

Virgin Matriarch

Martha Rosenbaum and her husband Sid were reading in bed the night their son telephoned to tell them that he had four children and to invite them to the bat mitzvah of the eldest in April.

“*What?* Is this a joke?” Sid asked. “Where did you get four children?”

Martha sat up, startled. “Sid,” she hissed. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Jack,” he told her, and then turned back to the telephone receiver. “Are they yours or are they adopted?”

Martha grabbed the receiver away from Sid in time to hear Jack say, “They’re mine.”

“Jack, honey, what’s this all about?” Martha asked. “You’ve been divorced for more than ten years, and you’re not even married . . . are you?”

“He’s trying to give me a heart attack,” Sid said. Martha watched him shuffle to his study to pick up the extension. His kindly, basset hound eyes reflected a wry wisdom gained from a lifetime spent caring for children, elderly parents, and needy patients.

“I’m not married,” said Jack. “I have four kids.”

“How old are they?” Martha asked, removing her reading glasses. Suddenly everything in the room looked odd and unfamiliar: the two mismatched dressers—one tall, the other short; one oak, the other pine. When she moved into this house 40 years ago, there had been only enough money to redecorate the living room and dining room. That, and to re-panel the charred basement.

“Thirteen, ten, five, and two. And one on the way,” Jack said.

“*Oy vey!* And how many more after that?” Sid asked, from the extension.

“Who’s the mother?” Martha asked.

“You’ll meet her. Assuming you come to the bat mitzvah,” Jack said.

“But why didn’t you tell us . . . before?” Martha asked.

"I told you, he wants to give me a heart attack," Sid said. In the background, Martha heard rustling sounds and imagined Sid pushing things aside to make room to sit. His study hemorrhaged a plethora of papers: haphazard piles of medical journals, magazines—*National Geographic*, the *New Yorker*, *Travel*—splayed open to articles he wanted to finish reading, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Onion*.

"No Dad," Jack laughed. "I didn't tell you sooner because I didn't want to upset you and Mom."

"How touching," Sid said. "Like we are not shocked *now*?"

"Look, this is a unique arrangement," Jack said, suddenly serious. "I wanted to make sure it worked before I brought you into it."

"What kind of cockeyed logic is that?" Sid asked.

"Sid, stop it," Martha said. "Jack, tell us more. We didn't see any kids the last time we came to Texas."

"They don't live with me. They live with her. I visit."

"Are they her kids from a previous marriage?" Martha asked.

"No! I told you, they're mine."

"Then why don't they live with you?" Martha asked.

"Because I don't want them to. I like it better this way."

Martha persisted. "But what about her? Doesn't she want to live with you?"

"Hell no! What woman could stand living with me?"

"Don't swear, Jack," Martha said.

"Mom, please, I'm not six years old anymore."

"Obviously not," said Sid.

Martha hesitated. "Are they . . . yours with Lynette?"

"I haven't seen Lynette in years and I hope I never see her again. As the saying goes, I played with fire and got burned. I'll never get married again."

Sid stepped in. "Then who is she? How did you meet her?"

"Okay, that's enough questions," Jack said. "I gotta hang up. I'm getting beeped from the hospital. The invitations go out next week. Hope you can come!"

Sid returned to the bedroom. "To be named Rosenbaum is to be crazy," he said, shaking his head. He got back into bed next to Martha.

She lay back on her pillows, pushing strands of salt-and-pepper hair behind her ear, thinking about Jack's marriage many years ago. He'd been ecstatic. Finally, at the age of 41, he had found the woman of his dreams!

For so many years all the women he met were too old, too ugly; smoked, had bad breath, had a space between their two front teeth; were gold diggers, clock cleaners, princesses, or so he said. He gave them all grades of C, D, F, or—the ultimate deficiency—Incomplete.

"No one in the entire state of Texas is good enough for him," Sid used to complain.

But Lynette was perfect—or a least, almost. "She's so beautiful," he told his parents. Thirteen years his junior, she could still bear the many children he wanted—that is, after graduating from dental school.

Also she was Jewish—or rather, half Jewish. "The *right* half," Jack insisted.

In an orgy of expectation, Jack and his fiancée registered for all sorts of expensive items: crystal, linens, appliances, and two sets of china and two sets of silver, so Lynette could keep a kosher household at Jack's request.

Martha had been concerned: Lynette knew nothing about keeping kosher, with all its elaborate rules and rituals. But Jack said she would learn.

The triumphant wedding ceremony was followed by a honeymoon in Belize.

One year later he was divorced.

Lynette had initiated the proceedings. In exchange for leaving Jack alone, she wanted one hundred thousand dollars in alimony, and she wanted it written into the settlement that Jack would continue to pay her dental school tuition.

Plus, she got to keep all the wedding gifts, including both sets of kosher dishes.

"I feel like I let a stranger into my house, and I got robbed," Jack told his mother after the divorce. "I loved her, and she hurt me." Martha sensed that he was not just hurt, but also humiliated.

His worst views of women confirmed, Jack eventually returned to dating in what he called "the Gulag of substandard single women."

“Where did we go wrong?” Martha wondered aloud.

“Please don’t start that,” Sid said. “Jack was always a *meshugenuh*. Remember the time he refrigerated a salamander in a cottage cheese container and didn’t tell anyone till you opened it? How the first car he owned was a secondhand hearse because it only cost \$300 and he could *schlep* his record collection back and forth in it from college? And he parked it out front—like we were the Addams family!”

Yes, she’d done the best she could, Martha reflected, especially considering that all four boys were under the age of 12 when their mother, Helayne, died.

She sighed, closing her book and setting it on the nightstand, recalling the four wounded sparrows, as she thought of them, who had become her sons when she married Sid. As she turned out the light, a thought suddenly ignited.

In what year had Jack married?

She searched her memory. If his daughter was 13, she must have been born just four months after Jack’s wedding, which meant she must already have been conceived . . . before Jack married Lynette! Yet Jack insisted that Lynette was not the mother.

One week later, the bat mitzvah invitation arrived in the mail: *Dr. Jack Rosenbaum and María Ruiz request the pleasure of your company at the bat mitzvah of their daughter, Victoria Regina Ruiz Rosenbaum, at 9:30 AM, on the fifth of April.*

Against her better judgment, Mrs. Esperanza Sanchez Ruiz Espinosa had agreed to attend the bat mitzvah of her eldest granddaughter.

With everything she had to do at the restaurant on a Saturday and the heat and at her age when even to step up and down stairs was exhausting, this was the last thing she needed.

It was a source of great irritation to her that María had taken up with a *judío* and converted to his religion. This, in addition to the shame of five babies with no husband!

“*Putá,*” she muttered under her breath.

True, Esperanza herself was not as observant as she might have been. But running a restaurant seven days a week, she didn’t have much time for church.

She had been determined, however, that her four children would be good Catholics. She sent them all for free to schools run by the local parish and she didn't care if there were those who called it charity.

Esperanza hoped she could still fit into her party dress, red satin with a wide belt, which she hadn't worn in many years, since the departure of her second husband, that *cabrón*. And her high heels—delicately she inserted one plump foot into the pointy toed shoes—*¡Ay Dios mio!*—well, at least the foot went in, and she thought she could endure the pain.

She glanced around the room, cluttered with small knickknacks and other items: a china shepherdess, an old framed photo of her parents on their wedding day, a pink plaster pig with a slit down its back for coins, a glass candy dish that contained bobby pins, old lipstick tubes, a few solitary earrings minus mates, and loose change. A fringed shawl covered the tear on the armchair by the window. A stack of *foto-novelas* sat on the end table, many already read, but who knows, they might come in handy again? And of course, on her dresser, a figurine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which always reminded her of home.

There was a knock at the door.

"Mom?" Her daughter Antonieta entered, wearing a fuchsia dress that set off her figure to the best advantage. "Do you need help? Want me to zip up your dress?"

"No. Toni, I want you to tell them I'm sick, I can't come. *Llame a un médico.*"

"Oh mamá, stop it," Toni said. You sound like an old invalid. You know how much this means to Victoria."

"Don't speak to me that way!"

To Esperanza's chagrin, when Toni turned 19, she had taken a job as a bank teller during the day. They had worked out an uneasy truce, where Toni worked in the restaurant six nights a week to make up for it. When Esperanza chided her, Toni simply said, "I don't want to end up like María." One night per week she took a business class at a nearby community college, with the goal of earning a degree and becoming a loan officer at the bank.

"It's no lie, Toni," Esperanza said. "I have a bad headache."

"Mom . . ."

“You want to go to this thing, whatever it’s called?”

Toni burst out laughing. “It’s a bat mitzvah,” she said. Think of it like a baptism. Or a *Confirmación*.”

“But the girl is already 13!”

“Then think of it more like a *Quinceañera*.”

“But the girl is only 13!”

Toni laughed again, holding up Esperanza’s dress. “Stubborn as a mule,” she said with a smile and a wink. “As always. But I know you will go. You won’t disappoint Victoria. May I zip up your dress?”

“If it zips . . .”

When Victoria was born, Esperanza had refused to see her or speak to María for a year. But one Sunday María had come by with her baby, and holding her granddaughter in her arms, Esperanza knew she could no longer pretend that this sweet little child didn’t exist. She could not help loving all of María’s children.

Toni held the dress open so that her mother could step into it. Then, as Esperanza sucked in her stomach, Toni forced the zipper past the waistline up towards the neck.

“¡Ay! I can’t breathe.”

“Good,” Toni said, giving her mother a playful kiss on top of the head. “Now, if you can corral those *traviesos*—”

“Don’t speak of your brothers that way! They are good boys. You will see. They will do well. And you could too. You’re a pretty girl. Find a rich man, get married.” Toni just shrugged.

Esperanza hastily applied lipstick, powder, earrings. Then, opening the door to the hall, she yelled “¡Ya muevansè! Move it! It’s time to go!”

Esperanza and her family met Jack’s parents for the first time at the entrance to the synagogue. Jack lined up his children in chronological order, proudly pointing to each as he said the name: Victoria Regina, Cyril, Beryl, and Basil.

The girls’ shiny dark hair was tied back with ribbons that matched Victoria’s white dress and Beryl’s pale yellow one. The boys wore starched white shirts and long pants.

But Esperanza heard Sid whisper something to Martha, and she knew it couldn't be good because Martha elbowed her husband in the ribs.

And then Jack introduced María to his parents. Esperanza watched, knowing that even aside from María's current pregnancy, they might consider her fat.

Still, her daughter had a sweet face, and Jack's mother seemed to like her, clasping María's hand in both of hers.

Jack's three brothers were there too, arriving in a separate car from his parents. He introduced them: Joshua, Todd, and David.

"And these are María's brothers, Raul and Jaime," Jack said, indicating the two teenagers.

"Hymie?" Sid said uncertainly.

"Jamie," the boy corrected Sid quickly. "Call me Jamie."

"And Toni."

Toni smiled and said, "Wow! There are as many Rosenbaums as there are Espinosas."

Esperanza had to admit that they were good-looking men. Todd, especially, was tall and muscular, with lively blue eyes. He looked like the actor, Paul Newman, she thought, and exuded the confidence of a man who understood women instinctively.

Finally, after the round of introductions, Jack said, "Let's go in."

Esperanza had never been in a synagogue before, and approached the doors cautiously, turning toward the wall as they entered and quickly—so no one would see—genuflected. It pained her deeply that her grandchildren would never even know the names of the saints.

A smartly dressed, precision-coiffed blonde woman strode toward them from the crowd. She flashed a fluorescent smile and extended a jeweled hand to Esperanza.

"Mrs. Eskinosi, *Mazel Tov!* I want to welcome you personally," she said. "I'm Shana Liebewurtz, president of the Sisterhood. We have so few Sephardic Jews join us that it is truly an honor to have you here with us today." Esperanza stared at her, bewildered.

"I realize that some of our melodies may be foreign to you, although I'm sure you'll still recognize all of the words," Shana continued. "Hebrew is, after all, Hebrew—no matter how it is sung. Victoria reads it

perfectly. My son, Joey, is also *B'nai Mitzvoh* today and I wish he could read half as well as she does! Joey? Joey! Come here. Say hello to Mrs. Eskinosi.”

“The name is Espinosa,” Martha said gently.”Esperanza Espinosa.”

“Oh. My apologies. But you *are* Jewish, aren't you? I just assumed, because María is. . . .” The silence lasted just a tad too long, but Shana quickly took charge again. “Joey? Say hello.”

A small boy, eyes obscured by a curtain of bangs, teeth straitjacketed in braces, said “Hi.”

“Joey,” Shana Liebewurtz protested, “you can do better than that. Shake hands.”

He extended one pale moist paw, drawing it back almost immediately.

“Please, make yourselves at home,” Shana said. Help yourselves to the *yarmulkes*. And let me know if there's anything else you need. Come along, Joey.”

When she was out of earshot, Todd said, “A real sweetheart, that Mrs. Liverwurst.”

Everybody laughed.

“Just add lettuce and mayo and spread her on bread,” Toni said. Todd smiled at her.

Raul and Jaime fingered the tiny *yarmulkes* gingerly, as they both started to chuckle.

“¡*Cállate!*” Toni whispered to Raul. “It looks like the same little cap the Pope wears.”

Raul and Jaime laughed even harder.

“*Madre de Dios,*” Esperanza muttered. She took a black lace mantilla from her purse and placed it carefully over her hair.

“Come,” said Jack, leading everyone inside the chapel. Esperanza gazed about the room like a tourist trying to read road signs in a foreign country. She already knew not to look for a crucifix.

Jack and María sat at either end of the front pew, their children neatly arranged between them. María slipped her arm around the sons sitting to her right, while Jack gently stroked the hair of his youngest daughter, seated immediately to his left.

Esperanza observed the scars on Jack's hand. Once she had asked María about them. They didn't look like scars from cuts. Rather, his hand looked as if parts of it had melted. María said something about a fire when he was younger.

Throughout the ceremony, Esperanza watched carefully as people stood and sat at unpredictable intervals, guided by a rabbi who chanted in Hebrew. Every time she scrambled to stand, Esperanza's toes were reintroduced to the boundaries of her shoes. ¡Ay! She longed to remain seated.

Victoria and Joey stood at the altar at varying times, each singing from a scroll taken from a velvet and silver case. Each time Victoria sang by herself, Esperanza counted the rosary beads in her pocket, mentally whispering Hail Marys.

Esperanza could never have dreamed, when she left Mexico with her first husband to move to Texas, that one day her own daughter, María, would stray so far from everything holy. Although her own marriages had come to grief, Esperanza still regarded the institution as sacred. She had simply assumed that her daughters would marry and that they would be virgins at the time of marriage. But in María's case, she reflected sadly, neither assumption proved true.

She was distracted by Raul and Jaime, who slipped out three times when the congregation received the unintelligible order to stand and returned smelling of cigarettes. Esperanza glared at them, but they pretended not to see. After the third smoke they didn't return.

When the ceremony finally—blessedly—ended, the doors opened and they crossed the hall to the reception room. At the table, set with white linen and a modest centerpiece of flowers, Esperanza accepted the glass of wine offered by the waiter.

She examined the slimy beige lump on the small plate in front of her. It resembled a tiny brain pickled in brine. She sniffed. The smell of old seaweed. Told that it was fish, Esperanza shuddered inwardly and slid it beneath the lettuce leaf on which it rested.

But where were Raul and Jaime? she wondered. To repay hospitality with such rudeness was unforgivable. She poured another glass of wine.

The band started to play during the meal, and Esperanza watched as some of the children started to dance. Jack joined his children and lifted Beryl, screaming with delight, atop his shoulders as he swooped and spun elaborate circles.

Eventually, her sons returned. Jaime's jacket was slung over one shoulder, and Raul's shirttail hung outside his pants.

Esperanza spoke to them sharply in Spanish, noticing that their breath smelled of beer. They shrugged. Returning to her seat, she swallowed her rage with a sip of wine.

Between the main course and dessert, more couples gravitated to the dance floor: Sid and Martha; Jack and a woman from a nearby table; and—Esperanza's jaw dropped—Todd and Toni?

It was apparent immediately that they were the best couple on the dance floor. Todd was accomplished in ballroom, disco, and even salsa.

Toni was a wonderful dancer too: energetic, graceful, and able to follow Todd's every move. She even managed to show him some Texas two-step swing.

Esperanza watched their clinches and twirls, annoyance and longing swirling in her mind. Many years ago, she and her second husband—the slimy *ratón*—used to dance; in fact, that was one of the things that made her fall in love with him.

Her first husband, José, may he rest in peace, was a good man, a hard-working man. He had brought her beloved firstborn, María. It was he who had launched the food stall that gradually grew into a restaurant, together with her, and established a life for them in their new country. She had loved and respected him. Both she and María—still a tiny child—had grieved his loss terribly.

But with her second husband, there was something more. When Lorenzo came along, he insisted that she come dancing, that she wear high heels. He livened up the restaurant by bringing in *Maríachis* and obtaining a liquor license.

She had been raised by her mother to understand that drinking was not something that nice women did. But Lorenzo—the *cabrón*—drank a lot and they always had beer and wine on hand to serve at the restaurant and sometimes after closing up late at night when she couldn't

sleep, worrying about the rising cost of corn and beans and rice and other staples, the wine relaxed her.

After Lorenzo left and she had to run the restaurant all by herself, she never danced again.

And now here was Toni making a spectacle of herself! Esperanza shuddered: Not another pregnant daughter without a husband. . . .

She watched from a distance, eyes narrowed, lips compressed, her left hand nervously kneading an invisible lump of dough.

“*Putas*,” she muttered. “Sluts.”

At the synagogue entrance, Martha met her four grandchildren for the first time and her Latino in-laws—well, not exactly in-laws, but what should she call them? Jack lined up the children, proudly pointing to each as he said the name: Victoria Regina, Cyril, Beryl, and Basil.

“What’s with the names out of *Burke’s Peerage*?” Sid asked Martha in a stage whisper. She shot a quick elbow into his ribs. Sid was so perverse. Couldn’t he sense how awkward Jack felt, introducing his children to his parents for the first time?

She had to admit, it was a bit of a shock seeing Jack’s Semitic features melded with liquid Latin eyes and caramel-colored skin.

But the children were precious, she thought, casting an admiring eye down the row of neatly dressed, freshly washed, solemn-eyed boys and girls. As she bent to shake each child’s hand, each said formally, “How do you do, Grandmother Rosenbaum?”

“Please, call me Grandma Martha,” she urged.

And then Jack introduced María. A heavy young woman dressed in shapeless black pants and a roomy floral-patterned blouse, her placid presence and beatific countenance conveyed the serenity of a woman who gave no thought to her appearance. Martha noticed that María wore a Star of David around her neck.

“My dear, I’m so glad to meet you,” Martha said taking María’s hand in both of hers. María smiled.

Martha looked for the similarities in María’s appearance to her siblings and could find few. María’s face was wide and round whereas the others had sharper features and lighter complexions.

“You have a lovely daughter,” Martha told Esperanza, who smiled cautiously. “Is this your first time coming to a synagogue?” Esperanza nodded. “Well, don’t worry,” Martha said, “Everything will be fine. Just ask me if you have any questions.” Esperanza smiled again, this time more relaxed.

To Martha’s chagrin, they were approached almost immediately inside the synagogue by a lacquered-looking *yenta*. The woman harangued Esperanza and repeated the wrong last name until Esperanza began to look like a squirrel regarding a cat. Martha felt compelled to intervene.

“The name is Espinosa,” she said gently. “Esperanza Espinosa.”

“Thanks Mom,” Jack whispered later, just before the service started. “María converted to Judaism, of course.”

She watched Jack now, as he stood on the *bema*, his hand—still scarred from the long-ago fire—on Victoria’s shoulder as she read from the *Torah*. Returning to his seat, he gently carried Basil out with the diaper bag when the child began to fuss and cry in the middle of the service.

He was surrounded by the large family he had always wanted, Martha reflected, but without the wife. How could this be?

When she married Sid, Martha had legally adopted all four boys, so that they would be her sons in fact as well as in name. “When the mother dies,” she told Sid, “that’s not just a death, that’s a desertion.” She wanted the boys to know that they could always count on her and that her love for them was constant. She was sure she could make the difference that would enable them to grow to confident and responsible manhood.

How had she failed?

At the dinner following the ceremony, Jack and María cut their children’s food and ensured that things like silverware and table manners were used properly.

Strange, Martha thought, how well they functioned as a unit with the children, yet how detached they seemed from each other. She only saw them touch once, when, after seating the children, María gently patted Jack’s shoulder as if he were one of her own.

“C’mon, Martha,” Sid urged. “This is a party! Smile!”

She looked across the table, to where Toni and Todd, seated next to each other, were laughing and chatting as if they were old friends. Suddenly they both jumped up and hurried to the dance floor.

Watching them, Martha recalled her own wedding many years ago, when she had laughed and danced as freely as Toni did now.

Martha was 33 and still unmarried when she met Sid and his children. She left her job as an occupational therapist at the hospital to cook meals for Sid and the kids, organize picnics, and minister to coughs, cuts, and colds.

Soon she had Jack weaving potholders and braiding baskets, creating a pile of handicrafts that healed his hand and his spirit. She felt justifiably proud of her handiwork.

With one exception.

Despite her efforts with Sid over several years, Martha herself could not have children. Sometimes, in a rare moment of reflection or resignation, Martha thought of herself as the barren mother of four sons.

As the band shifted into a slow dance, Toni and Todd segued off the dance floor. Still conversing as they sat down, their faces suddenly turned serious. Bits of conversation floated to Martha's ears, over the noise of the party.

“ . . . understand María,” Toni said, in response to a question from Todd that Martha couldn't hear. “When my dad left, our mom had to be the bread winner . . . María took care of us . . . became our little mamá, our *Madrecita* . . . that's all she knows.”

“But . . . marriage . . . ?” Todd asked.

“ . . . don't know . . . adores kids . . . never had a boyfriend, never seemed interested in guys . . .”

“ . . . must like guys at least a little,” said Todd, “ . . . all the kids she had with Jack!”

Toni gazed down at the floor, momentarily silent. Todd bent towards her, looking concerned.

Finally she spoke: “ . . . not the usual way.”

Martha leaned closer. And then, she heard the barest outline of the words, “ . . . artificial insemination.” Startled, she straightened momentarily, then leaned forward again.

“ . . . mamá doesn't know . . . don't say anything . . . please . . .”

Todd nodded, said something inaudible, and briefly touched Toni's hand.

A blast of music came from the band, and everyone ran to the dance floor.

The dancers formed a large circle and began moving at breakneck speed. As the circle grew, the line of people spiraled inward, like the whorl of a snail's shell.

Jack's brothers brought a chair into the middle of the circle and Jack brought Victoria to sit on it. To the cheers of the dancers, the men hoisted Victoria into the air. She smiled and laughed, waving her hand and blowing kisses. After a minute, the brothers lowered the chair, and Victoria hugged her father. She ran over to María, who contemplated the proceedings with a benevolent smile while holding Basil on her lap.

Watching them, it occurred to Martha that her son had finally found some measure of peace in his life. At the time she had adopted them, each of the boys carried a special burden of sorrow, but Jack's was the saddest of all. He was in the hospital the night his mother died. He had been playing in the basement with his chemistry set when the flask on his Bunsen burner suddenly burst into flames and splattered all over the room. Fortunately, his burns were limited to just a few areas of his body—the worst on his left hand, which required extensive skin grafts. Helayne, who raced down the stairs to save him, was not as fortunate.

Had Jack finally found a way to satisfy the domesticity he craved, Martha wondered, without risking the hazards of conjugal love?

Victoria grabbed her mother's hand and tried to pull her towards the dance floor.

"No, no!" María said, "I don't dance!" But Victoria handed Basil to Jack, and led María, laughing and protesting, to the circle.

The noisy group continued to spin, until suddenly María tripped and fell, and the crowd emitted a collective gasp of bilingual horror:

"Oy!"

"¡Ay!"

Esperanza gave a yelp and hurried through the crowd as Jack scrambled to help María, who was crying.

Enfolding her daughter in her arms, weeping slightly herself, Esperanza murmured, "*Ay Dios mio, mi hija.*"

Jack gently helped María up, asking if she felt pain anywhere. She slowly shook her head.

“She’s probably alright,” Jack told his mother, but just to make sure, he was taking María someplace private so that she could calm down, and he could make sure there was no blood.

Martha put her arm around Esperanza, who—after a moment—slowly slipped her arm around Martha in return. Trying to compose herself, Martha turned to the assembled crowd and attempted to smile.

“Seems like nothing’s broken,” she said. “I think it’ll be okay.”

