

Anna Feit

Edith Greenbaum on Her Period While Trying to Keep Kosher on Passover

Revi'i, 15th of Nissan / Tuesday, 4th of April / 7:22 pm / Erev Passover

She sits in the break room of her work on a small plastic chair, facing the small window with her back to the gray kitchen. She clutches a Ziploc bag of salad in her hands, fingers sore from the harsh chemical cleaner she used to wipe down the vinyl table. Ziploc bag because her tupperware isn't kosher, instead tucked in a box under her bed. Chemical cleaner to rid the *chametz*.

From her bag (cleaned the day before, along with her clothes, sheets, body, and apartment), she pulls a box of generic-brand *matzoh*, an apple, and the *Kedem* grape juice whose price made her wince. It's expensive to be Jewish in America, where kosher goods need to be shipped from Israel. At the supermarket, she held a tub of Greek yogurt, vanilla flavored, in her palm, tracing over the ingredients list again and again. Unknown bacteria cultures swam in the plastic tub. From the hands that graze the udder to the fermenting, curdling milk to whining industrial machines, she imagined small flecks of *chametz* souring until her hands shook and the tub was put back in the case where it belongs.

Now, she takes a photo and sends it to her family, with a short text saying:

Chag sameach!

But the phone is quickly put away, as her ten-minute break time is decreasing by the second. In the following minutes, she conducts the fastest Seder she has been to in her life, drawing partly from memory and partly from a page she printed from the internet: The 10 Most Important Aspects of Any Seder. Can Seders be done with only one person? Do they need a minyan? Does it matter that the article was technically from a Jews for Jesus site, which she despises, but it was the most succinct instructions she could find?

She fumbles through the *dayenu* and thinks of her uncle's usual hands drumming the table, keeping them on beat. Wide fingers and simple thick gold wedding band deftly keeping rhythm as their family sings *dayenu!* for much longer than any *haggadah* instructs.

She uses her pinky finger to dot grape juice onto the side of the Ziploc bag, watching the drops run down its sides like rivers of blood.

Softly, so softly, she recites each prayer and thinks of the rest that she cannot sing, of the prayer for bitter herbs and a bowl of tears, the prayer for the candles (which are not allowed in the break room), the prayer of togetherness.

In the break room bathroom, already four minutes over her break, she crouches on the toilet and slides down her pants.

The smell registers before she can even look down. Red blood coats her underwear, starting at a streak at the top, pooling on the strip in the middle, and spreading out like tree roots on the wider part of the garment meant to cover her behind.

She cannot name the scent, can only recognize it when it is there. But it smells like death, like old uterine lining or blue cheese or uncovering damp soil when you lift a mossy rock in a forest. Or perhaps another month passed with no life in her stomach. That is not to say that the smell is unpleasant, but it certainly could never be made into a Bath & Body Works candle.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Is it kosher to say that? Is it kosher to swear? If she is swearing, isn't it better that it be while using another religion's G-d instead of her own? Although Jesus *was* Jewish. But it's more about what he represents. And Jesus isn't even their G-d, more like a demig-d! It still feels like a betrayal. But she has more pressing matters at hand.

Five more minutes. A new change of underwear. An extra thick pad with wings. A lot of toilet paper. Hands cleaned, she stands in front of the sink with two red pills in her palm. Is ibuprofen kosher for Passover? Maybe she should start calling it Pesach. The pills go down with a handful of tap water.

Chamishi, 16th of Nissan / Wednesday, 5th of April / 8:15 pm / The 2nd Seder

is her only real Seder this year. She has Wednesdays and Saturdays off like a weekend spread so thin it's untraceable. So, on a Wednesday evening, the second night of Passover, across an ocean from one-seder Israel, she sits tugging on a deep blue tablecloth on a table in the dining room in the home of her parents. Long-sleeved white dress to cover the tattoo her parents know about but choose to ignore. Hair up in a bun that kept the curls out of her eyes while she cooked. Candied carrots and brisket fat crusting under her fingernails that she picks at while looking around the room.

Grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, aunt, uncle, brother, brother, cousin, dog.

Dog whines and she frowns, because dog, like the rest of them, will not receive any meat scraps for two more hours, until the meal portion of the seder commences.

In fact, she had not received any food scraps since waking up in her childhood bedroom, having breakfast, and starting preparations immediately. Scrubbing toilet with mother (otherwise grandmother would notice). Clearing out *chametz* with father (he should have done that yesterday). Vacuuming around brothers (playing Minecraft). Hours of cooking in a house at last at grandparents-standard. Pain shooting up her feet straight to her light head.

Gummy frogs.

They laid on the granite kitchen countertop, tucked next to the mixing spoons. Her stomach full of pins, she grabbed one and popped it into her mouth before thinking. White nougaty belly with sweet green upper back, for a moment she almost relished it.

It was only once it dropped through her gut like a rock that she remembered: wheat and corn ground up and boiled into sticky glucose, poured into frog-shaped molds. Infinitesimal evils.

Feeling like she had broken some covenant with G-d, she dropped the bag on the table and walked away, came back, put the bag in the trash, came back, and kept cooking. If brothers had stashed any more snacks, grandmother wouldn't be happy.

At the seder table, she checks and rechecks for bloodstains, sliding fingers under her thighs over and over until mother glares at her to stop. She should have worn her black spandex underneath the dress. Maybe next year.

They sing *shehecheyanu*, but nothing feels new.

Shishi, 17th of Nissan / Friday, 6th of April / 7:55 am / Day 3

She wakes before the sun with sticky eyes and stiff fingers. In this time between dreams and reality, she feels the most untethered.

In dreams, she knows who she is. The stubborn girl with a changing environment and infinite worries.

In life, she can feel every pinprick and garbage truck, so much she gets lost in the sounds.

She pulls the blinds taut but doesn't turn on the lights. In the pitch black, she pulls a cotton t-shirt over her head and imagines it turning thinner than tissue paper and floating away. Its tendrils would seep into her ceiling.

She mutters the *Sh'ma*. Wraps and unwraps her *Tallis*. Recalls a poem once about the *Sh'ma*. Rabbinical advice. *Mishnah*. To envision the four corners of a *Tallis* as the four corners of a room and everything it encompasses. Her room does not have four corners, instead six-cornered and shaped like a blocky **⌘**. As a remedy, she envisions her far wall extending out to a complete rectangle, a shape more palatable for religious texts' tastes.

She brushes her teeth. Packs her work ID. Swallows bitter, powdery pills. Changes her pad. Dons nurse-grade sneakers and reading glasses and two extra pimple patches. Swallows extra ibuprofen. As a reward for completing daily tasks, she allows herself to enter the kitchen. Until that point, her routine could be completed with tap water and her closet.

Usually, for breakfast, she eats yogurt and granola. Yogurt for protein, granola to fill her stomach, and strawberries for the strange and unknown but vitally important nutrients that lie within. She molds herself to the standard of functioning adult human and feels the growing pains much later.

In preparation for a week without yogurt or grains or truly anything beyond meat and fruits and vegetables, she bought cartons of berries and a bunch of bananas. Carrots and chicken cutlets and thick slices of frozen mangoes for the abstract promises of chopping and cooking and blending into dishes she might be excited to eat. Despite her mental apathy for the selection of foods that awaits her, the pain of a hungry stomach stabs away.

The two steps that take her from her bedroom and bathroom to her kitchen make it apparent that her preparations had been for naught. A trail of ants, like a thin strand of black pearls, wraps into

her fruit bowl. Fruit flies hover around a half-used carton of raspberries she must have left out overnight to grow thick blankets of white and green mold.

Her kitchen smells like death.

For breakfast, she resigns herself to a bag of baby carrots. Their inconsistent textures almost make her gag, but they quickly fill her stomach. She puts the remainder of the leftover brisket in her bag for her lunch break and slips out the door, leaving the berries on the counter.

She can no longer eat the fruit, but why should the creatures suffer too?

Shabbat, 18th of Nissan / Friday, 6th of April / 8:40 pm / Day 4

She is let out late from work once again, despite repeated asks to her boss. *Friday nights are special*, she wants to tell her. No use.

Now, dripping wax tails adorn her two lone Shabbat candlesticks. A half-eaten plate of *matzoh brei* decorates her sink. A small *hamsa* chain grazes her collarbone. She slips out the door once more in a wisp of white dress and takes an elevator to her car in the garage.

She should have found an apartment closer to her congregation so she could walk there on Shabbat. Although, a lone woman walking at night may attract unwanted attention. And her commute time would triple.

Temple is in a residential neighborhood of the city, and the route she takes in her 20-year-old Toyota winds through a dark, wooded two-lane road. Sometimes, cars tailgate her until she pulls over. The speed limit is 25 mph, but with her white knuckles around her steering wheel, she is the only driver to go under 50.

Driving at night, she doesn't play music. She locks the car doors over and over to hear the *click*. She strains for the hum of other cars and listens to the tickle of heated air on her ears.

From the road, a white blur appears.

She slams on the brakes without swerving. Skidding tires let out an agonizing squeal. But at last, she stops in time, heart beating rapidly.

A coyote calmly stares through her windshield.

"*What the fuck,*" she whispers.

Why didn't he run? The coyotes in her neighborhood are skittish creatures, appearing at night with the raccoons and fighting over food scraps.

This one is stoic, with deep brown eyes and a thick fur coat that glimmers like scales in her headlights. She flashes them once, but he remains unmoving.

Slowly, another white creature emerges from the side of the road, trailed by two gray pups. A family. They sniff each other, in greeting or reassurance, she doesn't know. But the first coyote glances back at her one last time, unblinking, and then they are gone.

At *Kabbalat* services, she starts to think they were angels. *Shalom aleichem, mal'achei ha-sharet.*

Rishon, 19th of Nissan / Sunday, 8th of April / 10:20 am / Day 5

Typically, post offices are closed Sundays. The one that Edith works at is always closed then as well. But as the office Jew, who gets Saturdays off (a tremendous ask of the postal service, she knows), she is always scheduled on Sundays. She is often the only one scheduled Sundays, except the particularly unpleasant kind of Sundays (such as this one) where she finds herself under the suffocating presence of her boss.

Her boss, Jane, is not a bad person, she reasons, but certainly not excellent company. Jane is a woman in her forties, antagonized yet respected like middle-aged women often are, with perpetual spittle around her mouth and a hunched way of walking like she is always leaning forward in a rush.

It would stand to reason, of course, that a woman such as Edith, a woman in possession of a master's degree, would not count janitorial duties as part of her job description. And yet. (There is always a yet).

Sundays are the only days this sort of cleaning can get done, Jane reasons. The actual custodial staff is busy with actual custodial work like waxing floors and scrubbing toilets and wiping windows, she says. Who else has the time or opportunity to clean the wall of P.O. boxes without the interruptions of customers, she asks.

It is a tedious, repetitive task in a place already known for its repetitiveness and tediousness. Always more forms to fill out or stamps to order or packages to ship. Edith can usually enjoy Sunday shifts, where a space perpetually in transit can exist in stillness, between breaths. But with Jane typing away on an office computer in the back corner of her mind, she wipes down each mailbox handle with a tightness in her stomach unrelated to its incessant growling.

Sunday shifts start early, and Edith is not skilled at receiving less than eight hours of sleep and is even less skilled at falling asleep early. Early shifts and late rising and the paralyzing non-choice of kosher food means skipping breakfast only to fantasize about it while chemical cleaner burns the pads of her fingers.

Jane will be unhappy if she does not speed up, but Jane will also be unhappy if she is not thorough enough. She will also be unhappy if Edith does not submit her hours or complete this week's outreach project or send out the next supplies order or rewrite the code for the self-help station's payment system which is always on the fritz. All of these things, Jane will be unhappy about if Edith does not complete them, and yet here Edith is, disinfecting. Sometimes, Jane just watches. She never says anything, but Edith always experiences the distinct prickling that comes

with her grandmother's critiques or a doctor's discerning gaze. Clinical. Impersonal? Certainly examinational.

Like a butterfly pinned to a corkboard, Edith spends the rest of her shift with Jane, breathing out when she breathes in, and vice-versa. When Jane's back is turned, she lowers her hand to her pants, trying to re-adjust her pad. It never stays. On her lunch break, Edith eats a bowl of strawberries and carrots (rabbit food, she calls it). Jane clicks into the break room and points to a pan on the shared table.

"Look! Terry made cupcakes."

She looks at Jane. Jane looks at her.

Jane waves her hand in another gesture. "They're for everybody, so help yourself."

She has not spoken a word all day. Clearing a throat cracked from disuse, she manages to say, in a *no big deal please don't make this a big deal* way, "Oh, I can't. I'm keeping kosher for Passover."

Jane's face morphs into almost horror. Like she has committed a grave mistake. She's not a bad person.

"On any other day, I would love—"

"Ohhmyg-d I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Truly. My deepest condolences—apologies, that is."

She now sits there with Jane hovering over her, stuck as figures in a painting. Consoled; receiving consolement; a widow in mourning with the quick blue brushstrokes of a mourning veil. Does this require a *thank you*? Condolences reciprocated? She really does want a cupcake. They are red velvet, her favorite.

The moment passes, as does time. A beautiful April day had dawned through the glass door, but now in the dim afternoon, a thick drizzle has slunk in. Jane leaves at five o'clock on the dot, while Edith closes at half past seven. Clouds obscure the impending sunset.

She presses the buttons of the alarm system, locks the door, and checks it twice.

On her second check, hand slick from the raindrops of the door's handle, her foot slides on something smooth and dark in the rain.

Muddy water? Her eyes follow the dark stream along the sidewalk until they reach their destination: a pile of white fur darkened in the rain and thick blood like the reddish brown of a used pad.

She doesn't know how she knows, but she knows. She has never seen another coyote that color, a stark white in her headlights, wet brown eyes. It lays before her on the sidewalk in front of the post office, impossibly dead.

She digs her fingernails into the skin of her cheek, pinched around their destination: a protruding (painful) red spot.

“Shit,” she whispers as her pinching only makes the pimple angrier, redder. She stops for a moment and sees the imprints: fingernail crescents.

In the yellow light of her bathroom mirror, her face stares back at her. Waxen and oily on the forehead, dimpled and scarred on the cheeks. She could write a list, a whole catalog, of each crater and mountain on the surface of her moon face. That’s what she called it. Some people had moon faces, rough faces with dark features (like her unplucked eyebrows) and perpetual shadows (her bone structure never quite looked right). Some people, lucky people, had sun faces, like something glowed from their dermis, like a smooth sphere from every angle and orbit.

She stares, and her moon face stares back.

Approximately a week later, she would look back at this moment and scoff, chalk it up to crazy-period-hormone-induced acne and persistence. Somewhere in a recess of her mind, she knows this. But that fact doesn’t stop an angry tear dripping down her cheek, mixing with the blood and pus of her past half hour’s work, creating a salty, pinkish line down one side.

She pats her face with wettened toilet paper, smears it with stinging salves, and checks the clock. No time to eat breakfast, no time to pack lunch. She figures she can pick up something during her lunch break at the convenience store nearby the post office.

It is only once she arrives at work and sees the pan of half-eaten cupcakes does she remember that the convenience store almost certainly does not sell kosher.

She coats her hands with hand sanitizer and says hello to her coworkers and unlocks the front doors. Welcome, welcome, how may we help you?

Shlishi, 21st of Nissan / Tuesday, 10th of April / 5:27 pm / Day 7

“Don’t buy guacamole. Avocados are fatty.”

Her mother’s voice worms its way through her phone as she pushes her shopping cart through the fresh food section. Compared to other shoppers, her basket is bare: a singular bunch of bananas and a box of unsalted *matzoh* she knows she will never finish on her own. She was contemplating pairing her box of salted *matzoh*, currently tucked away in her kitchen at home, with guacamole and sour cream, but now it seems she will not.

“Maybe I need fat,” she tells her phone receiver. “It’s not like there’re any carbs I can eat.”

“Speaking of carbs, bananas are rich in them. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather eat a salad?”

She looks at her cart with a sigh and removes the bananas, replacing them with some apples. “A salad without dressing?”

“Salad dressing is kosher, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure. But when I can’t pronounce an ingredient on the label, I’m sure it’s not Passover-approved.” Even when she can read a nutrition label, there will be a line at the bottom stating that it is PRODUCED ON EQUIPMENT THAT ALSO PROCESSES EGG AND WHEAT. She wipes down her hands after touching those bottles.

She hears her mother rustling to sit up. “Adam!” she calls, “The salad dressing we had last night, the one I made with the nice kale.”

“What?” His voice sounds far away and garbled like he is in another room.

“You know. I made a salad last night for us to eat. It was a very nice meal. You remember, don’t you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Well, I used that new salad dressing that Samantha and her husband gave us a while back. Their son owns a farm north of here.”

“Who?”

“You know, Samantha. With the small waist and son who dropped out of college? Her husband likes hockey. She came over last week. I showed her our new landscaping.”

“Samantha and Bill.” If nothing else, her father remembers someone else who likes hockey.

“Yes, Samantha and Bill. Anyways, their drop-out son’s salad dressing was kosher for Passover, right? We had it just last night, with our nice kale and green serving bowl. A lovely meal.”

“Oh, right. Yes, kosher.”

“See, Eddie? Kosher.”

In the span of her parents’ conversation, Edith had put back the bananas and the guacamole into her cart and moved on to the eggs, inspecting their prices. “Okay, mama. I believe you.”

“Anyways, I have to go. The Belmans are coming over for dinner tonight and I have to finish the duck. Do you want me to send you the recipe? It’s very good. It uses a handful of walnuts for the side salad, but I halved that and added tomatoes instead. You should eat more tomatoes. Your Great Aunt Edith, the one we named you after, ate a lot of tomatoes when my father was growing up and that’s how she survived her lung cancer for so long.”

“Okay, mama. I’ll look at the recipe.”

“Love you. Stay safe.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

She winces at the total on the bottom of her receipt as the grocery clerk finishes bagging her groceries. She steps forward to walk with him to her car, but the next instant she is almost doubled over in pain.

The clerk notices she has stopped and turns toward her, one hand on the cart handle. “Are you okay, ma’am?” When did she become a ma’am? In fairness, the clerk cannot be older than a high school junior, with an ill-fitting apron and acne to match hers.

She is unable to speak, just nod as she continues walking.

Waves of pain crash within her, a mix of dull and sharp, uniform and uneven. She imagines a creature dragging its claws along her uterine walls, desperate to escape. Then her thoughts leave her head and more than anything in the entire world she wants to condense herself into a ball and surgically remove her torso from her body and never stand up again.

For those with a normal cycle, (although her doctor told her to refrain from using the word “normal” to describe people’s bodies), the seventh day of a period marks its end. Not for Edith. Her blood flow peaks on day two and her cramps peak on day seven, finally abating by day ten. Like any vicious, painful cycle, such as taxes or giving birth, it is easy to lose all memory of such pain by the next time it comes around. With that loss of memory, it is easy to forget to take precautionary ibuprofen or schedule a gyno appointment (because this level of pain cannot be normal, right?). Like any vicious, painful cycle, it cycles.

Impossibly, miraculously, like always, she still walks. Her primal urge is to cut open her stomach, but she still walks.

The automatic doors *whoosh* open to the parking lot. The sound is what she notices first.

A million thuds as ice pellets rain from the sky. Unlike the soothing sound of rain, a late April hailstorm is disjointed and grating. She and the clerk brace themselves in the doorway, wind and bits of ice cutting their faces. Her curls dance around her face.

Magic, is what she thinks at first. But it is G-d’s wail, a guttural scream. She stands, a girl with a screaming stomach in the face of a screaming sky.

Revi’i, 22nd of Nissan / Wednesday, 11th of April / 11:34 am / Day 8

Her blinds are drawn to block the sun, but slivers still peek through, revealing hidden worlds of dust particles. Little miracles. She stares at them floating for hours, curled in a warm tangle of sheets and sweat.

Her weighted blanket and her heating pad and her prescription-strength ibuprofen were not enough, so twenty minutes ago she found her old set of hand weights and rested them above her abdomen. The weight makes her breaths shallow and long.

She should get up. She should brush her teeth and cook herself breakfast and do her laundry and wash these sheets that she can feel beneath her, grating with crumbs. But her limbs are impossibly heavy. Every blink feels like a marathon.

She presses the dumbbells further into her stomach, but it does not help with the new wave of pain. She thinks of an old song she used to hear on the radio stations near the mountain roads. She would stick her hand out the car window, letting the wind whip smoothly around her fingertips

like an old friend. Her mother would turn down the music and tell her to stop, that it was dangerous.

“I knew a little girl once,” she would say, “who stuck her head out of the window on highways like a dog. One day, her parents were driving along a beautiful wooded road on the bottom of a cliff. The road suddenly took a sharp turn and her head was smashed into the rockside. They had to re sew her nose to her face and it never looked the same. She still has a long scar along here,” and she would trace a line on the right side of her browbone to the top corner of her lip.

Horrified at her mothers’ words, she would slip her hand back in through the window. Her mother knew how to protect her, even then.

She reaches a stiff hand to her phone to dial a number.

“Mama? Do you think you could come over? I’m having a—” she pauses to consider her options, takes a glance around her dark, dirty room, “—bad day.”

“Of course I can,” her mother cooed from the receiver. “We’ll have a girl’s day. What movie do you want to watch? I’d make you a smoothie, but I went to the supermarket today and they were all out of kale. *Kale*. There’s a crop shortage wherever they grow it. California, maybe? Something about a pest infestation? Can you imagine? Who runs out of kale? Why haven’t they learned to keep a storage bunker for these types of things? You know, me and your father keep a year’s worth supply of grain and seed, just in case.”

“Thanks, mama. And I’m fine with having a smoothie without kale, like strawberry mango.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Mangoes have too much sugar.”

Chamishi, 23rd of Nissan / Wednesday, 11th of April / 11:30 pm / Passover is Over

She carefully shifts herself out from under the security of her her mother’s soft, warm arm to sit up and rub her eyes, sticky from sleep. She can hear a wash of rain on her window and light snores emerging from the other side of the bed. She does not try to adjust her eyes to the dark as she pads across the laminate floors to the kitchen, letting her eyelids and eyelashes droop over her vision.

The black of night is soft, woven through the air. She braces herself as she pries open the refrigerator door to a small burst of cool air, expecting the spell to be broken. Instead, she is met with gaping darkness. That afternoon, her mother had bought two bags of groceries and stocked her fridge with cream cheese and carrots and cans of sparkling water. Now, the food sits on unlit plastic shelves in as shadows, sillhouetted by the small amount of light coming through her kitchen window.

As soon as her brain registers the problem, she quickly shuts the fridge door and walks towards the window to peer outside. Her neighbors’ windows are dark, the streetlights absent. All is still.

She wakes up to a half-charged phone and her microwave clock flashing an error code. Praying, she opens her refrigerator door once more. Pokes at the carrots. Sniffs the cream cheese. She is met with mush and an unpleasant aroma, and she soon faces a barren fridge and full garbage can.

She is now running ten minutes late to her shift and she still has not had breakfast or packed a lunch. Her mind flashes briefly to her emergency stash of cookies, tucked away under her bed with the rest of the *chametz*. Then she imagines the face of her mother when she is woken up before 8:00 am, and decides to leave her apartment, empty-stomached and empty-handed.

As she drives to work, she receives a call from her mother.

“Eddie? Where are you?” She sounds frantic.

“I’m fine, mama. I’m in the car, driving to work. I didn’t want to disturb you while you slept.”

“No, it’s not that. Your brother’s in the hospital.”

Shishi, 24th of Nissan / Thursday, 12th of April / 10:49 pm / 1 Day Post-Passover

I’m so sorry, there’s nothing we can do. In hospitals, tragedy is happening all around. The doctor’s voice and distant sobbing seeps into the hallway where Edith sits.

Clad in a glowing white cloak, the doctor exits the doorway across from her, clutching a sparse clipboard with pale hands. He starts at the sight of her: a crown of greasy curls and an old college sweatshirt, sipping a styrofoam black tea. Her feet are crossed at the ankle and her free hand is splayed across her knee. She makes brief eye contact with him before he lifts his chin in a nod and shuffles away.

Her tea has grown lukewarm, grains from the teabag settling on her tongue. The caffeine makes her hands shake and her mind scattered. The hospital bathroom only had thick, starchy tampons, one of which she can now feel inside of her when she crosses her legs. But when she closes her eyes, leans back on the vinyl chair cushion, and tries to get some sleep, she can almost make out the murmur of machines coming from her brother’s room and the hysterics of her grandmother.

“Hey, Eddie. Have you eaten?” Her mother softly clicks into the hallway, red-rimmed eyes and worn leather fingers stroking a silver chain around her neck.

Her father appears too. The hockey game playing on the TV above her brother’s bed must have ended. “His condition is hasn’t changed, but I can sit out here while you girls eat, in case the doctor comes back with any news.”

With a surprise, she realizes she is reluctant to leave what felt like a guardpost. However, her mother is right. She has not eaten anything in over 24 hours, save the packet of almonds she found in her purse. She pushes herself up, stretching out stiff muscles and a crick in her neck.

It may be eleven o’clock at night, but the only indication of temporality is the closed cafe in the hospital’s small cafeteria. The vending machines have a sparse collection of sandwiches, which she almost skips over before she realizes with a start that Passover is over.

She breaks her Passover fast quickly and without chewing, letting the stale bread and mayonnaise of the tuna salad sink to the bottom of her throat, washing them down with purple Gatorade. She finishes it in three bites. She looks over at her mother on the other side of the linoleum table, picking at her Greek salad.

“Why do you call me Eddie?”

Her mother glances up with empty eyes. “Oh, I don’t know, hon. It’s just what we would always call Aunt Edith. She never cared for her full name, or for much of anything, really. She was always a fighter...” she trails off as tears start to form.

“She sounds like a pleasant woman.” She abruptly stands up, scraping her chair on the floor and hitting her calf with a wince. Throws her wrapper in the trash and strides towards the exit, using the side of her arm to push open the door to the white of the hallway. For a moment, the rush of quiet and cool air hits her face. She hopes her mother won’t follow her.

In her back pocket, her phone vibrates with a flutter.

The caller ID reads *Jane*. Her heart jumps to her throat.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Edith. How are you doing?” Her voice is level and smooth, like a glass vase.

“I’m fine. How are you?” She is not fine. But what else should she say?

“Excellent. Thank you for answering so late at night, but closing took longer than expected, and there was some car accident on a ramp. Traffic is always a pain in this city, but—”

Edith’s vision blurs. She places a hand on the cool of the wall to steady herself, tries not to think about her brother, his car, her brother in his car, or her brother in his car on the ramp splayed out on the rough concrete and tire skids.

“—but I really called to talk about your attendance,” Jane says, still talking. “I hate to have to say this Edith, but it has become unacceptable. We require at least a two hours’ notice of any lateness or absence to your shift, and today was the third time in the past month that you failed to meet that requirement.”

Unacceptable? Failed? The words send needles through her upper arms, her chest, the ridge on her neck connecting to her spine.

A snooze button pressed one too many times. A road closed for construction. Her fault. They were both her fault. Why couldn’t she have done better? Why couldn’t she have been better? Didn’t she want her job? “But today, my brother, he’s in the hospital. I had to...” she trails off. She has no defense for the other times. What would be the point?

“I’m aware, but we have this policy for a reason. Our office cannot function without a full staff. Unfortunately, this was your third strike. I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.”

The fluorescent lights seem to dim.

“You’ll need to clear your things out of your locker by tomorrow at five pm. Anything you leave after that will be discarded. Your last paycheck will arrive on schedule next Wednesday, but if you have any issues with that feel free to contact our billing office.” Jane has done this before. Her voice is level and smooth, like a plastic vase.

Edith has not done this before. She has never been fired. When Jane finishes rattling off her list, all she can say is, “Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow,” and the call is over.

It takes her mind a minute to catch up to her body. She is moving down the hallway, on the original path she planned to take out of the cafeteria before the interruption of her phonecall.

She tries not to think about her work locker or her Great Aunt Edith. Tries not to think about the cafeteria sandwich she ate and the amount of calories in two slices of sourdough. Tries to forget the strange texture of bread on her tongue and the rough sheets of a hospital bed where her oldest brother lays and occasionally writhes around like he’s swimming with handcuffs on. Jane’s stare and blood staining white coyote fur and colonies of yellow mold on her apples and the smell of burnt tires on highway ramps and IV fluids.

The bathroom door, the pearly moon of the toilet bowl shines for a perfect moment before her stomach unfurls like a flower and a stream of bitter, fishy vile spews out. Almonds and tuna salad and feta cheese and black tea swirl into a stew. Her hiccups turn to gags and she throws up again, again, again, until her gums are sore and stomach acid drips from her lips, and she takes a handful of rough toilet paper and dabs her lower eyelids, the corners of her mouth.