

Sisters

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My sister Chani left for her third semester of college at UCLA and never came back home. Not even for a visit. After that, I only knew bits and pieces about her life, and none of that told me much. When my older brother Ari got married, she sent a gift, a red glass vase that was some modern art-type of shape, and the package was postmarked San Diego, so I assumed she'd moved there; at a Bar Mitzvah I heard one of my aunts tell another one that she was dating someone who wasn't Jewish, but they shut up very quickly when they noticed me eavesdropping; and there was the night I found a letter that she wrote my mother, buried beneath a pile of underwear in a way that made me suspect my father hadn't seen it, a letter which said, "I know I can't ask you to accept or understand my life, the same way I was not willing to accept or understand your life, so I am asking you for distance."

I collected this information and went over it a thousand times in my mind, and tried to balance my memories of Chani against what I knew of her now. She used to sleep in the bed next to me and I always waited up for her to come into the room so that she would tell me a story. She had a running series about a girl named Susie, who always fought injustice and got her own way. Later on, when she was in a constant battle with my parents about her boyfriend and college, she'd get into bed and cry, and I didn't ask for a story but instead went to her and hugged her, held her hot teary face next to mine and told her I loved her. Then she would stop crying and tell me about her plans: when she grew up she'd be a lawyer or a doctor, get a house with a pool, live somewhere warm, go on vacations. She never said anything about planning to give up religion, or her family. But it was true that she screamed and carried on when my parents tried to move my younger sister Suri into our tiny shared bedroom, and I knew she hated being the oldest, overworked daughter. My mother had seven children, and depended on Chani to cook and bake, especially since there was no money and we had to save every penny. Chani wasn't allowed to babysit or tutor to earn money because my mother needed her at home, and I knew she resented not having nice clothes.

Chani left when I was eleven and she was nineteen. For the next few years, nobody talked about her. The older boys, Ari and Yeziel, got married, and Suri moved

into my room. The younger boys, Naftali and Yehuda, eventually went away to a sleep-away yeshiva, so our family became really small on a day-to-day basis, very different than the home Chani had lived in for all her growing-up years. I missed her, and dug out old photo albums my father had stashed in the basement. I was forgetting what she looked like. She was as pretty as I remembered, freckled, with curly light brown hair, a wide smile, a slender, delicate build. It bothered me that Suri, who was three when Chani last appeared, had no memory of her at all, and that my parents refused to talk about her. And I didn't really know why Chani never contacted me, whether it was because my parents had forbidden it or because she simply didn't care. Both possibilities made me dizzy with hurt and I preferred not thinking about them—until I was seventeen years old and won the National Jewish Day School Torah Contest, with a weekend in Los Angeles at a conference with other Jewish high school students as a prize.