

Cooking a Baby Goat in its Mother's Milk
by Tamar Gribetz
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I always imagined it would be lobster with its buttery sauce, pure *treif*, the sheer chutzpah of it. A food wrong in every form. Or maybe pork. Yes, bacon! As wrong as you can be. Everyone knows Jews can't eat pork. It's written in the Torah, for God's sake! But not a cheeseburger. Because a cheeseburger is really no big deal. After all, I have had many burgers before and countless pieces of cheese. Just never together.

Having pre-marital sex, marrying a *goy*, not using a condom if you did have premarital sex, living outside of New York, joining a reform shul, trying any drug other than pot, dating a married man, once married, having an affair, getting a tattoo, not going to graduate school, eating on Yom Kippur. These were just a few things I knew were off limits in my narrow world.

But I also made sure to experience as much as I could from life. I never wanted to miss any experience. I spent a year of college in Israel, but I really got college credit for a year of collected *chavayot*, experiences. I devoured experiences that year like a starving child eating food.

If I had a doubt about going somewhere or doing something, my code word that year with my friend Lauren was *chavayah* – experience—and, together, we would jump ahead and go for it. Not sure whether a guy was kissable? Chavayah. Should we hitchhike with a cute stranger? Chavayah. Should we cut class to travel to

Egypt? Turkey? Chavayah. And then when I studied in NYC, I applied the same rule. Should my friends and I go to a couple of guys' apartment whom we had met an hour earlier and smoke up? Chavayah? Should I fool around with a black guy, something I had never done? An older man? A younger guy? Chavayah.

I also had a severe case of wanderlust. I would travel at every opportunity. I had various jobs during college just to make extra money. I folded sweaters at the Gap, I waited tables at a local café, I babysat for many Upper-East-Side brats. I spent the money on experiences, not things. Drinks and vacations, rather than shirts or necklaces. I worked at Club Med every winter break. I built houses for Habitat for Humanity in every exotic place that fell victim to Mother Nature: Indonesia, Guatemala, Vietnam, Dominican Republic. I wanted to eat everything if I hadn't tasted it before. I wanted to try it all. So what if I was fifteen pounds overweight? Big deal! It was worth it. I wore it with pride. It was evidence of my passion for life. A life I was living! I would taste everything.

But not lobster, not shellfish, not bacon, not ham, and certainly not a cheeseburger. Of course not!! It never even occurred to me to eat that. There was always a limit. A line that I dared not cross. I often liked to see how far I could go without technically breaking a rule.

When I was a little girl in Hebrew school, the Rabbis used to sing this song to us:

Hashem is here
Hashem is there

*Hashem is truly everywhere
Up, up, down, down, right, left, and all around
Here, there, everywhere
That's where he can be found*

As a child, this song made me feel safe and protected. Hashem would always protect me and keep me safe, away from harm, away from monsters, and witches, and robbers, and fighting parents. He watched over me. But there was a flip side. If he was everywhere, he saw everything, all the bad things I did. And he was there for me as long as I behaved. But if I violated the rules and rejected him, I was alone.

Alone is something I didn't like to feel. I was alone as a kid a lot. When I was a child, my bedroom shared a wall with my parents' bedroom. Through this wall, I would hear my parents argue.

"I don't understand why you have to come home so late every fucking night!"

"Because I have to work to make a living. We have to eat."

"Oh come on, where are you really so late?"

"What are you talking about? You sound stupid! Enough! Really!"

"You don't give me affection. You don't care about me. This marriage is—"

"Shut up already! What the hell do you want from me?"

"More than this."

"So leave me!"

"You'd like that, huh? You prick!"

"What do you need? You're pathetic. Leave me the fuck alone!"

"Where are you so late late at night, you bastard! Are you fucking around?"

“Why are you so difficult? Fuck off already!”

“You just don’t love me enough. You never have.”

“You sound like a psychotic bitch, you know that?!”

“You’re a fucking bastard. Bastard! I hate you. I fucking hate you.”

And then she would cry.

I would lie in bed and try not to listen to the screaming, the crying, the *Fuck Yous* and *Assholes* and *Bastard* – the bad words that I would be punished for using. The slamming of doors. I would lie in bed and worry my parents would get divorced, and sometimes I’d wish that they would. My neck would tighten up and I’d hold the cool sheet to my mouth, my cheek, and feel the soft cotton. I would inhale the scent of the detergent and say the Shema prayer you were supposed to say at bedtime. I believed that G-d would protect me and keep me safe and that I could tell him anything and he’d love me. But I did have to follow his rules. In the Shema prayer, G-d promised to keep you safe if you obey his commandments, but then he threatened to hurt you if you do not obey him.

When their fighting got bad, my father would retreat to his home office with a glass of vodka or he would stay at work late and I wouldn’t see him until the morning. My mother would lock herself in her room. I’d be on my own. I couldn’t ask for help with Math or for a ride to the library or for money for lunch or for advice on my increasingly clicky group of friends, or about boyfriends, or for comfort from a slight from a best friend. But I had G-d. I didn’t want to lose this. It was pretty simple to me: If I listened, I would be safe. I just had to listen.

So I was afraid to break the many rules we learned in school. A small price for protection. I didn't want to reject what made me feel safe. Because then what would I have?

Shabbat was my favorite commandment. On Shabbat I always felt safe and protected. It was the one night during the week when my parents didn't fight. It was the one night my father didn't stay late at work. He came home early, before sundown, and he went to synagogue and we had dinner together – the three of us, like a normal family. My parents would be happy, and it seemed like everything would be okay because G-d watched over us on Shabbat. He blessed the home with peace and warmth and love. My father would fall asleep on the couch reading the *New York Times* and there was no screaming to ignore, no cursing, nor slammed doors. No hatred spewed. I'd go to sleep feeling so happy. The only time I sometimes forgot to say *Shema* was on Shabbat.

My mother was difficult even when she and my father weren't fighting. One night my mother and I had just eaten dinner and we were cleaning up.

“So, I have basketball practice tomorrow night.”

“Get a ride home,” she said as she loaded the dishwasher.

“Of course.” It just came out.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It's just that I always do. It's embarrassing.”

“I embarrass you?” My heart was racing, my throat was falling.

“Forget it. I'll get a ride.”

“I am always schlepping you around!”

I had to say something. I braced myself.

“It’s just . . . every week I have to ask Mrs. Goldberg or Mrs. Klein for a ride home, and I feel embarrassed. Maybe you can offer to drive the girls home this week.”

“Who the hell are you to say that to me?! I work. I cook, and daddy’s never home to help!”

“Forget it! I didn’t think it was a big deal to drive a mile and pick me up this one time.”

She took the plate of tuna casserole and dropped it onto the counter. It shattered into pieces. I gasped, and my heart stopped beating. She marched to her room, slammed the door and stayed there all night. I was stuck picking up the glass shards that had rained on the kitchen counter and floor.

I woke up the next morning and passed her in the hallway and she wouldn’t look at me. She didn’t say “Goodbye. Have a nice day,” when I left to school or even a “Hello” when I came home. The silence would sicken me and settle in my stomach. I would lose my appetite and feel nauseated (it’s the only time in my life that I ever lost weight).

Two days later, I could no longer take the silence.

“Look Ma, I’m sorry about the other night. I know you work hard.” I could barely look at her.

“Okay. But you understand why I was upset, right?”

“Of course. Sorry.”

So I often apologized. For selfish reasons, so I could eat and have my appetite back and feel Not So Alone. Then things would be okay until the next fight.

So maybe that's why I want to be on good terms with G-d. I can't stand it when someone (who is stronger than me, who has power over me) is angry and ignores me. It makes me feel alone and scared and I hate that feeling. I'll do what I have to to get rid of it. I'll even lie.

I went to Jewish Day School as a kid, and we learned these rules about what you couldn't do on the Sabbath. You couldn't work or light a fire, which in the modern-day world meant you couldn't use electricity. So you couldn't watch T.V.. When I was in college, out of my parents' watchful eyes, I used to put the T.V on before Shabbat and leave it mute in case I wanted to watch it on Shabbat.

You were not allowed to drive or cook or use electricity on Shabbat, but technically you had eighteen minutes after sundown as a grace period. I would do it all until the last second before I lit the Shabbat candles, even if I didn't need the eighteen minutes. I would try to get away with as much as I could without violating the rules.

It's like when I was a kid, and my mother would tell me not to touch anything in the fancy store she went to purchase wedding or housewares gifts. When she had turned her back, I touched the crystal with a giddy thrill. I touched as many pieces as I could. Touch. Touch. Touch. See? Nothing happened.

When I was ten, my best friend Tina would tell me these scary things that could happen if you She warned me to never lift up my eyelids and look down

while hitting my back because my eye sockets would stay pure white. So, of course, I walked home from her house with one hand lifting up my eyelid and looking down, while I smacked my back with the other hand.

“But I did it and nothing happened,” I told her on the phone as soon as I got home.

“You must have done it wrong.”

Or the time Tina told me to never mix pop-rocks and Coke because that’s how Mikie from Life cereal died. So, of course, I insisted on mixing them together at my earliest opportunity. I felt the bubbles flow down my throat as the pop rocks sizzled on my tongue. I was scared, but also sickly excited to see what would happen. Would I explode? Could this really happen? And I’d be waiting and giddy. But nothing happened. It seemed there were so many bad things that could happen that in order to cope, I had to dare them to. It felt as if I were in a room full of bubbles and it was irresistible not to pop them, so I would sometimes pop them and they disappeared. But others always remained. There were just too many of them.

Did I think I was invincible? No, not at all. Quite the opposite. I was curious. Afraid and curious all at the same time.

As an observant Jew, I was taught it was forbidden to have pre-marital sex. As far back as I can remember, that was taboo. But in my mind, sex was really intercourse. Everything else was fair game. I would lie in bed with each of my boyfriends, both of us naked, and roll around over each other and have oral sex.

There'd be semen on my bed and I'd have orgasms, both of us smelling of each other's juices. But I was still a virgin.

I even had a threesome, but I made my boyfriend and his friend promise not to penetrate.

I didn't see the point of breaking such an important rule for several inches of contact. Three fingers worked just fine, thank you. And I never had to worry about getting pregnant or catching an STD. What was the point of breaking that rule when I had tremendous pleasure coming from oral sex or, better yet, my favorite, the simplest and neatest option: a finger? And making a guy come – actually seeing the milky-white juice squirt out – was my prize. I wouldn't be able to see it if he was inside me.

No, I would save myself for my husband.

When I was in college, AIDS scared the shit out of me. I thought that this must be G-d's punishment for all people who did bad things: use drugs, have pre-marital sex, or be gay. I really didn't get the pay part. I always thought that it was so silly because G-d made you that way so how can he be pissed at you for being that way?

Fear of HIV was probably the real reason I avoided having sex with many guys. I would be tempted and almost do it, but I'd think that G-d would give me AIDS if I did it. I knew he always threatened to smite if we didn't follow the rules, but this was so specific and so scary and it was all around me in the news. My friends were all worried about it. The fear stopped me, not the belief that there was anything wrong with sex. That's why I always went so close to the line. G-d never said you

couldn't give blowjobs or receive oral sex, just not have intercourse. I was safe because G-d wasn't angry at me, because I did nothing wrong.

I confirmed this with the Gay Men's Health AIDS Hotline on many occasions. The guy who answered the phone probably recognized my voice.

"So you can't get AIDS from oral sex, right?"

"It's very unlikely. You would have to have an open cut in your mouth."

I had the same conversation with him about three times a year. So I was okay – having my fun, not missing out, sowing my wild oats – so long as I did not do *it*.

A part of me worried G-d might think I was violating the spirit of the law and make me the one out of a million who did contract HIV from oral sex, but I tried not to let my mind go there. It was enough to have to remain a virgin; I couldn't deny myself everything. I thought it would be a shame to live a full life and only receive orgasms from my husband. That seemed so sad to me. Besides, I told myself, if I didn't have these experiences, I'd be resentful later in life when I was forty and I'd want to have an affair, which would be a worse violation of the Torah.

I knew my heart wasn't in these mitzvot. If it were, I wouldn't violate the spirit of the law. I wouldn't dance at the border and taunt the heavens above and threaten to cross that line. I knew my actions were based on fear. The fear was part of me, always lurking in the background, daring me to *really* fuck up. Just try it and you'll see what I'll do. Just try it. I see you.

Don't we all as human beings long to be free? And when we're told something is forbidden, don't we want it even more? There is nothing unique about this. I felt like such a cliché even dreaming about the taste of a cheeseburger, the anticipation of the melted, creamy cheese against the juicy grainy burger. But I did.

Would G-d really care, I wondered? When he told the Jewish people: "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk" in Exodus and Deuteronomy, wasn't that about compassion and ethics? About being a decent human being? Taking what G-d has given us while not hurting God's other creatures? This had nothing to do with a cooked burger and melting processed American cheese on it.

Was I even hurting anyone? If anything, wasn't I only hurting myself if I didn't eat it? Because then, I'd be wondering about it all the time until I did. I often looked at other people who "broke the rules" with awe and envy. They did it and they're still standing. They didn't die. They're breathing and living and learning and they're Not Afraid. I was on the precipice looking and longing and curious. Yet I was too afraid to jump in!

Besides, what did being good get you? Moses led the Jewish people around the desert for forty years, but he never got to enter the land of Israel because he hit a rock! Six million Jews were gassed by the Nazis. Brian's mother's entire family in Europe was murdered. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Good things happen to bad people. So what was I doing? Why was I so afraid to break a rule?

Sometimes I look at the world and I can't take how beautiful it is. In the spring especially. The green leaves and blue sky, the flowers in purple and pink – so many different shades of pink! – and the smell, oh the smell of honeysuckle and lavender. And the yellow and purple “weeds” that grow along the highway, sprouting for miles for people who can't afford to plant. For anyone driving along the highway with a pit in their stomach because of a doctor appointment or root canal or visit to their in-laws. The endless ocean and the kindness of dogs, giving birth and nursing a baby. Giving birth and then seconds later actually nursing a baby! Giving birth to my first child was the most spiritual and religious I have ever felt. I couldn't even take the beauty. It was too much to bear.

So I have a hard time reconciling that G-d with a punitive G-d who insists I immerse in a mikveh – man made – where a witch inspects me for stray hairs and makes me feel dirty and tainted. I believe in G-d, in all the magic around me, but I don't think G-d really wants this. A G-d who makes flowers bloom after a dark and cold winter has to be a kind G-d who appreciates change and growth and freedom and comfort. How I struggle with this! The G-d I was warned about in school punished you if you strayed. The G-d I live in fear of vs. *this* G-d who I know is kind and compassionate and generous. I don't think G-d really cares about some of the rules the rabbis preach. Maybe the rabbis were lost and confused and needed something to hold onto. Maybe they were wrong and I'm stuck with all these rules, their baggage.

Now that I'm older, I really think G-d cares about us being good to one another. I don't think he cares about this other stuff. He does not want us to be

unhappy or frustrated or feel like we are missing out on life, especially those of us who are free spirits. I can't deny my being, my nature. I want to live and to be me.

I truly don't think *this* G-d gives a shit if I: Turn lights on on Shabbat to read a good book (sometimes a spiritual book written by a Jewish scholar), watch T.V. on Shabbat (especially an educational program about the Holocaust or the News), not wait three hours between eating meat and milk, wear a garment made of both linen and wool, drive to synagogue on Shabbat when it's raining (rather than walk a mile and catch a cold), drive to my family in Brooklyn for Rosh Hashanah dinner so I don't have to choose between spending the holiday apart from my elderly grandparents and hosting eight sleep-over guests – including parents and Grandparents and aunts and uncles – for two days which will inevitably lead to thoughts of murder, have premarital sex (the best kind of sex), go to the mikveh, eat a cheeseburger, eat lobster, eat shrimp.

* * *

Anyway, so last week Brian, took the kids skiing for five days over February break. I was stuck at home because I had to work at the damn marketing firm that is sucking me dry and always demanding more of me. When they left, I was excited to be alone in the house. I haven't been home alone in a long time without my three young kids (who I love to death; but still, it was soooo nice!). I walked around naked, and I ate Cap'n Crunch for dinner. I didn't wash the bowl or spoon, a habit Brian always bugs me about. I caught up on my favorite shows. I watched five episodes of "Girls" without a break.

I ate Cheez Doodles in bed right from the large bag, letting the orange dust stain my fingers and our ivory sheets. I took a nap after work without feeling guilty about it because I knew I could. The kids wouldn't wake me. Brian wouldn't warn me that I'd be up all night. My time was mine. There was no schedule, except for work. It felt great at thirty-eight years old to live the life of a twenty-year old.

On the third night, I was supposed to go to the mikveh, the ritual bath that observant Jewish women immerse themselves in to purify themselves after they menstruate. Technically, a woman must finish her period and then wait seven clean days before she goes to the mikveh. During these twelve days every month, an observant Jewish woman is not allowed to have sex with her husband. Very strict, ultra orthodox Jews do not even touch one another or pass each other food. Brian and I take this *Mitzvah* seriously; we touch and kissed, but we never have sex during this prohibited time which is sometimes a great excuse if I'm tired . I always heard that you would have healthy children if you keep this mitzvah, and I am too superstitious to mess with that.

When I was a sophomore at my all-girls Jewish high school, they took us on a class trip to a Syrian mikveh in Brooklyn. It was known to be the nicest one in New York. I had never even heard of a mikveh before then. (My mother was very closed; her life was a secret to me.) Most of the girls in my class knew about the mikveh from their mothers. The mikveh was a beautiful place. It looked like a marbled spa with deep bathtubs, large showers, plush white towels that looked like clouds, silk

cream bathrobes that hung loosely on hangers. The woman in charge told us it was a special place for woman to relax and purify.

Though it was a beautiful place, I thought the whole premise was awful. Was I dirty during my period? Why did I have to feel unholy? Would these magical waters purify me? But from what? God gave me my period anyway. And he did so we could have babies, and the holiest thing a Jew can do is procreate: “Be fruitful and multiply.” But, alas, going to the mikveh is what you did as an observant woman. They said your children would be healthy if you kept this mitzvah. It was good for a marriage to have some time apart, so it could be more special when you were together. The day of immersion coincided with your most fertile days, so observant Jews were blessed with many children. I took it as a given. Not going was one more thing that was out of the question. I wouldn’t mess with that. A big thing with scary ramifications if violated. The certainty of which I would never dare test.

When you go into the mikveh, you have to be completely naked and dunk three times. A “Mikveh Attendant” watches you to be sure that every inch of you from head to toe is immersed and does not touch anything. Your fingers and toes must be unclenched. You must keep you mouth loosely opened. After three immersions, the mikveh attendant pronounces you “kosher.” That pronouncement always made me feel good. Good and dutiful and pure. Though I dreaded preparing and going each month, a part of me yearned to hear that pronouncement. I was *kosher*.

Anyway, back to my story: That night I prepared for the mikveh. I did everything I was supposed to do. I bathed for the requisite twenty minutes. I shaved, clipped my nails, removed my nail polish and makeup. I combed my hair and flossed and brushed my teeth. You were supposed to remove all cream, makeup, lotions, so as not to have any barrier between you and the holy water. The mikveh night was always the cleanest I was all month. I was definitely not a woman who could be bothered with this stuff normally.

I felt proud of myself for preparing even though Brian and I wouldn't be having sex that night. You were supposed to go to the mikveh on your first clean night and not delay the mitzvah. *Zrizim Makdimim Limitzvah*. Righteous people rushed to do mitzvot. I didn't consider myself "righteous," (whatever that meant) but I took certain mitzvot seriously and I always felt that Mikveh was a spiritual experience. It connected me to Jewish women from centuries back, to my ancestors in Europe and Africa.

I drove the fifteen-minute drive to the mikveh. I inhaled the scent of my Dove soap that I had scrubbed my body with, my nail polish remover, my green apple shampoo. I felt my smooth legs. I was squeaky clean. I drove past the "Smash Burger" that I passed every morning when dropping off my youngest daughter at preschool. The red and white lights invited me to in.

I was almost at the mikveh when my cell phone rang. It was Brian. He was excited that the kids were loving the ski trip and he gushed how Rachel was zipping down the hills.

So I said, “That sounds great. I’m actually on my way to the mikveh.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You forgot?”

“No. Well, yeah. I guess I did. . . . Maybe push it off until I get back. Enjoy the quiet while we’re gone.”

“You always tell me to go on the day I’m supposed to –“

“Look, do what you want. I gotta go. I’m sorry. The kids are making a mess.”

I heard the laughing, the squealing and screams all together, the sound of joy and pain commingled.

“You just called me.”

But he had already hung up.

I drove up to the mikveh’s parking lot. Most of the spots were filled with minivans and SUVs. The cars of choice for suburban moms dutifully schlepping their kids around with spare booster seats and oversize trunks filled with bottled water, Trader Joes canvas shopping bags, Target returns, and half-eaten cereal bars ground into sawdust on the carpeted mats.

I stayed in my car and listened to the end of an old Howard Jones song, *Things Can Only Get Better*. I watched the women who were scrubbed clean from their mikveh preparation (I could almost smell their soap) get back into their vans. Their noses were shiny and red, their skin—with blemishes and spots and veins and blood vessels and pores—was exposed for all to see. They were virtuous, pure, and

proud. But nothing was attractive about them. I wanted them to cover up their rawness. Something about the way they look disgusted me and saddened me and made me want to scream.

Some of the Orthodox women returning to their cars wore hats for modesty reasons, so men would know they were married (and taken). But there were no men at the mikveh. It was supposed to be dark outside when one went to the mikveh anyway – again, to be modest so no one should see you and know you were about to go home and have sex with your husband. All this modesty for women in Judaism! Wasn't it overdone? As if all us married middle-aged women were irresistible with our stretch marks and cellulite and double chins and spare tires from multiple pregnancies, and sagging breasts and gray roots and shadows under our eyes from exhaustion and concern. All of us had vertical wrinkles between our brows that made us appear perplexed. That seemed to say, "How the hell did this happen? How did I get to be like this?"

Oh, the men of Westchester would have to knock each other down fighting over this bunch!

At the mikveh I took a quick shower as required (again with the cleanliness!! The Rabbis must have all had OCD in those days. I had just bathed! Could I really have gotten so dirty in the car ride?). I walked into the mikveh room with the robe and slippers they gave out. I stripped before the mikveh lady. I held out my hands for her to inspect to be sure my nails were cut and unpolished. She motioned for me to turn around, and she inspected my back for stray hairs that may

have fallen from my head. I heard myself breathing; the room was getting hot. I cringed.

“I’m good, thanks. I prepped.”

But she kept at it like she hadn’t heard me and searched my back as she held my hair up.

“This is making me uncomfortable.”

She said it was for my own good. I began to walk away from her, into the mikveh water, as she pulled at my hair for any loose strands. My neck tensed and I clenched my hands.

“I’m good,” I said without looking at her.

“But you have knots.” She continued to yank at my hair.

I turned towards her and saw how her eyes were fixed on my shoulders. She was determined to get to the bottom of this. To fix it all. To fix me. Every last piece of fucking hair. I wanted to pull at the pasty loose skin that hung from her chin. I wanted to yank it and kick her to the floor.

“You know, you can use cream conditioner. That is allowed.”

I wanted to run away with my robe and slippers on, out the door and scream to G-d: Is this what you really want? What you need me to do? To feel like a tainted, dirty piece of meat? Is this what you really think of women? What the fuck? I felt like screaming and shouting to the heavens. And if I don’t do this, you’ll threaten me that my kids won’t be healthy?! How evil and manipulative you are!

No, I knew this was surely not what G-d had in mind – this modern-day mikveh.

When Brian and I were in Florida about six months ago, I had to go to the mikveh and none was nearby. So we went skinny dipping in the ocean with the moonlight to guide my steps. I dunked three times and I lay on my back floating in the water, watching the stars for a few minutes. I thought how beautiful the world was, how close I was to nature, to G-d, the ocean, the moon, my People. I came out of the water to Brian greeting me with a towel, to his embrace. There, I felt whole – not pure – but peaceful and serene. Without a word, we walked inside to the apartment we had rented and fucked on the cold tile floor.

That was what G-d must have intended. Not this shit-hole place with the witch fondling me. But I was there at this shit-hole and I had done all that preparation, so I clenched my teeth until she stopped. I quickly dunked three times and left.

I drove to Smash Burger. I didn't tell myself I was going to do this. It wasn't really a decision; it was more of a reflex. I walked in and saw a sign that aptly read "Live Life to the Fullest Burger." *That* I took as a message from above.

The menu had so many options, but I wanted a simple cheeseburger. I looked around and wondered if anyone saw me walk in. But the thought was really more of a curiosity than a concern. I ordered a cheeseburger a little too loudly. I was determined not to whisper.

"You mean a Classic Smash?"

"What?"

"That's our cheeseburger."

“Oh. Sure. Yeah.” This was clearly my first time. I was a *treif* virgin.

And that was it. It came out a minute later. All too easy. I sat down and looked at the creamy, butter like texture of the yellow/orange cheese drape itself over the sizzling burger, the burger’s bronze juices caressing the cheese’s embrace, intermingling to form an inevitable, most natural connection.

The burger also had a pickle, lettuce, tomato, and onion that were really beside the point. I took them right out and tossed them aside. I looked at the cheeseburger and knew that doing this would probably bring me to a place where I would never be the same, where I would never feel honest or true about my once-comfortable shelter.

But the desire to have this forbidden combination inside me trumped all else. Taking something so “wrong” and putting it inside me felt necessary to my survival.

So I ate it.

It was okay. It was globby, mushy, a little gummy and rubbery and pasty. It tasted like a regular burger with some mayo thrown on top – nothing spectacular. I didn’t even fully taste it. I was gobbling it down so fast to get it over with before I could change my mind. I didn’t want to back down. To go back to being afraid. I forced myself to finish it even though I wasn’t hungry. I was sure I would choke on it.

I drove home and was sure I would get into a fatal car accident—God’s immediate punishment for my sin. I drove painfully slow, never reaching the speed

limit, and I looked around ready for a deer or a drunk driver God would throw at me. I wanted to be sure I didn't kill an innocent bystander, some kid wearing all black. That guilt would haunt me forever. God would be sure I felt guilt about *something*. If the guilt weren't over the cheeseburger, it would be over something else even worse. God would see to that. That's what I learned in school. God was everywhere. He was always watching. And he recorded your every act, the good and the bad, and on Yom Kippur he weighed it all and decided whether to grant you a good year filled with health and happiness, or . . . early death, suffering, burning, drowning, starvation, humiliation, illness.

I managed to get home safely and when I walked through the door, I didn't slip on any toys or shoes and crack my skull open. No burglar waited in the house ready to attack me.

I lay in bed with my laptop and tried to work. But I couldn't concentrate. I checked my Facebook page and wasted thirty minutes. I was about to log off when I noticed a picture an old high school friend posted of a group having dinner to celebrate her birthday. It was one of those photos where everyone looked tan and confident and relaxed and happy. I looked more closely and noticed that one person tagged in the photo was Alan Stein, my high school boyfriend from junior year. My first love.

I hadn't thought about him in a long time. He looked good, which for a forty-something-year-old usually meant that he still had hair and hadn't grown too fat. But he looked good for *any* age: tall, strong shoulders, with olive skin, thick, curly

black hair and green eyes. Without thinking about it, I friended him and sent a message that it had been too long. He looked great. How was he? We should get together for coffee and catch up.

I had never before tried to reconnect with any other old boyfriends on Facebook. It seemed so pathetic. But now that I broke one cardinal rule, it made the other rules seem flimsier. I had eaten a cheeseburger and wasn't struck by lightning. I was still breathing. What else could I do? I felt deliriously excited about my actions. I crossed that line, that boundary I had feared would electrocute me, blow me up. And it didn't. I was free. But just for a few minutes.

I got ready for bed. I changed into an oversize T-shirt and a pair of Brian's boxer shorts. I turned off my cell phone and locked the front door. I brushed my teeth and felt the cheeseburger residue wash away. But, it occurred to me, it didn't matter. The *treif* was already inside me. Like I had wanted. I looked into the mirror and saw my bare face – scrubbed clean only a few hours ago, with no makeup or cream. I was still so clean on the *outside*; I didn't have to bother washing my face. But, I thought, the mikveh lady never pronounced me “kosher.” This time the preparation was just that -- preparation that didn't culminate in any pronouncement. I was now the opposite of pure and good and kosher. My stomach was digesting this cheeseburger. In my stomach was a baby goat in its mother's milk. I suddenly felt hot; my stomach churned, and it was hard to breath. I wanted to

throw it all up. What had I done? I wanted to go back to before I crossed that line that I always danced in front of.

After laying in bed for an hour staring at the red numbers on the clock, I fell into an uneasy sleep and woke up to the doorbell ringing. There was that split second when I was unsure where I was, what day it was. Though I felt a sense of panic, I hoped that maybe last night was just a dream. But reality quickly set in and my stomach dropped. Brian and the kids were coming home early in the morning. I had overslept.

I slowly walked to the door and took a deep breath. I wanted to let them in. I did. But I was afraid that when I opened the door they wouldn't recognize me.

"Who is it?"

"UPS delivery. Open up!"

"It's us, Mommy!" my little one squealed.

The girls were giggling. I could almost hear their breathing; I could feel their excitement on the other side of the door. I froze for a second. My hand hung in the air inches from the door knob.

"Come on, Mommy! It's cold."