



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'Kosher ritual turns into a food fight', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 20/10/07.  
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Writer/s: [Fiona Winning](#)

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The child was born frowning.

Her mother had had a dream the night before the birth. She was at the local shop. Her dead sister appeared from the darkness behind the counter, holding a fresh cabbage in one hand and a blue glass bead in the other. They were gifts, her sister said, for naming a beautiful girl child after her.

So when the baby was born, her mother insisted on naming the child after her sister. Her father refused. They'd agreed, he said, long ago, that their first girl was to be named after his mother. Between caring for the new baby and the endless visits from relatives, a sullen battle went on between her parents, until her mother gave in.

And so she was named, when she was eleven days old, after her living grandmother.

Everyone said she was a beautiful baby. Serene. Her father would always touch his head to warn of the evil eye when they said it. And to ward it off, her mother would rub the child's cheek with a little spit and say it was a pity she was dirty today.

She grew into a beautiful child.

When she was almost five, she was out with her family when the soldiers opened fire nearby. They ran down a laneway and into a house where they sheltered until it quietened down. The man in the house, who'd lost his son just weeks before, began wailing, so loud, so hard, that he forgot to breathe. He collapsed and the adults put him to bed. Everyone was wailing now and she asked her mother when it would be safe to go outside.

After they got home, she snuck onto the roof and watched as men from the neighbourhood left the communal prayer space at the bottom of the house across the road. She slept.

When she woke, she was still sleeping. Then she couldn't sleep. Not unless it was daylight and then it was too hot.

Within a week, it seemed to her parents that she was either in a state of waking stillness or frenzied thrashing. Everyone thought it would pass. Her parents. Her grandmother who'd raised seven children of her own. A doctor who came to the house when the curfew was lifted. It went on. And on.

Her mother blamed herself for having cursed the child by giving her the wrong name. Her father shouted that it was because she'd been born in the wrong place.

The stillness and the fits went on.

Though the child was quiet most of the time, when she opened her mouth, it was to scream a thin sound that could go on and on. She frightened all the family. It was only her tiny brother who was unaffected. Oblivious to her intensity and her effect on others, he played with her, teased her, talked to her while she screamed. Stroked her hair when she lay quietly for hours, exhausted.

These long listless episodes scared her parents most. Was it meningitis? A gripping daydream? Severe dehydration? Her body inert, her eyes open. No response to talking or sponging or shaking or weeping.

Afterwards, the girl would simply stand, look down at her body as though surprised to see it, and wander into the kitchen to eat an apple or a piece of bread. She'd drink a whole jug of water and then draw shapes on the wall with her finger. A kind of running writing that never made sense. But she could trace back and make the same words that weren't words over and over again. Her brother would stand there copying the same kind of fluid movement of the wrist and forefinger. Giggling.

There was no question of school for her. Her parents said that. Their friends agreed.

So she was always with her mother and her days were confined to home, the homes of relatives, a local shop, a market. All within a radius of a few hundred metres.

When she was eight, a friend of the family who ran a children's centre asked her mother to bring her there. The man was kind and thought he could encourage her to play. The centre was a small room above the shop at the end of her street. It was directly across the road from the wall.

When she arrived, the man's wife was teaching a folk dance to the children. They had to learn in groups of four because the room was so small and soldiers had fired bullets across the wall that morning, so going outside was not safe. She watched as each group of children came forward to learn the phrases of the dance. The music played over and over. When it was her turn, she danced the phrases without hesitation. The teacher laughed, and told her she should have said that she already knew the steps. The girl smiled shyly.

Later, the teacher showed a dvd of a large group of children from another part of the country doing a dance she would teach them next week. The girl stood and danced the steps from memory.

The other children clapped. She had not spoken to any of them yet. And she would not for a number of weeks. But she kept going back to the children's centre. Every few days, staying as long as she could.

Her waking sleeps happened less often. And by the time she was ready to speak again with other children she'd already begun to sit with her brothers and sisters and mother and father and uncle and grandmother at mealtimes. Now she listened to the family telling stories —about the nice man who'd rebuilt the bakery in the next street, about another checkpoint closing, about the marriage of a cousin. She danced to a dabkeh song her grandmother knew and the song of a warbler her brother had spotted on the rooftop.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Fiona Winning.*