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Excerpt from [The Others](#)

[...]

5.

I rush by the wax pavilion, following my conversation with Eli, ignoring the figurines' inquisitive eyes. I'm not in the mood.

Last night I tossed and turned in bed, replaying my meeting with Dina, knowing there was something that eluded me there, something important. Some word that was said, a clue suspended mid-air, something deep and dark, impalpable, like BO.

A moment before falling asleep, my body already cold and slack, I felt the answer teetering on the edge of my consciousness, like when you're about to sneeze, but the fleeting moment passes, *it's right under your nose, silly!*

The figurines lock their wax eyes on me, none of them smiling.

The collection was donated by one of our bigger benefactors abroad. At first there were a few who tried to object on the grounds of 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,' and there was a vociferous article in the local paper and an attempt to organize a protest against "blasphemous" sculptures "in the Bible museum no less!" But as always in such cases, when it comes to a serious benefactor, the collection stayed right where it was. Normally I actually like walking along the pavilion, but these days are anything but normal, and the figurines look especially grouchy.

Our mother Leah seems grouchiest of all, with those dead eyes of hers, placed next to a figurine of our father Jacob, and her big brood of kids are all slung from her arms like cherries on melting ice cream. The artist obviously took his interpretation of 'tender eyes' a little too far, rendering her expression a unique combination of cross-eyed and blind.

Our mother Sarah, standing by the figurine of our father Abraham, also frowns at me, looking old and more wrinkled than ever, especially since she's holding the little wax hand of baby Isaac. Sarah's Egyptian slave Hagar, of course, has been sculpted as young and beautiful, "too beautiful," a visitor once remarked disapprovingly. I agreed with her, finding her generous and perky wax breasts annoying as well.

As usual, I pick up my pace as I pass by the figurine of Miriam the prophetess, feeling that same old peevishness over the fact that they chose to immortalize her in her famous scene, as a little girl peeking through the reeds, looking over baby Moses, who, for some reason, was shaped as a pig in a blanket. At least he got another figurine as an adult, while Miriam has been frozen in time as an anxious child. What about the powerful prophetess she grew up to be? What about it indeed.

Today I rush past her even faster than usual, a few more figurines and I'll be out of the pavilion. Here's David and his wives, a smug redhead surrounded by a group of beautiful women, and next to them, at some distance, sits a proud, sad woman, her small crown a tilt. All the other women are carrying a chubby wax toddler in their arms, while she settles for the crown and a hungry expression. It's Michal, daughter of Saul, the only one among King

David's wives I was ever partial to. But the lecture about her is in scarce demand; or as some instructional coordinator from the south once commented to me, "Who wants to hear about that barren hag?" before asking to sign up for the lecture "Four Mothers – Birthing a Proud Nation."

Adam and Eve are waiting for me near the exit, clad head to toe in fig leaves.

Efraim saw to that, brought kids over for a special arts and crafts workshop to churn out dozens of ornate fig leaves, and glued them on himself. I remember watching him, gluing on one leaf after another in silent wrath. By the time he was finished, Adam and Eve looked as if they were wearing dark green scuba suits.

At least he was spared the sculpture of Lilith. A few years back the girlfriend of one of our benefactors decided to donate a sculpture of Lilith to our collection. Unfortunately for Efraim, the girlfriend was a renowned New York sculptor who argued it was ridiculous not to include the first woman created in the Garden of Eden in the exhibition. Efraim tried to fight it, explaining that it was more homiletical exegesis than biblical figure per se, but as usual, the big bucks tipped the scales.

I was standing next to Eli when the truck arrived and unloaded the New York Lilith, and together we watched Efraim lose his cool. She was naked, Lilith, tall, gigantic, hairy and stark naked (later the sculptor explained that she actually did try to be considerate and glue on her long dark hair so it would cover the more risqué bits, but the glue wore thin along the bumpy journey and revealed the sculptor's hyper realistic styling of body parts). And if that wasn't enough, she had her teeth sunk into a tiny baby. She looked like predator.

I wasn't surprised, knew all the myths describing her as the enemy of mothers and devourer of babies, and even the sculptor explained, once the tumult died down, that her intent was merely to criticize the manner in which Lilith's character had been vilified, that she would never dream of eating her young, and that her only crime was her unwillingness to become the mother of a controlling man's children; but for Efraim it was a real lifesaver.

He knew that fighting liberal loons over exposed body parts was one battle he stood to lose, but over a woman devouring live babies? Come on.

Letters were sent, phone calls made, and Lilith the cannibal was duly dispatched overseas to appear in the exhibition "The First Woman – The Last Mother," the sculpture's last known address.

But if you take a close look at the wax figurine of Eve, you can still see the crack that split open in her shoulder when she was moved in order to make room for Lilith and got crushed against the wall. The shoulder area has since been restored, but the injury is still visible.

It's just how it is with Lilith, always leaving a trail.

My phone rings. I look at the name flashing on the screen and my heart skips a beat. *You idiot!*

I debate whether to answer right away or prolong the anticipation, then remind myself this isn't the usual tug of war we're playing here.

"Hey, Micha," I say, trying to find the right tone.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't arrest you right now."

I freeze. From the corner of my eye, I notice little Miriam peeking from between the reeds.

"What... what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you bullshitting me about you and Dina not being in contact when it turns out you went over to her place the night she was murdered, that's what I'm talking about."

I feel the chill creeping through my entire body, *how does he know?* And that raw anger in his voice, with just a hint of violence. I was never good at dealing with direct accusations, always preferred the more indirect, roundabout way.

"I wanted to tell you," I drag the words out, "but I was afraid it wouldn't come off so well."

"It comes off like shit."

Okay, so definitely not the roundabout type. Little Miriam gazes at me with worry as I search for the right words and keeps on gazing when they don't come. I hold the phone silently, a horrible, never ending, radiation-riddled silence. *Well, make something up already!*

"Look, Sheila," he says, and mentioning my name makes him sound a little friendlier. "What am I supposed to think? You didn't tell me the truth."

"Because I couldn't."

"Okay, so tell me now, slow and steady, why did you go to Dina Kaminer's?"

"She initiated it."

"Really?" he says, his tone once again devoid of sympathy. "Just like that? After twenty years?" He's asking the same questions Eli asked, but he's not Eli, *he's the opposite of Eli and you better keep that in mind.* "Or did you in fact keep in touch all this time? Maybe you lied to me about that too?"

"Look, I have to go teach a class, can we talk later?" I take a deep breath. "You can come over to my place, if you want." There, I said it. I feel the fear and foolishness jumbling in my stomach, like every time I make a destructive move. The wax figurine of Michal fixes her icy glare on me, the crown on her head sparkling.

"I'll come over, but this time no lies, Sheila, because I don't know where that will lead us." And he hangs up, leaving me clutching my phone, surrounded by wax figures whose gazes all say the same thing: *incorrigible.*

I walk into the instruction room, and Efraim immediately blurts out, "Well hello there, good morning! Look who decided to show up! We were afraid some murderer had gotten to you as well."

Good morning to you too, Efraim, I know you mean well, or at least you think you do, but very soon I'll make you stop.

From across the room, I exchange looks with my colleague Shirley, her consoling eyes telling me that she's already received her daily dose of high-risk-single-women jokes.

Poor Efraim! If only he knew that Shirley was already making great strides towards getting pregnant via sperm donation, it would really have messed with his head, but eventually he'd reach the conclusion that it was a blessed event. Childbirth is always a blessed event. Obviously, if said baby came with a father, maybe even an observant father, it would make it all the more blessed, but Efraim has learned not to expect too much of his two spinsters – who also happen to be the best instructors on his team – so he's careful with his jokes. However, this particular murder seems to be beyond his self-restraint.

"Here are the reports Eli sent," I say, shoving them in his hands.

When Eli started working here, the mere mention of his name would bring a dreamy smile to Efraim's face, and he'd send me on all these ridiculous errands, fussing around me like a wrinkled old Cupid. Those good intentions again.

"Kill me now!" Yifat bursts into the room and collapses onto one of the chairs.

"What an awful group, they wouldn't stop complaining the entire session."

"What do you expect from teachers?" the seasoned Efraim says. "Don't worry, it's all been taken care of, they just want a slight alteration in their lesson plan." He informs me that subsequent to recent events, this particular group of teachers from the settlement of Elkana in the West Bank is now interested in a brief overview of that famous article by, you

know, that friend of yours – but be gentle, Sheila, don't start up with all those aggressive opinions of yours.

That friend of yours. I once read that when someone uses that expression, more often than not they're referring to someone who isn't your friend at all. I take the instruction manuals and make my way to the auditorium, hearing from a distance the wax figurines bursting into giggles.

They're already waiting for me, sitting there chewing despite the No Eating sign hanging above the entrance to the auditorium.

A closed room crowded with religious women of child-bearing age has a very distinct smell, a combination of sweetness and acidity, the aroma of hormones, milk and blood. I feel the invisible babies nestled up against a few of them.

"Hello there," I begin. "I understand that, following recent events, you're interested in a brief review of Dina Kaminer's article." The words get stuck in my throat, but one should never show weakness, certainly not in front of a room full of teachers.

"Excuse me." It's one of them, the invisible baby clinging to her neck. "It's absolute hogwash. What does it even mean that women in the Bible didn't want to be mothers? Who doesn't want to be a mother?"

I look at her without blinking, taking in the smell of sweat and milk.

"Well, that theory certainly has quite a few detractors, but there were indeed several prominent biblical women who didn't have children, supposedly by choice. It might also explain the fact that many women in the Bible, including the nation's matriarchs, were portrayed as barren." I recite the essay's opening line, feeling my voice becoming lower, purring.

"What are you talking about?" a few of them exclaim in unison. "Those women begged for children, Rachel almost died childless!" I note to myself that Rachel eventually died in childbirth, but I don't want to incite the room, which is already starting to buzz with commotion.

"That's certainly the opinion of the biblical narrator," I reply calmly, "who was a man, of course, but he doesn't conceal the fact that some of the most active and accomplished women in the Bible, like Miriam the prophetess or Huldah the prophetess, didn't have children."

"A life without children is no life at all!" a woman from the back of the auditorium shouts. "Look at Michal, daughter of Saul, her punishment was a life without children."

"Punishment?" I reply. "Perhaps she simply wasn't interested in having children with the man who murdered her father and brother?" Michal's wax figurine flashes before me, maybe she's not sad at all, maybe her expression is one of relief, *I was spared*.

"Where did you come up with that nonsense?" Another one, ruddy and round, stands up in front of me, going on the warpath, *don't take my motherhood away from me, it's all I have*.

"It's in the essay, dear," I reply peacefully.

"What essay? That's Kaminer's famous theory? That malarkey?"

"Call it whatever you like, but that theory gained her international acclaim, and has a very deep, serious factual basis."

"And how would you know?" It's the flushed one again, and she's standing so close to me now she almost looks cross-eyed; she's starting to resemble the wax figurine of our mother Leah, *melting babies to boot*.

"As a matter of fact, I was the one who helped Dina Kaminer develop the theory." Efraim, who happens to be passing by the auditorium on his way out, halts and fixes a curious gaze on me.

"Are you sure?" *Then how did you become such a loser?*

“Yes, I’m sure. Google it and see for yourself,” I say, and hear the sound of all the wax figurines starting to applaud. With the exception of Miriam, of course, I can picture her evil eyes. A little girl standing between the reeds, frozen in time, never to grow up to be a leader, never to hold the drum.

By the end of the instruction class I revert back to my familiar, calm and collected self again, including during the usual conciliatory closing round, in which each teacher likens herself to an inspirational biblical character. The ruddy one, as could be expected, chose Leah, the great matriarch. *Good for you, homegirl.* All that hormonal, milky sweat I have inhaled makes me a little sleepy and almost blend into them to become one of them. As it was back then, living in the all-girls national service apartment, when after a while the little garbage can in the bathroom filled up with bloody sanitary pads on the exact same day, and later at the exact same hour. That subterranean female connection, working around the clock. *Tick-tock.*

And now, as I make my way home to prepare for Micha, I run through the list of suspects who could have told him about my meeting with Dina that evening, and none of the possibilities makes me very happy.

But only one makes me shudder at the mere thought.

6.

He’s coming. Tidy up the place, hide whatever needs to be hidden.

I rush through the rooms, checking every box, making sure that what happened last time won’t happen again.

A quick sniff reveals the slightly dank odour coming from the plumbing system, *always the same smell.* I spray a few aggressive spurts of a special mist that’s supposed to give my living room “the fresh floral aroma of spring,” but unfortunately the whole apartment now reeks of a giant toilet. At least my sweaty clothes found their way to the bedroom; they’ve been sprawled out on the couch for over a week now, waiting to magically regain their former cleanliness and take on “the fresh floral aroma of spring.”

I was never good at housekeeping. I remember the painfully brief period in which Maor and I lived under the same roof. I had a few reservations about it, a few fears, but they were probably misdirected, because what turned out to threaten my composure most (apart from having a very young and capricious partner) was the constant need to pretend I was adept at household chores. How often should the sheets be changed? When does the floor need mopping? What do you use to wipe the counter so it won’t be rough and grimy? *What kind of mother will you be?* All those rags and dusters naturally placed by the sink in every home, what are they for? *What kind of mother will you be?* That mysterious business of “housekeeping.”

A house doesn’t need to be kept, oh no, it’s the one keeping you in its vice grip, chaining you to it by a string of clandestine tasks. “And that’s when it’s just the two of you,” Shirley told me at the time, “just imagine what it’s like when you have kids.”

Believe me, I did.

A quick glance in the mirror, *Who are you trying to fool, Sheila? You’re not waiting for a cop, you’re waiting for a man.* I run my fingers through my hair, trying to fluff it up, and consider my face. *He’s twenty-seven, and you have that new crease between your eyebrows.* Even if it is a fine, almost imperceptible line. It’s true what they say about us women who’ve never given birth. We maintain our youthful look. Nature is on our side, aiding us in the deception,

at least until we attract a suitable male, and then, only then, will we let our bodies collapse with a loud thud into gestation.

But nature also wants us to attract males of a suitable age, which is why the face wrinkles, someone once told me. The lines reflect the womb's biological state, so that young men can know what's happening inside you and you won't be able to fool them. I think it was Maor, he always liked presenting me with these fun bits of trivia. I even found it amusing at first.

I keep studying my face until a deafening knock on the door jolts me back into the present, and I realize that I forgot to hide the most important thing.

He barges in and stands in the middle of the living room; he's taller than I remembered, and his eyes much darker, a kind of dirty green, not to mention the expression.

Silent and hostile he stands before me, and I take a step back, praying he won't turn his gaze in the wrong direction. I try to enlist the help of polite gestures, imprinted on us by centuries of civilization – "Coffee?" My voice is warm and civil, "there's even milk." The image of Dina suddenly flashes before me, her small hands cradling the empty mug.

"Tell me, what were you doing there?" he asks in a churlish tone, "what were you doing at her house on the night of the murder?"

The night of the murder, the words sink deep inside me.

"I told you, she invited me over, we talked for a while, that's all."

"Oh, so it was a friendly conversation?" No. I don't like that tone one bit.

"Yes, pretty friendly, I think."

"You know what I think? That you're a shitty liar."

You're wrong, I'm an excellent liar.

"Pretty friendly," he parrots me mockingly. The impersonation, I must say, is surprisingly good. "Stop bullshitting me! She was scared to death of you, scared you'd kill her!"

"What?" I exclaim, hoping my shock sounds genuine. "Who told you such a thing?"

"Who do you think?"

I'll never say.

"Come on, Sheila." Even now, saying my name makes him sound a little more relaxed, but he's still standing firm in the middle of my living room with those squinting green eyes, like a giant boa constrictor.

"Who even told you I was over there?"

"You tell me."

Not again with those silly cop-show games. "Has anyone ever, in your entire career, given you a straight answer to that 'you tell me'? Does that even work?"

He smiles despite himself, although it's definitely not the smile I was hoping for. *As the venom glands begin to swell, the snake appears to be smiling.*

"Ronit Akiva," he says, "she told me."

Thump! Thump! Of course it was her, and still it isn't easy for me to hear. Ronit's image flits before me, dark and beautiful, flashing that crimson smile of hers, *a man eater*. That smile erases all other memories, apart from that final one.

"How does she look?" I can't believe that's the first thing to come out of my mouth.

"I have no idea, we spoke on the phone," he says, "but she's around your age, isn't she?"

Okay, I deserved that, ask a dumb question, get a dumb answer, and Ronit always did make me act like an idiot.

"It turns out your..." he pauses for moment, "*friendly* chat with Dina scared her so badly that she called Ronit right after you left."

So the two were in closer contact than Dina was willing to admit, and this revelation makes me so angry I almost miss the implication of Micha's last few words.

"But that means when I left she was still alive!" I exclaim triumphantly. He pins me with a sharp gaze.

"It doesn't mean a thing. Maybe you went back there afterwards?"

My eyes bore into his, which have resumed their bright, soothing shade, and what I find inside them encourages me to continue – "Look at me, do you honestly believe I killed her? Come on, you actually think I tied her to a chair and glued a doll into her hands? How did they even manage with those tiny fingers of hers? Like a midget's hands." *Shut up, you moron.*

And once again his green gaze locks behind the thicket of eyelashes, casting about the apartment and lingering on the couch. He's searching for my doll, I know, but he won't find it, and the rest of the boxes are carefully sealed.

"I honestly don't know," he finally says. I guess it'll have to do for now.

When I bring him coffee, he's already sitting leisurely on the couch, one leg folded underneath his youthful body, full of bendable joints. I hand him the mug, and our fingers brush against each other.

"Did you add anything to this?"

"Other than sugar?" I consider him.

"You know what I mean."

Oh, yes, I definitely do. I felt it the moment he stepped into my house, the way he studied me, that something was certainly there. I never get these things wrong. I have no doubt the blame lies with Ronit, who opened her big painted mouth. "You tell me," I say, I just can't help myself, but he refuses to play along.

"Ronit said Dina was scared of you, afraid you cursed her or something."

Good.

"Then you can tell her from me to stop talking nonsense."

"She talked about it very seriously. Said that in college they called you the witch."

"Baloney," I reply, but suddenly, in what must have been the devil's work (or a witch's), the familiar song arises from the street, "Little witch, little witch fell down a ditch!" The small voices sound more menacing than usual, and despite my overwhelming urge to slam the window shut, I obviously won't do that in front of the suspicious green gaze.

"Are they singing about you?" he asks, feigning amusement, but it only makes him sound more serious.

"Of course not! What are you, crazy?"

"If that was your reputation in college, maybe you carried it into adulthood."

"Now you listen to me, it was a private joke between me and my friends, nothing serious, I just had... good instincts, intuition, that's all. Like how I knew the moment I saw you that you used to be religious."

"You don't need intuition for that, most religious people would have caught onto it within seconds."

"Or how I knew you were into more mature women."

He considers me carefully. "You don't have to be some gifted psychic for that either."

True, certainly not with all those looks and innuendoes of yours, which at present seem to have faded without leaving a trace. But I'm not worried, cute ex-Orthodox boys like you are invariably capricious, playing hot and cold with you, expecting you to be the supportive adult, until it blows up in both your faces, because you yourself happen to prefer being the little girl.

He picks up his mug, now cold. His eyes narrow as he studies the inscription, "To the Best Mum in the World."

And now he's tinkering with his teaspoon, eyeing it intensely, as if it will reveal to him everything he wants to know. I can't help but notice he hasn't taken even a tiny sip, just keeps on stirring.

"Have there even been any Jewish witches?" He's still stirring the coffee with those slow circular motions, like a witch over a bubbling cauldron.

"There were a few," I say, "but I promise you, I'm not one of them."

"Hypothetically," he says, stirring even slower now, "strictly hypothetically, what would you have slipped into my drink?"

I know I'm supposed to say now something like 'a love potion,' and I know that if I say it in a seductive, soft enough tone, I'd clear the air between us and maybe even more than that. But that slow stirring, the fact that he's barely looking at me, not to mention everything that happened with Ronit, who apparently stayed in touch with Dina after everything – everything! – that had gone down, all these result in me blurting out the word "poison," promptly followed by – "I'd slip poison in your drink."

He finally stops stirring, looks up at me, and without blinking draws the mug to his mouth and takes a big gulp. I stare at his Adam's apple. Yes, that was indeed a big, smooth swallow. Good boy.

"You know, we used to sing a different song when we were kids," he says. "Instead of Little Witch, we sang Old Spinster. It went something like, *fat old spinster, chin full of whiskers.*" He smiles at me while taking another sip of coffee, making me regret not lacing it with a deadly dose of poison.

Translated from the Hebrew by Daniella Zamir