

## *Shomer*

MY FATHER IS A CANTOR, an old school baritone with a voice that is a place. He is also a television executive, starting out as an entertainment lawyer and becoming later a producer and finally an Executive Producer on shows you've heard of, but on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur he is a cantor, and Jews who grew up Conservative and cannot bear the thin sound of a woman's voice come to the temple to hear him pray. Sarah Silverman's sister is a rabbi—it's that kind of town. I bring my books with me from Oakwood and sit in the back of the sanctuary while he rehearses with Rabbi Beth. I'm good at math. I could do it for a living. I do it the way that some people doodle on a pad. I make a bridge with my knees on the back of the chair in the sanctuary and finish my calculus and once in while my father's voice is so stunning that I realize I am looking up at him, my pencil's poised in the middle of a separable differential equation and my mouth's a little open like I'm catching a breath. If you saw my father in the hall at the studio you would think he absolutely belonged there, but when he sings he is someone else altogether. He is like the glow from a warm fire in a temple in a shtetl and the rest of the world is cold as hell and your feet are wet and you are lying on the skylight of the temple longing to be inside. His voice is a place you want to go to. Rabbi Beth is incredibly pretty. She looks like a Jewish Snow White. When I was a little kid and she had just started, she would tell us Jewish folktales that didn't make sense and were impossible to follow. At the end, you felt dizzy like you'd

been spun around wearing a blindfold. “One Friday night in a village there was a banquet and a beggar came in asking for food,” she would start, “the people ignored him because his clothes were tattered. Then a prince came and the axle to his carriage broke in front of the house of the poor beggar.” In the middle of her story there would always be another story, like Russian nesting dolls: the angel buried gold under the bridge; the tailor had a dream with the butcher in it; the son became a bear. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Somewhere in the middle of the story she would leap to a moral: “and that’s why we don’t gossip,” or “that’s why we give *tzedakah*.” And she would look at us searchingly, hoping that we’d bought it. She would bite her lip a little. My mother had been dead only a few months when Rabbi Beth came to the temple and I thought for a while that I could get her to marry my father. But then she showed up with a husband who wasn’t anything special as far as I could see, he couldn’t even sing, and I mourned my mother in earnest.

The reason I would like to go to Princeton is that my mother, whose hair was the color of turning leaves, had wanted me to go there. Every year we would take a trip together to her parents’ house in New Jersey and we would see autumn. Just my mother, my brother Jonah, and I. My father, who made all things possible, was never able to get away with us. My mother, Nava, would draw a rake across the lawn and look up at the wide sky and the trees as if she were listening. Together, we would stuff the leaves into black bags named for the purpose. The lawn was studded with piles of leaves; we would run and leap into them. She would laugh, but she would guard us, because a childhood friend of hers had been run over in that terrible way, hiding in a pile of leaves. When my brother died, my mother and I stayed in New Jersey for three weeks and in sweaters, with a cool in the air, we sat an extended *Shiva* at my grandparents’ house. My grandmother was relentless and woke my mother early each day, forcing her to get dressed, sometimes drawing her up and out of bed with her own hands. Every day, friends of Zayde Jack and Tate Ruth who had known my mother when she was a girl would come and sit with her, sipping cups of Red Rose tea, quietly dipping mandel bread. They would, by way of comfort, tell stories of

other losses, punctuated with *t-t-t* and *chas ve challelah* G-d forbid. I was nine, Jonah had been thirteen. My mother was thirty-seven.

WHEN PEOPLE LEARN that we have lost both my mother and my brother they react with a kind of consternation, as if tragedy and loss are meted out in a logical way. Steve Colbert lost his father and brother in a single day. In confirmation class, Rabbi Beth told us about a man who had lost his sister in the Twin Towers and when his father had learned the news he'd had a heart attack and died on the spot. This is what the world is, people reacting to what they have lost, wandering around, looking. If you sit in temple on Yom Kippur and say "who shall live and who shall die," you can be sure that someone to the right of you and to the left of you will die. Tragedy is newly invented every day. Look around the sanctuary—a woman with a baby in her arms lost her husband before the child was born. The baby has a shock of black hair and the mother studies the baby's face for her husband. She looks as if the baby was only just placed in her arms. She is still so lost. Shiva is just the beginning. The first year is just the beginning. My father went back to work right away, after Jonah and after my mother too. He dressed each day in a pressed blue shirt and sat with a cup of coffee and the *Los Angeles Times*. When it was just us, he would make my breakfast and would touch my shoulder to wake me. Our mornings were quiet, silent but for the turning pages of his paper. Before I would walk out the door for my ride, he would tip my chin and look at me. He would draw me to him and kiss my head. Then he would release me and send me out the door to school. I worked hard and did well, as you know, in spite of, not because of, teachers who regarded me shaking their heads, sometimes tears welling in their eyes.

WOMEN ADORED US. We could have never cooked a meal. They arrived every evening, bearing baskets with napkins wrapped around plastic forks, Tupperware containers filled with meatloaf and potatoes—a separate one for each. Always cookies. The women would duck in with a

kind of curtsy, placing the basket on the island in the kitchen. They were often beautiful, their cheeks flushed as if they had come from a run. I had cello on Thursday nights and that is when he probably slept with them I realize only now, although he was discreet to the point of worry. Zayde Jack and Tate Ruth were the ones who introduced him to Marisa, at the wedding of cousin Ziggy's son Brett. Marisa was pretty and had eyes like blue water. She would look at me for a long while first and then, sometimes, push the hair out of my eyes. She played flute for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and invited us to see her summer evenings at the Hollywood Bowl. She would appear on the giant screen in a white blouse, a look of intention on her face. Although I was in love with her, my father was not. She left us and later married an engineer who worked at JPL.

After a while it became hard to imagine a person intruding on our home. Our evenings were quiet too. I did my math at the dining room table. My father would read scripts seated on the sofa, the remote in his hand, watching CNN. We had what my mother would have called a "companionable silence." And, in the space of it, my mother and Jonah still dwelled. Between us they were present and, although we left our house and went to dinners and parties and basketball games, we were both of us eager to return to this place because they had been here. Often, we would look up from our work and find each other. Our timing would affirm that we and only we knew what was so beautiful before. We, in that space, would travel to it—the portrait of our family: my mother's auburn hair falling to the top of my head, Jonah's head tossed back in laughter, my head pressed to Jonah's shoulder, my father enveloping us all.

Every day the world is new. The day before Jonah died there was one world. The following day there was a world without Jonah. There are a hundred Jewish stories in which the world makes sense. In the stories the wicked are punished and the good are rewarded. I don't need to tell you that this is not true. There is a story about Elijah, the Elijah who stealthily sips wine on Passover, in which the life and untimely death of a child changes the world. It is false to give meaning to

death. The stories are to keep us from running into the streets and rending our clothes.

When my father prays he is both entirely present and completely remote. He is an agent for the entire congregation and when he prostrates himself in a white suit for Yom Kippur is it for the benefit of others. But when he does, when he lays his hands in front of the ark and gives himself over in surrender, in a vow of his helplessness, I see that he is as a child before God. I have lain on the floor of my room the way that my father has before the *bima*, in silence—the clear moon in my window like in a storybook—and I have prayed. I have prayed that my mother and Jonah will be restored to me. I have prayed with a weakness that my father does not die. I have prayed that he does not die.

I am in love with Maya. There is an idea that seventeen is too young to love someone, but that could not be less true. She has long dark hair and dark eyes and she is smarter than I am. She is compassionate and kind. She is funny in a way that is unexpected. We met last year when Rabbi Beth led the confirmation class on a trip to Israel. The classes flew to NY and left on EL AL with groups from all over the country. I first saw her at the airport leaning on her backpack, reading. I can't tell you what the book was because I only saw her. There was something about her hair falling forward as she leaned over, reading her book that she held against her knees. She kept pushing her hair back behind her ear and it was hard not to watch her. On the plane, she was laughing with her friends a few rows in front of me. For the rest of the trip I was able to find her by her laugh. We were in a place called Sde Boker—the desert where the Jews wandered—when I kissed her. We were lying on the ground looking at the stars and one by one the others left. I reached out and held her hand. I felt at home. She gave me the feeling of being in the right place, that the hard part was over. Her skin tastes like lemon and the saltiness of the beach. That is more than I should have told you, but I can't make myself delete it. I don't want to delete it. The air that night smelled of sage and the air in LA sometimes smells the same way. She will be going to NYU in the fall and if I am accepted to Princeton, I can get there by train.

WHAT I BELIEVE is that the presence of a person beside you has great power. It is why we pray together. Why we are proximate to each other. Why a minyan is called for. This is the work and the gift God gave to us. When we stand in the sanctuary and our sleeves brush the person beside us, that is God telling us we are not alone. After Jonah and after my mother died, ten people from the temple came to our house for seven days and made a sanctuary of our living room. Ten members of the congregation came and prayed in a room that looked out over the Hollywood Hills. When I would open my eyes after the *Sh'ma*, I might see a piece of the ocean sparkling on the edge of the shore, shimmering like mercury. The room was crowded with people *davening*. We stood shoulder to shoulder with ten people, some that we knew, and some, whose gift seemed yet greater, that we knew not at all.

When a Jewish person dies there is someone who is assigned to sit beside the body until it is buried the next day. The body is wrapped in white and treated with a mixture of egg white and vinegar. Shards of pottery are placed over the person's eyes. The *shomer*, who is a member of the burial society, sits near the body and recites Psalms. He is there to shepherd the soul, so that as it lingers it is not alone. He is there all night and his voice is a lullaby for the departing soul, the sound of comfort. So that we are not alone, God has given us each other.

I want to tell you about Jonah. I feel like I should tell you. It is hard to know me without him. It is impossible. Dad and Jonah and I had been hiking in the mountains of San Gregornio. It was summer and we were in shorts, but there was snow on the mountains and you could taste the snow on the air. I had been tired and wanted to rest. I was nine and Jonah was thirteen. All around you could hear the bees humming and it... it made you dreamy. We stopped by a beautiful clearing and there was a glassy lake. My father set the pack down and I ran to the lake's edge to put my feet in. We could not have hiked in too far, because we were children. It might have been under a mile. We had no cell phone, because my father meant the weekend to be like the kind he had spent with his own father. I walked back to my father, who was taking a sandwich out of the pack. We had the kind of canteen that has flannel and I twisted the top and took a drink. The water had

a metallic taste that made the water seem colder. Jonah had been lying in the grass looking up at the sky and he cried out. You need to know that it was not the kind of cry that had alarm in it. “Damn it,” he said. My father had not even looked up. “Jonah,” he had said. He had admonished him for his language in the lightest way. A minute later, Jonah walked over to my dad and me. He moseyed. He was scratching at the sting with his fingernail. And then suddenly his eyes raced around frantically and his hand went to his throat. You know that he dies in this story. We all know that. My father dropped the pack and ran to Jonah. He made a decision in that split second that he would move faster without carrying his son, without me trailing behind. He told me to stay and he ran for help. Jonah, and I were alone in the middle of a grassy field and I stayed next to him and I talked to him. I was crying and was prattling on. I tried to be funny like my mother would be. “Way to spoil the camping trip, Jonah,” I said, things like that, but I was scared, a baby really. I ran out of words. But then I looked at Jonah and his fear subsided altogether. He was my older brother. His eyes were at once calm and locked to mine. He knew that my father would not return in time. I will not describe the sound of his breathing or the color of his skin, because this is not a movie. It is the story of my only brother, who was dying. He held my hand and reassured me. When he died, I was alone in the meadow but I spoke to him. I lay down at his side and told the story of all our good days together and the *neshama* in him that lingered was for me, so that I would not be unguarded.

When my mother and I returned from her parents’ house in New Jersey, she rented a house near the beach in Venice. She sat in a fabric chair with a metal frame and smoked Marlboro Lights. During the week I stayed with my father, because he was closest to school but on the weekend I would stay with her. No one spoke of divorce or something ending, we just carried on in this new way. I learned to make coffee. I would bring my mother a mug with half and half, and I would make a cup of tender coffee—milk and sugar with some coffee—for myself. She cried when she needed to, but it did not interrupt the flow of her words. We were friends in that time. She would hold her cigarette away from us and she would study me, push my hair aside with

her free hand and warn me that I was becoming handsome. I would chop peppers and onions and together we would make dinners without my father. Afterward we would sit in our chairs wrapped in blankets and watch boats rock on the canals.

MY MOTHER RETURNED home and to my father a few months later. She traveled the halls of our house with caution. Taking half steps. But soon we were a version of a family who had dinner together on Shabbat, who sat pressed on the sofa to watch TV. My mother drove me to school and to practice. They discovered the cancer during a routine exam she had postponed because of Jonah's death. She died in weeks. After the second funeral, we came home to a house so empty it could not have been ours. The sounds of our own voices harsh and abrupt, we listened instead to our own heartbeats the taking and releasing of breath. We lived in this silence, so that a whisper was made by the knotting of my father's tie or the crisp falling of pages of my book, and then, when the prohibition of the first years mourning against singing was lifted, almost to the day, Rabbi Beth came to my father and asked him to sing.

He had said no, but she had pressed him. He was busy with work, he protested, but she insisted it was temporary, the beloved female cantor of thirty years was leaving and a search committee had been formed. In the end, he relented, right away consumed with it, setting scripts aside to review music. My mother's side of the bed was stacked with prayer books and books about prayer. He sat where he had read the paper and studied *trope* instead, humming the notes, his eyes guided by a silver *yad*, the one given by Zayde Jack to Jonah on his Bar Mitzvah.

We went together to the temple sanctuary, which was empty during the day. Fred, a pharmacist from Russia, who now ran the sound at the temple and arranged the microphones that were set up for the High Holidays, set the branch of the mic to the height of my father. I was in the back of the room and snaked around the empty aisles bored, distracted. Rabbi Beth, dressed in her street clothes, turned pages and

spoke to Fred over the mic, like testing it for a play. She stepped down off the *bima* and walked into the sanctuary to where I played and my father stepped forward to the mic. I knew why we had come, but in those moments I had forgotten. And then my father sang. My father, whose voice might quaver with sorrow while saying good morning, sang. I stopped still. Rabbi Beth stepped beside me and lightly placed her hands on my shoulders. The wide sound of his voice opened and yearned into the corners of sanctuary. He sang and my bones vibrated. I let the sound roll over me and fill me and break the clay of silence that had held our lives.