

In Casablanca this summer, I had dinner with a young writer who three and a half years ago made the mistake of publishing an inventory of Moroccan jokes: the ones that everyone knows but no one had dared to print before. Jokes about religion, sex, the king, right there in a popular Casablanca magazine with her name on it. She and the magazine's editor were taken to court, given three years suspended sentence, huge fines, and the weekly periodical shut down for two months. Unless you are Moroccan, I doubt you would laugh at the jokes, for they are local.

That night, I found myself increasingly unsure where I myself was placed in relationship to this writer whom I had just met. And as if she sensed this, she kept breaching the course of our conversation with jokes. It was magical—and disorienting—and it brought us into the joyous and rare proximity of shared laughter.

## I'M NOT CRAZY ABOUT THAT PART AVIVA KUSHNER SARAH LAUGHS, GOD EDITS

One of my biggest fears is that I will die because I have talked too much. According to Jewish tradition, every human being has a limited number of words, and then that's it—you're gone. Every few months I start to worry about my tally, and warn my friends that a quieter life lies ahead.

And then there is my sister. Once, in the middle of dinner, my parents complimented her on her magnificent efficiency (she had, as usual, brought order to a family mess). "*Emor me at ve' arch barbech*," she said, crediting Abraham. "Say little and do much."

I love the way everyone has their own scheme, and their own way of reading and absorbing reality. In the story of Sarah and Abraham, my sister—the future management consultant—noticed how Abraham rushed to get butter and milk, how he rushed to delegate, how he coordinated all of the tasks to welcome the visiting angels. What I've always loved about that story is Sarah's laughter.

When the angels come to talk to Abraham, Sarah listens in the

opening of the tent and laughs when she hears the angel say she'll have a child within a year. In English, the Oxford Annotated Bible printly says, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'"

The Talmud is a little blunter. Sarah says something more like, "Is there any way this withered old husband of mine will give me a good time in bed? (The word for pleasure here—*edna*—is from the same root as Eden: Can this man take me back to Eden, can he take me back to pure delight?)"

How Sarah laughs is hard to translate. She laughs *be'eriba*. Literally, that means inside her—in her guts, in her intestines. That laughter turns God into an editor, and Sarah into a liar.

In the translation and in the original, God is a benevolent gossip. "Where is your wife Sarah?" God asks Abraham as Sarah listens. It would be nice to have Sarah out there too, with Abraham and with God's representatives, instead of in the tent, eavesdropping and thinking that her husband isn't all that talented. "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" God has just edited Sarah. What she actually said about Abraham, how bad a lover she thought he was, is no longer part of the conversation.

The rabbis discuss the matter further, saying God knew Sarah laughed because she found Abraham, well, a little disappointing. The translation can't convey the fascination of the rabbis at God's editing. The Talmud suggests that God knew that *shalom bayit*—peacefulness in the house—was the most important thing. "Great is peace," a rabbi explains, "and even God will make changes to have it."

When God asks Sarah why she laughed, she denies it. All the commentators chatter about this too—why did she deny her laughter, why did she try to lie to God? Most of them agree with what the text says: because she was afraid. I'm not crazy about that part. The only person with the guts to laugh in all these chapters is a very old woman who is barren and stuck making conversation with a concubine she doesn't like much anyway. She's out there in the desert with a ninety-nine-year old husband who runs around to fetch butter as soon as he

sees a guest. All Sarah did was what God did: edit the truth, say as little as possible and try to keep the peace.

## I WAS A MICROAGENT OF THE BODY GUARD IAN CHILLAG MISSING ARBY SEA

*Red blood cell.* For twenty-five years, every time I've heard or read the term, I've thought of *Arby Sea*. It's a useless memory, the words somehow just the wrong shape to enter whatever hole the things I forget pass through. Instead, *Arby Sea* is caught there at the drain, picking up bits and hairs of phone numbers and names as they move out into nothing.

My memories of *Arby Sea* himself are pretty vague. I've wondered if other people have memories like this: quick images arriving on cue. The smell of gasoline and lake water: I'm treading water with my sister behind my grandfather's motorboat, aware of what *neutral* means but afraid of the propeller anyway. When I decide to leave work every day, I have the memory that confuses me most: a flash of an intersection on a hill, halfway home from my elementary school, where I can't remember anything ever happening.

When I was six, I played a computer game, a take on *Fantastic Voyage*, in which you, miniaturized, traveled around a diseased body diagnosing and curing. *Arby Sea*—as in, R-B-C—was a red blood cell who gave you advice, and on whom you rode through the bloodstream like a surfboard. It was an educational game, and so no game at all. I remember trying to pretend otherwise, because it was the closest thing I was going to get.

Thinking of the game recently, I couldn't remember what it was called. I searched for *Arby Sea red blood cell*, and discovered an entire forum of other people who could remember *Arby Sea*, but nothing else about the game. It had caught in their brains too, a leaf against a rock in the middle of a hurtling river, everything else rushing past. A dozen people, in a dozen towns in America, had thought of the same dumb pun every time they heard "red blood cell" for twenty-five years. Maybe there was a moment we all thought of him at the same time. *Arby Sea* written in unison in twelve brains, and disappearing at once.

Was it called *Plasminium*? Knight's Literature? No, no. Then someone said: Was it *MicroAgent of the Body Guard*? And we all remembered everything at once. We'd had subscriptions to something called *MicroZine*. Scholastic at once. Every month, or quarter, or some other unbearable unit of time, we'd receive a package of four new educational computer games on 5 1/4 inch floppy disks. Some were disguised well: *Nature in Wonderland*. *Escape from JettCarnaz*. Others were not: *Math Mail*.

We had played *MicroAgent of the Body Guard* on computers not connected to anything else. You wouldn't imagine anyone was doing the same thing you were, and you couldn't ask them if they were. The computer was a box, open toward you, but closed at the other end.

Some more looking and I came across a worksheet, meant for health classes. Sample essay questions: *Write a section for the MicroAgent Handbook containing everything an agent needs to know about blood. Write a description of the coloring machine which will allow Arby Sea to enlarge and recite his medical imaging you are a MicroAgent. Write a description of your travels through the body as a secret impulse telling the left hand to wave good-bye.*

It was my guess that the name *Arby Sea* had stuck because even at six I'd had contempt for the pun. The name had attached itself to that contempt and ridden it safely through my history like a miniaturized *MicroAgent* on a red blood cell. But someone on the forum recalled there was a point in the game where we'd been required to remember. *Arby Sea*—a door you couldn't pass through if you didn't know the name of the red blood cell you traveled with—and that rung a faraway bell. Was I just doing as I was told? Did some memories ask to be memories?

*Imagine you are a memory. Write a description of what it's like to stay inside a brain forever.* I haven't asked my sister what she thinks of when she smells gasoline and lake water—if she's on the other side of my memory, treading water with her little brother, watching the oil make rainbows on the surface. Maybe she is afraid of the propeller too, or thinks I'm silly for trying to keep my distance from something we know is idle. The intersection I remember is deserted, so there's nobody who can tell me why it visits me every day. There's no one to confirm or complete the memory the way there was with *Arby Sea*. To turn steam into water, or all the way to ice.