

Solace

By Haasim Mahanaim

One morning, a year ago, I woke up, went downstairs and saw my mother standing silently in the narrow corridor that divides our kitchen. "Come over here," she said. "Look at this." She directed my attention at the countertop. "What does this look like to you?"

I wiped the sleep out of my eyes and focused them on the coarse, faux-granite surface. And there before me was a perfect rendering of the number five etched out in a thin film of water. It even had the smooth curves and serifs a font maker would design. But how could anyone carve this shape so cleanly and flawlessly from a glob of water?

After a moment of silence, I acknowledged the word that had been hanging in the air: "So you think a ghost did this?"

My mother said "yes" with her eyes, the shaking of her head and the movement of her lips, but she couldn't say the word out loud.

I paced around the kitchen and looked about the place in search of some kind of rationale.

I don't believe an old white guy in the clouds is scrutinizing our sex lives. And I don't have any sentimental or superstitious notions of death.

When I die, I expect to be unceremoniously buried in a nondescript pine box. And I don't want loved ones standing over my grave meaningfully or resting flowers against my tombstone.

But I can't say whether or not I will fade into oblivion--I'm not even sure what it means to exist. But, I can't imagine the point of dying just so I can leave cryptic markings behind on kitchen countertops.

We left the surface undisturbed, and delayed the making of breakfast, so my brother and father could inspect the image for themselves.

My brother's reaction was just as reluctant as my own. My father, on the other hand, smiled at this affirmation of the metaphysical.

My father always talks about spirits and "presences" inside our home. And he burns incense and candles that are supposed to purge our house of evil entities. (But all they seem to do is give my mom laryngitis.)

Once, when a doorway in our home was creaking and cracking without interference, he insisted it was the work of these spirits. "What else could it be?"

Surely it must have been the expansion and contraction of metal due to the fluctuating room temperature.

But there are times when I wonder...

A spiritual person sees the number five etched in water and they know this to be evidence of the divine. A skeptic sees the number 5 etched in water and they know this to be evidence of chance and probability.

But what can a person ever know when they are both a skeptic and a believer? The skeptic and the believer each find solace in their certainty. But for me, all I will ever know is the limbo between knowing and not-knowing--the place where troubled souls reside.