I Ask You

To tell you this story I have to go back more than forty years, to when I was a wife and mother. The marriage was never a bed of roses, but who gets that? My husband was a good enough man, he provided. He made a mistake that hurt the three of us, and maybe that's where a lot of the blame belongs, and not all on me. You can decide.

We had one child, Marla. Up til the time she was twelve she had been happy, carefree. But then she became ambitious. First she wanted ballet lessons. So we sent her to a lady who taught ballet. How Marla struggled to be good at it, but she never had the body. She had a nice body, but solid, earthbound, like her parents. Still, Marla wanted so bad to be a prima ballerina, to dance in Paris and London. She was hurt when she realized it would never be, and the little ballet shoes with the ribbons went into the back of her closet. Next it was the violin. Again, lessons. And how she practiced, for years she practiced. And again, her dreams were way up there in the sky. Not just a member of an orchestra, not Marla, she wanted to be a Jascha Heifetz. The striving! But try as she might, beautiful sounds never came from her room. Again, she gave it up, and again it hurt her. Next it was art lessons, and this she was good at, but she was in her late teens by then, and she understood that she had no genius for art. Anyway, she had discovered her true calling, her passion. She would be a great actress.

What did Max and I think of all this? We never discouraged her, but it worried us. We knew that the young have dreams, but with her it seemed different. "Why the sky?" we asked. Because we both had come up in hard times, and what we dreamed about when we were Marla's age were warm clothes and a meal that filled our stomachs. Things like that, which we often had to do without. In the family I grew up in even affection was something you had to do without. Marla had all the material things she wanted, plus love. From the moment he first held her she was Max's princess. She was deprived of nothing.

And you're probably wondering, did she become somebody important in this world? No, she was just another nobody. For Marla there would be no rushing joyously up to the stage to receive her Oscar. She married a man who sold large farm equipment, tractors and such. Now she's a sixty-six year old widow living in Provo, Utah, near her children. Mormon country — she had married a Mormon, had become one herself. What does that have to do with anything, her being a Mormon? Well, this story has to do with her being Jewish. Because I'm a Jew, her father was a Jew, so she was a Jew. Our name was like a slap in the face with a big, wet kosher herring. Rosenblatt. Marla Rosenblatt. Now her name is Helen Burke, her middle and her married names. The last time I saw her was when she came home for her father's funeral, when she was nineteen. It was the last time because Marla — or Helen, I should call her — broke all ties with me. I've never seen so much as a snapshot of my three grandchildren, now grown men. And Max, when he was in the hospital, wouldn't speak a word to me. As soon as I came into his room he turned his face to the wall.

So the life of wife and mother ended for me, and suddenly — in less than one year. That comes back to how everybody blamed me. But I wasn't to blame for the root of all the trouble. It had to do with that mistake Max made. When Marla was ten we moved to a small town. A town the name of which I will never speak. Max moved us there, he said it was a great opportunity. The owner of the only shoe store in town had died, and the family was selling the business. We

were living in Cleveland, and Max was employed by a big shoe store, he was manager of its repair service. Max was a cobbler, which was what his father was, and his grandfather, back in the shtetl. In the forties and fifties there was money in shoe repairs. He made a good salary, we lived well. I was a big city girl, I had friends, did things, if it was just to walk along Euclid Avenue with Marla holding my hand and look into the department store windows. I was afraid of small towns. Especially this one, because I knew there was only one other Jewish family, the Kaplans, a couple in their eighties who had sold their bakery and stayed on, too old and set in their ways to move. The town was made up mostly of people of German, Scandinavian and English descent. Of course, no synagogue for fifty miles — not that we went, but still. The churches were Lutheran, Protestant, Presbyterian. It was a religious town, the churches were full on Sundays. It was also a town with a secret past. Mrs. Kaplan told me about it. When Hitler came to power, but before the war broke out, there was a thriving German bund, complete with uniforms and a youth camp. Of course, after Poland was invaded those organizations disbanded. I'm not saying that they went underground. The people were patriotic Americans, they sent their boys to fight. But still, they had once been zealous about Hitler and his ideas. What did they think about his hatred for the Jews, which he made no secret of from the beginning?

Before I knew about the bund I begged Max not to make the move. But I guess he had dreams too. To be his own boss, to wear a suit and tie, to employ others. To make more money. The American dream. So he bought the store, added a repair shop in the back. And how he worked! When he closed at six he'd change clothes and repair shoes. Didn't come home til eight, sometimes later. Anyway, the store was a success. I was afraid that people wouldn't shop at a store run by a Jew, but I was wrong. Max was a pleasant guy, people liked him. He gave good value for the money.

Still, what kind of life was it for us? We never experienced outright prejudice, but we had no social life. In town I got hellos, chats, and that was all. In the evening we only had each other to look at, or the TV screen, with Max too tired to even carry on a conversation. No wonder Marla began to spend so much time in her room. I'd watch Max nod off in his chair and think, Yeah, great business opportunity.

And how did growing up in that town affect a girl in her teens? Was Marla made an outcast for being Jewish? No, not that. She was even popular. But her friends were school friends. She involved herself in every school activity under the sun – debate club, newspaper, chorus — and, of course, first and foremost in her heart, drama club. If there was a big party, she would be invited. But she was never invited for things that involved family. Like when she was younger, she never went to someone's house for a sleepover, though she knew that others did. And, later, the gathering place for teens was the country club, and she was never invited there. Though she was pretty, she was only asked out on dates for school events. So there was a line drawn, and she was alone on one side of it. Maybe this feeling of being set apart led to her striving. If she must stand alone, she would stand out, but in another, more glamorous world. I don't know. When she was around fifteen she stopped confiding in Max and me, no longer told us what delighted or troubled her.

Anyway, that's the way it was just before everything fell apart.

In her senior year of high school the drama club put on an end-of-the-year play. The director, who was also the Speech teacher, gave Marla a starring role. I'm speaking of someone I'll call Miss Veronica Hayes. That sounds like a stage name, because that was what she used in real life — her stage name. She was a home town girl who had made a splash in the Big Pond. Actually it was more like a ripple, but she had been in many plays on Broadway, usually in supporting roles. Some big hits, with big name actors. When she got older, and the roles dried up, along with the husbands, she came back home, still retaining her glamour. Miss Hayes made a point of telling us that our daughter had a special talent. Marla worshiped her.

The play was "Our Town." Marla played Emily, the girl who dies in childbirth. The boy who played the Stage Manager may have had more lines, but Marla had the most important moment. I mean that scene at the end, when Emily is allowed to return to the living for one day — I was crying. Even Max's eyes were red. Everybody around me was dabbing at their eyes. When the Stage Manager said "Good night" the lights slowly dimmed until we were all in darkness, not a sound, and then the lights came back on, and we saw the entire cast on the stage, and everybody in the audience stood up, applauding and cheering. When each person took their solo bow, it may have been my imagination, but I believe Marla got the loudest applause. To the people in that auditorium, I think she was still Emily. Oh, it was heady stuff. That night, finally, all Marla's dreams had come true. She had moved people with her acting. And it was Marla who led Miss Hayes out, to take an elegant bow, like she had on many Broadway stages. The sound at that moment was like a wave that reaches a crest and breaks. And then it was over.

Which brings us to the plaque. One was made in commemoration of the play. Three weeks before the end of school it appeared on the wall by the door to the principal's office. I would see it when I visited the school. It was a first class piece of work. It had a dark walnut frame, but the plaque itself was marble. The words were etched in the marble — I ran my fingers over the surface. Under the title of the play was the name of the director, Veronica Hayes, done in script. Below that were the cast members, listed in alphabetical order, more than twenty names. Very well done, no expense spared, except for one small omission. The name of Marla Rosenblatt was nowhere to be found.

I said that this story is about being Jewish. At this time, in 1959, Jews in Europe were no longer being piled into cattle cars, crowded into gas chambers. Some of those lost were cousins I never met, but as a child I repeated their strange names in bed at night: Pelte, Katriel, Getzel, Chaim. There was never a brick thrown through the window of Max's store, no swastika scrawled on his door. What I'm talking about is a not a fire-breathing dragon, nor a serpent, but a worm. A worm inside people. Hidden, deep inside, in the gut. When it came to that plaque — well, they just couldn't stomach having those nice names besmirched by the splat of a Rosenblatt. Why else would my daughter's name be left out? Why?

I might never have found out about the plaque if I hadn't gotten a phone call from the school nurse saying that Marla wasn't feeling well — had been throwing up — and one of the secretaries was driving her home. So Marla told me what had happened. But she told it sullenly, almost as if she were angry at me. Blaming me. And it was the same with her father. No pouring out of her heart to us. Our sympathy was received without emotion. I think she had decided on the path she would take, one away from Rosenblatt.

Max was angry. When we were alone he paced the room, muttering “God damn goyim” over and over. But do something about it? Confront the principal? No. He had a business to worry about. Let sleeping dogs lie, there was no way to change what was etched in stone. Complaining would just get people riled up against us. At that time another shoe store had opened in town, and Max was worried. This new store was more stylish, and carried women’s shoes, which his didn’t. So, no, he wasn’t going to do anything. I had always bowed to the wishes of my husband — that was how I had been raised, for the man to have the last word. But not with this. I didn’t tell him so, but those sleeping dogs weren’t going to lie in peace. I also didn’t tell Marla that I was going to do anything, because she had made it clear that she didn’t want trouble stirred up. She was looking ahead to college, to getting free of this town, free of us. But I was angry, deep down angry. It was about more than that plaque. It was about eight years of living in a place where we were unwanted, a place where I had no life outside the walls of my home. The name of the play took on a special meaning for me. “Our Town.” It wasn’t ours, that was obvious. So I called the school and made an appointment. That was when I saw the plaque, when I came to the school, and after I had studied it long and hard I went in to talk to the principal.

He was polite, but formal and wary. I asked questions, ones I had carefully planned out, beginning with the innocent ones. The plaque is beautiful, where was it made? We ordered it from a firm in Chicago. What’s the name of this firm? Someone else handled that, but I can get the name for you, if you’d like, though I really don’t know why this matters. Are you aware that a mistake has been made? Yes, an unfortunate one, and we regret it. Were any other names left out, or just my daughter’s? I haven’t been told of any others. Did you send this Chicago firm a work order, or whatever it’s called, telling them what you wanted on the plaque? I’m sure we must have. If my daughter’s name was on the work order, and this firm omitted it, wouldn’t they correct their mistake? That would involve making a whole new plaque. So? I mean, if they’re a reputable firm, I’m sure they’d take the loss. Could I see a copy of the work order you sent them?

The principal leaned back in his chair, studying me. Neither of us was smiling anymore. “I see where you’re going with this, and all I can tell you is that if the mistake was ours, it was inadvertent. There were over twenty students in the cast, so an omission is understandable. You should know that this plaque — its purpose, because we’ve never done this for a play before — was to honor Miss Hayes. She isn’t well, she won’t be returning next year, so this was her last play. As for the cast members — really, only the student would look to find their own name.”

“Are you saying that the fact that my daughter’s name was left out is of no importance?”

“It’s of great importance to her, and to you, obviously. What I said was that . . . if a mistake was made, it was unfortunate but inadvertent.”

“It’s strange to me, that a person who played a major role should have been left out. When others in the play who had a few lines are included.”

“Your point, Mrs. Rosenblatt?”

“You just said it, when you said my name. The point is Rosenblatt.”

“You’re talking in riddles.”

“Not at all. The name left out is the only Jewish one.”

“Ridiculous. Your daughter has in no way been discriminated against in this school. In the four years she’s been here she’s been treated fairly. Hasn’t she? And if we were so against

having a Jewish name in the cast — as you're accusing us — why would she even be used in the play?"

"Because she was the only one who could do the part justice, and Miss Hayes knew that. But when it came to having her name on a plaque that would hang on the wall outside the school office — no. Not that one, the Jewish one."

"I'm trying to see this from your point of view, but, really, you're blowing this way out of proportion. You're making unfounded accusations."

"Am I? By the way, did Miss Hayes see the plaque?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything about Marla's name being missing?"

"No."

I suddenly saw Miss Hayes as a co-conspirator. Like the rest. And this blond-haired, blue-eyed man sitting in front of me twisting things — as if I were in the wrong, as if I were being unreasonable. The principal was taking me for a fool. So that's why I asked the next question. That's why, out of anger. Unreasonable anger.

"Were you a member of the Nazi bund they had in this town in the thirties?"

The principal got up from his chair abruptly.

"I think we're done talking. Though I wonder — did you know that I enlisted in the army at eighteen and served in Italy? Two years, was wounded. Did you know that?" He laughed, grimly. "But I'm going to make a concession to you, Mrs. Rosenblatt, seeing how strongly you feel about this. About us, about this town. Yes, a concession. I'll have the plaque taken down immediately. Today. That's all I can do for you. Now you'll have to excuse me, I have a meeting. Goodbye."

That night I had to tell Max and Marla what had been said. Including the remark about the bund. When he heard that Max began to pull his hair with both hands.

"We're ruined!"

"Well, if I handled it so wrong, it was because you wouldn't do anything!"

Marla took her father's side. All the kids had told her that they were sorry that her name had been left out. So had Miss Hayes.

"Words are cheap. Did your beloved Miss Hayes raise a finger to make things right? Why don't all these sympathizers see the principal? Draw up a petition?"

"Petitions!" cried Max.

"It doesn't matter that much!" said Marla. "I told them so!"

"Then why were you throwing up? Why? I try to defend my daughter against a wrong, and what do I get?"

"No, it's not about me, Mother. If you really cared about me you would have stayed out of this. You just wanted to settle your own score."

That's how I remember it, my talk with the principal and then with my husband and daughter. How could I forget it, the words that ended my life? In those words you can see how they all blamed me. And in me a feeling of the unfairness of it grew and grew.

Turned out Max was right in what he said, about being ruined. What I told the principal became common knowledge, and it's as if the town answered with one voice: If you want to see

discrimination, we'll show it to you. As the days went by his business steadily fell off. He'd report each night, bitterly, on the dwindling number of customers that came through his door, and his bitterness was toward me. Max knew that things wouldn't change, the customers wouldn't come back. He sold the business, tried to start another one in Cleveland. He died trying. First the chest pains that put him in the hospital, then, two days later, a massive heart attack. And never relenting in blaming it all on me. The gray face turned toward the wall as I sat silently by his bed for my allotted time.

Marla came for the funeral from college — one on the other side of the country, as if she couldn't get far enough away. She cried at her father's grave, but she was cold toward me. Could she possibly blame me for his death? That too? I got two short letters from her, then nothing. When a letter I sent her came back as undeliverable, I called the college. I was told Marla had withdrawn from school and left no forwarding address. I didn't try to find her.

Though my life had fallen apart, it didn't end. I had money that Max left me, and there was an insurance policy. I moved into a small apartment. I took a secretarial course, to brush up on my skills, and got a job as a bookkeeper in a trucking firm, stayed there almost twenty years. A business run by a Jew. I went to the synagogue — not that I believe in anybody's God — and to events at the Jewish Community Center. I stuck with my own kind. I made friends, we did things. No men friends. I had offers, but I wasn't interested. When people talked about Israel, what was going on there, I thought of tanks and bulldozers and the stones being thrown at them. I wanted to ask, what kind of the Holy Land is that? But I kept my mouth shut.

So life went on, though now, at eighty-six, I'm fading. I still live independent — I'll die alone in this apartment. Which I accept. The old and needy are a burden even for loved ones, and long ago I gave up on love.

I thought only scar tissue remained from the past, but something happened recently that showed me it wasn't healed. My brother has cancer, in the last stages, and I spoke to him over the phone. He came out with a kind of deathbed confession, a secret he had kept from me. It was about Marla. He had been in touch with her for thirty years. She sent him cards on the holidays, and in them she included a note, sometimes snapshots. Apparently she had a lasting affection for her Uncle Morris. Anyway, that's how I found out what had become of her, from my brother. When he was done telling me the surprising story of her life, there was one thing I needed to know. Did she ever ask about me? No, he said, and his words seemed very cruel. No, only in the beginning, to tell me that she would never have a reconciliation with you, and that I shouldn't share with you what she wrote. Since then she's never mentioned you.

Those words opened a wound, and it was fresh and bleeding. But after a few days it closed, a shriveled, ugly scar again. Closed it will stay. Because what has she become, that young girl on the stage, radiant in the applause? I imagine a fat, gray-haired old woman, tight-lipped in her righteous hate for me. Maybe that's all my story is about — hate. More likely it has no meaning. So I'll leave you with what seems to be a perfect ending, and one which could well be true. It has to do with that plaque. In this ending it went back on the wall of the school the day we left town and is there now and will still be there when we're all dead, with one name missing forever.