

“Because”

...And back we go, Reader, to the past for a moment. I thought it would make things clearer up ahead if I slipped these journal pages in now. It should all make sense soon, don't fret; have some tea (-Raven)

foreward

the Days of Awe- approaching the High Holy Days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. I felt bursting with hope and promise, I remember- the month preceding, the month of Elul, had been the most beautiful time in my life thus far. Over the course of a year, I had begun studies with Rabbi Ariel Wolf. I studied with Grandfather's consent, of course; Grandfather had always encouraged my hungry brain, saying that it did not matter what shape I wore on the outside; my soul, brain and heart were as capable of finding deeper meaning in texts as any man's were. It was a scandalous way of thinking at the time and in a small town, but being the town Quizzes had its compensations: Grandfather and I were not held to the same standard as everyone else. Yes, they often looked at us askance or laughed behind their hands, but they also smiled indulgently when they saw me, with my plain, serviceable dresses and round spectacles, entering Rabbi's office with books tucked under my arm for an afternoon of study.

What a heady thing, to engage in the forbidden act of Torah study! To walk into his office was an adventure in itself: it was a wonderland, lined with colorful books and curios, wooden masks and musical instruments of all kinds, bright, primitive paintings from far away places, small wooden boxes containing things like an etrog that he let me touch and smell, a set of tefillin that he taught me how to put on, and beautifully embroidered tallitot. The brightly

colored books used to be painfully enticing, entirely closed gates to me: how my heart squeezed with excitement when I found all of those gates opened and waiting for me to walk through and learn!

We studied with the doors open- there was no impropriety- and yet, I can see why Torah study is forbidden to women: if we were all to engage in study, it might threaten to overthrow the entire “safe” structure of society that they have worked so hard to build and preserve; whether or not that world encourages the greatest growth of soul is debatable, but study for all would topple the old, narrow ways entirely.

When minds meet and wrestle with great concepts, it is possible- nay, it happens very often- that human beings can grow close. When minds and souls and spirits engage in the exercise of reaching for deeper understanding, when the heart quickens with joy at discovering agreement with ideals in another, it is possible, very possible, to fall in love.

I never thought this would happen to me in this way- I always envisioned meeting my future love in a sedate, approved fashion: perhaps at a dinner party given by friends of my family, attended with Grandfather. This would be followed by a sweetly calm and mildly romantic courtship, a proper and approved proposal, after which I would calmly and contentedly press my bridal flowers in a book so that I could remember as an old woman that I had once been lovely; I would step into the role of nurturing wife and, eventually mother, and that would be that.

This is what happens when girls grow up reading insipid books, listening to the dictates of the most closed-minded men (who often happen to be the loudest, and thus the only ones who make themselves heard,) filling their minds, not with questions, but with cliché and outworn

answers! My vision of the future was tidy, but it didn't have room for me in it. Me: clumsy, passionate, at times inappropriate, curious, nosy, outspoken and shy, but living with all her heart me! Me, Mari.

This was my love: he asked me to be his bride during the month of Elul. The letters of Elul are said to stand for "Ani l'dodi v' dodi li," "I am my beloved, and my beloved is mine."* I said that I would be his, and he held me so tightly, I could feel his heart hammering, and his tears lay on my hair like dew.

I thought that everything would be all right. Yes, he was my rabbi, and we fell in love. Decidedly awkward, but in our small town, people loved us both; they always had an indulgent smile to see us, our heads bent over books in study, or walking together- talking, always talking, oblivious to the world around us.

Of course, in the round spectacles I often wore for reading and forgot to remove, with my hair untidy, often bristling with pencils I had poked into my pinned up coils of hair for safekeeping (a terrible habit, I admit) and likewise forgotten to remove, I did not exactly present the picture of a femme fatale. However, Grandfather would tell me, as the days ripened and grew full, and the air turned crisp and the sun mellow, that when I came home from studying, my cheeks were glowing from within like a glass of his favorite brandy.

And so, I stretched my real-life romance to fit those story book ones: I began to sew dresses that were more fitting for a rabbi's wife, planned the meals that I would cook for him, and gradually, ever so gradually, my studies lost their edge as I began to think I knew the whole of the depth and breadth of my life. I began to knit myself into the shape of the character I

imagined I would become, in a story of my own making; I remembered God in order to give thanks, but forgot that God is the one who writes my story, not I.

Excerpt from Mari's journal, one year ago today

"See, I am showing you how domestic I can be," Ari crowed, putting his plate, (un-rinsed, heavily adorned with enormous, buttery cheese sandwich crumbs) in the sink. Grandfather and I live simply; we have no servants, except for a woman who comes in to clean once a week; we are both busy, solitary sorts, and live very much separately in our own sets of rooms in the house. Grandfather calls himself an amateur inventor, and spends much of his time locked away in his study and workroom, tinkering happily. It means that Ariel's visits to me are highly improper, but no one in the town knows that Grandfather always seems to have an absorbing project in hand when Ari has an afternoon or evening free.

"I can cook, too," he put his arms around me and I imitated our lunch (melted cheese and spinach with a soybean loaf I had smoked and seasoned to taste like bacon- my little joke) and melted.

However, being female, while I was absolutely and wholeheartedly melting, his remarks were still clanking around busily in the back of my mind.

Later, my inner dialogue went something like this:

"Oh, blast. If he wants to show me he can cook and do the dishes, then he really wants me to be working to support us after he leaves the synagogue, even though I told him the office work I have done exhausts and depresses me. I was going to do it to take care of him while he studies, as traditional families do; but I know I'll grow to resent it. He doesn't really clean anyway, he doesn't notice the things that need cleaning. He

won't want to hire any staff, as his views are as modern and egalitarian as mine...his cooking is so fattening, I would not be able to eat it...He wants me to work in an office full time; oh (various expressions of woe, anger and depression here) I can't believe the man I love would sacrifice me to that miserable existence so happily."

My obliging imagination conjured up pictures of him going on rambles, writing sermons, studying Torah, leaving me to my twelve hour workdays...of myself slogging home, my hands and cuffs stained with ink, exhausted with a headache, having to make do with cold sandwiches for dinner, sit at home wondering where he'd gone; of him, bright and chirpy and well-rested, wanting to talk and make love and joke and play, and of my exhausted, achy, drained, miserable self not being able to be the partner he fell in love with.

All this was conjured up in a few minutes. I'm that kind of girl.

Designing the embroidery for the tallit I am making for his birthday, I simmered and stewed, gnawing over this series of imaginings like it was a very real, tangible, gamy bone.

Grandfather came out of his study for dinner, and after I had snapped at him twice and sloshed tea into the saucer three times, he asked me what was wrong. All my worries came tumbling out, as they do with Grandfather, and he went right along with my thoughts, as he always does. "WELL! If he thinks he's going to have a beautiful young wife to support him, you're just going to have to tell him he's mistaken."

"He feels he has to leave the synagogue once we announce that we are to be married. People already know, of course, and look on us indulgently; they would not force him to leave, but it is not the best thing in the world for a rabbi to marry one of his

congregants," my cheeks grew hot. I was often surprised these days to find that at my age, I could still blush...I suppose that is one of the side effects of love, at any age. "But I have to know for sure. If the man I love could really, actually, want me to go slog away as a typewriter girl in an office. I couldn't live with always wondering."

"Just tell him what you WANT to do, and let him do what he needs to do. If he thinks you're a secretary, he's got the wrong girl," Grandfather growled.

In this way, though Grandfather is my best friend, we are not good for each other. We exponentially increase worry and anger. He takes my imaginings and goes right along with them as though they are real. Grandfather is an extremely forward-thinking and rebellious man: it was Grandfather who taught me Hebrew, who first guided my studies in Torah, though women are not supposed to read Torah. It was Grandfather who encouraged my ambitions as a writer, serving as my proofreader and greatest supporter.

"Ariel doesn't like to talk about upsetting things. He won't listen, he'll change the subject."

"So write him a letter, and don't speak with him until he's read it and thought about it."

"I will."

I didn't, though. I chewed on the miserable bone for a few more hours while working on the embroidery; I remembered that in the past Ari had said, "Just do whatever you need and want to do. Do what your heart is telling you to do, and I'll figure out the rest. "

So I decided to listen to that past phrase, and just tell him my decision.

He telephoned from the synagogue after the airship competition. (the Pirates lost. He always says that he is able to let it go after a few minutes of mourning, but his voice gave him the lie: he sounded as mournful as Charon, ferrying a new batch of souls across the Styx.)

"Do you want anything from Annie's Super Tea Shoppe?" (It was a small joke of ours: Annie, the resident synagogue cook-and-housekeeper-and-everything-lady, kept a stash of tea and baked delicacies for Ariel that would have fattened him to twice his size in a fortnight, if he consumed it all.)

"Just a super man."

He chuckled, then growled. "You HAVE one of those already!"

"Yes, but he's not here. he's at the Super Tea Shoppe."

(This is how inane our conversations are. No wonder nobody can really write true love into a book: the dialogue is terrible. It usually consists of three words, repeated over and over. Usually there might be a slight modifier. like "I love you so." "Oh I love you." or "I am wildly in love with you," is one of the longer variations.)

"Ari."

"Hmmm?"

"I am thinking, and I hope you'll ... no, I'm not going to start it that way," I hedged, and he chuckled.

"I am not going to train as a secretary. I don't like how upset I feel every time I think about cramming myself back into that confining world..." I didn't have a chance to finish. He interrupted me with a cheer.

"What?" I breathed, then held the ear-piece of the phone away, looking at it suspiciously as it erupted in quacking clamorous sounds.

"HOORAY! "

"You- you're glad?"

"I was hoping you'd decide to stop letting fear make your decisions for you."

I could have cried.

"I was hoping you'd continue to study Torah with me, Mari, as my apprentice. I know a woman can't be a rabbi, but in this town no one will mind if you study Torah with me. They already look on you as the town eccentric," he chuckled at my outraged squawk, "and you would make a very fine Maggid* one day."

I always underestimate him. I guess because I've never known a man like him. Nonjudgmental. Supportive...also very simple in a way. His attempts at domesticity were not veiled hints, they were not attempts to make me do something-- they were, in fact, just attempts to please me.

Oh, I can be very, very dense sometimes.

I am writing this here now because I want to remember that :

- 1) he's not as complex as I imagine him to be.
- 2) My imagination is very real to me, and I must value it, but I must also learn to be its master, not let it master me.
- 3) My Grandfather and I fire each other up like university students before the revolution. I really must use caution when communicating my thoughts to him.

4) I don't need to make choices from fear. I don't need to let fear determine anything in my life: not my relationships with people, not my choice of study, not anything at all.

5) I am very, very lucky. Why this man puts up with me, I do not know.

"Did they call you 'Bacon Breath' at the synagogue today?" I chortled.

"No...no, they did not call me 'Bacon Breath."

I am having trouble keeping the secret of the tallit I am making him. tonight I designed the back - it is a Raven with spiral markings, holding the moon in her beak. it's going to be very difficult to make- I hope I can do it.

"I can never keep my mouth shut about gifts, " I told him, "especially from people I love the most. when I find something for Grandfather I usually stew for an afternoon, then tell him about it in the evening. I just can't keep secrets from those I love," I chuckled.

"But...but... does that mean you're going to tell me about The Secret Project?" his voice was small and husky.

"No."

"But you can't keep secrets from the people you love."

"I know you love surprises."

"But...don't you love me?"

"I love you very, very, very much. SO much, in fact, that in order to give you a

surprise, I am achieving the near-impossible feat of keeping a secret."

"Oh," he said, happily.

This day is a simple, silly thing to record perhaps, but once in awhile there are moments when my life seems to hang shining in front of my eyes like a beautiful ornament. In those moments, I can see how very blessed I am. As far as I can tell, nothing in particular surrounds these moments and makes them stand out; they are nearly always completely everyday times. But I am at peace, and I am full with love for my Grandfather, this town I live in that views me with such tolerance and indulgence, and my love, my Ariel. It seems to me that if I were to run into the world chasing an elusive dream, I would forget to have gratitude for the gifts the Maker has given me right here, in this moment. I could chase the "false Gods" of adventure and notoriety, like my hero Nellie Bly did recently, in her exposure of insane asylum conditions...(I will confess to my journal, I have longed to live bravely, as she does, to change the world with my writing, to reject the traditional roles reserved for women.) but if I chased those false Gods, ever hungry for more, I would be denying the deep blessing that comes in gratitude and satisfaction for what I have. Resting in the fullness of moments like these, when I can stop and thank Hashem, the Name, the Maker of us all, for the life I live, I can truly feel the blessing. Gratitude inhabits me, and I inhabit gratitude. Mine may be a small, ordinary life, but I can inhabit it with all my heart.

*****"Ani l'dodi v'dodi li, / I am my beloved and my beloved is mine" - Song of Songs, 6.3***

****Maggid: Jewish spiritual storyteller/guide/itinerant preacher***