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“Judges”

To the past again. I do keep bouncing you around in time, Reader, but I suppose it will add verisimilitude (if that is the word I want), allowing you to feel as I felt, banged about in Time with no say in the matter. I hope you enjoyed your tea. I have ceased taking a nice cup of tea for granted since my endless tromp through the woods. (-Raven)

Excerpt from Mari's journal, one year ago today

Did I write that insipid, self-congratulatory, smug entry a mere two weeks ago? I am glad...I am glad I was innocent, I am glad I had those moments, may they still be preserved as beautifully in memory as they seemed at the time; now, with my life crumbling around me, I can say I am glad I took the time to be grateful when I felt safe, when I was surrounded in the warm amber glow of our future plans, and of the love of family and friends.

Everything changed on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.* Grandfather had been dealing with a testy boiler all day long: he is certain that if he gets the pressure just right, he can make a pair of steam-powered clockwork wings that will actually enable him to fly. Yes, steam power mixed with clockwork...many in our town raise eyebrows; I have heard gossip that my Grandfather is finally losing his mind. Of course, they say, everyone knows that no one can actually wear a steam engine upon their person, it's not safe- further, everyone knows the only safe air travel is by airship. Their gossip is not, for the most part, malicious. I think it is fueled in part by concern: they would not wish him to come to harm. They view him as they view me, with mockery at times, but with patient indulgence. I think they know this town would be a duller place without Grandfather and I.

But I am forgetting. This town will be without me, as I have to leave. They aren't viewing me with indulgence now; outright hostility is the mildest reaction. They were fine, even pleased, when they thought the romance between Ariel and I would end in a wedding they all could go to, no doubt anticipating being able to knowingly murmur to their neighbors that they saw it all happening. I should not be surprised by how quickly they have turned. I should not be surprised that it's not Ariel, but me, that they've turned on; I should not be, but I am.

I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning. To Rosh Hashanah, the time when we usher in a New Year. The sound of the shofar* is a lance, cutting away all the excess, making our hearts free and clean. When I heard the shofar this year, I was sitting in a state of rigid control, completely alone for the first time in my life, though surrounded by people I had known all my life. Ariel had come for dinner before the evening service; I could still taste it in my memory, the salmon I had made for him, the bread, the wine. I always tried to make him good, hearty meals in the days leading to Yom Kippur, as I think it helps him get through leading an entire day of services while fasting, if he has fortified himself well in the days before.

He had opened the service with a quote from a prayer book he had found somewhere along his travels. "Let me respectfully remind you, life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken. Take heed. Do not squander your life." He paused, eyes resting briefly on individual faces throughout the room. His eyes met mine, and there was a twinkle of warmth in their depths. I smiled.

"How will you spend this time?" asked Rabbi Ariel Wolf. "How will you spend the time you have left? Reflect. Reflect on how you spent your year, and what you want to do with

the time you have left. Spend it loving, giving, believing, growing; in acceptance, in joy, in singing, with tears that need to be shed and laughter that is from the heart."

He had begun to go on, when a woman walked into the synagogue, using the middle sanctuary door, walking straight down the aisle, not quietly entering the back as people usually do when they are late. Ariel's words stumbled to a halt, his face blanched white, and my life changed in a single instant.

Ten minutes and a lifetime later, his earlier words were running around my head like a steam train, banging against the sides of my skull, sending echoing, painful shards spearing through my body: "*Take heed. Do not squander your life.*"

I had just had the biggest shock of my life, and I watched my body sit calmly in the synagogue, gloved hands folded, ankles together, very much the proper lady, while everything inside me was cracking, breaking, shrieking like one of Grandfather's inventions not working properly; there was a war inside my spirit. Still, I could not bring myself to stand and leave. I pictured myself like a clockwork woman, made out of copper. Pictured the hinges of my hips unfolding, the knee hinges straightening, torso leaning slightly forward to rise, until all the weight had shifted to my feet. Standing. Then, hinges working, machinery clanking, walking out the door. Not looking to the right or left; just straight ahead, hand rising to touch the mezuzah, kiss the hand, then walk, walk, keep walking.

But still, I sat; aware of the new presence in the room; the disruptive presence every single soul in that room was focused on. No mind could possibly be strong enough to have moved back wholly to the prayer service. The rabbi himself was as pale as cheese; he stumbled,

his hands trembled, and he did not look my way. He did not look at me at all. That, I think, is what hurt the worst. It lances my heart still, as I write this.

The sound of the shofar did not cut through any of my sorrow tonight. It did not pierce the fog of confusion; it did not cleanse me or bring me to a new awareness, as it usually does.

Tonight, a little bit late, (my petty mind whispers: *probably on purpose, it was clear she wanted to make an entrance,*) the rabbi's wife came into the sanctuary, interrupted everything in order to introduce herself to us.

I had not known she existed, until this night: no one had known.

At first, I thought it was a horrible joke, or that the woman was deranged.

When she walked in, Ariel's face blanched completely white. I have never seen such a thing: I hope to never see it again. His lips moved stiffly. He said, "Margaret?" Just her name. A horrible name. An ugly name; I feel as though I have cobwebs in my mouth when I say it.

She was tall, very tall, and broad shouldered like a man. She walked with a strange, clumping gait, as though her shoes or her feet were too large and heavy. She had wispy, thin blonde hair, and triangular, glittering greenish blue eyes set far too close to the bridge of a large nose. Was she pretty? No. She was far older than he, and not pretty, and I don't say that just because she calls herself his wife. Just because her existence shattered my life.

I'm sure she is not a bad person, but she has to be self centered, to come in unannounced, without even contacting her so-called husband.

Husband.

We didn't know, yet; he had just said her name. I thought it rude and utterly beyond the pale to interrupt the Rosh Hashanah service; we have very informal services, with people talking, going in and out in a comfortable way, but this was Rosh Hashanah. It is a special service.

She walked straight up to him with her odd, lumbering gait. Walked up the three steps onto the bimah; at this point, some of us were getting ready to go up there and help him, not sure if she was completely sane. She leaned over, kissed him on the cheek. He flinched; he looked smaller. She walked behind him, put one hand on either of his shoulders; her hands were ungloved and the fingernails painted- painted! - making her aging hands look like the feet of a bird of prey. In fact, looming behind him, clutching his shoulders like that, every inch of her resembled nothing so much as a vulture.

“It is lovely to see you all. I am Rabbi Wolf's wife, Margaret. I am your rebbitzin. I know we have not met, but I want to wish you a Shanah Tovah,* and extend the hope that with the coming year, we will all become very good friends.” Her voice had a rasp to it, and lilted upwards and downwards in strange places while she talked, as though she were making random words into questions. She smiled, and her smile was not an ugly one. It was pretty, in its own way. I want to say everything about her is hideous, but I cannot fault her smile. The way her hands still grasped his shoulders, it appeared as though she was digging her fingernails - those strange, shining, silver-painted nails! - into his bones. His face was like stone; it did not turn to me. His eyes did not find me, but every single other pair of eyes in the congregation did.

As did hers. Her eyes darted to me, and squinted; she seemed to take in every detail of my face, hair, costume and posture. In glittering, bright movements, those eyes of hers invaded

me, seared me. Cut through me like a lance. No; the shofar was not my lance this year, the eyes of the “rabbi’s wife” were.

It may have been my imagination, but I felt the congregation draw away from me. A moment ago, listening to his words and telling myself that I would awaken to the awareness of the deep blessings in my life, that I would treasure each day, I had felt warmed by the presence of the people around me.

Now, I was cold and, for the first time, utterly alone in a room crowded with people. Why had I sat at the front? There would be no way out for me. I could go now, past the staring, shocked faces, or I could wait until it was all over; I could just sit in my seat and hope that they would file out to digest the new and shocking gossip, that no one would approach me. I knew, however, that people would want to know my reaction. They would want to know if I had known he was married; they would want to know so that they could decide, in the coming days, if I were an adulteress or not.

I thought then that it would take them a few days to decide; I thought that they might feel protective toward me, that Ariel would be the one under fire for having deceived me. I was wrong.

I made myself like ice until the end of the service, just trying not to react, trying not to cry. I did not hear much; I sat, simply taking deep breaths, willing my pounding heart to slow.

She had sat down in the front, simpering and smiling; and - another repellent shock!- the people around her had welcomed her quite warmly. I suppose that’s as it should be, but it felt like they had stabbed me, dropped their allegiance to me and welcomed her instantly. It’s some kind of magic word, “wife.” As though a ketubah* somehow means something, even if one of the

people in it has already broken it by disappearing, another by proposing marriage to his true love. How could that piece of parchment mean a thing if the words on it had already proven false? And yet, they all honored it. Without knowing her, they honored that wretched contract.

Ariel did not look at me through the rest of the service. At the end, when I finally rose and made my way out, it was clear that somehow they had all come to the same decision: I was an adulteress, and they must shun me. No one looked at me; no one spoke. If their eyes accidentally encountered mine, they went glassy and cold like chips of ice (already, then, even their eyes resembled those of the rabbi's wife! How impressionable and fragile these people are, I thought.) looked through me, or turned away abruptly.

The dress I had put on earlier that day in a hopeful mood of celebration felt stiff, like paper; I was a small, vulnerable thing, my heart still beating, wrapped in a hard, painted case, like the Egyptian sarcophagi I had seen in one of Grandfather's books.

Part of me waited for Ariel to follow me, to call my name, to explain; my feet, sounding in my ears like the tick-tock of some horrible, inexorable clock, counting down the days we had left to live, did not stop. They never stopped. My relentless feet took me out of the door, and down the street, and into my home; I thought that pouring all of this horrible night out into my journal would help ease the ache in my heart. It has not.

I must leave. I will do my own Tashlich* ceremony; I will infuse a small piece of wood with all of my hopes, with all of my memories, I will pour into that piece of wood everything I believed we were and were to be, and I will throw it away and watch it float down the stream.

Then, I will pack, and I will leave. Grandfather will understand. Grandfather will help me think of a place to go.

* * *

Later

I walked into the park, where there is a small river that runs through the town. The park is on either side of the river, and it is crossed by small bridges. I was numb; the air was crisp and my hands hurt and tingled, as though they had been frozen and I had slammed them against something hard. I stopped to search under one of the trees for a small piece of wood. Rising from a crouch, I steadied myself with a hand against the solid trunk of the tree. I could almost feel the life pulsing underneath the bark of that tree, and I imagined a great heart, beating inside it. I leaned my cheek against the rough bark. "You did not pull away from me," I whispered. "I thank you, friend." my eyes filled with tears, but I refused to let them spill over. I took some deep breaths, taking in the sweet piny smell of the tree; I would carry that smell with me in days to come, I thought, and I would remember that I am not alone. Not every living thing condemns me. These rules and judgments are made by human beings. Sometimes silly, quick to react, unthinking and fallible human beings. They appoint themselves Judges, and they forget compassion.

I walked through the park and passed the first bridge, only slowing when I came to the second; a lovely little wooden bridge with railings that hit me two hand spans above my waist, perfect for leaning my elbows on, perfect for gazing at the river and thinking, perfect, at one time, for Ariel to lean his elbow on, take my chin in his hand and steal a kiss. I blinked away the memory and took off my gloves, tucking them into my belt, transferring the small piece of wood to my bare palm.

I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath to begin my journey of letting go.

“I hope you are not throwing me away with that piece of wood,” his voice came from the other side of the bridge, making me jump and nearly drop the piece of wood. My eyes flew open.

“Ariel.” my voice was husky. I cleared my throat.

“Mari, I did not know. Please believe me, I did not know she was still alive. I have not seen her for many years. We have lived separate lives...we fell into marriage, it was expected by our parents...we didn't ever have what...” he swallowed, hard, and looked away from me then, “what you and I have.” Resting his elbows on the railing of the bridge, his stormy, troubled eyes searching the river, he spoke more slowly. “She left me long ago. She went away to escape being a rabbi's wife; it was a job thrust on her, she said, and she resented it deeply. She wanted to be alone, to see the world; she was reported among those lost after a train accident. I have thought her dead these past five years.”

“You did not look at me.”

“What could I do? I wanted to protect you. I saw how they shunned you. I ... I don't know what to say.”

“What will you do? Will you...” I could not say it.

“Divorce? No...Mari... please forgive me. I have to...I must rebuild my marriage. She had heard a rumor. She came back to town because she heard about you. I am glad, because if we had married and she was still alive, we...”

“Don't say it. I don't care to hear it. I do not want to know what I am to you now.”

“She has brought her ketubah. The marriage contract. I have to live up to what it says. I have to be good to her. I have to make it work.”

“Honoring a piece of paper that was broken when the woman left you, years ago, honoring a contract between two people not in love but trying to satisfy others with a marriage is more important than caring for my heart? More important than living your truth? Do you love her?”

“I ... I don't know. I ... not like I love you. We have a lot of past together...our families... She is my wife.”

I turned away and balled my hand into a fist around the small piece of wood. I had heard all I needed to hear; my heart was hammering, and I brushed angrily at the tears that flowed hotly down my cheeks. I took shallow breaths, willing myself not to be sick. I may have just heard something my heart was completely unprepared for, but I still had my pride; I was determined, at least, that his last sight of me would not be of me being sick over the side of a bridge.

“I love you, Mari. I always will. Please forgive me. I hope you will forgive me one day.” With that, the coward, the weakling, the man who “wasn't sure” whether he loved another or not, turned and walked away.

So easily, he walked away. I think I hated him, then. The small piece of wood cut painfully into my palm as my thoughts banged relentlessly against the inside of my head. I had made the mistake of thinking his love was as strong, as enduring, as loyal as mine. I had made the mistake of reflecting my own strengths onto this weak man, this man whose loyalty is so lukewarm, he can pledge me his soul through several lifetimes, knowing that he was married to another! He had told me that we had stood at Mt. Sinai together; that we were bound, that I was

his *besher** and he mine. I wondered now, acidly, if he had told her the same thing, once upon a time.

“Fool!” I didn’t know if I was talking about him or myself. I flung the small piece of wood, painted now with a little blood from my cut palm, into the river. I watched it float under the bridge, and then, balling my gloves into my palm to ease the small cuts made by the wood, I walked back home.

I flung a few things into a small bag, talking to Grandfather all the while. He had not been at the synagogue; he was still working on that tricky small boiler and portable steam-engine. His face was mournful, his large eyes swimming with tears as he folded me into his arms.

“Mari, I know where you can go. The Mountain has arrived, just a few days’ walk from here. I have been asking Sally-the-Post to inform me, because I need to buy some new gears-they have the best watchmaker. I’ll go with you, if you like; there is an Academy there, you can train for...oh, for some sort of job. It’s not what you wanted, but it will get your mind off this, and get you out of this...Town,” he spat the word out, angrily. I loved him with all my heart; standing there, defending me from an entire town. Oh, Grandfather. “Pack a few things and we can go.”

I will never forgive myself for what I said next.

“Grandfather, I love you; I thank you for your offer, but I really feel like I need to go alone.”

As I walked, at first I cried; I went over all the memories in my mind, seeking false notes in Ariel’s face, his eyes, his promises. I could find none. I had either been thoroughly blinded by foolish love, or he had been just as foolish as I, thinking our love unique in all the world and able

to survive anything. We had thought it a miraculous gift from God, the Maker, this love. With his own hands, Ariel had smashed that gift to pieces. By choosing to “honor his ketubah,” he had declared this love a mundane thing, less important than words on a piece of parchment written to a woman who had left him years ago. If our love was not stronger or more important than that false, shallow love, that abandonment, our love was nothing, was fake, a lie.

I was sick; I walked with my head pounding, and my stomach churning. Only when I came to a small neighboring town to spend the night, was I jolted back into perspective.

The news was all over town. A man in a neighboring town had been killed in an explosion; he had been working on a new type of steam engine, and the pressure was too high. It had exploded and killed him outright. Grandfather. Grandfather.

The people who told me did not know I was related to him. I did not enlighten them. They were horrified, but in the way that people are when they hear of something tragic that does not touch them personally. Some of the men were full of bluster, “Old fool! Why, everyone knows airships are the only safe way to fly.” I did not engage them in conversation. I did not defend my dear, gallant, brilliant, brave Grandfather; I simply turned away.

With nothing now, I walked. I determined that I would do as he had told me, I would set a fence of protection around my heart, and I would install a Judge. Judging had always been a negative word for me; now, it was time for me to embrace it, to have my own personal Judge, weighing everything that was told to me, letting nothing into my heart until it was deemed true.

Having grown more armor by the day, I finally arrived at the Academy. There was a package there, waiting for me...a tiny package. I unfolded it, and out fell Grandfather’s embroidered kippah, folded in on itself until it made a tiny, jewel-bright wad of fabric that fit in

my palm. I held it in my hand where the cuts from the wood were already healing. With tears blurring my eyes, I read the enclosed note.

Mari, your Grandfather always meant that you should have this. He wanted you to wear it when you told your stories and travelled as a Maggid. Not everyone is against you, girl. Find your way. Learn what you need to learn, then come back to us some day. Not all is lost; there is always a home here for you.

~Nell Butters

Nell: Grandfather's beloved best friend. I suspected they held each other in closer regard than friendship, but never had needed to pry. My heart throbbed painfully, once, then, I crumpled up the note, threw it in the small fire in the grate of my new room, and I let it go.

I put on Grandfather's kippah, and I let it all go.

With an echo of the shofar in my mind, and Ariel's words coming to me :

"...Each of us should strive to awaken. Take heed. Do not squander your life."

I let go of my home, I let go of Grandfather, I let go of my hopes, I let go of my shock and betrayal. If Ariel had not lived by the words he spoke in the synagogue that day, I would.

How do you want to live the rest of your life? I asked myself silently. I looked around the bare room, and placed a hand on the soft, worn fabric of Grandfather's kippah. He must have already had it put away safely for me, since it wasn't harmed in the accident.

I embraced my loneliness. I let it sit in my heart and be welcome. I didn't surround myself with people and try to fill the hollow in my heart; I didn't try to bandage myself with distractions of food or chatter or a new social circle; I removed the bandage, and I faced the pain. This time, walking away was simply a matter of looking ahead.

*Rosh Hashanah: Jewish New Year, beginning of the High Holy Days.

*"Shanah Tovah"- Happy New Year in Hebrew.

*shofar: a hollowed out ram's horn, blown at certain times during the year. It is a startling sound...do try to hear one sometime.

*ketubah: marriage contract. It is an actual piece of parchment that a man gives to his wife on their wedding day: sometimes very decorative and highly beautiful (if one is careful to marry the right person...)

*Tashlich: literally, "casting off." a Jewish practice usually performed on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, however, it can happen at other times. The previous year's errors are "cast off" with bread, small pieces of wood or stones, into a flowing body of water.

*beshert: soul mate