

Genesis, Part I

I learned about forgiveness at the age of thirty-three. I know I must speak for others when I say that, for the most part, it is a gratifying age. An age at which time you are convinced that all the tinkering in your twenties had been left behind — never to catch up to you. Satisfaction can be found in the belief that there are no more lessons to be absorbed. The world is your oyster. And so, I was terribly unprepared when I met Runyon Woolf. What I hadn't banked on was falling in love. What I didn't realize was that I had, yet, so much more to learn about the trustworthiness of love. It was a trying lesson, and at the age of thirty-three, one that I had neither the time nor the patience to grasp onto.

Those who know me will say that I am prone to emotion. That I tend to get carried away with whatever I am feeling at the instant I am feeling it. And maybe they're right. However, at the end, there had been no tears or carrying on, no highly excitable moment; it was more like a slow rise to panic. Looking back, I would describe it as akin to that feeling of being lost in the wilderness. Just before dusk. When the demand for seeking shelter, food and water is at its most desperate point. And then recognizing your one greatest fault: you are not the surviving type.

So, when he asked me to drive him back to the airport, there was reason to believe I wouldn't have to forgive him, after all. And all those feelings my body was fighting to react to — the panic, the desperation, the anguish — melted away into the bucket seat as I conspired on how I could use that hour and a half to my advantage. I thought I could talk my way back into his heart. Not that I voluntarily ventured from those pulsing cavities, warm and lush, cozy; there was just no room left for me anymore. Not with her there. The girl from Brooklyn or Passaic. The girl with Jewish blood racing through her veins — the same blood that traveled through his that could easily mix with hers — and none would be the wiser. As I imagined, it would be like a harmonious occurrence in nature, like the joining of salt and water to create an ocean. Much unlike the combination of my blood with his, which can be easily

equated to the blending of oil and water: eventually, the two would separate, necessitating a continuous catalyst to unify.

So, with unabashed enthusiasm, I offered my services to him. I held his carry-on as he spoke with his hands, walking from one terminal of the airport to the next, and my own heart pounded with the need to leave coupled with the desire to stay. He departed with a mournful glance and I watched from my window perch to see whether the 727's hatch would open and he'd reappear, sliding down the chute, one hand holding onto his yarmulke, the other balancing his stocky body so that his feet would firmly plant themselves on solid ground, suspending embarrassment. I kept waiting for the announcement over the loudspeaker, "Ladies and gentlemen, Flight 311, en route to Richmond, Virginia, is being delayed because someone had changed his mind."

The year is 1983. It is two days before Thanksgiving and Newark Airport, normally a bustling haven for time-travelers, is more so, due to the impending holiday. I had been forewarned, though, so I have only myself to blame. Never find yourself in close proximity to any airport 48 hours before a national celebration. It is suicide. But I've always liked airports. The mysterious promise of something better, when leaving one space and touching down into another, excites me unlike anything else. Hope is contagious. It becomes a festival. And when there is more than one person gathered in the name of festivity, it is easy to get caught up in the sparkling energy of it all — that magnetism that draws each person to another. It's an attraction that can be detected even over the ripe stench of clustered bodies, or below the loud and varied snippets of conversation, the buzz of laughter. It is there for the taking. This glee. This optimism. If I were so inclined, I could reach out and grab a handful. It is that near.

And so, on the thrum of high spirits, I am pushed along the corridor leading to the waiting arena of American Airline's Gate 26. In small increments, the mass of legs and arms, soft carry-on bags and hard-topped luggage pilot me to where I stand now: before a wall of plate glass windows. It is difficult not to notice my fractured reflection in the panes of glass. While those around me might see a pulled-together woman — confident, younger looking than her 32 years give away — the reality is closer to a

mirage; and my body, while losing its opacity, takes on the shape of wavering wisps of idealism shimmering like heat coming off a summer's pavement. It is a distortion. The melting glass. My life.

As a rule, the dead giveaway of my inner tension normally begins at my feet, which are, at the moment, pinched into designer pumps that are a size too small. The tension is in the toes, however, which are pointed inward — an unwitting memento from time spent, as a toddler, in leg braces. And then, from my feet, the edginess travels to the ragged fingernails nibbled to the quick, the unconscious gnawing away of skin, pearly varnish and time. To the face, which is partially hidden under the wide brim of a hat and frozen into an expression of unflinching scrutiny. And then, finally, to the moist glimmer under the shadow of the brim closely following the snake of a runway just beyond. It is the body language of deceit, of guilt. If one were adept at reading the language of the flesh, the very sight of me would scream, “I do not belong here, not in this place, not at this time.”

If I were a different woman, I would be at home, with my boys, preparing cranberry dressing for our own festivities. The memory of purchasing two pounds of the bitter fruit — in need of sugar — comes to mind. As well, the deep-bellied copper-bottom pot in the farthest-reaching cabinet wedged under other copper-bottom pots in descending order of size. Designer pumps would be safely collecting dust tucked behind more practical shoes at the back of a closet, feet stowed away in fuzzy slippers. A face would be breaking into laughter, cuticles, mercifully intact.

From across the wide expanse of the terminal, a ruckus distracts me and I easily lose sight of the reason for my being here. A stony-faced teenager is coming off the gangplank and entering the lobby, boisterously hailed by — as I can only imagine — members of his immediate family. I watch this reunion with amusement while trying to recall whom it was exactly that cautioned me from airports two days before any national holiday and with the added stipulation — “*particularly* if I were not the one journeying.” And then the Boeing 727 comes into view. It taxis down the runway, coming to a stop to wait its turn in line behind several aircraft of varying shapes and sizes. The day is dismal; a chilled gray sky gives way to spurts of icy rain. Beyond the runway spans the New Jersey Turnpike, dirty and gray,

blending in with the sky to create a seamless canvas. Cars and trucks idle in traffic; gray streams of vaporeing smoke drift from exhaust pipes like the ghostly vestiges of former explorers now elapsed into the next world.

Someone once told me that in every ending, there is a genesis. It might have been the same person who suggested I wait until after the holidays to venture so close to insanity. If my memory serves me well, this mentor was very wise indeed. I should have listened, for his premonitions have come true, and I am just now rousing from a hypnotic sleep that has plagued me for the past twelve months, leaving an entire year uncharted.

And now, I am in this corridor. And he is on that plane. Something has ended and something is beginning. There's logic to this theory. Maybe. After all, even God rested on the seventh day. This is my argument. And so, it would only make sense to begin my story with its culmination. However, much like the relationship between Lenora Lavato Burnhardt and Runyon Woolf, there can be no clarity of their tale's true conclusion. Or, for that matter, it's origin. The timeframe seems more a life sentence rather than a year. One has a sense that the courtship had taken root in a previous era, or possibly, in an age before even the recording of time itself had been in existence.

For me, the analogy that comes to mind is a bottomless pit.

Once again, I turn my attention to the wall of glass. Three days ago, what had pleased the man now sitting smug in the window seat of Row 6, only makes me feel like I belong on a stage waiting for curtain call and the rush of applause. The part I play is one of caricature, perfectly cast as the impersonator. I look foolish in my make-believe clothing. The black dress that falls ankle-length, it's clingy material mistrustfully wrapping my body as if it has no business gripping each curve and swell in the manner in which it does. An elegant fur-piped three-quarter-length coat is draped over one arm. A wide-brimmed hat sits like a well-fed black crow upon my head. Ridiculous.

Three days ago, his eyes had traveled along the lines of my body, taking in the hat, the dress, the coat and he said, "Miriam Hannah, you're too beautiful to be a Jew." For the record, my name is not

Miriam Hannah. And I repeat. It is Lenora Lavato. My married name is Burnhardt. I am a nice Catholic girl who has found herself on the wrong side of the confessional. Miriam Hannah is the Hebrew name he assigned to me when we were flying ninety miles per hour headlong into a brick wall called denial. Denial of ourselves, of who we are, of who we want to become. Three days ago, I had lied to my husband about some fictitious business trip to Chicago. Three days ago, I was ready to throw it all away. Now, I secretly wish that the Boeing 727 would take a nosedive right over the Atlantic. I had discovered how quickly love could turn into its antagonist.

Staring at my double, I mouth the words, “Who are you?” If the lips in the mirror image had not puckered into those clearly defined syllables at the exact same moment they had been worded, I might have been gazing at a complete stranger; a person not even recognizable to myself. Why am I pretending to be someone else when the other woman I once knew had been a better person, a kinder person, a person someone would have been proud to call my wife, my mother, my friend. Why am I here, and not at home with my husband and my children preparing the cranberry dressing for our turkey feast? They deserve more than just wine-dyed jelly from a can. I spin around in my sacred dress and find that I stand alone in the seating area of American Airline’s Gate 26, and yet I am besieged by those who have lives worth living — couples holding hands, families being reunited for the holiday, college students on a much needed break.

My concentration, though waning, is now focused on the 727 as it jockeys for position, preparing for takeoff. Two wheels lift from the tarmac and then the entire body heaves itself into the clouds that wisp around like a low-lying fog. The gray airplane slices through the gray sky as it gathers speed. I can almost see him sitting in the window seat of Row 6, his right leg crossed over the left in that complacent social worker stance that he likes to take when he is teaching a lesson, when he knows he is right, and when he knows he is not. He leaves the earth wearing the royal blue yarmulke with threads of gold metallic embroidered around the rim — the one I fashioned from yarn with my own two hands as an early Chanukah gift. It is bobby-pinned to the thatch of black hair I had, only this morning, run my

fingers through and pulled as he lay on top of me. He is now a part of the grayness that seems to have enveloped the world. I open my clutch to retrieve a tissue and dab at my eyes, careful not to smear what had been, earlier, so meticulously applied. Turning to leave, I hesitate, and then place my fingertips on the cold glass. It is the closest to a goodbye that I can muster.

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The scenery changes in trace shades of color as I travel from Newark to Glenside Heights on the Garden State Parkway. Browns and grays of industry, interrupted by stretches of scrub brush and concrete medians are gradually replaced by colonies of naked trees and something closer to frontiers of grass. Fiddling with the radio, I feel a jolt of homecoming as I near my destination. I turn the corner of North Avenue onto Woodland Avenue and one of the two bags barely opened during my three-day leave rolls to the floor.

And I miss him.

I cannot seem to hold onto the anger that had, only this morning, forced me to view the situation through a wall of plate glass windows with eyes that glistened in self-pity. No matter what I do to get him out of my head, I miss him.

Three days ago, I had walked through Newark Airport with the sharp click-click-click of my heels announcing an aura of substance, a demeanor more significant than soft malleable flesh and feeble spirit. I was on a mission and my assignment was to hold onto what I never truly possessed in the first place, but hold onto it, nonetheless, as tightly as I could, knuckles stretched white. And then he was there, in front of me, looking me over, taking me in with his eyes. Those eyes that could melt a glacier.

Runyon Woolfe is not a man one would consider handsome, or even mildly attractive. He just isn't. On a tall day, he stands at five feet seven inches with a paunch around the middle and stocky legs too short to fit into a pair of slacks one would casually buy at Macy's or order from the Sears & Roebuck catalog. His pants require hemming and it is apparent that he's the tailor. Putting aside these attributes, though, he lives on the verge of poverty — paycheck to paycheck. Not a penny does he have

to his name. No liquid cash, no 401(k), no brokerage accounts. His home is the basement apartment of a two-family house. He sports around town in a used Ford Escort, one in which the floor of the passenger side is in a constant state of irrigation — the wetlands, as I endearingly called it — or heater core leakage, as he would correct me. If I happened to be careless, it was guaranteed that I would return to work with my own hemlines stained with moisture. So, you must wonder, what is it that attracted me to this man?

Have you ever been in the company of a person who makes you feel as if you are the only person in the world worth being with? That you are the most important person in that person's eyes? And speaking of eyes, his are warm brown — his best feature — but it is not the color or the shape or the size. It is the way they capture you and force you to see him, for all of his faults, to see him as if he were a Greek god or a movie star. He has a presence; I think that's what they say about Greek gods and movie stars. And once in the grip of those eyes, it would be impossible not to venture slightly south to his lips, to a full mouth that can either crush or soothe. Lips as soft as pillows. I concentrate on maneuvering around a jug handle turn in the road. My hands are sweaty and they slide along the steering wheel. Even now, it is still difficult to speak of his eyes and his lips without crashing into a telephone pole, physically and figuratively speaking.

But no matter what his appearance might reveal to others, that day in the airport, he looked handsome to me. He wore the long black coat and tall black hat of a rabbi. His beard was fuller than I remembered. I could tell he was close to the end of his studies, although he would admonish me if I had spoken these thoughts aloud. A rabbi never stops learning, he would have said. To be a rabbi is to learn; one who is always open to something new to grasp. Those moments spent waiting at the gate unravel inside my head like spliced-together clips from a dance number whose rhythmic steps I had once learned, but since, have slipped through my fingers like grains of sand. It is the memory of dancing that leaves me breathless. My head in the wide-brimmed hat, tossed about, searching for him. My eyes were the types of heat-seeking missiles to hit upon a locked-in target, its sole purpose: annihilation. He wasn't

and then he was. There. Standing before me. His eyes lighted upon me. So much can be said in one glance. So much had been said. Thereafter, we were clumsy with each other. And so we stood, at the baggage carousel — shoulder to shoulder — afraid to touch, afraid to make a scene. Like two stone monuments erected in honor of the Orthodox chaste system. Yearning for him to encircle me within his arms, alas, I knew that he would not; I knew that he would wait until we were sequestered away from judgment. Even though I looked the part of his wife, I was still a gentile.

During our courtship, I had picked up a word or two, and *frume* comes to mind when I recall our meeting that day in the airport. *Frume* is from the Yiddish, meaning pious one. I am not *frume*; I am what they would label the lowest form of reptile. I am not holy enough to even take his hand in public. I am a married woman. A Christian. A Catholic. A mother to two boys. A pretender. How many more strikes must I have against me?

“Miriam Hannah,” he had whispered. “You are too beautiful to be a Jew.”

Then quietly, we had walked — me in my silly hat, he in his coat of righteousness — through the airport to where a rental car waited in short-term parking. He slid into the driver’s seat and I into the passenger’s and that was when we had finally embraced. It was a burning touch and my entire body ignited. It knew what he wanted. Exactly. He had taken off his hat and he kissed me. And that one moment became a lifetime. That single kiss, a life. Gone from my consciousness were the two pounds of cranberries still in their original polybags; its yearly tradition might have held meaning for me at one point, though seated there, his lips upon mine, I could not fathom a guess as to why. That kiss had forced me to disregard the muscle spasms that were, by then, shooting past my knotted feet and traveling up my calves. But more so, it had commanded me to forget the husband and two children that remained at home. That kiss was my drug of choice. I could see clearly how it was that addicts became addicted. My need was that great.

Rules of Deception

I pull into the driveway with my thoughts and the garage door is raised. The flutter of a curtain tells me they've been waiting. My boys. Simon comes running from the side door and grabs one of the suitcases out of my hand. He throws his other arm around the fur-trimmed coat.

"I missed you, mommy." At seven years of age, and in spite of relentless teasing from his older brother, he still calls me mommy.

"I've missed you, too, sweetie. Where's your brother?"

"Playing video games."

Ian is eleven and not as demonstrative. I walk into the house with my son's arm still warm about my waist. We live in a small colonial dating back to the 1920s. It is situated on a middle-class street in a wealthy community. We were lucky to stumble upon this diamond in the rough. Five years ago, we hardly viewed the house as such, but as what Martin and I could afford so that our children were able to reap the benefits of a first-rate public school system. You see, Ian had just been classified as learning disabled. The actual term, minimal brain disorder, had been the identifying mark stamped onto my son's forehead by those who studied him — those doctors and psychiatrists who lorded over him as if he was some new species to be picked at and prodded. I felt I had failed my child; I made him into a monster, a freak who would have to bear the consequences of such a label. That ugly name alone was enough to scare us into settling down within the suburbs of New Jersey — Glenside Heights, specifically — something we fought until it caught up to us at the bitter end. The house was a "handyman special." Rather, after moving in, we discovered that this title did not even come close to an accurate description. It would take five years of weekends in order to restore some semblance of home to the place.

As we peeled off layers of neglect, the small colonial offered to us its own quaint way of saying thank you. We found gleaming hardwood floors under the worn shag carpeting. The shabbily

constructed nooks in both the kitchen and the dining room morphed into charming alcoves, which overlooked the scope of the backyard that, two summers later, would exhibit a flourishing perennial garden. Sculpted thick crown molding separated ceiling from wall while other decorative types of fluted molding — whose names escape me now — yet, at the time, had charmed me into thinking that each room possessed its own personality. The brick fireplace that had once been a drab focal point came alive with a coat of white enamel and glossy shellac brushed on its slab-of-wood mantel. We painted the interior warm pastels; I hung satin swags and jabots in the living room. We bought a grandfather clock, our first piece of good furniture. Two years later, Martin lost his job.

It was not the first job to take flight. We were newlyweds, Martin fresh out of school and I, pregnant with Ian, when he came home early — it was a Tuesday — funny how I can remember the day like it just happened. But we were so young and we laughed, convinced that it was only a stupid job and could easily be replaced by another. Sometimes I wish I could go back to those languid times where ignorance dictated the course of our lives.

Simon has been speaking while my mind has been occupied elsewhere. I squeeze his shoulder and his tiny hand pinches my waist with a firmer grasp. My son and I, accompanied by two suitcases, trudge up the three steps that lead into the kitchen. Martin is seated at the kitchen table, staring from the window. It seems that he doesn't hear us come in.

“Martin?”

He turns abruptly and then stands from the table. He stumbles and he must grab onto the edge of the refrigerator for support. He is pale and visibly shaking. I drop my suitcase to the linoleum and the sound of it causes him to flinch as if struck. Simon is rushed off into the next room to play video games with his brother.

“What's the matter,” I ask, thinking the worst in the way of deaths in the family.

“Where were you?”

“What?”

“Where have you been?”

“You know where I’ve been.”

Martin lowers himself onto the chair he just stood from. “Lily,” he says.

Lily is what my father called me after it had been agreed that Lenora was too severe a name for a child. The name stuck even after I had grown away from those chubby formative years and into someone in which being called “Lenora” would fit more comfortably.

“Martin. What’s the matter? Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Obviously there’s something wrong. Talk to me.”

He turns to face me and he appears much older than how I had left him three days ago. He looks like his own father, deep wrinkles around his eyes, eyes that are sunken in his head. But there is pain in those eyes. Something had happened while I was away.

“Why are you keeping me in the dark?” I ask.

“Lily . . . I . . . “

“What? Tell me.”

“ . . . there’s nothing to tell.” He pauses to look out the window again. “Nothing.”

I turn away from my husband. Suddenly, the room feels hot, too hot to bear with my big pompous coat. I hang up the coat in the hall closet at the foot of the steps. In the kitchen, I turn to reach for the handle of the refrigerator for something cold to drink. My throat feels coated with a gritty layer of sand.

“Are you having an affair?” The question is asked point blank leaving me no room to maneuver away from it, to squeeze my way out of answering it.

“Martin . . . how . . .” I stop in mid-sentence, standing there with my hand still wrapped around the handle. I look down at myself and I’m still wearing the foolish black dress that smells of sex.

“Just answer the question and I’ll never bring it up again. Are you having an affair?”

My arm falls back down to my side and I face him, the enemy. “No.”

His lips curl up slightly and I think he will break into laughter. He is playing a practical joke. That’s what this is all about. It’s his way of getting back at me for going on this business trip. Just a prank. Tomfoolery. Mischief. Sometimes he does this — puts me on the spot and then laughs at his own dry humor. My shoulders relax, one muscle at a time; I am just now in tune to the tension that had been placed upon them — standing accused like a common criminal in my own kitchen. I give myself permission to smile but he does not reciprocate.

“Is this funny to you?”

“No, Martin. It’s sad. I’m sad that you think so little of me. Where you got this idea from . . .” My arms are crossed over my chest and I drop them to my sides, conscious of what my body language is telling him. “Did someone say something to you? To plant this in your head? What did I do to make you think I’m cheating on you? To make you think I’m even capable of cheating?”

“I . . . I don’t know . . . I don’t know what to think, Lily.”

I go to him. He’s a tall man and there is a good ten inches of air to make up before I find the back of his neck and pull him down closer to me. I often jest about living in a house of trees, for the boys are surely following in their father’s footsteps. I hug him and at the same time I wonder why it is that I don’t confess. What is it that I want from this man? Do I wish for the easy ways we once had with each other? For the sight of his long lean figure in the distance to make my heart quicken, and in turn, make my steps quicken toward him? For the playful moments when he would sneak into the kitchen, surprise me from behind and wrestle me to the floor, even as my hands were still coated in whatever I had been preparing for dinner. To hear him tell me how my hair smells like a spring day.

Instead, I whisper into his ear. “I am not having an affair. I love you. I would never do that to you. Please believe me.”

This seems to be enough for Martin. He tightens his grip around my waist. His throat gurgles with a watery sound and he is trembling. He might be crying. I don’t want to know. We release each

other; I am not sure who pulls away first. I cannot look at him, although I must force myself in order to complete the act of duplicity. The first rule of deception is maintaining eye contact. This is crucial. We stay that way for what I consider as the appropriate amount of time and then I open the fridge and fetch the two bags of whole cranberries from the top shelf. He follows my lead, bringing the sugar bowl and measuring cup to the table. I cut the tops of both polybags and throw away the plastic. In the garbage can are broken pieces of glass. I recognize the picture frame that had held a family portrait, sans the portrait, lying on the heap in fragments. Mixed in with the shards of glass are balled up paper towels stained with blood. I remove my foot from the pedal and the lid to the garbage can smacks shut.

“Guys . . .” I call out to the boys in the next room. They need to know that everything is how it should be; that although there’s been a misunderstanding, it is now all behind us. “Who wants to make cranberry sauce?”

Simon comes bounding into the kitchen, followed by his brother. I get an awkward smile from Ian, then a forced limp hug. His face appears swollen and his eyes are glassy as if he had been crying. I worry and yet I cannot worry about the reasons driving them all to the edge. My job right now, at this moment, is to keep the charade going. We will make the cranberry sauce. We will keep to tradition. Ian moves away and retrieves the spaghetti pot. He knows its location and the order to which it is nestled between the others. The copper bottom glints and I think I see Martin looking at me in that same manner one person will glance at another when they are no longer familiar — when they have become strangers under suspicion. I know we have lost something. And I recognize this not out of self-reproach or the way the fluid curve of the pot alters appearances, but because I have lived with this man for twelve years. We have lost the part of a marriage that is important above all else — and I’m not talking about sex, love, respect. We’ve lost trust.

The boys are laughing. The relish thickens as they take turns stirring the pot. Simon, who is too small to reach the top of the stove, must stand on a chair. He becomes ambitious with the long wooden spoon and accidentally flings cranberry sauce on my fancy black dress. Blobs of it roll from the tight

fitting bodice to the skirt-line, leaving a track of congealed syrup the color of blood. Simon looks as if he will cry. It seems that everyone else is holding their breath but then I begin to laugh and the room exhales. The stain will come out. But do I really feel like trying? After all, it's just a dress. If I want to forget its memories, then I have no reason to ever wear it again.

A Virtual Reality

But how *can* I forget? As I stand in the bedroom I share with my husband, the feel of silky fabric cradled in my arms, my first recollection is of the frock lying in a heap on a dirty floor. Looking back, though, it was not so much dirt as it was sand that covered the hardwood planks with a gritty layer. Yes, it was sand. We had three days and so we celebrated by going down the shore. Not *to the beach* or *to the shore*, but rather, *down the shore*. Don't ask me why; it is a New Jersey expression either handed down from generation to generation or simply inbred, but it was a cause for Runyon's consideration and we had talked at length on this meaningless subject. It was another one of the things I loved about him, his ability to find meaning in the most trivial. It was how we met.

Martin had been out of work for almost three months and no promising prospects in the way of interviews loomed on the horizon. I prided myself on not being one of those "supermoms," a woman who felt she needed to prove to the world that she could do it all. No woman can do it all — or do it all well — no man, for that matter. Multitasking is best suited to the workplace, not for raising children. Call me old-fashioned, however, Martin's growing salary, before the layoff, afforded me the privilege of being able to stay at home. I hated the thought of giving that up but I had a degree sitting in a desk drawer not being used. He needed my help. I showed my support. It was the least I could do.

My first resume in the mail had been replied to almost immediately. Five days later, I was sitting in a comfortable waiting room wearing my best business suit, my portfolio leaning against one pantyhosed leg. I had applied for the position of art director for the local chapter of the Jewish Community Federation of New Jersey located 30 minutes away in the growing township of Fairmont. My not being Jewish hardly entered into any thoughts I might have had about graphic design or the ability to do the job. I would learn. I was not afraid to roll up my sleeves and dig in.

A week later, I found myself with the daunting task of setting up a new chain of command with those whom I would be supervising. And that included a graphic designer, a cameraman and two pressmen. As I logged in the hours, my reputation for being efficient, budget-conscious and dependable grew along with my knowledge of any and all things Jewish. I had come to say things like, “*Shabbat shalom,*” instead of, “have a nice weekend.” Or “*Mazel tov,*” instead of “good luck,” *L’Chayim,*” rather than, “cheers.” I learned to prepare kugel, a popular sweet casserole made with eggs, noodles, cinnamon and raisins. And during Rosh Hashanah, I looked forward to the mouth-watering flavors produced when combining honey and macoun apples. I swept my drawers clean of all bread particles in preparation of Passover. I picked up funny sounding words in Yiddish and enjoyed the stories that were theatrically featured along with those words.

My office was like an aquarium in that I was shielded from the elements by a barrier of glass. Located at the farthest end of a long line of offices skirting the “bullpen” where the writers and secretaries were housed, I lived in a corner all of my own. These windowpanes overlooked the woods that separated the federation from a well-developed strip mall of shops and restaurants and food marts. My drafting table was positioned facing the forest. Along the far wall, row of flat files were arranged like dominos and held stacks of chipboard, pads of tissue paper and vellum, sheets of acetate, Letraset, old pasted-up mechanicals from previously printed brochures, posters and invitations. Oodles of stock samples lined the shelves of the expansive office, as did Pantone books revealing shades of every possible color of the rainbow and coffee table-sized hard covers outlining the fundamentals of style and design popular for the times and of the past. There had been talk of a new super computer that would take the place of painstakingly pasted rubylith boards, exterminate the hum of the wax machine and force the lowly graphic designer to toss away the Schaedler ruler used for counting characters, the Exacto knife for slicing up galleys. The physical act of selecting, creating and arranging marks on a surface to communicate a message would become, instead, something called a virtual reality. Similar to

smoke, it was a thing to view, yet, never to be held. Much like the rabbinical student who occupied the corner office adjacent from mine.

Of course I knew of him. We brushed by each other in the hallways and while he had always been cordial, we were never formally introduced. That is, until he showed up on a rainy afternoon as my two o'clock appointment. My back was to the door; I didn't hear his knock nor did I hear him come in. I had just pitched my eyeglasses to the desk.

"When are you leaving? You know I won't go." I rubbed my eyes allowing the phone, trapped between shoulder and chin, to slide from its resting place. "We've been through this before. You interviewed at Kellogg the last time you were laid off, and I wasn't keen on moving to Battlecreek, Michigan then. What makes you think I've changed my mind?"

Listening, I sighed into the receiver. "Go then, whatever. If you ask me, it's a waste of time and money. Martin, you don't need to brush up on your interviewing skills. You need to get a job."

I hung up without saying goodbye.

"I'm sorry, is this a bad time?" The voice was deep and resonant. It could have been a voice from one of those late night radio shows.

I turned around and in the process, ran over my glasses with the wheel of the swivel chair. They must have fallen from the desk during my fit of anger. The crunch of broken glass brought Runyon Woolfe to my side and down on all fours at my feet.

"I hope no one decides to pay a visit now," I said. "This would be very embarrassing to explain."

He looked up at me; the smile on his lips had touched his eyes.

"I'm a rabbinical student with only the purest of thoughts in mind."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot . . . you're not a man."

The smile turned into a full-blown grin, the eyes had crinkled into slits and they darkened so that all I could see was the twinkle in each pupil. Poised like that on hands and knees, he was sexiest man I had ever seen.

“I believe I’m your two o’clock.”

“Right on time.”

“I pride myself on being at the right place at the right time.”

He was smooth. And I was expecting something of a stereotype instead of this strangely attractive man coiled about the legs of my desk. He put his head down and continued with the task of picking up every piece of broken metal and glass, pinching between his fingers the smaller particles that could have easily been sucked up by the nightly vacuum. When he was finished, he grabbed onto my knee and pulled himself to a standing position.

“I’m Runyon Woolfe.”

“I know. I’m Lenora Burnhardt. You can call me Lily.” And I offered my hand. If he didn’t take it then I knew what I would be dealing with. But he clasped it with confidence, and his hand was warm and large and it enveloped my own. My expression must have shown my surprise because he started to laugh.

“You believe everything you hear?”

“When it comes from above and when it dictates how I’m to act around rabbinical students, yes.”

“Okay, so it was wrong of me to touch your leg. But I would still be on the floor. Bad knees.”

I nodded my head slowly.

“And maybe I shouldn’t have taken your hand,” he continued. “But the sin of embarrassing another person is far greater than the sin of touching a strange woman. Shaking your hand was definitely the lesser of two evils.”

“So you’re a philosopher, too.”

“Too?”

“Besides being a schmoozer. Please, sit down. In a chair.”

The smile persisted as he explained his reason for being in my office and we discussed the details of an invitation I was to design for a candlelit Midnight Shabbat he planned to host at a nearby synagogue. I filled out a job ticket, stapled the sheet to a folder.

I grabbed my color swatch book. “PMS 275 . . .”

“I won’t even ask . . . “

“Color. The background color for the night sky.”

“Midnight . . .”

“Yes.” I nodded my head. “It’s a whole lotta blue with a hint of red mixed in. Gets the blood flowing.”

He kicked back in his seat and laughed a hearty laugh. I showed him paper samples — glossy kromkote, fine linen, cottony wove — until we found a coated clay stock, not too “in-your-face,” not too underwhelming, one that just felt good to touch. We discussed the difference between his budget and what the job would cost. Somewhere in the middle we arrived at an agreement. But it would be our last juncture; whereas, I would be the one to cross that imaginary line time and time again. Our meeting was coming to an end and I slipped the job jacket into my to-do box.

“It was certainly a pleasure to meet you,” I said as I stood from my seat. It was a cue, and most understand, but he remained seated. So I returned to the swivel chair. “Is there something else?”

“I’m sorry, I probably shouldn’t interfere, but when I see someone in distress my first reaction is to help. My second is to find out the cause of that stress. It’s the social worker in me.” He paused, running his hand through a curly thatch of black beard. “When I walked in on you, and you were on the phone . . .”

“That was my husband.” I hesitated, stopping to choose my words. To the outside world, my life was to appear hunky-dory. He had, however, a calming effect on me when normally I wouldn’t give in to such an emotion, especially when discussing the intimate details of my decaying marriage.

“He’s out of work,” I said. “It’s been, what, almost a year, eleven months. He’s looking for this dream job that just . . . doesn’t exist. He’s chasing it across the country. First Oregon, then Utah — do I really want to live with the Mormons?”

“Mormons and Jews . . .”

“I’m not Jewish.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m a nice Italian girl. Catholic.”

“Burnhardt . . . is your husband Jewish?”

“No. He’s German descent. Catholic, too.”

“Oh.”

“Does this change whatever opinion you’ve formed about me?”

“No, of course not. I guess I shouldn’t assume.”

“Yes, well . . . you know what happens when you assume?”

He smiled but the smile, this time, barely reached his eyes.

“Listen, I don’t have to be Jewish to do a good job here,” I said.

“It might help.”

“I’ve worked for lots of different industries — finance, retail, publishing — and I’m hardly a broker, a buyer or an author. I know what sells and I know how to translate that into a pleasing package.”

“I just said it might help.”

“Why do I feel the need to explain myself to you?”

“Because you care.”

And then he stood. This was my cue that our meeting was now officially over. He nodded and said he would check back with me in a couple of days.

“Hey,” I called out to him as he turned. “What kind of a name is Runyon anyway?”

“My parents’ stab at humor.”

I swiveled in my chair to the wall of glass. The woman in the glass appeared cross, her brow, furrowed. A seed had been planted. I knew it in my head and I certainly felt it in my heart. That racing of blood through veins, the double strikes of that throbbing chest muscle, the tightening of the diaphragm — all those physical indicators that go off inside your body when it is first realized you are attracted to someone new. I patted my upper lip with a tissue. I don’t believe in love at first sight but if I could pinpoint the moment he had developed into what I would later recognize as an obsession, it would had to have been during this very brief meeting. Sometime between two o’clock and two-twenty on a rainy afternoon in 1983, the rabbinical student with the funny name, who, by every definition, should have been untouchable to me, became my every thought.

Lenora Goes Astray

Martin shows up at the office with Simon in tow. My little boy looks as if he hasn't had a bath — wearing his breakfast on his cheeks and down the front of his shirt — and, to make matters worse, he drags behind him the ratty old blanket I have been trying, without much luck, to coax from his possession. He is in a whiney mood and his voice lifts through the hallway, making his disposition known even before his presence. And as usual, my husband's visit is poorly timed, being that Rosenthal, the president of the federation, is on the floor making his rounds. He is known around these parts simply by his surname, Rosenthal. By character, he is the type of man who has risen above the commonality of being identified on a first name basis.

“What do you need, Martin? Can't you see I'm working?”

“Mommy, I'm hungry.”

“Can you get him some lunch? I'm busy now.”

“We wanted to see you,” Martin says. “You won't be home tonight, so I thought we could all go out to lunch.”

“Why didn't you call first? I'm busy.”

“Mommy, I have to pee.”

“Can you take him to the bathroom?” I pause from my work to look up at him. “You know where it is.”

My husband's unannounced visits have lately become habitual. My co-workers are fond of him. I hear him in the hall and can visualize him pausing to stop at each desk — “*Why good morning Joshua, yes I'm fine and yourself? Alan . . . long-time-no-see. Is that Beatrice waving from across the room? I should go over and say a quick hello.*” Yes, he is well liked here. Luckily, though, he has managed to escape Rosenthal's hawk eyes for the fourteen plus months of his unemployment. But, such as luck

goes, it is about to run out. The voice is strictly baritone, filling the doorway, pushing its way into my office.

“What do we have here? And who are you?”

I listen for my son’s response. “Simon,” he says. His voice is small in comparison, a tinkling sound.

“Simon. Why, that’s my name. You took my name.”

“No I didn’t.”

I can hear the panic rising; the tinkling of bells shifts into something more like grinding metal. If Rosenthal continues the conversation in the same vein, he and those nearby will, undoubtedly, be witnesses to a full-blown temper tantrum, one whose power can be compared to a tropical hurricane blowing through.

“Are you visiting?”

“My mommy.”

“And who’s your mommy?”

I could only hear tone and Martin’s voice warbling in and out as he introduces himself. So now Rosenthal has enough information to know that this twosome belongs to me. More tone follows and then the hallway grows quiet.

“Just met your family, Lenora.” I spin in my seat and force my lips to curl into a smile.

Rosenthal is the only person who does not call me Lily. It could be that I’ve never invited him to do so.

“Only part,” I respond. “My other son, Ian . . . he’s eleven . . . is in school.”

“Nice family. What does your husband do?”

“He’s in advertising.”

“Any of the big houses?”

“Ogilvy & Mather.”

“Used to be an advertising man myself. BBDO.”

Somehow I don't see Rosenthal as an ex-advertising executive. Maybe it's the lack of personality. However, I respond, "My husband's taking some time off."

"So you can work?"

"To be with the children."

"Ah." He pauses as if his vocabulary holds only so many words and now there are none left to utter. His eyes drift to the mechanical board taped to the drafting table. He shuffles to the right — close enough to detect the headline of an advertisement. "Hmm . . ." Again, words are elusive. "Well." He nods and, as if the morning's pleasantries had never taken place, he abruptly disappears into the hallway.

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On this night, Runyon is graduating from a masters program in social work from Yeshiva University. He invited me and I said yes, not knowing why I said yes. It just came out that way. It just happened to be the word that formed on my lips while my brain, simultaneously, considered this invitation to be on the same level as a first date.

Is this what I want?

It is early afternoon, well after the fiasco with Martin, and Runyon materializes at the door to my office. I am at the cutting board, slicing sheets of paper for a mock-up brochure. He is wearing a suit I have never seen before. The pants appear professionally tailored.

"You look nice," I say to him.

"So do you."

We stand there facing each other. He takes a step closer and rubs his beard. There is a moment of discomfort. "I'm looking forward to tonight." I have to say, breaking the tension. "What time shall we leave?"

"Lily, would you mind if we went in separate cars?"

"Why? I thought you asked me to come with you."

"My parents decided to go. Nothing like the last minute to tell me . . ."

“Oh. Well, Okay.”

“You sure?”

“HmmHm.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad?”

He looks over his shoulder and then presses his hand into mine. My face grows warm. I can tell without looking into a mirror that my cheeks are flushed. We leave the office at different times and in separate cars. I hate driving in New York City. It makes me nervous; so, whenever possible, I insist upon taking mass transit. I have little experience maneuvering through the streets and avenues. It is supposed to be easy. Most of Manhattan is laid out in a grid. The numbered avenues run north to south; the numbered streets run east to west. Along the avenues, there are twenty blocks per mile. So how can anyone go astray?

I speed down the Garden State Parkway, hoping to get a glimpse of his Ford Escort. I wish that a stream of water would lead me to him. But even a five-minute jump can easily amount to many minutes more when you take into account stopping for red lights, stopping for tollbooths, getting lost. No sooner do I exit the George Washington Bridge than I am forced to make my first real decision. Do I want east or west? My directions are folded over the steering wheel; I remove my eyes from the road for barely a second. Isn’t that when most tragedies happen, though, in that less than one second? I realize my mistake as it occurs; it is the route to Amsterdam Avenue in which I should be traveling — via the Harlem River Drive on the East Side — instead of the Henry Hudson Parkway via the Riverside Drive on the West Side. And so, consequently, my initial blunder is followed by several more miscalculations until I have to question whether I am still in the States and not in some faraway foreign country. I end up in neighborhoods in which the Jeep Cherokee is too large for the narrow city streets. I am wandering, it seems, in a circle. I recognize Saffe’s Sandwich Bar on the corner. And the boy, the one with studs through each eyebrow, leaning in a stoop of a walk-up apartment building. And the man of no

distinguishable nationality who had threatened to kill me when permission to wash my windshield had not been granted. I am acutely aware of the exact time in which I slip into that state of panic, the one that can overtake my body in a matter of seconds. The welling in my throat rises before it can be contained and my eyes blur with the tears of frustration, of failure. Of embarrassment. *She* starts to cry. From above, I watch her cry, and it is like having an out-of-body experience. *She* is another person, paralyzed with fright, incapacitated by indecision. *She* is not I. The woman in the Jeep Cherokee is entering the phase more commonly known as hysteria and I want nothing more to do with her. *Female drivers, no survivors*. Ian's little ditty.

I pass a sign for the Lincoln Tunnel and swerve to be in the correct lane, which is outlined by arrows and bright orange cones. In the process, I cut off an irate truck driver. The blare of a tuba forces my hand to slip from the steering wheel and the directions skitter away from my sweaty palms, landing on the floor just beyond my reach. And yet, after all of this, I am still in a lane that will prevent me from leaving. Trying to cut through the haphazardly placed cones proves to be futile. I am accosted by a Hispanic woman wearing the uniform of a road worker; or maybe she is a volunteer police officer. And now I am imprisoned within the walls of this city. Imprisoned. It is the only word that comes to mind. I feel that the road worker or the volunteer police officer despises me and she wishes to keep me entrapped within the orange cones. She is waving me frantically away from the lanes to freedom. I inch up beside her and when I roll down my window, her hip is at eye level. She is a tall woman and I have to crane my neck in order to see her face.

"I'm lost. I just need to get to the Lincoln Tunnel."

"Go around."

"Where?"

"You're blocking traffic. Go around!"

"Please, let me . . ."

"Move your car."

“Please . . .”

“Move your car or I’ll . . .”

I gun the engine and the Jeep shoots past her. Daring a peek in the rearview mirror, it appears I have already been forgotten. I proceed down a one-way street and around the block to a traffic light — the same light I had passed in my previous jaunt through this neighborhood. Idling at the corner, the feeling of imprisonment is quickly replaced by a sense of déjà vu. I am in the wrong lane again. “*How the fuck do I get out of here?*” I scream to no one. I pass the Hispanic woman again. Does she recognize me? Why do I care? But I find myself gazing in the rearview mirror. She probably encounters many like me during the course of an average day. Crazy tourists. I drive around the same block again, mindful — ever so mindful — of my spot in the universe. The gods are with me on this third trip around. I lean on the horn out of gratitude. Once inside the tunnel, twilight turns to pitch darkness, and it takes several seconds for my eyesight to adjust.

The time is seven forty-five. The ceremony has started. Will he have realized by now that I didn’t make it? Or maybe he is not yet aware of my absence. *Or maybe* the truth lies closer to the reality that he didn’t want me there, in the same room, with his parents and his friends and his professors. Now that I can safely say I know my way back home, I start to ask myself those questions I should have queried before I embarked upon this fateful trip. Just how was he going to explain my presence? Who was I going to be to him tonight? A co-worker? A family friend? I certainly wouldn’t be a girlfriend, a potential lover — or whatever he views me as. What exactly am I to him?

As soon as I emerge from the tunnel, my head seems to clear. The entrance to the New Jersey Turnpike looms up ahead. I follow the beacon of the towering green sign and my heart rate returns to normal while the sweat on my brow dries back into my hairline. Once on the Garden State Parkway, I travel with no destination in mind and then exit at the town of Maple Grove, pulling into a McDonalds just off the highway. Parked on a patch of gravel in the far corner of the dimly lit parking lot, I wolf

down a Big Mac, a sack of fries and a vanilla shake. It is a fistful of grease I certainly don't need; yet one that never tasted so delicious.

Jerusalem, One

Mid-morning the next day, I meet up with Runyon near the ladies' room. The muffled echoes of high-pitched voices drift from underneath the door.

"Why didn't you show up last night?" he asks. "I waited for you. I was worried."

"I got lost, so I went home."

"I was worried."

"I'm sorry."

"Where did you get lost? What happened?"

I feel the need to tread with caution, but instead I blurt, "Did you really want me there?"

"I . . . of course I wanted you there? Why would I've asked you?"

I don't have an answer and neither does he wait for one. "I want to take you to lunch," he says.

"But you'll be seen in public with me."

"I don't care."

"Yes you do. How you appear to others is very important to you."

"How's twelve-thirty sound?"

"Should we take separate cars?"

"I'll meet you downstairs at twelve-thirty."

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The second floor is an open loft that overlooks the expanse of the main level below. From the loft you can see the double glass doors at the front entrance, the revolving doors, and the front desk where Avi Horowitz is seated, peering over the fifteen camera screens in front of him. You can see clear to the end of the floor, hundreds of feet away, to the double glass doors near the Jewish Community Center. At twelve-thirty, I steal a glance from the loft and there he is — as he said he would be —

chatting with Avi, pausing every so often to smooth his beard. I am not ready to make an appearance; he will have to wait. I tiptoe away.

At twelve forty-five, I pick up my purse. Fifteen minutes is hardly enough time to determine my significance to him, but worth would be reduced to rudeness if I made him wait any longer. A peek over the banister and to the first floor reveals a roundish man dressed in black shabby pants and a white oxford shirt; a wrinkled black suit jacket is draped over his arm. He wears a full beard and his dark hair curls around his collar. He looks up just in time and catches me spying on him. He is naked standing there; his thoughts are openly revealed on his face and in his expression. His eyes. He levels me with his gaze and we are locked onto each other. It scares me, that look. It is too brazen, too expressive. It tells me everything that he wants from me. Earlier, I had asked myself the question.

What am I to him?

Am I prepared for the answer? My heart pounds as I break away and stumble down the two flights of stairs to meet him. I wave hello to Avi who looks up briefly from his console. He seems unaware of neither the warmth generated from my body as I near the desk, nor of the desire I feel for the rabbinical student he has been casually speaking to for the past fifteen minutes. I pray he cannot tell from behind his desk how difficult it is for me not to reach out and touch the bearded man, to grab him and crush my mouth over his, to take in his breath so that it mingles with mine.

My face is flushed with all that I have to hold back and somehow we do not touch. We make our way to his Ford Escort, and it is with great determination that I resist any attempt on those thoughts or behaviors that had, earlier, risen to the surface — thoughts or behaviors that might have been deemed obscene or inappropriate. He opens the door to the passenger side, like a proper gentleman, and I proceed to saturate the hem of my skirt in a stagnant pool of condensation. It takes more than one try to ignite the car and he adjusts his seatbelt as we sit in silence. And then, in a sudden burst of motion, he leans over me, feeling for something next to the passenger door, rummaging around under the seat — and, after locating the elusive object, rights himself, allowing his hand to brush up against my chest.

Through my coat, a sensation erupts that kindles every nerve ending in my body and I startle, flinching in my seat as if frightened from behind. The click of a seatbelt firmly in place somewhat steadies my erupting heart, however, to this day, I will never know whether he was aware of what that soft touch had done to me.

We pull out the parking lot and travel through Fairmont, onto Morris Avenue and into the town of Woodbury. He talks about his work, and his plans to someday live in Israel. He asks me if I enjoy my job at the federation. How are my children? Idle chitchat. He parks the car on a residential side street lined with cookie-cutter split-levels.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Jerusalem.”

“Jerusalem?”

“You mean, you’ve never been?”

“No. But I’ve been to Bermuda once. Did you charter a plane?”

“Funny. No. Guess again.”

“Is it a restaurant?”

“Bingo. My dear, I am about to introduce you to the finest kosher food in the state of New Jersey.”

The restaurant is crowded. As we walk in, Runyon touches a rectangular block of ceramic attached to the doorframe. It is decorated in Hebrew letters. He then kisses the fingers that have grazed the surface. He calls it a mezuzah. Inside the mezuzah, he explains, is a tiny scroll of parchment inscribed with a passage from the Torah.

“Like a good luck charm?”

He laughs. “No, not really. We place them on our doorposts to remind us to keep God’s words in our minds and in our hearts.”

I look around the room. This is not your typical restaurant. Some women wear hats pulled down to their eyebrows, while on others, the glossy drapery of wigs are prominently displayed. Men with big black coats and tall black hats perched precariously upon their skulls bob their heads and dance on the balls of their feet. Young boys wearing colorful yarmulkes fastened with bobby pins play upon the floor with strange-looking tops riddled in Hebrew letters. At each table is seated a family larger than the one before, and there are many children. It is a loud boisterous chaotic atmosphere. The smells are none that I can recognize. Runyon says something in Hebrew to a young man on the other side of the counter and a plastic-coated menu is passed over. We sit at a booth at the far end of the room — the last booth not taken — and he interprets for me, the bill of fare.

“Jews follow the dietary laws given in the Torah,” he says. “We keep kosher because every activity associated with food becomes an occasion for spirituality. I like to think of the metamorphosis of food into a vehicle for holiness as the meeting of body and soul. The joining of the physical and the divine. The Torah tells us not to reject the physical but instead, to turn it into a source of grace, an object of reverence. To look for meaning in everything that we do. To say the blessing before and after we eat. To separate meat and dairy. These are the things that we do to make the ordinary, sacred.”

“So you can never eat a cheeseburger?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because the Torah says in three separate passages, ‘You shall not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk.’ In the ancient Near East, a young kid boiled in its mother’s milk was regarded as a great delicacy. The rabbis called this gluttony and after realizing the power of the law’s threefold repetition, took it as a symbol that meat and dairy must never be prepared and eaten at the same time. Because of this law, kosher homes must have two sets of dishes, pots, utensils, cutlery, and ideally two kitchens — one for meat and one for dairy.”

“Two kitchens? That’s too complicated. How do you keep it all straight? And why do you take the words of the Torah at face value? Couldn’t it be that these stories were invented with symbolism in mind? Perhaps a deeper meaning than what you see on the surface? I mean, what if you really *want* a cheeseburger?”

“You just don’t. It’s called willpower.”

“Never heard of it. Let’s order. I’m hungry.” I glance at the menu. The food choices are foreign to me. “What’s a falafel?”

“Fried chickpeas and breadcrumbs served in a pita bread.”

“That sounds awful! How about a schnitzel?”

“It’s what you Italians would call chicken cutlets. Instead of tomato sauce, we serve it with a mustard dressing.”

“Gravy.”

“Gravy?”

“That’s what we Italians call tomato sauce.” I pause to scan the menu. Something earlier had caught my attention. “What is cholent?”

“That’s a very special meal. It’s the meal of Shabbat. A stew of meat, beans, rice or potatoes. Any combination will do; I like them all.”

“Then maybe one day I’ll cook it for you.”

He looks at me as if he is angry that I have been so flippant in my offer. It is true that I am just now realizing the extent of the roll as to which religion plays in this man’s life. That it *is* this man’s life. How would I fit into this scenario?

“Let me order for you. I promise, nothing weird.”

My eyes follow him through the maze of jumbled chairs and the children seated on the floor spinning their strange tops. He stops at a table and pumps a man’s hand and then another, nodding to the women in their long drab maxi dresses. I am out of place, wearing the uniform of a gentile in bright

shades of color. No hat for my head, and my legs conspicuously exposed. I pull my skirt down on my thighs as far as I can stretch the material. Runyon returns with a tray heaped with food. He smiles at me, places the tray on the table, then walks over to a large sink at the back of the room. He removes his jacket and rolls up his sleeves. While his hands are immersed in water, he begins to bob his head in that same strange dance of the black-coated men I had observed upon first entering the restaurant. He is rocking on his heels, stringing words together under his breath. I am mesmerized. But not so much so that I would have missed completely the ribbons of white material hanging from outside his pants. They make a fringe around his waist and the material sways as he undulates. He finishes what I gather to be a prayer before eating, wipes his hands and returns to our table. He has that same steady gaze that had thrown me off course earlier. It has a similar effect now, the only difference being the intimacy we have just shared. He did this for me, so that I can have a single glimpse into his life. He is asking me, is this something we can share?

He takes the seat across from me and not a word is spoken. He doesn't explain himself; he does not translate what I have just witnessed. Instead, he picks up a large square of cracker; it is coated with delicate brown dimples from where it has been placed over a fire, and he spreads an olive colored mixture over its surface. He hands it to me on a plate. It is delicious, like a liver pate on a fresh cracker.

"Hummus on matzoh," he says.

He divvies up a bowl of seasoned granules similar to barley and mixed with colorful vegetables cut up in tiny bite-sized pieces. It is tabouli — a dish I have heard about yet, never before chanced a taste. There are pitas cut up in slices with a brown substance oozing from their centers.

"Try it. I made a promise, remember? Nothing that will make you go running for the bathroom."

I venture a bite. "This is so good. What is it?"

"Falafel."

"You tricked me."

“You needed to try it. I once read that a reliable sign of intelligence is the ability to try new foods.”

“Then I must be a genius today.”

And with that steady gaze and in a voice just above a whisper, he says, “No, you’re beautiful.”

I look down to my lap, the placed napkin suddenly a point of interest. The food in my mouth becomes a mass unable to be swallowed.

“Do you know that?”

I reach for the water glass. “Oh, stop it.” The words squeak out with effort as the mass of food is pushed down my throat.

“Lily, you’re a beautiful woman.”

“It makes me uncomfortable.”

“To hear someone tell you that you’re beautiful?”

“To hear you say it.” I place the sandwich on my plate. Suddenly, I’ve lost my appetite. “What’s going on here?” I ask him.

“We’re enjoying a nice lunch together.”

“On the surface.”

“Why can’t we just be out to lunch?”

“That’s fine . . . if that’s all it is.”

“What do you want it to be?”

“A nice lunch. Listen . . . I’m confused right now. I’m having a hard time at home. This isn’t helping.”

“A nice lunch usually does wonders for me.”

“I’m serious.”

“Don’t be so serious, Lily. Here, I want you to try something else. Something sweet.” He uncovers a plate of cookies from underneath a napkin. Desserts are my weakness and I recognize the

rugelach immediately, those rolls of coiled cream cheese dough baked to a golden brown, stuffed with walnuts, raspberry and apricot jam; some drizzled with sweet butter, some with dark chocolate. I could smell the cinnamon.

“What are these?” I ask, pointing to a curious-looking triangular cookie dipped in dark chocolate.

“Hamantaschen.”

“Sorry I asked.”

“We call them Haman’s Pockets. Used to get these at Shafir’s Bakery on Houston Street. This one’s apricot; here’s one with cherry filling, and apple filling. And these are . . .”

“Jelly donuts.”

“Not just any jelly donut. Sufganiyot. It’s the official treat of Chanukah.”

I take a bite. The raspberry filling coats my mouth in sweetness. “Runyon . . .”

“Hmm?”

“About before . . . I’m sorry. Maybe I am reading too much into this.”

“Forgotten. Here, try this.”

“Ah, my favorite. Macaroons. Are you trying to get me fat?”

“Fat? Ha! Here, taste. These are called Mandelbroit.”

Up until now, I have avoided the large looming hands of time displayed on the wall opposite our table — hands that seem to travel, this afternoon, at a swifter clip than they had this morning. Somehow, two hours have slipped by and it shocks me into thinking that every journey begins as a trek through time. We share a laugh as I wrap the remainder of the cookies in a napkin and tuck them into my handbag. Runyon bows his head.

“Stay,” he says. “Please. Listen to the words.” As a child and into my teenage years, prayer had been a daily ritual. And now, thinking back to the hours spent on my knees with folded hands, I am more prepared to hear pinched words of piousness. But the words that flow from his lips are not

uninviting and they are not offered in monotone statements, rather, it is a song that he sings. His voice, deep and resonant, is penetrating and it's a voice that commands attention. It is the voice of a holy man.

“Ba-ruch a-ta a-do-noi, Elo-hai-nu Me-lech Ha-o-lam, Ha-mo-tzi Le-chem Min Ha-a-retz.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

We are walking back to the car when I comment: “You don't bless yourself before and after a prayer.”

“You mean like the sign of the cross?”

“Well, maybe something like that. I know you don't believe in the cross.”

“I say quiet blessings throughout the day. To myself, mostly. No signs. No before and afters. I'm not trying to prove anything. Prayer really is between a person and God. Not to show off holiness or piety. It's meant to be internal. I say a prayer when I open my eyes in the morning, when my car starts on the first try, when I get to work, before breakfast, before I wash my hands. The list goes on.”

“And if your car doesn't start on the first try . . .”

“Okay, I still say a prayer. That it'll start on the second try.”

We are silent on the car ride back. He fiddles with the radio.

“Here's a piece of ancient trivia for you,” he says. “Would you believe I used to be a radio deejay?”

“Yes, I would. When I first heard your voice that was the thought that came to mind.”

“That was a long time ago — before I became frume.”

“Frume? What does that mean?”

“Religious. And not just in prayer, charity or ethics — but by allowing Judaism to encompass every aspect of my life; from the Torah, *‘to know Him in all your ways.’*”

“Do you mind if I ask you a question? What are the strings that hang from your waist? You allowed me to see that and I know you wanted me to ask you their meaning.”

“You ask the right questions.”

The first stirrings of an emotion deeper than affection, flutters deep within my chest. He is a man I can see myself falling in love with. Here I am, searching for purpose in my life — and a man like this practically falls into my lap. He doesn't think I realize that he is teaching me lessons from his life. And instead of backing away, I welcome them. I want more. I hang on his every word and although I hope this is not apparent to him, I can't help but wonder if he sees me as star-struck. I stare too long. My eyes are opened wide in amazement. I lean into him, waiting. I don't want to be just another groupie.

“Those strings are called tzitzit. They are ritual fringes attached to any four-cornered garment worn by a male. During prayer service, the tzitzit are attached to a large prayer shawl called the tallit.”

“Why are you wearing them now?”

“During the day, I wear them under my shirt in a garment called arba kanfot. It's similar to wearing a poncho.”

“But why?”

“The Torah actually gives a reason for the law of the ritual fringes. *“And you shall see the fringes at the corner of the garment and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and observe them.”*

“So the fringes are like an ethical string around your finger.”

By now, we have been sitting in the parking lot for twenty minutes. My lunch hour has turned into three hours. I don't care. It's strange, but I just don't care.

Runyon turns to me and kisses me on the cheek.

“You ask the right questions and you say the right things. I could grow to love a girl like you. I'll go inside through the front door; you can sneak in by the JCC. I'll come see you later.”

“Thanks for lunch.”

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I return to my office without consequence. Quickly, I sit down and grab for the top job jacket in my in-box. I missed one appointment, which can be easily explained by an earlier appointment going beyond normal time constraints. Grace Jones, the assistant to the head of our department, strolls into my office and takes a seat in the guest chair; she waits for me to end my phone call. And yes, that is her name; don't wear it out, was how she had introduced herself to me that first day on the job. She is my friend, my confidante.

"Hadassah was looking for you earlier. Where've you been?"

"I took a long lunch, I know, but . . ."

"Three hours? Why didn't you just take the rest of the day off?"

"What does she want?"

"Oh, who knows? To look busy, I guess. She's gone for the day but she might bring it up tomorrow. Just a friendly warning."

"Thanks for the friendly warning."

"So, where were you?"

"Well, a funny thing happened while I was at the Hallmark store picking out a birthday card. An old friend from high school recognized me and we ended up going out to lunch."

"Does that friend happen to sport a beard? A big black beard?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw you . . . and . . . him," she whispers, moving closer to the desk. "You're playing with fire. He's a rabbinical student, you know. And you're kind of married."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Lily, stop whatever you're doing before you get yourself fired. Think of your boys. Your husband's a mess, but think of those boys."

"I'm not doing anything wrong. I went out to lunch with him. We lost track of time."

“Then why did you make up that story?”

“Because I know it would look bad; I know people would talk. But why is he untouchable? And I don’t mean that in the physical sense. Why can’t we go out to lunch without it becoming a reason for gossip?”

“He is untouchable. You’ll both get into trouble, but you’ll bear the brunt of it all. You’re married and you’re a goy.” I smile at her use of the word, goy. It’s our running joke, the fact that neither of us is of the Jewish persuasion.

“And you’re also seven years older than he is,” she continues. “He’s a God-damned child.”

“Are you kidding me? My God, I would have guessed him to be in his late thirties.”

“Will you promise me you’ll stop before it gets out of hand? I know what a romantic you are. And you ain’t getting any at home . . .” She smiles with her lips while her eyes convey their warning.

“I don’t know, Grace. There’s something about him I can’t turn away from.”

“Have you, like, fucked him yet?”

“No. God no. We just talk. We talk a lot, about everything. He surrounds himself with so much meaning. It sounds stupid, but that’s something I’ve been craving, a part of my life I’ve been searching for. Martin’s so . . .”

“Tedious? So dull? So unexciting? So lifeless?”

“Yes.” The word comes out as a sigh.

“Been there, done that. I got to get back to my desk; I’m sure Hadassah has tried to call. I think she’s on a date with that new advertising guy. I had to buy her black pantyhose earlier.”

We giggle over that and then Grace casts a look in my direction that says — *Lily, watch out. These walls have eyes. These walls have ears.*

The Meeting of Body and Soul

On my way home from work that evening, I stop at the Barnes & Noble bookstore. A swift current pulls me towards the back of the store, to the rows containing literature on theology. I run my fingers across the spines of daunting volumes on Judaism. Many are oversized, too bulky to hide in my satchel, and certainly, too cumbersome to keep from my husband. And then I spot a small paperback entitled, *The Reasons for Being a Jewish Woman*. Before I can lose my nerve, I grab the book and carry it under my arm to the checkout counter. I fish through my handbag for my wallet and I can feel the eyes of the cashier upon me. I look up and he is busy stuffing the book in a plastic bag. Again, maybe it is my imagination. Maybe I'm becoming paranoid. Or maybe he's a Jew hater. Maybe he belongs to one of those underground cults who still search for those who reside on the fringes of a proper society (this defined according to such groups) — in order to point fingers at them, lynch them, burn them on crosses, murder them with poison. Runyon had told me a story, a horrible story of pain and torture that left me ashamed of my heritage — and that I was a Christian. He was fifteen years old at the time, growing up in south Jersey. He had been chased after classes to an abandoned industrial center where a group of boys from the local Catholic school had cornered him inside a warehouse. The boys threw rocks at him, rocks they had the mind to pick up in the yard and store in their pockets, and they cursed him for being Jewish, a dirty Jew, a lazy Jew. And then when they grew tired of pummeling him and when he could no longer stand on his feet, they led him to an area in the warehouse where there were tall metal spikes driven from the floor and reaching to the ceiling. He had no idea what this might have been used for when the warehouse had been alive; it could have been the skeleton of some type of conveyor belt. The boys tied him to the metal bars, his arms stretched out and over his head. His legs were splayed in a similar fashion. They spit on him; they were out of rocks so they grabbed whatever was laying around the floor — shards of metal, chips of concrete, broken glass — and cut the frightened fifteen-

year-old until he cried. And then they pulled their pants down, one at a time, and peed on his legs, jostling each other to see who could aim their stream past his belt buckle. The last boy sat on Runyon's shoes, voiding on them. They left him there, not to die, for the bindings that held him loosened with some friction, but to remind him that he was different from them and they took offense to this.

It was dark by the time he reached home and, along the route, the only question that had circled through his mind was, "How am I going to explain this to my father?" He didn't think about revenge or hatred. He didn't think about how he was different from those boys. He didn't think about why he was different. He only considered the embarrassment to his father upon seeing his son with shit on his good shoes and piss on his clothing.

I cried when he told me that story. My face was hot and red and he said don't be embarrassed. You're a good person. There are good people and bad people in all walks of life. Good Jews, bad Jews. Good Christians, bad Christians. Look at Jesus, he said. Bad Jew, good Christian. And that made me laugh. I couldn't remember another time in my life when the need to laugh expunged the need to breathe. I told him my father would kill me if he heard me laughing at a joke in which the Son of God happened to be the punchline. See, he said, you don't want to embarrass your father either.

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It takes me a week to finish the book. I try to keep it secret from Martin and from Runyon. Martin sees glimpses of it every so often — but I always have my nose stuck in one book or another, as he would say — and therefore, it hardly seems necessary to comment on this particular subject. In my brief reading, I discover that the life of a frume woman, a kosher woman, is a difficult life to lead. She is held responsible for every piece of food and every drop of liquid her family places into their mouths. She is in charge of the home, in keeping the home sacred and holy. She raises the children — and families steeped in this severe lifestyle usually embrace a great many children. She teaches her daughters the sanctity of being frume: shopping for kosher food, learning from the Torah, lighting the

candles, reciting the prayers, going to Temple, covering her head, covering every square inch of visible skin on her body, her arms and legs, when she is displayed in public.

I fill my head with the ideas behind the mikvah. At first glance, the mikvah speaks to me about limitations, and emphasizes constraints and a loss of freedom. I close my eyes. I quiet my mind, freeing myself of any misgivings, of any negative thoughts, of any prejudices that I might have, and I am finally able to see this important part of a woman's life through the innocence of a child's eyes. And why wouldn't I? As a child, I had often immersed myself in our backyard swimming pool until my skin was as shriveled as that of an octogenarian. And now, as I look back on those moments of womblike pure silence where only water existed, I sense a bond, a similarity between what I had experienced as a child and what the mikvah must hold for those who believe in its rejuvenating powers.

And what about water? Clean. Colorless. Odorless. The most elemental of elements. It is the primary source of all sustenance. It physically purifies the body. It restores and replenishes our spirits. Water is the sustaining force reflected in both the material and the spiritual. This goes back to what Runyon had spoken to me about over falafels that day. The meeting of body and soul. The joining of the physical and the divine.

I learn that the mikvah must contain a minimum of two hundred gallons of rainwater gathered and siphoned into a pool in accordance with Jewish law. One would descend into the mikvah by a set of stairs where the waters are commonly chest high and kept at a comfortable temperature. A woman would immerse herself entirely until the waters enveloped each and every part of her body, down to the very ends of every hair follicle. I consider the utilitarian function of the mikvah: from the onset of a woman's period and for seven days after its end, until she has immersed herself in its waters — husband and wife may not engage in the sexual act. They may not touch each other, even in as casual a manner as a tap on the shoulder. They must find other means of communication, of expressing love, care and concern without touching. Two people who have taken vows to love and cherish each other until their dying day, two people so in tune to each other because of constant interaction day in and day out —

suddenly become inaccessible, forbidden, off limits to each other. I try to put myself in the role of a woman who cannot be touched for twelve days. Would it be tortuous? I can understand how it would be. But I can also see that because of this “separated” span of time, how a man and a woman, when allowed, would approach each other with a renewed passion. With my eyes closed, I can visualize how anticipation translates into hunger.

And then I consider the metaphysical aspect. A woman’s monthly blood signifies the death of potential life. It is the shedding of possibility and, according to Jewish law, the shedding of a woman’s purity. Before I had identified with the mikvah, I looked upon its waters as a vessel in which to wash away a woman’s uncleanness, a woman’s blood. However infuriated, after reading this chapter, I realize I am clinging to the wrong interpretation; I mistakenly attached a definition to the word “unclean” as meaning dirty, and taking it out of its true context, meaning impurity. A state of impurity is not sinful, but instead, a spiritual state of being.

I feel an attraction toward these spiritual waters. As I dig deeper, it seems to me that immersion suggests the power to transform. Every month, a complete metamorphosis transpires. A pupa into a butterfly. Is this what they feel? The women. When they ascend the stairs, wet and dripping, and begin to dress or comb their hair. Is this what it’s like when they see their husbands for the first time after nightfall, on the seventh day after their bleeding has ended? Do they fall under his spell as they had when they were first attracted to each other and he appeared shiny and new and full of promise? No mistakes had yet been made. The slate was clean. The game, scoreless.

I dare to speak of the mikvah to Runyon one day. Our lunchtime excursions had taken on new meaning after we had discovered a wooded area noticeably vacant of extraneous distractions. It is an oasis in the desert where we talk and eat fruit and bread. We eat with our hands and never with forks or knives or plates, littering the floor of his car and ourselves with crumbs from matzoh or pulled apart challah. On one such afternoon, we were sitting there with the windows open, for the air was heavy with humidity, our mouths filled with the sugary sand of fresh pears.

“Why is a woman looked upon as dirty?” I ask.

“What have you been reading?”

He knows me so well. “I want to know about the mikvah.”

“It’s a good thing to know.”

“I’m having a difficult time deciding whether I should be outraged that Jewish men consider their wives impure when they have their periods or whether I should look upon this custom as just that — a custom — different from the way of life I’m used to living.”

“Well, let me ask you this. How is a woman bathing in the mikvah different from, let’s say, us eating food with our hands and not from fine bone china and sterling silver utensils?”

“That’s what I mean. It’s just another way that we’re different from each other.”

“It’s a law we obey. Like any other. Sure, there are those who don’t understand and claim the mikvah is just another sexist ploy religious men like to entrap their women with ensuring that they remain two steps behind. But really, Lily, that’s so far from the truth.”

“Is that why you shouldn’t touch me? Because I’m dirty? Is that what you believe?”

“I don’t want you to be upset about this. The mikvah is supposed to be a beautiful part of a married couple’s relationship. There’s joy in going to the mikvah. It’s not embarrassing. I know of this; my married friends tell me their wives are practically glowing when they return to them from being immersed. They say it’s like the first time every time. Can you imagine feeling like that? Can you imagine the desire that builds in between those times when a couple cannot make love? The tension between them?”

My face grows warm with agreement. “How does it work? Sleeping in separate beds.”

“Two twin beds. When a woman is menstruating — and for seven days afterward — the beds are apart. But when she returns from the mikvah and all during that week, the beds are together.”

“So a married couple is permitted to make love one week every month. How do they have so many children?”

“That’s how.”

I laugh and he starts the car. These days, Runyon is being more watchful of the hour — and I, of our budding relationship. But instead of spending more time together, we are apart quite often. I find myself sitting at my desk wishing that he’d poke his head in the doorway or that my phone would ring and it would be his voice on the other end of the line. This afternoon, in particular, a restless feeling has been roiling in my gut since we’ve returned from lunch. Maybe all that talk of sex. I stifle a grin behind my hand. And then the phone rings.

“Hey, what’re doing tonight?”

It is his deep resonant voice I have grown so accustomed to listening for.

“I don’t know. Going home, I guess.”

“Would you like to go out to dinner?”

My response is immediate. “Yes.”

“What about . . .”

“No problem. I can think of something.”

“We’ll leave a little later, okay?”

I catch his intention. No one can ever see us leaving together. I hang up the phone and a self-congratulatory smile touches my lips. You might ask yourself; does she feel any guilt?

Yes. Yes, she does.

It’s hard not to feel guilty. I am quite aware that my selfishness is taking me away from my children and time spent possibly patching up my failure of a marriage. At my disposal, however, is an entire arsenal of reasons and explanations as to my absences, and Martin, unbelievably, never questions them. But the storage facility for rationalizations I use to convince *myself* is, still, far more substantial. Yes, I count myself in that group of those being lied to. And the longer I lie, the more convincing I become.