

The  
**ATHEIST'S**  
**BIBLE**

Series

**SHALOM**  
**CAMENIETZKI**



# The Atheist's Bible

Series

by Shalom Camenietzki



Strategic Book Group

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# The Star of Childhood Memories

Shalom Camenietzki

For a fifty-two-year-old man, it feels less embarrassing to write about my nanny than to tell others I'm still in love with her. My friends strain and squint, puzzled, when I tell them how Maria stands out as the most inspiring figure in my life. Deep in my heart I know they expect me -- a portly, greying psychologist -- to credit my parents, my analyst, or one of my teachers, as the wellsprings of my character. I do insist that Maria is the key for understanding me in depth, but my colleagues reply that I overstate her influence on me.

At cocktail parties in Toronto, where people chit-chat about Italian restaurants and private schools, I do bring up how Maria, the only nanny I ever had, overshadows my life, even today. And from the reactions I get, you would think I had mentioned indelicate stains in my shorts! People mouth, "Oh, really?" and roll the conversation over into a new topic. Not that I try to be difficult, but working mothers have left -- to re-fill their glasses, they said -- when I stated that mostly Maria, and not my mother, forged my talents. The example I usually give for Maria's impact on my personality is my good habit of calling a spade a spade.

The first memory to slip from the mists and silences of my infancy is of Maria. In a once-flowery blue dress, she is standing barefoot on our shaded front porch, holding a two-year-old naked me by the bum. It must have been a summer morning in Rio de Janeiro: droplets of perspiration already shimmer in her forehead.

"Candy, candy," I wiggle in Maria's bony hands, and wave a frantic goodbye at my short and plump mother. Mamae sports a blue suit with brass buttons, a frilly white blouse, matching blue shoes, and a black leather purse. She's leaving for work, and doesn't stop. Instead, as she walks away, she turns her head and waves goodbye. Whenever this scene comes back to me, I get the eerie feeling it repeats itself often.

At that time, it surprised me that people called Maria "black" because her face was not the colour of the black beans we ate at noon, but brown like the hunks of *rapadura* she dropped in her coffee. She smiled often, more often than my Jewish parents ever did, and two rows of gapped teeth twinkled behind her lush lips. I wondered then if I smiled at Maria because she smiled first, or did she smile because *I* smiled at her? I began to sort out this chicken-or-egg puzzle only years later, when I learned the word "simultaneity."

Because my mother had an "interesting office job" in downtown Rio, Maria took care of me the whole day. As far back as I can remember, playing "Horse" was our favourite game. First, Maria got down on her hands and knees, her smiling face turned to watch me clamber onto her back. As she galloped along the walls of the living room, I swayed back and forth, my hands clutching the neck of her dress. "*Oba! Oba!*" I screamed, and my bare heels spurred her on. When she puffed to a stop, I slid off. My turn. I threw myself on all fours and scurried from one corner of the room to the other. "*Oba! Oba!*" she slapped my bum, to make me go faster and faster.

We played the game a dozen times -- or more. Too soon she announced, "I have to look at the beans on the stove" (that was in the mornings). In the afternoons she said, "Your mother is soon home. I have to fix dinner." Even before I turned two, I concluded that adults -- even my Maria -- didn't have much stamina for play. They needed a lot of breaks.

While Maria worked around the house, I played with Little Horse. My inseparable toy stood only five inches tall, but boasted a thick mane and a long tail, and his glass eyes shone a lovely brown. I held him all day long, and his wooden back and neck had grown *very* dark. At night he slept under my pillow, and it

was out of the question for me to stay in bed, even with the lights on, unless I felt his legs poking the back of my head. In the daytime he basked in my adoring eyes. I hugged and praised him a lot. I was his sweet, loving nanny.

One morning, as I played in my room with Little Horse, I called out to Maria. No reply. I called again, louder. Desperate for the sound of her voice, clutching Little Horse, I wobbled up from the floor. In a cold sweat and a stomach in knots, I toddled in and out of all the rooms. "Maria! Maria!" I begged.

"A-yim, A-yim," I heard her singing.

I followed the echoes of her voice. In the far corner of my mother's bedroom, I found my queen on her knees, reeking of gasoline and wax. She leaned on her left hand, while her right rubbed in the pearl-white wax with a rag. A white cloth hid most of her black, kinky hair. Maria raised her head, and with her upper sleeve wiped her moist brow. She smiled. Her black eyes glinted, so soothing, so sweet.

"Your horse is just a little one," Maria stressed. "A big horse, a real one, pulls wagons full of vegetables, fruit, or bags of rice. When they pooh, they lift their tails up and to the left. They're so clever that they pooh and trot, *at the same time*, and the green droppings fall down and roll on the cobblestones."

I gaped. Her magical stories about things happening at the same time left me as awe-struck as the mystery of she and me smiling *at the same time*. What other wonders loomed beyond the entrance to our side street and the vast shade of the ficus trees?

It happened on Friday, the day before my third birthday.

Once I stopped fussing and emptied my glass of warm milk, Maria went to my room to get the hairbrush and comb. As far as I can tell, this sequence -- warm milk, fussing, combing -- had taken place every morning of my life since I was two months old, when Mamae, I'm told, hired Maria.

Maria returned to the kitchen and, humming the same wordless song I heard every day, brushed and combed my hair at length. After setting the brush and comb on the table, her fingers rested on my head, gently. My hair and scalp told me her fingers were coiling three curls: a big one on top, and a small one on each side. The brushing and combing had felt a bit like a chore, but her fingers now sent waves of delight down my neck. I chuckled, but not enough to interfere with her work. She played with the curls for a while longer, to savour, I imagined, the twists and turns of fingers through hair. I knew we were done when her wistful tune stopped.

"Let's look in the mirror," she suggested.

We walked to my mother's bedroom, and inside the armoire, in the mirror, I saw three little curls framing a round face, two brown eyes and a thick, short nose. High above me, Maria's chocolate-brown face smiled, pleased that the curls, *her* curls, stood up without any pins. Only my romping in and out of rooms would later on flatten the fruits of her work.

On that Friday, a sultry afternoon of a long, drawn-out summer, Papai came home from his store earlier than usual. Playing with blocks beside my bed, I heard him say a brief 'hello' at the entrance, then go straight to my brother's room. The door closed, and soon I heard some muffled chuckles and whispers, too blurred for me to follow. Papai and Samuel, my brother, excluded me from conversations at times, so I went on building my block truck.

Mamae, who left her work on Fridays at noon, must have been in the kitchen telling Maria what had to be done now that the Sabbath was only three hours away. The keen smell of gefilte fish floated through the house, subduing the scent of the chicken in the oven and the aroma of carrots stewing with raisins and cinnamon sticks. A white linen cloth, stiff and shining from the iron, would be stretched out on the dining room table. Two tall candles, their wicks already lit once, would be standing in silver holders, like soldiers at attention, waiting for my mother's blessing.

"We are going out, the three of us," Papai announced at the kitchen entrance.

"In this heat?" asked Mamae who, like Maria, kept me indoors on hot afternoons.

"The boys are going for a walk," Papai sounded cheery. "We'll be back in an hour."

"An hour? Well, keep the little one in the shade, as much as possible." Mamae meant me, of course; my brother would soon be fifteen years old.

Outdoors, a white ball of fire still torched our neighbourhood. I squinted hard, and the dusty air scorched my nostrils.

"We are going to the barber, for a haircut," Papai turned to me, as we walked our empty side street, my left hand in his right. "You will be three years old tomorrow, and I want you to look like a boy, a real boy." He stopped and stared me in the eye, as if to stress the importance of that moment. "When you were a baby, your long hair and curls looked just beautiful. Your Mamae and Maria still want to keep them for a while. But I'm your father, and I've decided that from today on, you'll have short hair, just like Samuel and me."

"I never had curls, my whole life," said Samuel. Walking two steps ahead, my skinny, bespectacled, always clever brother bragged about something I didn't quite understand. The more we walked, the scarier the scene became, so I asked no questions.

"Going to the barber is a surprise. I'm glad Mother didn't suspect anything when I said we were out for a walk." My father smiled, proud of his ruse.

They took me to a barber shop on Rua Pereira Nunes, where the streetcars ran, and Maria and I shopped for groceries. "In downtown Rio," Maria's voice now played in my head, "there are some *really* big boulevards. One of these days we'll take the streetcar and have a look." Above the entrance to the shop, a green awning carved a square oasis of shade in the blinding sidewalk.

"Good afternoon, *senhor* Ari. I see you brought me a new customer." Inside the shop, the white barber, a stocky, half balding man, rubbed his hands. His trim, sloping black moustache made his face look fierce.

"I want him to have a short cut, like a boy, Ademir," my father sounded firm. "His *baba* still rolls his hair into curls."

"I know what you mean, *senhor* Ari. These black girls are really nice to the kids, but, after a while, they behave as if they owned our children." The barber studied me up and down, amused, and went back to sharpen his razor on a long strip of leather, the blade flipping from side to side. Papai sat next to me, reading a newspaper, while Samuel chose to wait in the street, under the awning. In public my brother behaved as though he had never met me before, but at home he kept reading me stories, even when I didn't ask.

Two big globes lit the shop and cast a sallow tint on everyone's faces. Overhead, a large, sluggish fan turned and blew warm air down my face. The place reeked of lather and aftershave, and the background scent of talc carried me back to our bathroom. There, Maria powdered me after showers, and I giggled -- perhaps too much so -- when she rubbed my crotch with her fine, scented dust.

The barber's chair tilted back, and a customer lay flat on it, an apron covering him to his knees. His cheeks and neck had vanished under thick lather, while his closed eyes and the upturned corners of his mouth suggested the man was having a sweet dream. Ademir, holding the razor between his right thumb and a bent finger, startled me when he took the blade to the man's neck. Bending close to check, he cleared a strip in the lather and wiped the blade on a pile of paper tissues. The barber continued to shave in silence, unsmiling, absorbed in this ceremony for males.

"It's soon your turn," Papai gave me a pat on the head. He must have seen me biting my nails and wobbling up for a better angle at the man before me. I felt relieved when the customer sat up and, the apron removed, got to his feet, smiling at Ademir.

"It's your son's turn, *senhor* Ari."

I saw the barber place a wooden board across the arms of the chair. Then he bent down, tweaked my chin with his thumb and finger, and asked for my name.

"Kha-yim," I bleated. It hurt me that Ademir was taken aback at the sound of my name, a smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"It's a Hebrew name, Ademir," my father explained. "I called the boy after his grandfather, who passed away just before the war. Actually, the name means 'life' and sounds quite pleasant in our language."

"I'll get used to it, *senhor* Ari."

Ademir held me high in the air, my head close to the lazy fan. He cooed a few times, twisted me left and right, then sat me on the board. The apron he tightened to my neck covered me like a blanket and more. The mirror showed a familiar face, its hair now long and flat this time of the day. Samuel had walked in to watch the operation. Papai stood on my right.

Twice Ademir snipped in the air a long, lacklustre pair of scissors that made a zipping sound. Five quick strokes on the top and sides, and a lot of hair disappeared from my head in the mirror. On the real apron and chair, some flimsy strands of black hair clung to the white cloth, unsteady, as if they would blow away in a moment. The barber wasted no time and trimmed behind my ears and neck.

"I don't use the razor on kids, *senhor* Ari. They wiggle when you try, and I hate to nick them by mistake."

"This is a fine haircut, as is," my father replied.

The mirror showed a new version of myself: a smaller head, a higher forehead, two even more anxious eyes. Is that what a real boy is supposed to look like? I was not at all impressed; the reflection struck me as scrawny, frail.

"Tomorrow you'll get a real tricycle, a big one," Papai told me on our way home. "Your friends will stand behind your seat, and you can take them for rides on the sidewalk."

"And I'll put a bell on your right handle bar," Samuel followed up. I already got one, for you." I stroked my head and the short hair felt creepy.

I still have found no words to describe the little something that had slipped out of my life and would never come back.

"Mamae and Maria have stopped boiling the gefilte fish," I muttered when we arrived home. The smell of fish had mellowed, and now I savoured my favourite, the aroma of prunes and other dried fruits that had stewed for hours. Their backs to us, the women were still bustling in the kitchen, hurrying to put the last touches to the meal.

"Look, Rivkah," Papai said.

Mamae turned around, drying her hands on a towel. Her brown eyes glared and four fingers capped her mouth. "What have you done, Arieh?" This was my father's Hebrew name, but only Mamae ever used it. My father surprised me, he didn't mind at all when people mangled his first name.

"That's his first hair cut. Now he looks the three year old he'll be tomorrow."

Maria took off her apron, tossed it on the counter, and walked out of the kitchen. Soon, the door to her quarters slammed. My mother's puzzled eyes begged an explanation, because Maria always prefaced all her answers with "*Sim, senhora*" or "*Nao, senhora*." I turned to follow my nanny to find out how she was feeling, but my father barked, "Go play in your room." A bit later I heard him order Samuel to his room, too.

About an hour later, when I came out of my room, it was dark. I saw Mamae wearing the white apron Maria used when she brought plates and vessels from kitchen to table, back and forth. Mamae blessed over the candles with a muffled voice. Her cheeks glowed, and I sensed that she felt very angry.

The four of us ate in silence, even my talkative father. I looked around the table. Maria's absence cast a shadow on my plate, the tablecloth, the walls. My heart had sunk. Was she in her room? What was she doing? I wondered, but didn't dare ask aloud. Clearly, Maria was not to be mentioned. My head rested on my left hand and I glanced in despair at the morsels of chicken on my plate. Sooner or later Mamae would nag at me to finish my plate. Friday's roasted chicken had never been my favourite dish, and I mumbled to myself prayers for a painless way to gulp down the pasty ball in my mouth.

"You should have told us you were going to the barber," Mamae broke the silence.

"No matter what, I don't think a maid, *uma empregada*, should decide how our son looks," Papai half closed his left eye. Two upright lines between his eyebrows deepened.

"Maria cares a lot about Khayim's appearance. If you'd told us about the haircut the day before, she wouldn't have been hurt." Mamae cocked her head. She looked down her nose at Papai, as if she had knocked him out of the argument.

"I took the trouble of closing the store early to make a point: he isn't a baby any more," Papai waved his hand at me. "And to tell you the truth, the boy spends too much time with Maria, anyhow."

"Are you criticising *me*? Every time we have a problem, you drop hints about my work, or about me not spending enough time at home."

Samuel stood up, still chewing the last bite of dessert.

"Aren't you staying for coffee?" My mother's tone of voice implied he should.

"I'm sorry to eat and run like this, Mamae, but my friends are waiting."

After coffee, Papai removed the dishes, while Mamae tied on Maria's kitchen apron, the dark blue one, to rinse the plates and pans.

I tossed in bed that night, studying the ceiling, the pictures on the walls, and each one of my toys on the floor. Sleep, however, refused to come. I propped up my pillow, but my worries kept me awake. What had happened to my Maria? Where was she? Had she left me? I hadn't seen her eating anything since lunch time. Her empty tummy, I imagined, was growling and aching.

Despite the closed door, I could hear from the living room the muted voice of the radio announcer dropping names I had heard before at dinner time: Churchill, El-Alamein, Hitler. Sleep stubbornly refused to come, so I decided to take a risk and see my love.

I slunk out of bed and walked to the door. I turned the handle so softly it made no sound at all. The corridor to Maria's quarters was dark at my end and the other, but I had to cross a long swath of light from the living room. I heard the clear voice of the radio announcer and pictured my parents on the sofa, listening to the news, slices of lemon swimming in their cups of tea.

I tiptoed up the corridor, a huge heart pounding in my chest. I had almost crossed the stretch of light, when Mamae rose from her seat and ambled up to me.

"What happened? Is the radio keeping you awake? Tell me, Khayim, I'll turn it off".

I stood flat on my feet, no longer a burglar.

"And where are you going?" Still peeved, Papai sat on the sofa and watched me from behind a lowered newspaper.

I squinted back. "Maria."

"We don't know where she is," he said. "And if she's still with us, she may be asleep." His comment disturbed me; it had never entered my mind she would ever fall asleep before me.

Mamae bent over and kissed me. "If she's in her room, you can play with her. But you have to be in bed soon. Tomorrow is your birthday party. You need a good night's rest."

In front of the door to Maria's quarters I stood and listened to the silence. With my shoulder, I pushed on the door. An inch-wide column of light shone ahead.

"Maria?" I held my breath.

"Come in, love. Don't just stand there."

She sat on the white cover of her bed. Her quarters were an elongated cubicle, and the window, on my right, was too small to let in the evening breeze. Three walls were white, unadorned, but on the fourth, a bare, unstained wooden cross shone two feet above the head of her bed. In the centre, a naked bulb hung by a cord from the ceiling.

"I was praying," she stood up. I must have looked puzzled because she added, "to God." Now, this name sounded familiar! She often exclaimed "Thank God" or "My God."

"Dinner?" I asked when she sat down again. Maria nodded, and despite my attempts to engage her, she gazed at the floor, sullen. I leaned on the side of her bed and racked my brain to find something that would take her bad mood away.

Palm down, I stretched out my right hand to play one of her favourite games. She pinched the back of my hand, I pinched the back of hers, she pinched mine again. When she said "now," we tossed the pile of connected hands high in the air, then threw ourselves into each other's arms. We played the game a couple of times, but now her hugs felt limp, her kisses too dry.

I did not give up. First I wiggled myself onto her lap, then kissed her cheeks and put my arms round her neck. She didn't draw back when I blew air in her ear, but remained listless, no matter what I tried.

"I should've known better." Her fingers stroked my hair. "I'm just a maid, *uma empregada*. I can't make decisions about your hair." She fell silent again. "And one day, your *baba* will kiss you goodbye, I'm afraid."

"Em-pe-ga-da," my lips and tongue struggled with the twice heard polysyllable.

"It's late," she helped me to my feet, "time you go to bed. Tomorrow you'll get a tricycle. It'll be a wonderful birthday." She kissed me good night on both cheeks, then led me back to the living room.

Mamae tucked me in a second time. I lay awake, all over again. The ceiling and the walls loomed darker now. I barely made out my toys on the floor. I wondered what awful things I must have done, because in just one day Mamae, Maria, and my father -- even my brother -- got upset. I remember feeling so sad that I had to talk myself to sleep: Maria hadn't left me, after all. Tomorrow I could get on with being a three-year-old boy.

This may sound unbelievable, but the star of my childhood memories ran a very tight household. No departures from routine were allowed -- ever. Mornings meant porridge steaming in my bowl, and it was useless to appeal her rule on finishing the white, gooey stuff. Daily I scooped the cinnamon and sugar off the top, and, to make her happy, gulped down two spoons of the flabby substance. Lips sloped down, I snivelled and whimpered, probably looking like a mask of tragedy. Maria caressed my neck, she muttered *meu coracao* -- my heart -- but her right eyebrow stayed just a little bit up, until I scraped clean the bottom of my bowl.

Breakfast finished, she hummed a soft samba, to celebrate, I imagine, the still young morning; a day of sweet routines lay ahead. First, her match lit the gas burner. It boomed once, the same bass of the giants in the stories she made up for me. Little flames streamed out of endless cavities and moulded a blue crown with a black hole in the middle. On top of the flames she rested a glistening aluminum pot, to cook the black beans she and I ate every day, except on weekends and Jewish holidays.

While I rode my red tricycle or played with Carlos in the backyard, Maria waxed and polished our wooden floors. All the while, the blessed scents of her slow-cooking beans, meats, onions, garlic, sausage, and seven spices wafted in from the kitchen and lifted my body and soul higher and higher on the steps of a ladder to heaven.

"A-yim," she mispronounced my name again, "It's noon now. Your beans are soft."

Ravenous, I sprinted all the way to the table, because she almost never handed out any snacks. My right hand clutched the spoon, ready to throw myself at the beans, the rice, the blackened meats.

She ladled vast helpings of her homemade manna onto a bed of steamed rice. At the end of the meal, I felt so blissful and drowsy, that more often than not she took me in her arms and carried me to my room. My after-lunch naps were long.

At three o'clock, when Maria stopped wiggling her butt to the *sambas de amor* from her favourite radio program, we got ready for our daily walk. Even if puddles dotted the streets, she still helped me every day into a starched sailor's outfit smelling of dew. (My wardrobe, I assume, must have been home to five or six such uniforms, including caps with foot-long, black ribbons fluttering down the back.) Before I swung the front door open, she urged me, "Stand still, *meu coracao*," while her thumb and finger slid up and down the crease of my pants. She spat saliva the size of a mothball onto the brush, to lend my buckled shoes a clear, limpid shine. Only then we darted down the steps of the front porch.

Maria owned only one good-looking, white taffeta dress, which she wore for our strolls. She always wore white low-heeled shoes, for she stood quite tall and bent a bit forward. A *Kreeme*, a warped one, I vaguely remember someone -- probably my father -- whispering in Yiddish once.

While we strolled side by side -- I refused to hold hands in public -- I breathed in her afternoon aroma, a blend of mild Palmolive and the odours of woman-after-bath.

Walking on the sidewalk, we came across throngs of mothers, nannies and children in their finest garb. All girls wore short, pink dresses, and boys wore sailor suits, high fashion in the forties. I glanced at my Maria from time to time, to show her off, the most appealing, best smelling woman in the neighbourhood.

Every time we stumbled upon empty cans on the sidewalk, their lids tilted up like visors, my right toe itched to kick the cans so badly that tears welled in my eyes. And to this day I'll swear there is no music as rousing -- not even Shostakovich's Ninth -- as the sound of a well-kicked can, rattling away into silence. But Maria tapped my shoulder. In my best shoes and clothes, can-kicking was out of the question, no matter how hard my sighs courted the cans.

On evenings and weekends I had an easy time with my mother. Her tired, long face forever mirrored the guilt of spending fewer hours with me than Maria did. Almost every day Mamae bribed me with new toys or sweets. I loved my Mamae. With her, I never had to finish my plate. My spoon on the floor, or a few short-lived whimpers got me off the hook. After dessert, I rode my tricycle indoors for hours, imitating car horns at the top of my voice. I cycled in and out of all the rooms, except for Samuel's. My brother kicked me in the ass if he ever caught me breathing near his treasures.

More often than not, I woke up surprised to find myself in my room. Who had carried me to bed? How did I get into my pyjamas? The night before I didn't wash myself, undress and crawl into bed. I'd played as late as I wished, and lay down to rest on the sofa only when my legs began to hurt, tired.

My heart tells me my first memories just don't add up. Early images of Papai and Samuel almost never flash in my mind. My intellect points out that even if Samuel locked himself in his room or spent some evenings outside our home, I should have kept at least a few traces of him. And even if my father kept his furniture store open late, six evenings a week, a child's mind should have registered a few lasting pictures. What happened? Did I inadvertently or unwittingly expel these two figures from my private Eden -- well, some of the time -- and never let them come back? But instead of hunches, hopeful leads or answers, I hear only the echoes of echoes rumbling in the distance.

Clearly, I recall my fourth birthday. Green and yellow streamers, the colour of the Brazilian flag, spilled from the corners of our dining room, climbing up again in the centre to join the lamp above the table. Mamae and Maria tied white and blue balloons, the colour of the Zionist flag, to the back of each chair in the house. Carlos, four kids from our side street, and two cousins of mine came to the party.

When Mamae brought in my chocolate cake with four pink, skinny candles burning on top, only the mothers sang "Happy Birthday". We kids sat around the table and looked at each other puzzled and pained, our chins and white shirts smeared with brown icing. The crowd turned cranky, and it grew increasingly painful for me to sit at the head of the table, embarrassed. Glass after glass of *guarana* tumbled down, and puddles the colour of amber stained the white tablecloth. Wistful, I noticed how nobody finished their slices of birthday cake.

But Mamae never got upset at the uproar and mess. Twice she clapped her hands. "Time to play outdoors," she announced. On the way out, my guests howled like hungry coyotes and wolves.

Mamae just smiled at me. "Did you enjoy the cake?"

Soon after that birthday, a mystery began to haunt me: what did my Maria do after dark, while I slept? Where, and with whom, did she spend her evening hours? In the afternoons, while I napped, she washed dishes. Then, hidden in the cool shade of our neighbour's avocado tree, she smoked a cigar in the backyard. I knew she occasionally took a nap, because several times I'd woken her to play. Maria prayed at bedtime, but I wished to get hold of more precious clues to her life at night. Of course, I could have posed a few direct questions, but they struck me as being too delicate. Week after week I procrastinated, till it became impossible for me to ask.

For comparison, I made notes on how other members of my family spent their evenings. After dinner, my sleepy mother listened to the radio or read the newspaper. On warm nights when I abandoned my overheated room and moist pillow, I would find her sitting at the dinner table again, poring over papers. Did my Mamae ever take a break from her work?

From my bedroom, I often overheard my parents speaking Yiddish. Whenever I squinted my way into the living room, I found them sipping cups of hot tea. They never dropped sugar cubes into their drink, but balanced the cubes on the tips of their tongues. "That's the way my family did it, in Poland," Mamae had explained. "It keeps the taste of tea." With the war still raging in Europe, my parents almost never mentioned their families in my presence.

It was no mystery, really, how Samuel usually spent his evenings. Right after dessert, my brother, now sixteen years old, rushed to the living room and planted his feet by our metre-tall radio. Bent over, he brought his left ear close to the speaker, and rocked back and forth from the waist, the way we Jews pray. His eyes stayed wide open throughout the local and national news. But as soon as the announcer reported on the Red Army advancing in eastern Europe, he closed his eyes and rocked slowly, in bliss. If there were no news from the eastern front, he stopped swaying at once. Furious, he paced the room.

"Brazil is a fascist dictatorship!" Samuel yelled and raised a fist. "They don't want the masses to know about Stalin's victories!" In the middle of the room he came to a standstill and mumbled, his forefinger wagging at an invisible audience -- rehearsing a political speech, it appeared.

Amused -- and smug -- I had watched my brother's love for Stalin for months. On the eastern wall of his room, above his bed, Samuel nailed a photograph of a dour, unsmiling man with a high brow and rope-thick moustache, who didn't look people in the eye. Once or twice a week Samuel brought home a couple of red carnations or roses. First he crossed the stems, then lovingly gazed at the flowers. After smelling them, he pinned the roses or carnations to the wall, right below the picture of his sweetheart in a faraway land. Rarely had I witnessed Samuel enjoying his love affair in my plain, homely ways. Flowers sniffed and pinned, he never succumbed to Stalin's own fragrances, the way I smelled my Maria, many times a day.

Lately, my skinny, restless, myopic brother had refused to wear glasses. At all times he looked cross-eyed, as if startled out of a dream. Once Papai commented that both Stalin and Hitler bore ferocious moustaches -- the hallmark of intellectual lightweights. For days Samuel scurried red-eyed about the house. This barb, I believe, must have hurt a lot, since my father was a very smart man. In his youth, before he went into business, he had spent three years learning the Talmud and commentaries in Poland. "Not all my fingers," he used to say, "are needed to count the men who beat me in a game of chess."

As clear as an oboe solo, one evening flows from the recesses of my memory. I was about four, and it must have been Friday because two candles had burnt past midway. Mamae turned to my father at the head of the table.

"Last night, Arieh," she said in Yiddish, "I turned off the lights at eleven thirty. Samuel wasn't home." Her low voice breathed despair.

"Where were you?" Papai barked. Between his eyebrows, two upright lines sprang to life.

"I hung around the gate with my friends." Samuel replied in Portuguese, to be on the safe side. "I forgot to look at my watch. I'm sorry." He blinked and fidgeted in his chair. The "gate" meant the entrance to our side street.

"He's not telling the truth, Arieh." Mamae raised her voice, in Portuguese. "He's going to political meetings. How will he be able to concentrate at school?"

My father's stern face gave Mamae a chance to finish her piece. Usually, Samuel hollered that she meddled in his life.

"And what were *you* doing at the gate?" My father turned curious. "That's where maids hang around with *namorados*."

My heart beat faster.

"I was talking to friends," Samuel shrugged. "That's all."

"Friends? What friends?" My father's eyes brightened, his air of authority vanished. "I bet you guys were ogling the couples doing whatever they were doing." He smiled shiftily. "Was Maria there?"

"Oh, no," said Samuel. "I've never seen her with a man, anywhere. Have you?"

"She is tall and gawky," Papai chuckled. "It'll take her a long time to find a man."

I blushed. I wanted to hide.

Mamae brought her forefinger to her lips. In a loud voice she turned to Papai and Samuel. "The roast is very good, isn't it?"

Desperate, I prayed to God that Maria didn't hear anything. My father laughed, tilting his head back, his Adam's apple jutting out. "Never mind, Rivkah. Samuel is soon a man. Some things you just can't read in books. Let the boy learn about real life at home."

"Not many men like a skinny ass," Samuel laughed, encouraged.

"Ugly women look like machos," my father hammered the verdict.

Roaring, Samuel slapped the table.

I reached for my glass of *guarana*, but it wobbled and tipped over. Highlighted by the wood beneath, an amber river streamed across the table cloth, towards Samuel.

"What's going on?" my brother hollered. "I swear Khayim spilled the *guarana* on purpose." He flung his chair back, and jumped to his feet, wiping his pants with a napkin.

Scared, I stood up.

"And now, look what you did." My mother's voice soared, "You got Khayim upset." Her hand flailed back and forth, from Papai to Samuel.

My father stopped smiling. "Just a joke, we meant no harm."

A joke," Mamae hissed in Yiddish. "How can you say something so gross when Maria's in the kitchen? And in front of the boy?" Her nostrils swelled: rarely had I seen my phlegmatic mother so angry. "You just wait, Arieh. You and I will have a little talk about all this."

"What is there more to talk about?" Papai said.

"Enough. Be quiet. You've done a lot of damage already," she said. Bending over, chin almost brushing her plate, Mamae told Samuel, also in Yiddish. "Is this the way you Commies treat working-class women? *Shame on you!*"

Samuel turned white and withdrew into his chair. He too couldn't handle my mother's sudden anger.

Mamae stood up, folded her napkin and patted it flat on the table. She walked to my chair, and took my willing hand. On the way to my room I licked my briny tears.

"Nothing but a stupid joke," Mamae said later, as I stood by my bed. She knelt down and hugged me. "You know Maria likes you so much, she's so good to you."

Was Mamae feeling guilty again? I wondered.

She unlocked her hug, and wiped the tears off my cheeks. I lay on my bed, facing the wall.

"Too early to go to bed," Mamae spoke softly. "I'll read you a story. You'll feel better." She untied the laces and pulled off my shoes. "Please, turn over. Look at me," she implored, but still stunned, I continued to gaze at the wall. Her hand cupped my shoulder to roll me over. I sat up.

Mamae read from *Robinson Crusoe*, but occasionally raised her eyes to watch mine. I stopped sobbing, but barely listened. I worried, instead. Was Maria crying in her room? I dreaded she would *never* recover from the two monsters' mean blows. And she'd done them no harm at all! Are you feeling better?" Mamae asked at the end of her story.

"Yes," I muttered, but a finger of shame stung my cheeks. I'd listened to the first twenty words. Maybe less.

Once in pyjamas, I began to hiccup. Every few seconds the loud and frightening hiccups exploded. My chest and shoulders shuddered.

"Do you want a lemonade?" Mamae asked.

I nodded, and she headed for the door. "I'll ask your Maria to make one."

Bewildered, I began to cry again. Mamae had acknowledged that another woman, a maid, could better settle me down.

Soon Maria strolled in, and the scent of the freshly squeezed lemon filled the room. Not a grain of pulp floated on top.

Maria eyed me up and down, while my mother, two steps behind, stared at me with tear-drenched eyes. Sipping the sweet potion, I stole a glimpse at Maria. Her eyes and tight cheeks betrayed no inner storms. Yet, vertical lines appeared in the gap between her eyes. To calm the two women, I gulped down the lemonade, and stretched out in bed.

"I'll see you in the morning," Maria waved good night from the door.

Mamae bent down by my bed. "Next weekend," she hummed in my ear, "we'll spend a whole day at the Zoo, as we did a year ago."

"Two years ago," I uttered, half-asleep.

Later, I awoke as if a hand had yanked me up by the hair. In the darkness, feverish thoughts kept me alert. What is a *namorado*? How can she find one? Where could I get her one?

As I tossed in bed, the initial question returned: how did Maria spend her evenings? Right away, other questions came up. *Why* didn't she spend time at the gate like other maids? And what, precisely, did couples do at the gate? Why did Papai laugh when Samuel said she *couldn't* find a *namorado*?

I sat up. Eyes adapted to the darkness, I made out the ceiling lamp, the curtains blowing by the window, the silhouette of my tricycle on the floor. The walls and ceiling glowed, as if painted the minute before. Unannounced, my father's laughter and Samuel's roar bounced off the walls and ceiling. My forefingers plugged my ears, to block out the monstrous sounds. I gritted my teeth.

"*Can't* find a *namorado*!"

I repeated this horrible phrase so many times that I began to have doubts. Had I heard it in the dining room? Or just now, lying on my bed? Maybe I'd not heard it at all? Maybe I just needed to close my eyes and fall asleep again? Forget such stupid words!

Still, my face and scalp were boiling. Painfully alert, I counted and recounted the spokes in my tricycle's wheels. I sat up. Wave after wave of shame flowed from every pore. The room became unbearably hot. There was no escape.

Where in the world could I find her a man?

Despite the pain, it didn't occur to me to walk to my mother's room and cry, "Help, help." The darkness, the silence in the house, the body heat befuddled me. My thoughts rioted in all directions. But not even for a second did I doubt it was my inalienable duty to make Maria feel better.

When a sleepless night seemed almost certain, a name flashed into my mind: Manuel! -- a short, skinny black man in clogs and frayed clothes. About once a month Manuel came to our side street to sing the latest sambas from a booklet he held. At the end of his throaty performances, his fans yelled "bravo!" and "bis!" The older boys whistled.

Manuel bowed, then smiled. Working his way through the audience, he sold booklets to those who could read. Others, like children or Maria, rewarded him with fresh fruit, a slice of bread, or a glass of cold water on a hot day.

"Manuel!" My scream shattered the silence and cleared my thinking.

Leaning on my elbows, I knew he was a good match. Maria laughed during his tours to our street. When he departed, they waved good-bye and smiled. Made for each other, no doubt. She would be happy. I slid under the cotton blanket and surrendered to sleep.

"You're quiet this morning," Maria commented when I showed up for an early breakfast. "There must be a reason."

My eyes latched onto the table, to avoid hers. "Manuel!"

"Manuel?" She wiped her hands on her apron and drew closer. "Did you dream about him? Don't be afraid. Tell me the dream."

I stole a glance: she'd knitted her eyebrows. "Manuel! You...the gate...the whole evening!" On my bed, I'd prepared a much better speech. But her body rose one foot away. Only those words left my lips.

Her eyes quivered, one tenth of a second. "But my love," she bent down and kissed my hair. "Manuel's already married. He has six children. They are poor. They live in a *favela*." She gazed at the window, then eyed me. "I'd rather stay with you and your parents. It would be awful, plain awful, for me to marry a poor worker, and live again in a shack."

"But if you find a *namorado*," I blurted out, "I still want to live with you!"

"My love! I'm not going anywhere. I'm in school. It takes time to learn to read and write."

"School? What school?"

"Night school. Three times a week, after dishes. When you're a big boy, I'll get myself a job. Maybe a clerk, in a store. I don't want to be a maid for the rest of my life."

I stared at her, less anxious, less jealous.

She planted a moist kiss on my nose. Her breath smelled of coffee. "Don't worry. The day I have to leave, you'll be the first one to know."

I listened, but couldn't quite trust words. They had bruised me the evening before, and I felt fearful, even of her.

She straightened up. "You look very tired, Ayim. You don't have to finish the porridge. Just three, four spoons more."

"But thank you, Maria!" I lit up, amazed.

She went back to her work in the kitchen. The rest of the house was silent; my family hadn't stirred yet. I rolled my tricycle into the backyard. Carlos was not out yet.

Against a pale blue sky, the sluggish leaves of our neighbour's avocado rustled in the morning breeze. Hidden in the dark branches, a lone, unseen bird piped. It stopped in mid song, shy.

A vise clamped my temples. My eyes burnt. My jaws ached. I must have clenched them in a rage for hours. Too tired to ride my tricycle, I toddled into the shade and collapsed on a bed of leaves and dry branches. Looking up, I caught sight of pale blue, jagged slivers of sky shining through the foliage.

My eyelids felt heavy. I kept them closed longer and longer. In front of me, Maria's face flashed on and off: her dignified face the night before, and her forgiving face that morning.

It didn't bother me that I'd failed as her matchmaker. But I craved sleep, and a chance to forget how my own brother and father had hurt me and my innocent nanny. I prayed for tears to soothe my eyes, and for dreams to relieve a sadness in my heart.

As years add up to decades, and the decades ring up a half-century, memories of Maria deepen my own insights into the essence of caring. But were I to write a book, and especially a book that sold well, on the altruism of young children, it would be quite difficult to get referrals from my greying, rotund, stolid colleagues. My fellow psychologists, almost without exception, swear that altruism is an acquired taste, like the love of Schoenberg's music. Perhaps some teenagers -- but certainly not children -- are ready to appreciate such subtleties. For so egocentric are children -- my professors droned, and I, wishing to graduate, pretended to agree -- that even for a moment they could not conceive of enhancing the well-being of anyone but themselves.

I would be spared no mockery and, behind my back, be pitied as a closet amateur, if I went public on my nanny's teachings. Her actions -- not her words, mind you -- have for decades inspired me to see how humans of all ages care for others deeply, and, at the same time, are inevitably self-serving.

Maria and my family introduced me to these tangled issues on an unbearably hot afternoon. Our lunch dishes were stacked to dry on a folded-out wooden rack. To my right, Maria hummed a wordless tune and with a wad of steel wool polished her aluminum pots to a sheen.

"Chemistry! Chemistry!" I trumpeted. Standing on the kitchen stool, my right hand clutched a small corked bottle. A second corked bottle bobbed up and down in the water of a steel bowl, which I'd set on the marble counter.

"What *are* you doing?" She approached my lab, suspicious. "And why is the gas burner on?"

The evening before, Samuel, my seventeen-year-old brother, had monopolized the dinner conversation and made my parents shake with laughter. In great detail he had told how *seu* Perelmuter, his chemistry teacher, heated a glass tube until yellow fumes billowed out the top, like a mushroom. The room began stinking of rotten eggs. The students snuffled and plugged their noses with forefingers and thumbs.

"The class turned into a matinee at the movies," Samuel smiled, triumphant, as my father wiped the tears that had gathered in his eyes. Murderously jealous of all the attention my brother was getting, I twisted and turned in my chair.

"The guys jeered and whistled," my brother carried on. "The girls shrieked 'Help! Help!' The teacher, my brother said, folded his white handkerchief down the middle, and tied it at the back of his head. "*Seu* Perelmuter," Samuel wore a deadpan face, "looked just like a train-robber."

Oh, well. The real story was that Samuel took his chemistry course *very, very* seriously: a good grade would certainly help him fulfil his dreams of getting him into medical school. Already in kindergarten, my brother made it known he would be a doctor when he grew up. And even I must give him credit for having

no second thoughts whatsoever on the matter of his vocation. Samuel -- and there was both pride and anxiety in the way my parents told this tale -- had battled with meningitis and asthma as a kid. He'd spent more time flat on his back than playing ball with his friends. Nevertheless, it got boring for me to hear my brother, an ardent lover of Lenin and Stalin, boast, time and again, how he would become a pediatrician and treat the children of the proletariat for a token fee.

"Hand me the bottles!" Maria's tone of voice left no room for pleading. "One bottle has nail polish," she established after uncorking it and sniffing. "The other one is empty. Jesus, what *are* you doing?"

She was right. I'd stolen nail polish from a bottle in my mother's dressing table. "It's an *experiment*," I showed off my new word, right hand stretching for one of the bottles, which she moved out of my reach.

"I'm pouring the nail polish back. Don't you dare move till I return."

Quickly, I wrapped a kitchen towel round the bottle's neck. I twisted the bottle left and right in the gas flame, the way I visualized the Chemistry teacher doing it. When I dipped the heated bottle into the water in the bowl, a muffled sound reached my ears. I let go of the towel, and, to prevent my cracked bottle from disintegrating, tussled with it in the cold water.

A dull pain cut across the back of my right hand, as a red and shapeless jet mingled with the water. I raised my wounded hand out of the bowl and gazed at two open lips in the middle of a red pool. A slender, off-white bone shone through the wound.

"Maria!" I screamed, in terror.

In she ran. "*Meu Deus!*" she clapped her hands, "Ayim, what have you done?" Maria picked the towel from the floor and slit its edge with a knife. The cloth shrieked as she ripped a long strip off and rolled it round my bleeding hand, tight. In a hurry she helped me into my shoes. Her purse hung on her left shoulder when she locked the door to our house from outside.

"Let's rush, love, before they close the doctor's office," she muttered as I waddled down the stairs of our porch.

I blinked into the *mormaco*, the silent, white, flaming afternoon outdoors. Other families, I cried, must be still sitting at the table. Where was my Mamae? At her office? On the phone? I dragged my feet, whingeing about the bare bone and the gore, even if her bandage covered it now. It scared me to death even to think what *they* -- I couldn't attach a picture to their anonymous faces -- would do to my hand.

"Hurry, love, hurry." She tugged at my other hand, but I felt so sad, and so scared, that my legs just wouldn't obey. She halted and, without a word, lifted me high up. And for whose sake, I still ask myself today, did she take me in her arms like her baby, making me feel less afraid, less fragile?

Maria began to run, and I heard her clogs beating the pavement, each of her steps shattering the silence anew. In a while she was panting, and a crooked old man with a black walking stick stopped dead on the pavement, to let us pass, safely.

"How's... your hand?" she asked, her throat rasping like an old pump. My mumbles didn't quite reach her ears, apparently. She went on, puffing, "It'll be...alright... don't worry...doctor...in a sec."

In front of the doctor's house Maria set me on my feet. She caught her breath, wiped her wet forehead, smoothed down her fading yellow dress. She knocked on the door. We waited.

"*Doutor* Almeida is on house-calls," a grey-haired white woman in a baby-pink robe leaned her arm on a door jamb. Her voice, nasal, sounded as if she was snorting through an old telephone. "And we're going out afterwards. He can't see any patients when he's back."

"But the boy's bleeding." Maria was panting, still.

"Where's his mother then?"

"She works, downtown."

"Oh, I see." The woman eyed me as though she had just got hold of an essential clue. "What's your name, *menino*?"

"Kha-yim," I stressed the last syllable.

"Jews," the woman sighed. "Oh well. These days a lot of women, not only *gringas*, take a full-time job. Sooner or later, kids get hurt at home. My husband sees it, everyday." The woman made me feel awful, a flawed creature that deserved nothing but guilt and shame for being there.

The woman pointed at the fierce sun. "Take the streetcar, to the First Aid. Anyone will tell you where to get off." She pulled in her robe. "*Nega*, do you have enough money for the streetcar?"

"Yes, *senhora*."

By the curb we waited and waited. Thinking about it now, the street felt as though a lens had converged the sun's rays to scorch the Earth. Time and again Maria bent forward, to stare at the street. "Only a few streetcars run this time of the day," she muttered, indignant. Almost no cars passed by. Their drivers, I told myself, were taking a nap.

It must have been a long streetcar ride, because I woke up in her lap, my forehead moist. We got off and, my knees and ankles feeling like melting butter again, walked along a shaded lane. She stopped by a building with an ambulance parked in front and groomed my hair with her fingers. In a room smelling of iodine and perspiring bodies, a nurse in white coat told Maria to take a seat and wait for our turn.

We sat on a wooden bench, and, to my left, an emaciated black man hunched forward, the toenails of his muddied, twisted-in feet scratching the floor. His tattered clothes and body stank of urine and filth. Once in a while the man slowly opened his eyes, then locked them again. In terror, I snuggled up to Maria.

"It's our turn," Maria woke me again.

Anxious, I followed her and the nurse to a room that reeked of gauze and alcohol. A tall, balding man in a white coat sat on a chair and gestured at a swivelling, white stool. Maria stood behind me, her hands on my shoulder.

"What's your name, *menino*?" the doctor asked.

"Ayim," Maria answered for me. I didn't mind, so petrified I felt.

The doctor began unrolling Maria's towel strip, each layer stained with larger and larger coins of blood. Pain struck only when he pulled out the last piece of cloth, and a brittle clot shimmered on top of the wound. I held my breath, relieved not to see the lean bone.

"We'll have to stitch it up. It won't hurt," the doctor said, and I, of course, didn't believe a word.

The doctor doused a cotton ball with peroxide, and was taking it to the wound when Maria's moist hands shielded my eyes. Did she do it to allay my fears or for her own well being, I still wonder.

The cool, moist ball swabbed the back of my hand, around the cut, then went at the wound itself. I tried to jerk my hand back, but someone gripped my wrist, tightly. A needle pierced my hand, I cried and begged them to stop; still, they went on working in silence, the needle groping in and out of my skin. What about the bone? I dreaded even to think.

"Gauze, please," the doctor muttered.

When Maria uncovered my eyes a clean white cloth wrapped my right hand. The first thing to enter my mind was whether sickly Samuel had ever sported such a neat little bandage, narrow enough to let my fingers bend.

"Come back in ten days, to remove the stitches."

"Yes, *senhor doutor*."

The *mormaco* had abated as we headed home, and the sun, like a strawberry now, hung just above the dark red tiles of the two-storey houses. On the now crowded streetcar, Maria remained dour, even when I tried a conversation about a two-toned car that passed by. As alert as if I'd just woken up from a good night's sleep, I waved my bandage up and down in the air. It took a while before a red-cheeked woman -- it was still hot and humid -- bent forward and turned to me, "*Menino*, what happened to your hand?"

"He cut himself, it was an accident," Maria answered for me, curt, and I felt anxious at once. I never knew what to do when she was in a funk.

Our front door stood wide open. "Where have you been?" Mamae screamed as soon as Maria and I, in tow, stepped in. "I came home from work, blood was on the kitchen counter, water on the floor! What have you done to my son?" She held up my hand and showed it to my father, who had just rushed in, from the living room.

"What happened to his hand?" he bellowed, and I got even more scared.

Maria waited a while before she said, "Ayim cut himself with a piece of glass."

"You left him unsupervised," My mother screamed again, and I began to cry. "We can't have you. He's not five years old yet, and you left him unattended."

"And why the hell didn't you call me at the store or leave a message with a neighbour?" My father lowered his voice, now mean and cold.

"I...can't write...when I'm in a hurry to the doctor's office." Maria, pretty angry, bit her lower lip.

"After what happened, we can't trust you any more. You're fired." Mamae said.

Maria didn't apologize for anything.

"You'll get two weeks pay," my father added. "You're allowed to use our phone while you look for a new job."

At dinner Mamae sat close and, spoon by spoon, fed me like a baby. I cooperated in gulping down a tomato salad, a chicken leg with rice, several slices of bread and butter, and a mashed banana.

"What a horrible day. No wonder he's so hungry," my mother eyed Papai.

Samuel's myopic eyes ogled me with annoyance now that I was hogging all the attention.

All the while I visualized my *baba* wasting away, as the sick man I had seen languishing in the waiting room. Hungry and thirsty she would limp up and down the streets during the *mormaco*. Open wounds and unspeakable pains would come over her, and she would die by the curb one night, all alone. As I swallowed my last spoonful of banana, boiling tears -- of injustice, I suppose -- gathered under my eyelids. Rage began eating me up inside. I prayed for a huge Negro to come into the dining room and, with a fork, pluck out the eyes of everyone in my family.

"Do you want sugar and lemon juice on your avocado?"

"Yes, Mamae," I answered, compliant.

Despite the sweet and sour oily cream of avocado filling my mouth, I felt my belly shrinking in pain -- like Maria's empty stomach, I imagined. I swore to help her.

The last spoon of dessert over, I slid out of my chair and, officially on my way to the washroom, stuck a forefinger down my throat. In four or five fits I threw up my entire dinner on the carpet, not on the wooden floor, just the way I must have planned almost from the start.

"What now?" My father raised his voice. Samuel got up and stood nearby, to catch a better look at my vomit.

Eyes and forehead strained, Mamae wiped my mouth with her napkin. Three or four times her hand patted my forehead, as if searching for a fever. Then she bit her lower lip and took me in her arms. A few minutes later she bathed me and tucked me in.

In a cold anger I stretched out in bed and brooded on the ceiling. She looked at me for a few moments, her head bent down. "Forgive me, please forgive me," my mother begged. I did not look at her even once.

"I made a terrible mistake." Now, on the verge of crying, she sounded pitiful. "I saw the bandage on your hand and felt very bad. I know, it's very hard on you. Every day I leave you behind, with her, when I go to work. Please," she held my wounded hand, "I already told Maria she'll stay on as long as she wishes." I closed my eyes and felt tears well up in the corners.

The day Maria took me to *doutor* Almeida to remove the bandage, a pearl-white scar, an inch long and a quarter of an inch wide, shone against my tanned hand.

"We must take good care of our boy," Mamae told Maria when she came from work in the evening, "the scar may never disappear."

Maria wore a frozen mask, and I felt rotten inside. What a rotten, mean kid! I'd stolen nail-polish, broken bottles, made people angry, had to see doctors back and forth -- and all for a few crumbs of attention!

Maria fondled or kissed my scar whenever we sat down to play. "The scar isn't very nice," she would say, wistful, "but your hand is beautiful, still."

"You can pinch the scar, any time you want," I tried my best to cheer her up.

One morning she whispered a secret. While asleep, my scar rotated, clockwise; after one year, when it completed a full circle, the scar would disappear. My hand would be as good as new. For weeks I vetted

my hand by the window as soon as I opened my eyes in the morning; but the slothful, lazy, indolent, do-nothing scar never moved at all.

This was the only lie my nanny ever told me. Did she do it out of kindness, to soothe me, or to feel better herself? I want to believe I've long ago forgiven her, as memories of her fib make me smile, just the way *she* used to smile: for her sake and mine, at the same time.

"What's your mother tongue, Khayim?" I've been asked in Toronto, where only two of the countless languages spoken close to the tallest of all towers, boast official status.

"Yiddish, of course," Mamae would have answered, without a thought.

This assertion carries a grain of truth, as all her endearments and words to her sons were expressed only in *her* mother tongue. From early on, I'd learned to accept my mother's lacklustre eyes and long face after a day's work at the office. She never kicked up a fuss, as many housewives would, when Samuel and I fostered our own brand of bilingualism by firing back in Portuguese. Thus, my heart rebels, I could not have spoken my first words in a hybrid of Hebrew and German.

The first sounds out of my lips, I suspect, were the tuneful phrases to explode from Maria's mouth. Every few minutes she spluttered "*Nossa Senhora!*" -- Our Lady! -- or "*Meu Jesus!*" And so spontaneous were these words that each, I believed, had a life inside her chest; from time to time her exclamations needed a breath of fresh air and stepped outdoors, for a stroll. To me, *Deus*, Jesus and *Nossa Senhora* were inner parts of her body, not unlike the beads of sweat her arm wiped off her brow.

Once I began to talk, my parents told me with a snigger, I too exclaimed "Jesus!" and "*Credo!*" at all hours of the evening. How amusing to hear a kid with a name like Khayim cry out like a Catholic! They begged me and begged me, I remember, to sound like Maria. They laughed, and wouldn't hear enough of it. And too many times was I carted in my oversized pyjamas into the living room, to entertain friends of my family with my version of her prayers.

Before long, the praise turned to shame, for Maria's words and music became rehearsed, a lifeless act. One night, standing at the centre of our well-lit living room, I shook my head and sealed my eyes and my lips. My parents coaxed me to perform, and two aunts moaned in protest. Still, nobody since has heard me parrot the words that thrived inside my nanny's chest.

But it was Maria's cooking, not her prayers, that brought forth the warmest citations from my mother. On Friday evenings, with few exceptions, Maria served Gefilte Fish on a leaf of lettuce, each portion bathing in clear broth. (In the old iceboxes, the broth cooled, but never jellied.) A carrot ring crowned each slice, and the ground meat overflowed its enclosing skin.

"The student surpassed her teacher," Mamae commented once, alluding to Maria's learning the intricacies of Polish-Jewish cooking while labouring in my mother's hot kitchen.

But the master never tasted her own Rosh Hashanah honey cakes. Honey -- Maria's grimaced in pain, as her hand rubbed her belly -- irritated her bowel, badly. Still, on the eve of the holy day, my nose informed me her cake was rising in the oven. (I played no rough games with Carlos that afternoon -- for fear of soiling my navy-blue suite in our back yard). More and more, the scents of walnuts, cinnamon, butter and cloves wafted through the entire neighbourhood, like messengers of an irresistible faith. With growing vehemence, the aromas proclaimed a sweet, new year -- not only upon the Jews in their dry-cleaned clothes, but upon their Catholic neighbours, too. Weeks after Rosh Hashanah -- I must have been in Hebrew kindergarten -- I dropped in for a sip of water. Who, for the first time, did I find sitting at the jacaranda dining table with Samuel, but Maria, her apron off? Forefinger on an open book, Maria haltingly muttered numbers, as if in pain.

"You may sit with us if you want, but you have to be very quiet," Samuel told me. Turning to Maria, he pointed at her book. "Nine times eight," he lowered his voice, "minus seven equal..." he waited. She looked up, her eyes tremulous.

"Sixty five!" he gave away the answer, smiling.

Maria's face darkened, and wrinkles rose between her eyebrows. She studied her book, then eyed Samuel. Her face lit up, and she smiled, thankful.

My heart raced in alarm: this was not their first encounter! I blamed myself for playing too many games in our side street. What else, I worried, was going on?

Early afternoons were a good time for Maria's private lessons. From five to six, three times a week, her teacher cudgelled his brain under *seu* Bandeira, *his* tutor in Math and Physics, the way many therapists consume high doses of therapy. Now in his final year of high school, Samuel was so fearful of failing the entrance examinations to medical school, that he surprised me and my parents by locking himself in his room at night, to do homework.

The year before, he'd spent almost every evening at underground political meetings. These were difficult times for my parents, who brooded over untouched cups of tea at the living-room table. Not even radio broadcasts of Nazi Armies being smashed in Europe would shake off their grief over their untoward firstborn.

"What have we done?" Mamae would sigh, as if waiting for her indictment to be served.

"I have no idea," Papai replied, his sad eyes peering beyond the wall. "Since 1920 I've been a Zionist, and now I feel betrayed. Yes, betrayed. How do we tell even your best friends we have a commie at home?."

"It'll be all right, Arie. It's just a stage he's going through. When they win the war, he'll get over Communism." Evidently, Mamae believed in stages, the unyielding mechanisms that governed the lives of her children from the inside.

To allay my gloom, I would anxiously sneak into Samuel's room. I rifled through book after book. They contained no coloured pictures, only drawings of disgusting things, such as frogs being nailed to a desk, their open eyes begging for mercy.

It became impossible for me to relax when Samuel winked at Maria as she served dinner. Were there secrets between them? Such signs of intimacy worried me so much that I cut out all afternoon games in the street. Instead, I chaperoned Maria from the beginning to the end of her lessons. I checked her reader and Math book, too, but found no clues that would lull my impotent jealousy. Why was Samuel all of a sudden fooling around with *my* nanny? And why was he working so hard to help her with numbers?

I breathed some relief when the Math lessons ceased, and Samuel began reading from big-lettered leaflets he brought along. Soon Maria read longer and longer sentences from his leaflets. But droplets shone on Maria's forehead, and an unsteady forefinger escorted each of her words, no matter how well her voice flowed.

They worked hard on her writing, too. At first Maria clutched her pencil until her finger pads shone, chalk-white. Gently, Samuel's fingers would pat hers, and his voice, like a doctor's, would lilt, "*sossega, sossega*" -- calm down.

My heart warmed to my brother, so loving a teacher. As though floodgates had opened inside, some tender feelings Samuel rarely showed were flowing now. I loved him, at that time, for helping Maria.

"What you guys see is just the beginning," Samuel boasted at dinner. Tears of excitement glinted behind the glasses he was wearing, since he'd metamorphosed into a candidate for medical school. To the last bite of my dessert, he bored me by ranting about maids and workers reading underground leaflets and, before long, rising against their class enemies, the fat cats.

"It's just around the corner," he shook his forefinger, threatening the fat cats around the table. "Our revolution is just months away. Nothing under the sun will remain the same." His vehemence and my parents' fearful, frozen faces gave me goose-bumps.

A few mornings later, Maria commented, "Looks like the Allies will win the war before long. I'm praying for it to be over even before the *Carnaval*."

Recently, she had begun reading the newspaper, her finger no longer shaking across the narrow columns. How proud she stood at the grocery store, her forefinger off the paper while reading her shopping list! "One kilo of sugar, one bar of laundry soap, two kilos of black beans." Her voice would rise, as clear as

my mother's silver dinner bell. On rainy afternoons she no longer made up tales of wolves chasing bad boys; instead, she read me stories from my mother's books.

"Do you want me to teach you a Hebrew song?" I offered at the end of such a story. I was aching to teach her *something*.

"No, thank you, not today," she said. "Some other time," she added, thoughtful, "after I take the tests."

"Tests? What tests?" I asked in alarm. My brother spoke of tests as instruments of torture, lying in wait.

"The teachers ask you to read and write and play with numbers. If you do right, they hand you a paper saying you're an educated person." She raised her chin, in anticipation of something precious.

Weeks later she announced we were going out, in the afternoon.

"And where are we going?" I asked. It was one of those hot days she did not allow me in the backyard, until the *mormaco* had passed away.

"You don't know this place. We haven't been there before. It's only a few streetcar stops away."

Why is she so secretive? I asked myself.

"When you wake up from your nap," she went on, "take a shower, please, and put on your navy-blue suit."

"Not the suit, Maria! Please, it's too hot!"

"I know, love, it *is* hot. But still, I'd like you to wear it. For *me*." Puzzled, I watched her lowered eyes, this being the first time she ever asked me to do something for her sake.

When I opened my eyes, she stood by my bed, smiling, her white taffeta dress tightened at the waist by a slender black belt. Her white, freshly dyed shoes glistened against her brown skin.

After my cold shower she helped me into a suffocating outfit: a starched, white, long-sleeved shirt and long, blue pants. I dreaded even to think how hot it would feel in the street. She knelt down to knot my red tie and tighten my blue suspenders.

"I'll carry your jacket. It's still hot outside," she said. I breathed in relief.

Under a still high sun, we made our way to the streetcar stop. Wave upon wave of torrid air spewed into the flaming streets, as if an oven door had been flung open. Maria's large, white straw hat kept her face in the shade, elegant.

Within minutes we alighted and walked in the shade of tenement houses lining both sides of the street. Unlidded garbage bins gave off a nauseating stench of rotting tissues and putrid vegetables. Everywhere I looked coloured shirts and sheets hung out to dry. On narrow sidewalks and cobblestones a host of skimpily dressed, barefoot children played soccer with a ball of rags.

She halted by a house not much bigger than ours. Steps of cement led to tall, double doors of brown-stained wood.

"What's this, Maria?"

"My church," she said, and bent down to adjust my tie and suspenders.

"A church? Is this a church?" I asked, incredulous. My father would raise hell -- no, kill Maria -- if he ever found out I'd set even my toes inside a church. Right there and then I decided not to tell.

"You can't talk loud inside the church."

She helped me into my jacket, then took my hand in hers. We walked up the stairs, and past the wooden doors. My face felt cool and dry. Inside, the church looked very dark, except for a small altar that glowed in the light of a few candles and a bare bulb, overhead.

She let go of my hand and, chin to her breastbone, genuflected to the altar. Standing upright, and more dignified than I'd ever seen her, she crossed herself. My hand in hers again, we walked slowly down the aisle. By the third pew Maria stopped and nudged me in first. After she bent legs to the kneeler, her fingers quickly covered her ankles with the hem of her dress.

Kneeling so close that my pants brushed her dress, I stared at her in astonishment and fear.

"Let me pray. Then I'll tell you why we're here." She closed her eyes and joined her palms. Under her wide-brimmed hat she murmured, solemn.

All around, the other pews were empty. The sides of the church remained very dark, even after my eyes had adapted to the humble light. Ahead, a blue, worn-out velvet runner covered the altar, some of its golden fringes missing -- like my front teeth, I thought.

Behind the altar rose the small statue of a black and barefoot, skin-and-bones man fastened to a wooden cross. His chin was planted on his shoulder, and his locked eyes and twisted mouth signalled overwhelming pain. I gasped. In the dim light, the statue of Jesus dressed in a loincloth reminded me of the sick man who sat next to me in the waiting-room of the First Aid station. "I promised you'd be the first to hear," her whisper ripped my reveries. "I passed the tests. I got a job with the railway," she spoke quickly. "In about two weeks, I'll be a cashier."

Her eyes turned pensive. I panicked. "But you'll be living with us, won't you, Maria?" I whispered back.

"No, I'll be renting a room, not far from work. But don't worry, I'll come and visit you. You know I like you very much, don't you?" She bent her head and kissed my lips, softly.

"Please Maria, please, don't go." I fought back my sobs. Samuel's face flashed across the scene. I hated him, he'd taught her numbers. I pictured myself tossing a pot of boiling water at his face.

"I'll help your mother look for a maid. I've talked to Laurinda, a friend of mine. She'll start the day I leave." She fondled my cheek. "Your birthday is coming up soon -- "

"I don't care!" my shout reverberated in the church.

"Ayim," she squeezed her eyelids in disapproval, "we better pray now. Pray. He'll listen. He always listens to children." She turned to the altar.

"But what do I tell him?" More than desperate, I was whispering again.

She eyed me. "Tell Him how you feel, tell Him what you want. Don't worry, your prayer will be heard." She blew air into my ear. "I've brought you up to be white and black inside, rich and poor, Jew and Catholic, at the same time."

"But I don't know what to say," my eyes watered.

"Go ahead, love, pray. Ayim," she paused, her face stern. "It'll hurt when I leave, but it's time for me to go." Her eyes locked on the altar.

I joined my palms in front of my chin and closed my eyes. "*Deus*," I whispered and halted in fright. Was I praying to the right person? She'd forgotten to say! I opened my eyes, but she was still in her prayers. It wouldn't be right to disturb her.

"*Senhor Jesus*." Anxiety rushed over me. What a huge risk! What if I'd addressed the wrong *senhor*? But I forced myself to continue. "If Maria leaves me, it'll be very, very hard. You see, she took care of me all my life and I...I...like her very much." I sobbed a few times, softly. "It'll be awful... if she leaves me."

I wiped my cheeks. "All I want, *Deus* and *senhor Jesus*, is for Maria to stay with me." I slowed down, scared I'd done the wrong thing by mentioning *Deus* before Jesus. "No, I really don't mind if she works for the railway," I whispered a wee bit louder, to sound mature. "My mother works, too. I know how it feels."

The knots in my stomach were tearing me apart. I inhaled deeply. "But If Maria lives with us, instead of renting a room, I'll be good. I'll stop biting my nails. I'll never, never fool around with my brother's things."

Feverishly, my confused mind searched for an offering that would appease her *senhores*, so distant, so silent. "If you want me to, I'll come here and pray. I know how to get here, I do. I hope you won't mind if I show up in short sleeves and canvas shoes."

Maria was still absorbed in her prayers. I closed my eyes like her, and vowed to be honest with Jesus and *Deus* and the whole world. "If Maria stays with me, I promise not to bring marbles to Shul on Saturdays. I will not lie to my father that I need to pee, and then play in the backyard with the bad boys."

"Did you say your prayer?" She was smiling, and I nodded. Maria stood up and crossed herself. Hand in hand we walked up the aisle. Past the doors of the church, the city still blazed, white. My hands shielded my eyes from the stunning light. Still, I took in the black outline of Maria's hat and her long neck,

as graceful as a swan's. Her pointed nose and the fleshy lips that kissed me so many times drew a sweet, most lovely silhouette on the blinding sky. This is my last memory of her.

The next few weeks were the most eventful time of my life. Maria left and Laurinda took her job. Soon after, I started grade one, and, to celebrate my sixth birthday, my parents threw a big party. Maria, I'm told, came by to visit me three times, once before the party, twice after. My brother got drunk -- like a dirty Goy, my father hissed -- and danced in the streets with a broom, the day he began medical school. Soon after, he was thrown in jail for a week. Two plainclothes policemen beat him up for his subversive political activities while calling him a dirty Jew.

I've heard many tales about those heady days, and the family album preserves the fading pictures of all characters, doing their best to smile at the camera. But all these stories leave me indifferent, as if they happened on some other, cold planet. A clumsy hand, I feel, erased that time from the blackboard of my memory, and just a few specks of chalk glitter on the plank floor. Angry, and perhaps more unforgiving that I'm ready to admit, I still bang my head against walls that others cannot see.

Yet, in child-like whispers I still pray, "One day I'll be whole again, with her."

On Sunday afternoons, in Toronto, I take long naps. I wake up in a daze, with fragments of dreams hovering over the surface of my mind. Quite often I remember dreams about Maria and my childhood. My heart is filled with *saudade* -- that untranslatable Portuguese word that loosely means a painful longing, a deep pining for a person, a home, or one's past. I pine for Maria and remember my halcyon days with her.

Months ago, I decided to translate my longings into action. I paid a visit to the priciest private investigator in Toronto, Mr. Neil O'Hara. Mr. O'Hara was tall and paunchy. His hair was cropped short, and he wore a navy blue suit and a white shirt. He talked in a business-like fashion as he laid out the terms of his work for me. Any similarity of that private eye to the characters I have seen in movies and television programs was utterly superficial.

Excited, I told him about Maria. He asked details, and I poured out all I knew about her life and background. It turned out, to my surprise, that I didn't know her surname, her place of birth, and birthday. I had no idea where she worked after she left my parents' home.

Mr. O'Hara leaned back in his chair. "You're giving me too little information about Maria, doctor. It'll be a lot of work to find her."

He surprised me. I had wallowed so much in my memories of Maria that it had never dawned on me that what I remembered was insufficient for a private eye hired to find her. I leaned forward. "Make an effort, Mr. O'Hara. It's very important for me to meet her."

"Is she a relative?"

"No," I replied. "She was what Brazilians call my *mae preta*, my black mother. She raised me. She is the most important figure in my life after my wife and children."

"I'll see what I can do. There isn't much to go by. To get started, I need a retainer of ten thousand dollars."

Over the next few months Mr. O'Hara called me every month to report on the progress of the case. In fact, he let me in on leads that went nowhere, on dead ends in the investigation, on information that led to no further clues. After eight months on the job he invited me to his office and let me know that he was closing the file, as he saw no chance of ever finding Maria. "She may be dead or she may have moved away from Rio. Brazil is a huge country. We have no clues on where she ended up." He signed a check on the little money that remained from the retainer.

I felt devastated. My fantasies of holding her in my arms and kissing her kinky white hair went up in smoke. I would never again feel on my cheeks the hands that had caressed me so many times. Her lips, I fantasized, were still as lush as I remembered. To introduce a grain of reality into my daydreams, I imagined an overweight woman with wrinkles in the corner of her eyes and mouth. I had planned to visit her in Rio and shower her with gifts. I had even calculated that if I worked an extra hour a week, I could support her financially. Life in the Third World is so cheap when you deal with Canadian dollars!

None of that would ever happen. My Maria would forever be the stuff of dreams, memories, and fantasies, as intangible as characters from children's tales. It occurred to me to allay my grief by perpetuating her in a novella, a paeon to her kindness and caring. Yet, all the words I wrote paled in comparison with the *saudade* that filled my heart.

Truth is, even if it hurts I won't let go of my nanny.

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