

The Tale of Three Scribes
After "The Tale of the Scribe", by S.Y. Agnon

The last of the guests had gone home, but Miriam still slumped on the low stool that signaled she was in mourning. Behind her, Miriam's sister bustled around the kitchen of the shabby, one-room house, wrapping breads and cakes brought by the neighbors and packing the chicken stew she'd made that morning into the ice box. Chava looked up.

"Oh, Miriam," she cried. Chava wiped her hands on her apron and knelt before Miriam, pressing Miriam's down-turned face between her hands. "I'm so sorry." Miriam stared at the floor. She must keep as still as possible inside, or the pain would overwhelm her.

"Let's get you into bed," Chava instructed. Miriam followed her around the low wooden partition that separated bed and wardrobe and the table where Avram used to work from the kitchen and table where Miriam spent her days. She let Chava unbutton the black dress and pull it over her head.

"Shoes," said Chava. Miriam took them off. She got into bed and let Chava tuck the blankets around her. Chava sat beside her and stroked her thick black hair, the hair Avram had noticed falling around her shoulders when she was a girl and he a yeshiva student, all knees and elbows.

The tenderness cracked through her numb belly. "Chava, what will become of me?" she asked. "Shh, shh," her sister crooned. "There is time to figure that out. Now, you rest." Chava stayed until Miriam seemed calm. Then she went home, where her husband and her five children breathed and ate and coughed and argued: the acts of the living.

Miriam woke to a cool morning. The rituals of mourning had kept her busy for seven days. But she knew that things were different now, that without Avram she would have to remarry, or sell eggs (God forbid), or become a burden to Chava, reaching for her crust of bread while the children watched with narrowed eyes. She rose and dressed. Now what?

Miriam laid the plates out on the weekday tablecloth, humming. The chicken was perfect, moist with fat and sweet with carrots. She untied the strings of her apron and covered her head with a fresh white kerchief. As she cooked, her kerchief had slipped back on her head, and brown, wavy wisps sprung loose as they absorbed the moisture of the pot. She looked into the mirror only for a moment, to make sure each hair was covered, then bent her head modestly down.

Across the wooden partition of their small house, Miriam bent close to the vellum with his quill. The word he was writing formed silently on his lips. Each letter of each word was a whole world, the teachers taught, and he had so many worlds to form.

But soon he looked up again. This was their rhythm: the sounds of the plates against the table, the pot lid lifted and lowered, Miriam's footsteps crossing to the chest of drawers, the drawer of kerchiefs sliding open.

Avram placed his quill in a jar and put aside his pot of ink. He rose, davenned mincha, washed his hands with the small washing cup, and came to his place at the table.

But that was before. Miriam opened the cupboard and ran her hands over the neat packages of kugel and loaves of bread. She closed the cupboard. If she couldn't eat, she would sew. She sat at the table and spread out the cloth from her mending basket. Avram's shirt. How had she let this go undone for so long? She threaded her needle and made a row of tiny stitches across the torn fabric. She finished, ripped the end of the thread neatly with her teeth and knotted it. There! She felt the satisfaction of a job well done. She was good with her hands, a fine seamstress—she had made this shirt, once, long ago—though nowhere near the genius of her bubbe, who could make a pattern, “pin” it with spoons, and finish a dress in half an afternoon.

Miriam folded the shirt and crossed to the wardrobe. Her dresses on the left, Avram's shirts and pants on the right. She froze, mended shirt clutched in her hands. A guttural sound burst from her throat. Avram would not need this shirt.

Miriam yanked his nearly identical white shirts from the hangers and swept socks and sweaters from their piles in one swift motion and slid to the floor. Sobs pounded through her lungs. She was alone, without even a child to comfort her.

This was the rhythm of their days. Avram rose from bed in the dark to recite the psalms, and when day broke over the shutters of the little wooden house, he took his mishna from the shelf and committed the day's page to memory. By the time Miriam rose, putting on a new underdress before taking off the one she had worn the day before, he had laid the vellum on the little table, and the two quills beside it.

She prepared for him a little broth, some bread from the day before, and when he had finished his study, he washed his hands in the basin and said the blessing, ate the bread and drank the soup, thinking of the good land the Lord had brought the Israelites too, and the manna in the desert that tasted of cardamom and was always enough.

While she washed his bowl, he put on a worn gray coat and hat and hurried to the ritual bath next to the Great Synagogue.

Not until he had purified himself in the mikveh would he put ink to paper, would he dare to form one stroke of a letter in the Holy Book. When he returned, divested of all worldly concerns and their residue on his skin, he went straight to the page, sharpened his quill, and began to write.

Sometimes, Miriam watched his face as he worked, furrowed in concentration and lighted with ecstasy. For in writing, although he was too humble

to say so, he was part of a design that lifted him beyond the plain walls and muddy streets of this life. Writing a Torah whose words were studied and chanted even after one's death bestowed upon both the patron and the humble scribe the immortality of memory. But Miriam knew Avram's was not a calculated devotion: it was feverish love of the Master of the World and His great gift of Torah.

His lips around each word as he spoke it aloud were a caress. His fingers stroked the pages of his prayerbook, as though he could read by touch.

When the sun set, they ate another bowl of broth. As Avram prayed the afternoon and evening prayers, Miriam worked over her basket of mending. And then the chores were done and there was nothing left to do but go to bed. Miriam bent lower over her head over the sock or apron so that Avram could undress in peace. She heard his footsteps, then the sound of the covers pushed back and the creak of Avram getting into bed. Only then did she look up and take her turn at the wardrobe, fading, in the night, into shadow.

Avram's beard brushed against her chin, and his lips brushed against her cheek. "My beautiful wife," he said. But he pulled back, then, and his mouth slipped around the words of the bedtime shema, and Miriam knew he would let nothing pass to interrupt the continuity of prayer and sleep.

Green shoots poked out of the potatoes in the cupboard. Miriam had hardly left the house since shiva ended, and now shloshim, the thirty days that followed a death, had passed. She moved slowly through the room, holding a rag, picking things up and putting them down without a wipe. Sometimes, a neighbor knocked on the door, bearing a pot of noodles or a bit of roast chicken. When they saw her weak smile and ghostly eyes, they became performers, reciting their lines as though they were projecting to the last row of a cavernous theater. "Miriam, here, eat a little," they'd say. "How will you find a husband like this?" They, too, made circuits around the little house, but their hands were never idle. They fluffed the mattress and opened the cabinets, clucking and carrying on a conversation of the usual gossip one-sided.

The new moon came and went, Tevet faded to Shevat. The days between visits began to thin. Miriam cored the eyes from potatoes and fed the chickens. She went to the market, and to shul. She went home. But her eyes were dull and her heart was numb.

The house was dark and cold. Tomorrow, she would line the walls with newspaper to give the wind one more layer to pierce before it forced its way in. She lit a lamp, but could not bring herself to cook. Avram could work all day at his little desk, never stopping to eat. But now that she had no need to stop him, steaming the window with chicken broth and demanding he come to the table, she understood, with a deep weariness, how one could forget to eat.

Miriam woke in the dark. It was, she realized, the hour when Avram would rise to study, and with a rush of possession, she threw off the covers and swooped to his shelf. She felt her spine curve into Avram's slight stoop, and the sureness of his step as she crossed to his table. She slammed the sacred book on the table and opened to the middle. Yes, she was Avram, keening piously over his *seforim*, tugging at his beard. So pious in his humility, so smug in his renunciation.

She read the words, deciphering without comprehending. She finished the page and put the Mishnah aside. It was dawn, time for prayers. She opened the velvet bag that held Avram's tefillin, wrapping the straps that held boxes containing the most sacred words around her arms and placing them on her head as she had seen her husband and her father do a thousand times. She threw his prayer shawl over her head and rocked back and forth on her heels, mocking, furious, and yet somehow, still Avram herself, two souls in one body.

The light had resolved into morning. Usually, she would cajole him to eat now. But she had no wife to interfere. She felt like a column of fire. She threw off the prayer shawl and unwound the straps of tefillin, noting with satisfaction the red marks the leather had cut into her skin.

She laughed. What had stopped her from doing this very thing years ago? It was so easy to break a taboo, to violate a norm, to shock the holy men. She had put a cloth over her head—ha! She had wrapped some leather around her arm—so! Didn't she kiss the box with the same holy words every time she walked through her door? Who was to say she couldn't wear them like jewels in a crown, like a necklace nestled against her breast?

She strode back to the table, and uncovered the piece of stretched hide on which Avram had scribed the words of the most holy Book, bringing forth generations of Torah, one scroll springing with his hand from the womb of the next. The fire settled into the hearth of her belly. She stared, in awe, at the letters on the page, the last he had written, and sank into his chair.

Va'yachalom Yosef halom, va'yagad l'echav, va'yoseefu od s'no oto. Once Joseph dreamed a dream which he told to his brothers, and they hated him even more. The words were beautiful, perfect strokes of the pen, holy, yet from a human hand. She breathed. The letters breathed. She spoke the words aloud, creating them again in her mouth. The Holy One spoke, and the world was created, she thought.

When the sun had burned through the last layer of cool morning air, Miriam tied a clean black kerchief over her hair and set out for the market. She bought a fat turkey and had it slaughtered by the shochet. While the blood dripped from the bird, Miriam finished her shopping: celery, carrots, a sheaf of paper.

Back home, she hummed as she plucked the bird and removed its innards. The turkey simmered in the pot with the carrots and celery.

Miriam washed her hands and went to the pile of feathers. She sliced the tip of the feather into a sharp point, and split the nib neatly down the middle. Dipping the point in ink, she touched it to paper, and a small black dot soaked into the page,

as if it had been thirsty for it. She drew the quill down the page, and the dot became a line. Miriam felt her heart quicken. Dot, line, curve, point, she was the author; she would decide.

The dishes were undone, the sheets unwashed. But now it was not grief that had stacked the dishes precariously in the dish bin but preoccupation as Miriam drew the same careful strokes over and over again. As she practiced, she felt like she was at her father's table again, learning her alphabet with his gentle corrections: aleph, aleph, aleph, bet, bet, bet. Miriam's mother had taught her to read, but her father insisted on teaching her to write. "Each letter is a whole world," he told her. "To know it, you must know how it is formed." The lines fluttered and cracked on the page; her quill sputtered and refused its ink. Still she wrote. Gimmel, gimmel, gimmel. The flourish of the tet, the crown on the zayin.

Each evening after maariv, her father had stayed to return stray prayerbooks to their shelves and sweep the floors of the Hall. Sometimes, she came with him, playing by herself in the women's section while the men prayed. Sometimes, she tucked her legs up onto her chair, playing Noah's Ark. Other times, she pretended to be Bubbe Girsh, dabbing at her forehead with a handkerchief and shushing the children with a whisper louder than their chatter.

When the men drifted out, in twos and threes, arguing and talking business, she crept down the stairs and into the room where her father swept and mopped. On the evenings he polished the ark where the Torahs were kept, he laid a tallit over a table, took the Torah in his arms and laid her gently on the prayer shawl, covering her with another tallit.

"Hello, my dear," he murmured as he opened the ornate cabinet and cradled each Torah in his arms. "Just for a minute, now." Miriam drew near and reached out to feel the thick red velvet draped around the scrolls. The air filled with the scent of cedar from inside the ark, and the lemon of her father's polishing rag.

"The heart of our people." Her father spoke without turning from the cabinet. "You can tell her whatever you like."

"I love you," said Miriam, her lips almost brushing against the velvet.

And there were her father's hands again, thick and calloused, scooping up the Torah in her velvet finery and holding her firmly against his chest. "Not so bad, my dear, was it, not so bad," he whispered in Her ear.

Miriam bent low over her work. She was nestling letters together now, practicing her favorite psukim. "Va'ya'avov Yaakov b'Rachel sheva shanim— *"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel—"*

There was a knock on the door. Miriam hurriedly pulled a cloth over the table of quills and vellum and went to the door. Before her stood a woman, smartly

dressed. She wore a hat, but her chestnut brown hair—Miriam was shocked to see—was short, a wave that landed at her chin.

Miriam looked at her cautiously and pushed the stray hairs beneath her kerchief. “Sholom aleychem.” Her voice was thin, and she realized it had been two days since she had spoken aloud.

“Aleychem sholom,” said the woman, smiling warmly. “I’m Atara. You must be Miriam. I’m sorry I didn’t wait to hear back before I came, but I was so eager to get started.”

Miriam did not move.

The woman tried again. Her Yiddish was halting, as though it was not her mother tongue. “Atara, Gershom’s daughter? Gittel’s great-niece? Perhaps Avram never mentioned, or the letter was lost—you can never trust the post out here, that’s what Papa always says.”

Miriam felt her stomach clench and she pressed her hand against it. “Avram, may his memory be a blessing, is dead.”

The woman’s face paled. “I—I—” Her eyebrows knitted together in confusion and pity. “I’m so sorry. May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion,” she said haltingly.

“Thank you,” said Miriam, her eyes dulling as she tried to choke off the fresh wave of sorrow. “But come in, please,” she said, gesturing.

Atara stepped through the door and Miriam took in her fine leather shoes and clean suitcase. “Please, sit,” she said. She pulled out a chair and swept the morning’s plate and cup from the table. “Can I get you some tea? Bread and jam? I think I still have a cake here somewhere.”

“Tea is perfect.” Atara smiled again, but her furrowed brow remained. Miriam returned to the table with two teacups and a bowl of sugar cubes, then bent over the stove.

“Do you often drink tea in the afternoon? Do you always serve bread and jam to guests?” asked Atara.

Miriam raised an eyebrow. “Yes. And no,” she said.

“Forgive me,” Atara apologized. “I got carried away. How—what happened to Avrom?”

“Avrom was a little feverish, but he was so devoted to his work. The mikveh was closed one day to repair some pipes, so Avram went to immerse in the river—he wouldn’t touch quill to parchment without being in a state of total purity. The next day, his fever soared and—” she trailed off. “Blessed be the true Judge,” she said softly.

Atara bent her head, and they sat together, the tea cooling in its cups.

“So,” Miriam jiggled her spoon absentmindedly on the table. “You said something about a letter?”

“I am part of the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition,” said Atara. Her eyes brightened. “We are collecting the stories and customs of our people, two dozen of us—musicologists, photographers, fieldworkers.”

“Why?” Miriam ventured.

"We are a people like any other people," said Atara, leaning forward. "We have our own language, our own customs, our own relationship to the land. If we want to be respected as equals, we have to show the world who we are."

"I see," said Miriam, and although she did not, she found herself leaning forward too, into the warmth of Atara's enthusiasm. "And what brings you here, to Kremenets?"

"Well," said Atara, "The members of the Expedition plan to visit three hundred Jewish communities across the Pale of Settlement. I wanted to start here, where I have family."

Miriam nodded, and took a bite of bread.

"I was wondering if I could stay with you, see how you do things in Kremenets up close—of course, that was before I knew..."

Miriam spread her ink-stained hands on her lap. She hated to leave her letters behind, but how could she refuse Avram's relative? "Of course you can stay."

"I'd pay for room and board, of course," Atara went on. "I insist. It can't be easy without Avram."

Miriam looked away. "There isn't much space," she said. "Of course, I will sleep on the floor."

"Nonsense," said Atara. "Why shiver when we could both be warm?"

Miriam laughed. "You make a good point."

"So it's settled," said Atara. She took off her hat and took a thick packet from her bag. She thumbed through the pages of questions. "But where to begin?"

That evening, over potatoes and turnips, Atara's questions continued. Who are the most important families in Kremenets? What are the forms of industry? Who are the biggest gossips?

Miriam shook her head. "If I tell you who the gossips are, I'll be one of them," she laughed.

"My turn," said Miriam finally, as Atara took another hurried bite. "How did you come to do this Jewish expedition?"

Atara laughed. "Nepotism—or whatever it is for women. My father helped fund the expedition."

Miriam froze, imagining the sums such an expedition must cost.

"Of course, I was at the top of my class in university, but that doesn't matter when you're a woman," Atara continued, a moment of bitterness passing over her face.

"You must be very talented," Miriam said. She wanted to come around the table and press her hand to this city woman's cheek.

"You're very kind," Atara replied. "But what matters now is the Expedition. Every day, more stories are lost, more songs are forgotten."

"And every day, more stories are written," said Miriam. "You should get some rest." She poured hot water into a basin and passed Atara a cloth. As Atara undressed, Miriam washed the dishes, studious with the consciousness of her turned back. The water had grown cold, but still, Miriam scrubbed at a pot.

"You can turn around now." Miriam blushed. Atara lay in her bed, covers to her chin and the sinuous line of her body finally still beneath the blankets.

Miriam hurried to the wardrobe and removed her dress in its shadows. She untied her kerchief and ran her hands through her hair. Moving the blankets as little as she could, she maneuvered herself into the bed, suddenly unfamiliar.

In the space between them, Atara's warmth radiated from her as her energy did during the day. Miriam exhaled.

"Goodnight, Miriam," said Atara, a gentle bemusement coloring her voice. "*A sheynem dank*. You have no idea how much this means."

Atara began everywhere, it seemed to Miriam. She followed Miriam to the market and asked each vendor where they got their goods, whether their mother or father had also been an egg seller or cloth vendor, if they knew any healing remedies or incantations. She came with Miriam to the synagogue, watching Miriam to see when to sit or stand and peering around the mechetzah to see the men rocking back and forth and circling the Torah like bees around a flower. She asked to meet the best storytellers in the town, and took furious notes in a notebook so flimsy the pages nearly tore when she flipped them.

It was, Miriam decided, like having a small, curious puppy thrusting his nose in every corner and licking every shoe.

When they were home, Atara had more questions. What do you cook on festive occasions? Who decides on a match between a boy and a girl? Do girls attend school? She sat at the table with her notebook, eyebrows raised, lips parted, as though she was breathless. Or she pulled her chair close to the stove and read *Folkways of the Russian People*. Miriam watched her push her hair impatiently away from her face and smiled.

"Why aren't you married?" Miriam asked one night as they lay in bed.

Atara turned onto her side and shoved her hands under her pillow. "A husband would trap me at home, doing his chores, hauling babies from room to room."

"But aren't you lonely?"

An expression Miriam couldn't interpret crossed Atara's face. "I have my work, and my friends," she said. She paused. "And sometimes, I have very good friends."

Miriam's brow wrinkled.

"Have you ever had a best friend?" Atara asked. "And you get closer and closer, you tell her everything. And you just love her so much you want to kiss her?"

A ray of heat seared Miriam's chest. Rachel. The night she had boarded the train for America.

"Miriam?" Atara reached over and put her hand on Miriam's.

"Avram never touched me," she whispered. "Our wedding night...didn't go as planned," she said.

"He never touched you?"

"He wanted so badly to be close to God."

Atara found Miriam's hip under the covers and pulled her onto her side. She draped her arm across Miriam's back. Miriam could hear the soft sounds of Atara's breath. Their faces were inches apart.

"It is good to be close to each other."

One day, Atara unwrapped a large parcel from her suitcase. A large wooden box topped with a maze of brass cylinders and gears, it looked like a clock whose innards had been mistakenly assembled outside its body.

Atara ran her fingers reverently over the gears. "What is that?" Miriam asked.

"This," said Atara, "is an Edison wax cylinder phonograph." She cranked the handle on the side of the box and watched the contraption spin.

"To play music?"

"To record music," said Atara triumphantly. "Bubbe Roykhel must know a hundred lullabies. If we don't record them, they'll be lost to history!"

Miriam touched the fine wood of the phonograph's base. "Of course they won't. Bubbe Roykhel sang them to her daughters who sang them to their daughters. Why record an old woman when there are symphonies in Moscow and choruses in New York?"

Atara raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. "Our people must know themselves," she said. "And to know themselves, they must know the songs of women." She put on her coat. "Are you coming?"

The Roykhel family lived in the cluster of houses around the synagogue. "Miriam!" Sara Roykhel threw open the door. "Come in, come in."

Miriam stepped inside and gave Sara a warm hug. "Sara, this is Avram's cousin Atara Gintsburg. She's part of an expedition to collect information about the Jews of Russia, and she wanted to talk to Bubbe Roykhel."

Atara put out her hand. "Pleased to meet you." Sara laughed and swooped past her hand for an embrace. "Bubbe will be so happy to have a visitor."

Soon, a gaggle of uncles, aunts and cousins was crowded around the kitchen table, where Bubbe Roykhel sat like a queen surrounded by attendants. Atara unwrapped her parcel like a traveling salesman.

"This," she pronounced, "is an Edison wax cylinder phonograph. It records the sounds it hears with perfect accuracy."

Atara trained her gaze on the old woman across the table. "Bubbe Roykhel, I understand that you know a lullaby that was once sung to the great Apter Rebbe. Would you do us the honor of singing it into this wise machine?"

Bubbe Roykhel squinted and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. "It sounds like dark magic to me," she said. "How do I know it won't suck my voice from my lungs like a cat?"

"I'll show you," said Atara. She lowered the needle to the wax cylinder, turned the crank, and spoke into the long metal cone that protruded. "This is Atara here

with Bubbe Roykhel, venerable and pious matriarch of the Roykhel clan, in their beautiful home." Miriam rolled her eyes at the flattery but was impressed to see Bubbe Roykhel straighten in her chair. Atara coughed extravagantly and stopped the needle.

She replaced the recording cone with a wide bell and returned the needle to the beginning of the cylinder. "This is Atara here with Bubbe Roykhel..." Her words echoed back with the same rise and fall of pitch, sounding only slightly tinnier than they did when she had spoken. A cough rang from the bell, and the remaining unbelievers gasped. More than one of the assembled spit over their shoulder to guard against the evil eye. But Bubbe Roykhel laughed and clapped her hands.

"So? Will you sing for us?" Atara asked.

"*Kol isha*," she said, shaking her head.

"*Kol isha*?" Atara repeated. Miriam leaned in. "The voice of a woman. It's immodest to sing in front of men." Atara stared back at her in horror. "Immodest?" she echoed. Miriam put a hand on her shoulder and nodded.

Atara turned back to the matriarch. "What if only women could hear?"

Bubbe Roykhel made a non-committal sound.

"Please," Atara pleaded. "For History, for our People, to be a wellspring of Art and Culture for generations to come." Bubbe Roykhel looked unimpressed.

"Bubbe," said Miriam, soothingly. "It would be such an honor for you to be the first person in all of Kremenets to be recorded in this marvelous machine."

The old woman folded her hands and looked back at Atara. "I suppose it's only right that the eldest should precede the youngest. But no men!" She shooed them away with a wave of her hand.

"Thank you, Bubbe," Atara said emphatically, and looked up at Miriam with a grateful smile. She arranged the phonograph in front of the great transmitter of lullabies, and held her breath as the old woman deposited her song in the great archive that would be the foundation for an enlightened Jewish future.

Miriam was kneading the dough for the week's bread but Atara could not sit still, and certainly could not do the one task Miriam had assigned her, which was to chop the carrots for the stew. "That was incredible," she repeated. "A song transmitted through the generations, the same song that was sung to a great Rebbe, something so innocent no one thought it was important at all. And now we have it, in wax, forever."

"Yes," said Miriam. "You certainly charmed her."

Atara stopped pacing and came up behind her. She put her hands on Miriam's waist. "*You* were the charmer." Miriam's hands stilled and her pulse quickened. Atara leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

But just as quickly as she had stopped, Atara was back to her pacing monologue. Miriam felt the cool absence of her hands, where no absence had been before. The dough felt like a heavy weight she needed to escape. She wanted to turn around and—

"And kol isha!" Atara's voice rose. "What is that? What an antiquated way to devalue women's voices. The idea that men can't control their lust in the seductive

presence of a woman's singing? Please. How are we ever supposed to be equals if these ridiculous superstitions don't end. There is no place a man's voice should be that a woman's voice shouldn't." She slammed the knife on the table, sending the carrots rolling.

"Atara," Miriam said softly.

"Are you going to defend this nonsense? Really?"

"No," said Miriam. "I want to show you something."

Miriam scraped the dough from her fingers and washed them carefully. She walked to the writing desk in the corner of the room and uncovered the sheet of vellum across which flitted the black birds of her letters.

Atara bent and followed a letter that stretched impossibly to reach the straight edge of the column of words. "It's beautiful," she said, looking up at Miriam, her long dark hair shimmering like fresh ink.

"I was writing Rachel," she said, "*For seven years I labored before I found you.*"

"You wrote this? I thought it was Avram's."

"It was. And then... I picked up where he left off." Miriam's heart pounded. She bent her head so she would not see Atara's condemnation.

"Miriam." Atara stepped forward so that only a slim outline of light stood between them. They stood together, touching without touching, as though Miriam held a quill above a page. "I love it."

Atara crossed the thin space between them and pressed her lips to Miriam's mouth.

It had been so long since she had felt any kind of touch, and not since her wedding night, this pairing of lips with lips, buzzing and alert with sensation, as though they swelled into the open space between their mouths. Atara wrapped her arms around Miriam's waist and pulled her close. Miriam felt the swell of breasts and belly, the strong trunks of leg between them. Every inch seemed to hum.

"I've never met someone like you, Miriam," said Atara, looking into her eyes with startling directness.

Miriam forced her gaze into the brightness of Atara's.

"I've never met someone like you," she whispered back.

Their routine took on a different cadence. Now Miriam rose early, not to prepare breakfast, but to daven and train her hand into the reflex of language. *Alef alef alef, bet bet bet, gimmel gimmel gimmel*. Atara awoke to the scratch of her quill and with a luxurious yawn, thudded across the floor to wash and dress. Now, it was Atara who stirred the porridge with one hand as she read some socialist tome with the other. When she placed the steaming bowls on the table Miriam lay down her quill and they ate together.

After breakfast, Miriam transitioned to the Torah scroll, bringing forth the holy words letter by letter, and Atara made careful notes on every observation. In the afternoon, Atara went out with her list of questions or her magical wax machine. And in the evening, there were always stories to tell by the fire.

"So, what does he look like, your father?" asked Miriam. They were burrowed under the feather comforter, letting the candle burn just a little longer before they faced the cold water of the washing bucket.

"I'll show you!" Atara slid from the bed and went to the wardrobe. She rummaged through her leather traveling bag. Miriam heard a chuckle emerge from the closet.

"Have you ever seen something like this?" She held up a brown garment.

Miriam rolled onto her side and propped her head up on her elbow. "Of course I've seen pants," she said. "We have those all the way out here in the village too."

Atara stood and held the cloth to her waist. "Lady pants?" she asked, a sly smile darting across her face.

"Lady pants?" repeated Miriam. She sat up. "Those are yours?"

Atara nodded and spun around, striking a pose. "What? You don't believe me?"

Miriam laughed, but Atara was already stepping into them, hopping from foot to another as she pulled the pants up her legs.

"Ta da!" she exclaimed, tucking the skirt of her dress into the waist of the pants, stuffing them until they bulged too far to button.

"No wonder women don't wear those things. It takes ten minutes to put them on!" Miriam teased.

"Now imagine me on the streets of Warsaw or Paris or something. Walking around like I own the Eiffel Tower." She sauntered across the room in wide steps, turned, and swaggered back.

Miriam clapped. "Bravo! Bravo for the great Emperor of France!" She laughed. Atara waved and bowed to the audience left, right, and center. She fanned herself with a final dramatic flourish, and leaned against the bed.

"What is it like?" asked Miriam. "Do you feel like a man?" Atara snorted, then saw that Miriam was serious. "I've never been a man," she said, "but I feel powerful, like I can go anywhere and walk firmly on the ground and no one can stop me." She paused. "Except maybe a mob that attacks me for being a woman wearing pants." She laughed again.

Miriam reached out to touch the course brush of wool pocket against Atara's hip. "Can I try them on?"

"I thought you would never ask!" said Atara.

Miriam stuck her legs into the pants and stood up, tipping one way and then another as she yanked the waistband over her hips. Her hair fell from her kerchief in immodest dark waves.

"Let's see," Atara commanded, and gestured across the room.

Miriam tucked her dress into the pants as Atara had done and fastened the straining buttons. Looking down, she took one long step, then another. Her legs moved through space as if they were no longer her own, but a strange creature attached to her torso. She reached the end of the room and turned. She looked up at Atara. A smile broke across her face.

"What do you think?"

"It's like—" She paused. "Dancing."

Miriam crossed the room in an exaggerated twirl and leapt onto the bed. She ran her fingers through Atara's chin-length hair. "*Bei mir bist du shayn.*"

Atara did not hesitate. "To me you're beautiful too. Especially in those manly pants." They laughed.

Miriam kissed her mid-laugh, and Atara drew her in close. She traced the curve of Miriam's chin and the soft wave of her lips. Then she turned, covering Miriam's body with her own. Miriam's breath stopped. She did not know what was next, but she wanted it, more than anything else.

Atara was bent over the table scribbling furious field notes. She had a preternatural ability to recall conversations word for word, and Miriam mused that if she wrote on vellum, she would be responsible for the slaughter of herds of goats each week.

Atara flipped a page and put down her pen. "Done!" she exclaimed.

Across the room, Miriam did not respond. She held her breath as she glided the quill in the swoop of a lamed and looked back over the line of letters she had just completed, checking, one by one, against the printed tikkun she copied.

Atara pushed back from the table, rummaged through the wardrobe, and came to Miriam's desk.

Miriam looked up. "Congratulations!" She grinned. "I'll be done in about... two years."

"We make a pretty good team," Atara said, bringing Miriam's writing hand to her lips and kissing it with a flourish. "Written torah—" she gestured toward the seated woman. "Oral Torah," she pointed to herself. Miriam laughed.

"Miriam—" Atara stooped and pulled up a second chair. "I've been writing about you."

"About me?"

"What you're doing, Miriam, it's radical—an act of liberation! How many women have dared to write these words men have controlled so tightly since—Eve?"

Miriam's face had paled. "No, Atara. You can't."

"Miriam, you're a revolutionary! Think how many little girls would be inspired by this!"

Miriam walked to the wardrobe and slammed the doors closed. "Atara, you may think everything is better exposed and hanging open, but I do not. I happen to value the way things are done. Modesty, tradition, devotion."

Atara followed her, like someone she might approach on the street with a workers' rights flyer.

"You said yourself women have been trapped!"

"I did. I did say that, Atara." Miriam's voice dropped and she turned away again. "But you have your father's fortune to fall back on when your *narodnik* fantasies of living with the common people lose their shine. If you've forgotten, I am a poor widow. If I can't sell this Torah as Avram's work, there will be nothing for me."

"There will be people—liberals in cities across Europe—who will jump at the chance to buy your work."

She snorted. "I would be cast out like a leper."

Miriam yanked a shawl from its hook. A thread snagged and the fabric bunched in a spasm of warps and wefts. "I'm going out."

Miriam paced through the streets. She did not know where she was going, but she knew she needed to move. Her anger singed through her until she felt it would burn through her clothes. She thought of the words for anger in the Torah: *xyz af*, his nose grew hot.

And then, she was at the graveyard. She found the little hill where her parents rested close to the entrance. She choked and wanted to rip her throat out. She sank to her knees. "What have I done, Papa?" She cried and could not stop. The ground that held her parents was firm and covered in thick grass.

"You loved the Torah," she heard her father's voice, crooning and certain.

"But it's forbidden," whispered Miriam.

"When something is right, the rules have a way of changing."

She stood and crouched to kiss their headstones. Then she placed a small stone on each and looked down to the newer part of the graveyard. The funeral came back in tattered scraps. Her shoes sinking in the damp earth. The sound of earth falling onto the coffin. Hands, so many hands, patting her shoulder or reaching around her in a tentative hug. Chava at her side.

Here was Avram's grave, nine months old, a sprinkle of grass pushing up through the newly tilled soil. The stone had not yet been unveiled.

"I'm sorry Avram," she said. "I know you wouldn't agree."

Leaves shook companionably in the wind and the scent of honeysuckle drifted towards her. In the distance, she could hear a mother calling to her child.

"I have to write my own story," she whispered. "I love Torah. And I love Atara."

Miriam rose. She broke a branch of honeysuckle and laid it on his grave. "May you find sweetness in the World to Come," she said.

When Miriam reached the house, the sun had begun to set. Her anger had cooled, like a horseshoe pulled from the fire, into something malleable. Inside, she breathed a cloud of onions and carrots. Atara put down her long wooden spoon and came towards her.

"I'm so sorry, Miriam," she said. "You were right. I burned my notes. Every word."

Miriam sat down and unknotted her kerchief.

Atara sat next to her. "Not every story should be told, I see that now."

"With a few strokes of the pen, you could destroy me, Atara." Her voice trailed off. "Every letter is a whole world."

"I know. I didn't think." Atara scratched at an invisible stain on the table. "Sometimes, I get so caught up in this grand vision of peoplehood and liberation I forget about the people."

Miriam reached forward and kissed the line where her hair gave way to the smoothness of forehead. "I love your grand vision."

Atara met her eyes.

"You can't forget about the people for long when you love the people," Miriam said.

And in the warm air that smelled of onions and carrots, they kissed.