one

Rebecca got off the number six bus and stumbled on the last step. She was dazed by the sun as she faced the Jaffa Gate, Jerusalem’s most prominent entrance to the Old City. Crossing the street without looking long enough to her left, a sherut driver in his long Mercedes taxi with beaded curtains, the mark of an Arab operator, shot into her path, honked, then gave her the finger, swearing in his language.

Her long legs were slower than ever, the pain killer only partially dulling the awful ache in her forehead while making every movement a labored effort. The mess of buses and cars, the congestion of visitors creating a jam at the ancient gate made her regret she’d chosen this morning, the day before her wedding, to finally put her dead mother’s note in the Wailing Wall. Why bother when there were so many living people who needed help.

The Israeli summer wasn’t comparable to that of Arizona or even Mexico. It was thicker, its intensity striking even the inner organs. Rebecca’s fiancée told her this was because the land remembered so many fires.

Rebecca peered ahead through squinted eyes, looking for shade beyond the triangular configuration of people in front of her who resembled a swarm competing for entrance to the hive. She gently pushed her way through a cluster of Japanese tourists and stopped beneath the arch of the Jaffa Gate. It provided a sliver of coverage from the intolerable heat. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, then again. A neighbor in Boston taught her to inhale three times then hold the last breath to the count of forty before exhaling. She could still hear the woman’s flat voice telling her to observe the air swirling in her lungs, pressing to escape and think of absolutely nothing. She still didn’t understand what could be benefited by withholding carbon monoxide.

The third breath was interrupted by the sound of coins being shaken inside a tin box, held out by a beggar squatting to Rebecca’s right. To her left stood a man selling red string bracelets displayed on his forearm all the way to his elbow. He looked at her and warned, “It is to ward off the evil eye.”

Rebecca shivered and turned away, began the last breath once more, managed to hold it to the count of twenty and then moved back into the sun. The alley leading to the Wailing Wall was full. Two paratroopers with beet colored berets patrolled inside the crowd while their fellow soldiers stood on the periphery with their rifles ready for anything. They swiftly scanned each person headed into the Jewish Quarter. Rebecca imagined the men knew what to look for in a potential terrorist.
The soldiers were younger than her by several years, most of them no older than eighteen or nineteen. She eyed a sturdy, dark one who seemed especially nervous, sweat dripping into his collar, making him twitch ever so slightly. He looked at her and she turned away, walking forward, knocking up against a little boy who raised his large blue eyes so that he could see her shiny green ones. He blinked deliberately in what Rebecca thought was, perhaps, a tic, or the heat, drying everything that needed to be moist and creating wetness where it wasn’t wanted. The boy was holding onto the hand of a woman who was straining her neck to see what was happening ahead of them. Her interest in the little boy felt limited and when Rebecca went beyond his face, to look at his body stuffed into khaki pants and a collared white t-shirt, she noted the violet aura surrounding him from head to little foot like his own, personal rain cloud. She recognized this as the halo of grief. She had become an expert since her mother’s death, and could spot another orphan or half orphan without any effort in the least. She wondered who the little boy had lost and when. She smiled down at him in silent camaraderie and he smiled back with very crooked baby teeth, the remainder of something orange stuck on the side ones. Rebecca heard him ask the woman he was holding onto, “Aunt Sandy, can we please buy some water now?”

“Soon Garrison, soon,” the impatient aunt replied, “I don’t want to break off from the group. We’re almost where Jesus walked, you know.” She gave him a tug and they were lost inside the alley.

A pale looking guide was explaining loudly in French just ahead of Rebecca. It was a neatly dressed group: women with fluffy skirts, high heels and good haircuts. One woman had an enormous silver clip on her white bun that was in the shape of a bird. Rebecca watched the guide force a smile as he struggled to share history against the hum of the crowd. Rebecca had fallen for her future husband in a similar situation. Jules had guided her and another kibbutz volunteer through the mystical city of Sefad shortly after their arrival in Israel.

There was a light drizzle that afternoon and unlike today, the air was cool and cloudy as he related stories about Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and the great kabbalist, Isaac Luria. These Jewish heroes belonged to a world Rebecca had never learned about in Sunday school. She was instantly hypnotized by Jules: the cleft in his chin and the hairs popping out from the tailored shirt he had chosen to wear that day. He was so gruffly sensuous when compared to the dry colleagues at music school and neurotic men she had encountered among her father’s patients that she was beyond smitten within the first hour of the tour.

That day in Sefad, the center of mystical Jewish life where Josef Karo was visited by his supernatural guide and instructed about the rules of Jewish life which he recorded as the shulchan aruch, had lead to this scalding moment in the Old City. Her scalp pounded under the Jerusalem sun as she stood at the edge of a body jam which filled the alley leading to the Wailing Wall. A voice she knew passed through her head: Why are you going to marry a man who is cheating on you?

Rebecca’s shoulders drooped. She had no answer for the voice and she didn’t even want to seriously consider the question. This thing with Jules was bigger than her mind could handle and her behavior, as usual, thoroughly defeated logic.

She ached all over from sleeping on his sister’s short couch. How stupid to come here today. She couldn’t turn around now – Jules was going to meet her.
Finally the crowd began to flow at a more reasonable pace and she reached inside her skirt pocket to check on the reason for her mission. She would go straight to the Wall, find the first available crack, slip the note into it and leave. Her mother’s will had not requested that she pray or linger to see the message collected by angels, only to ensure its delivery. She would do just that, eat in an air conditioned restaurant and cool down before she met Jules at shoe store nearby.

Her fingers searched from one side of the deep, skirt pocket to the next and found only the few squares of rough, Israeli toilet paper and an emergency headache pill. The envelope had disappeared. Rebecca’s ears began to ache and her mouth burned as she checked once more. She cursed Jules for telling her what to wear and she cursed herself for listening to him; the paper would never have fallen from her tight jeans.

When she discovered an open seam within the folds of the material, agitation transformed into complete terror. She closed her eyes and could see the blood pouring into her right temple like lava. This couldn’t be happening. Not after all these years of waiting.

Each September since her mother’s death, Izzy Bloom reserved a ticket to Israel in order to fulfill his dead wife’s request. Not a religious woman, Sarah Bloom had surprised them all with the quirkiness of her last wish, stated in a legal document several years before she actually committed suicide. Rebecca’s father always ended up canceling his trip for one reason or another and so her sudden decision to leave teaching and work on a kibbutz for six months, had made Rebecca the first of her family to actually reach Jerusalem. Responsibility for the note logically re-delegated to her, she had postponed the task for all these months.

Within deep panic, Rebecca remembered that she moved it to the right pocket, away from the other stuff. When her fingers registered the piece of paper, she filled up with a mixture of relief and a new kind of hysteria: what if her crazy mother’s last wish contained something awful? Wasn’t it irresponsible not to check?

Rebecca entered the great asphalt area in front of the ancient Wall which she thought suited a parking lot more than a sacred site. She held the envelope between hot fingers and decided to open it despite the risk of creating more guilt than she already coexisted with every day. Her father would never know. She would never tell Anna.

Rebecca stood in the heart of the plaza and looked at Sarah Bloom’s nearly illegible, drunken looking scrawl. Her mother had written: “Don’t let Rebecca marry a man whose name starts with J.” Rebecca felt like a scorpion had stung her between the eyes. She swooned and closed her eyes.

This message was created when Rebecca was ten. How could the awful witch have known how Rebecca’s life would develop: for she was set to marry a man called Jules Saltzman.

She stuffed the note back into her pocket, in complete emotional disarray which made her head start knocking, once again, from the inside and produced a slight tremble in her hands. Sweat trickled down her thighs onto her sandals as she headed for the women’s section with no clear idea about her next move. She looked at her watch. She had thirty minutes to figure it out. Her mother continued to wreak havoc from beneath her tombstone.

At the entrance to the actual praying area of the Wailing Wall, the part section which was designated for females, a raisin colored Yemenite forced Rebecca to cover her
curly, light hair with a musty smelling, blue scarf she drew from a box. Rebecca had already learned that heads had to be covered before entering sacred areas. She didn’t resist as the little woman tied it securely at her nape and then adjusted the cloth around her ears, flashing a half smile with several broken, very yellow teeth. The woman’s touch was suspended her attack of nerves for a moment.

Once the procedure was completed and only Rebecca’s earlobes stuck out from the cloth, but none of the hair surrounding her round face, she made her way toward the rows of plastic chairs facing the great Wailing Wall.

She looked at the orthodox women with wigs who stood and chatted. Children chased each other between the chairs. One of them banged into an older woman and nearly knocked her over. There was no aura of holiness here and certainly no promise of magical solutions.

Rebecca slid by another group of women who had formed a circle with their chairs and seemed caught within a meditative process. They wore oversized, cotton scarves tied at the top of their heads after circling the nape. Rebecca knew this was the common head covering among the wives of the kipa sruga, a sect of orthodoxy which originated in Israel, not in Europe. One of these women shot a look at Rebecca’s feet, naked in sandals.

Rebecca moved to the row of chairs closest to the Wall and furthest away from the ruckus. One of the women near her held an open prayer book against her face and moaned into the pages. Rebecca would have liked to groan too; her hot scalp was promoting a new version of the monster headache. The skin on the back of Rebecca’s thighs burned from the chair through the thick jean skirt; that’s how scorching the morning had become and it was only midday.

It was during this blanching moment that her future dress code finally sunk in: the halter tops and shorts filling one of her two suitcases would never be allowed again if she went through with this marriage.

The wigged group had finished their talk and gathered at the Wall, praying with great fervor, pressing their breasts and hips against the stones. Rebecca felt embarrassed by her thoughts – it looked like they were making love to it.

Rebecca had truly prayed only once in her life – when their dog was hit by a car. It died and she stopped asking God for favors. She faked it at synagogue with Jules, moving her lips as she looked down at the prayer book. These women were clearly not pretending today. Rebecca would be expected to show exactly this kind of diligence when she became Mrs. Saltzman. Lessons in Hebrew and Family Purity had already been arranged for her Tuesdays and Thursdays with the great Rebbe’s wife and soon her day would be filled with learning how to be a good Jewish wife.

Rebecca looked to her left and noticed a tall soldier as he paced the divider between the women’s and men’s section. The strap of his gun was outlined in sweat on his back and shoulders. He snapped his head to the right and left like a nervous grasshopper. The left leg of his trouser wasn’t properly tucked into his army boots, making him appear lopsided but very cute. She felt the crunch of attraction run through her stomach. It had been a long time since she’d even noticed anyone but Jules. This was a good thing. She decided to get a closer look at the soldier instead of continuing to watch the women. As she stood up a little girl bumped into her and landed on Rebecca’s sore toes, swollen from the heat. “Ouch,” she squealed.
The child went about her business with a squeal as she continued the game of chase between the folding chairs. Rebecca had learned quickly that Israelis don’t apologize, no matter what their age. She regained focus on the soldier and made her way along the Wall to the area where he was guarding.

A free spot opened up next to a woman who was audibly weeping as she beat stones on the Wall with arthritic fists. Another one, much younger, was crying as well, speaking quickly to no one, expressing great pain in the tone of her voice. What a searing nightmare, thought Rebecca.

The soldier in the corner of her eye was moving closer to where she now stood. A group of men began chanting loudly and she looked over despite Jules’s explanation that the separation between men and women at synagogues and sacred sites was to avoid distraction and protect modesty for both genders. But there was a surprisingly pleasant balance to their joined voices which she couldn’t resist investigating.

One of the singers lifted his head and caught Rebecca’s observing eye. He turned the color of shame and quickly looked down at the ground. The song was abruptly abandoned for quiet prayer and Rebecca continued to watch as they now bounced forward and up in their black suits like angry elastic bands. They wore different kinds of hats which she knew connected them to the various sectors of orthodox Jewry. Jules informed her that he too would begin wearing one over his kipa after the wedding. His new, coarse beard was unpleasant enough, but she said nothing.

“Do you have a tissue?” the weeping woman next to Rebecca asked. Her breath reeked of cumin.

Rebecca shook her head and didn’t offer the toilet paper in her pocket. Then a voice said, “Hey,” rather loudly, right next to her and she jumped. She turned to see that this was no golden angel on a sapphire chariot coming to collect her dead mother’s message and deliver it to the Almighty while she procrastinated, it was merely the tall soldier who had found her first. Up close she could see that his hair was truly red and there were bunches of fat freckles all over his cheeks. “Wow, at yaffa,” he said. Her Hebrew was weak but she understood the compliment. Jules was the only one who failed to mention her beauty. She had learned the vocabulary of seduction from the other men in this country. She decided to smile back at the soldier despite the disappointing features of his face and the disappearance of her desire.

His eyes glistened with pleasure like sweet Turkish coffee as he received her two dimples and gently flaring nostrils. He unabashedly repeated, “Wow.”

“Moshe!” someone shouted and the soldier came out of his trance. He shrugged and moved away in dramatic, silent reverse without another word to Rebecca, almost tripping on the same girl who had crashed into her moments before. Rebecca giggled at his theatrics and he bowed. When Moshe met up with his commander they both turned in her direction, waving as if Rebecca were an old friend. She waved back. Moshe and the other young man were already ogling another girl coming into the women’s area. The attention was over.

Rebecca put her hand in her pocket and took out the note again. She re-read her mother’s words and decided to just do what she’d requested without giving it one more thought. She concluded that it was only a note and it was only a wall. Enough energy had been wasted on this already.
Rebecca scanned the ancient structure for a free crack and spotted a long one not far away. She was about to head for it when she heard shouting break out behind her. She turned to see what the ruckus was about.

“Geveret!” was followed by a very loud, “You cannot go in without something on your hair!” Rebecca watched the Yemenite at the entrance as she thrust two gaudy scarves at a fabulously dressed, rather short blond woman in her late fifties. A tight, knee length, lemon colored skirt was matched with a sleeveless linen blouse. Dangling from her elbow was a small, pearled purse. She sported a thick, chunky gold bracelet which looked more like a shackle than a piece of jewelry. While silently resisting the Yemenite by simply not accepting the scarves, the blond woman plucked a cigarette from her bag and lit up, making the darker woman lose it entirely. “Ze asur po,” she screeched. The Blonde responded by throwing the cigarette to the ground and mashing it with an open backed sandal a shade lighter than her sunny outfit. When she turned to go through the gate despite the Yemenite’s protests, the short guard grabbed the flesher part of the Blonde’s upper arm. She slapped her knuckles in answer to the attack and the Yemenite cried out but did not release her grasp.

At that moment three pigeons appeared above the struggle and honked just over their heads. Rebecca heard someone on the kibbutz say that birds carry messages from the other world but she couldn’t remember what kind: curses or blessings. What could it mean that one of them shat right on the Yemenite’s head, forcing her to release the Blonde and rip off her own, ugly scarf?

two

The Yemenite woman who guarded the entrance folded the soiled fabric and put it into a plastic sandwich bag which had been flying around their feet while the women fought. The blond woman escaped in the meantime and went quickly toward the edge of the Wailing Wall not far from Rebecca who was now infused with an intense urge to get as close to this blond stranger as possible. This desire overtook her feet and within seconds she found herself in touching distance of the older woman.

Rebecca watched as the woman quickly extracted a tiny piece of folded paper from her purse and slipped it between two stones. When the Blonde turned around Rebecca bumped into her. Sunglasses fell off her face and smacked to the ground. “Oh my,” she cried out and bent to retrieve them.

“I’m so sorry.” Rebecca was mortified. When the woman straightened herself up they were eye to eye. She didn’t seem too bothered. She smiled quite widely. There was a definite gap between her two front teeth which gave Rebecca the uncanny sensation that she had seen this woman somewhere before. Rebecca’s milky emerald eyes were reflected back at her from the woman’s Mediterranean grey-blue ones until she replaced the injured tortoise shell sunglasses. They now sat painfully crooked on the bridge of the stranger’s tiny nose. The sense of familiarity intensified as Rebecca watched the woman bend her head and smooth her skirt. Rebecca remembered this moment with complete accuracy but couldn’t place the memory.
“Nothing to worry about, my dear,” the blond woman announced calmly, the accent either Austrian or German, perhaps even Polish, as she unsuccessfully tried to bend the glasses back into shape, then gave up and put them on again.

Rebecca winced as she turned to go, quickly thinking of something to get her attention.

“Lucky you didn’t accept those horrible scarves,” she called out, “they would have ruined your outfit.”

The woman laughed. Her back was still toward Rebecca as she waved her hand in the air and continued to walk away. Then she stopped abruptly, turned around and told Rebecca, “I believe the hair police are coming to get me. I’ve been cornered.” Rebecca looked past her and saw the Yemenite woman from the gate approaching quickly. She was accompanied by a taller woman. They were marching in the direction of the blond woman, a great bunch of scarves flapping in their hands like banners. They were synchronous, their arms moving like oversized sticks to the same inner rhythm of sacred justice. There was no place for the bareheaded, bare armed woman to escape. Rebecca watched nervously as the stranger calmly dabbed her upper lip and brow with a tissue, the open purse hanging within the crook of her bent arm until she was finished and then snapped it shut. She just stood there and waited for the women to arrive. Rebecca thought if she were to light up a cigarette the scene would be worthy of a canvas.

The taller woman had a smoother, kinder face. She approached the Blonde and pleaded softly, “Bavakasha geveret. Please do take something for your head and your arms.” The Yemenite who had pinched her earlier now extended the choice of scarves in exasperated silence. There was an oversized yellow gauze one, a horrid triangle the color of dirt and a striped rectangle that resembled the one with the bird shit. They reeked with an orange spice used on chicken.

The short woman with the fishy slit of a mouth and yellowing nails waited stoically while the younger one adjusted her own head covering over a widow’s peak, smiling meekly at the Blonde as she pushed white strands back under the cloth. The stranger continued to completely ignore the offer and turned to Rebecca nonchalantly, suggesting, as if they had come to the Wall together, “Let’s go.”

Rebecca had no option but to accept the blonde woman’s arm as it looped through hers. Her flesh was so warm that it seemed to melt with Rebecca’s own burning skin as they quickly moved away from the Wall and toward the exit. The two Yemenites had roped off the opening during the scarf chase and the Blonde casually untied the barricade, letting in a swarm of teenage tourists, all of them moving quickly inside the woman’s area, without hats or scarves. Buzzing in French like mosquitoes, the girls infiltrated the sacred space. The guard called out to the Blonde, “At mechshefa!” as she ran to stop the new visitors.

“It means witch,” Rebecca’s new companion explained and laughed nervously as she removed the scarf on Rebecca’s head so she could throw it into the box. “Not to worry. I’ve been cursed before.”

They pushed past an enormous group of tourists coming into the asphalt area and the Blonde led Rebecca into a shaded, musky alley that was blessedly emptier and cooler. Cobblestones replaced the hot, open cement. Instantly the air was more bearable. The woman released her hot grip on Rebecca and they stood still. “Ah, this is much more human.” Her hands shook as she reached into her bag. She pulled out a cigarette and lit
up, telling Rebecca as she exhaled, “Thank you so much. You can go back now if you want. I think I’m safe now.” She wiped her brow. As she clicked her bag shut Rebecca felt her legs turn liquid and she knew she was about to faint. There wasn’t a thing she could do but call out, “Catch me.”

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