



The Kiss

Amy Graubart Katz

I get the phone call the day after Michigan kissed me. I'm sitting between my two best camp friends, Orly and Michelle, when the camp secretary walks into our Shabbat service. Just as we rise to "kiss the Torah," my counselor Becky scurries to hear the secretary's whispered message. Don't ask me how, but I know that they are talking about me. I'm not surprised to feel a tap on my shoulder and follow them outside as the voices of my *edab*, my fellow campers going into seventh grade, sing "It's a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it."

The cold air stings my bare legs, and for a minute I regret the decision to wear shorts this morning. All of the girls in my bunk wear long and short combinations on chilly mornings: either shorts and a sweatshirt, or jeans and a T-shirt. Today I am wearing denim cut-offs with the navy "Oxford University" hooded sweatshirt that Mom and Dad bought me in London. My bunkmates argue over who gets to borrow my sweatshirt nearly as much as they argue about who will wear Orly's perfectly faded Levi's. Partly because I don't mind lending it, I am more popular this summer than last. My bunkmates are mostly like me: much cooler at camp than home.

"What's up?" I ask Becky as I strain my neck to look up at her. She plays basketball at the University of Minnesota, is impossibly thin, and her sleek blond hair and blue eyes make her stick out even more than her height at Camp Shalom in Wisconsin. Most of us are shorter and darker.

"There's a phone call for you in the office," says Becky as she takes my hand.

A phone call? No one ever gets pulled

out of services for a phone call. Campers aren't even allowed to use the phone unless they get a message and then they must call back on the pay phone outside the dining hall. But we are headed to the main office.

And today no one should use the phone; it's Shabbat. That's why Michigan kissed me last night; it was a Shabbat Shalom kiss. His real name is Marc, Marc Mishilin, but on the first day of camp last year he wore a blue T-shirt that said MICHIGAN in frayed yellow letters, and ever since we call him Michigan, or Mich. A Shabbat Shalom kiss always has the potential to be the kiss that starts a relationship. Or not. I wish I knew if he really liked me—my stomach has been flip-flopping all morning and everything feels really bright today. Until now.

At the main office, we find Rabbi Sykes, the camp director, talking on the phone. "There is a flight leaving Rhinelander today at 5:30 which arrives in Kansas City at 7:15." He looks up as our little group walks in. "Judy just arrived, I'll put her on." Rabbi Sykes smiles wanly at me as he hands me the phone. "Judy, your mother needs to speak with you. Becky and I will be right outside if you need us."

Why would I need Becky and Rabbi Sykes? Before I put the phone to my ear I promise myself that whatever it is, I will not leave camp. "Mom, what's going on?" I say into the speaker.

"Hi, sweetie," Mom's voice sounds slurred and far away. My legs feel wobbly, my head buzzes. "How are you?"

"Fine." Why is she asking how I am?

"Honey, Daddy died this morning."

"Zayde?" I never heard my mother

refer to her father as "Daddy."

"No, baby, Dad."

I have no idea what she is saying.

"Judy, are you there?" I hear tears in her voice. "Can you say anything?"

I can't.

"Rabbi Sykes booked you a flight home. Someone from camp is going to drive you to the airport. Michael and I will pick you up. The funeral is tomorrow."

It sounds like my mother is reading from a script, like she is an actress playing the part of my mother.

"Judy, please, say something," she begs.

"Why is Michael coming with you to the airport?" Michael is my little brother. He is eight.

"He wants to see you, he needs to see you. I need to see you. Sweetheart, do you have any questions?"

"Do I have to come home?"

"Judy, do you understand? Your father died. He's dead. Yes, you have to come home." For the first time during the call, she sounds like my real mother.

How could my father be dead? He's not old like Zayde. He eats shredded wheat with bananas for breakfast and rides his bicycle everywhere. Even in the rain. He wears bowties, coached my soccer team in first grade and always has a book in his hands.

"Mom, I don't understand," and then, "Are you sure?"

"Oh, baby. My poor Judy. He went for a bike ride this morning but came home after about 20 minutes saying that he didn't feel well. He lay down and complained that he couldn't breathe. By the time the ambulance got here he wasn't breathing at all. He had a heart attack,

honey. The doctors say it didn't hurt." Her voice sounds thin, like a little girl's.

"Mommy?" *Where did that come from?* I haven't called her that since I was six.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"I don't want him to be dead," I sob.

"I know, I really do, me neither. Judy, I'll see you tonight. I love you, Judy."

We don't really say "I love you" in our family. Not because we don't, but it feels awkward. Now, I guess, everything is different. "I love you, too, Mom."

Leaving the deserted office and stepping back into the chilly morning feels like walking into a blurry dream. Rabbi Sykes and Becky are standing directly in front of me. Becky tries to pull me to her boney chest. Even though I just found out that my dad is dead I don't want to hug her. I leave my arms where they are and wait for her to let go.

It suddenly occurs to me that everyone else at camp is going to have a regular day. After services they will head into the dining hall for lunch and singing. Michigan might stand up and help the counselors lead. Last week he was wearing his Michigan T-shirt and a kippah that said "Go Blue" when he got up and belted out the first part of *Chiri Biri Bim*. Will he notice that I'm not there? Will anyone?

"Can Orly and Michelle come help me pack?" I ask. I need to see my friends. Rabbi Sykes nods at Becky, and she goes to them.

It's so quiet and still as I make my way up the hill to my cabin that it feels like everyone's vanished. I can't help it; I think about him again. The thing that I like about Michigan is that while he is a really good basketball player, he also likes to lead services and act in the camp

play. He was a lead gangster in *Guys and Dolls*. Most guys are either into sports, acting or Jewish stuff. Mich is the only one I know who is into all three.

Last year the counselors voted him and Orly the Cutest Camp Couple, but this summer Orly has an older boyfriend. She and Mich are only friends now, but it seems to me that Mich hangs out with us just as much as he did last summer, maybe more. For the past week, at the end of our evening activity, when we all stand in a circle—arms crossed and hands joined together singing *Rad Hayom* (The Day is Done in Hebrew)—he has been right next to me. When it is time to send around the squeeze (someone squeezes the hand of the person standing beside them and they "send it around"), Michigan keeps a slight pressure on my hand even when our turn to squeeze is over.

Friday nights are the only time the whole camp comes together. After services everyone kisses. Just before dinner, when the sky is finally streaked with black, you turn to your bunkmates, your friends from home, your counselors and wish them Shabbat Shalom with a kiss. If a boy kisses a girl who is not his girlfriend, it is possible that he likes her. You are allowed to kiss anyone the whole night.

As I headed into dinner, Michigan's sandy-haired, too-skinny frame approached, and I knew what would happen. "Shabbat Shalom," we said at the same time. He leaned in and kissed my cheek at the closest possible point to my lips. His lips were dry and surprisingly ordinary. The kiss was over so quickly, but I can't stop thinking about it.

When I reach the door to my bunk, I don't want to go in. Was Dad still alive the last time I was in here? What did he look like when he died? On TV it always looks like the person is asleep. I try to picture the way he looked on the morning I left for camp. He was wearing shorts. I know because when he hugged me goodbye I could feel the hair on his legs against my freshly shaved ones and the sharp tickle felt embarrassing.

Orly and Michelle find me standing outside the door of our bunk. Every time I see Orly I wonder why she hangs out with us. She is short and skinny but, unlike me, actually *needs* to wear a bra, and her light brown curls always stay coiled, even when it rains. She has green eyes and clear skin, and guys love her.

Although we both love Orly, it is good that Michelle and I have each other; sometimes it is easier to like someone who is not perfect. She opens the cabin door and we sit on my rumpled bottom bunk. "How are you doing, Jude?" asks Michelle.

"I don't know, everything feels fuzzy."

Orly puts her arm around me and rests her head on my shoulder. "We're going to miss you so much, sweetie," she says.

"You *have* to come back to camp if you can," says Michelle.

"Why wouldn't I?"

Orly and Michelle look at each other. I bet that they are thinking about how Adam Wolfe's grandfather died last summer; he promised to bring bags of popcorn and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups back from Chicago for his friends, but he never came back.

As I get into the van for the airport, I whisper into Michelle's ear as I hug her: "Do you think Michigan likes me?"

"Yes," she replies, "I think he does."

As the van moves into the town of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, I try to picture my family's ranch house on a cul-de-sac in Overland Park, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City. I have my own phone in my room, where I used to spend hours curled up on my bed talking to my friends. The

Moment Magazine-
Karma Foundation
Short Fiction Contest

Amy Graubart Katz's story won third place in the 2008 *Moment Magazine-Karma Foundation Short Fiction Contest*. Founded in 2000, the contest was created to provide recognition to writers of Jewish short fiction, a legacy that includes writers as varied as Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cynthia Ozick. The stories were judged by Anita Diamant, author of the best-selling *The Red Tent* and the new novel *Day After Night*. Please visit our website for official rules and guidelines for the 2010 contest.

problem is that no one has been calling me lately. Luckily, I have camp because the only people I have to talk to at home are Mom and Michael. Dad is usually at work or out riding his bike. I'm pretty sure he has no idea that my friends stopped calling. I'm not trying to keep it a big secret from him, but he just isn't home enough to know that I am different from who he thinks I am.

When I arrive at the airport in Kansas City, Mom and Michael are waiting for me. Mom has her hair in two lopsided ponytails on either side of her head, and her face is red and splotchy. Michael's hair is sticking up and he has chocolate smeared all over his face and on his clothes. They look as if they had been in a tornado. This is real, then.

"Judy, Judy sweetie," Mom holds me as I finally cry. Dad is not with them. I reach out and pull Michael in. We form a little huddle, all of our hot tears mixing together, and landing on Mom's bare shoulder. I think that we may stand here crying in the airport forever. Finally, we go to the car clinging to our mother's hands like little children crossing a dangerous road.

When I wake up the next morning, I pad across the house to my parents' room and peek inside. Mom is sitting in the middle of the bed in her underwear and a purple tank top. She is surrounded by pictures and old letters, sobbing. I close the door. I open Michael's and find him curled up with his old stuffed rabbit, asleep on the floor, his thumb in his mouth. I wonder if I *will* go back to camp.

After I get dressed, Mom says, "Bubbe and Zayde are coming over soon." For a minute, I think about the fact that Mom still has two parents, and I only have one. Mom says that Aunt Molly and Uncle Steve are coming, too. "We are all going to ride to the funeral together in the limousine," she tells me. I have never been in a limousine before.

They all arrive at the same time. Bubbe kisses my cheek and then she

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and Zayde take Michael to his room to change out of his Spiderman pajamas. Did he forget how to dress himself?

I am glad to get out of the house. Michael and I climb into the back of the limousine; Bubbe scoots in next to me and holds my hand. Her hand feels solid, the one thing that is keeping me here, with my family, in this car. If she lets go I might float away.

The funeral is at the funeral home my sixth grade Sunday school class visited last year when we learned about Jewish life cycles. The funeral director pins torn black ribbons on our clothes. His voice is low and deep, as he explains that while some Jews rip their clothes when they lose a member of their family, others wear these torn ribbons. I don't want to do either and plan to take the ribbon off as soon as no one is looking.

The rabbi begins the ceremony, looks at us and says how my father's memory will be a blessing. What does that even mean? The cantor sings some Hebrew songs. At camp we sometimes sing one of them, *Esab Eynay*, but we sing it fast and loud. The cantor sings slowly and alone. I used to like that song; now it's ruined.

The worst part, though, is the box. A plain unfinished wooden box, decorated with nothing but a Jewish star, rests on a platform. When my class visited, the funeral director told us that Jews are supposed to be buried in a plain box that would disintegrate and return to the earth. My dad has nothing to do with that box. I cannot look at it.

After the funeral everyone comes back to our house. Some of my former friends, the ones who stopped calling, come with their parents. I see Mandy, Nili and Margo clustered in my living room, whispering. I'm not ready for them. I was supposed to have the whole

summer to recover from Mandy telling Nili and Margo that my breath smelled and that I was sometimes chosen last for basketball at PE. I had hoped everything would reshuffle in the fall.

After they tell me they're sorry about my dad, I find my Mom and ask, "What am I supposed to say back?"

"I don't really know, but I've been saying 'thank you.'"

"Am I going back to camp?" I didn't mean to ask that. But now that I had I really wanted to know.

"God, Judy, your father died, and you're acting like the only thing that you care about is camp. I don't know! I don't know anything anymore. If you want to go back, go back!" Her voice is high-pitched and wobbly. I can feel everyone looking at us. I race to my room.

As I flop onto my bed, I look up at my dresser and see the house made of old wine corks. The fairy house. When I was six I asked Dad if he would help me build a fairy house. It took more than three years to collect the corks, and I was past the age of caring about either fairies or building houses when Dad and I finally made it. For the past two years, I had pretty much stopped seeing it. I'd probably always see it now.

Just then Mom opens my door. I can barely look at her. "I'm sorry that I snapped at you, Judy. Things are going to be rough around here for a while."

"I know." I feel like crying again.

"Honey, I think the best place for you to be, if you still want to, is at camp. Uncle Steve offered to drive you back on Tuesday."

"But Mom, I don't know if I should. I think Michael needs me. He's turning back into a baby."

"Michael will be okay for three weeks. It's up to you, but what I really came to

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MOMENT CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

In celebration of *Moment's* 35th year, we are launching the *Moment* Cartoon Caption Contest. In each issue, we will provide a cartoon drawn by *New Yorker* and *Moment* cartoon editor Bob Mankoff. Submit a caption, and *Moment* staff will choose the winner. Captions for this cartoon must be submitted by February 5, 2010. The winner's name will be announced with the winning caption in the March/April 2010 issue. In addition, the winner will receive a free gift subscription to *Moment*. Any U.S. resident age 18 and over can enter. To do so, visit momentmag.com/cartoon.



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Menocal, who has denounced Halevi as a narrow national chauvinist who turned his back on the magnificent Iberian “culture of tolerance,” known as *convivencia*, an act that Menocal views as portending the decline of Iberia’s Golden Age. Halkin rejects what he calls her idyllic rendering of relations between medieval Spain’s Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Halkin similarly evinces little sympathy for reductive political uses of Halevi and other polemics that the poet’s life and works continue to foment. He laments how the poet’s mystical passion for Zion has not only been misappropriated by West Bank settlers but absurdly denounced by several prominent, liberal Israeli public intellectuals.

The movingly personal final chapter reflects how deeply Halevi resonates with Halkin (who left America for Israel in 1975), responding to a sense of shared destiny with the poet’s conflicts but without ever coming across as grandiose.

“So like Yehuda Halevi,” Halkin writes, “I grew up with *convivencia*. It was just that the *con* didn’t go with the *vivencia*. Like wrong pieces of the puzzle, the two sides of me refused to fit together. The Jew and the American were barely on speaking terms...

I could imagine life as an American in America, and I could imagine life as a Jew in Israel, but I couldn’t imagine life as an American Jew... How do you accommodate what is tearing you apart?”

And as Halkin powerfully argues, for all its paradoxes, uncertainties and contradictions, Halevi’s story—much like his own—finally is best appreciated as a life resolutely devoted to resolving that agonizing existential question.

Allan Nadler is the Wallerstein Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Jewish Studies Program at Drew University.

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tell you is that you have a phone call.” I wait for her to close the door behind her before I pick up my phone. It’s Orly telling me that everything is not the same and that Michelle and she tipped the canoe because I wasn’t in the middle. Then Michelle gets on the phone to urge me to return to camp. I ask, “Michelle, if I come back do you promise to tell everyone not to say ‘I’m so sorry about your dad?’”

“I promise.”

“Do you really think Michigan likes me?”

“Yeah, Orly thinks so, too.” I hear rhythmic murmuring coming from the living room as I reluctantly say goodbye to my friends. Services are starting. I look back at the fairy house. How can I leave?

When school starts in the fall I am going to be the Girl Whose Father Died. When Nili’s parents got divorced the summer between first and second grade and her dad moved to California everyone stopped talking to her for a while, even me. It was like she was a different person. I don’t think any of my former friends are going to talk to me now. I am going to have to help Michael remember how to eat and dress himself, and I have a feeling Mom is going to get sadder and smaller.

At camp, it will be weird at first but then it won’t. Orly and Michelle will make sure of that. I’ll bring back goodies for my bunkmates. On cold mornings I’ll borrow Orly’s Levi’s and Michelle’s orange T-shirt, which she assures me looks great with my shade of brown hair. I think I’ll give away the Oxford sweatshirt. I’ll see Michigan again. We will walk down to the lake arm in arm to Friday night services. I have never told anyone, but at camp I kind of like services. Afterwards there will be kissing. ♡