

## I. Her Place

It is a hot summer afternoon in Jerusalem, but Doda hands me a sweater to slip over my bare arms when I meet her at the entrance of Kiryat Mattersdorf. Several feet from the dusty sign that marks the start of the ultra-orthodox neighborhood, a small chubby boy with curly blond sidelocks and a black velvet *kippah* walks back and forth, picking his nose and staring, like he's standing guard. He looks at me curiously, like he knows that I am not from this place, like my lilac skirt is too fashionable, or my gait is not timid enough. His eyes follow my aunt and me, but Doda doesn't seem to notice. She just walks tiredly, with her head down. The dark brown wig looks unnatural and awkward on her head, the way some of the hairs stick up uncombed in the front. She wears a faded yellow blouse and a pleated navy blue skirt that's pulled too high over her stomach. I take her arm as we walk up the street toward her apartment, and she almost seems to lean on me, but then straightens up apologetically, as if to say acquiescently, *this is my lot*.

She tells me breathlessly about Leah-Yehuda-Shmuli-Tziporah-Miri-Yoni-Daniel-Moshe, in Yeshiva or married with babies of their own, and she's worried that Shmuli has started smoking, that Miri hangs around secretly with boys and that Daniel hides stylish clothing in the back of his closet. She might send Yoni to America because he has started talking about going to the army next year, and this is *out of the question, of course*. But everyone is in good health, *thank God*.

Doda doesn't talk about her husband because he's a tyrant who sometimes locks her inside and unplugs the phone. In family photos my uncle is imposing, hefty and unsmiling, with a full red beard, and never looking at Doda. A true hot-headed *gingi*, my parents have always claimed. Doda says only that he sent their girls to chasidic schools so that their minds would be less occupied with

nonsense, and they would have more time to help maintain the home. For this she is grateful.

When we reach her apartment, she leads me to the kitchen, a bright room with mint-green wallpaper that has started to peel at the edges. The peppery smells of cooking linger heavily in the air. On the table, several leather-bound volumes of Talmud lie scattered, their tractate titles printed on their covers in thin gold lettering. Doda lifts the books off the table to put them on the shelves in the next room, and I watch her press her lips to them mechanically. Then Doda urges me to sit, placing down a bowl of oily vegetable soup and a tray of whole-wheat pita, chumus, and cucumbers, before taking a seat opposite me at the small rectangular table.

She watches me eat, resting her chin in her cupped hands, and telling me that I look like my Savtah, may she rest in peace. I smile politely, swallowing spoonfuls of the soup slowly. Doda keeps getting up, bringing me more food, soy schnitzel and eggplant salad, complaining that I'm too skinny. She wants to know, do they feed you at the university? She worries that there is no one looking out for me in the outside world, and that university is like some remote desert island where I might starve to death. I tell her not to worry, that I eat felafel everyday in the cafeteria.

Doda asks me about my semester abroad, if I miss the comforts of America. I don't, maybe a little, but I've been here for only three weeks. She smiles, asking me how I like Israel, calling it *Eretz Yisrael*, and if I've been to the Western Wall yet. In a low, grave voice Doda warns me not to walk near the Temple Mount, for fear of trespassing on the most sacred area, the Holy of Holies. Her jet-black eyes are big and anxious like rippled pools of ink, and she shakes her head piously when she speaks. Such a violation, she reveals in hushed tones, leads to premature death. There are some places you just shouldn't go, she instructs me.

I nod ironically, recalling one Saturday when my defiant cab driver turned onto Bar-Ilan Street, and the next thing I knew there was a big religious man with a dark beard and a black suit looming menacingly over the car like an evil spirit, smacking at the windows and crying fanatically, *Shabbat! Shabbat! Transgressors! Sinners!* I remember fearing that the horrible man might summon others, and that they would stone us for breaking the sanctity of the Sabbath. I remember thinking I might die, but surely this could not be what Doda means. Doda is talking about divine punishment.

I sit up and pretend to regard her heedfully.

But inside I am aching to take her away from this place, just for a few hours, to eat felafel with her in the university cafeteria, because she is my Doda and she's afraid to go places and her husband doesn't love her. Doda chews on her lip meekly, and I realize that she would probably hate the university cafeteria and twist her napkin fretfully and beg me to take her home.

Now she just looks at me with those dark, muted eyes, offering me a chocolate *rugelah*. I have no choice but to give in. So we drink tea with lemon and I promise Doda that I will stay away from the Temple Mount to avoid premature death.

## **II. The Wall**

I take small, careful steps backwards, the way I see Miri doing it. It is a sign of reverence, not turning our backs to the wall that is a remnant of the Second Temple.

This wall is not as massive as I anticipated. Between the pale stones, patches of shrubbery have sprouted. From far they look like charcoal shadows or tufts of old rabbi beards.

Miri's eyes are closed in solemn concentration as she moves beside me. Her heavy figure is graceless but her movements are strong and familiar. She has lived in Jerusalem her whole life and must know these rituals in her sleep.

I look over my shoulder and then back at the stone wall and at the crowd that converges at its base. Religious women with thick ankles and cloth head-coverings pray, some with their eyelids closed, their dry lips moving rapidly. Old beggar women cup their fat speckled hands and cry out to us in hoarse Hebrew.

Beside us, in the adjacent section fenced off for the men, a low wailing rises from beneath prayer shawls that rock back and forth. A chasidic chant is let loose, *ay-bi-bam-bi-bam*, as men with swinging sidelocks dance earnestly in front of the wall, the way an old-fashioned groom might dance before his bride.

My long, thin skirt brushes lightly against my legs as I draw my ankles together. I am thankful that Doda insisted on sending my seventeen-year-old cousin to accompany me. I would be lost here. But right now Miri's sealed eyes and loosely drawn lips leave me feeling somehow abandoned. Her rocking is vigorous and then listless as if she has slipped into a stupor. I almost tug on the thick sleeve of her high-collared dress, wanting to pull her from this unsettling trance.

Then a dry breeze makes me shudder, and Miri awakens, smoothing her frizzy ponytail. A few more minutes, she says, flipping quickly to the back of her oily brown prayerbook. She wants to recite a few Psalms for the reconstruction of the Temple and for a sick friend's complete recovery.

I stand awkward and still beside Miri's swaying body.

I look at my hands. My fingertips are coated in a thin film of sandy dust that I must have picked up moments before when I swept my fingers along the stones, poking into the flaky crevices, and pasting my tiny scrap of paper somewhere in the wall. It wasn't a prayer; I don't think that I believe in God. I scribbled my name in sloppy script letters, *A-n-n-a*, like a sudden invocation of myself amidst the zealous worshippers.

It was real when I touched it: the wall was hard beneath my fingers. I had stroked it with my hands. Miri and I had to push our way through the stream of women to get close, and they were swinging rhythmically side to side like marionettes. Miri kept reaching for my arm urgently, as if she were afraid that I might disappear or turn back. Had she sensed my skepticism already then?

And when I had stretched my hands to the wall, I did not expect to feel something so concrete, so physical; I thought it must be made up of tears and prayers and a saintly wind. I felt dazed, disappointed. And when I ran my fingers over the cool stones and turned and saw Miri alongside the other women bowing in worship, bowing to stones, I watched them making God out of a wall. All of the women around me, and all of the men in the area beside, they all throw themselves at the wall, swaying, praying at the wall.

Now Miri closes her prayerbook, a sentimental expression on her broad face, and we continue to step slowly backwards.

I pause, feeling envious of her content, even if it is idolatrous.

Then I wipe my fingers on my sweater, leaving faint streaks of sand like tears. And before turning my back to the wall, I offer a silent prayer: I want to run back to you, I want to press myself to you greedily like a pious slut, I want to fold my body into you like a secret prayer, I want to worship you and only you; but you are only stone.

### **III. Worship**

I can hear it through the walls. Boaz is having sex with another man in the next room, and so I count in Hebrew *achat*, *shtayim*, *shalosh* inside my head, hoping that they will finish already and that the sounds will stop before I begin to confuse masculine and feminine numbers and have to start all over. Or that you will return soon with the milk, so that we can sit out on your porch in the steamy mid-morning sun and eat bowls of cornflakes and watch the people

stroll four stories below on Dizengoff Street in bathingsuits and shorts, carrying striped towels and bottled water, making their way to the beach. We'll make fun of their oiled bodies and call them vain. Then you'll light a cigarette and begin to brood over today's paper with your dark eyes that are sometimes gentle and sometimes fierce, depending on the political situation. You'll teach me street slang in that head-hanging, mock self-conscious way, whispering sheepishly in Hebrew words that you can never go over in class, like shithead and cunt. Then growing suddenly authoritarian and mature, you'll tilt forward in your chair, talking loudly in fast-fast Hebrew, waving your hands in the air like you know it all. Almost knocking off your greasy white baseball cap, you'll argue passionately about Zionism or why French girls are the best lovers. I might mention the idolatry of the Wall-worshippers, and you'll say something cynical about religion. You'll lean back and smoke another cigarette with an academic expression, maybe crossing your legs like you are being interviewed on TV. I'll sit there wide-eyed, playing with my hands and thinking you're brilliant.

You don't know that I'm here. You don't know that I'm here, half-lying on your bed, my legs dangling heavily over the side. I called you four times this morning, but there was just your voice on the machine, first in Hebrew and then in English. So I used the key, the one you casually asked me to return last week. Now I am waiting for you here.

I sit up, absentmindedly unstrapping the leather sandals I bought two days ago on end-of-season sale, still concentrating – *shmonim ve'chamesh, shmonim ve'shesh*, and finally Boaz roars, or maybe it's the other guy, but I can stop counting now. Now it's just the steady whirring of the ceiling fan and my soft, even breathing. And I don't know why I'm here, in your apartment, but I could invent an excuse, like maybe I need extra help with next week's grammar assignment.

Your room is a small square with a narrow closet, a bed, a dusty floor lamp, and several piles of Hebrew and English books stacked sloppily on the floor up to the window sill. There is a blue and white "Shalom, chaver" bumper-sticker glued to the lower left corner of your window pane. And pasted on your pale gray bedroom walls are American movie posters like *Pulp Fiction* and *JFK*.

I slide my body along the thin mattress, burying my toes inside the folds of your faded blue blanket, and close my eyes. I feel suddenly clammy and thirsty. Maybe you have walked all the way to the *shuk* to buy fresh watermelon or strawberries or those dark blue grapes that burst in your mouth with a slight tartness. Or maybe you have run into an acquaintance and lost track of time, telling him or her about your summer job teaching Hebrew at the school for overseas students and how you might have enough money saved up to visit America by next spring, but you are not one hundred percent sure; and no, you and Naama are no longer together; and yes, you will be attending Tel Aviv University in the fall; and yes, you are furious with the current Israeli government, and you have been attending peace rallies all over the country...

Down below someone has turned up a car stereo, *Zombie, zombie, zombie*, and I hear Boaz lean out the window and curse in Hebrew, but whoever it is yells up at him to go fuck himself. The Netanyahu heat seems to thicken with each passing minute, and beads of sweat tickle me between my breasts. I brush them away with my fingers, letting my left hand linger on my chest, over my heart, fixated on the *thump-thump-thump*. Your room seems to grow small and tight around me. If you were here, you would urge me to drink a tall glass of water; you're always worrying about me getting dehydrated. So now I'm dizzy and faint; *serves you right, chamudonet*. I prop a pillow beneath my head and try to focus on *Pulp Fiction* and *JFK* on your bedroom walls. I wish you would hurry; I don't know why I'm here. Doda's words of last week echo nervously in my head – There are some

places you just shouldn't go – and I know that I shouldn't be here. Now I am becoming delirious, worrying about premature death.

I swallow uneasily, unbuttoning my cotton blouse and sliding it off to cool down a little. Stripes and splashes of hazy sunlight shoot through the window and cut up the walls, making them spin-spin-spin suddenly around me. The ceiling fan seems to rattle violently. Outside a siren screeches mindlessly, followed by another and another, and still *Zombie, zombie, zombie* from the radio. I start to count *achat, shtayim, shalosh*, to make the walls stop bowing and sagging inward, and because Boaz is going at it again in the next room. And then the wall is leaning in on me, face-to-face, and *Pulp Fiction* and *JFK* and blood-red graffiti running down the sides: *Rabin, you are missed by us; Victim of peace; Forever, my brother; We won't forget; Good-bye, friend; I salute you; Slicha!* The word *slicha* in big, weepy letters, trailing across the wall like a solemn procession of mourners: *sorry*. Horrified, I clamp my hands tightly over my eyes, my chest jerking as if slapped. I push it away, away, away; *Forever, Slicha! Slicha! Slicha!*

And I start all over again, *achat, shtayim, shalosh*; hush, hush, hush. I think that I should probably leave right away. I shouldn't even be here; you won't be expecting me. I picture you standing in the doorway, with the paper and a bag of groceries and maybe a curious half-smile. I'm sitting limply on your bed in just my bra and flannel shorts, flushed with nausea and humiliation, and you'll want to know, *Why are you here, chamudonet?* You'll shake my pale shoulders gently as if to break some spell, looking confused and disappointed like I have three heads or like I'm your little sister. Or maybe you won't even touch me. If I lie and say I need help with next week's irregular verb conjugations, you won't believe me, because why have I taken off my clothes, and besides, you already think that I could teach the class instead of you. You'll just stand there, unmoving, in that impenetrable way, remarking vaguely on the latest developments in the political situation. You'll just stand there,

blocking the door. And I'll back away stupidly, kicking the walls frantically with my bare feet, scrawling mournfully all over your room: *Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!*, like I have made this your shrine.

#### **IV. Guarding**

The Guards of Chastity are religious fanatics who take it upon themselves to save girls in the community from behaving like sluts, Miri explains, seated opposite me at the crowded outdoor cafe near Zion Square. Her voice is low and furious, and she turns around in her chair, scanning the area distrustfully. Her father had personally summoned The Guards to follow her around after school, and they reported her. They told him about Zakki, the Moroccan boy who plays soccer. They also told the principal of her high school.

I raise my eyebrow, The Moroccan boy?

But she only watched him on the field; he didn't even know that she existed until a few days ago. Now her voice is soft and confessional, and her face becomes pink. Every day after school she took the bus to the soccer field, usually with her friend Hadassah who was in love with the goalie. They just hung around near the bleachers, watching. But the other day, after the team finished practicing, Hadassah, a real loudmouth sometimes, called Zakki over to where they were standing. They must have been spotted.

She pauses. Then her breath hisses, Those fuckers.

I study her unblinkingly, not believing that this is the same girl, Doda's daughter, who was so impassioned at the Wall last month. Now her eyes are squinted in anger, and she slaps the table with the palms of her hands. I edge my chair closer, shifting slightly, and I clear my throat to hold back an incredulous chuckle. Guards of Chastity? It sounds like voyeurism, I remark contemptuously. Then I start describing the Jewish conversion ceremony of a friend back in the States. The three rabbis supervising her conversion stood spying through the door of the ritual bath, making certain that every last inch

of her naked skin was submerged in the purifying waters. But maybe I am just making something out of nothing.

Miri peers at me quizzically, pushing a thick strand of hair from her eyes, not understanding my meaning. Momentarily embarrassed, I look around for the waitress with my cappuccino. It is early Friday afternoon and the cafes that line the pedestrian mall are packed with young Jerusalemites. The door of a nearby record store is flung open, and European music spills pulsating into the street. Conversations are mostly loud and vulgar, and everyone seems to know one another. Many are making plans to drive to Tel Aviv tonight, to the discotheques, because in a few hours Jerusalem will shut down for the Sabbath. Already shopkeepers are starting to lock up their stores a little early. I check my watch quickly, planning to catch the last bus to Netanya, to spend the weekend with my grandparents.

The waitress hurries over, flushed, setting down a mug of steaming coffee and a small plate of *baklava*. I offer Miri a taste of the nutty pastry, but she refuses, signaling wearily with her hands, she's too depressed right now. She picks at a loose thread on her embroidered vest, her stubby fingers trembling.

Withdrawing from her reflective silence, Miri tells me that she'll be burned at the stake if her parents or those lunatic secret agents suspect that she has been sitting in a café in the city centre a few hours before Shabbat. She shouldn't be here. If only Zakki were her boyfriend, she would leave her family and run away with him. She swears she won't have a marriage like her parents'.

There is something dark and brooding in Miri's gaze. Then she blurts out, That I could be a radio DJ, that is my dream. Her eyelids begin to flutter while she chatters on about a popular Israeli radio personality whom she idolizes. She has never confessed this to anyone, her mother would certainly strangle her. Now she looks at me beseechingly, waiting for me to say something.

I am quiet for awhile, thinking. But all I manage to say is, It's a problem.

She sighs emotionally, In two years or less I will be married, God-willing, and at least then I'll be out of my parents' house.

I nod distractedly, chewing on the thin dough of the *baklava*. And then you can be a radio DJ?

She can never be a radio DJ. Not in this lifetime, she says glumly.

I am curious, And Zakki?

Not in this lifetime.

I have an aisle seat near the front of the bus. As we move away from Jerusalem, speeding down the curved roads to the fast clanging of Eastern music, I feel lighter. I rest my head drowsily against the fabric of my seat. From above the bus driver, the painted turquoise eye of the *chamsa*, the five-fingered lucky charm, watches me, and I drop slowly into a heavy sleep.

In my dream, I am back at the cafe, alone. In my dream, I hear my name, Anna, Anna, and there is Elan, surrounded by a harem of girl admirers in flesh-squeezing blue jeans. He is emerging from the record store, waving his long arms with big sweeping motions to get my attention, and every part of me freezes because I haven't seen him since I made an ass of myself in his apartment last month. I am always seeing him in the street, but then invariably he changes into someone else. But now he is here, perhaps staying with his parents in Jerusalem, like when he taught Hebrew classes on Mount Scopus. My mouth flops open and I avoid his face, stammering a small hello. Elan introduces me as a former pupil, and his girls snicker with their arched, crimson mouths, and address me in slow, mocking Hebrew, because I am American.

The girls squeal and cling to Elan when a khaki army jeep rolls up sputtering in the middle of the pedestrian mall. Two rabbis with red beards and black suits leap out, shaking their fists and yelling in shrill voices,

*Transgressors, sinners, suspicious object.* One of them could be my uncle. They grab me like I am an impostor, Suspicious object.

Elan and his girls laugh, Don't worry, *chamudonet*, this is just routine, probably a false alarm.

I fumble in my pockets for my Hebrew University student ID card, or maybe some proof that my parents are both Jewish.

Suspicious object, you shouldn't be here.

Bewildered, I want to know why why why. But the rabbis just pant on my neck with biblical breath, ancient and stale, and Elan is too occupied with his girls.

Suspicious object.

This is one of those dreams where cries are soundless and ineffectual. Stop it, stop it, but they just pin me against an old stone wall where folded notes rain down like routine prayers. Appearing in her lopsided wig, Doda stands off to the side, chanting, Premature death, premature death. Her arm is looped protectively around her daughter's wide waist, but Miri breaks loose, drawn into the circle of Elan's worshipful girls. The rabbis forget about me and reach for her savagely. But then Elan bursts out into a popular peace song, waving his flannel shirt above his head, and everyone rallies around him until one of the bearded zealots with flaring nostrils shoots him through his chest, *achat, shtayim, shalosh*.

My eyes fly open. I am here.

I am back on the bus that is just now approaching Netanya, feeling overheated and agitated. Beside me a freckled girl soldier naps innocently against the window. When I look up, there is the *chamsa* eye glaring ahead, guarding no one.