

TESHUVA

Martha sat on edge behind the wheel as she wound her way into Lebanon and out of it and turned finally down the long driveway. She leaned on the horn as her Camry rolled slowly along its last curve: one long crystal blast like the opening call of a shofar. *Tekiah*, to summon Shirley into the crispness of the woods. *Let's go*.

Dovid was away at a conference. He had left immediately after Shabbat, and Martha had spent a simple Sunday working diligently on her book. But by Monday Dovid's absence was no longer a working reprieve. It had been an evil morning in their empty next.

She rolled her window down and pulled the car closer to the house. She savored the fine sound a car makes on gravel and she felt the car shimmy as its tires swished through the stones, a queasy and familiar sensation. She craned her neck to look for motion at the windows or the side of the house; she slowed the car to a crawl and felt the wind gust on its own, no artifact of speed. A squirrel ran down an oak tree and froze the way squirrels do when they wait nervously for

something bigger to move. Martha eased her car to a dead stop without disturbing the creature, then slammed the horn cruelly with the meat at the base of her palm. *Tekiah* again, that frightening call. The squirrel fled the din.

Her victory in this small battle satisfied Martha. More than animal, she knew the meaning of the call. She fumbled with the seatbelt as she unstrapped herself. Then she got out of the car and slammed the door shut for the noise that it made, the dead clap of an autumn day in New Hampshire. Martha made for the porch.

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When she'd woken at six, she'd forgotten that she wouldn't find Dovid in the living room, facing east towards Jerusalem and *davening* the morning prayer before work. She missed the comfortable murmur of his *Shacharit*, the way it transformed their house into a house of devotion. She even toyed with the idea of reciting it herself, though Jewish law did not require a woman to do so. But born Protestant, she had come late to Hebrew, and although she had mastered the songs and responsive prayers by now, the dense paragraphs of the private prayer still daunted her. Her struggling through them couldn't reproduce the rhythms she was missing.

She wanted to move swiftly that morning. She wanted to pull a Thelma and Louise. In the shower she searched her memory for a friend who would drop everything at once and come with her, somewhere. Not the synagogue women; and her friends at the library were bookish. She missed her children, whom she could have hijacked to accompany her: Avi, the oldest,

Menachem, and Angela. She had insisted on naming Angela for her grandmother. “It’s not un-Jewish,” she’d argued. “There are Jewish angels.”

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She shook herself and looked at the quiet house. It wasn’t especially big, but it had two levels and a screened-in veranda. She’d grown up here with her sisters, and when the house had become too constrictive, they had taken their play into the surrounding woods. Martha supposed Alice, the youngest sister, could listen sympathetically enough. But she would be eminently, horribly, reasonable. She was still bound up in the pragmatism of raising Rob and Ellie, her school-aged kids. Just how old they were Martha didn’t know, but she was sure Alice would offer cool comfort with no cathartic eruption of empathy. Instead of stepping out to the car to talk and drive, she would make lemonade in her kitchen in Connecticut and keep Martha there. So Martha had come for Shirley.

But where the hell was she? If the honking hadn’t raised an answer yet, the place must be empty. Rarely did anyone disrupt the aura of this house as Martha had. Something had moved her to make an impression.

Shirley would empathize. She still lived in the old house with the “old veteran,” which was what she had called Dad for decades behind his back. She had invented the nickname as she was leaving home for the first time. She’d thought she was leaving permanently, which is probably what gave her the courage to take a slap at Dad, but now she said it to his face, because he really was old. Maybe she took care of him as a kind of penance, although Dad was both

sound-minded and strong. Yet Martha couldn't fathom Shirley's guilt. Forty-five years of smoking had only destroyed the old veteran's voice, and he'd quit on his sixty-third birthday. With a combination of pride and disgust, Martha imagined his lungs were probably pink again by now. He was well into his seventies, and with every year he stayed healthy, Shirley's devotion to him made less sense.

They had fought over it. Martha wanted her big sister to find her own house, maybe a husband. She could afford it in Lebanon, or nearby, working as a registered nurse, but Shirley demurred. "He doesn't *need* you," Martha had thrown in as a clincher, but perhaps it wasn't true. Shirley's sense of obligation was religious, and she not only hauled the veteran to church on Sundays but held herself and him to a high standard of "fasting and good works," as she put it. "You make him *fast*?" blurted Martha, when she heard the phrase, "But he doesn't even believe!" Still, if the veteran had accepted Jesus only equivocally, he had accepted Shirley's authority over his life. "It pinches a little," he'd rumbled when Martha confronted him, "but no harm in it. She keeps me honest with God -- and vice versa."

Martha knew she'd go mad if she were confined so definitely to this small place. Didn't Shirley grow restless at least? Did the veteran's gravelly voice really lay down a ballast of guilt in the pit of her stomach? *Honest with God and vice versa*. Very strange. Martha was unsure what the words meant, and the old veteran had resisted her interrogation; but it dawned on her that he and Shirley led religious lives that were reciprocally and co-dependently passionate. They circled each other in a tight orbit of blasphemy and zeal so that if one threatened to bolt from the church -- or the house -- the other would be ready to chastise.

At least Shirley let *me* decamp, Martha thought. Shirley alone had been unfazed when Martha announced she was converting to Judaism and brought Dovid home for the first time. They'd visited in mid-December, bringing the old veteran a silver menorah to keep, and they'd lit it both nights that they stayed. They sang the traditional blessings in Hebrew, though somehow they never explained them to anyone else. In fact they'd kept mostly to themselves, even eating at the far end of the table, off of paper plates, in order to keep strictly *kosher*.

Dad was so unfailingly polite that Martha could tell he was rattled, and it was Martha's sheer good fortune that Alice hadn't come home yet for the Christmas break. In the end it was Alice who most viciously accused her of betrayal, who called her between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. almost every night for two weeks, intending to drive Dovid off. It was Alice alone who invoked their mother's memory to shame her, but it was also Alice who later ditched God altogether. Dad still barred Alice from the house, though Martha sometimes took Rob and Ellie up to see him.

Now, standing in the old veteran's driveway, Martha wondered at his tolerance of her. Even though Shirley was the calm one, it could only have been he who guided the whole family firmly to Martha's wedding and somehow kept Alice in check. Martha supposed she would never thank him for that -- today of all days she wasn't likely to -- and why had Shirley let her go so easily? Perhaps it had been a mistake to drive up here, to rely on Shirley's impulsiveness, her big-sisterliness. Martha had wanted everything to happen in a rush. She never even meant to get out of the car. But now she stood uncertainly by the front porch, waiting and not wanting to wait.

A rustle in the underbrush distracted her from her puzzlement, and she turned to see another squirrel put its head out and then scamper across the drive. What day was it? Monday?

With the week stretching ahead of her, she dismissed the thought of driving home again. So what if she couldn't go tearing around the countryside like a madwoman, with Shirley whooping in the passenger's seat. It would be nice just to have her company. Martha even resigned herself to seeing Dad.

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She climbed the front steps, reached in through the sliced mesh, and unlatched the screen door. One was supposed to do this. She stepped in and across its weathered boards to the wooden front door and opened that, meaning to march straight through to the kitchen, to see if there was a car parked out back. If it was, Shirley was at least nearby, out walking for one reason or another. But its absence would tell a different story. She and the veteran would have gone into town to shop or to visit the little second-run cinema for a *matinée* show. Martha stopped by the stairs, though, where a faint odor hung in the air, something she recognized but couldn't place. Maybe it was just the smell of the house itself, or of childhood. Odd that it persisted in a place where only an old man and an indisputably grown-up woman now lived.

A swell of intimacy moved in Martha, as though she had never left this house at all, never met Dovid, changed her religion, raised two boys and a girl. It seemed to peel her whole history away. She sat down at the base of the steps and leaned over to bring her nose close the physical structure of the house. The odor was stronger near the floor, and she clambered up the steps on her hands and knees, keeping her face close to the strength of the aroma. She remembered that there were fourteen stairs, and that she liked to sit on the seventh. She remembered gathering all her pillows and bedding, and her sisters' pillows, and all their spare sleeping bags on the floor

below the stairs. It would be a Saturday. Then they would wiggle through the banister and fly down into the cozy heap. Sometimes Alice wouldn't want to jump, and Shirley would shove her through.

Martha gripped the banister now, recalling those days. Were they restful? For the past thirty years she had clung to and revered the Jewish Shabbat. She and Dovid almost never spent it apart. It was their day of rest and respite and togetherness, utterly nonnegotiable, and central to her happiness. She couldn't imagine allowing herself to be harrowed by the telephone or by deadlines on the Day of Rest, and she secretly conceived of a life without it as miserable. Privately, she had even ascribed Alice's chronic troubles with her husband to their lack of Shabbat. She believed that Shirley and the veteran would like it, too. Couldn't they see that Saturday's holiness outclassed Sunday's? And its strictures were liberating. With careful preparation, the observance of Shabbat set you spiritually free, and after it you had Sunday as a secular interlude before the work week began. She thought that with the Sunday Sabbath, Saturday was just an empty day, and waking up on Monday was like jerking into motion when you throw your car too quickly into gear.

The unexpected reminiscing nettled Martha. She hadn't known Shabbat as a child, playing around the house, yet weekends had been restful, even with the exertion of adventures in the woods and spats with her sisters. Now that she thought back on it, her own boys had griped about Shabbat when they got old enough, chafing at the proscriptions against playing ball outside with the other neighborhood children. After synagogue and lunch they would shut themselves in the room they shared, and Martha had trouble getting them to keep the spirit of Shabbat through

its close at dark on Saturday. They changed too hurriedly into their weekday clothes, and sometimes Martha thought she heard the muffled beeps of electronic games through their door -- violations of the day. Of Martha's children, only Angela seemed to enjoy Shabbat, and now Martha suspiciously wondered why. It was not much of a day for a child.

Martha retraced her small life, wondering again how she had become a Jew. She recalled no revelation. The Jewish God had never saved her life or shown her the way out of the woods on a wintry night, though she knew people with such stories. They remained alien to her, simply weird. Yet her conviction was just as tenacious.

She got to her feet and wandered the second floor aimlessly, touching old objects and new as though they held answers for her that she could decode with her fingers. They held the complementary resonances of memory and strangeness, and as she walked and touched, she drifted into a dreamlike state. She found herself by Shirley's bedroom, which Shirley still slept in. The door was open, and she doubted Shirley ever closed it now. The veteran didn't climb the stairs anymore.

Looking inside, Martha found the sun streaming through a southern window from high in the sky. The uneven glass of the window gave the sunlight a magical strength, and when Martha put her hand on the doorframe, the old rush of fear and excitement came back to her. As a child Shirley had guarded her room ferociously, and entering without her permission was taboo. But Martha had always been drawn there when Shirley was away. Now, as she stepped across the threshold, Martha saw a soft patch of light checkering the bed. It was alluring and warm, and at the sight of it, Martha gleefully kicked her shoes off by the door and darted across the room to lie

down. In the warmth a wave of exhaustion washed over her, and she slipped quickly into a dream, while the sunlight shifted subtly across her as she breathed.

She was eight years old. She had snuck off into the woods when everyone else was dressing for church, and they had left her behind. When she came back to the empty house she climbed the stairs to the second floor and stepped brazenly into Shirley's room, where the big soft bed was unmade, and a few strands of Shirley's long hair lay on the pillow like relics. The power of the place, of Shirley, seemed to pulse from the bed, and Martha shut out the hundred other curiosities of her sister's life and went straight to it. She wriggled under the covers, trying to disturb the linens as little as possible, and lay waiting, perfectly still, for what seemed like hours, until a low, warm voice roused her. It was unintelligible, but it was paired with a huge hand cupped around her torso, shaking her awake. They were the same thing, the voice and the hand, and they belonged to God, who lifted her out of her bed and through the window and let her go in the air. And she flew across the hills of New Hampshire, seeing everything green. The voice still spoke to her, and she began to follow its modulations. It seemed to reach her through tears, but in a minute she would understand. *Hold on God*, she thought. *Please keep talking. I'll be there as soon as I can.* The family car pulled up in front of the house, and someone beeped the car horn three times: *Shevarim*, the second call of the *shofar*. God whisked Martha back into bed and kissed her on the cheek, leaving behind a tiny glistening tear; then he vanished as Martha's father entered the room.

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Martha awoke suddenly, with the distinct feeling that someone was watching her. She kept her eyes shut tight, but she sat straight up in the bed. “Shirley?” she said. “Dad?” In the stillness, the house didn’t even creak. It had settled easily into the warmth of the afternoon, and the sun wasn’t low enough in the sky yet for it to begin shrinking back again.

Martha opened her eyes to find that the patch of sunlight had traveled diagonally across the room, so that it lay in a queer parallelogram on the floor. It made her anxious that she had somehow been left in the shadow. She couldn’t gauge how much time had passed, and she felt her loneliness keenly. She wanted very much to call Angela, to ask her about Shabbat. She went down to the kitchen and microwaved herself a cup of tea, then reached for the phone. As she stretched her hand out, it rang three times in rapid succession: *brrrrrrrp, brrrrrrrp, brrrrrrrp*.

Shevarim, thought Martha, and hazily she realized she had dreamed.

She fled out the back door as the phone rang again, unsteady on her feet, the attitude of sleep still heavy about her. The house felt foreign to her now, without the clarity of midday light. Martha crossed her arms and clutched herself, though it wasn’t yet cold.

By now she expected no car behind the house. She didn’t know what to do. Unwilling to wait because of the strangeness, but unwilling to depart, she walked towards the woods. Shafts of sunlight still forced their way through the trees, and as she wandered, she struggled to call up her dream again. It was difficult because it was set just where she had actually been sleeping. For a long time she couldn’t distinguish the sun’s real warmth from the dream-warmth of the hand and the voice. She kept on into the woods with her thoughts turned inward, and to focus her mind she

tried to remember exactly how she had lain in the bed and what she had physically felt as she slept. She was rewarded with the discovery that in her dream she had been a child, and then she paused in a patch of sun, determined to recover the rest of it. She had been curled up in sleep, she knew, so she crouched now. First she remembered flying. Next, exactly as sharply as in the dream, she heard a voice. *Yes*, it said. *Yes, you remember*. She closed her eyes as tears welled up and sat back against a tree.

There, behind her closed, damp eyelids, Martha saw the Exodus from Egypt: a mixed multitude to the east of *Yam Suf*, the Red Sea, celebrating the devastation of the Egyptian charioteers. They had no order yet, and they danced exultantly, without regard to their tribes. In this tumult stood a small girl, with wide black eyes and brown skin, stupefied in the center of a circle. Her mouth hung open in shock, and slowly, slowly, she raised her hands to her ears. It was wrong, all wrong; the language of the song was wrong. And as it dawned upon this child of Egypt that a throng of Hebrews had swept her from her home, she gathered herself in a furious determination and bolted on her short legs toward the edge of the circle which surrounded and seemed to imprison her. She broke through, hardly noticed by the jubilant women, but with a heart that pounded in pride and indignation. Then she hurtled pell-mell into the surf.

Superimposed on this image, Martha's dream came back to her, and she understood that her antics that Sunday morning, years and years ago, had confused the order of the universe. She had dozed in the wrong bed, stolen a vision from her sister. No wonder she had been unable to distinguish God's words. No wonder Dad had picked her up and hugged her, forgoing all punishment. The veteran had seen the glimmering divine tear on Martha's cheek and known it

wasn't hers. He had also seen in her eyes the despair of a child who has heard the last echo of God's footstep as God walked away -- which was also the fear of a girl caught up in an ecstatic enemy throng.

Dad must have divulged her secret to Shirley, too, Shirley who now would stay with him forever. Once she had flown from home, to escape reminders of the vision she should have had, but she came back finally and permanently to seek out its traces, to recover it, if she could. If Shirley understood her, Martha thought, it was because Shirley's despair was still more poignant. She'd been chosen, then robbed of her peace.

No wonder, either, that Martha had banished herself from her father's religion and submerged herself in the ritual waters of the *mikveh* to complete her conversion. In Judaism, she thought, one was meant to seek God's footsteps, to bathe in his absence. Her experience was accepted and true. The Jews' exile from their holy land was a shadow of God's exile from Earth, a consequence of the destruction of his *mikdash*. Without a temple, a dwelling among his people, God was afar.

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By the time she quieted herself, the sun had gone, and a cold stillness prevailed. Martha stood up and lifted her face to the treetops. She was not looking for aid from above. Even if she did not know God, she felt clear-headed and steady, no longer half swaddled in sleep.

Above, she saw a few leaves still faintly glowing with the fading light. She would go home, she decided. She would walk back to the house, climb into her car, and drive home to Lexington, because her life was irreversible, and not bad.

She walked with long, fast steps, racing the light. The light was competitive today, Martha thought. Even as she approached the back of the house, in an awkward twilight that washed the color out of things, her surroundings felt unfamiliar, but she pushed on until she could see the gray outline of the two-story building clearly through the dusk.

Shirley was sitting in her car beside the house, the engine ticking over unevenly. The dome light was on, and Martha paused at a distance, in the shadow of the house, to watch her older sister. She saw Shirley lean forward and cut the engine, and with the engine noise gone Martha could recognize the strains of “Hey Joe” coming faintly from the radio in the car. Shirley looked almost haggard as she listened. Her arm rested atop the steering wheel, and she leaned her head on it, covering her face. She must have seen Martha’s car in front.

Before the song ended, Shirley killed the radio, sat up straight, and brushed her hair back from her face. She was gathering herself. *For me*, thought Martha, at once. *For whatever I’m bringing*. She stood still, not daring to confront the strange sister whose vision she had usurped, thankful for her concealment.

Shirley opened her door a crack and let a small white flash of a dog spring out of the car. It ran half-way to the house then stopped, sniffed, and turned back. As Shirley extracted herself from the vehicle, the dog stiffened its body, lifted its snout, and began yelping in high harsh

triplets. Three of them. Three times three: *Teruah* -- the *shofar* continued. Martha clenched her teeth, wanting to disappear totally, and then, as though sound, memory, and motion had finally coordinated their efforts, she eased herself deeper into the shadows and reentered the cover of the woods. The dog never moved, though it must have heard her. Shirley called out only briefly, “Martha -- that you?” and the call came so late that Martha didn’t hear it at all.

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She gave up the thought of driving, the thought of home. The only thing now that mattered was some kind of reconciliation. The day had struck its three sonic blows, had moved her three times to flight, and she had cooperated. There could remain only a short time before the final sounding, the *tekiah gedolah*, which would close the day, close the gates of prayer which were open in this season of *teshuva*, returning to God. She walked in the dark, planting each step firmly upon the surface of the Earth, not for self-protection, but to feel its solidity and its permanence underneath her; and it seemed that the way was prepared for her as she trod the wet, compact ground.

She *would not* stop walking. She turned when she felt moved to turn, or when some obstacle blocker her path forward. She prayed under her breath those Hebrew incantations that she knew by heart, and when she could think of no more she fell silent. Again and again she saw herself breaking from the circle of celebrating Hebrews and plunging into the sea; again and again the ocean shrank from her until all the water in the world was a single, holy teardrop on her cheek. She forced herself to relive her dream, convinced that only if she clearly heard the words

God spoke to her could she redeem herself from fraudulence. She was neither Egyptian nor Jew, but if she could recover those words, by any means, maybe she could forgive herself.

As the night wore on Martha had no sense of its passing or of its animal rhythms. She wandered immune to her environment, not cold or hot, not tired -- not sensible of anything that surrounded her. Only as the night stilled in its last true darkness before dawn did the sensible world swim back into being, and her thoughts rested without resolution, also without pain or guilt. Shivering, she examined herself. Her skin was in goose bumps everywhere, and her hair was tangled, her clothes muddied, her feet inexplicably bare. They were worn white, then scraped into livid welts, but there was no blood. Enough, Martha thought. What her memory hadn't accomplished, her heart had striven for. For the words that she could not discover or retrieve, she had compensated with the mortification of her flesh.

She resumed walking now, not oblivious anymore, but exhausted and dazed. She struggled through a thicket and emerged on the soft shoulder of a two-lane highway where the stars, which had begun to fade in the forest, seemed to blaze down on her from the swath of open sky along the road. The wood had ushered her out again to the edge of human habitation.

She halted there. She wanted to rest her feet but couldn't make herself sit. She sensed, above her, the presence of the Almighty, and she stood there ragged and trembling, open to the sky. On another road, out of earshot, on another side of the wood, a tractor-trailer rattled through the morning and sounded its air-horn, a blast that hung and lingered and seemed to grow louder as it blew.