The Sotah

I knew the moment I got off the plane that my mother was totally wrong. So what if I was equipped with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Public Policy from Tel Aviv University, soon to start grad school on a full scholarship that would set me up for life. I didn't belong here.

All the reasons were clear. I looked around at the crowd on the loopy passport inspection line. I counted the number of people with Louis Vuitton luggage, otherwise beautiful women with face make-up piled high and peeling in the heat, and the endless supply of pork-belly men standing there waiting for anything female to sing hallelujah to them. My mind stuttered in time with the constant din of announcer voices all over the place. On the television monitor alone, I heard: 7 murders, 15 bludgeoned or kidnapped children, 5 estranged wives suing for millions.

Welcome to the United States, Zena Batya Cohen, I thought to myself. Yes, the John Fitzgerald Kennedy airport spelled out all the troubles outside the *Garden of Eden*. I stood my ground, arms folded over my tall skinny body, dirty-blonde ponytail and all, until I was called to present my dual passports.

"One will do," the agent trilled off, handing me back my Israeli passport.

"Sorry, I'm in the practice of…."

"Seems like you've been all over." The man scratched his forehead as he flipped through the blackened pages of my U.S. Passport. "Jordan. Egypt. Soviet Union. Germany. Bet you were in Berlin?"

"We're in the mid-90s, sir," I whistled. "All those walls are down."

"I have to ask you why you travel so much. Work?"

I smiled at the man to let him see how young I was: one month shy of 25. "My *ed-u-ca-tion*," I enunciated slowly and deliberately.

"Quite a one. You've been back and forth from Israel to here, and to all of these other exciting places. And you've made it back today in one piece?"

"My parents wouldn't have it any other way."

"Will you be staying home from now on, or will I see you traipsing through here again soon?"

"I've always been at home," I answered him. "That's why I carry two passports with me." What I failed to mention was how much more at home I felt on the Mediterranean in Tel Aviv than at Long Beach on the Atlantic where I was heading now.

"Right," the man spit at me. "I hope you stay here for awhile and stay out of trouble."

I tried to come up with an answer that wouldn't sound too much like a wisecrack, just to make my irritation known. But the man returned my American passport and called for the next traveler. I had no other chose but to move on and collect my two withered suitcases from a rickety old conveyor belt in the adjoining room, and face the inevitable reunion with my parents, their SUV, and their insistence that I *finally* be contented with their version of my American dream. Within several hours they would walk me from their house, down several streets, to a spot on the beach I had just flown over before my plane circled over the rabid stretch of southeastern Queens, and came to its screeching halt after half a day of flying.

As I stepped out into the American sun for the first time in 15 months, I hit my hands against my thighs. I made a vow to never relinquish my Israeli dreams. That was where I was born, where I struggled with Hebrew and Gemara at a woman's yeshiva, and began my sequestration by a faceless God who sometimes answered me.

True to form, my parents were 50 minutes late. They always blamed it on being hidden as children, endlessly fearing to be seen in broad daylight. I laughed patiently, taking my mother's tanned hand in mine, noting the yellow center of her pale green eyes in the late

afternoon. I sensed her pride: I was home. She had finally persuaded me to return and take back my old bedroom while my younger siblings were away, safely put in American colleges. I was the only one to make Ivy. I was going to Columbia University.

"You've made an excellent decision," my father said, his v's and d's pierced by his German-French accent; his vowels cut short by the Russian he learned while in hiding during the war. "Harvard was a better place, but they decided against you. At least you come to us in one piece."

I surprised myself that I didn't believe he meant me any harm. He was a Holocaust survivor who roamed streets, mountains and forests longer than it took the Allies to defeat Hitler. I sucked in my pride and hugged him.

Rocking my body slowly back and forth to try and stay awake, I answered my parents' questions.

Did I have a boyfriend? Who had I left behind? Should they begin preparing my siblings' bedrooms for the onslaught of guests coming to see me from Israel? I looked around. Their vehicle was for the first time totally empty of things. No, I couldn't ask. My mother would be insulted and my father would come to her defense. I found myself giving in to the atmospheric pressure of family gravity, the three of us together in the large, neat, fortress of a car.

That night, my parents did an unspeakable thing. They had their closest friends bring over their son—my age, also going to Columbia at the 168th Street campus. The faces of the four super-adults took on a glassy tone when Moshe—yes, he was named after the supreme prophet—announced he was in his third year of medical school. I detected the calculation in this: I would be done in 2 years, and he in no fewer than 3 years, meaning I could serve as his main financial support until the time came that I would lull around at home as a doctor's wife. I tasted the sweetness of their best intentions, and I gagged.

Three hours later, our guests left and my parents went to bed. I hesitated before taking full view of myself in my girlhood mirror. I hadn't done this since I left home for Israel shortly after high school. I unbuttoned my blouse, gently easing first the right sleeve off my shoulder and arms, and then the same on the left. The gold-green fabric fell to the ground on the dull carpeting. I turned just enough to silhouette my bra-clasped breasts. I stood there looking and then I closed my eyes. Now I saw exactly why being home was all wrong. There was no place else in the world where I needed to take myself seriously, because no one else would.

My last month in Tel Aviv, I had slept with someone. I had thought it was a bit of fun. Even now, there was no feeling of severed wires. Just the grip of passion in my belly that I thought was just a bit of fluff, like soap bubbles I could wash off with a bit of water, or a sponge. But, I really couldn't, could I.

We had met in the shower. I was struck by her shower cap. The finely painted flowers were lavender, she told me. I understood by her voice that there was something British in all of this, including the way she held her hand to her chin, and winked at me when I released the towel from around me, quite the same way I released my blouse just now. She came to my room with me. She ran her fingers through my hair and asked me if I felt anything. I spread my legs wide for her.

There is nothing in the Bible that emphatically condemns a woman from sleeping with another woman. But standing there in my parent's house I felt so shamed by this. How could I be loved by the one true God if I was something short of perfect? Being Jewish meant marrying, having children, blessing them every night. Everyone knew that, accepted that. But I would have none of this. I had defiled every dream I had for myself with this burning desire I could not control. I struck my fist into my thigh, this time, duly hard. How could I pray, really pray, and feel that my life was pure? I was like a woman who cheats on her husband, because she sleeps

with someone else out of wedlock. That was what I had done, and in my heart, I knew I would do it again and again.

"I am like a Sotah," I thought. I am like a woman who goes where she is warned by her husband not to go, but she goes anyways. She goes near another she can love besides him, long enough to raise suspicion.

I wrapped my bathrobe around me, tying myself in tighter than before, and crept barefoot into the kitchen. I had to know if was a Sotah, and I knew how to find out through an ancient Hebrew ritual. I knew my mother kept barley around; it was in the pantry wrapped in a plastic bag. I found a clear glass bowl and filled that with cold water. When I returned to my room, I gently rested the glass bowl filled with water on my bureau and the barley wrapped in a plastic bag next to it.

The last thing I needed was a bit of dirt. I ventured back into the living room where my mother raised a bevy of orchid plants, each highly delicate requiring the exact amount of sunlight and water, and clipping down at the right time. I pinched a bit of dirt from the hardiest plant between my thumb and forefinger, and carried my find carefully back to my room. I quickly dropped the piece of dirt into the water, shaking the bowl from side to side in my hands. I raised the bowl above me, using the light from the ceiling fixture, to see if the dirt was settled enough, even throughout, melting from tiny brown specks into an even gray that refused to reform and resettle at the bowl's bottom. I almost placed an edge of the bowl to my lips. I caught myself just in time. I needed to name the accusation I had for myself and repeat: "*Amen, Amen.*"

I placed the clear bowl filled with dirt-water back on my bureau. I quickly retrieved a piece of paper from my purse and a pen. I raised my head again and squinted my eyes in the blazing light from the ceiling. I bent my head back down and began writing. When I was done, I read out loud what I had written: *"Zena Batya Cohen is accused of betraying her debt to G-d, by*

sleeping with another woman."

I bowed my head over the paper a second time and held the barley in its plastic bag in one hand saying *"Amen, Amen."* I quickly moved my lips over the edge of the clear glass bowl and began to sip the dirt-water, There was no way to finish drinking the mixture without relinquishing the barley back onto my bureau, and placing both hands around the bowl, allowing myself to mercilessly sip every last bit of the dirt-water full and hard into my mouth and down my throat.

When I was done, I coughed and began to feel a gagging sensation at the back of my throat. But none of this mattered. I gathered the barley in its plastic bag in my hand and began to shake it hard. I placed the barley down and gathered my robe in both hands until the ends were high up in the direction of my chest. I looked intently in the mirror at my stomach and thighs expecting disgusting fat to ooze out from beneath my skin, my womb emerging, darkened like an empty sieve, revealing my inability to bare children because I was a gay woman, a religious gay woman, a religious gay woman who loved and praised G-d three times per day. But my flesh winked back at me, deeply tanned like my sun-worshipping heterosexual mother. The muscles in my stomach and thighs remained taut, revealing nothing to indicate that my womb was made barren by my terrible sin. My body did not betray my guilt.

In an instant, I threw my bathrobe down around me and ran to the bathroom down the hall. In one exaltation, the dirt-water wretched up into my throat, up into my mouth, and finally into the toilet. There the dirt-water settled into its original components. Clear water joined with whatever water the house plumbing had brought there. At the same time, the original dirt settled into one solid dark brown clump at the bottom of the toilet. I didn't know what to think.

Only when I flushed the toilet did the dirt and water swirl around and congeal, most of the joint compound finding its way back down into the plumbing of the house. But still, at the

very bottom of the bowl, was the remaining filament of dirt that needed to be scoured in order to go away.

I left it just that way for my mother to see. In the morning, she'd find in my eyes the tears I cried because I could never love a boy like Mosche.