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The Two Conversions of Catherine Schwartz

Long before she began calling herself Chanah, I believed I knew her better than anyone. Perhaps you can only imagine her as the woman your community revered: the inspirational speaker, eloquent writer, women's advocate, and mother of Rabbi Shmuel Feinberg. But I could tell you things that were not in her writings. I could tell the other side of the story. Maybe you forgot; I was there. I am her son. The other one.

Will you listen now?

For the first eleven years of my life I was an only child, and sometimes I feel I still am. I have a beautiful wife, and live a comfortable, quiet existence in New Hampshire where there aren't many Jews. My son is eight-years-old. When I look into his green eyes, I see the boy I was when I lost my dad, and my heart gets twisted up with a sadness I wouldn't wish upon anyone. I can't wait for Jack to turn nine, just so I won't have to look at him when he asks me how old I was when my father died and say, "Your age."

The last time I made the trip to visit my father's grave, I told him I was sorry. I always figured he'd have been baffled by the way things turned out. Standing in the Jewish

cemetery, beside the bones of Nathan Henry Schwartz, I realized that this is where my mother's story really began and where the life I knew and loved ended.

They say that in one's old age the earliest life memories are the last to go. In that case, mine should be pleasant memories--all the ones my mother tried to erase. I hope to still smell the spicy incense of St. Mary's church, to hear the angelic voices of the choir boys, and to see the stained glass faces of saints watching over me. I will remember the surprise of Christmas morning. I will remember my grandmother's suppers and the taste of her baked ham. (Does this make you uncomfortable?) But mostly, I hope to hold on to this: the image of my father in his suit and tie, just home from work as I run to greet him in the driveway, where he drops his attaché case and swoops me into his arms. *There's my boy!* Then I see my mother's young face, with the smile she wore for me in the days when I could do no wrong.

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My father was a secular Jew when he met Catherine Quinn on a blind date in 1967. Ten years older, he was smitten with her beauty and wit. Her devotion to the Catholic faith didn't faze him as far as I ever knew. My grandparents, on the other hand, were devastated that their daughter married outside the church. It wasn't until I was born that they even accepted my father, that is, after he agreed to my baptism. In my young mind, Dad's Jewishness simply meant that he couldn't join us in church. I never heard him speak of God, or saw him read the Bible. That's your mother's department, he'd say to my theological inquiries.

My parents had been married ten years when Dad collapsed of a brain aneurysm while playing catch with me one June evening. I thought he was pretending to be knocked over by the strength of my throw. For years afterward, I could not shake the feeling that I had some how killed him. My father's only sibling, Irene, begged my mother to let him be buried in the Jewish way. Irene wasn't a religious Jew by any means, but she didn't want to see her brother ushered into eternal rest by a Christian clergyman. Irene offered to make all the arrangements, which my mother, in her shock, readily accepted.

I was too swallowed up by grief to notice anything particularly Jewish about my father's funeral; never having been to one, I had no comparison. The Hebrew words the rabbi chanted seemed no more mysterious than a Latin mass. I simply wanted the whole thing to be over so I could shed my Sunday suit and retreat to my room. Afterward, neighbors, church friends, and relatives traipsed through our house bringing casseroles and flowers. I hid in my bedroom, listening to the adult murmurings, and waited for my father to come back and tell me this was all pretend.

Hours later, asleep in my closet, I felt a pair of strong arms lift me from the floor. Sleepily, I looked up into the face of my father. For a moment, relief washed over me. Yes, it was all a bad dream. "Christopher," he whispered, carrying me to my bed. His gray eyes latched on to mine, then his face morphed into Father McNamara's. The priest patted my hand. "I'm with you, Christopher. And God is, too. He will never leave you."

Sometime later, I don't know how long really, perhaps a few weeks, my mother took me on her lap and told me she had something very important to say, something that might be hard to understand. I looked into her eager blue and waited.

"Daddy wants us to become Jewish, " she whispered. "Like he was."

"How do you know?" I asked.

She stroked my cheek. "Because…he came to me in a dream and told me."

"But a dream isn't real," I said.

"This was real, Christopher. I felt him, saw him, and heard his voice . He said, 'Catherine, I know the truth now, and you and Christopher must become Jewish.' "

I was happy that my father had said my name. I wanted to believe that he existed somewhere and that he thought of me. "Do you want to be Jewish, Mommy?"

"If that's what your father wants, yes. Of course, I do. Because, well, it's possible that he is bringing us a message from God."

I considered this for a moment. "How do we be Jewish?"

My mother patted my hand. "That's what I have to find out, sweetheart."

When God calls, you answer. That was what I had been taught. But I was learning that it didn't work the other way around. I had been praying every night for God to send my father back. I wondered why God had taken him in the first place. Now, we were supposed to turn Jewish, like Dad, even though he was in heaven. What good would that do? After pondering this a while, a possible answer hit me like lightning: Dad was in the Jewish heaven and in order to join him one day, we had to be Jewish, too.

The first time I put on a yarmulke was at Rabbi Altman's Shabbat table. The yarmulke was gold velvet with black trim. I felt silly wearing it, but I wanted to please my mother who drank in the rabbi's teachings with a thirst I didn't understand. Having presided over my father's funeral, Rabbi Altman was the obvious choice for a spiritual guide. The rabbi gave my mother books to help her prepare for our conversion. At bedtime, she read to me from Jewish Stories for Children. *Now I lay me down to sleep* was replaced with a simple declaration of Jewish faith. I jumped on my bed to a more exciting prayer--*Sh'ma yisroel*, Hear Oh Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One!

We stopped going to church. I didn't miss it, at least not then. Next, my mother began cleaning our home of Christianity. Down came the crucifix from our living room wall, the Virgin Mary statue on the bookshelf, St. Peter's picture above my bed, and the New Testament from our coffee table. Over time, Jewish symbols sprang up—a menorah, Sabbath candlesticks, a kiddush cup, a mezuzah on the front door. I pestered my mother with questions. "When will we be Jewish? Did Daddy talk to you again?" At night just before sleep, I begged God to send me dreams of my father. I wanted to hear his voice once more before it faded from my memory.

In September Rabbi Altman enrolled me in Hebrew school where I dutifully colored in the letters of my new language. I hoped I was making my father proud. When winter came, I told my Christian friends that I would be celebrating Hanukkah instead of Christmas, and that this new holiday was eight days long. In the spring we joined Rabbi Altman's family for a Passover seder. I proudly recited the Four Questions, and then listened with curiosity as Rabbi Altman read the Hagaddah's description of the Four Sons, never imaging that, one day, I would become the Wicked one.

What was my mother telling her Christian friends and neighbors, I wonder, as she took to lighting candles on Friday night and going to synagogue Saturday mornings? Did she tell them about the dream? Did they feel sorry for her--the grieving widow trying to cling to the religion of her dead husband? I never knew. What I did know was that Father McNamara seemed to disappear from our life, that Grandma and Grandpa weren't happy about our turning Jewish, and that Aunt Estelle said Mom was 'losing it'.

After a year of Jewish living and religious lessons, Rabbi Altman pronounced us ready for conversion. On the morning of the big day, I stood in my bathing shorts beside the indoor pool of the Jewish Community Center, the moist air wrapping around my body. I was delighted to have the entire pool to myself, and the chance to swim in the wintertime. Rabbi Altman pronounced the blessing and asked me to repeat it. Then he told me to jump in the pool and swim. *Wow,* I thought, as I glided through warm water, *turning Jewish is fun.*

I received my Hebrew name, Chaim, hand-written on a conversion certificate. "Your name means, 'life'," Rabbi Altman told me inside his book-lined office. "Judaism is a religion that celebrates life. You should remember that."

My mother became Chanah.

When I let these memories unfold, I associate them with a feeling of stability, perhaps even contentment. Yet, I cannot conjure the memories without thinking, *what if*? What if we had continued just as we were? How different a life would I now be living? Maybe my brother and I would still be talking to each other. I suppose that's the question we all ask ourselves, isn't it, as we reconstruct our past, looking for that demarcation line, the Before and the After?

Let me set the scene. I walk home from school like any other day, looking forward to my mother greeting me with a hug and some Oreos. Perhaps she'd be ironing while watching her favorite soap opera. But on this particular day I find my mother lying on the couch, one hand covering her eyes. I hear her crying softly. This has never happened before. Immediately, I fear someone we know has died.

"Mommy?"

She sits up, motioning for me to come. She reaches out to me, squeezing my arm. I sit down next to her. "What's wrong?

She looks away and whispers, "I just found out that we're not really Jewish after all."

Her words hit me in the stomach. "Who said?

She can barely speak. "An…important rabbi."

"Rabbi Altman?"

My mother looks at me, her wet eyes fierce. "No. A real rabbi! We've been tricked, Christopher." She puts her hands over her face and sobs. "I am so sorry. What did I know?"

Then she attempts to explain what I cannot understand—that Rabbi Altman is a Conservative Rabbi who doesn't keep all the laws of the Torah. Orthodox rabbis wouldn't accept a conversion performed by Rabbi Altman. I would not be able to attend a yeshiva. I could not get married in an Orthodox synagogue. We would not be considered Jews in Israel.

Nothing made sense to me. Did we jump into the wrong pool? Why was she worried about me getting married? Was Rabbi Altman really Jewish? Who were the orthoducks? But I could not summon any of these questions. What came out instead was, "So…are we going back to being Catholic?"

"Of course not! Daddy wants us to be Jewish. I want to be Jewish." She shook her head. "No, Christopher. The Schwartz family doesn't give up."

Notice, if you will, that she never asked me if I wanted to be Jewish. But this is the truth: after a long, exotic vacation, I was ready to go home.

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Like Father McNamara, Rabbi Altman, a man I had grown fond of, disappeared from my life. Enter Rabbi Aaron Ganz, the "real" rabbi, with his black hat and full black beard and long fringes hanging from his pants. It was Rabbi Ganz who would fix our conversion problem but only after we went through another trial period of learning and practicing Judaism. Rabbi Ganz tried hard to win me over, tossing around jokes and baseball trivia. He invited us to his home for Friday night dinners where his young wife offered sweet homemade *challah*. None of these gestures could undo the mistrust that had wrapped my heart.

My mother has written of this period as a time of "discovery and enlightenment", a time when the Torah truth became clear and her soul "yearned to become an authentic Jewess." I have different associations, if you care to know. My mother dragged me on this journey; as her child I had no choice but to trek along in a new life of Thou Shalt Nots. On the Sabbath I

was not to ride in a car, touch money, carry things in my pockets, draw, watch TV, or ride my bike. No Saturday baseball games. The stringent kosher laws meant I could no longer trade lunches with my school friends or eat dinner in their homes. And I was to wear my yarmulke at all times, no matter how much I was teased on the playground. I couldn't imagine that this is what my father had in mind.

Even my Hebrew School, which I had grown to like, was no longer good enough by Rabbi Ganz's standards. He arranged for private lessons with Adina Shapiro, a senior at the girls yeshiva in Deerfield. She began my Torah study with the portion of *Lech Lecha* where Abraham is told by God to leave his birthplace and go to the land where God will lead him. Adina liked to ask me probing questions. "Why do you think the Torah says, 'leave your birth place, your father's home, and your land?' Why not simply say 'leave your home'? What can this teach us, Chaim?"

I had no idea, but Adina offered an answer that resonated in my young soul. "Because God is asking Abraham to completely leave his past," she explained. "Abraham will have to be reborn. He will inherit a new land. He must trust God to lead him there."

In her lectures, my mother describes her orthodox conversion as rebirth. *I stepped out of the mikvah waters as a Jewish woman with a Jewish soul, daughter of Sarah and Abraham, cleansed of my past.* Where I was in this description? I was naked, legs trembling, as Rabbi Ganz ushered me into the mikvah chamber. The small room was windowless and humid. I was not prepared for Rabbi Ganz did next. Although I had been circumcised, the rabbi told me he was required to draw blood and make a blessing. As he bent down with a needle

between his fingers, I cried, not out of pain but of humiliation and fear. Where was God leading me?

"I want to go home," I said.

Rabbi Ganz put his hand on my bare shoulder. "First you need to dunk yourself under the water three times. And you'll be one-hundred percent Jewish. Then you can go home."

Embarrassed, I stepped forward, and slowly descended the steps until the warm water touched my chest. I looked up at Rabbi Ganz.

"Put your whole body in," he told me. "But don't touch the sides."

I took a deep breath and dunked. On the third time, in an act of private rebellion, I quickly touched my toe to the pool wall.

Afterward, I sat in the rabbi's office. He handed me a red lollipop. "From this day forward, you are no longer Christopher. You are Chaim Schwartz, a complete Jew." He patted my wet head. "Mazel tov."

I remembered my tutor, Adina Shapiro, telling me about how God changed *Avram's* name to *Avraham* when he became the first Jew. At least his name still sounded the same, I thought. I liked my birth name. It was the name my father had called me. And as the years went by, when I no longer heard anyone call me by that name, I began to secretly write it on sidewalks, in bathroom stalls, inside books. Sometimes at night, I closed my eyes and simply whispered, *Christopher, Christopher*…

My mother wasted no time after her second conversion. Within three months she was engaged to a religious widower I barely knew. After their marriage we moved from the

home where I was raised to his house in the Orthodox section of Deerfield. We never visited my old neighborhood again. My mother cut off all contact with her Christian relatives. Her new husband promptly enrolled me in the boys yeshiva. I had always thought of myself as a smart, but in this new school the students taunted me for my Talmudic ignorance. I fidgeted and daydreamed through the long hours of sitting and chanting Hebrew texts. I never knew the answers to the Rabbi's questions, and after a while, he let me sit in the back of the classroom and surreptiously read an English book.

Meanwhile my mother made new friends, volunteered at the sisterhood, and attended Torah classes transforming herself once again, now into the woman you came to know. Where was the mother I knew, the mother who once believed Jesus had died for our sins? Who was this woman in the shiny blond wig and long skirt praying behind the partition that separated men and women in the synagogue?

My growing despair was tempered by the prospect of a sibling. After eleven years of being an only child, I was open to the novelty of a baby brother or sister. My mother was elated throughout her pregnancy. This is the part you remember. Now, if you will, kindly see it through my eyes.

The morning of my eight-day-old brother's *bris*, you all crowded in our house to celebrate. I sat in the living room next to my stepfather as he read the psalms. I watched the *mohel* remove various items from his black bag and place them on a silver tray. Cotton balls, gauze, rubbing alcohol. My eyes fixed on a tiny knife. The room grew silent as my step grandfather carried in his new grandson. The desire to protect my little brother overwhelmed me. I stood up and whispered to the *mohel*, "Don't hurt him!"

My stepfather shushed me. "Sit down, Chaim!"

My eyes welled up as the *mohel* unfastened my brother's diaper. I looked away. A second later the baby's shrill cry pierced my heart. Amidst his wails, the guests shouted, "Mazel tov!", and began singing. I pushed my way through the crowd, and ran down the hallway to my mother's bedroom.

"Mommy, the baby's screaming and they're *singing*!" I cried.

My mother sat up in her bed and reached for my hand. "It's a happy occasion, Chaim."

"But he's hurt—" I turned toward the door to see my step-grandmother Zelda holding my crying brother. She wore a white scarf wrapped around her head. "Little Shmuel is here!" she sang. Zelda placed Shmuel in my mother's arms.

"Shh, little one, shh. Oh, my sweet boy." My mother lifted her blouse.

"Come with me, Chaim. Have something to eat," Zeda urged.

"No thank you," I muttered.

My mother patted the empty space next to her. "Chaim will keep me company."

Zelda frowned. "Alright then, be a good."

When she left the room, I sat at the edge of the bed. My brother's shriveled hand and fingers mesmerized me. Had mine ever been that small?

"I'm going to play catch with him," I announced proudly.

My mother laughed. "You'll have to wait a while for that."

"And teach him how to shoot hoops and catch a football and swim—"

"I hope you'll teach him Torah, too."

I shrugged. "What does Shmuel mean, anyway.?"

"*God heard*," my mother replied, as if everything in her life could be summed up in those two words. "Shmuel's mother was Chanah, like me. Did you learn the story of my Hebrew name?"

I shook my head.

"Chanah--Hannah--lived in the time of the prophets. She was heartbroken that she couldn't have a child. Every year she went to the Tabernacle at Shiloh and prayed her heart out. She promised that if she had a son she would devote his life to God."

"Did she?"

"Yes. She named her son, Shmuel, Hebrew for Samuel, and he grew up to be God's prophet." My mother stroked the baby's forehead. "Unlike you and me, this little guy is a Jew from birth." And then she sighed.

What I heard in that sigh was a longing for a kind of perfection that she and I could never achieve. On that day, whether she meant to or not, she drew the dividing line between my brother and me.

You shall love the convert for you were once converts in the land of Egypt. When I first learned of this commandment a pain lodged in my chest. My mother and I were the only converts I knew, yet I never felt your love. Instead, I heard your whispers in the synagogue.

During my rebellion, I knew you tried to shield your sons from my influence. Who were you to tell me I was a disgrace to my family? Instead of helping me, you consoled my mother saying she had little Shmuel to raise, a child so bright and pure. I could not fit within the narrow walls of your mind. You did not stand in my shoes. Here's the truth: for my brother, Judaism became a second skin; for me, it was like an oversized coat, uncomfortable to wear and easy to take off.

No, I didn't run away from home, as the story goes. It was my stepfather who asked me to leave. I was eighteen. And yes, my mother stood behind him. The further I traveled from the fishbowl of the Deerfield Jewish community, the more alive I felt. With each move, I tried to reinvent myself until I wasn't sure who I really was anymore. The possibility of choosing what, if anything, I revealed to people I met exhilarated me. I adopted new stories, invented backgrounds, tried on different personas, until I became, once again, Christopher Schwartz.

On my twenty-fifth birthday I stood outside my childhood home, by the overgrown birch tree I once climbed, and watched the ghost of a young boy playing catch with his dad. The Before. I thought of my grandparents whom I had not spoken to in several years. I thought of the three cousins on my mother's side I had never even met. I tried to remember the last time I saw Aunt Mary and Uncle Patrick. All this because of a dream. Her dream. It was then, surrounded by The Before, that I decided to find Father McNamara. I won't describe our reunion other than to say it saved my life. That's all you need to know.

And now, tomorrow. Tomorrow. I have been away eighteen years, *chai*, the Hebrew number for life. That I remember. Will you greet me tomorrow as a Christian, Jew or

apostate? My wife says time will have softened your judgment. I don't ask for acceptance; that need faded like my Hebrew name. I ask only one thing: permission to participate in the burial of Catherine Schwartz Feingold, and the chance to mourn my mother in privacy and with dignity.

Then I will return home, to the place where God has led me.
