

## Behind the Blue Door

My son, we lived in different worlds on the settlement. We were on the border, on borders of borders. The Rabbi sent us there -- away from bus bombings in Jerusalem. For you, I feared. (I have never feared death; rather waited for its release.) To the border between the territories and Israel, between Syria and the territories, between Arabs and Jews, between secular and Orthodox, between sanity and insanity, he sent us. Surrounded by electrified, barbed-wire fences, protected by young soldiers, each of whom I imagined were shadows of my Benjamin. I felt safe guarded by Benjamin-ghosts.

*Son, I will teach how a woman can live in a different universe, even as she lives in the same house; a lesson about woman-loving.*

These were also inner borders, between sanity and the other. Moments, I could not tell where sanity lay. Inner borders are covered by shadows; lines become befogged.

Immersed in the Orthodox yishuv, we were. Where the residents barely tolerated democracy: "When we have Chumash, a Bible to live by," they argued, "Why democracy?" "Well," they shrugged, "Since the Rav tells us how to vote, let there be democracy." Where woman had eight or ten children, and also a husband, I was alone. In this crowd, I felt alone.

You thrive among the children, become one of them, become Israeli and Orthodox. You are too young to protest the long black pants, black

shoes, white shirt. You remember your first haircut, when they left but stubble of your blond hair, except for you peyes, your side locks, which you tucked behind your ears, or twiddled between your fingers when you studied.

My hair, they did not touch. At first.

Later. Later.

They put us in the apartment at the end of the Yishuv, facing the donkeys; beyond these asses were the Syrians. The moshav mamas pronounced, “ We put you there, at the edge of the yishuv, for we do not want you here. You are here only because of the Rav, not us.”

Here is a secret. They did not know that the gray donkeys protect me. In a beloved opera, there is an aria of one who disguises himself in mule’s skin, protected by gray. When alone, I would coax them to cross the path, join me, protect me. Their hoofs would clack on the metal culvert that bridged the path to my door. (Armani knows the protective power of gray.)

The first day, the Rav asks me to meet with several of the women, the important ones. He rules that I was to cover my hair, like a married woman. The women object -- I am not married; why, they insisted, should I have the honor of covering my hair in modesty. The Rav answers, jabbing his finger at one accuser, “For protection from your envy!”

I buy the hats, the hair covers -- head lids; I lengthen my skirts, my sleeves. I abjure slacks. All the Parisian clothes -- dresses made for me for opening nights -- I display on the salon wall, as art. All the custom

jewelry -- some gifts of Henri, some gifts to myself, the sapphire pendant from Thailand, the black pearl necklace from Japan, Mobi pearl earrings -- become wall art. My books became a library for the moshav. I plant the barren Golan ground with trees, flowers.

And the women accuse me of planting poison bushes to tempt, as bane for their children.

And the women spread rumors that I am a whore.

And the women say that I have AIDS, had come there to die.

And I am hated and despised.

And I feel forsaken. *Lama azavtani?*

And the men, the religious men, some come to the door, downstairs, shouting for coffee. I could not lie. Leaning out the second-floor window, I call, "Just a moment." Then, I spilled the coffee into the trash and called out to Mischa, (or Shmulik, or Putzi) "I have no coffee!"

And the Rav sends unmarried men to meet with.

One, the plumber, says he would "take care of me," "snake my pipes," he calls it; to sleep with me every Friday night -- a mitzvah, he insists, to make love on the eve of Shabbat. A woman, he proclaims (such proclaimers in this Holy Land) -- forefinger pumping Talmudically above his head -- is like plumbing: she must be flushed by a man, so she does not get plugged up. Lye for the soul, I think. And as corrosive.

The car mechanic offers to fix my car if he could have me on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I recall the stink of benzene on his hand as he

reaches around my shoulder (not the shoulder nearest him, around, to the shoulder opposite, dragging me closer to his stained overalls, to his stink). And I say to him that this was not *tznu'ah*, not modest.

The young Russian, the Rav sent to fix the leaky roof. And, he lectures me about *freyers*: whomever doesn't lie, cheat, is a *freyer* -- a castrated rooster -- good only for soup. He wore a kippah, but also a tight black T-shirt, rolled sleeves, the front collar ripped a few centimeters so chest hairs and pecs are revealed and much gold around his neck, wrist. He complains that his girlfriend could not satisfy him; he wants me to pleasure him. He had heard that French woman knew techniques, did things that Russian wives did not know. I say no, left my home to shop, returned to find money missing. But, to tell the Rav would be *lashan ha'rah*, the evil tongue, slander (I had not seen him take money); so I say nothing.

Another sent was the fat rabbi, divorced, from West Rogers Park, Chicago, Illinois. Short. Teeth missing, black gaps in front, drool and foam accumulate at his lip corners, as he speaks rapidly. His left sleeve is streaked of spit-wiping. (Sleeve buttons that Lord Nelson introduced to keep young midshipmen and cabin-boys from snot-wiping, did not deter this slobbering Chicagoan.) Much of his hair had disappeared, as if the fat on his neck had evicted them. His remaining strands were oiled in place. He kept the black knit kippah on his head with three pins, a touch of Haman. He came to Aretz to find a wife. He would make me pregnant, he promises on our first meeting. (Why didn't the Rav who sent these men, why didn't he also send a woman to meet with us, protect my modesty, at

least for the first meeting? This they did only for virgins, the women insisted.)

What could I do, what could I say? I said no to all, but wanted to protect you, my son, wanted to stay in the commune. How could I continue saying no to the Rav's choices? To tell Rav what they wanted, what they said, was gossip, a sin in itself. And who would believe a French woman on the lam, single mother, bastard child?

I paint our door the blue of my childhood house, the house before I was twelve. Blue as a shield of protection. The blue of Chagall's Sarah and Abraham. The deep cielo, as Abraham, behind his love, reaches his left hand to console her shoulder as Sarah looks downcast, and in the distant, out of sight of both barren husband and wife, ride the angels who will bring them hope of their son. All this on the background of swirling blue, like the marbled Florentine paper in my desk. *Techellet* blue of the bible; that dye made of Mediterranean snails and used to adorn the *tzitzit* of prayer shawls. This blue was my door.

And Yentl came and accuses me. This blue, she screams, is the blue of Hamas; I am a Hamas spy, she shrieks; they would watch me now; eyes they would keep on me. I try to tell her of the blue of my childhood home, of Chagall, of the Israeli flag, of *techellet* (let alone the green of Hamas). But she hears nothing. And they watched me. They watched.

When I fall ill, just a few days ill, Yentl threatens, "The Yishuv will take your son. You cannot care for him." This rouses me. With fever, I teach.

And my students torment me out of their desperate yearnings. The teen boys, ejected from their Yeshivas, were placed on this forsaken patch

of Golan land, so that they would not escape. Those boys -- while they grew *peyes*, wore black -- were petty thieves, runaways. But I love them; I believe that with enough love, they would live straight lives. Yes, I think of them as my Benjamins gone awry. (My Benjamin would not have strayed, but he would have shadowed, protected this *khevra*.) They know enough Jewish law to know that a man could “marry” a woman by putting a ring on her finger and quickly reciting one sentence, “*Harrei, mikudeshet li...*” One or two would distract me, while another would sneak from behind, a metal washer slipped on my finger and his attempt to rush through the prayer before I could discard the “ring.” I try to teach them of different flavors of love --- between teacher and pupil, between parent and child, between man and woman.

And when they escape the Yishuv (somehow they managed), they call me on my cell phone and ask me to pick them up at the forlorn bus stop in the Bikaa, where they wait besotted with stolen ritual wine. And they beg that I not tell the Rav. You remember the late night trips, the gauntlet of Bikaa Arab villages (a treacherous strand of pearls on a necklace of roads, places not to stop, not to be stranded). The rendezvous in the wilderness, the late night returns. I tried to save them.

And as their boys and men began to adore me, the women talk more. That I am a boy-seducer; that I am an AIDS-infecter; that I lure their husbands into sin.

Yentl’s prodigal son returned from his disappearance to Nepal, India, Thailand. And he was sick. And he returned home. And he died. And she buried him on the Yishuv. Blood cancer she said he had. But I recognize

the wasting. I saw the needle tracks (like those that traveled Wolfgang's arm, between his toes, the top of his feet). One should make tracks in the sands of time, not one's arm. I say nothing, nothing to this heartbroken mother. In my heart, I forgive her for her Hamas rants.

And, after terrorist bombings, these mothers sent their sons to scour the roads, even as far as Gaza, for dead bits of Jewish soldiers' flesh stuck to asphalt, bricks, even as their sons became snipers' targets.

My jewelry began to disappear. My Armani shawl. From the walls of our house they were taken. Remember how we did not lock our doors on the yishuv? The only danger, they told us, was danger from the terrorists; here we all trust each other. And I ask about the jewelry. And they pronounce "These losses of yours are *kappores*, ritual offerings, for your past sins. God is using people as instruments of his justice to punish you. You should feel cleansed of your past and these reminders of your tawdry life. You and your son will be cleansed."

All this I bore (*for you my son*).

Until they came for my hair.

The women call to meet with the Rav. It matters not, they insist, that I cover my hair with a straw hat. Hats only inflame their husbands' imaginations, they argue. I am a temptress, a Lilith with seductive tresses, they cajole the Rav. They -- the women -- had seen my long, elegant hair in the mikvah. The men know what lies beneath. My dresses, they say, are not modest enough, show my shape when I walk. And I do not walk modestly enough, rather like a model or a streetwalker -- a runway model, one foot planted before the other. To entrap their men.

And they demand: hair. Cut the hair! From my waist to my chin, my hair is shorn, publicly. In the yishuv center, the women gawk.

My hair, not touched since I was twelve, is hacked. I could no longer console myself, twist its ends into my mouth to suck; hide my face in its veil.

They “donate” my hair; donate to make wigs for religious women in Monsey, New York, so that they could cover their hair in modesty. There is a crisis in Monsey; they have learned that the wigs they had bought from India were made of hair shorn in Buddhist ceremonies. “Unkosher wigs!” the Rabbis insisted. (*Trefe* wigs; *tref* – the word for animals torn limb from limb in the wild.) In Southern Andhra Pradesh, Buddhist women sacrifice their long tresses at the holy shrine of Tirupati. Shorn, shaven to the pate they are; laid bare (the women; their hair). Long, weighty, black heavy locks are bundled for sale to --- Orthodox married women of Monsey, U.S. of A. and environs. For this, Rav Ovadiah of Jerusalem called women who wore such wigs, “whores.” A bonfire of wigs they made (a different kind of vanity). An emergency wig shortage in Monsey. My hair, from the Holy Land, would protect the modesty of these good women. I should know that my hair would go to good use, the women’s committee insist.

And I am broken. Without my hair, my defense, I am broken. And I left with you.

And, I met Chanan.

