The Diamond Necklace

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Exactly one month after her seventieth birthday, Rosie got engaged. The occasion was marked by the purchase of a diamond necklace, which Rosie’s daughter Elsie, a talented shopper, had helped her pick out at the Diamond Exchange. The first time she put it on to display to Isaac, Rosie smiled as she turned her warm full throat towards him. He was hypnotized by the magnificence of both the necklace and his fiancé.

Isaac secretly congratulated himself. “Thank the Lord! This proves that she's finally agreeing to marry me.” The necklace had cost him a pretty penny, but it was well worth it.

What a necklace! How brilliantly it blazed. Tiny clusters of diamond flowers sprouted along its length and in the center was a spray of bigger diamonds, all cut and polished to perfection. Isaac found himself dreaming about the necklace almost every night. It would float into his mind's eye in the middle of his dream state and his whole being would be showered with light. When he awoke he could never quite remember the details of his dream, but a warm joyful feeling stayed with him throughout the day.

Theirs had been a rocky courtship. He had known from the first time he saw her that this was the woman he wanted. She was so full of life, a strong, charismatic woman who dressed in rich blues and greens and was as charmingly headstrong and curious as a child about everything. He felt a rush of vitality as he thought of how she would bring a new spirit to his dusty sad little house, where his poor, thin serious Frieda, who perpetually dressed in grey, had died after a long and painful illness. The house felt like an empty shell, as if it, too, had died. But now, how the walls would sing with his Rosie's exuberant presence!

But when Rosie had first seen the house, she told him that she wasn't moving in until it was repainted and there were new beds. “After all”, she tried to explain tactfully, “You can't very well expect me to sleep in a dead woman's bed, now, can you?” Isaac was speechless for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure and was able to tell her, “Rosie, dearest, your wish is my command.”

And yet Rosie still found one reason after another to put off the impending marriage. The truth was, she still had not definitely made up her mind, even after the necklace. She could always
give it back, she reasoned to herself, or she could pay him out in installments for it if she decided in the end not to go through with the marriage. Isaac was nice, at least nicer than all the others she had gone out with these past two years. And he was generous and comfortably off. And he adored her. That was always a desirable quality in a man. But just how excited could a woman get about an old man? And so she was being practical and making sure of all the details before she finally committed herself.

First there was the need to make an agreement with the lawyers. “But why? They're not the ones getting married,” Isaac joked weakly. But Rosie didn’t smile. She had been left by the death of her last husband, Aaron, with very little security, as she hadn't made any prior arrangement with him about the disposal of his property; and so, when he had died, his children had come and taken everything, leaving her only a small inadequate government pension. She wasn’t going to let that happen again. Fortunately, Rosie had spoken to her friend Ethel, who had remarried a year ago; and Ethel's sage advice echoed loudly in her ears.

“Rosie, if you don't have a pre-nup, you'll be in trouble. Get yourself a good lawyer and make that intended of yours sign on the dotted line.” Ethel had tapped the table emphatically with her right index finger, as though the desired legal agreement was spread out there, awaiting signature. Ethel then smiled a knowing smile and continued, “Men are like that. If you don't insist on what you want before you agree to marry them, you don’t stand a chance afterwards. Listen what I'm telling you, Rosie, and don't be a fool”, begged Ethel, and now she gently but firmly tapped Rosie with the same emphatic finger.

Rosie had listened and, just as she had suspected, Isaac's children had objected to the first agreement she had proposed, and it had been revised and redrafted several times. But now everything was signed, and Isaac was getting restless.

“Come on now, Rosie, let's get married already. After all, the holidays are just around the corner. Don't you want to be in your new home with your new husband for the New Year?”

Rosie had deliberately not given the matter much thought, hoping to put off the final moment of decision as long as possible. But now, as she turned her mind to the prospect, she didn't like it much. The holidays were always such a busy and confusing time. Since Aaron's death, she had been spending the holidays with her older daughter Judy, who lived nearby. That way Rosie didn't have to spend days tiring herself out with all the preparations, seeing that the fish was ground just right, and calculating how many matza balls to prepare for each meal. Even though Judy's fish was not up to her exacting standards, still, Rosie was able to spend time with her
grandchildren instead of in the kitchen. After she married Isaac, she would have to do everything herself, just as in the old days, and though she didn't really mind cooking, why not wait just a bit longer, get married after the New Year, and start the domestic routine from then on. But she could see that he was not going to agree to this so easily. And so Rosie smiled sweetly at her fiancé and replied, “That would be nice, dear.”

But now Isaac was insisting that they set a date for the wedding. “And I want to have a really grand wedding. Say, maybe two hundred people. That’s not really big. Why, at my son’s wedding there were over six hundred. But I am so proud to be marrying you, I want to show you off to all my friends and relatives!”

Rosie was flattered. Though she really would have preferred a smaller wedding, she agreed. After all, wasn’t one supposed to compromise in marriage? She started to make an inventory in her mind of all her friends, wondering which ones to invite.

“Why don’t we write out an invitation list,” Rosie suggested, “Get a pen, Isaac, and sit down”. They were in his newly-painted living room. His brother and sister-in-law were resting in the back bedroom, letting the engaged couple have some time together, yet remaining within earshot if they were wanted for any reason.

“I’m not sure I can find a pen. It has been such a mess this past week, with the painters and everything topsy-turvy. I had to take all my books and papers down from the shelves and cover them up. And I haven’t finished putting everything back yet.” Isaac was a little disgruntled by her inconvenient suggestion. Yet he was glad that at last she was seeing things his way. At least they were moving in the right direction.

“Don’t worry about putting things back, I can help you with that later”, Rosie reassured him. “And I think I might have a pen. Hand me my purse, Isaac”, she ordered.

He picked up her bag which had been lying on the sofa and handed it to her, being careful not to touch her hand with his. Until they were married, any physical contact between them was strictly forbidden, and they were both very careful in observing this prohibition to the letter.

“We should marry on a Tuesday, since that’s the most auspicious time for celebrations, according to an old tradition of our sages”, he mused, smiling at his beloved Rosie, and the diamond necklace seemed to wink at him in a dazzle of conspiratorial joy.

She looked up from where she was sitting and glanced into her fiancé's eyes. This was one of the things she liked most about him. He was learned in the ways of the sages, and she could always
count on him to know what was the most appropriate behavior on any occasion. She wouldn’t have to go running to her rabbi downtown at the Torah Study Center every time she needed clarification on a troubling practical point of Jewish law. Now she would have her own rabbinic authority right in the comfort of her own home. This gave her a good feeling of pride and satisfaction.

“And let’s do it quickly,” he began with a rush of emotion which made him feel like a young boy again, though he lightheartedly added, “after all, we’re not getting any younger.” But right after these words left his lips — when he saw her stricken look — he realized he had said exactly the wrong thing. “At least, I’m not”, he backtracked with an uncertain smile.

Rosie also managed a ghost of a smile but quickly changed the subject. Age was something she was very careful not to discuss with her fiancé. Or with anyone, for that matter. When her daughters had made her a seventieth birthday party last month, she had sworn all her guests to secrecy about her age. “I want you all to promise me that my age will not leave this room”. They were her dearest friends, after all, and could surely understand.

As far back as she could remember, it had always been a tradition among the women in her family not to reveal their ages to anyone. Rosie remembered that the first time she had wanted to spend the summer with her sister in Switzerland she had nearly been refused a passport because she did not want to disclose her age at the American consulate. She had finally given in when it became evident that there was no other way; though from then on, she always kept that incriminating document well out of sight.

Isaac did not press Rosie on this point. He could feel that she was sensitive about her age, and he understood that some women were like that. It was even enchanting, in a way. He had told his children, though, that he figured she was about sixty, maybe sixty-five. Rosie, for her part, told her children that she knew Isaac was retired, since he was already living on his pension, but she hadn’t inquired further. “Because if I start asking him, he might ask me. So we simply don’t discuss our ages. Silence is the best policy!” she stated with finality.

There were a few other things they didn’t discuss, and this is what led them into deep water. For instance, later that evening, when they were speaking on the phone — Isaac had called to make sure Rosie had arrived home safely and to say goodnight — he found out, quite by chance, that Rosie had been widowed twice.

They had been talking about tombstones, of all subjects. Earlier in the day, Isaac had spoken with his friend Sender, who was in the business, and he was casually mentioning the
conversation to Rosie. “Yes, I remember Sender,” said Rosie, “I bought the stone for Aaron from him.”

“Aaron?” queried Isaac. I thought your husband's name was Hank?” Isaac had known about Hank, Rosie's first husband. He had even been acquainted with him in the old days, when they both lived in New York's Lower East Side. And he thought that he might have even attended his funeral, though it was so many years ago he couldn’t be sure.

“Oh, no, silly boy,” scolded Rosie, smiling at her fiancé's ignorance. “Aaron was my second husband. It was his stone that I bought from your friend Sender.”

Isaac’s face turned white, and he began to tremble so violently that the receiver fell out of his hand.

Rosie could sense his agitation and felt instinctively that she must try to calm him. “But Isaac dear, surely the shadchan told you? I never tried to hide that fact from you. Why should I? It wasn’t my fault that two husbands died on me, now, was it?” Rosie was surprised at his reaction. What did he expect of her? Did she have power over life and death?

Isaac had retrieved the telephone and now held it tightly, as though he would crush it, and with his other hand he clutched at his beard, trying to recall something. “It’s true, the shadchan did tell me that you were married twice; but I assumed that you were widowed once and once divorced. This... I never dreamed. It puts things in a very different light, since it raises a serious... complication in Jewish Law. I have to think about this and look into the Halacha. We’ll talk tomorrow. Goodnight...” His voice trailed off, sad and broken, with unexpressed anger lurking behind his words.

When she heard the dismissive click of the phone being hung up, Rosie looked disdainfully at the receiver in her hand and addressed it sharply.

“He certainly has some nerve! Insinuating that I was trying to deceive him. What does it matter anyway, if I was widowed once or twice or even three times?” She lifted one soft round shoulder defiantly, looking as she had when as a child she’d been crossed by one of her doting parents. Her chin trembled. “If he doesn’t like it, he can just not marry me. Let him find someone else, if he can, who will be more to his liking.” She threw out the challenge to the empty air, and in response, the phone's persistent dial tone seemed to mock her petulance. Finally she slammed the receiver down and stormed out of the room, determined to put the incident out of her mind and get a good night’s sleep.

But as she passed the mirror on her way out, the reflection of the diamond necklace caught her
attention. For a long moment she stood transfixed and stared into the mirror. Then she tore the necklace from her neck and tossed it far into the corner of the room, where it fell with a voluptuous and almost musical clatter.

“Let him take back his precious necklace. The shadchan told me he had plenty of other men. Plenty. So what do I need this one for, with his accusations?” and she burst into tears.

“Yes...it certainly...puts things in a different light,” sighed Isaac after he hung up. Disoriented, he wandered over to his bookshelf—Rosie had indeed helped him return a few books to the shelves, but it was far from back to its usual comforting and reliable order — and stood there lost in thought for a few minutes. An image of Rosie as he had last seen her, in the rich blue silk which brought out the color of her eyes, tried to enter his mind, but he put up his hand and pushed it away.

Now which Gemara, which tractate of the Talmud, was it that discussed this matter? Kiddushin? Ketubos? He couldn't quite recall. He did remember, though, that it was a machloches, one of those famous disputes among the Talmudic sages, about a woman who was three times a widow. She was known as a katlanis, a “killer”. He shuddered at the thought, and his hand rose instinctively to his throat. The dispute, as he recalled, was over whether she was to be considered a killer after the second husband died or only after the third. There were two opinions, but the upshot of the argument was, for all practical purposes, that a man should not take the chance of marrying such a woman.

When he spoke about it the next evening during their nightly Talmud learning session to his dear friend and learning partner, Reb Chaim Schlesinger, Reb Chaim leapt out of his chair, knocking it over in his haste, and almost danced over to the bookshelf. He pulled out not one but two different volumes of the Talmud and opened the first one to the argument which Isaac had groped for in his memory the night before.

Here it was, Tractate Yevamos. It was not exactly what Isaac had thought, at least not this particular discussion. But it answered his question perfectly. The discussion was between Rebbe and his teacher Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, and it concerned making a Hazakah, that is, establishing a legal precedent. There was a principle in Jewish law that if something happened three times it henceforth became established as legally binding. To illustrate this, the sage, Rebbe, brought the example of a woman whose son had died as a result of being circumcised. If a second child of hers also died after circumcision, then if she had a third son, even if he was from a different husband, that child need not undergo circumcision on the legally ordained eighth
day, but rather the child could wait until he was older and stronger. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel
maintained, on the contrary, that one should circumcise the third son at the proper time but, if he
also died, not the fourth. Then they attempt to bolster their argument by citing the example of a
woman who marries several times, and each subsequent husband dies. Rebbe says that another
man should not marry her after she has been widowed twice, but Rabban Gamliel, in keeping
with his earlier opinion, allows her to marry a third but not a fourth time. But the legal ruling
follows the opinion of Rebbe.
Reb Chaim then opened the second volume, Ketubos. He melodiously intoned the Aramaic
words of the Gemara, his long elegant nostrils flaring with excitement as they often did when he
was engrossed in the heat of a good argument.
Isaac listened attentively, and then, unable to contain his emotion any longer burst out, “But tell
me quickly, Reb Chaim, which way does the Halacha go?” Usually it didn't matter. Arguments
 ebbed and flowed like a mighty river through the pages of the Talmud. And even though matters
were decided according to one opinion or another, yet Isaac knew that fundamentally, because
the sages who argued were such mighty intellectual and spiritual giants, that even though the
course of Jewish legal history had gone a certain way to meet the spiritual needs of a particular
generation, yet on a supernal level of truth, both opinions were equally sacred. “Elu v’elu...both
are the words of the living God”.
But this time it was different. The outcome of the sages’ discussion had momentous significance
for him. Isaac’s happiness hung in the balance. Hardly daring to breathe, he scanned the page
with his eyes, searching for what Rashi had to say on the matter. Rashi’s commentary half-
encircled and embraced the text of the gemara like the protective arms of a wise father, making
sure that his children did not stray far from the right path. Sure enough, that great sage did not
fail him. Since he'd been a small boy, Isaac had depended on Rashi to help him through the vast
and often turbulent sea of Torah learning — first the five books of Moses and then, when he was
a little older, the Talmud — with his incisive commentary that cut right to the bone and brought
one safely to the shore of understanding. Now surely, Rashi could clarify the situation for him as
he always had. But as Isaac looked more closely, what the wise Rashi had to say this time
brought him to the brink of despair. For there, calmly and painstakingly, Rashi explained that
such a woman, after two husbands had died in succession, had now established a Hazakah, a
legal precedent, of being a “husband killer”. Isaac groaned, a long, heartfelt, soulful groan of
pain.
But Reb Chaim, grasping the situation with his quick intuition, rushed over to the bookshelf once more and this time took down one of the largest volumes from the very top shelf. Isaac could see the tall gold letters on the book's spine: “Mishne Torah of the Rambam”.

“Itchele, Itchele, my dear friend, why do you aggravate yourself so? You know as well as I do that there are always extenuating circumstances to be taken into account. Only wait, be patient; the Rambam will surely help you.”

In search of these extenuating circumstances, Reb Chaim began turning the well-worn pages. There, towards the end of the twenty-first chapter of the “Laws of Forbidden Marital Relations”, Reb Chaim showed Isaac that the Rambam, Maimonides, in keeping with the halacha cited in the gemara, clearly states that a woman twice widowed was not permitted to marry a third time. Nevertheless, if one had unknowingly already married or even betrothed such a woman, he was permitted to go ahead with the marriage.

When he was finished reading, Reb Chaim looked up from the volume and continued expounding. “Of course, even though the concept of ‘betrothal’ is not the same today as it was in his day, still the principle applies. And in any case, if one can determine that both times the husbands died of natural causes, then everything should be all right, my friend.”

But Isaac was no longer listening to Reb Chaim. Instead, as he drank in Maimonides' words he became intoxicated with what he heard. And then an unexpected vision of Rosie's diamond necklace floated into his mind's eye. He felt a powerful surge of certainty, accompanied by that joyful warm feeling which he remembered from his dream.

Of course, that was it — the necklace! It had established a contract between them; it made everything all right. He stood up and, in order to hide the flood of deep emotion which overcame him and made him feel once more like a young man — made him feel as though he wanted to laugh and leap and sing with happiness — he reached down and picked up the chair which Reb Chaim had knocked over and carefully set it upright. If Reb Chaim had been able to see his eyes at that moment, he would have been alarmed at how brilliantly they blazed.