

COLBY LYSNE/ALAMY

The Lady Rancher and the Grad Student

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Editor's note: *In 1943, the Israeli writer—and eventual Nobel laureate—S.Y. Agnon published one of his best-known short stories, "The Lady and the Peddler," a tale of a petty Jewish merchant who finds himself ensnared with a beautiful, wealthy, and menacing non-Jewish woman. The story has since become a modern classic, appealing to generations of readers and writers. It appealed to Dorit Rabinyan as well: One of Israel's most celebrated contemporary writers, she was inspired by Agnon to imagine what a similar relationship might look like in modern-day America, a place where sex and gender and power and religion are as rife for re-examination as ever. Agnon's Lady and the Peddler come to life in Dorit Rabinyan's modern tale, however she offers a new ending, wholly her own—an ending offering a luminous shift in perspective that urges the reader to rethink the topics unveiled in Agnon's classic.*

When Joe's mother called to tell him he was named in the will of some distant uncle of hers from Israel, who recently passed away, Joe felt flooded with warm nostalgia for a man he hadn't seen since his own Bar Mitzvah, a man he could remember, only somewhat vaguely, as carrying him on his shoulders as everyone danced in that synagogue in New Jersey twenty years ago. The warm flood cooled down and washed away when his mother said some lawyer from Jerusalem called and that the inheritance he was about to receive consisted of a few albums of stamps and a handful of antique coins. The package that arrived in the mail two weeks later also included a bundle of rather embarrassing ties, a Swiss Army knife, and a Bowie knife in a worn-out leather sheath. With little passion or enthusiasm, he photographed each item and put them up for sale on eBay.

The following morning, he was treated to a surprise: a message from a woman who informed him she would like to purchase all of the items he had advertised. All of them? Yes, replied the female avatar calling herself *Helen72*, and he googled her ZIP code—somewhere north of Greensboro, North Carolina—and realized that she lived a mere three hours away. When he toggled back to their chat, he saw that *Helen72* had just sent $3,200 to his account. He let out a big breath and felt so energized that he immediately offered to drive down and deliver the package himself.

Around noon, his Hyundai heads south on US 29. The Appalachians rise like a painting far away on the right, above him the wide sky with its herds of silvery clouds, and the entire road dotted with groves. It's the middle of December, and the semester had finally ended on Monday, and two weeks earlier, when he spoke to his mother, he let her know that he had many commitments to take care of at school (it was true, he did, he put it all off to winter break) and that he won't be coming home for Hannukah. He drives past small churches and deserted cemeteries, by gas stations and railroads, under bridges. And then he gets off the highway, heading towards Greensboro, taking this turn and then the other. He follows his GPS instructions, drives on and on through the woods, drives on as the asphalt winds down into a dirt road. It's an isolated ranch, "PRIVATE PROPERTY" the sign says, and the car is greeted by the howls of two chained Rottweilers. A horse is dozing off in the stable, chickens and geese wander about. Joe parks in front of the house, right by an old Toyota pick-up truck caked with mud.

As he climbs up the stairs, the door opens and onto the front porch steps a tall and fit blonde in her early fifties.

He feels the need to bow down slightly and greet her. "Helen?"

She took one look at the Hyundai and his box. "Thanks. Put it over there," she said, pointing at a small table on the porch. He put the box on the table and started showing her the stamps and the coins.

She took a quick look. "It's nice," she said, in that soft Appalachian drawl, "very nice."

A big, earthy woman, almost as tall as him, her eyes blue. When she leaned down to look in the box he snuck a peek at the cross dangling down her neck, and for a second there caught

a glimpse of her large breasts and of the braid coiled on her shoulder. She was wearing a gray overall, a blue apron, and black rubber boots, like someone you would find if you Googled “voluptuous farmer”.

Joe tried hopelessly to impress her. “It was left to me by a distant uncle,” he said, snickering. He wanted to add “who lived in Israel” but found himself instead, a touch ashamed, saying “who lived in Europe.” He expected her to invite him in, to offer him something to drink, but she kept rummaging around in the box. He looked around, wondering, did she have a man? Kids? The house was silent. She nodded her head knowingly, thanked him, and closed the door behind her.

The sun disappeared slowly. The highway disappeared as well. The GPS was in a tailspin, constantly recalculating the route. He drove for an hour and then an hour more, in and out of wooded paths that unfolded like a maze, up and down the same backroads he’d driven down before. It was dark now. He looked around and began to feel afraid, but he drove on because he thought he saw some lights and he drove in their general direction, only to discover, to his astonishment, that he was right back at the same exact ranch. Even though it was late, he knocked on her door.

“You again?” she said, angrily this time, looking as if she had just woken up. “What do you want?”

He apologized profusely. “I’m sorry ma’am. Ever since I left here I’ve been lost in the woods and can’t find the highway,” he said, barely audible above the thunder that had begun to roll. “and I’ve got no cell reception.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“Please, ma’am, just let me stay on your property for a few hours. I’ll sleep in the car and leave at dawn.”

She looked at him blankly and shut the door, saying nothing. Joe got back in his car, put his head on the wheel, and dozed off. It rained furiously during the night, and when he got out of his car in the morning, the ground around him was one big swamp. He saw the lights on in the house, and he smelled the smoke coming out of the chimney. He was hungry and thirsty, but he knew the lady of the house was tough. Better, he thought to himself, to risk it and not ask her for any more favors. He got back in the car and got ready to drive away.

The lady come out suddenly, calling to him. “I think my roof is busted,” she said, “could you take a look?”

There’s no ranch hand around? He thought, no stable boy? No other living soul? But he said sure, why not, and he skipped to avoid the puddles, climbing a ladder she had given him up to the roof. The wind, he saw, had shaken some of the roof tiles loose, and he meticulously put them back in place, not much minding that he was dripping wet and his sneakers

pooled with water like two buckets. Maybe, he said to himself, she'll repay me for my help by letting me wait out the storm.

He climbed down. "Good as new." he said, "Your roof won't leak anymore."

"You've got good hands. Say how much and I'll pay you."

He placed his hand on his heart. "Heaven forbid I'll take a single penny."

She gave him a long drawn out look. "Come in," she finally said. "I'll make you some breakfast."

The house is cozy and warm. A mighty fire is burning in the fireplace, and the scent of wood blends in with the smell of coffee emanating from the kitchen. In the bathroom, Joe squeezes the water out of his clothes and empties his sodden shoes, emerging into the corridor wearing the sweatshirt and joggers the landlady placed wordlessly on the toilet lid, and now he's in the living room again, wearing woolen socks and leather slippers that may belong to the man who may be her husband and may have traveled away on business. He walks around examining the crucifixes and the little statues of Jesus, as well as the trophy animal heads mounted on the walls, the horns of rams and bucks, and he examines, too, the three decorative hunting rifles mounted on the wall as well, and he thinks about the knife she had bought from him. Maybe her husband is a hunter and the knife is a gift for him, and here she is again, inviting him to step into the kitchen, where he is welcomed by six shining eyes of eggs over medium, with crispy bacon and biscuits.

"I sure hope you're not vegetarian, or vegan, or whatever you call it these days," she says with a note of judgement.

"You mean Jewish?" he says with an awkward chuckle.

She was even prettier in the morning's bright light. Her white skin radiant, her lips red and juicy, and as she spoke the small wrinkles around her eyes quivered, moving up and down with her pronounced arched eyebrows.

"Jewish?" she said, surprised and blushing.

"Nah, it's alright," he said, eager not to make her think he'll turn down non-Kosher food. "I don't believe in God, so it's all good."

Joe sat down, ate and drank. And after he ate and drank he looked outside, and he looked at the lady, wondering when she'd order him to leave. "Is there anything else you'd like me to fix?" he asked. "Maybe something computer-related? Sitting before you is a PhD student in neuroscience, at your service."

She surveyed the room with a scattered sort of look, and said, "Go, find something yourself." And Joe was glad that she let him stay until the rain stopped. In her study she had

an old desktop computer, plugged into an antiquated router, and as he waited for all of the software updates to download, he fiddled with the toolbox, fixing this thing or that. It was getting dark outside, and the lady was in the kitchen, cooking. At some point, she appeared at the door of the study, came in and changed the sheets on the single bed in the corner of the room, and Joe thanked her for her generosity. Over dinner, misty-eyed and wiping off a glob of steak fat from his lips with his napkin, he swore he would never forget her.

Outside, the rain intensified. He sipped more of the wine, and felt himself toasting by the fire's pleasant heat. Helen sat on the couch opposite him, coiled up, her eyes dull with boredom. He could smell the steam rising from her freshly shampooed hair, and he could smell, too, the tree sap and the smoke and the fleshy scent of the bucks and rams mounted on the walls.

"Did you fall asleep?"

"Huh?" he shook himself into alertness, putting down the wine. "Oh, sorry, I'm with you. I'm with you."

Having been silent so far, she suddenly started talking. She talked about the rain that wouldn't stop pouring and the winds the wouldn't stop howling, about the roads going bad and powerlines failing. "And the internet? Sometimes it takes days until they get around to fixing it."

Joe listened to her melodious voice and felt grateful, because every time she spoke of something new it meant he could stay there, in her home, for a while longer.

And she, too, was pleased, pleased that there was another living soul right by her side. She grabbed her knitting needles, but not before she poured him more wine, and he drew nearer and sat on the carpet by her feet and told her of his family in New Jersey and of his studies at Princeton, of the job he was offered at the University of Virginia that took him to Charlottesville, and of the doctoral dissertation he'd been writing for four years already.

He said, "You live here all by yourself? No husband or kids?"

"I used to have a husband."

Joe sighed. "Died?"

"Was killed."

He sighed again. "How?"

"What is it that you'd like to know?" she said, losing her cool and scaring him. "What the cops don't already know? What business is it of yours, anyway? What do you care if he was devoured by some wild animal or slaughtered with a knife? You know, this knife you sold

me," the fire in the fireplace sparkled in her deep blue eyes, "you could really butcher someone with it."

He bit his lip and said he was sorry. Sorry for having asked, and sorry that his question reminded her of her sorrows. Then he grew silent, and she was silent, too. A few moments later he dared to say "I wish the police catch them. Your husband's killers."

"They won't," she said. "The police don't catch all killers."

He looked down. "Again, apologies. I swear, if I only knew a way to make you happy, Helen. Just say the word."

She looked at him with a strange smile. Maybe it was a contemptuous grin, or maybe it was meant to appease him, or maybe it was just a friendly smile—he couldn't tell. He felt sorry for her, she was still beautiful and still in her prime and still worthy of being courted by men, and he wondered again about that smile and about her ripe womanhood and his youth, two decades her junior. Maybe it was the wine, or maybe the radiating heat, but he started saying the sort of things women love to hear. And she didn't chastise him, or tell him to stop. On the contrary: she was perfectly pleased to hear more and more. Feeling braver, he started speaking words of love. She accepted them, showing him affection, and even after the rain stopped and the roads grew icy the two were inseparable.

For ten days Joe lingered in Helen's bed. Night after night, he satiated her with his passion and satisfied her in full. He had sex with her at dawn, as she woke up for her duties on the ranch, and in the middle of the day, in the kitchen, when she summoned him and fed him a spoonful from one of the pots and he in turn pleasured her with his tongue and squeezed her fully. And then again, at nightfall, on the rug in the darkening living room, under the frozen gaze of the bucks and the deer on the wall, their bodies intertwined and twinkling in the fireplace's light.

He was curious, and he had tried almost everything with his previous girlfriends, diligently learning what being a good lover was all about. But he had never known a woman like Helen, so powerful, so carnal, so orgasmic. She went wild on him, insatiably, and even in his sweetest dreams he could not imagine a mouth as hers, so deep and so hungry. Afterwards, he would fall into an abyss of sleep, rising late and emerging in her late husband's plaid wool robe and his leather slippers, and she would bathe him and soap him and shave him, pampering him as if he was the man of the house. Every day she would cook for him sumptuous meals, using whatever she had on hand on the ranch, taking from the pigpen and the henhouse and the cowshed, stews of rabbit and venison, hamburgers and enormous sandwiches stuffed with ham and creamy cheeses and butter. He was shocked the first time he saw her beh eading a chicken, but then he ate it, sucking on its bones, and his appetite grew.

No body was waiting for him in Charlottesville. He hadn't had a girlfriend in two years, and there was no one he missed back home. He helped Helen decorate the Christmas tree with a

string of lights, and on Christmas Eve they dressed up and attended church in Greensboro. On New Year's Eve they went out drinking at a local bar. Again and again he offered to help out on the ranch, but she teased him, saying his hands were too gentle to clean up cow manure, and she wouldn't even let him take out the trash or unload the dishwasher, asking him to let her do it herself until, eventually, he offered no more. He spent his days lazily watching TV shows, taking his time on the bathroom and reading some paperback thriller that came free with a newspaper he had lying around in his Hyundai. He hardly went for walks outside, except in Helen's company. Once or twice he got up, put on his shoes and his coat and said he was going out, and once or twice Helen swept in, wrestling him with kisses, taking off his coat until he dropped back down on the couch.

At night she grabbed him and pleaded, whispering she was afraid he'd run away and she'd wake up and discover he was but a dream.

He smiled in the dark.

"I'm happy here, Helen."

"Me, too," she said.

"I have nothing else going for me out there," he pressed himself against her breast and kissed her neck, kissing and feeling her crucifix with his lips. "I'm here. I'm with you."

It was her father's farm, and his father's before that, and her mother, too, hailed from these parts.

"Did she teach you how to cook like this?" he asked.

"Yes," Helen answered.

He asked how many siblings she had, and she said, "My sister and I."

He asked if she was the older or the younger one, and she said, "Older."

There were no framed pictures of her husband on the mantlepiece in the living room, nor pictures of kids. He didn't ask about children, but he searched her body for clues. Had she ever been pregnant? Had she ever breastfed a baby with these crimson nipples? And out of her heavenly gate, which was hairy and so wild - Had life ever emerged from it? He also refrained from asking her which party she voted for, though he could guess. And he was afraid, too, that if they talked politics, she'd parrot some nonsense she read online, or say she believed the earth was flat, which would make him think less of her. One morning, as she was baking in the kitchen, he heard her singing, and he stopped and listened. She sang, and her southern drawl pealed, and he knew she was keeping some secret. She was a simple, practical, lonely and quiet woman, but she was not naïve.

One thing made him wonder—all these days, he never once saw her eat. At first she told him she was watching her weight, only sipping on the wine, but once, as he was sitting in his boxer shorts at the dinner table, he said, “What’s this, Helen, ever since I arrived you work so hard serving me food and watching me devour it.” He saw her blushing and he felt his heart fluttering, thinking for the first time that maybe she ate when she was alone, away from his gaze. “Come on, come here. You don’t need any diet.” He hugged her hips with both arms, and buried his face in her soft belly. “Come on. Eat with me. Please.”

Helen loomed over him, smiling. “You really want to know what I eat?” she said, her fingers playing with his chest hair, combing it back and forth, “and what I drink?”

He gripped her divinely curved hips tighter and shook. “Yes.”

“I drink human blood! And I eat human flesh!” She was hovering above him and bellowing wildly, like an animal, as she laughed heartily and squeezed him with all her might before leaning over, pressing her lips to his, and saying, “You know, Joe? I wouldn’t have guessed that Jewish flesh would be so sweet…”

It was a bit creepy, but he laughed with her. She grabbed him by his hair, bent his head backwards. “Kiss me, Joe. Kiss me, my big raven, yours are the sweetest kisses in the world.”

She was beautiful and lively, and he sat her on his knees, kissing her and thinking, she’s falling in love, yeah, look at her, all amorous. And she, too, kissed him and said, “Remember the day you came here? When I saw you standing outside?”

He caressed her face and stroked her hair. “Yes.”

“I wanted to sic the dog on you, I swear,” she laughed. “Seriously. I wanted to sic her on you. And look at me now, biting and sucking and gnawing on you like a bitch in heat.”

He knew this chatty and self-content mood of hers, when she was satisfied and snuggled up to him. “I’m really getting worried about you, Joe.”

He smiled. “Worried about me? Why?”

“I worry that maybe… that maybe I won’t let you out of here alive.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes, my big, beautiful raven. Yes…”

But he remained bothered. She refused so much as a taste of anything she cooked for him. Again he asked her, and she said, taunting him, “Didn’t they tell you about the place God made for people who ask too many questions?”

He thought for a moment. “What place?”

“Hell,” she replied. “Be happy, my sweet Jew, that you’re eating and drinking and making love, and don’t ask questions that can’t be answered.”

Maybe she was right. What business was it of his how and when she chose to eat? She’s healthy and her face is pretty and her cheeks rosy. He decided to respect her privacy and resolved to stay silent. For ten days, he lingered in her home and enjoyed her handiwork and made her body produce moans and shouts. He didn’t bother her too much with questions. He just ramped up the loving, and he knew in his heart that he had fallen for her on day one. He just didn’t know if it was Helen he was in love with or this riddle without an answer.

The trouble started one white morning. He sat down on the bed in the study and turned on his iPhone. He scrolled quickly past all the happy new year wishes, and skimmed the messages of friends who texted or called to look for him, and replied briefly to the string of question marks sent by his concerned mother and sister, and then, in the family group chat, responded to the picture of his nephews by the Menorah’s light with a stream of heart emojis. Helen kept her phone buried somewhere in the kitchen, and he, too, in all his time here, barely touched his phone. He had disappeared. And now he’s reading emails from students, answering them, going over the announcements the university and the department had sent members of the faculty. He was planning to hit the road in two days’ time, on Sunday. He had lesson plans to prepare and papers to grade, everything he intended to do during the break and had put off.

“And you can visit me in Charlottesville,” he said to her as they left that bar on New Year’s Eve, walking, arm in arm, to Helen’s Toyota. He was wondering out loud when he could next visit her. “It’s only three hours away.”

She tightened her grip, and her neck stretched out from under the folds of her scarf. She blinked and pulled on her nose, pretending it was the evening chill that brought tears to her eyes. And he hugged her and kissed her on her head, which was covered by her scarf, and then lifted her chin and kissed her lips. And they knew, didn’t they, that soon he would have to go back to the university, to his life, leaving her behind.

“What are you doing?”

Now she was standing nervous at the door, her fists on her hips.

He looked up at her, sighed, and then looked back down at the screen. “Nothing. I have a million emails, and a thousand things to do when I get back home.”

He didn’t sense her leaving the room, and only when he heard the clang of the dishes being pulled out of the dishwasher did he get up and leave his phone behind. And from the moment he left the study and followed her into the kitchen, Helen started teasing him and taunting him. All day long she pestered him, annoying and taunting him like a little girl,

picking fights and making up, making up and picking fights, until the evening came and he was listless and burst out, “I’m warning you, Helen. For the last time.”

And so it was the next day—chasing him and pinching him, mocking him and mimicking him, or jumping him and shutting him up with wild, hard kisses, and bringing him into her. He wondered, we’re so close, so intimate, intermingled. We haven’t left each other’s side for two weeks now. “And still, I know almost nothing about you,” he told her as they lay, silent and half-naked, on the floor, and then he turned to face her profile as she stared up at the ceiling, and said, “How come you have no kids, Helen? Or maybe you have a boy or a girl somewhere and you didn’t tell me about them?”

Helen remained silent, and then she got up, her hair disheveled, pulled up her panties and got dressed. He heard her stepping out to the porch, and fell back into pondering until he resolved: I will not leave her be until I discover her secret. At night, he tried again. “You remember, babe, back when we first got together? When I asked you about your husband?”

“Which one were you asking about?” she said.

“Hold on,” he paused and said, “you had two husbands?”

She said, “What do you care how many I had?”

“But you only mentioned the one who was killed…”

“Or if I slept with two or three guys?”

He laughed a strange laugh. “Three? So I’m, I’m… your fourth?”

She laughed, too, and teased him, “Would you like to marry me, Joe? Is that what you’re asking?”

“Helen, what were you talking about?”

She said, “Wait for me to count them all.” She spread the fingers on her right hand and started counting them: one, two, three, four, five. When she was done with her right hand, she stretched the left one and kep t counting.

Astonished, he said, “And where are they all?”

She said, “Didn’t I tell you that he who asks too many questions finds himself deeper and deeper in hell?”

He thought he was about to throw up.

She tapped her belly. “A few of them may be in here.”

“What do you mean, in here?” he whispered, confused.

She screwed her eyes at him and smiled. She looked at him for a few long moments, pointed at him, and laughed. “O, Mary, mother of God! Go look at yourself in the mirror. Your mouth is wide open, like some dead animal.”

From the moment she started counting on her fingers, two and three and four and five, he felt his brain exploding and all connection to reality lost, and that everything he had asked from that moment on he had asked without making any sense of any of it. Now he felt as if he’d lost his power of speech, too. He sat there, silent.

“Tell me, honey,” she said, “and tell me the truth now. Do you believe in God?”

Joe sighed. “I don’t know any more.” he said.

She said, “Oh, my black raven, you’re a Jew, right?”

He sighed again. “Yes. I’m Jewish.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Jews don’t believe in God like we do, because if they did, they wouldn’t have killed him. But you, Joe, if deep down inside you believe in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you better start praying to him. Or else you’ll end up just like them.”

“End up like who?”

“Like the ones you were asking about.”

“Your husbands?”

“My husbands.”

“How did they end up?”

She crossed her arms on her breasts. “If you don’t understand, there’s nothing more I can say to you.”

And as she spoke she looked at his neck, and her blue eyes gleamed like the blade of a sharpened knife. He looked at her, shocked. She looked at him, too. “How come you’re all pale?”

He felt his face. “Pale?”

She said, “Your hairs are all standing up! Like the hair of a pig!”

He felt his head. “My hair?”

She spat suddenly in his face. “Feh! Ugly! A cowardly face is ugly.” She brought her face very close to him, and said, “Watch your neck.”

He nodded his head, fearful. “Helen, honey…”

“O Mary, mother of God, look at that chin quivering as if he’d just seen a knife. Calm down now, sweetie. Calm down.”

Joe remained sitting. He felt his face and then his head, frozen as if buried underneath an iceberg. In these moments he neither loved nor hated her. His limbs were motionless, as if he could no longer control them. On the other hand, his thoughts were growing clearer. He said to himself, I’ll get up on my feet, I’ll walk over to the room, I’ll grab the car keys, and I’ll drive away. And since he was contemplating an escape, his limbs felt even looser, sloppier. Again, he could hear Helen’s footsteps. He could also hear dishes knocking about in the kitchen, and he could smell something delectable cooking. He got back to daydreaming. I have to leave, he thought, if not now, then first thing tomorrow morning.

How happy he’d been, on that first, rainy night, when she asked him to stay and spend the night in the study, and now even the narrow bed was screaming pick up your pace and run away! And Jesus, from his crucifix on the wall, was screaming, too: Go, brother! Go, run! He is clutching the keys in his hand, and pocketing his iPhone and his wallet in his jeans, and he’s looking out the window and seeing that it’s getting dark outside. For a long while, he sits on the bed, holding his head tight. He agrees, reluctantly, to spend one more night, but not in Helen’s room, not in the bed she had shared with her dead husbands, but here, in the study, until morning comes and he can hit the road. He pats his pockets once again, and then takes off his jeans, rolls them up, and stuffs them underneath his pillow.

Helen walked in. “Why are you shaking like this?” she said. “We haven’t even started yet.”

She took him by the arm and led him to the dining room and sat him down at the table and said, “Now eat.”

He looked up at her.

“Eat,” she said again.

He took a slice of bread and shoved it in his mouth.

Helen said, “I see I need to chew your bread for you.”

He spat out the slice, shook it off his hand, and was getting ready to get up and leave.

“Wait,” Helen said. “I’ll come with you.”

She came over and took his arm and led him to their bed. In the middle of the night Joe woke up terrified and screaming. In his dream someone stabbed him in the heart, stabbed

him with a crucifix-shaped knife, and even though he was now up and even though he realized it was just a dream, his heart was pounding. He tossed his head this way and that on the pillow and sighed. Once again he was seized by sleep and dozed off. He heard a rattle and he opened his eyes, horrified, knowing that the rattle was the dogs' chain. He closed his eyes and sighed again, feeling sorry for himself. A huge beast pounced. It bit his neck. He was bleeding. The beast was licking his blood. Joe shouted loudly and thrashed his head.

Helen woke up screaming. "What's all this noise? Why won't you let me sleep?"

He curled up and fell asleep, his face buried in his pillow, and remained motionless until early afternoon.

Joe sat down for lunch. On the table Helen had placed a steaming pot of meatballs in red sauce. When she leaned over to kiss him her breath smelled awful. He couldn't help but making a face. Helen sensed it, and said, "Why did you make a face?"

"I didn't," he said.

She smiled a strange smile. "Maybe you could smell my stench?"

He said, "Come grab a slice."

She said, "You, Jew, don't you worry about me. I won't starve to death." And again her face was fixed with a smile, stranger and harder than before.

After he ate and drank, he went into the study and shut the door. He'll call the police, he'll give them the ZIP code or just send them his location on WhatsApp and within the hour the house will be surrounded with cops and cars—but underneath the pillow, rummaging through his pockets, he finds only the keys and the wallet. His iPhone had disappeared. He looks up at the desk, and sees that the router is gone, too.

He lies down on the bed, bending over himself. And suddenly he thinks he ought to pray. Above him on the wall was Jesus on his cross, and he closed his eyes and whispered the only prayer he could remember from all his years in Hebrew school: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Amen." And the prayer made him feel stronger and resourceful and he knew that he will leave tonight, because tomorrow is Monday and he's due back at work, he'll split in the middle of the night, when she's sleeping. He planned to wait for Helen to slumber deeply, and then get up as if to go to the bathroom and not come back, and the plan made him feel anxious and aware and short of breath, because he knew all about the handgun she kept in the drawer of her nightstand, and he knew, too, about the three black long-muzzled guns hanging on the wall, and who knows how many more weapons she kept around, and he thought, too, of the Bowie knife she had bought from him, where was it now?

He got up and put on his coat and stepped out onto the porch and took in the cold air. Even without looking back at the kitchen window, he knew Helen was standing there, watching.

He saw his Hyundai parked out front, covered in snow, its wheels buried deep in the snow, and he felt like crying. The ranch was all white, and the sky murky and crusty. Joe looked up and could see not a glimmer of hope, looked down and saw his shoes wading through the snow. He felt as if he was trapped in a snow forest that kept on getting covered with fresh snow. And he himself was being covered in snow. He unrooted his legs and started running. He ran in the snow, ran on away from the house, ran to the end of the dirt road, and fell to his knees.

“God in heaven,” his heart hollered. “Where am I? How far adrift did I get?”

The crying and the shouting calmed him down a bit. He sat on a rock, and the only sound around was the muffled thud of the snow gently falling on the snowy ground. And in all that quiet a sound reverberated, the sound of his legs sinking in the snow, too tired to extricate themselves. His shoulders felt very heavy, and when he returned to the house he sat on the stairs and cried some more.

At night, for a long time, he lay on his side, awake and alert, listening to Helen breathing heavily in her sleep. He got up and went to the bathroom. When he returned, he saw that their bed was empty.

He walked around cautiously, calling “Helen?”

The house was steeped in darkness. He turned the light on in the hall, walked over to the living room, and turned on all of the lights there, too.

“Helen? Where are you?”

His teeth ground together with sheer hatred, hatred for her. Afraid, he shut his eyes and walked into the study. For a moment he imagined that she was right there, in the room with him, but when he turned on the light she wasn’t there. Suddenly, he heard her coming from behind, heard her roar, rushing towards him, and his blood froze in his veins. With bared teeth she attacked him from behind, holding the knife, and he grabbed her arms, and she hissed and contorted her face and kept stabbing the air again and ag ain as if puncturing holes in the atmosphere. As if he was still dreaming that dream about her stab bing him in his heart and then slitting his throat, he wrestled with her and threw her against the wall, and he was so gripped by some satanic force during those terrible moments that he, too, roared and whimpered when he realized that Helen, hitting the wall, plunged the knife into her own stomach and was now bleeding.

He looked at Helen and saw her wounded, still holding on to the knife. He took the knife out of her hand and lifted her off the floor, lying her down on the narrow bed. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

He leaned down. “What?”

She kept looking at him, opening her mouth just a little bit. “Are you trying to say something?” Joe asked.

But she said nothing.

Suddenly, she sat up straight, like a bolt, and sunk her teeth in his neck and started biting and sucking. When she was done, she pushed up away and yelled, “Ugh! Disgusting.”

He rolled around on the floor.

“You’re so cold! It’s not blood you’ve got there, it’s ice water!”

Joe stayed with Helen. He found her phone, called 911, and, later, looked on until she, stretched out on a gurney, disappeared into the ambulance. His clothes were stained with her blood, his shirt collar ripped, and the cops had already handcuffed his hands behind his back. At the Greensboro police station, they ushered him into an interrogation room, and that’s where he woke up just before dawn, his head slumped on the table, when someone brought him some coffee and a sandwich.

“Yup,” said an officer who had taken the seat across from him, “she’ll be alright. She’s under psychiatric care right now.”

“Sir,” said Joe, “she hurt herself, you know. I had already told them. She came up from behind me and attacked me with the knife.”

The officer kept looking at the stack of forms in front of him, dangling a pen between his fingers. Then, he looked up, and gave Joe a long, heavy look.

“Tell me, son: you Jewish?”

Joe’s mouth was torn open and bent, as if he was trying to figure out whether he should laugh or cry. For a moment, he thought about protesting, raging at the audacity of the question. But he was spent, his nerves were shot, so he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Yes, sir. Jewish.”

The officer nodded. “Jewish.”

Joe sighed again, feeling resigned. “Yes, I’m Jewish. Yes.”

The officer asked Joe if he wanted to know what Helen told him when he questioned her. “Because a story like that, I had never heard in my life,” he muttered underneath his silvery mustache, and his eyes bulged a little. “and I’m an old dog, as they say.”

Helen, he said, told him that each year, at Christmas, she lured Jewish men over to her farm, had sex with them, cooked for them, fattened them, and then ate them. Yes, she said, she

remembered four such cases, maybe five or six, though she got the names of the victims and the years all mixed up and couldn't remember who was first and who last. She said she cooked them and then drank their blood, and that she was going to do the same to Joe, that she had come to slaughter him the other night but injured herself instead.

As the officer shared these horrors, Joe just sighed, repeatedly, and when the officer was done and grew silent, Joe sighed again, this time with relief.

"Ever heard anything more strange?" the officer asked quietly. "It's the strangest thing I've ever heard."

"Only Jews?" asked Joe.

Of all the grizzly descriptions he had just heard, that was the one thing that broke through his puzzlement, that stuck with him and rang somehow true and familiar, bringing some order to the chaos.

"And only on Christmastime?"

He suddenly remembered himself pacing up and down the hall in Helen's home, pacing and pacing, as they waited for the ambulance. He remembered her wailing, "Where are you, my raven? Beautiful raven, black raven." She was screaming inside the room, and he was out in the hall, crying with her. "Where did you go?!?"

"But why?" Joe asked the officer. "Why would she tell you all of this? Like, out of her own free will?"

The officer threw his hands in the air. "It turns out," he said, "that human flesh isn't easily digestible." Traces of it can be detected in the digestive tracts of cannibals even years later. The psychiatrist at the hospital told Helen all that, and he told her, too, that her bloodwork showed no such traces whatsoever. When Helen heard that, she started screaming, going wild and thrashing at the doctors until she was restrained and tranquilized.

"Anyway," said the officer, "you're free to go."

He pointed to the forms and handed Joe the pen, and Joe, feeling as if he was in a dream, signed.

"So she… she didn't eat them?"

The officer chuckled, showing, for the first time, his teeth. "No! Are you kidding?"

Joe wanted to say that alright, she's absolutely nuts, and she didn't really eat the poor saps who had come before him, whether there were four of them or five, but maybe she did kill them, maybe just two, maybe just one Jew, and, after all, she had begged to be arrested for murder. They ought to start an investigation. They ought to look at missing persons' files.

But maybe because he felt sorry for Helen for being so lost, or maybe because he felt sorry for himself and wanted nothing more than to get back to his place in Charlottesville and fall face-down on his bed, he didn't say a thing.

"Come on, buddy," the officer was standing at the door, pointing the way out. "Broken hearts ain't police business."

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Translated from the Hebrew by Liel Leibovitz

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