

My little cup

Riley McTeer

The name feels foreign on my tongue. I print it in my planner, on the two o'clock line.

Riley McTeer

It's the name of a stranger. I draw a heart around it.

"I love you, Riley," I practice saying.

Riley McTeer Riley McTeer Riley McTeer

I write it in my best handwriting.

"I love you, Riley," I say again. I love you, but that name!

Shanti has backed down. She's not going through with the ceremony.

"We used the initial, we know who she's named for," she says, over the phone, of course; she still doesn't like to confront me in person.

I press, but lightly. "You both said you'd be willing to have her named. It's not that big a thing, not like a bris, just going to the temple--"

"Mom, I haven't been inside that temple since Dylan's bar mitzvah, and neither have you." It's not exactly true, but close enough. "I don't need to bring my baby to some stranger I've never met so he can say a blessing for a child he'll never see again."

"Maybe we could do something at home," I say.

"Mom, I'm not doing something, I'm not doing anything. We've had this discussion. Greg and I are absolutely in agreement, so please just accept it."

I bite my tongue (my most important parenting skill) to stop the thoughts before they take the form of words and burst from my mouth. She's still a little Jewish girl, I'm thinking. Her name may be Riley McTeer, but she's still my little Jewish granddaughter.

I've been through this naming business before, but from the other end. Shanti's Jewish name is Shayna, for my mother's mother, my Bubbie, who lived with us until she died when I was five.

"Shanti?" my mother said. "Why not just call her Shayna?"

"Shanti means peace," I told her, for the tenth time.

"So," she said, "Shayna means pretty."

"Peace is more important to us than pretty right now," I said. It was 1970.

Eighteen months later, we gave our son the name Dylan, at that time still exotic.

"The Welsh use the name David, you know," my mother said.

"That is his name, his Jewish name," I said. "His English name is Dylan"

Now in 1999, four years after my mother died, her granddaughter has been given her initial.

I hold on to the fact that officially Riley is Jewish. She continues the female line, the carriers of Jewishness and mitochondrial DNA. It's dizzying to realize those chains of molecules in me replicate my mother's and her mother's, on and on, back through time, then forward, through Shanti and now Riley, the same pattern repeating and repeating.

And the names weave in and out, across time and space, another kind of template. I make a mental list, the generations of women in my family:

Rochel bat Shayna--my mother

Basha bat Rochel --I was named for a great-aunt

Shayna bat Basha--my daughter

Rochel bat Shayna--what it should be, what it will be, with or without a rabbi. Rochele, it will have to be my secret name for you.

Kenny turns on the tv as soon as he gets home. He's obsessed with the details of the impeachment and its aftermath. He takes notes when he reads the papers, he tapes CNN and Jim Lehrer. He's planning a new seminar for fall semester. I have to wait for commercials to communicate.

"She's making it clear," Kenny says when I inform him that Shanti cancelled the naming. "She's picking and choosing." He's patronizing me, explaining to me in that overtly patient tone.

"Doesn't it matter to you?" I ask. I already know the answer.

"What I don't get is why it matters so much to you," he says. "We have Passover, we have Chanukah. Riley will have all that, too."

We've had longer versions of this conversation dozens of times. Kenny's theory is that we live in a cultural marketplace. People select what's meaningful to them from their own culture, and from other cultures, for that matter. We had a bat mitzvah for Shanti, a bar mitzvah for Dylan, and Kenny joined in enthusiastically: it was a rite of passage, it had meaning. He likes the meaning of Passover; he's even added his own riffs to our Seder over the years. But if something isn't relevant to the present, it will disappear. He's said it a hundred times.

He de-mutes, and I check on the pasta. At the next commercial, I grab the remote and press the mute button again.

"Don't you care about passing something on to your grandchild? Something Jewish?"

"What do I have to pass on?" he asks. "A moral stance? What's Jewish about that?" He finally turns away from the tube. "She can get that from her other grandparents, the illustrious minister and his wife. You're certainly impressed with their virtue!"

He glares at me. I'm taken aback by his vehemence. I admire Greg's parents. As far as I know, Kenny does, too. Charles and Eugenia are intelligent, down-to-earth people. They live

outside of Fresno; their congregation is made up mostly of poor families bypassed by the economic boom. The McTeers love Shanti like a daughter. I think they're actually delighted to have Jews in the family, though they do seem disappointed that we can't discuss the finer points of ritual or Biblical interpretation.

Kenny's attitude bewilders me. "Why are you talking like that about our *machutunim*?" I ask.

Kenny laughs. "*Machutunim!*" he says. "I've really cracked him up." "*Oi vei is mir*, the *machutunim*." He uses a jokey Yiddish accent and shrugs his shoulders up and down.

Wolf Blitzer's mouth is moving, so Kenny reclaims the remote and blasts the sound back on.

"I'm glad you decided not to cut your hair off," he says a little later when I plunk his plate of pasta down on the table. "I'd hate to see you in one of those wigs."

Kenny and I met at Berkeley. I was a junior studying languages, he was a grad student with a draft exemption due to a minor spinal problem. He raged against this twisted bit of luck--it destroyed his opportunity to say no to the establishment. He raged, too, at his parents, who, overjoyed at his exemption, only wished he'd chosen law school over poli sci.

He wasn't handsome, but intense, interesting, alive--and Jewish. When I think back to those days, I realize that the fact of his Jewishness provided a shortcut to intimacy. Because he was Jewish I believed and trusted that he was believable and trustworthy. How naive I was! My best friend Susan married a nice Jewish doctor. She finally left him when he broke her arm.

Kenny and I consciously raised our kids with a respect for all cultures. We hated the condescension we'd heard from our parents when they spoke about "the goyim" in a particular tone of voice. I even used Susan as an example when I talked to my kids about marriage.

"Of course I would like it if you married someone Jewish," I often said, "but Jewish isn't everything. The most important thing is to find a kind, caring person who shares your values."

And I meant it, every word.

Machutunim It's not the first Yiddish word to surface recently, just the first I've said out loud to Kenny. Maybe saying the name, *Rochele*, started it. Maybe pronouncing the *ch* has loosened some constriction. *Rochele*. There's a melody to it, unlike the sounds of English or of the French and Spanish I taught for twenty years. *Rochele*. I feel something, a tear or sob, waiting at the back of my throat, waiting to be said, or maybe sung.

In her white and yellow room I'm indulging in my new hobby, gazing at my first grandchild. The slight May breeze stirs the sheer curtains. Sunlight casts the delicate shadow of her fine fringe of lashes onto her cheek. Tiny muscles twitch near her mouth. She wakes up slowly. The various colors of her parents' and grandparents' eyes have formed a kaleidoscope of greens and blues and golden browns in hers. Damp tendrils of dark hair curl on her smooth forehead.

"She is exquisite," I email Susan. "And smart! She watches everything, tries to imitate. She takes the spoon from my hand, sticks it in the pears (which Shanti purees herself, of course), and aims for my mouth. Not even four months old! I feel like the woman in a joke--the Bubbie who can't shut up about her gorgeous, brilliant, perfect grandchild."

When Riley is seven months old, Shanti goes back to work half-time, sharing a teaching position with another young mom. I tell her, "You and Greg are both so tired at the end of the week. Why not bring the baby and come for dinner Friday night?"

For the first Friday night I cook more than I did the whole previous month. I make soup, chicken, kugel. I buy a challah. I buy a chocolate cake. I put a white cloth on the table.

"So much food!" Shanti says. She looks at me, that look a daughter gives her mother, studying my face for clues of what I might be up to.

The second Friday night I blow it. I light the Sabbath candles. I say the blessing, circling my hands above the flames, but even with my eyes closed, I can feel Shanti burning up behind me.

"I don't appreciate this, Mom," she says, her lips compressed and hard, her voice tight with the anger she's barely controlling. I'm holding the baby, showing her the light of the candles, how it dances when I wave my hand in the air. She's fascinated.

"Not very subtle, Barb," Kenny says later, after the almost silent meal, the quick departure.

"I meant it as something beautiful," I tell him. "My grandmother lit candles every Friday night." In my mind I can see my grandmother's worn face, the light from the candles glinting off her glasses. I feel graceless and guilty, playing tricks instead of creating a special moment.

"You're turning them off, pushing stuff you don't even believe in," Kenny says. He predicts they won't come back. He nods smugly as he hands me the phone. "Shanti," he mouths.

"Fridays just don't work," my daughter tells me. "If you want to have us over, Sundays are much better." Neither of us is willing to name what this really is about.

"Now I feel like I'm in another kind of joke," I email Susan. "It's like that recurring dream-- I'm taking a final exam, and I've never even been to the class. I'm flunking Jewish and Mother."

"Don't make such a big deal about it," she answers back. She's never remarried, hasn't had the pleasure of raising children. "You are who you are. Riley will get it."

I guess she's right. But what is it Riley will get?

Shanti has a child care crisis. The woman who babysits for Riley has some family obligation on Wednesday afternoons, the only afternoon that Shanti needs her this semester.

"I hate to ask," Shanti says, "but could you watch her, it's only for three hours?"

"Of course," I say. I'm cool. I don't let on how thrilled I am.

"You dont mind?" she asks.

"Mind? Mind spending time with my granddaughter?" I laugh at the idea.

Now she is mine, three hours a week that usually stretch to almost five. And now Wednesday night is family dinner night, but it's pizza and a salad or Kenny fires up the grill and does his famous barbecued salmon. No kugel. No candles.

In our hours alone together, we play peekaboo, I read her books, I feed her, and change her, and lie next to her while she falls asleep, and I ask myself: what do I have that I can give her?

"Rochele," I whisper in her small, pink ear as she sleeps, as though subliminally she will absorb this other identity.

My mother's face comes to me in a dream. She's smiling her kind smile, not the one that always made me feel she saw right through me. She's wearing gleaming silver eyeshadow to signify some grand occasion. Around her shoulders she holds a shawl or blanket, woven reds and purples, lacy and yet warm. She spreads her arms. The shawl unfurls, feathers out above her. She twirls round and round, like a child seeking the disorienting pleasure of dizziness.

I awaken with a start. Riley is sitting up, staring at me, her eyes huge, luminous in the shadowy afternoon light shifting across my bed. A single shining thread of saliva hangs suspended from her bottom lip. She reaches out, puts her little hand on my arm.

"Hello, *tsotskele*," I say.

"Suddenly I'm spouting Yiddish," I email Susan. "It's like invasion of the bodysnatchers."

"Sounds like you're getting in touch with something from your past." Susan is a social worker. I can always count on her to track my unconscious. "Didn't your grandmother speak Yiddish to you when you were a little girl?" As if I'm too dense to make the connection.

"Yes," I reply, "she spoke Yiddish, yes, I seem to be channeling her or at least the remnant of Yiddish left in my dying brain cells. What a measly legacy--a few vaguely remembered words of Yiddish. At least Ill do a good job of teaching her French and Spanish."

Susan emails back. "You make it all so heavy. Cant you just enjoy the baby?"

A week later she emails me again. "I had an idea--Ill come down and take you to visit my Aunt Birdie--my mom's oldest sib--we had that big party for her 90th last year. Did you ever meet her? She was a Yiddish poet--or still is, I should say. I think it will help your process."

Susan is my best friend, but before I say yes to her I have to go through my annoyance that she's doing an intervention, Aunt Birdie-therapy to fix my problem, if there even is a problem.

Susan drives down from Bodega Bay on a Wednesday so we can take the baby with us. Aunt Birdie lives in a little Craftsman bungalow in Berkeley, a couple of miles from the University.

"Remind me what were doing here," I whisper to Susan.

Before she can answer, a tall, heavy woman in a white uniform opens the door. We introduce ourselves, and she leads us out to the backyard. A few remaining red leaves blaze on an overgrown maple near a small flagstone patio, where Birdie sits in a straight-backed wooden chair. Her eyes are closed, her face turned toward the sun that hovers between two neighboring houses.

"Aunt Birdie," Susan says in a quiet voice when were still six feet away.

"Shoshke," Birdie says, "I heard the doorbell." She opens her eyes. "So this is Barbara" She peers at me. "No, I never met you before. And this is the Irish baby?"

I start to correct her but change my mind. Scottish or Irish isnt the issue. Susan bends down to kiss her aunt's cheek. I perch on the edge of a worn teak bench with a missing slat and wobbly legs. I hold Riley tightly on my lap, take her favorite toy, a little wooden book, out of my purse.

Birdie studies and sniffs the contents of the bakery box we brought. She sends Susan into the

house to find some plates and silverware. "Bring water,too," Birdie calls after her.

While I make small talk, Riley stares at Birdie, her bright white hair, her deep brown eyes. The name fits: she's like a bird. Her wrists look not much bigger than Riley's. Her sallow skin is pulled tight against the bones of her jaw. Deep furrows outline her mouth, cut into her forehead. She's wearing velcro-fastened Reeboks, pale blue with silver trim. The pom-poms of her tennis socks protrude over the heels. One is dangling by a thread.

Susan reappears, carrying plates, forks, a pile of apple strudel, on a yellow plastic tray. She hands me water in a glass streaked with a grayish film. I take a polite sip. I share a piece of strudel with Riley. Susan sits down, recites the endless news about her brother and their many cousins--jobs, children, illnesses, somebody named Michael who was interviewed on NPR. Birdie bends toward her, nods, asks a question. I feel like an intruder at someone else's tea party.

Riley makes herself at home. She climbs down from my lap, inches her way around the bench, then crawls across the patio. She hoists herself upright and grabs the side of Birdie's chair.

"Dada," she says, as she executes a series of fast, jerky pliés.

"Leave her, please," says Birdie, when I start to retrieve the baby. "It's good to see a little one. So eager, everything is so important." She softly ruffles the baby's curls with her wizened brown hand. "So much lost," she says, her voice so quiet I'm not sure that I've heard.

We all fall silent, even Riley. I wonder what Birdie is remembering.

The low autumn sun abruptly deserts us, consigning us to shadow. Almost immediately the nurse comes out with a thick sweater and helps Birdie put it on.

"It's five past four, Mrs. G," she says. "We need to get you comfortable before I go."

"All right, Mrs. Cruz, we're finished. Right, girls?" Birdie asks.

Im startled; we've barely been here half an hour. I look at Susan, who shrugs.

"What about the book, Aunt Birdie? Your poems?"

"The book?" she says. "She doesnt need it. You dont need it," she says, looking at me.

"Please," Susan says, taking Birdie's hand, "I really wanted you to give Barb your book."

"Okay, come with me inside, we'll get it." She leans on Susan, and I lean over Riley so she can grasp my fingers and practice her walking. The four of us move unsteadily into the house. In the crowded living room, shelves jammed with books line three of the walls from floor to ceiling.

"Up there," says Birdie, pointing to a shelf just above my head. I take down one slim paperback from a stack of six. A River of Story is printed on the spine in red. I open it at random.

"It's Hebrew and English?" I ask.

"Yiddish and English," Birdie says. "A brilliant young woman worked with me to translate."

On the back cover is a photo, Birdie Gottlieb in middle age: her delicate face looks serious, determined, her dark hair is pulled back in a bun, her bright eyes burn, even in graytones.

Her hands are too arthritic to autograph the book. She looks exhausted as we say goodbye.

In the car Susan leafs through the poems. "Im sure I once had a copy of this," she says.

"Read me something," I say.

"Okay," she says after a minute, angling the book to catch the light. "Here's the first poem."

A river of story rushes beneath your feet.
A river of song flows underneath your feet.

Put your ear to the earth
and listen.

Drink from the river.
Its water is your blood.

Carry back the stories in your little cup.
Carry back the songs in your little heart.

Im concentrating on driving, so I ask her to read it again.

"I can really see the images, but what does it mean?"

"Well, what do you think it means, Barb?" she answers.

"Why do therapists always have to answer a question with a question?" I ask, exasperated.

I maneuver through a lane change in the late afternoon traffic. Riley has surrendered to sleep; her body appears soft, boneless, held upright only by the straps of her carseat.

"I think it means," I say, finally, "that the stories are there, the stories about my grandmother, for instance, and that we can learn from them. Could that be it? Maybe Im not getting it."

"Maybe its always the same stories, maybe were not as different as we like to think we are."

I feel a great sadness. "So much is lost, did you hear when she said that?"

"Yeah, and she also said," Susan reminds me, "everything is so important."

After a while I ask her, "What did you think was going to happen when you planned this?"

"I didnt know," she says. "I just had a gut feeling that we should go."

"It was pretty weird," I say. "But also--" I search for a word, "also moving. I was moved."

"That's not such a bad thing," Susan says, "to be moved."

Tomorrow is Riley's first birthday. We have more room, so Shanti's making the party here.

Last month was Riley's first Christmas. I went to a program one night at the temple, "The December Dilemma: Grandparenting the Interfaith Child". The message was that we should role model celebrating events on the Jewish calendar. I guess I had unrealistic expectations. I was hoping for enlightenment or courage or a different point of view.

I did Chanukah the way I always have--we lit the menorah and had a big latke party for

family and friends. Shanti also lit candles in her home, and I made sure that we showed up on several nights with little presents for Riley--a book, a sparkling dreidl, an outfit from Gymboree. We also bought her a bond, and I explained Chanukah gelt to my son-in-law.

The Christmas part was hard, I have to say, hard to have to bite my tongue as I watched Riley enthralled by the beautiful little tree in the corner of their living room. But I survived.

Shanti just pulled up. She's bringing the cake over today--it's too big for her refrigerator. I hear the door slam and then the sound of Riley's little feet running into the house. She points out her shiny new shoes to me before she raises her arms to be picked up.

"Mom," Shanti says from the kitchen, "the strangest thing: every time we drive up to your house Riley keeps saying Ossa, ossa! What is that?"

It takes me a minute before I realize.

"*Tsotskele*," I say. "It's what I call her-- *tsotskele*."

Shanti walks into the family room where I'm sitting on the floor with Riley.

"You call her 'soskele?'" She has that look.

"*Tsotskele*," I say, "it's Yiddish, I guess it's like honey or sweetie. My grandmother used to say it." I don't feel defensive. Why should I? I have a right to express myself.

"You never spoke Yiddish to us," Shanti says. I can't identify the emotion in her voice.

"That's a long story," I say. "I'll tell you some time."

She stoops and gathers the baby into her arms.

"In fact," I say as I stand up, "I'm taking a class at the Lehrhaus--Yiddish Women Poets in Translation." I've blurted it out instead of waiting for the right time. My heart is pounding.

"Whatever, Mom," she says, jiggling the baby into position against her body. "I'll call you, but we should be back around eleven."

I walk outside with them, kiss the baby's ripe-peach cheek. "Good-bye, *tsotskele*," I say. I kiss my daughter on the corner of her mouth. "Good-bye, *tsotskele*," I say again.

My daughter looks at me, her whole face on alert. She shakes her head, irritated, and then, almost against her will, her beautiful smile breaks through. And suddenly, I am in this moment, in the sweet surprise of the January sun, filled to overflowing.