

AMEN

by

Megan Vered

I knew that Mom would not linger. My impression is that people die the way they live, and Mom was efficient. I called my siblings and all the grandchildren that lived nearby. “If you want to say good-bye, go. Now.” I called James and told her I could feel Mom leaving, like a tug on my umbilical cord.

“Ahh, Megan, I’m so sorry. Do you want me to come?”

“How could I do this without you?”

“I’ll be on the next train.”

Relief. I would not be alone.

It was December 27—the day after my birthday and two days after Christmas—the anniversary of my father’s death. Mom had recently told the nurse, “It’s been almost thirty years. I really miss my husband, you know.”

When I arrived at the skilled nursing facility, she was surrounded by grown grandchildren. They soothed and stroked her, as she had done for them so many times in the past. Tiny in the huge hospital bed, I could feel her soaking in their love with her eyes.

Soon we heard a light knock on the door. James entered, wearing a dark green suit, dressed like she was going to church. She held me close, pressed her lips to my cheek. She stood over Mom’s frail body, held her hand. “Mrs. Hesterman, you are one of my best friends.” She pulled Mom’s favorite reading chair to the head of the bed, draped herself with a blanket, and

remained by my mother's side until morning. I knew she was praying, and after all we'd been through together, it was perfectly reasonable to have Jesus in the room with us.

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When I was young, my mother—a first-generation American Jew bruised by the Holocaust—often said, “I wouldn’t trust that person to hide me in her closet.” Raised in Boston in the Jewish ghetto, she was leery of gentiles and extremely offended when a Christian woman in our neighborhood sent a converted Jew to visit, in the hopes that Mom would accept Jesus as her savior. Jesus did not have a seat at my family table. Not until James Ella arrived. James was raised in Alabama by her Baptist grandmother. Her most-common utterance was, “In the name of Jesus, amen.”

I met James when I was five. The first thing I noticed when she walked through the front door was how tall she was next to my diminutive mother. Her face was expressive, the kind that could tell stories. She stooped down until our eyes matched. “Hi, I’m James.”

I held tightly to the pleat of my mother's skirt, worrying the dense fabric between tiny fingers. “James—that’s a funny name for a girl.” In my mind I pictured a boy in my kindergarten class we called Jimmy, whose real name was James.

“You’re right about that.”

When she smiled, I could almost count her beautiful white teeth. Now that she was up close, I noticed the scar that cut across her forehead, past her eyebrow, and down into her cheek. I remembered I hadn’t introduced myself. “I’m Megan. It’s a funny name too, but more like a girl than yours.”

Mom and James laughed, I supposed because of what I said, though I didn’t think I’d said

anything funny.

Eve came up from the basement playroom, thumb in mouth, stuffed bunny in tow. James bent down to say hello, and then Eve was up above me in James's arms, bunny ears flopping. I was normally the one who threw myself into strangers' arms, but not this time. Even though this one appeared beautiful and friendly, I decided I would keep an eye on her.

It was the end of summer, and we'd just returned from our family camping trip to Sand Pond. Hours on the beach, tumbling in and out of cool green water, rolling in the coarse sand, playing hide-and-seek in the trees. Back home with the dust of the Sierras ground into our pores, pine needles stuck to our hair, and a mountain of laundry by the washing machine.

My father came home from collecting rent at one of the apartment buildings he owned in Oakland to find my mother elbow-deep in dirty clothes. She normally had a housekeeper to help her, but the most recent one had vanished.

"I need help!" Mom cried.

My father replied, "There's this one woman I've seen. Her apartment is immaculate every time I go there. I think she's looking for work."

"Bring her to me! Now!"

Dad and his driver, Lemuel, took off and before long, returned to the house with James. She tackled that mountain of laundry—which was just the beginning—and stayed with us for the next twelve years. After she arrived, I could feel my mother relax, like James was the one she'd been waiting for all along. From that day on, Mom—even though she didn't believe in God—described James as a godsend, and even though she didn't trust gentiles, she entrusted James with the care of what mattered most to her in the world: her family and her home.

I was understandably leery after the parade of housekeepers that had come and gone. The first one I remember came when I was three. Black hair slicked back into a bun on the top of her head. So tight it made her eyes stretch. When making beds, she would hold the feathery pillow between stubby white teeth and shimmy the pillowcase up toward her nose, making her stout tummy, hips, and bosom shake. She called us “hammerheads.” Every day she yelled, “Come here, hammerhead! Stop that, hammerhead!” She was so mean, my mother made her leave. After her, we had one with slim long arms, fair skin, and sleek red-toned hair. Even though she wore a white uniform and shoes with thick white laces, Mom told me she showed up for work drunk one morning, and that was the end of her.

It was not long before James took on the role of second mother. She brought a traditional sense of discipline into the house, trying her best to tame the chaos engendered by my father’s shifty business schemes, wild older brothers, and a general sense of laissez-faire circulating in the house. My mother, who initially wanted nine children, assumed we would be cut from her compliant, rule-following cloth, only to be surprised by a flock of hellions. While she took to her bed—the only quiet place in the house—with migraines, James chased my brothers, sent all five of us to our rooms, forced us to apologize to each other and to her. She even washed my brother Oran’s mouth out with soap after he called her a bitch under his breath, claiming all the way to the bathroom, “I said witch! I said witch!”

James never had children and it was not long before we heard that the people in her church were referring to us as her “white family.” Differences aside, she and my mother shared an intuitive understanding about mothering. They formed a partnership in which words were never exchanged. James struggled to manage our mouthy, disrespectful behavior, and years later

told me she prayed every day she would live long enough to see how we turned out.

James was the first person who ever prayed in our house; she relied on the Lord for all requests. My mother, who did not believe in prayer, began to say things like, “It must be so comforting for her to have something to believe in.” My father, an agnostic, made a joke of it by saying, “I wasn’t expecting so much Jesus in our house.”

James brought a new moral standard to our home, where truth was often as slippery as black ice. She never lied. Even if she cheated at solitaire, she’d say, “I won with two cheats.”

When Mom and Dad went out of town on business trips, James often spoiled us with homemade fried chicken (Mom did not allow fried food in the house) and fresh fruit cobbler, with a dash of Christian prayer. We said grace before meals, kneeled by our beds at night, even went to church with her on Sunday mornings. The only white faces amid dramatic falling-out episodes and cries of *Amen* and *Praise the Lord*. Her resolute belief in something larger than herself intrigued me, and I paid close attention when she and my grandmother, a staunch Zionist and nonbeliever, argued about the existence of God while playing gin rummy. This was in stark contrast to my parents, who avoided religious discussions with James. Curiously, they set no limits on her expressions of devotion.

I didn’t go to James’s house until I was much older, but I knew a lot about her. She had beautiful swirly handwriting. She always wore a pretty, perfectly fitted dress under her apron. She went to church at least twice a week and read the Bible every day. She was married when she first came to work for us and then got divorced. She was a very intent listener. When she laughed at a funny story, her eyes filled with tears.

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James and I sat vigil by my mother's bedside. For twelve hours she lay between life and death, eyes closed. I paid close attention to her labored breathing. Mom had witnessed my first breath, and I was soon to witness her last. I sang lullabies and did my best to help her. I reminded her throughout the night that my father, her parents, and her siblings were on the other side, waiting. James—who had been my mother's rock through countless family celebrations as well as upsets—offered a steady presence.

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I phoned my sister to tell her that Mom was gone. James, who after all these years was still unable to use my mother's first name, wiped tears and said, "Mrs. Hesterman, you were my best friend. You were always the same."

We sat quietly with Mom's body, and James began to reminisce. She told me about an interaction I did not remember, that we'd had when I was in elementary school. She'd just come up from doing the ironing and watching her afternoon stories: *All My Children*, *The Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*. I rushed through the front door and flung my sweater across the living room sofa. She asked me to pick it up. I ignored her.

Exasperated, she said, "I don't know where your mother got you from."

"I came out of my mother's stomach!" I said with know-it-all defiance.

"Too bad she can't put you back in," she said.

"You're not even part of this family!" I yelled.

Pausing to touch the blanket covering my mother's body, she told me that was the one time her feelings got hurt. "I guess somehow I'd got to thinking that I was a member of the family. But you sure set me straight."

Mortified to hear that I had ever hurt her feelings, I apologized. James had been there for all of the milestones in my life; we'd been intertwined for years. "When I look at you, I see myself. You are my family, my genetic material."

Her eyes brightened.

"Anyway, you are my mother now. Whether you like it or not. And don't even think about dying. I'm putting you on death restriction."

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.

THE END