonesome, and yet— she is here, with the fish and the birds, on this holiest of days. With Noah she rarely feels the tears, the flight urge, and

yet— Yonina has flown, she's flown up, uptown, away from her husband, away from her children, away, away, to the company of swans.

It is almost dusk. Timid shadows lengthen on sidewalks. It had rained earlier, a sudden, swift, drenching storm that had caught Yonina unawares, soaking her pale holiday dress through. Yonina is doubly cleansed, twice purified: last night her immersion in the holy waters of the *mikveh*, today the sweet surprise of a sun shower. Dressed in the traditional white of a penitent she finds herself, to her own bewilderment, at the entrance to the George Washington Bridge. It is out of her way, certainly. The *shul*, where she had meant to be, is on the Lower East Side. Her husband, her children are already there, preparing themselves piously for the Day of Judgment, surrounded by neighbors in somber mood for this particular holiday, the men swathed in white *kittels* like angels untainted by sin, or like the shrouded dead. The hum of many voices starts to swell in the small sanctuary as the sun begins its descent.

Yonina, dreamlike, steps onto the pedestrian walkway. Bending at the waist, she leans out over the railing. Before her is a great milky-white expanse of sky, the sun just hinting at its presence as it settles leisurely beyond the sheer cliffs of the Palisades. Below, gentle waves bob in the Hudson River, sparkling playfully when they catch a glint of fading sunlight. Yonina believes she's finally caught a glimpse of the elusive rainbow she'd been searching for. She presses her palms against the flimsy mesh of the barrier. There! Rising from the clustered trees embracing each other, branches entwined, in the shadow of the cliffs, and stretching gloriously toward the clouds, is the storied shimmering band, a vision of pale colors. Yonina feels the cables of the bridge sway gently, buffeted by a humid breeze after the storm. She imagines she's perched on the deck of a ship, a bird on a wire, rocking lazily on the quiet river, a peaceful vision with iridescent fish leaping lightly about with nary a splash, a painting, a poem, a tale she might tell to her sleepy

children. The rainbow's colors flash on the glistening surface of the water. She uncurls her clenched toes and releases the railing; she steps toward the light. Is this the feeling, then, of a leaping-up heart? She can feel a tugging between her shoulder blades, her wings sprouting, her white dress billowing, and she knows she can fly. Yonina soars toward the bouncing winking beckoning waves, in her mouth the faint taste of olives.