



ROBIN BLACK

THE ANSWER THAT INCREASINGLY APPEALS

A phenomenon that fascinates me:

Patina.

A fragment of something I wrote on that subject:

“Are we taking the patina approach?”

“Yes.”

It was the only way.

I lived in fear of every scrape, of every drop of water on our new, much too expensive leather chair—until he asked and I answered and we took the patina approach. We held our eyes screwed shut for just about one year, the official period of mourning in many religions (mine to name but one), until each individual scratch and every stain just disappeared, merging into something wonderful.

A short period of endurance. In retrospect. For something so lovely.

(Forgiveness itself, as I now understand.)

It takes your breath away.

A funny question:

What exactly is my religion?

9:34 a.m. Nov. 7, voice mail message left by me:

“Rabbi, hi. My name is Robin Black, Robin Black Goldberg. My husband, Richard, and I are members of the synagogue, yours, and our daughter Elizabeth is having a bat mitzvah this coming April. Becoming a bat mitzvah this April. I guess that I’m calling because I am feeling some conflict about this due in part, maybe entirely, to the fact that my father, who is dying right now, isn’t Jewish. My mother is.

“Anyway, we were wondering if we could come in to talk to you about this. Just us. Not Elizabeth. I am really not looking to dump my ambivalence on her. To burden her. Our phone



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number is 555-1429, and if we could come in, maybe just to sort some of this through, I would really appreciate that.”

9:42 a.m. Nov. 7, overstatement to my husband made by me:

“Sometimes I feel that I am the bravest person I have ever met.”

9:47 a.m. Nov. 7, deceptively complex thing my brother says to me on the phone:

“There’s actually a new book out called *The Half-Jewish Book* that I was going to buy you for Christmas, but it costs twenty-five dollars. In fact, I was wondering if maybe this Christmas we could just skip grown-up gifts altogether.”

9:47 a.m. Nov. 7, my immediate response:

“Actually, I could really use some presents this year.”

My most prized possession:

The handsewn Christmas stocking my grandmother made for me. It’s velvet, a deep red that I have never been able to match. Edged in green satin ribbon and covered with miniature toys. A half-inch frying pan with quarter-inch fried eggs. An impossibly small pair of scissors, which actually do cut. And jingle bells. There’s a little baby doll girl attached to the center of the front, and when you lay the stocking flat her eyes fall shut. But when the stocking is hung, her eyes open wide. They’re blue, just like mine. I liked knowing as a child that the doll was hanging there to watch Santa Claus when he arrived. I named her Robin, after myself.

6:03 p.m. Nov. 7, snippet of conversation between my husband and me:

“The rabbi didn’t return my call, by the way. I guess my spiritual crisis can just wait.”

“Well, I’m not trying to excuse the guy, but generally Monday is their day off. They work weekends, you know.”

“Oh. No. I didn’t know.”

10:12 a.m. Nov. 8, snippet of my telephone conversation with the rabbi:

“So, I don’t know, I assume, Rabbi, that this isn’t uncom-



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mon. People who are mixed. Having mixed feelings. You've dealt with this kind of thing before, I assume?"

"Well, yes. Though usually it's been resolved by now."

"Oh."

"But why don't you and Richard come in and we'll see where we go from here."

"Thank you. That would be great."

Reason my father is concerned about authorizing anyone to pull the plug:

Fear of eternal damnation as a result of assisting in his own suicide, which is a mortal sin.

Helpful hint from me to you:

The proportions on the Manischewitz Matzo Meal box are wrong. In their matzo ball recipe. You want to put in a lot more liquid than they say. Twice as much. And you want to let the mixture get back up to room temperature after you have refrigerated it. And you want to refrigerate it for longer than they say. And sometimes, for reasons I will never understand, you may have to let them cook for up to three times as long as you think. Even if you have done absolutely everything else right.

4:32 p.m. Nov. 8, statement made by me to Elizabeth that documents my ambivalence about not burdening Elizabeth with my ambivalence:

"We're going to meet with the rabbi on Friday to discuss my feelings about your bat mitzvah."

Something about Elizabeth that started when she was ten, the meaning of which I do not understand:

She won't eat pork.

Way she handled this when we were in Italy, where just about every sauce contains pork:

Asked her parents loudly at every meal: "Is this pig?"

Something that I like about myself:

Despite enormous temptation, born of tremendous inconvenience (not to mention irritation) I have never misled Eliza-



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beth about whether something we were eating was or was not pig. And never will.

Precise cost, tax excluded, of The Half-Jewish Book: A Celebration:

USA \$22.95

CANADA \$32.95

A request for advice:

To Whom It May Concern,

I have a question. I am in need of some advice.

I am meeting with my rabbi this coming Friday to discuss with him the ambivalence I feel as a half-Jew/half-Southern Methodist in having my daughter bat mitzvahed this coming spring. In having her become a bat mitzvah, that is. My husband will also be at this meeting. I do not know the rabbi at all, but he is about our age, either side of forty. I assume that he is a spiritual person, at least I hope that he is, and I hope that he is an intelligent person as well. Because I think that the problem I am struggling with is a complex one, quicksilver, a matter of balance and of shades of identity.

I have chosen to raise my daughter as a Jew for two reasons. The first is that it is important to my husband that she be raised that way—though to be fair, he would be fair. He's not a bully on matters like this. Or anything, in fact. Not at all. But I like giving him this. The second reason is that I want her to have somewhere to turn in times of loss. I want her to have a spiritual home to come home to. When life hurts her. If she chooses to. I don't have a home like that, and when I have been hit hard, hit with grief, I have longed for that. I have felt at sea.

I think that it's too late for me, but this is a gift of sorts that I want to give to her.

So my question is, on Friday, for this meeting, what should I wear? Seriously. This isn't the punch line. I don't know what the right thing is to wear. I've never met with a rabbi before.

Question Elizabeth will ask when my father dies:

“Am I allowed to say kaddish for Grandfather even though he wasn't Jewish?”



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Authority with which I will say, “Of course”:

*Circa 1975, my mother on the subject of organized religion:
“It’s all horseshit.”*

Throughout my childhood, my father on the subject of organized religion:

“If I really wanted to be rich, filthy rich, wealthy beyond all dreams of avarice, and did not believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ, which I most certainly do, I would make up a religion and just watch the money come pouring in.”

After her heart attack, my mother, again, on the subject of religion:

“I know it’s all horseshit, but are you comfortable promising me that someone will say kaddish for me when I am gone?”

Principle by which my cabinets are organized:

One cabinet is for food and one for ingredients. Some things, like dried beans and like sugar, are hard to categorize, but there are only two cabinets to look in. So nothing that we store is truly lost.

11:57 a.m. Nov. 10, driving to see the rabbi, nicest thing my husband has ever said:

“I love you, you know.”

Rhetorical question I must never ask Elizabeth again:

“Do you have any idea what this is costing us?”

11:59 a.m. Nov 10, emotion that overwhelms me as we enter the synagogue hand in hand:

Sadness.

What I am wearing:

A black skirt and a black turtleneck. My earrings are made of miniature compasses that actually work, and my brooch is a teeny, tiny triptych of an Italian landscape. They all sort of go together because both the triptych and the compasses are framed in gold.



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Number of minutes late the rabbi is for our meeting:
Twelve.

Noon to 12:12 p.m. Nov. 10, thing I try to do for twelve minutes:

Not to think the rabbi is keeping us waiting because he thinks that I am a bad Jew.

Letter I will never send:

To the Authors of *The Half-Jewish Book: A Celebration*:

First I would like to thank you. For celebrating me. Because I think that you're correct and it isn't done nearly enough. In my opinion. And thank you as well for making a few other points. Like that half-Jews are also half-something else. That the other half isn't just a blank. That's a very important observation and one that I agree does get lost in the shuffle all too often.

But now I have a terrible confession to make: I hated your book. First of all, there's no index, which is a pain in the ass, but that isn't my main issue here. I only mention the index problem because after I read it, something struck me as odd and I went to look up "religion" in the index. And there wasn't one. "Religion" or "religious observance" or "practices of mourning." Anything like that. But there was no index, and I'm pretty sure, having flipped through the pages again and read the chapter headings, absolutely no discussion of how half-Jews might comfortably handle issues of loss and of mourning. What the role of ritual is. No real examination of the pain that might be inherent for some of us in having nowhere obvious to turn. Because, while I do leave room here for individual choice, there does appear to be, judging from history and all, a pretty strong and common human pull toward wanting to believe. And toward wanting to know what it is that you believe. And what you don't.

And even toward belonging to a community that shares at least some of your beliefs. And that can help you, I don't know, perform rituals without thinking them through. Without having to make decisions about it all the time.

Is that a crime?

I personally find that an impossible thing to have.



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Because every step toward one half is a step away from the other.

So I do agree with your basic premise, that there's a need to stop treating us all like the problem children of the Judeo-Christian era, but who's kidding whom here?

Simple, it is not.

Reason I will never send that letter:

I really haven't figured out why I hated their book so much. And it was kind of nice of them to celebrate me. And, as it turns out, I'm not particularly articulate on the subject of their book. Not yet.

Occasions for the grief that left me feeling at sea:

I lost two pregnancies, two babies I very much wanted to have.

12:25 p.m. Nov. 10, thing my husband accuses me of being, in front of the rabbi, that I deny:

Angry.

12:42 p.m. Nov. 10, statement I hear coming out of my own mouth:

"I feel like I am betraying my father. At a particularly inopportune time."

12:47 p.m. Nov. 10, thing the rabbi accuses me of being, in front of my husband, that I deny:

Angry.

How I feel at being accused of being angry:

Well, angry. Of course.

Snippet of conversation I have had with Elizabeth, time and time again:

Her: Why do I have to go to Hebrew School?

Me: Because nobody made me go.

Her: That doesn't make any sense.

Me: (*sigh*) I don't care what you do when you grow up. Honestly. I just want you to make whatever decisions you make from the inside. The inside of something.



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Her: You make it sound so simple. Do you know even what we actually do?

Me: Humor me. I'm a mother. I'm allowed to make mistakes. Maybe this is another one.

Her: I don't think it's a mistake.

Me: So what's the problem?

Her: It's just boring, that's all.

What I have written so far of the speech I hoped to give at Elizabeth's bat mitzvah:

Just about thirteen years ago, when I was new to mothering, and was very close to drowning in the joy of having you, somebody, a friend, watching how I reveled in your every moment, said this to me. She said: Enjoy these days, because you know, the very first step that your child takes is taken away from you.

At the time, I thought that she was very wise, and maybe she was. And her wisdom wounded me, because all that I could feel was the completeness I knew in pressing you to my skin. So this image of your leaving me was painful for me, because it did ring true. And as it turns out, as I now see, it is true that with each day, with every new challenge you take on and meet so well, you do take steps away from being the baby I nestled against myself. You have likes and dislikes that differ from mine. You shed with every passing second another need you have for me. As you gain competence, strength, independence, tastes of your own. These qualities you have so beautifully acquired, and that you carry with you so gracefully.

But now I also know that even in her wisdom, my advisor left out the other side. The other view that I have gained, not from wisdom but through experience. The salve, the balm, the reason why every mother is not inevitably doomed to grief. For with each step that my baby girl takes away from me, a woman takes a step in my direction. A beautiful, competent, strong, brilliant, complex, compelling young woman who is my own. You are no further from me now, my love, than you were when you were first born. No further from me now than you were the moment before you were born. You are as close to me now when you stand beside me as you were pressed onto me, an infant, soft and sleeping, sprawled across my chest.





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The number of pieces into which my heart breaks when I learn that there is no time allotted for the mother to speak:

How many pieces are there?

12:41 p.m. Nov. 10, what my husband says as my eyes begin to fill:

“Are you sure, Rabbi? It would be a really great way for her to feel involved.”

One of many reasons I love my husband:

Moments like that.

12:41 p.m. Nov. 10, the rabbi’s response:

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible.”

12:43 p.m. Nov. 10, obvious thing that suddenly occurs to me for the first time:

This bat mitzvah isn’t about me.

Reason my mother stopped lighting Shabbos candles when I was eight years old:

She realized that she was just going through the motions, just reduplicating the customs of her home, and that she didn’t believe in the ritual itself.

Two things Elizabeth invariably does at take-off in a plane:

Prays in Hebrew.

Holds tight onto her mother’s hand.

12:56 p.m. Nov. 10, the one thing I know for sure:

I want to go home.

Letter I may actually send someday:

Dear Rabbi,

It may not have looked like it to you at the time, but meeting with you when we did was actually a tremendous help to me. I actually had to eat some fairly good-size crow with my husband afterward. He had said seeing you might be helpful. I, well to be frank, I scoffed.

I think that what you said to me that helped the most was . . .



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Reason that that sentence never ends:

I don't really understand why it helped. And to the extent that I think it did, it had nothing to do with him. And I just don't think you can say that in a letter of that kind. A thank-you note to your rabbi.

In fact I think this is just another letter I will never send.

What I will do while my husband recites the parental blessings in Hebrew:

Stand next to him. Hold his hand. And keep my lips sealed.

Question to ponder:

If the rabbi had told me I'm a bad Jew, why would I care?

Fact that also needs to be pondered:

I would care. I would care a great deal.

Question that persists:

But why?

Odds that someday I will talk to a Christian minister about settling this sense of dislocation in myself:

Fifty-fifty.

The most likely reason that my father will not be attending Elizabeth's bat mitzvah:

He will be dead.

What it looks like when someone draws their dying breath:

I can only tell you what my mother's mother looked like. I went to the door of her room, to check on her, because we knew that she wasn't going to last much longer. I loved her very much. She taught me how to cook. And when I saw her chest move up and then move down I thought to myself, *Well, she's okay*; and I stood there, in her doorway, relieved and safe because it hadn't happened yet. She lay buried deep in blankets, nothing much left of her, her long hair splayed out gray across a pink pillow case. And as I leaned against the doorjamb, the side with the mezuzah fastened there, watching her I slowly realized that her chest had never risen after that, and that what I had just witnessed was her death.



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*What my daughter eats when I have scrambled eggs and
bacon:*

Scrambled eggs.

Where I am left to turn when I am in pain:

Here. There.

And everywhere.

A funny question, repeated one more time:

What exactly is my religion?

Answer that increasingly appeals:

The Patina Approach:

A short period of endurance

For something that is so lovely

It takes your breath away.