A Party for Miriam

by

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Planning the party for his wife was the hardest project Marc had ever undertaken without her help. She was a woman with few friends she saw socially but many lifelong friends she kept in touch with through letters and email, and it made it difficult to know who to invite. He’d often wondered if she was lonely, but it seemed to be an exile she had imposed largely upon herself. She’d never been able to fall into the easy conversations most women had. Even her friends who were professors and lawyers talked about shopping, their children, and the various TV series everyone seemed to be watching, and to Marc, it seemed that his wife spent these conversations nodding politely, waiting to get away and back into the ideas crowding her mind. Because she was non-confrontational but had strong (sometimes too strong, he thought) convictions, she would end other relationships abruptly because of early disagreements, coming home from social gatherings, and fuming, “I can’t be friends with someone who would vote for him” or “How could that woman serve veal at a dinner party? And to her children?—It’s cannibalism!” and then rip up phone numbers, cross entries out of address books.

If she hadn’t had female lovers throughout their twenty-two years of marriage, he would have been sure she was lonely. Even though she didn’t maintain traditional friendships with women, when she didn’t have a woman in her life, she was like an animatronic version of herself with some of the circuits gone out. He’d nearly forgotten the contrast because she had been with Valerie for twelve years. They had met in the hall sitting on uncomfortably small elementary school chairs while each waited her turn to speak to Mrs. Lovell for the first semester parent-teacher conference of their daughters’ fifth grade year.

Marc knew the second that Miriam walked in the door. There was a pink glow beneath her smooth, olive cheekbones, and the lines that had started to form around her eyes crinkled. “I met someone,” she beamed, stuffing her jacket down on the kitchen counter and wrapping herself around him. The beginning of his wife’s relationships was always a difficult time for him. On the one hand, he felt elated for her; since he had known her, this seemed to be something she needed to feel complete. On the other hand, there was always a sinking feeling that she was starting on a new journey with someone else, and their path together, complete with tenured professorships and a middle schooler, was on its mundane way.

He kissed her and felt the soft give of her body against his and understood that part of the attraction immediately—how soft two female bodies must feel against one another.

Her last relationship had ended nearly a year before, and Marc could tell it had been hard for her, but he’d never been sure of how to talk to her about her life with other women. She’d been seeing her daughter’s ballet instructor, Aimee, whose lithe, young body had intimidated her at first. He had warned her that a twenty-three year-old might be a mistake—especially one so close to their daughter, but she had assured him that
Aimee was mature for her age—she’d gone to conservatory in London and had moved on her own to Chicago at sixteen to perform with the Joffrey. She was only teaching ballet in their town while she nursed an ankle injury and waited for another company to give her a chance. The Joffrey had left her for dead after a serious sprained ankle and stress fractures, so at twenty-three she had already had to downscale her career goals, and something about the disappointment in addition to her early success had made her seem almost middle-aged in her resolve. She rented a small apartment, R-I-C-E’d her ankle and shin every night—Rest, Ice, Compress (with a hot water bottle), and then Elevated her long, muscular leg on a pillow at the end of the couch, all the while reading Dance magazine and reviews in The New Yorker of performances she knew she would never be in, made love to his wife, and babysat his daughter a few times a week, and then a call from Alabama Dance Theatre took her away from their lives.

He had been somehow relieved when Miriam met Valerie, someone steadier, closer to her own age, who had a daughter in the same school. They seemed to have everything in common—Valerie was a poet who was achieving the very beginnings of success—giving a reading here, teaching a workshop there, and Miriam started painting again—sometimes with Valerie as a model. Four years into their relationship, they had a show together with Valerie’s ekphrastic poems about Miriam’s paintings and paintings Miriam had interpreted of Valerie’s poetry. They joked that if they ever “made it” they could be their generation’s Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, “sans suicidal tendencies,” they always added in unison.

So it seemed only natural to him that Valerie should help plan this gathering of women for his wife. She went through address books, made phone calls; he felt it was his duty to write the invitations, which Valerie went over with the critical eye of a college writing instructor, and the event was set for a Saturday early afternoon brunch with eleven women and their significant others.

He didn’t know how he first came up with the idea of a “headwear” shower for his wife, but he hoped it sent the right sentiment. It had been a whirlwind few months since he had been making love to her, put her nipple in his mouth, and begun caressing her breast when he stopped, open-mouthed, and kept kneading—his touch immediately cooling from sensual to clinical, prodding.

“Do you feel that?” he had asked, and she nodded, wide-eyed, then assured him she would go to the doctor as soon as she could get an appointment. He would never forget that she then rolled him onto his back and made love to him. Every time he thought about that day he wished he had stayed on top, kissed her the whole time, and that they had come together, then fallen asleep until the sun woke them the next day.

Only a week later, they were in the doctor’s office where a woman who didn’t seem old enough to drink, let alone be a doctor, monotonically told his wife what she could expect from chemotherapy and radiation. He had started tearing already, his elbows on his knees, forehead on the heels of his hands while Miriam held her breath and took notes like one of his eager college freshman on the first day of Western Civ.

He envied her strength until she broke into gasping sobs as the doctor explained that she would lose her hair with this form of chemo and that she might want to think about cutting it short to get used to the idea or check out the headwear accessory shop on the third floor, directly above the second floor gift shop. He wondered if anyone used the
headwear accessory shop at the hospital or if it was a sad, reverential place, like the glove counter of a fancy department store.

His wife was a stunning woman who, at forty-six, still prompted stares, but her hair was her only feature she was even remotely vain about. It was nearly black, except when direct sunlight transformed it to an amazing deep burgundy against her olive skin, and it curled in spiral ringlets no matter what length she grew it to. When they had been too young to care about water bills or the environment, she had always taken a shower before and after sex—before, to have her hair damp and in ringlets she called her “fuck me curls,” and after, so they could soap each others’ tired bodies before falling back into bed.

He didn’t know exactly when the idea came to him, but he thought that there, in the office with its fluorescent lights washing them all out to a sickly paleness was when the idea of the headwear shower occurred to him. It seemed so much more personal for your friends and family—people who knew you—to pick out turbans and scarves and hats—oh my!—for your cocoon stage of chemo, before you emerged butterfly-like, cancer-free on the other side, rather than this newly minted doctor suggesting you try the accessories shop on the third floor.

His wife always seemed most comfortable around women at gatherings where the display of things was the center of attention; for this reason she had hosted make-up parties, candle parties, Pampered Chef parties (entirely to get the apple-peeler-corer-slicer as a gift), and even the raucous sex toy party where he still couldn’t believe she had spent $229.99 on a Pyrex glass dildo. He’d always felt a slight sense of betrayal when she was invited to a women’s only party of these sorts, which was odd, considering he had shared her with many women during their marriage, but now he found the planning of one exhilarating. He kept a notebook of lists, dates, contacts, recipes, and worked on the details every time she went to her art studio, a small cedar shed they had built together behind the house.

Making the phone calls and explaining the party was difficult—he decided sending written invitations was somehow wrong—how could you explain to a dear friend that a loved one had breast cancer, was going to go through chemo, and could you please bring some form of head covering to help her cope with the loss of her hair?

The only person he wrote to was their daughter, Shoshanna, away at tiny Grinnell College in Iowa. She had already been home to visit her mother, been through the tears and hugs since the diagnosis, and he felt explaining the party in a letter would be best in her case. He couldn’t hear her voice without breaking down—his strange, beautiful, dark daughter who reminded him so much of his strange, beautiful, dark wife when they had met, only four years older than she was now. And a letter, she could take with her to a quiet place, ruminate over it. She wouldn’t have to shoo a roommate out of the room or walk to some odd location on campus for good cell phone reception.

As he sat at the table surveying the faces all of these friends, he thought what a remarkable wife he had. Here she was, in a battle 40,000 women lost each year, and she smiled from her seat of honor—a big Queen Anne damask they had pulled in from the library—like royalty, laughing at the bright red Farrah Fawcett style Frederick’s of Hollywood wig someone had brought, oohing and ahhing at the Chinese silk scarves from Valerie, and giving a thumbs up and squealing—“Oh, get a picture of this one!” as
she opened Shoshanna’s present, a Minnesota Twins baseball cap with the team name embroidered in Hebrew letters.

He captured his wife and daughter in the viewfinder, their nearly identical faces, their long, tan arms thrown tightly around each others’ shoulders, their sharp cheekbones held bone-crushingly close together, and snapped the picture. The one that no matter how modern medicine intervened, how fate played out, or if G-d listened to prayers—the one he would treasure forever.

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