

Gabriella

by Elizabeth Loeb, '00

Gabriella.

Sometimes I still say your name, just to hold it in my mouth, to twirl it past the curves of vowels and into the trill of the l, the lilt of the final a.

Gabriella, I still see your sharp, strange face, in street crowds and in airports, the flutter of your long hands tracing my belly button.

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I can't remember Gabriella's last name, something quite Russian and excitingly foreign to the five year old self of mine who last saw her. I don't know which part of Russia she lived in before coming here as part of a refugee plan for Soviet Jews, never even thought to ask. In 1983, I only knew that Russians were communists, and communists were bad, which was why Gabriella (stop, wait, say the name again, slowly). Gabriieeellaaa ran away.

I am four years old and have to read one whole book with chapters before starting kindergarten next week at Ezra Academy, a Jewish day school in Woodbridge, Connecticut which requires all students to read and write both Hebrew and English at a basic level upon entrance. When we met the principal over the summer, he said that I would be the youngest pupil by more than a year.

For my book, I pick Meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from a shiny shelf at Stop n' Shop while dangling over the front of the child seat in my mother's shopping cart, already too round to fit in comfortably. That night, I curl into my pink flannel princess nightgown to read in my mother's big maroon rocking chair.

"Mommy, were the Jim Crow people commu...commm...communin,...cc...communists?"

"Communists?"

She smiles, and I watch for the crinkles at her eyes to tell me if she noticed my tangled pronunciation.

"Are the people who hated Dr. King the same people who hate Gabriella?"

"Who?"

My mother drawls over the who, dangling the word like the glass in her hand, one sip left of pale rose colored wine so perfect I want to place it like dew on my tongue

"Wine is only for mommies"

"If I'm not allowed to drink more than one glass of ginger ale why can you drink five glasses of wine?"

"Because it's different for grownups, our stomachs are bigger"

"Big enough for the whole bottle?"

"Don't be silly. Who were you asking me about before?"

"Remember! The girl who is going to be in my class who you said Rabbi Scolnik helped rescue from the cc...commmoo...ccc... commuuno... communists. I saw her in the second row at Shabbat services in a fur hat. Mommy! You're not listening!"

Two foot stamps, the kind that bend at the knee to come down hard and quick, printing staccato echoes on the polished wood floor.

"God! Must you always make so much noise! What's your father doing?"

"Something with the new computer."

And then she is gone, up the stairs. I take my cue, familiar, and run into my well lit room. I am afraid of the dark so instead of sleeping I read to keep my eyes open as long as I can, sure that if I close them something terribly bad will happen. Some nights I creep to my little sister Jaemi's room and watch her asleep in her crib, thinking that if someone so small with curls so soft and yellow can close her eyes each night, maybe this night I will try closing mine too.

Soon the yelling begins, Daddy's voice deep and short, Mommy full with loud screeches. I try to peek through my door, to find out if the thumps are thrown books or if Mommy's hitting Daddy again. I'm not allowed to hit. Mommy says to use big words instead, so I read the dictionary, copying lists of words to give Mommy in the morning so she won't hit either.

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That night I dream of winter, of the crisp edges of sound grown large in the stillness of cold on an oatmeal morning just

past daybreak. I dream that Gabriella hides under my bed, and when the bad people come we knock three times on my closet wall to find Narnia. I dream she is the winter queen, offering Turkish delight from a matrushka doll, bright and terrible and lovely. I dream we are tangled, long limbs in flannel sheets, pressed tight and warm.

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Third day of kindergarten and I am wearing my new blue dress embroidered with small flowers and musical notes. I decide that my dress makes me a minuet, and I dance like a real ballerina in our driveway, waiting for my father to come out to the car. Mommy says that if I want to be a ballerina I have to quit violin, which I've played for two whole entire years. She says that I'm too chubby to be a ballerina, and that I need to stop eating sweets. In the car we only speak Hebrew, for practice. Daddy switches between the Spanish station and the classical music station, and we both make up our own words to sing along with everything. Today I break the rules and speak English, since I can't pronounce some of the Hebrew words and I can't wait long enough to try.

"Daddy, can I go to work with you today? People have so many teeth, you must need help cleaning them"

"But Elisheba, don't you want to go to school?"

"Don't call me Elisheba! I hate my Hebrew name! "

"I thought you loved it"

"I love teeth more today"

"You have to go to school"

"Then can I play with Gabriella after school?"

"Ask your mother"

"But Daddy, that's not fair!" I start to cry. "Mommy always yells at me!"

"Who is this Gabriella?"

"She's my best friend. Her Hebrew name is Yael and she knows how to do handstands and she plays violin too"

I knew Gabriella was my best friend because at recess, yesterday, we had held hands and spun around three times, reciting "Gabriella and Elizabeth, best friends forever". Ari and Josh, older boys from the first grade class, spy us from the monkey bars.

"Hey look at the dummy heads! It's fatty girl and the Russian Commy girl! Eeewww, they're kissing! You better run away Commy girl or you'll get cooties! c'mon, we'll help you, you have to escape the cooties before she kisses you again!" Hey, Elisheba! do you know what Elisheba means in English? It means baby fatty girl.! Baby fatty girl can't have a friend! Baby fatty girls don't have friends!"

They shout louder and louder, as I stare hard at the gravel and sand, the playground filling with more and more chanting voices.

"Fatty girl likes commy girl, fatty girl likes commy girl. Fatty and Yael, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g. first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes fatso in the baby carriage."

Stronger now, short and rhythmic, the repetition of commands.

"Run away Yael. Go home Fatty. Run away Yael. Go home Fatty. Run away Yael"

If I move my eyes even an inch from their patch of ground, I know that I will cry. Suddenly, I realize that Gabriella's hand is still in mine and startled, I pull sharply away. Only she holds on, tightly, tugging me forward in awkward stumbles. Then we begin running, down the dandelion hill to the flat grassy spaces of the school's apple orchard. Soon, the voice of our teacher, Netty, calling us in for afternoon classes,

"Sheket gavot! Sheket bavak a shat!"

Dirt caked and humming, Gabriella and I return to the classroom to find that everyone except us has an invitation on their desk to Sarah Kreiger's sixth birthday party, even though it's against the rules not to invite everyone if you give invitations out during school. On Gabriella's desk lies a note, "Lift up Fatty's skirt during Torah reading and you can come to the party". Yesterday, Sarah wanted to play in the sandbox with Gabriella and I. The sandbox has high walls, high enough that if you sat down you can't see over them. , and Gabriella was going to be Guinevere and I was going to be Elaine and we were going to draw up our drawbridges and weave tapestries and sing songs together and never let anyone else in.

"You can't come in," I shouted to Sarah. "Only really smart people can come in. I bet you don't know what an encyclopedia is"

School ends at four and Mommy's waiting in the hallway to take me to my violin lesson with Miss Switzer. She's brought me an ice cream cone covered in rainbow sprinkles, and I reach for it while putting on my sweater. My mother sighs, a short push of air,

"If you keep eating sweets, you'll never be able to wear pretty dresses."

I think of calico and the long, petticoated skirts in Little Women, which I read in secret during nap time.

"Mommy, can I play with Gabriella after school tomorrow?"

Gabriella doesn't care about the party, we want to play pretend and I promised to show her our climbing tress and the secret stream down the street behind Meadowbrook stables where I take riding lessons on Saturdays.

"But Whoosh..."

"Mom! Whoosh isn't my name. Can't you ever use my name!"

"But sweetie, Mrs. Kreiger called and said that Sarah's party is tomorrow"

"We don't want to go. I won't go if I don't want to. So there"

"Well, I'd have to talk to Gabriella's mother, and I don't think she speaks English". "Please Mommy, please"

Biting my lip, then my cheek, I tighten my throat muscles like the boa constrictor in Daddy's encyclopedia, gulping at the coming tears like mice. I can't cry. I cannot, will not cry. If I cry, Mommy might ask why, and what if I have to tell her about the teasing? If I tell her, she'll yell at me, like at Cindy Griswold's pool party.

"Get out of the pool this instant, you rotten brat!"

"Why? What did I, what did I do?"

Her hand clamps from above, dislocating my shoulder from its socket as she pulls me from the water. When the doctor asks me how it happened I say that I was practicing cartwheels and tripped.

"Don't you dare ask me why! You're a monster, a pathetic little monster who can't even use the toilet. I can't take you anywhere. Revolting! Disgusting! No wonder you don't have any friends!"

"But I didn't.. I....I was only sss..ss..swimmmmmimm.. sss....swimming!"

"What, do you think I'm stupid? Sure, your father teaches you real good to think your mother's stupid. I heard Lauren teasing you. I heard the kids saying you peed in the pool. Now get in the car"

Back outside my kindergarten classroom, so close to crying because I am ashamed. My mother, the boys on the playground, my teacher, Netty, who during morning discussion made me sit in the corner until "I learned not to interrupt", all of them are right about me and I am ashamed for my mother to know that other people see what she sees.

We walk slowly through the parking lot, plenty of time before my lesson

"Mommy, did you know that in Russia they drink tea from something called a samo, a sam, a samu, a Safromar!

"It's a samovar, and only Goys use them.

"Did you know that Gabriella is going to be a ballet dancer when she grows up? Not a ballerina but a real dancer, like Bar.... Barom... Barishna... Barkovna.. Barimnokoffishnakov.

"Barishnakov"

"Right, and I'm going to be her accomp, accom...,accompleee....acompa... aopp..accompleeness"

"Accompanist. Can't you say anything right? Are you starting to stutter again? "If you let Gabriella come over we'll practice the Bach suite together, the one Miss Switzer said I have to learn for my recital. Pretty please."

"I don't think so"

"But Mommy, why? You don't even have a reason! You can't tell me what to do!"

My voice pitches high, long and whining. Don't cry, oh please don't cry

M, Baruch atta adonai, eloheinu melach ha'olam, Reciting the silent Sh'ma, baruch sh'em gavot, I'll die if I can't see Gabriella, v'yitgadal, v'yitgadash, v'yitga'ar, If only she says yes, she has to say yes or I'll die, oseh shalom bimromav, oyah sai shalom aleinu

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Each morning and each afternoon the entire school gathers in the synagogue for services. Melodies wind languorously round the early dark, just after sunrise, just after twilight, at exactly moonrise, the season always early winter, before the first snow, when I linger on our driveway to hear the clicks of my patent leather Mary Janes and watch my breath blow crystal.

When I am old enough, maybe in first grade, the rabbi will call me to aliyot, to help carry the Torah covering as it is raised from the ark. When I am called, I will wear a keepah and t'fillin, even though only boys have to wear them. I think

of the silk and fringes on my skin, like the shawl Gabriella wears to cover her head in the presence of god, like my father at Rosh Hashana. Netty says if you drop the Torah the entire minyan has to fast for 40 days. I imagine dropping it on purpose, and squirm with the thought, excited to think that I could even think it. Torah means law, and when Rabbi Perlman carries it around the pews we touch it with our siddurs, kissing the dark leather covers and singing. I love the musty smell of thick paper and leather, and hold it long to my lips, lightly. Gabriella teaches me the Torah melodies she knows from Russia, slower and more dissonant than ones I have learned. My favorite melody is oseh shalom in the Sh'ma, the part everyone sings together before the silent amidah. Years later, I still find myself humming its heavy invocation while walking down the street on a cloudy afternoon ripe with snow, late afternoon, mid December, without even realizing.

Today it is Shabbat and there are no afternoon services. Most of my classmates have to home before sunset, since their parents won't drive on the Sabbath. Before lunch, Netty announces that Ari and I will be the Ima and Aba today, the mother and father for the kindergarten shabbat we have each week. Hooray! That means I get to sing the blessings in front of everyone, and hold Netty's hand while she lights the candles, and braid the challah in my very own pattern, without having to listen to anyone else. Instead, everyone has to braid their challah the way I tell them to. Most of my classmates stumble and forget the words for all the different prayers, one for grape juice, one for bread, one for candles, one for boys, one for girls, one of thanks and one for peace, but I know that I will sing them perfectly, without even needing to look at the siddur. When Netty lights the candles, I'll remember to circle my hands three time over the flames, covering my face with wax tinged fingers, baruch atta Adonai, I had liknair shel shabbat.

"Netty, can Yael be the Aba with me? Ari doesn't want to"

"Bah! Only boys can be the Aba"

"But if she wears tfillin wouldn't that be the same?"

"No, this week it's Ari's turn, it wouldn't be fair. Yakob, you be the Rebbe while I go find the flour in the kitchen. "

"Eeewww... Netty,"

But Netty was already gone

"Elisheba can't be my Ima....Gross! Cooties!!!"

"Yeah Ari, you'll be Mrs. Fatty baby girl! Ha Ha! Ari's marrying fatty! Look, Ari's in love with stupid face!!!!"

"Stop it! Stop it right now! I hate you!"

They don't stop, but I can't hear them. Mouths open, hands wave, all silent. I have never said 'I hate you' before. Never ever. Mommy says "I hate you" is the absolute worst thing I can ever say, that I should never waste it unless I really really mean it, or I will turn into salt like Lot's evil wife for taking words lightly. Mommy says "I hate you" makes me like Communists and Jim Crow, and people will write books to say I am bad, and Gabriella will have to run away again.

Stopped still, holding my thrilled breath, waiting for some awful doom, waiting for the ceiling to crack and tumble as I listen to my own quiet echo. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you"

The others hear it too. Ari stares hard, whispers,

"Elisheba, You're not aloud to hate me. "

His mouth tightens, shoulders curl. I think maybe I have hurt him, and almost smile.

The door opens, Netty humming Sabbath songs, carrying messy flour in a burlap sack.

"Netty! Netty! Elisheba said I hate you to Ari!!!!"

"What! Ari, Elisheba, is this true?"

"No"

Silence again. We all turn towards Gabriella, sitting cross legged and tall in the corner, rigid.

"Yael?"

"No, Netty it's not true. Ari's making it up because he doesn't want to be Elisheba's Aba because she knows the words and he doesn't."

Quickly, so quickly, before I can even think, Ari and Netty are off to Rabbi Perlman's office, the rest of us squeezed into the first grade classroom for their shabbat. Gabriella's hand in mine, her head gentle on my shoulder, we sit in the back, and I whisper the Sh'ma, reciting "I told a lie, I told a lie, I told a lie"

In the Judaism of Ezra Academy, lies were community property, their insult not one to truth but to the social order. One day I ask,

"Netty, why isn't lying in the 10 commandments?"

In Hebrew, the prohibition against false witness means something different from lying.

"Well, class, can anyone answer Elisheba's question?"

Netty stands only four feet, 10 inches high. She hugs us in the morning and before nap time. She lets us stay outside five extra minutes on nice days and brings cookies on rainy days. She tells my mother I've been good even when I've had to sit outside the classroom for not raising my hand. She gives me books to read, special books she doesn't give to the others.

Shuffles and rustles and not a single hand raised. Netty has told me not to answer my own questions, but I do it anyway

"It's because false witness hurts someone and lying doesn't"

"In a way."

Now Netty changes into her Rabbi voice, the voice we hear her use during study with the other teachers.

"As the Talmud shows, there are many truths, and we must each find the truths we make our own, they cannot be given. To bear false witness is to injure your neighbor but also the community as a whole. One of the penalties for false witness is that the entire minyan must fast, to acknowledge their complicity...."

"Netty, what's complicity... cc...coplo... cuppil...complicity?"

"Complicity. That we are all responsible. But Elisheba, that's the third time you've interrupted today. Would you please go it outside the door and I'll come talk to you later"

I sneak my book, A Wrinkle in Time, under my shirt, even though I am not supposed to read when I'm sent outside (I'm supposed to think about my actions). Soon, I hear the stomps and murmurs of the first grade class, in two straight lines, one for girls and one for boys, passing through to recess. I curl into the edge of the wall, shrinking into my sweater, hoping that this passing could be simple.

"Hey look, it's cootie girl!"

"Yeah, cootie girl's so dumb they kicked her out"

"Nah, they put her outside cause they couldn't stand the smell"

Whispers the teacher can't catch from the front of the line. I stand on tippy toe to barely reach the doorknob of our room, almost tumble inside, breathless.

"Netty I have a stomach ache"

Lying was becoming easier now, and I continued.

"It hurts right here, in the middle. It hurts alot."

I hoped that they might call my Daddy and that he would come get me and take me to the park to play, or tuck me into bed with sweet honey tea and music and read me a story. Maybe they wouldn't be able to find Mommy, maybe she'd be gone far away, and Daddy and I would have to make TV dinners and play pretend games with Jaemi, who is two years old had long long yellow hair and perfect pinkness and people always stop us in the street to say , "What a beautiful child".

Waiting in the nurse's office, swinging my feet while I read, the door opens and there is my mother, smelling like a grownup, like wine and perfume, wearing a dress. She kneels down, feels my forehead with soft lips, smooths my hair, scoops me away into the plush front seat of our car, fastens my seat belt for me.

"It's all right sweetie, it's all right"

"You look pretty, like when you and Daddy go out to dinner"

"Shhh...just rest. Don't tell Daddy I was dressed up."

"Ccc...ccc..ca...Can we play a game when we get home?"

"Dammit, don't put your feet on the dashboard!"

"Sorry . Can we still play a game?"

"Sure, and I'll make you hot chocolate and we'll listen to Don Giovanni,"

"Mmmm, okay, thanks Mommy. I love you"

And I did love her, so much that I still cry after we talk on the phone, so much that at twenty one I still halfheartedly date certain boys because I can imagine taking them home to her.

"Whoosh,"

"My name is Elizabeth"

"Whoosh, it's okay if you're not really sick."

I rock my head against the window, following the trees as they spin, falling asleep.

. . .

Epilogues

On my eleventh birthday, after marshmellowy cake, I sneak upstairs to touch myself, trying to imagine one of the boys on a magazine cover, any magazine cover. Instead seeing Gabriella's lithe dark body, small and tight and five years old in snowy fields run white, snowy plains of shadowed grain filled heavy with floods, with her eyes like slopes of wheat, ending in the cubby corner of my kindergarten classroom. She turns her head, quick snap, black straight hair after thin, strong neck. "Who's there? "

"It's all right, no one".

And then, her hands all over, playing doctor during recess by the yellow willow tree. Press as hard as you can right here, above my tummy, the appendix, bursting, can you feel it? Press harder, now, there, yes.

. . .

I've learned the chanting wordless sounds the cantor makes during services, the "dai dai dai dai" that haunt and twist are called ninguns. I am fourteen, away at camp, kissing a tall dark girl whose name means butterfly, hearing quick inklings of Hebrew chants in the 80's pop music softly playing, and then it is like a ningun all over, Gabriella's head on my shoulder, asleep during services, her breath on my collarbone, long and drawn and circling, a moaning sound of almost, almost, here in the gloaming.

. . .

I am sixteen and running through the early June dusk, the new Chevy Cavalier my parents just bought me parked half a mile away behind bushes. I reach the river and stop, listening for Vanessa, scared that I am late and she has already left. But then, I turn and find the husk and heft of her quiet breath on my ear, her tall arms just under my waist., and it is like the first time I saw a bat, hiding underneath my house with Gabriella, the last day of kindergarten, barely past sunset. I trace her jaw, like holding hands and searching for sharp dark creatures near the first star. I close my eyes and wish for a million things, like Gabriella's small mouth on my spine, my wrists, so lightly I gasp, so filled and bursting with her lightness.