

SOTA

by Benjamin Shalva

Eve sat in the synagogue library. She was not a Jew, but she knew enough, had watched her father-in-law claw the challah, tearing her the largest chunk and tossing it to her, a twinkle in his eye. His son, her husband, took no interest. He slapped on a garish kippah and sneered. But she ate and it was unlike any wafer. It was thick and sticky and rained poppy seeds.

After the divorce, she met with the rabbi.

“You are not a Jew,” the rabbi said. “There is nothing required.”

“Am I no longer welcome?”

“God forbid,” he said. “This is your home as much as mine.”

She wept and did not return for many months. Then, one Friday afternoon, she fell asleep on her couch, awoke, and lit candles alone. The following morning, she sat in the synagogue library surrounded by old men in suits and old ladies nibbling cake. The rabbi entered. He opened his book and read. Hands shot up. The conversation veered and fumed. Eve followed well enough. The *sota*, the suspected adulteress, is compelled to drink—a dusty potion, God’s Name inscribed and dissolved. If guilty, her belly distends. Death by bloating. If innocent, the waters pass, free and clear.

“Where, in all this, is forgiveness?” Eve asked.

The shouting men paused. Bushy eyebrows danced. The women nibbled and grinned.

“Forgiveness,” the rabbi replied. “There is none.”

“But water is water,” Eve said. “Ink is ink and dust is dust. Guilty or not, the wife would survive.”

The rabbi smiled.

“It is a cruel ritual,” a man behind Eve growled. He had said this once already. “Forgive me, rabbi, but it is cruel and absurd.”

Eve agreed. But, after the class adjourned and the group shuffled to the sanctuary, Eve slipped out a side door and hurried to her car. She dug in her purse, came up with an old receipt and a pen. She pressed the receipt blank side up on her thigh and copied, best she could, God’s Name. Then she rolled the receipt and plunged it into a half-empty bottle of seltzer. She lifted the bottle to her lips and closed her eyes and chugged and felt day-old fizz tickle her nose. Of course, she knew she was not a Jew. But all the same, how sweet—the seltzer’s tang and God’s holy Name, this potion, this jealous poison, triggering no worse than a belch. Forgiveness, finally, for her ancient mistake—her survival, this morning, the proof.

END