

The Fifth Question

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Lina stood on the balcony facing Central Park and looked down. She was counting bald-headed men. Poor boys, she thought. All-the-way-bald was much better than fringe around the head, or a twenty-strand ponytail, or the parted-on-the-side, flipping-it against-the-grain-over-the-crown styles. If she counted twenty bald-headed men before going to sleep, tomorrow would be a lucky day. She watered as she counted. Flower boxes rimmed the roof garden. Lina was a farmer girl at heart; she had lived most of her life on a kibbutz. Her garden was royal. She picked a pansy and let it fall from her hand towards the sidewalk. If someone caught the pansy and looked up at her, tomorrow a miracle would happen. The pansy took its time falling and for moments seemed to float up, and when at last it hit the ground, Lina assured herself that although no one had noticed the pansy it did not mean that a miracle would not happen. It was just that she couldn't be sure that it would happen.

Next she drank red wine, because it was Friday, and then without a fuss she lit candles and said a prayer.

In the bathroom she stood in front of the mirror murmuring over and over, "Oh, this body. Oh, this body. Oi, oi this body..."

Her body had grown through the years into massive knotted muscles. She thought of herself as an olive tree, dark and twisted and with ancient strength, strong enough to lose branches and live with snakes. Her shoulders were small thrones for kings and queens to sit, lounge, or stand upon.

Each night she rubbed almond oil into her shoulders and arms and sometimes when she wasn't too tired, into her legs and on her face. She would close her eyes and touch her face, dreaming of someone else's hands massaging her forehead and eyes, especially her eyes.

“Oh, this body. Oh, this body. Oh, this body. Let me grow stronger every day in every way.”

She rocked naked in front of the mirror, her forehead touching an invisible wall. She spoke not to God, but to Strength. She was a Pagan. “Oh, this body...”

Thirteen years ago, after forty-seven hours of labor she had given birth to a baby boy. Under the sky, filled with Milky Way light and with her world around her, Chaim was born on January 8, 1984. She was 37 years old; Chaim was her firstborn. His father would have nothing to do with them, though Lina had hoped, and then still had hoped for something, and then had hoped for anything, and then had longed not to forget hope. He was younger than she was, a Dutch boy, passing through, and just staying on her kibbutz for six months. She was petite then, demure with small muscles.

After anointing herself with oil, Lina went into her son's room to watch him sleep. Often he was pretending. Sometimes she knew this and sometimes not. When he was still and the night-light held him softly and he slept the way all boys sleep, she would gaze upon him imagining what a normal life might have been. Chaim had no mobility in his legs. Stiff as bamboo, they did not bend without assistance. His head and torso and arms could move, slumping and flailing with joy. His hands did not work like normal hands; sometimes he could grip things and then not be able to. He saw only light. He knew no forms by sight. He could speak, sing, joke, and had exceptional hearing. And touch, he lived his life with a hand upon Lina, as the earth touched the sky. She didn't know what he understood. How he saw himself in the world. All the doctors, Israeli, German, Swiss, Hungarian, French, Tahitian, American, in all the offices and clinics on all the boards and before altars and behind magic curtains, said the same thing, “He should be institutionalized.”

He liked to sleep with the windows open.

Lina wiped the drool from the sides of his mouth with her hands.

She took the wine bottle into her bedroom and telephoned her New York friend, Jane. They had met on an airplane while seated side-by-side on a flight from Frankfurt to New York four years earlier. Jane had been exhausted and just wanted to sleep. But Lina spoke through the entire flight, telling Chaim funny stories and family stories of Morocco from the time before the family came to Israel, and dog stories and doctor stories and battle stories and

all the while Chaim touched her lips while she spoke. Whenever there was a lull Chaim would cry out as if speaking to the pilot, "What are we over?"

The moment arrived when Chaim had to go to the bathroom. Jane got up to ask for assistance. When she returned with a steward Lina had already swung Chaim over her shoulder and was walking steady as a bull down the aisle. At that time, Chaim was already a big boy; though only nine years old, he was a pinch over five feet tall. (He would add almost ten inches over the next three years.) Jane, along with the rest of the passengers, watched. Their meeting and the trip to the bathroom became a story Jane later told over and over to Chaim. When she would finish he would always say, "And when you got home, you went to sleep for a long time."

"Hello."

"Jane, Lina. We come tomorrow on the 1:40 train. We arrive 2:30. This is good for you?"

"Fine. It's just that Raymond's back is not better and he won't be able to help you with Chaim. I'm afraid he'll hurt himself if he is lifting him."

"No problem. It's okay. I can manage. You know I can manage. Don't worry. Chaim is so excited. We will bring dessert. Don't worry. How are you?"

"I'm a little overwhelmed with having so many people. I haven't had any time to myself. Such are the suburbs, constant in-laws and family and cooking."

"It won't last so long. The holidays will be over. Can I read you something? Chaim wrote a story. I mean he told me what to write. Can I read it to you?"

"Of course."

Lina took out the story, which she had folded and put in her passport. She thought that with all the company, someone would be able to help with Chaim. It didn't have to be Raymond. Even Jane's daughter, Dory, could help. Together they could carry him up the stairs; teenagers are strong.

"Okay, here goes, 'My name is Chaim Zetumah. I'm twelve years old. I live with my mother Lina, the Princess of Magonia. Not really a princess. We live fourteen stories up and our back door opens onto the roof, where I like to stay and smell the spring. I can smell Central Park. And I listen to our neighbors and the birds and the garbage men and people on the street: Jerry, who lives on the street, and Kim, the flower man, and Blue, the doorman; and Danny, the doorman across the street, who talks to all the dogs who walk by.

Also, a great noisemaker is Mr. Gold, who curses at the trucks that hem in his car. And oh boy, oh boy, sometimes I hear music. At the train station, I can hear the train coming before anyone. This makes my mother laugh. If we are with company she always says, Chaim has exceptional hearing. I was born on the kibbutz where my mother grew up. My father's name is Rolf Wenders. He milked the cows and loved my mother and went away. And he loved me and gave me his long legs and smile and yellow hair. Oh boy, oh boy, I'm a big boy, almost thirteen."

"Isn't that something?" Lina said.

"Maybe you should get him a tape recorder. Maybe he would talk more. He could tell a story without your help," Jane said.

"I'll get the tape recorder. But thinking of that I'm not so optimistic. Maybe his mind is like an eclipse. Clarity comes when things are lined up just so perfectly inside."

It's inexplicable, Lina thought; she found trying to explain Chaim's intelligence, or the shadows of his intelligence, exhausting.

"I don't know. Jane, maybe I should take this drug, Prozac? You're laughing. You think I'm so strong. You know I think it is better to be neurotic if I'm going to live in New York, better for making friends and talking. I think it was a bad idea to come."

"It's just the winter. When spring comes you'll feel better."

Lina wasn't sure the season had anything to do with anything she meant to be expressing. Gravely disappointed was how she felt. She'd lived in New York for four years and didn't feel really close with anyone. Though she was grateful for the apartment and toward her American cousin for helping in that way, she still felt alone. It is hard here to have a child like Chaim, not because of all the hardness that has always been with him, but, she told herself, because people do not live together here. We are not part of a tribe. This is the problem in America, the problem and the sadness; there are no tribes.

"Maybe, yes the sun is welcome," Lina said. "Sometimes I miss the community of the kibbutz. We are busy here, always busy. It will be good to see you. I'm worried about the future."

"Oh God, who isn't?"

"My cousin will only help me again by paying for Chaim to be institutionalized. I need to find a big, strong man. Maybe I'm talking crazy. Say: don't give up, don't give up, tell me not to give up!"

"Don't give up," Jane said. "Don't give up."

"It's so funny when you say this Jane. It's so funny the way you make my accent."

"I love you."

"Good. We'll see you tomorrow. I love you. Shalom."

Lina had one more glass of wine and began another book by Zane Grey; she loved westerns.

In the morning, Lina woke to Chaim calling her. He had woken up early and waited as long as he could. He hugged his velvet pillow and rubbed his face into its softness.

"Stop yelling, I'm not ready to get up."

"Ma."

"Not yet, little monster, I'm still sleeping."

"I'm a big monster, Ma."

Lina laughed.

Chaim laughed.

Lina fell back asleep.

"Ma, I have to go. I can't wait."

Lina had been dreaming about Elvis Presley. She was standing with him on the kibbutz diving board dodging sniper fire. The valley swept up and away from their kibbutz to the Jordanian border. Elvis would move his hips from side to side missing bullets.

"Ma!"

Lina ran into his room scooping up the pot. She grabbed hold of his penis and aimed.

Then she sat Chaim up and squatted on the floor in front of him. She pulled his body over her back and walked to the bathroom. Lina kept her body curled like a snail. This was the only way she could still carry him.

In the bathroom she laid him on the floor and ran a bath. She got him into the bath in two moves. First she picked him up, his body facing her, hugging him, and then she stepped into the tub and slowly lowered him. During the moments when she had to balance on one foot, it would not have been any scarier had she been walking a tight rope across the Grand Canyon. She held the whole world in her arms and could never slip. Chaim could sit in the tub leaning against the tiles for hours. Usually Lina cooked breakfast while he was in the tub. But this morning she stayed with him and again went over

how they would travel, and where they were going, and who would be there.

"First we'll go down the elevator and then we'll walk to Broadway and catch the bus."

"Number 124, 124," Chaim said.

"Yes, 124. When we get off we'll be at Grand Central station. We'll go down the ramp and buy our tickets and then wait by the track. We'll ride on the train for forty minutes and then we'll be in Larchmont."

"And Raymond will pick us up."

"Yes, Raymond will pick us up."

"In Butch!"

"Yes, in Butch."

Raymond called the family SUV "Butch," and this made Chaim laugh.

"And at Raymond and Jane's we will have the Passover seder."

"And can I tell about the lamb?"

"Yes."

"Oh boy, oh boy. And I can ask the four questions?"

"You can ask one question. Maybe Dory and her friends will want to ask one of the questions."

"I want to ask the four questions, Ma. Please. Tell me the questions. Tell me."

Lina recited the four questions that are part of the seder, and Chaim echoed in her footsteps. "Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we eat both unleavened and leavened bread. Why on this night do we only eat unleavened bread? On all other nights we eat herbs of any kind. Why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs? On all other nights we do not dip our herbs. Why on this night do we dip twice? On all other nights we eat our meals in any manner. Why on this night do we sit together in a reclining position?"

"Can we do it like that, Ma? Please."

"Maybe."

"Oh, boy. Oh, boy. And say who is going to be there."

"Jane, Raymond, Dory and Raymond's Uncle Saul, and Jane's mother Dorothy, and their friends Ellen and Morty, Didi and David, Miriam and Norm and their new baby Jose, and Dory's friends Jamil, Margy and Nicholas."

"No, that's not all. You have to say 'and Lina and Chaim and Boswell,'" Chaim said, and then barked and licked Lina the way Boswell does.

"That's right, though Boswell may have to stay outside."

"No, more. Elijah, the prophet."

"That's right. Maybe Elijah will come."

"I want to sit next to Elijah."

"You can sit next to his place. We don't know if he will come."

"We have to keep the door open."

It amazed Lina how excited Chaim became over Passover and what pieces of ritual and history he seemed to retain. The bit about the prophet Elijah or a stranger in the form of Elijah joining the Passover meal was something he seemed to wait for.

"Measure me, Ma."

Lina didn't say anything but blew a sigh.

"Please, Ma, please measure me."

Lina lay towels on the bathroom rug. Again she climbed into the tub and lifted Chaim to his feet, hugged him to her and climbed out. She lowered him to the towels. Sometimes her concentration and effort was so intense she made the sounds of a Japanese wrestler. Chaim loved these sounds.

She took the tape measure from her bathrobe pocket. Beginning at his feet, she slowly moved up towards his head.

"How much!"

"How much!"

"How much!"

"How much!"

They echoed each other, one with his bird voice the other with her gravely rasp. Lina wrote the date and his height on the bathroom door. "Five feet, almost eleven inches, April 1997."

"I'm tall. I'm tall, Ma."

"Don't grow any more."

She dressed him on the ground and then lifted him into his wheelchair.

"You can call me Baby Butch," Chaim said.

This made Lina laugh so hard she cried. Chaim listened to music out on the roof. Lina fed him. She had coffee and cigarettes for her breakfast. They had a very small apartment and so the roof meant the world to both of

them. Lina's second cousin owned the penthouse. He was rarely in New York and Lina took care of things at the house for him and did his bookkeeping. He paid her \$600.00 a month and gave her the apartment.

While she was showering, she decided she would wear her Bedouin wedding dress. It was one of the few special things she had left from Israel. When she was twenty-four she had hitchhiked to Jerusalem and wandered the Old City completely lost in the maze of old streets. She settled in the afternoon to play chess with a rug salesman, Hassan. They spoke to each other in Arabic and drank rose tea.

"Do you want to see the desert as a Bedouin does?"

"Yes, yes," Lina said.

If Lina won, he would take her.

The rose tea was thick and smelled like perfumes. Hassan had walnut eyes. Lina won, easily. She followed him out of the city. He ran through the maze as if he had drawn it. They took a bus south. An hour past Beer-Sheva, he stood up, and the bus stopped. When the bus had disappeared and all Lina could see was sand in every direction, they began to walk. The sand bled across the horizon, so the world did not seem round or flat. The stars touched her forehead. Hassan had stopped talking. He wrapped her head in a caftan.

Lina stood looking at herself in the Bedouin wedding dress. Years ago you could buy them in Jerusalem and other Arab towns, but not anymore. It hung to the ground, heavy white cotton embroidered across the chest and up the sides in reds and threads of gold, green, and blue. Hassan had given her the dress when they returned to Jerusalem six days later. She did not see him at the Bedouin camp. Men and women were separated. For those days, she lived amongst the women, and the notion of being a stranger seemed just that, a notion, something completely abstract.

Hopefully the kibbutz would allow her and Chaim to return. She had sent the letter five months before. But she would not give up hope. When Chaim was five she had left. She took him to Budapest. There, an institute that had made some progress working with children who had cerebral palsy took them in. For several years the kibbutz sent her money. After a few years, it became evident that Chaim would never walk and that his intelligence was limited. But, it was a good place to be. After the collapse of socialism the policy changed. Children of Chaim's status were no longer welcome. This was not stated but understood.

She stood in front of the mirror and began to dance with her image. Lina put on her jewelry.

"It is possible that I can look attractive," Lina said to her image.

She took the jewelry off, knowing Chaim would surely rip it off. He pulled on anything he touched and usually put whatever it was in his mouth.

The party had begun before they arrived, and when they drove up, Boswell, an Airedale terrier, met them at the corner of the street and raced along next to Butch. Chaim pressed his face against the window. Though blind, he usually liked to sit next to the window. He liked traveling in cars and trains and planes. The motion thrilled him. The driveway wound up a hill. Uncle Saul and Dorothy, Jane's mother, were on the porch, and under the tree sat Miriam and Norm with their newly adopted baby, Jose.

Lina opened the wheelchair on the driveway and lifted Chaim from the car seat into his chair. She let out one of her wrestling expletives and everyone ran to help. But the work was done. Lina wheeled Chaim down the driveway and onto the street, which ended in a cul-de-sac. People would be arriving over the next couple of hours, and Lina wanted to take the opportunity of open space to let Chaim exercise. She pointed the chair and Chaim turned the wheels on his own. There were times when his hands could not coordinate this sort of movement, but today he rolled up and down the street imitating his mother's grunts. When his arms gave out they rested. Chaim slumped forward in his chair, and his head dropped against his chest. Lina lay down on the grass and waited for her son's heavy breathing to relax.

Heading up to the house, she pushed the chair over the lawn rather than up the driveway. She would count ten steps and then put the brakes on and rest. Jane and Raymond had recently bought a mulcher lawnmower, which leaves the cut grass in a layer of nerves over the lawn. The sweet smell moved Lina. She missed soil and roots and rocks and desert and sky and building something from nothing. Lina gathered handfuls of the grass and pressed Chaim's face into her cupped hand.

"Green," Chaim whispered. Lina had taught him colors by smell. The air felt crisp as if it were fall. Jane came out and yelled hellos from the porch waving down to them. Chaim yelled "Oh, boy, oh boy," when he heard her voice.

"Jane, Jane," he called into the house. Every fifteen minutes or so Lina would push Chaim a little bit further up the hill. Boswell licked Chaim's face. And Chaim in turn licked the air or whatever bit of Boswell was in his face. Didi and David arrived with platters of potatoes and kugel and carrots with raisins. Jane had prepared brisket and turkey. Inside the table was already set and copies of the Freedom Haggadah lay across each setting. Raymond had bought a bottle of Cabernet for each person in addition to the Manischewitz they would drink during the reading of the Haggadah. There were eggplant-colored, long-stemmed roses in three different vases down the length of the table. A white embroidered tablecloth hung to the floor. Raymond had brought the picnic benches inside. Ellen and Morty arrived with humus and cucumber salad, gefilte fish and beets. Lina had brought a chocolate cake and macaroons but had given the cake to the homeless man who helped her push Chaim in the train station. But Dorothy and Uncle Saul had also brought dessert.

When Lina and Chaim finally made it up the hill and in the front door, they were starving. Lina parked Chaim at the end of the table and joined the rest of the party moving from the kitchen to the dining room and forth and back.

At five o'clock, Jane insisted they start. No one could actually read Hebrew except Lina who refused.

"I'm a Pagan or perhaps a prepagan. I'm just here for the community."

So Raymond read the English translations and when they came to the first prayer everyone spoke in a gibberish that sounded like Hebrew. Except that Chaim's recitation rung out over the chorus of voices, as he knew each prayer by heart. Though he usually ended up adding pieces of other things he knew by heart, like "Happy Birthday" or "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." After the first glass of wine, Jane and Raymond's fifteen-year-old daughter, Dory, arrived with her gang of three: Jamil, Margy, and Nicholaus. The four of them had met when they were ten years old and sang with the children's choir of the New York City Opera. Six months ago they had begun their own band, The Scapegoats. They practiced every Friday night and Saturday at Margy's, an enormous loft in Tribeca where Margy lived with her father. The band didn't have any songs in English, yet. They sang in Yiddish and French. Between the electric guitar, drums and bass riffs, they would sing a cappella. Most of their material was based on old poems Dory had collected and then set to music.

"Beautiful poems, which the world should know," was how Dory had explained to her parents what she was doing. The band would have its first gig the following Saturday night and had planned a preview for Passover. They came in singing something in Yiddish. Their voices preceded their appearance and the beauty of their harmonizing and the haunting melody made everyone close their eyes and listen.

The silence that accompanied the singing was followed by a dead silence. Their appearance shocked the group. Boswell sat outside the glass doors silent and stunned. Neither man nor beast made a sound. The faces around the table did not move, as if in a painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In Jane the viewer would see the face of a mother looking upon a mystery crawl forth from her womb, as Mary upon Jesus. Raymond's face held all the heat of the one who threw the first stone. Uncle Saul sat with a shade of despair beyond relief. Morty showed no surprise, just certainty, with the look of Moses as the Red Sea parted. Didi appeared as the sacrificial lamb, knowing it would die, not knowing its blood would mark the home of every Jew. David with the face of the last Jewish slave, the last wanderer. In Norm, one saw the Pharaoh's face scalded by rancor, while Miriam's expression was bright as a full moon. As if blinded, she looked without blinking. And Dorothy, unable to look, cast her glance within. God's face lay in Lina. These moments of silence moved the dead as well as the living.

Chaim broke the silence of disbelief. He knew not what had happened. Though even without sight and despite his absence of mind he sensed something profound and cried, "Elijah? Elijah's here?"

During that moment of questioning, Chaim had leaned forward and grasped the table so that when he leaned back he pulled with him the tablecloth and dishes, flowers, candles, wine, glasses. All went tumbling, and then even more so as the hands around the table flew, each trying to stabilize their places.

The teenagers stood, each proud of their stance and new image, more confident in their posture than they had ever been. Dory had tattooed up and down her arms in black bold letters the names of concentration camps: Auschwitz, Maidenek, Treblinka, Buchenwald, Mauthassen, Beize, Sobibor, Chelmo, Ponary, Theresienstadt, Warsaw, Vilna, Skarzysko, Bergen-belsen, Janow, Dora, Nevengamme, Pustkow. Margy had the word Fuck on

each shoulder and under the word a swastika. Jamil had numbers across his wrists and Nicholas, Jewish stars all over his arms. They each had the Star of David in the center of their foreheads and the name of the band, The Scapegoats, in an arc above the star. And they had all shaved their heads.

Chaim's hands contorted and held onto the tablecloth. The hysteria around him triggered spastic waves through his body. He looked as if he were undergoing electric shock. Lina whispered against the side of his head, "It's okay, it's okay."

She held him, and slowly the warmth from her hands and the melt of her voice calmed him. She straightened one finger at a time, until the tablecloth was free. Then she wheeled Chaim out of the dining room into the kitchen.

Raymond and Jane were both yelling. And Dory was yelling. The table, in disarray, had been shoved against the wall. The Passover platter, however, had remained intact; the egg, lamb shank, parsley, horosis and bitter herbs, each on its own little dish together on the larger tray which had landed in front of the television. It seemed the platter could handle commotion. Outside Boswell padded back and forth barking in his high-toned yelp from the depths of his terrier heart. The band had moved toward the front door. Dory kept screaming to them, "Don't go." Uncle Saul took his nitroglycerin pills and Norm his blood pressure medicine. Jose slept through everything. Ellen began to cry. Red wine bled into the tablecloth.

"I have to go, Ma," Chaim said, his hand upon Lina's.

Lina looked at him and wondered if it was true. In a few days he would turn thirteen and he had begun to want her touching him. "Pishy or pooh?"

"Pishy."

"You really have to go, Chaim? Don't make me struggle unless you really have to go."

Chaim pulled on Lina's dress until she was bent level with him.

"I have to go, Ma."

She simply could not carry him either up or down the stairs to the bathroom. She grabbed a pot and wheeled him out of the kitchen down the hall and into Dory's bedroom. She closed the door behind them and unzipped Chaim's pants as fast as she could. She pulled out her son's penis and caught his pishy in the pot.

Chaim sat with his head hung down.

"I'm sorry, Ma."

"No, no, it was my fault. I wasn't watching you."

"Why weren't you watching me, Ma?"

"I was looking at Dory."

"Why is Jane yelling at Dory?"

"She did something brave, and sometimes bravery causes fear in others."

"What did she do?"

"She is trying to be truthful and act on her convictions. You don't know what I mean, do you?"

Lina felt that she could not go on, at all, not another moment.

"You don't know that word, conviction. You don't know what I mean, Chaim. You don't know. How could you know?"

"I want to meet Elijah, Ma."

Dory burst into the room and collapsed on her bed. Lina shut the door and then lay down next to her. Dory cried and buried her face into the quilt. Lina waited and when the crying had passed she said, "Don't give up."

Dory rolled over and the two of them lay side-by-side looking into the iridescent stickers of the planets and stars covering the ceiling.

"Why doesn't she save getting mad for when I do something wrong? It's so fucked. I sit through Passover every year and really nobody is really doing it. It's all so vague, like math class where you hear the same thing over and over, you do it and then the very next class you can't remember, I mean you just never really get it. Moses fucked up making the Jews wander around the desert for forty years. If Jewish slaves had entered Palestine things would be a lot different. My mother just wants me to be Jewish by the clothes I wear and the college I go to. That's what she thinks Jewish is. I'm not gonna grow up and live in the suburbs. It's fucked. I want to be Jewish and in the world—the real world. I don't want to hide in the suburbs with a bunch of other people. And the only thing they really have in common is hiding. I bet she doesn't even know the names of the death camps. I know she doesn't want to know. I'm sick of it. She'd rather have me polish silver than really celebrate Passover. We're supposed to be celebrating that we are no longer slaves. My own mother told me I should be grateful I don't look Jewish. I have blond hair and freckles and blue eyes and I look Jewish because I am Jewish. My mother

is not free. And my father is scared of her. Passover is not about getting stuffed and drinking till you drop. I'd rather be dead than not stand up for what I believe in. I don't care if she hates me. This is the right thing to do and my band is great."

The sheets and pillows and quilt were black satin and the walls were painted brick red. On the door was a life-sized picture of Jim Morrison. One corner of the room was set up as an altar. Carefully arranged from the floor to the ceiling was an array of small things connected by bonds unique to Dory's generation. Icons that had never stood together meshed: Mickey Mouse, Barbie, Jimmy Carter, a torn picture of the Pope, Kate Moss, IKEA labels, a mezuzah, rosary beads, a pineapple, a picture of Sitting Bull, Arthur Ashe, Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, Sinéad O'Connor, toy soldiers and miniature race cars, crucifixes, plastic farm animals, marbles, Pink Floyd, Frank Zappa, loop earrings, bottle tops, frogs, flies, and glass horses, and chess pieces, rocks, skull and bones, a prayer shawl, Yassir Arafat, and James Dean. There were many images Lina could not identify. She decided she'd put things in Chaim's room that a boy his age might look at.

Dory had stopped talking and sat up. "You know you can't just live for yourself. There's got to be something that you'd give your life for. If you just live for yourself then all you are is scared."

"Ma, don't forget the pish. In the pot, Ma," Chaim said.

Dory laughed hard.

"Dory, 40 days, 40 days, days not years," Chaim said.

Outside Jane walked along the edge of her property. She carried a big stick and waved it at the ground oblivious to Boswell who frantically waited for her to throw it. In the living room Morty had gotten Jamil to play the tape. The first song began with an electric guitar and violin duet and then the voices. The singing sounded as if it came through the clouds. The lyrics were in Yiddish and Jamil translated for everyone: "*Zog nit keyn mohl...Never say that there is only death for you, Though leaden skies may be concealing days of blue, Because the hour we have hungered for is near, Beneath the earth our songs shall tremble we are here.*"

Ellen and Margy put what was edible back onto the table and people began to help themselves. Dory wheeled Chaim into the living room. Raymond kissed his daughter's Jewish star. Lina went outside and approached Jane.

"Would you just leave me alone."

"It's not as if she's doing drugs or got pregnant," Lina said. "It's not such a bad thing, this band. It may even be brilliant."

"For God's sake, Lina, shut up. Shut up. Damn you. What do you know? Nothing. Nothing. You'll never have to protect your son from his own intelligence. He'll always be a baby. He won't be tattooing death camps all over himself, will he? Or, I suppose that would make you happy?"

"Yes," Lina said, her body filling with tears.

"Fuck you."

The anger struck Lina. She staggered as if hit. "Do you really think your life is so hard?"

Jane struck her own mouth and began to cry. "I'm sorry, Lina, I'm sorry I said that."

Raymond, sensing Jane's distress, walked over and folded her into his arms; the two of them strolled together, a country of one, to the side of the yard.

The conductor helped Lina get Chaim into the train seat. Thank God, thank God, Lina ruminated. Mother and son leaned against each other and rocked in and out of consciousness. They were both exhausted.

"Ma, what are you going to do?"

Without opening her eyes Lina said, "We'll take the bus, number 124, go up the elevator, and go to bed."

"About me, Ma? What are you going to do about me?"

He had never asked her a question of this nature before. It was as if he had stood up and walked on air. Perhaps she had only dreamt the question. It didn't mean anything unless he could ask it again. Lina opened her eyes and searched her son's face. But there was nothing, just remarkably placid green eyes that stared at her without any recognition, focused on a darkness she could not see. Sometimes his eyes were yellow in the daylight. Her precious boy had fallen asleep. Maybe he had spoken in his sleep. She wanted to wake him, to wake him, to wake him. It was all she could do not to slap him. And then just as quickly as the hope had entered it was gone, and Lina relaxed with her head resting on Chaim's and they both napped.

In the morning Lina gave Chaim a sponge bath. Her body ached from the previous day and she could not summon the strength to lift him. Instead she put towels on the bed and sponged him with a washcloth. And then

she rubbed almond oil into his back and legs and she massaged his face. It was nice for Chaim. She knew he liked the way it felt because before she dressed him he kissed her hands. He kissed each finger and said, "Thank you, Ma."

She wheeled him onto the roof and put The Scapegoats tape, which Dory had given her, on. Light rays broke through the clouds. Lina lit a cigarette and went inside to cook breakfast. She cut twenty oranges for fresh juice. She tasted one and the smell filled her head. Orange. She felt excited by the smell for orange. Today Chaim will see orange. Often she spoke aloud while she was in the kitchen. Growing up on a kibbutz she had shared the kitchen with many others. Kitchen time was a time of conversation.

She sat down and had another cigarette. If there is a God, today you will give me an answer. And if you don't give me an answer, it means you absolutely don't exist. What am I going to do? All right, you have until dusk. No, I'm going to count to thirteen—I'm not waiting till dusk. Forget it. I'm too tired for games.

And so, if you spoke what could you say that I haven't said? There is only one thing. Don't give up. So I'll speak for you, again. "Don't give up," Lina said.

Lina inhaled and blew smoke rings towards the kitchen light. She could blow more smoke rings than anyone could on earth. As a teenager she had had the thought—if I blow twenty-one rings life will be painless—and ever since she had been practicing. She thought of Chaim as the rings floated away from her and vanished in the kitchen light.

"My creature, my baby lamb, my boy," Lina whispered.

But what she saw was none of these. A new picture of him rushed at her. She tilted back in the chair, lifted her face towards the light and exhaled. She saw a young man, her son, waving to her and standing tall. Behind him there was a pattern similar to the wake of a duck's swim, a V shape that expanded until the shape was the whole pond. Horror gripped her.

Oh, my God! Was it a wish? Was it intuition? When Chaim was alone had he put his hands on the wheels, gripped them and pushed as fast as he could? Had he moved in the direction that she had left him pointed? Had he hit the tomato plants first and then the pansies? Had he let the sound of his own efforts guide him until he came to the edge and no more effort was needed? As he tipped, he swung his arms high and yelled, "Oh boy, oh boy. I'm big now." And for a few moments had he stood in the air on his own?

Lina took the two glasses of orange juice and went onto the roof.

She looked into the sky, which was filled with millions of clouds racing in the wake of her imagination. The V shape spread until the sky spilled over and all she could see was white. And inhaling deeply, Lina was singed by the smell of white.

“Ma, I can hear the glasses touch.”

Lina waited for her hands to stop trembling. Nothing had changed. Lina and Chaim would go on and on. Her son turned toward her and sat up straight, his face contorted as if he had read her mind.

“Ma, Ma?”

Chaim turned off the music.

“Ma, what is God going to do about me?”



Robin Martin's fiction has appeared in the UK literary journal QWF, Rain Crow, Kaboom Press, and The Circle Y Anthology. She has recently completed a novel, *You With Me?*