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Getting A Get

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GETTING A *GET*

We dated for three weeks, were engaged for four, and lived together for six. It was a fairy-tale romance. A fairy tale like, perhaps, Perrault's "Bluebeard" or Erben's "The Wedding Shirts," which I'd recently translated from the Czech, in which an orphan bride doesn't realize that when her betrothed returns it's only his animated corpse. Most fairy tales of this genre end with the death of the bride, like Bürger's "Lenore." Divorce gives us more, if less romantic, narrative options.

Today in the rabbinical court of Tel Aviv, our divorce ceremony was finalized. My *mikveh* lady, who is a warm and learned woman, was with me in her long skirt and pleated hat. She is the woman who ascertained that I was prepared for the ritual bath, or *mikveh*, before marriage, and she accompanied me there, too. And a colleague with beautiful hand-cobbled shoes, a fresh blue handkerchief in his pocket, and a degree in diplomacy was my witness.

162 The first time we entered the room with the *bet din* (three rabbinical judges) that morning, I was given the role of a fly on the wall, much like the one I assumed one unpleasant morning in my five-year-old daughter's Hebrew-language kindergarten class. "Do you think she understood that?" "No, not a chance." They never bothered to ask me, and no one told me why the new girl in the corner was crying. This process now didn't involve me at all, except that I had to be present when the rabbinical judges ascertained that my husband did, indeed, want to divorce me. The chief rabbi kept saying, "Really? You want a divorce? What's your problem? What's going on? Why? Don't you even want to try?" Three bearded men with comfortable bellies; they had arrived in a special daily van from Bnei Brak at nine o'clock that morning, as they did every morning. They were not unkind. I sat invisible with a collection of poems by the Arab-Israeli writer Taha Muhammad Ali. I read "Abd el-Hadi Fights a Superpower," about a man who would serve his enemies a hearty breakfast, never knowing they were his enemies and not caring who they were. I was so astonished with Taha's reluctant but inexorable will to live. I hadn't been tested as Taha had, of course. He'd lost an entire village, Saffurriya, when it was razed by the Israel Defense Forces. But I often feel the same inexorable will—it was nothing you earned, but something you were born with, for better or for worse. This will to be yourself in your deep-

est humanity, after everything had changed around you. Every now and then I blew my nose on the blue handkerchief my witness had lent me, grateful that he was the kind of guy who carries handkerchiefs, and wiped my eyes, unsure if I was crying about the destruction of Taha's Arab village or that of my own emotional village.

It occurs to me now that there is another genre of the romantic fairy tale—the one in which the young, common girl saves her prince or her family. In the Danish tale “The White Dove,” a dove saves a prince who has been sacrificed by his brothers to a witch. When he kisses her, she turns from a dove back into a woman. In the Grimms’ “The Seven Ravens,” a little girl saves her brothers, who have been turned into ravens by their father’s inadvertent curse. And in their “Fitcher’s Bird,” the egg betrays the hapless women who don’t quite trust their murderous husband. The heroine of this story disguises herself as a bird.

No one in these tales wants to be a bird. You can fly, but you are removed from human company. And you lack speech.

After ascertaining that my husband did want to divorce me, the court offered me, and I refused, my right to *shalom bayit*, or peace in the home, which here meant couples counseling. I couldn’t save my husband from himself or from what he was doing to us. They didn’t press. It had been a brief marriage. But, if asked, I would have said, who wants to be married to someone who doesn’t want to be married to you? Don’t you think I asked for couples counseling already?

The *Get* is the Jewish document of marital severance. The word is composed of two letters, *gimmel* and *tet*, which, the Goan of Vilna once noted, are the only ones of the Hebrew alphabet that cannot make a word together. Later, the rabbi would fold the *Get* into a fanciful bird-like design, and a beautiful, blue-eyed young man would translate the proceedings for me, and my husband would deliver it upon my (“they must be passive, your hands”) hands, and I would place it under my arm and walk to the door and come back. It was my husband’s “gift” to me. He would state the contents of the *Get* in Hebrew and then in English: “now you are available to other men.”

Later a friend asked, “So are you permitted to go for all men, or is it open season for men on you?”

This “disturbing” and “darkly hilarious” document, as another friend described it, is unholy. A Jewish marriage is a holy act; the verb *kidesh* is done to a woman, not a man. The divorce is also done to a woman; it cannot, in

orthodox Judaism, be initiated by a woman, and a woman may not even need to consent to it. I was asked, and I consented. *Kidesh* is what the ancients did to the ritual objects used in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies. It means to sanctify, to set apart, as well as to betroth. When you are married, you are set apart for your husband.

I had prepared myself for my husband at dawn the day of the marriage ceremony. He had awaked early to be with my daughter when she woke up. Usually women use an indoor *mikveh*, but any living body of water will do. I was closer to the sea—ten minutes by bike—and my *mikveh* lady preferred the sea as well. I wore leggings under a loose, long shirt. I entered the water as the sun sent out its first probing rays from the horizon. We found an empty alcove past the hotels and marina; the sand was cool under my feet, and the salty froth-tipped waves that broke over my toes made me shiver. I waded out, took off the leggings, and submerged three times, letting the water enter between my skin and the shirt, nodding and turning my head so that my hair was completely submerged as well. Earlier that morning I had cleaned and cut my nails, filed calluses, brushed and flossed my teeth, washed and conditioned my hair, so that the water could enter all of me and cleanse me. Now, under water, I drew a small portion into my nose and mouth, I extended my fingers and toes, I opened my eyes. *All of me, all of me.* It was the beginning of my new life, this ritual that should be repeated after every menstruation. We watched the new sun rise higher in the sky as we cycled back.

My husband and I fasted all day until just before sunset, when the marriage ceremony was complete. The cup of wine we took under the canopy was the first sustenance to pass our lips all day. I was instructed to recite the prayers for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, before the ceremony as well, and I did that as best I could. Newly married couples are said to be close to God—like angels.

My husband moved out during the high holidays, when everything is holy. The material world is elevated and made fit for God's use, and we with it, I suppose. But even in the short time of our marriage, and in the short period of our engagement, I felt a strange rage, triggered by the misspelling and miswriting of my name on the marriage contract, the *kettubah*. "I even like the chip on your shoulder, it drives you to do wonderful things. But I don't like your anger," my husband had told me when we were dating. I had felt known and safe in being known. But to understand my temper, I had turned

to Simone Weil's meditations on the ego, which she compared to a gas. Gas abhors a vacuum; it fills the entire container, the entire space, it is given. She suggests that we create a vacuum in ourselves, that we force the ego to contract, and the difficult space that remains—the vacuum—is the space for grace to enter. In mystical Jewish literature this idea is articulated as G-d's willing withdrawal from the world, so that humans can act in it. If G-d would not withdraw, people would lack free will. Obviously, this contraction of the ego is unnatural, and Weil knew it, of course. Earlier I had written:

If to be holy
means to be set apart,
then keep the wound open until it no longer

resembles a wound,
but a constant tenderness.
In marriage it applies to women, what men make

of them. The difference
between a kept woman
and a wife is contractual. Every woman wants

to be her own
agent. But, holy, you
must lose an integral part. For the sole purpose

of not gaining
anything in return.
This is called grace—a permeable emptiness

(Keep it open.
Keep it embryonic).
It is the boudoir of the ego. This is a kind

of prayer. Or
even prayer's definition.

The emptiness in myself that I created felt like the size and shape of a wedding ring. Sometimes, when I felt I couldn't breathe, I would take my rings off for a few minutes. I kept feeling like my very being was being erased. I was assured by contentedly married women that this feeling was natural in the beginning. Your old identity *is* being altered, if not erased. It is difficult. But why did the contraction of my ego set me adrift? I'm no more of a control freak than any of my other married, neurotic friends, and *they* manage. Even though the wedding was exactly as I wanted—intimate, about thirty people, in the spice garden of the friend who'd adopted me into her family in Jerusalem, just before sunset. My friends made the food, just as I asked—gravlox, sushi, cheeses, lasagna, salads, quiches, hummus, olive and avocado spreads—all their specialties. And I had sewn my own veil—a birdcage, as it happened. My dress was a wonderful beaded vintage sheath over a silk slip that I found for cheap when I was in New York the weeks of our engagement, in a shop in the East Village under a leather motorcycle jacket. And the silver strappy sandals had been tossed in for free because the owner was a romantic and wanted to give us a gift. Children were there, and everyone had felt at ease and happy at the wedding.

In the marriage, the rage was slow to dissipate. True, it was the summer of the State-wide tent protests against the rising costs of housing, and Tel Aviv's was centered, inexplicably, on the boulevard outside our apartment, so bullhorns kept us awake at night, and in the daytime, protesters, who had no concern for bike lanes, made my one-and-a-quarter-hour bike commute hell. I turned to etymologies again and discovered that the word "anger" comes from the same root in all Western languages, from "narrow": *angus, enge, enghe, aggwus, amhu, ankhein, angere*. It produces a special kind of pain, akin to strangulation or throttling, and it results from want, deprivation. (Like the lack of space to pass through on a bike?) Fair enough. We know nature despises a vacuum. I felt I was living in a vacuum—I had created a space for grace to enter. Nothing entered. My husband, I discovered, was suffering from depression—had been before I met him, but our brief courtship had temporarily overridden the symptoms. I felt I had emptied a part of myself to make space for him, but he wasn't filling that space at all, and it hurt. Now I found myself throwing things out at his request, but not replacing them with anything that belonged to him.

I turned to language again, hoping for a cure. The Hebrew term *yetzer hara* would translate into English as the "evil inclination." Sometimes it is privi-

leged over the “inclination to good,” because the evil inclination, according to the sages, causes people to marry, to have children, to build houses, to engage in commerce. It is the opposite of Weil’s unnatural vacuum. It is a fullness of being that simply bursts, so that a person must find an outlet. And that’s what all of me wanted to do.

In K.J. Erben’s folk song “Willow,” a husband is so incensed with the fact that his wife’s soul leaves her body every night to live in a willow tree that he finds that tree and chops it down. She dies. In “Lily” the queen mother is so enraged by her unnatural daughter-in-law, who is a flower by day and a woman by night, that she tears down the protective home her son has made his wife. The lily princess dies. I translated the entire collection of fairy tales from the Czech. Sometimes there is no comprehensible constructive form for your anger or your rage because you don’t understand its context. You are still held accountable for your behavior. Ignorance is no excuse.

Now, the second time we were called into the *bet din* that morning, the witnesses were brought in one by one—my husband’s older brother was his. He had greeted me with an uncertain face and a “hello” earlier, but now he didn’t look at me. I’d met him only four times, and I’d liked him. He was sweet. He was asked to pronounce my name. It wasn’t pronounced Marsela, which is what he said, but Marcela. The rabbi kept asking him about both. I started to say, “but I pronounce it...” I was cut off. “It doesn’t matter,” I was told. We were adjourned into the waiting room.

I had felt such rage—the rage of misinterpretation and confusion—before. Once, biking home with my young daughter on the seat behind me and bags of groceries on the handlebars, I had reached an intersection across which a cyclist sprawled on his stomach, the bike to the side, and two men were straddling him, pinning down his limbs. A third was going through his wallet. It turns out that what I had taken to be a public mugging in broad daylight had been a rescue operation. Soon an ambulance appeared. The Israeli Defense Force, in which all citizens are required to serve for about three years, had apparently trained quite a few medics among the bystanders, and they were isolating the man’s limbs so that he didn’t move and damage his back. In the wallet had been the man’s medical insurance card. At the time, I had reached for my cell phone only to realize I didn’t know how to call the police.

When it was explained to me why my name had been written in its manner on the *ketubbah*, as well as on the *Get*, my rage disappeared. One must use all the names one has ever been called, rightly or not, but publicly. Identity as a

completely social construct—we can never know the essence of a thing, only how that thing appears to others. Those are the rules.

A romantic hero isn't really much of a hero. I mean by that, he doesn't act of his own accord. He is, instead, an object upon which the natural forces and the spirit world act—everyone is subject to the forces of the world around us. The heroine is often the means by which a community reaffirms its shared values. We had felt like fairy-tale heroes when we married, in the sense that we felt our union was fated. But before I met my husband, I had not believed in fairy-tale romance. If I had a *bashert* (the partner God had created for me before I was born), I assumed he'd probably been killed in the first Lebanese war, because he certainly wasn't in a hurry to appear. And if he had not been killed, then he was already irritating me because I hated it when people were late.

Furthermore, I'd never had reason to examine the actual ending of romantic European fairy tales so critically, even as I translated them. I always preferred pragmatic folk stories, such as those of Taha Muhammad Ali that I read all morning in the waiting area and in the *bet din*. In Taha's case, the forces that act upon his characters and his community, forces—the IDF—that he does not comprehend, attempt to destroy his humanity and his community. Unlike the Romantic European stories, his heroes assert their individuality, their humanity, by refusing to bow to these outside forces. They even refuse to dehumanize their foes. It's a stupid thing to do, according to the narrator of "Abd el-Hadi, the Fool," this refusal to learn what everyone and fate is so eager to teach, but it is the only thing you can do and remain a human being. (In the world of the poem, in Taha's world, the alternative was revenge murder—the only just punishment, really.)

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Now we were called into the scribe's office. We watched the scribe write the *Get* in beautiful calligraphy and blow it dry with a hair dryer propped on a plastic binder through which he'd thoughtfully bored a hole, so the thing could stand by itself and not damage the page. Even the sign stuck to his door with shiny tape was beautifully lettered in blue marker. My companions pointed out, this scribe really loves his job, takes pride in it.

Meanwhile, in the waiting area, the police had been called in to break up a fistfight, and they were grouped discreetly in a corner when we emerged from the scribe's office. I was told that fistfights weren't unusual in that place. Indeed, the prefab building made no attempt to comfort anyone, with its cement floor, its awful 1970s-style, socialist-colored curtains, its metal benches.

Finally, my husband was ready to give me the *Get*. I was to be de-sanctified. The rabbis of the Talmud quote the prophet Malachi, “The Lord has been witness between you and your wife of your youth against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion, the wife of your covenant” (2:14). They add in Sanhedrin (22a), “Even God sheds tears when anyone divorces his wife.” I was surprised at my own tears, shaking me so hard they propelled me out the door straight into the arms of my *mikveh* lady, who held me and then kissed my cheek. “You are so brave,” she whispered. Why did she say that? This wasn’t bravery; I had no choice.

I hadn’t expected to cry at all. I thought I had used up all my tears in the two months I couldn’t eat. I had gone to therapy for trauma then. It was like the first time I saw the *Kotel*, the so-called “wailing wall.” I hadn’t expected to cry there, either. But the tears were not mine then, perhaps. Maybe they belonged to the place, and I just channeled them. Like the dreams of total strangers I had dreamt the entire first month in Jerusalem. They hadn’t been mine either. Taha’s “The Falcon,” an eleven-part hymn to sadness, accounts for this kind of sadness:

Most likely,
sadness,
you are not mine alone
and, so long as you are mine and theirs,
how could I possibly
do with you what I will?

“I love you, and I want to be with you. But I don’t want to be married,” my husband had repeated for the last two months. But why? He couldn’t say. My therapist kept saying, “It’s nothing that you did. Even if he says it is.” That did not make me feel better. We always prefer something to be our own fault, then we can fix it. I fixed so many faults in those two months, I couldn’t recognize myself. But I did like my newly sparkling home, my infinite patience (*It doesn’t matter, I’ll clean it up. I’m not really here anyway*). However, to accept that, for no apparent reason, your partner had just bowed out, to be left without a narrative—that was unbearable. But it no longer caused rage. I had progressed. Which was good, because now, de-sanctified, I needed to learn to exist in the random world again.

Would I still get to keep the secret handshake of marriage? Incredibly, the minute you get married, other couples share their secret discontents, their problems and their coping mechanisms. It was an entire new world, withheld from singles, as if to preserve their innocence. Or maybe it was like X-ray glasses that could see into the polished surfaces of any union. Not the cracks, but the strengths that repaired them. I hoped so.

“Open your hands, palms up, and side by side, like this. Press your thumbs to the sides of your hands,” the beautiful translator instructed. He didn’t belong in that room. They felt very much like birds at that moment, my hands. They felt like the animals that flitted and fluttered away in Taha Muhammad Ali’s poem, “Warning,” in which the poet begs hunters not to take aim at his happiness, which isn’t worth wasting the bullet on. “They must be passive, your hands.” I let them rest, passively, in the air. It was an act of complete and vulnerable trust. Trust in what? I don’t know. Then the rabbi folded the *Get* into the shape of bird wings, fold upon fold upon fold upon fold. Of all the unexpected parts of the morning, that was the most surprising. He gave it to my husband, who placed it on my passive hands, asking me to accept his “gift” of divorce. I took it on my hands, then placed one palm over the other, as if I had trapped a creature that wanted to fly away. I tucked the *Get* under my right arm, as the blue-eyed translator had instructed. *I don’t want to be a bird. I want to be human, in the company of humans. I want this story to make sense.* I did it. I became the winged creature, albeit with my wings folded now. I walked toward the door, then turned and walked back. *If this were a fairy tale, someone would be redeemed.*

“You must wait ninety-two days before you remarry,” he said. It wasn’t a fairy tale, and I wanted to laugh through my runny nose and dripping mascara at the absurdity of that statement. Though, I suppose, I should be flattered at the thought that I would have had the energy and the allure already to have lined up my second husband. Ninety-two days would establish a child’s paternity, in case of pregnancy.

My daughter has recently taken to asking me to pray to God for a sibling for her. One day she was furious with me for having gotten my period, because she knew that meant I had no baby in my womb. Her anger stayed with her the entire day, until I told her at bedtime, “But it’s not my decision, it’s God’s.” I wonder now if I have planted the first seeds of doubt in her head. Will she grow up with a grudge against God because of her only-child status? When I had first married, she’d fallen apart at bedtime: “You are going

to love him more than you love me!” she’d gasped through her sobs, which shook her little body so thoroughly she could hardly speak. At first I was helpless, remembering my parents’ model of marriage in which the couple does, indeed, come before the children. Then I felt I was floating as I took her into my arms: “I will never love you less than I do right now. And I love you more than life.” She was comforted, and soon she loved my husband, too.

One day, a month or two after he’d left. And come back. And left again, and we’d tried dating, and we’d tried his staying with us for consecutive days during the week, my daughter got on a footstool and climbed up to the kitchen counter, where she sat and asked, casually, “So, he’s not going to live with us any more, is he?”

“No, he’s not,” I answered.

“And why not?” she asked, calmly, though I knew she missed him very much.

How to answer that? “Because he needs someone to take care of him so much, he can’t take care of us. And I told him that my daughter and I have so much to take care of. We don’t have time to take care of you like that.” Then I decided to make the decision hers, too: “We need someone who can take care of us, too, don’t we?”

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She paused, then agreed. We have taken to having “girls’ night” once a week (though every night is girls’ night now). We paint our nails, we do puzzles and listen to music, we eat falafel or pizza—something special that she likes most to do. We make it a ceremony of sorts. But she still wants a sibling.

Whatever it was, I do not consider our marriage a mistake. But I do know that I do not agree with my husband’s description of the *Get* ceremony, when he called me the night before to make sure I was planning to go: it is *not at all* like a doctor’s appointment. Unless by “doctor’s appointment” he meant a scheduled surgical procedure. But then, I had kept my unborn daughter, too, when her father had suggested an abortion.

Two weeks ago, after my husband and I had decided to cut off all contact, I missed him intolerably. I had just returned from a weekend in the desert, and I had awakened in the night because my hands were hot. They were fluttering in the air above me. I had been dreaming I was flying, of course, that I was a bird and I held my husband in my feet. He could fly, too, but he didn’t know it and was afraid. I called him. Mexican *curaderas* have a treatment for a condition they call *susto* (fear). They say the condition results from a sud-

den and unexpected fright so traumatic that your spirit leaves your body and can't find its way back. With his surprised permission, I tried their remedy. With him on the phone, I took an egg from the refrigerator and rolled it all along his absent body in the bed, front and back, from the top of his head to the bottom of his heels. I asked all the fear, all the malevolent spirits he had felt in his life, to enter that egg. Then we hung up and I put the egg outside on the balcony, to await its burial. The participant in such a ritual would then inhale the smoke of bitter and sweet herbs and eat a special soup. He couldn't be passive; he must believe. My ritual wouldn't work, of course.

How weird to accept a divorce from someone who loves you, even as he is divorcing you, and you love him, despite everything.

After I removed the *Get* from under my arm, I had to give it back to the rabbi to be filed. I can't imagine how they file them. Do they put them in a cage somewhere? Is there an entire aviary of *Get* birds? It seems unbelievable that they'd unfold them. But maybe they do.

172 *The poem "Hebrew Lesson: Kidesh" ("If to be holy...") first appeared in the journal Yew in February 2012.*