AKA
by Len Abram

Woozy when he woke, Rabbi Stolz gripped the nightstand. He listened to his wife breathing steadily as a metronome. He did not wake Eliora. She fretted enough about his health since he had such a hard time fasting – his worst yet – on Yom Kippur. He had argued with one of his daughters that morning, he remembered, upsetting him. But the warm day dried him out. A breeze could have blown him away, along with the leaves crunching under foot. Stolz barely made it until sunset and the concluding sound of the shofar.

His head cleared. On his way to the study, the rabbi glanced at the hallway mirror. He looked sturdy for his age, he thought, except for arthritis in his hip and cholesterol high enough, Dr. Rothstein joked, for a great bowling score. Through slits in the blinds, the day beckoned with fall brilliance, leaves in rich orange, reds and yellows, nature showing off. Stolz wet the pads of his long fingers rubbing the panes for a better view. Creation going on every day, he thought. On a notepad he scribbled

creation
Gen = starts time, timeless?

The theme of ongoing creation and Genesis, Stolz thought. He'd bring this up to his Torah study group, lawyers in downtown Boston. Stolz looked at his watch. Too late for morning services at his synagogue. From the sagging bookcase, he pulled a sack with tefillin and tallith.

Except for pinch-hitting at a funeral or wedding, Stolz never led a congregation. After the pace of ordination and graduate degree at the same time, he decided that he was not cut out for it. His friend Herschel, with a thousand-family synagogue on Long Island, called it “the hatch 'em, 'mitzvah 'em, and dispatch ‘em” career of a congregational rabbi. When the Jesuits at Boston College needed a Judaism teacher, Stolz brought half dozen articles and the first two chapters of his dissertation on Job, later his first book and the winner of the Silverfine Prize.

Stolz enjoyed his career, then the only Jew in the religion department of a Catholic college. Eliora and he bought the house off of Beacon Street, not far from Jewish delis and shuls, to raise their three daughters. Now emeritus, he advised doctoral students and taught Torah to adults.

For the last three years, he had been working on a book about families in the Torah, dysfunctional and healthy. Stolz had not gotten past the first few chapters and the packs of 3 X 5 cards tattooed with notes and references. His publisher said something about a writer's block cut from a Vermont quarry. Stolz owed Marty an email or a call about the missing chapters. This week, he promised himself, he would get back to the book.

Stolz rolled up the sleeve of his pajamas and wound his phylacteries around his arm, the leather worn until soft as silk. He must have pulled the leather straps too tight, he thought. That tidal woozy feeling came back. The rabbi loosened the straps, but he fell anyway.

Lying on the carpeted floor, Stolz saw the Milky Way like a NASA picture. He blinked until it cleared. Why am I here and not in my bed? he wondered. His head hurt. He tried to move until his hip shouted at him about the dinner plate shattered inside. Is this dying? he wondered. He spoke. Out came stale air.

He was looking at the bottom of the oak desk, maybe the last thing he would see, he guessed. Stolz saw the childish scrawl, white chalk against the dark wood, the names of his three daughters, when they played on the floor while he studied or typed: in block letters, *Rachel, Sarah, Leah*. A jagged line went through *Leah* and above it was scrawled *Lena*. I leave this undone, he chided himself. *My greatest failure, Leah, my rebel Leah.*

At four or five, Leah's willfulness got laughs from their friends. Eliora kept telling Stolz that it was a phase. The terrible two's extended their stay year after year. Her compliant and helpful sisters, Sarah a year older and Rachel three years younger, magnified the pleasures of parenting.

But Leah was another story. She observed the Sabbath earlier or later than the family, according to her play or a TV program. She questioned every holiday with, "Why do we do this?," by which it was clear to Stolz, the little kid meant, "Why are you making me do this against my will?" In the Passover Seder, with its four sons as object lessons on proper observance, Stolz saw some at the large Seder table smile at Leah when they read about the wicked son.

One day, Leah announced that her name was no longer Leah. She was now and forevermore Lena. The family and her friends might still call her Leah, but that was her aka, her also-known-as; her real name was Lena. Eliora, who refereed many arguments, told Stolz to pick his battles; her teachers and friends complied. Eliora simply called the girl "Sweetie" or "Dear," while her sisters used "Sis."

"Why couldn't Leah be more like Sarah and Rachel?" Stolz whispered to Eliora in bed one night.

"Why, Mr.-Rabbi-PhD-author? Why? Because, she isn't," whispered Eliora. She cautioned him to let the name change go.

Stolz gave it a few days and then challenged.

"I like the sound of it, Daddy, L-E-N-A," Leah spelled.

"Leah, this is silly. It has to stop," Stolz said, mixing plea with threat.

“Please call me Lena. Besides, in the Bible, Jacob changed his name to Israel. We read it in Bible class.”

“Well,” said Stolz, ready to explain the differences between a nine-year old girl from Brookline and one of three patriarchs of the Jewish people, but by then his daughter had her head down in a book. He loved to watch his daughters read, but Leah's eyes drank words from the page.

Stolz and Leah argued so often that Eliora made an appointment with a psychologist named Brine in Newton. First, the family interviewed together. Then separately. Last, Brine met with Leah while Stolz and Eliora sat in the waiting room. Stolz fidgeted when he heard their laughter through the walls.

Brine sent a three-page, double-spaced report. Lena – the rabbi noted that Brine used *her* chosen name – is smart, creative, full of ideas. As for her oppositionalism, the family might accept it. Most children become like their models, their parents. Brine had talked with her teachers, who aside from the name change issue, considered the Stolz girl a model student: a special child, even gifted. Stolz felt guilty. He was expecting a diagnosis, a name, not a compliment.

In a few years, while her sisters bloomed into young womanhood, Leah burst. Stolz saw men, young or old, whose eyes lingered over his daughter's rounding contours. The house had more teenage boys stopping by after school, like fluttering moths around a street lamp. Leah paid little attention to them. She was unaffected by her beauty or her test scores or her time in the hundred-yard dash; perhaps that was why her sisters were not jealous. Leah took her gifts in stride.

Her sisters met their husbands in high school (Rachel) or the first year of college (Sarah). Leah wasn't interested in marriage. She said she had time. Maybe after 30. Eliora worried that Leah was dating gentile men, even if her prom date was Jerry Feinberg from up the block. Stolz liked the young man and said so often. Leah shrugged. Leah and Jerry chose different colleges far from each other. A few years later, he got engaged to a girl at Brandeis. Leah was one of the maids of honor at the wedding. When Stolz saw the bride throw the bouquet to the single women, Leah didn't even put up her hands.

While her sisters had chosen local colleges, Leah went to Rochester in New York, on full scholarship; the family only saw her for holidays and vacations. By graduation, she was a master of computer languages and wrote papers posted on the Internet. Another author in the family, Eliora said, as Stolz published his third book, this time on mysticism. When she graduated, Leah had jobs around Boston, and stayed for a masters at MIT, but she moved to Silicon Valley to a start-up that went bust and ended up in Seattle. Stolz and Eliora visited her there. He saw the Pacific a couple of blocks from her condo. Any further from us, he thought, she'd be swimming.

Stolz's reverie was cut short. His wife's frantic face filled his view.

“Jacob, I called 911.” Eliora gripped his hand until it hurt. At least that works, he thought.

“Eliora, call Leah,” he said. “Please make sure you call Leah.” That done, Stolz said a prayer, and slept.

The message light on her phone was blinking when Lena came back from her run. She was wet. Seattle was washed in rain again. Lena peeled off her jacket, and hung it dripping in the foyer of the apartment. She had jogged along Puget Sound through salted haze and up the hills by tourists craning their necks at the Space Needle. She toweled her face, neck and then her hair, red as a flickering flame.

A guy in gray tights had tried to pick her on the run. She was used to men looking her over like they were buying a car in a lot. The usual – Have you been running long? What do you do? Are you from around here? At least this one did not hand her an embossed business card. She stopped to use the bathroom at Starbuck’s to get rid of him. After Al Torricelli, she had enough of men for a while.

She checked the message. It was from her mother: “Hi Honey. Not to worry. Well, Daddy is in the hospital. He has a broken hip. He fell this morning. The surgery is tomorrow or the next day. He asked for you. Can you come home, sometime soon? Love, Mommie.”

Not to worry? Her mother's voice crackled with it. Lena had to get home and had the time, the one benefit of being out of work. She thought of her father with a sympathetic twinge in her own hip. The pain, she had read, was extreme. She was sorry that they argued last Yom Kippur. It was over the cup of coffee she made the morning of the fast day. Her father walked into the kitchen as she sipped. She tried to explain how fasting gave her a headache, how one cup of coffee helped. Only the solemnity of the day checked his disappointment. Life with the rabbi, she thought.

She got a flight the next day. The cab for the airport went past where she used to work until six weeks ago. The tall building of stainless steel and glass always looked like a greenhouse.

How could she be so dumb? she asked herself. When you date your boss, it's bad, she mused, but when you get serious and stop, someone has to leave.

In Java programming, threads link programs and devices. Relationships had them too, she realized, strands between people that multiply and intertwine. Al Torricelli and she started spending time over a serious software bug. Al surprised her with his technical skill and his willingness to spend two, 12-hour days with her before they found and fixed the culprit.

Dr. Brine once said to her that people in high tech did better with the 1's and 0's of computer logic, than with feelings, often vague and troubling. She found herself looking

forward to seeing Al, in the hallway, in line for coffee, in his office for a weekly meeting where she leaned in to smell his soap. He wore self-confidence like a medal on his chest. Usually men pursued her. She knew that Rabbi and Mrs. Stolz would never approve of Al. They were back in Boston, she told herself, and her life was here. She didn't discuss her personal life with her family, even with her sisters.

His condo faced the Space Needle. Some nights she looked at the constellation of lights around the city and felt on top of the world. Al was her big bear of a man, she thought, a champion sculler in college, an MBA from Columbia, and , according to Seattle's gossipy magazine, an up-and-coming bachelor professional. Even that silly statement intrigued her like a school girl. She had dated gentile men before, but always as secular as she.

One night, Al and she walked by a book store. In the window display, she saw a book jacket with her father's ruddy face, gray beard and wiry hair. Her mother had mentioned a new book. The blurbs on the cover were outstanding.

"That's my father," she said. "His sixth or seventh book."

"You're kidding,"Al said. "Your father's a writer *and* a rabbi? Well, my father and mother go to Mass each week. Wouldn't miss it."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "This time you are coming home with me for Christmas. It's fun. You'll see."

Al's parents live in a large colonial at the foot of the Cascades; it was snowing when the couple arrived, a Christmas scene off of a card rack in a drug store. Al split logs in the back yard. She helped. They came in with their faces red and gloves smelling of resin. The flames from the fireplace crackled and lit the living room with its decorated tree. The sunny heat of the fire, Mrs. Torricelli's hugs (call me Rose), the Christmas music – Lena felt drawn into the orbit of the family around the holiday.

His father and mother asked Al and Lena to join them for midnight Mass; Al insisted on staying home with Lena, although she tried to dissuade him. They drank eggnog until Lena was dizzy. The next day after exchanging gifts and a large dinner, they drove back. She watched the white-tufted landscape recede.

"Did you really have a good time?" he asked.

"Of course I did. Your folks are very nice."

"Lena, tell the truth, wouldn't you want a kid to grow up with something like Christmas?" he asked.

Kid? They talked about marriage, only. What was wrong with just the two of them, Lena thought, without complications? Away from her family, she observed no Jewish holidays,

nothing more than New Year's Eve. His probe hit something hard. She didn't want to exchange Hanukkah with Christmas or Passover with Easter. She wanted neutrality.

For all her dating, the furthest she had gotten to commitment was exchanging apartment keys. Her men were successful, used to powering their way to a goal, type A's with a plus sign. Dr. Brine once told her that she alone had to figure out why none of these relationships worked. Her hairdresser found a strand the color of zinc in her hair. Only 27, she thought, but 30 was a sign on a turnpike fast approaching. Lena scoffed at the so-called biological clock ticking away, counting down. Still, each month she was reminded of a cycle.

“For your folks, it's fine. I think, you and I are secular.”

“We are, sure,” said Al, “but a kid needs to believe in something, regardless if they keep to it.”

In the following days, Lena realized that Al had decided on the next step for them as a couple. In MBA fashion, Al had drafted a business plan. He assumed that he knew what was best, and waited for Lena to come around. His disappointment over her resistance loomed larger each week. They bickered and made up. They had spats, they told each other, not real arguments, and when they had a real argument, they assured themselves it was a spat.

The morning after they shouted themselves hoarse, she called in sick at work. His harsh words and her counter-punches shook her. She waited for him to apologize. He had attacked her values and then character. She called him a bully. His email came in the afternoon – three dense paragraphs sprinkled with the shortcuts of text messaging and a four A.M. time stamp.

His verbs, Lena observed, were all past tense. Not future. He was sorry for things *they* said and sorry for the time he took from her. Time? Why is it, she thought, men think they are outside of time while women are slaves to it? Lena gave two weeks' notice and quit. She worked from home documenting her projects for her replacement. The following weekend, with the security guards making their rounds, she packed out in two cardboard boxes. On her last day, a packet from the company arrived with an offer of severance. A final gift from Al, she thought.

Lena arrived late in Boston. The hospital cleaning crews had left the halls gleaming and smelling of wax. Her brother-in-law David was reading on a chair next to her father’s room. Both her sisters had married Orthodox men. David wore the standard dark suit, white shirt, no tie and a dark fedora. He smiled.

“Leah, I've been waiting for you. Rachel stopped by before putting the kids to bed. Your Dad, thank goodness, is better.”

She looked into the room. Her father looked shrunk. She always thought of him in

charge, always in front of a class. Here, with tubes in his arm and tubing in his nostrils, he looked like a cutout. She leaned over to kiss his cheek. Stolz stirred.

“Leah,” he said. His eyes fluttered shut.

On the way home in David's old Toyota, with scattered law exam notes and his kids' cookie wrappers, Lena asked, “How are your kids, Ephraim, Abigail and Sonia – right?”

“They're fine, thanks to the Almighty. But Sonia is Sarah and Allan's daughter. We have Joseph and Ari and Tzipora, our oldest. They have Beryl and Sonia. I know, it's hard to keep the names straight.”

“Sorry, David. Not such a great aunt.”

“We don't see you enough. Rachel misses you. And the kids still ask for you.”

Her mother hugged Lena a long time. Eliora made her a salad with lentil soup. Lena recognized the bread from the bakery on Harvard Street. Her room, with her dolls, college diplomas and awards, was ready, the sheets fresh. She was jet lagged and so tired her skin itched.

“Sleep late,” her mother said, tucking her in like she was ten.“Dear, I thought we lost Daddy. Now he has all his daughters home. Can you stay long?”

“Mom, I'm out of work. I lost my job.”

“Really? It's fated, it's *beshert*, so you are with us again.”

Stolz left the hospital a day early on crutches. The doctors also found the reason for his dizziness: an inner ear infection. He had pills for that and for his new hip. He would do rehab from home.

Lena helped Stolz up the stairs. “Here, Dad, lean on me.” For a moment, he thought his daughter was punning on *Lena*. He looked at her face rimmed with curly red hair, the same color of his mother's, of blessed memory. Stolz promised himself not to argue with Leah or Lena or whatever else she called herself. But out of habit, he called her Leah.

Rachel and Sarah came by with their kids who were shy, then tugged at Lena's dress for attention. She sat on the divan in her parents' living room and picked them up. They were heavier than the last visit, the increments of every day so dramatic at a few months. Her sisters hugged and kissed her, their husbands looking on.

Lena offered to take the kids to Boston, her treat. “No. We'll make it a sisters' day out,” said Sarah, passing the baby to her husband. “Just give me a half hour to pump some milk for this little fellow. David and Allan can take the kids.”

The sisters took the trolley into Government Center and walked around, holding hands the way they used to go to play as children. Lena insisted on buying gifts for all the kids and filled two large bags. She felt she made up for the holidays and birthdays she missed. They found a kosher restaurant in the financial district where Rachel and Sarah could eat.

“How are you getting along with Daddy?” Sarah asked Lena over lunch.

“OK.”

“We love Daddy, but he's like a big baby about getting his way. You could stay with us – and I know a studio available in the neighborhood,” said Rachel.

“I don't know how long I'll be here,” said Lena.

At Macy's dress department, looking at themselves in three mirrors, Sara said to Lena, “I always envy your figure, Sis. Three kids – and my body springs back, just not exactly where I started.”

“I guess,” Rachel said, laughing, “my spring is sprung too. Time. It's hard to find time to work out.”

Lena looked at her sisters, happy and tired. “You look great, you do, both of you,” said Lena. “Besides, you have lovely kids. Good husbands.” Lena envied them not for their men or handsome children, but for lives on a chartered course, whereas she felt adrift.

Lena wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. She couldn't help herself. She let down her guard and cried. Her sisters consoled her over Stolz's accident and her job loss. Lena did not mention Al Torricelli.

Sarah asked, “Say, do you want to get fixed up?”

“Me? No,” Lena said. “I've had enough of men for a while.” She hoped her sisters would let her comment go.

“Well, no matter,” Rachel said. “We know one guy, Mendy. Recently divorced, and just too plain for our brilliant sister.”

“Besides,” said Sarah, “he's a rabbi – too observant for you.”

In a few weeks, Stolz improved enough to exchange his crutches for a cane. He walked to services, first with Leah who accompanied him to the door of the synagogue and then with Eliora. Stolz said nothing about Leah not attending services, but his face showed disappointment. Her sisters were right, Lena thought: living at home was not a good idea. And she still could return to Seattle.

Lena stayed up late with her laptop. One night, she got an email with the address of her former company. Elise, an office buddy, asked how she was; there was a link to a gossip piece in a Seattle newspaper. Lena clicked and saw the picture of a couple, clearly enjoying each other, at a charity ball: The caption read "Al Torricelli and significant other, Linda O'Neil." Lena stared at the picture. She found a Seattle real estate broker on-line and put her condo on the market.

Stolz's family and grandchildren, along with a few colleagues, came over to celebrate his recovery. Stolz tested his new hip every day, often without the cane. Fresh from their gifts, the kids clustered around their aunt from Seattle. Rachel pointed out to Lena the Ph.D. candidate at Brandeis, the rabbi teaching one of Daddy's courses, Mendy Goldman. Tall and thin and shy, Lena observed, as they were introduced. He cut his brown beard close. Rachel had said he was recently divorced: his smile, thought Lena, faded quickly.

With the noise from kids running around and adults shouting over them, Lena decided on a walk. In the hall closet, she reached in to get her jacket. There was a little boy hiding between the coats. He looked around five, Lena guessed.

"What's your name?" asked Lena.

Lena's oldest niece Tzipora came running over. "Reuben, I thought you were playing with Max in the other room."

"Anything wrong?" asked Lena.

"D-I-V-O-R-S," spelled Tzipora. "This weekend he's with his father."

"I'll take him," said Lena. The little boy gripped her hand. When she sat down, he jumped on her lap. Reuben put his face against Lena's chest. Lena smelled the shampoo and sweat in his hair.

"Thanks, sorry to bother you," said Mendy Goldman as he crossed the room to her. He turned to his son. "Reuben, I thought you were with Max. Let's go, please. Here, you dropped your *kippah*." His father handed him the head covering, which the boy pocketed.

The next day, Lena mentioned Mendy and his son to Eliora and Stolz. Eliora said, "Dentist."

"Dentist?" asked Lena.

"Mendy's wife and her dentist – how shall I say it? – fell in love," her father said. Quite unusual in our community. The dentist, Dr. Saul Black, has an office nearby. I think Mendy asked her to stay. To no avail. They married."

"Everyone around here gets married," said Lena, "even the married ones."

“Well,” Stolz started to ask when she, Leah, was going to be married. Instead, he said, “The next time you go downtown, can you stop by Mendy's class? I have a book for him.”

Lena left early for downtown Boston. She registered at placement agencies for software engineers, pegged her rate low enough to get some interest, and then walked around the city. The harbor was blue and sparkling. She forgot how much she liked Boston and its cold Atlantic. She ended up by the tall silver building where Mendy held his Torah study. The class, mostly lawyers, sat at a large ash table on the 23rd floor overlooking the Charles River and Cambridge. The rabbi acknowledged Lena. He flushed when he took the book.

Mendy was a better teacher than her father, the polished professor who lectured, even quoting from his own work. Mendy listened as much as he spoke. He stated a topic or opinion, and waited for his students to catch up. He licked his index finger and flew through the pages of Torah text until he found an exact word or quote. Lena was hardly aware of the time. Mendy looked at his watch, shrugged, and closed the book. He told Lena on the elevator that his son Reuben asked for her. They talked for a while in front of the building, mostly about her father and his books. She noticed he called her Lena.

On the way home, something about Mendy Goldman stayed with her. It wasn't his features or his frame, which matched his wire rim glasses, spare and functional. It finally occurred to Lena that Goldman did not look below her chin. Her figure had been surveyed by men for years, some openly and some with glances. Mendy focused on her face and what she said.

Mendy Goldman called the next night. Was he fishing for a date, she asked herself. She didn't date the yeshiva boys, starting with the ones who came to study with her father. Instead Goldman needed a sitter for Reuben. His mother and regular sitter were unavailable. Besides, his son kept asking for her. Lena drove over to Brighton in Stolz's old Buick. Mendy hardly looked at her except to thank her, she thought, too many times. Reuben brightened up when he saw Lena and said he would finish his supper like a big boy. She made a bath and tossed in all his floating toys.

While he steered his toy boat through the sudsy water, Lena asked him how he was.

Reuben said, “OK. My Mommy married another Daddy.”

“Yes, I heard,” said Lena.

“My real Daddy says Mommy and him fell in love. But then they had an accident. They fell out of it.”

“That happens, sorry to say,” said Lena, not sure what to say next. “But they still both love you. Always will.”

“Daddy says the Almighty is looking out for us.”

Toweled dry and wrapped in terry cloth, Reuben sat on Lena's lap. His skin gave off the heat from the bath. Her nieces and nephews gripped her while she held them, not sure if she might let them go. Reuben, with those two brown eyes like chocolates, fell into her arms and rested his head on her chest. Lena inhaled him. Over time, any body, she thought, shows the friction of life; the wear and tear on her father's hip came to mind and her own strand of gray; but Reuben Goldman was like a new coin, unspent and smooth. All kids are, she realized, as she put him to bed.

On Mendy Goldman's desk were notes for his Ph.D. dissertation and what looked like his few chapters, roughened with margin comments and scratched out lines and words. How complicated was *his* life, Lena thought: divorce, the humiliating loss of his wife, part-time jobs and grad school, and then sharing custody of his lovely, but sad son.

Goldman arrived after 11 and looked in on Reuben. When he took out his check book to pay her, Lena put up her hand. Goldman shrugged and put the checks away. Lena let herself out. When she got to Stolz's car across the street, she looked up at the third floor window. Goldman watched her until she got into the car and left.

Lena sat for Reuben on Sunday nights when his father was at Brandeis as assistant chaplain. She talked more with Mendy, who asked more about her. He admitted to Googling her name and found her listed as an author of a widely used algorithm, her master's thesis. She enjoyed the compliment. Lena looked at Mendy Goldman while he went on about his own graduate work. He talked with his hands like he was going to catch a football. She wondered why a wife would leave him; he seemed nice enough. Plain, maybe even dull, but nice.

Asking about his wife crossed a boundary, Lena thought. Shared intimacies spin a thread between people. His idea of socializing was Friday night dinners and after Sabbath, going to a lecture or a concert, things her parents enjoyed. Her sisters too hardly went to the movies and since there were few kosher restaurants. The families spent a lot of time together. One night, Mendy mentioned that Reuben was going on vacation with his mother and step father.

“What happened, Mendy, between you and her, your former wife?” Lena asked.

“Another time perhaps,” said Mendy, his mood darkening.

He walked her to the door.

“OK. Reuben is a great blessing. My wife had severe postpartum depression. Severe like she was a different person. Bea was hospitalized, in and out for a year. When she recovered, she didn't see us as a couple anymore. We went to counseling. Her mind, her recovered mind, was made up. There's a fancy name for this, but it means the same, divorce.”

“I'm sorry,” was the only thing Lena could say. When she got into the car, she saw Mendy watching her from the window.

With work and exercise, Lena's life had comforting structure. She found a software engineering job downtown for a financial services firm, a three month contract. She joined a gym and met a guy with whom she shared an interest in jazz and art films. They dated, but she kept him at a distance. After a while, he stopped calling.

She was still getting over her disappointment over Al, she thought, who was now engaged, so wrote her friend Elise, and not to the woman in the newspaper article either. She felt anxious, but wasn't sure why. She called Dr. Brine and talked for 20 minutes.

“I like his name,” Brine finally said.

“Who, Reuben?”

“No, Mendy, the father. Stay in touch. I'm happy for you,” said Brine and hung up.

She was not happy, whatever he meant. Brine liked to throw enigmas at her and wait for her to catch up. *Good As Goldman?* the play on his last name, she wondered. During the week, she was more troubled: she missed Reuben, listening and reading to him, bathing and putting him to bed, her pleasure in his pleasure. She saw a picture of his mother, the postpartum lady, in the apartment. Reuben looked just like his father. He had the chocolate brown hair and eyes, the spare, almost ascetic frame, the intense curiosity, a smile that came and went just as quickly. She had to admit: her life was better now that she had met the Goldmans.

Lena continued with Mendy's lunch hour Torah sessions. She participated in the discussions, sometimes telling herself to shut up, she talked so much. She had enough, she thought, of religion growing up with her father, but was surprised how much she enjoyed the learning. She always found something new, and saw things differently after.

She mentioned this to Mendy. He nodded.

“You're a good partner, too,” said Mendy. “I mean, that's what they call it, *chevruta*, when two people study together.”

Before she left him to catch the trolley, Mendy said that this Sunday night he was not working. He'd stay home with Reuben. Lena nearly asked to come over anyway and thought better of it.

Friday nights, Lena was usually at one of her sisters or her parents for Shabbat supper. Sometime she joined her sisters and their families at their small Orthodox synagogue within walking distance of their homes. It was on a side street off of Beacon. Men and women sat separated by a long cotton cloth on poles, chest high, between them. She

asked Sarah if she was offended by the separation. “Sis,” she said, “it makes us women feel special. We have our own study group too.”

Lena saw Mendy Goldman praying on the other side, fingering the threads on his prayer shawl representing the commandments. Mendy smiled and nodded to her. After the services, over tea and cakes, he told Lena good news: two chapters of his dissertation were accepted. He'd finish this summer. Lena congratulated him and sent regards to Reuben.

Lena mentioned Mendy's success to her sisters.

“Really? That's wonderful. By the way, I think we may have a match for Mendy,” said Rachel.

“Match?” asked Lena.

“He's divorced for a while now. It's a mitzvah, a commandment, you know, to get married,” Rachel stopped herself. “I'm not talking about you, Sis. You have lots of time yet.”

“Thanks. So what about Mendy?” asked Lena.

“Someone introduced them. From Newton, a divorced woman with a couple of kids. Observant and well respected. She sounds nice for him.”

When Lena got home, she could not shake her feelings. Why was she so disturbed about Mendy and some woman? she asked herself. She should be happy for him and Reuben, someone to share the Sabbath and the holidays and daily lives, more than Sunday nights. She repeated this until she put herself at ease.

That night she dreamed about Al Torricelli and Mendy Goldman and maybe her father Jacob Stolz too. They were all jogging along Beacon, she guessed, from the leafy wide street with the parking spots in the center lining the trolley tracks. She ran ahead of Al in his rowing T-shirt and spandex shorts; Mendy was way behind him, wearing his usual black suit, black hat and white shirt. He looked clumsy in his black street shoes. Possibly her father – he was not easy to see in the distance – was way behind Mendy. Stolz was limping from his surgery. Lena felt light as the wind and sprinted ahead. When she looked back, they were all gone. She felt sad at the empty street. She turned to run forward and there was Mendy Goldman, holding Reuben's hand, walking, too far away to catch.

Passover was approaching. Tree branches were sagging lower with the budding leaves. Eliora asked Stolz to take time out from writing to prepare the house for the holiday. She cleaned cabinets while he polished silver. She hated to interrupt him, he was working so well on his computer; she had seen it before: the notes, cards and yellow stickies on his research books – all said that he was making progress, in the final stage of creating The

Book, as it was called around the house, a demanding guest who moved out upon publication.

Eliora said, “Jacob, I hear Leah is going to Friday night services with Rachel and Sarah. Every week. She's there for the holidays too. I also hear that after services, Mendy Goldman walks her home.”

“So he walks her home. He's a gentleman and it's late. Don't make too much of it,” said Stolz, wondering how much to make of it.

Stolz finished polishing the silverware and unpacking dishes and pots for the holiday. Then he got back to The Book, which was going in directions he had not imagined.

Lena stopped for a mozzarella and tomato sandwich, put it in her backpack and headed for Torah study. He was not interested in her, Mendy Goldman, she admitted to herself. She was not religious or observant enough, she guessed. There were hundreds of commandments. How many did she follow? She was told for years that she was attractive or even beautiful, but Goldman did not seem to care. Lena remembered how Al Torricelli picked out clothes for her and showed her off. His big paws, as she used to call them, were always on her.

With his propriety, Goldman did not even touch her hand; they hardly brushed by each other. They talked a lot, about religion, politics, history, Reuben, grad work, computers, the weather, books they both read and those they hadn't. After services, he walked her home, wished her well and left. She used to feel safe in Al's arms, the best place in the world to be, and now that comfort was like last year's fashion hanging in the closet. She just lived, took each day as a gift, lucky or unlucky, happy or sad. She stopped by after work to see her mother and father; when she hugged her father, Lena realized she was done arguing with the great Jacob Stolz. Regardless of what happened with Mendy Goldman, she felt better, *mended* – that's what Dr. Brine meant by his name, she guessed.

The Torah class was studying Genesis 23, the sacrifice of Isaac. As a test, Abraham is commanded to bring his son up to a mountain for a sacrifice, which turns out to be Isaac himself. Mendy explained varying opinions on the story: one was that, in the test, Abraham failed by not opposing the Almighty, in the way that the patriarch had just argued to save the inhabitants, strangers, in corrupt and godless cities. The last minute intercession by an angel saves Isaac and proves Abraham's loyalty. The lawyers had lots to say about culpability and intent. Lena listened.

After class, Mendy and Lena took the elevator down and walked out in front of the silver building.

“I don’t think that Abraham failed any test,” said Lena. “I think that Abraham tested the Almighty, who would have failed if Abraham had sacrificed Isaac. First, child sacrifice was part of idolatry, which monotheism opposed. Secondly, “ Lena pressed on, “Abraham was promised a future for his people. That would have died with Isaac.”

“Interesting. Even so,” said Mendy, “Abraham took an enormous risk.”

“Everything worth doing is risky,” Lena said. It's never or now, she thought. “Even love.”

“True,” sighed Mendy. “You love someone with all your heart and it does not work out.”

“Except for Reuben. That worked out. And now, I think you should take a risk on me.”

“Meaning, Lena?”

“It won't be in the Talmud, although maybe it is. I have to admit, so much is there. No, you have to look into your heart for this, Mendy. Do you ever think of me, when I'm not with you or with Reuben? If I went back to Seattle, would it make a difference in your life?”

Mendy stopped and looked at her. “Think about you? When I go to sleep and then when I wake up. When I pray, you come into my prayers. When I study, you are on the page. Forget about keeping you out of my dreams. If there is no blessing for finding you, then I need to make one up. Don't go anywhere. Upon my soul, I love you.”

“I think, Mendy, that you should marry me. “

Lena saw his face heat up. Hers was on fire too.

“What about observing our laws? It's so demanding.”

“I grew up with it. I'll do it,” she said. “All the holidays. Honoring the Sabbath. Everything. But I won't cover my hair like my sisters. My hair is my hair.”

“It's beautiful hair. It's a deal,” he said, surprising himself.

“So?”

Mendy swallowed hard. “Lena Stolz, please marry me.”

Lena kissed him for the first time.

“Yeshiva boy, I'd love to. Shall we make another Reuben?”

A few weeks after the wedding, Stolz's book came out to strong reviews. In *Shemoth: Names and Meaning in the Torah*, Stolz analyzed name changing. The Almighty, Stolz argued, is known by many names, and Abram changes his name to Abraham, Sari to Sarah, and Jacob to Israel. For Stolz, name changing was evidence that creation begun in Genesis is ongoing. Names evolve because character develops. The design of the universe is dynamic. In a state of becoming, we realize our earthly and divine potential.

Soon after, Eliora insisted that Stolz retire. He'd keep his class downtown and lecture four times a year, out of which, might come another book. His leaving opened a position in the religion department. At Eliora's suggestion, Stolz promoted his new son-in-law. He forwarded Mendy's completed dissertation to his own publisher, who said the work showed promise and sent a contract. With any luck, Mendy's career would be off to a good start.

Eliora also asked Stolz to stop by the local Jewish newspaper for a formal announcement of the marriage. After his class with the lawyers, Stolz walked to the offices of *The Advocate*. The lady behind the desk handed Stolz a pad and pencil. He thought for a while. Then Stolz began, "Rabbi Jacob and Eliora Stolz are pleased to announce the marriage of their daughter Lena Stolz to Rabbi Mendy Goldman."