

The Rabbi's Wife

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Just weeks ago, I was telling Laura all there is to know about love. She's my oldest, my best friend. I was in her office, diagnosing her computer. She told me every time she puts a disk in the drive makes 'whrrr-ing' sounds, (this she imitated quite accurately) and tells her that her disk is unreadable. I was trying to get the drive to make that sound, but it never did. It read my disks and smiled at me when I booted it up the whole time I was there. I never did figure out what the problem was. But in the meantime, as I was waiting for Norton Utilities to tell me what was wrong with her B-tree directory or if it was one of her leaves, and we had one of those silly conversations we always have, about love.

It started with Marsha. She's the office manager, slinky and tall, of the non-profit training Institute for which Laura works. She stuck her very put together head into the doorway of the office and tossed off, "Hey, Dee, you spend more time with that machine than with Laura." And she was gone. Laura, who reads people like the Sunday Comics, gave me one of her Mona Lisa smiles.

"What?" I asked.

"You know." She gave me a Stan Laurel nod.

"What?" I was laughing.

"She has a crush on you," she sing-songed in her best Edith Ann voice. So much talent wasted in this little administrator's office.

"Come on Laur, she's married."

"So? "

"Puh-lease."

"Well, it could happen, you know."

Now as it happens, I believe Laura was right. Marsha was always popping in when I was there, a little too loud, a little too bright. But I was not about to give Laura the satisfaction of being right. Instead, I went and got didactic on her.

“Look.” I put on my most professorial expression.

“I don’t buy that stuff. That’s the movies. You know, where you meet somebody and wham: “The Thunderbolt.” And everybody’s life is ruined, because love conquers, and wrecks, all. I’ve been around enough to know that shit like that just doesn’t happen. You choose. Every step of the way. And choose again. And,” I paused here to make sure the studio audience was with me, “if and when you fall for someone who already has a someone or a whole brood of someones, or whatever, then you choose ‘no.’ Plain and simple.”

“So what has that got to do with Marsha?”

“Marsha has a husband and two kids and she’s just playing. Just throwing around a little energy. You know, flirting, I think is what they used to call it in your day.” Laura is all of three weeks older than me, but I laud it over her. She ignored me. She is nothing if not focused, my friend Laura.

“And you, Miss Celibacy Queen?”

“What about me? What’d you do, skip breakfast again? Look, when I’m good and ready to be in another relationship, I will. But it will be a careful, well-considered choice, none of this head over heels, love is blind crap. This time I’m going in with both eyes open.”

I really did believe every word I was saying. At the time. I mean, people don’t leave perfectly good relationships because they get hit with a little putto’s arrows. As much as it appears that way. Take my ex-lover, Brenda. Well that’s just what he did. She and I had been

together for three years, when she suddenly left me for a swami in a diaper we met at a chanting workshop. Before I could light a stick of incense, she was on her way to India to get married. Some karma, huh? But as hurt as I was, I am not so foolish as to believe that she left a perfect relationship. It had its bumps and bruises. But a guy? Yeah, I know, on a spiritual level, guy, girl, what difference does it make? But on the gross personal level, which is where I hang most of the time, yucch, a guy?

Well, God must have heard me pontificate that day, cause She got me good. And she enlisted the troops. It was only days later that Daniel called.

“So,” he began in his best rabbi voice, “Laura tells me you work wonders with computers?” If this was a question, I didn’t know what kind of an answer was expected. Leave it to Laura to sing my praises to her favorite rabbi.

“I do some work, installing software, setting up databases, office networks, that sort of stuff. Nothing mysterious. Freelance, you know?”

“Well I have a favor to ask. You tell me if I’m out of line, but my wife, Dena is a writer and she just got a new computer. I was wondering. Maybe in exchange for lunch next Sunday you could come over, meet with her, get her set up. I’m completely technophobic, and I know she’s just dying to get started. What do you think?”

It didn’t matter what I thought. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing at attention, my mouth was dry and red warning lights exploded in front of my eyes, flashing, Danger! Danger! I imagined Daniel, at the other end of the wire, his long dark lashes fluttering over his crystal blue eyes, waiting for my answer. I hadn’t the faintest idea why, but I had to turn sweet Rabbi Daniel down.

“Sunday, let me check.” A voice, not mine, responded calmly. I whipped out my handy dandy electronic pocket date book and punched in Sunday’s date. “Amelia, Opening Day-2:00 pm” it flashed back at me. Laura’s twelve year old daughter, and a Red Sox fanatic, had been down with a wicked case of the spring flu. I promised to take her to opening day at Fenway to cheer her up.

“Sure, I can do the morning on Sunday. I’ll bring over some software samples. If she’s just doing straight word processing, she won’t need much. Just that, and maybe some kind of simple database to keep track of submissions. You know, addresses, tele- ”

“Yes, well I’m sure you girls will work it out. Thanks, Dee. Will I see you on Shabbat then?”

I wish that I could have seen Daniel at that moment. Was he working on his sermon for Saturday, sorting through his correspondence, or just having a technophobic attack? Or did he just not care to chat? Had he really called us girls? What had I gotten myself into?

I had seen Dena only once, at the Bar Mitzvah of one of the young congregants. She came in late and sat in the back of the large, airy sanctuary with the vaulted-ceiling, darting in and out of the service, never once cracking the prayer book. I only noticed her because the hinge on the old doors whined whenever they opened or closed. And when I turned to see who it was that kept coming in and out, there she was, standing on one foot, scratching the back of her calf with the toe of the other, swaying, not in prayer like the rest of us, but like a young willow caught in a mild spring breeze. Everything about her was breezy. Her hair never quite laid flat on her head, it floated off in four directions, and her gaze never seemed to

rest on any one thing. Like a trapped animal, she scanned the horizon for signs of a way out.

She was so unlike the woman of my dreams that even if I were completely honest with myself, which I make a point of never being, I wasn't thinking of her well, that way. All the same, I couldn't get her out of my thoughts.

At the Kiddush after the Bar Mitzvah I asked Laura.

"Who is that tall redhead? The one that can't sit still, at the back of the chapel?"

"Oh, that's Dena. She's the rebetzin."

"Daniel's wife? Come on. Pious, spiritual, radiant Daniel? Daniel with the magical blue eyes, the satin brown hair that he shakes from his forehead with such charm, is married to that nervouosa chaya? How come I've never seen her before?"

"She's here when she has to be. You know, like, when it would be damaging to Daniel if she didn't. But apparently, she's not all that interested."

"Not interested? She's married to a Rabbi and she's not interested? What, wasn't she raised Jewish?"

"O contrar, mon amie," Laura said doing her Pepi Le Pew, "she went to Yeshiva. For twelve years. She says she's had enough."

I didn't know what to say. My own connection to whatever atom of spirituality I felt was so tenuous that even the slightest suggestion that everyone didn't experience the services as I did was threatening. Laura dragged me to B'nai Or hoping that I'd get over my post-Brenda funk. And it had worked. Daniel and his congregation seemed to have the key to something I yearned for. Yet here was Dena, with everything I thought I

would have wanted; a Jewish education, a Jewish family, a Jewish partner, and she wasn't interested. It threw me for a loop. It also piqued my curiosity. Ever since I'd seen her at the back of the sanctuary, I saw her everywhere. At the library, at the health food store, floating around in the starry night on my computer screen. She remained in my memory as she had been that morning, eyes darting from one back to another, up to the clerestory windows, down to the oak floors, running her long freckled fingers through her already disheveled hair. Was she was trying to fix it or muss it up? Like my image of her, it stayed the same. That day she wore a long dress: brown and red flowers danced on a white field and circled her ankles as she rocked back and forth in her bright red, high-top Converse All-stars. The shoes got to me. What kind of a Rabbi's wife wears red high tops? I had to know.

But she never came back. I tried to pump Laura.

"So," I went for casual, but my very effort alerted Laura. "Doesn't the Rabbi's wife ever come to services?"

Laura gave me one of her scrutinizing looks, and then said,

"Forget it."

"Laur, I'm just curious. Look, I'm blown away by this prayer stuff. I feel like I've finally found myself and something that is meaningful in my life. So it tickles my fancy..."

"Let's just leave your fancy out of this. Or better yet, go find someone else to tickle it."

"Why Laura Berkowitz, you dirty old woman, you. I'm talking here, about my budding spirituality, about my relationship with God, and you think I want to get into this woman's pants? This woman, for all I know doesn't even

wear pants, just those flowery dresses. Laur, honestly, you'd think after all these years you'd know my type."

"I know you, Sondra Levine" Laura was the only friend I had that even knew my real name, everyone else thought I was born Dee-dee. "And I know when you get that casual, ohbytheway, sound to your voice, that you are up to something. I love you dearly, Dee, but trust you? Not on your life."

She had my number, there was no getting around that. But I was heavy into denial. I had to be. If I was paying attention to what I was about to do, would I have been able to do it? Maybe. But with so much at stake. Bright and early Sunday morning, I dressed to go over to the rabbi's house and help his wife set up her computer. (Normally I just throw on a pair of jeans and whatever t-shirt is handy. That's what I'm comfortable in, that's what I wear. Nobody cares how the tech dresses.) Every piece of clothing I owned was strewn across the bed, piled high on the easy chair in the corner that serves as both a hamper and a stand for my Gibson guitar, hanging from door knobs and lamp shades. I was a wreck. I wanted to look my butch best, but not too. Whenever I even approach the femmy side of the spectrum, it's a joke. Once, on Rosh Hashanah, in an attempt to appease my mother, I wore a skirt. I remember it clearly. I stood at the top of the staircase in my mother's Long Island split level house, wearing a beige sweater and matching skirt. My brother, still in high school, ran across the hallway at the bottom of the stairway yelling, "Dee-dee's in drag, Dee-dee's in drag." How did he know?

I ended up with basic black. You can't go wrong with basic black, my mother, when she thought I might turn out to have a life that remotely resembled hers, when she was still speaking to me, advised. So thanks, mom. I picked the tightest black scoopneck sleeveless body shirt I owned

and dressed it up with a red and gold silk scarf. Black 501's, black boots, my black silk jacket. With my gray hair, and my complexion (I had my colors done once out of boredom—I'm winter), I have to say I looked great. I restrained myself, and skipped the blood red lipstick I was dying to try. Too severe. And I held back on the studs as well. Just two plain onyx earrings. I was put together and ready to roll. I grabbed my sample program disks and I was off.

I didn't have any trouble finding their house. Laura had pointed it out many times on the way to shul. An old Victorian house on a corner, it was one of very few in the neighborhood that had a yard on all sides. The air was clean and sweet, and I felt, yes it was unfamiliar, but unmistakable; I was happy. I confidently rang the door bell.

And I waited. The door, painted a cerulean blue, was wide and held four panes of glass at it's center. I could see myself reflected back against the deep navy blue of the muslin curtains hanging within. I slicked up my front hairs, the ones that tend to droop down to the side, and checked my watch. Daniel had said ten. It was 10:02 now. In the driveway along side the house there was no car, but that could mean anything. Above the doorbell was a ceramic plaque, with the words, "Welcome to our home," scrawled in a cobalt blue glaze. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I noticed the mezuzah fastened to the door jamb. Intricate and colorful it looked as if it was made out of the ribbon candy I used to eat as a child, shiny reds and oranges, curvy lines, the Hebrew letter "Shin," staring down at me. Impulsively, I reach up and touched it, bringing my fingers to my lips where they remained as the door swung open.

I must have been staring because right away, Dena looked down at what she was wearing--purple Ben and Jerry's (written in Hebrew) T-shirt, a loose

gauzy pink ankle length skirt, and striped socks--and asked me if anything was wrong. That was the first thing she said "Is anything wrong?" only all I could do was stand there, my fingers plastered to my lips, like a baby who has just learned how to blow a kiss, but forgets the blowing part.

"D-D-Dena?" I stuttered from behind my fingers. I knew I looked like a tittering adolescent, but the motor signals my brain was sending out had stopped being received, like when you tell the computer what to do, but it just keeps showing you that silly little wristwatch with its arms spinning around. Looking at, smelling, imagining the feel of Dena, had every cell of my being occupied. There was no room for chit-chat, no room for explaining who I was or why I was standing in her doorway with my hands over my mouth.

"Yes?" Now there was her voice, too. I'm no callow youth, bowled over by sheer physical beauty. Which Dena was. She was beautiful. But not in any conventional way. Everything about her was will of-a-wisp soft; her voice, her frizzy hair, her eyes. I kept blinking because she seemed out of focus. But just when I thought, phew, I could blow her over with a whisper, I felt it. Like a steel rod, right up and down her center. This, and the delicious feel of her skin, which I must admit, I didn't discover until later. Later that morning, that is. But then, standing there feeling like every jerk I've ever been all rolled into one, I finally willed my hand away from my face and said,

"Nice mezuzah." How's that for suave? I was kicking myself. But there you have it. Dena stayed cool. She looked me up and down, trying to figure out if I was dangerous, if she should slam the door in my face and call 911. And then, like the cartoon light-bulbs that went off over the head of Betty Boop's gramps when he was working on one of his inventions, her whole face lit up. And like the cartoon character she really is, she slapped her palm to her forehead and said,

“Oh, you must be Dee. Computer Dee. I totally forgot. Daniel left early this morning to go hiking, which I detest, I hate schlepping, all that weight, I can never find a pair of hiking boots that fit me, I have really narrow feet, triple A widths, you know,” and up came her long leg without an ounce of effort, and she placed her stockinged foot in my hand for my examination and without taking a breath, “I mean I like nature as well as the next person, well, maybe not entirely, I hate mosquitoes, and camping, Daniel adores camping, so just to keep the peace I go with him once in a while, but I never can sleep, it’s so, well, it’s so noisy, do you know what I mean? I grew up in Manhattan, so what lulls me to sleep is cabs honking, ambulances screeching, knife fights on the corner, those sounds, I mean, that’s life, but in the country, all those crickets, and frogs, or are they peepers? I never could tell them apart, and cicadas, now those are loud, and chipmunks, did you ever hear a chipmunk? What a racket, and of course, Daniel, mister rough it up himself, likes to camp in the wilderness, no campgrounds for him, so we end up, naturally, beside a stream, for washing and drinking and stuff, but what gets me is the noise. Of course the fact that probably animals congregate around streams for the same reason that humans do, and that makes it even noisier, but I mean, have you ever tried to sleep by a babbling brook? Babbling, my ass, it’s as if someone was constantly flushing their toilet in your ear? Like the flood waters have broken loose, and you’re about to be swept away--did you ever see that movie, ‘Swept Away?’ What a great film, I loved all her films, but come in, come in, don’t just stand there.”

I followed Dena as she led me on an inadvertent tour of her house: through the living room with its overstuffed sofas and easy chairs, the state-of-the-art entertainment center on one wall, stone fireplace on the

other; through the minimally furnished, dining room, through the kitchen, sparkling with white, designer cabinets, and accents of red-red; the tea pot, the pot holders, odd floor tiles scattered with random precision among the white ones on the floor, until finally we arrived at the back of the house—her office. Now this was a room I could live in. Along one wall was her work station—a desk, built in bookcases, file cabinets. Opposite this wall was a large color field painting. Was it, no it couldn't have been, a Morris Louis? Amazing. But even more amazing was that where the fourth wall should have been, they had pushed the room out, capped it with greenhouse windows and filled it with the most unbelievable assortment of Cacti this side of the Mississippi. All sizes and shapes, many in bloom, many I had no idea even existed.

Dena left me there and went to make tea. I sank into a black, Levenson leather chair I would have died to own, and tried to catch my breath. And trying was all I was capable of. I was having classic panic attack symptoms; sweaty palms, palpitations, shortness of breath. Maybe I would die in this heavenly chair after all. Whatever was happening to my autonomous nervous system, I had to rise above it. I had work to do. I had to bring myself out of the lightheaded, semi-conscious state I had drifted into at the sound of Dena's voice, and focus. There was a job to be done. I yanked myself out of that chair and heading over to check out her Mac. She had an 9500 Power Macintosh with AV capabilities, and had no idea how to use it, according to Daniel. I had to wonder, too, how they could afford a great house like this on a rabbi's salary. And I had to wonder how had I gotten myself into this mess. In front of me on the screen of her computer, swam a colorful array of tropical fish, bubbling up to the surface at regular intervals. Off in the distance I could hear the whistle of the tea kettle, and I knew I had to do

some fast thinking. How had this happened? I stared hard at the little jelly fish on the ocean floor, filling up like a balloon and then deflating and settling down in the sand again. As the fish floated upward I inhaled. As it sank to the bottom, I exhaled. Ever since that day in Laura's office, when I mouthed off about there being no such thing as "the Thunderbolt," events had lined up like the red bricks of the Boston Freedom Trail, pointing me in the direction that God, in Her wisdom, had provided. And now I was about to blow it. Here was everything good and right in my life; B'nai Or, Daniel's congregation, had dredged me out of my morose self-pity. In that unlikeliest of places, my heart, trampled on by faithless Brenda, began to mend, I found a way back to my roots, and more importantly, to myself. Now, overcome by lust, I was, with unabashed deliberation, planning my own demise. I could see it all going up in smoke, right there before my eyes. Smoke blurred the fish on the After Dark, smoke was making my eyes tear, was tickling my throat. Shit, it really was smoke. A thick cloud of black smoke was billowing out of the kitchen.

I raced down the hall, and found Dena, swatting at the smoke with a folded up newspaper.

"Fan," I yelled at her, even though she was standing right next to me, as if the dark gray smoke was drowning out my words. "Do you have a fan? Over the stove?"

I kept on yelling as she looked at me uncomprehending. It took a moment to assess the situation. There were no flames, nothing was on fire. However, the red-ceramic tea kettle was blackened, apparently had boiled out, and was sitting in the sink, smoke pouring off of it. I waved at the smoke until it was clear enough to see the switch to the fan on the red

tiled-backsplash. I flipped it on, grabbed Dena's hand and pulled her out the front door.

Outside, we collapsed onto the porch steps, coughing and gasping for breath. I knew only one thing. I never wanted to let go of her hand, her pale freckled skin a rose petal in mine. I wanted to stroke, to bring that hand to my nose and inhale her. But I was too busy choking. When I caught my breath, I looked up to see Dena's cocoa brown iris's swimming in a red that almost matched the kettle before it's blackened demise, and the great tears that streamed down her pale cheeks. She seemed otherwise unfazed by the eruption. When my coughing subsided, she began to apologize.

"I'm so sorry. Daniel says I do this sort of thing all the time, and I argue with him, but I guess this time, I'm guilty as charged. You know how it is, you just start thinking about something, and then that something reminds you of something else and before you know it you're miles away, reliving some childhood trauma, or rewriting a poem or imagining how you're going to decorate the bedroom and wham-the tea pot's burning. I guess you might say I'm a little spacey--I have trouble negotiating the here and now, you know--That's why I can't deal with praying, at the temple that is--It's not that I'm not spiritual--I just can't afford to do anything that takes me away from the material world. Sometimes I feel like a big red balloon, I guess you must have figured out that red is my favorite color, what with these," (again she lifted her foot into my hand--this time with the emphasis on the bright red and white stripes of her socks) "the tea pot, it's really too bad about the teapot, Daniel's mother gave it to us on our first anniversary, I love the shape of it don't you, it's hard to believe we've only been married three years, it seems like forever, you know what I mean? It's not that I don't love Daniel, I do, but well you can see we have so little in common. He

likes the out of doors, I like the indoors. Those cacti in the study, they are enough for me. Don't you just love them? So many different kinds and when they bloom, it's a miracle, don't you think? And the best part, by far and away, is how little attention they need. I think I must be kind of like a cactus. I need sun, water occasionally and lots of quiet, lots of solitude. I don't know how I would ever make it on my own. I forget the simplest little things, like turning off the tea water when it boils, like flushing the toilet, that drives Daniel nuts, you should see him when he gets mad. Most of the people at the shul don't really know him, I mean you don't really know Daniel until you've seen him all red in the face, angry. But I don't let him get to me. The way I look at it, we're two souls that have some old Karma to work out. He supports me, I write, and it feels like an old debt made right. Don't tell him I said this, but I think he's just about paid me off. I have this feeling, Daniel's always making fun of my "feelings," but, you know, in a way, I really am the more spiritual one in this family. I mean he has the shul and everything, but he really is a very down-to-earth guy. He doesn't trust what he calls all this 'wooty-wooty' stuff. But I do, I get these 'feelings,' and they're always right on the money. And I feel my life is about to change in some major way. And,"

This woman was amazing, like one of those radio announcers that never pause for a breath. I was exhausted just listening to her. But on she went, barely hesitating, her cheeks even pinker than they had been and,

"Well, I feel kind of shy saying this, but I feel," every time she said the word feel, she dragged out the ee's to show she really meant it, "that this change has something to do with you. Oh, now I'm embarrassed, but you know the part in the Mary Poppins movie where she's waiting for the wind to change and she knows she has to leave when it does, well, I swear, the wind

has changed direction today, just since you rang the door bell. May I tell you something?"

Was she kidding? She could jabber at me until eternity and I'd be happy as a clam. This ditzzy woman took my breath away. The more she talked and the more ridiculous she sounded, the more I knew I never wanted to be out of her sight. And that hand. I had managed, I thought, like the maker and shaker I imagine myself to be, to let her think I hardly noticed it was still resting in my palm. And while the whole of her was in motion, her mind, her streaming tears, her words, only that hand, that lovely hand, was still. I thought I could sense in her long slender fingers the tiniest pulsing, which played in counterpoint to the deafening roar of my own heart. But I could see now, how she hadn't heard the tea kettle. She had an intensity of focus that astounded me. As she spoke, there was nothing else for her but her words. And even though she was talking to me with a palpable fervor, it was almost as if I wasn't there. To test out my theory I began, ever so stealthily, to stroke that silky hand, my guitar playing callous' dancing on the hills and valleys of her knuckles, aching to go further. She didn't bat one of her close to none-existent eyelashes. That's another thing: red-heads, their wildly light eyelashes. Not to mention a fascination with some other clumps of body hair.

"Mm-hm." I managed to force sound out of my mouth, which was beginning to feel like home to those cacti, although I knew whether I answered her or not, she would go right on talking. And she did.

"Well, I know this is gonna sound kind of silly and maybe even presumptuous of me, but, well you might have noticed, I like the movies. I'm a very visual person and I have a good ear for dialogue and well, enough about me, but I do love the movies, and even though they are clichéd and

silly, for the most part, I usually find that kernel of wisdom, something I can take away with me, something that relates to my life right now, something meaningful, you know what I mean? Well, here's the really silly part, yesterday at the Glennville theater, you know how they always show old movies? Well The Godfather was playing. Now I've seen The Godfather, years ago, and it was ok, not like my favorite movie or anything, but I felt compelled to go. I didn't know why, but I trust these feelings in my life, I've always been kind of impulsive, like when Daniel asked me to marry him, I knew, it was obvious to anyone, even to him, I think, that it wasn't passion that drew us together, but some kind of fate, we knew it would be hard, we had so little in common, but there was this impulse, I had to follow. It almost killed my mother. God. Her daughter marrying a Rabbi, that was a shonda. Can you imagine? Go back two generations and it's a mother's dream. But not my mother's. She's the original feminist, old lefty, card carrying communist and all. She's a writer, too. But she writes academic tomes. She teaches at NYU. Anyway she nearly plotzed, when I told her. But I felt, and like I said, I just get these feelings, that marrying Daniel would lead me to where I needed to go, like part of the journey, you know? Kind of like Ulysses. Not the end, not the goal, just a stop on the way."

I was starting to feel dizzy and slightly nauseous, I had been too nervous to eat breakfast, and I was beginning to wonder where all her meanderings were leading her. I thought she was going to talk to me about The Godfather and here she was backing way up to Greek mythology. I had regrettably let her hand fly, as she illustrated "the journey" with a pointed gesture. The loss of contact, my contracting stomach, and the toxic fumes I inhaled from the tea pot all added to my confusion. What was she trying to tell me? And then, through my

food craven fog, I heard it. That word. And I knew, this was all a cruel hoax, perpetrated by a wrathful God, finally and with great humiliation punishing me for my hubris.

“Do you remember the part about the “Thunderbolt?”

She had asked. The “Thunderbolt” come to haunt my very being.

“Dee, are you all right? You look kind of white and pasty-- Oh, here I am going on and on, and you probably inhaled too much of that smoke, and must be hungry and I don’t even notice. I’m so sorry. Look, it’s probably cleared out, but maybe we shouldn’t risk it, how about if I take you to lunch? There’s a sweet little deli on the corner of Broadway and Central. They have pickles there that are almost as good as New York. And the most amazing hot pastrami sandwiches. Do you like pastrami?”

Is your husband a rabbi? I love pastrami, I love pickles and I was terribly afraid that I also was beginning to love Dena.

We slid into a booth at the back of Sammy’s Deli, and faced each other square for the first time since she opened the door for me. I believed I had fallen into some lesbian fantasy movie. There she was, beautiful, open, sweet, telling me that when she saw me at her front door, she knew it was “the Thunderbolt.” And she wanted to know, did I feel it too or was it just her imagination, because she assured me, she could get carried away and melodramatic and Daniel accused her of being a Sarah Bernhardt, which, she said, was just an example of how mismatched they were, because his references were so dated she didn’t even get them.

Now, don’t think I didn’t notice how, every other word out of her mouth was Daniel this and Daniel thinks that. I’ve been around long

enough to know when the lady doth protest entirely too much. But with Dena it was different. It was like, he was in her world, in her experience, and she moved through that without censoring, just exploring, uncovering, lifting great stones to reveal the underside. I had the distinct impression that no matter what I said to her, it would be ok. She would accept it and not be detoured from her journey, wherever she was headed. So I thought I should tell her the truth.

“That’s how I feel, too. Exactly. I’ve always...” but before I could explain to her, how I really felt, about my recent conversation with Laura, about Brenda, about the shul, about my dilemma, Dena gently clamped her hand over my mouth, took one last bit of her pickle, threw a twenty dollar bill on the table, grabbed my hand and tore ass out of that delicatessen. And the whole while we were speeding down the block back to her house, she didn’t come up for air.

“Oh, I am so glad you said that. I just knew you would. Today Jupiter is conjunct Venus and Mars, I just knew something wonderful was going to happen. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not usually the fast kind, the only person I’ve ever had sex with was, well, is as a matter of fact, Daniel, but that doesn’t include all the girls, well not all exactly, but most of the girls in bunk 17, but I always thought that that was a phase. You know you hear so much about adolescent girls, but god, were those nights delicious. There was supposed to be a counselor in the bunk with us. But every night, when she thought that we were asleep, she’d stuff pillows under those scratchy woolen camp blankets they gave us, remember those?”

I had never been to summer camp but Dena didn’t pause long enough to find out.

“Well, Doris, that was her name, not a particularly pretty girl, you know she was short, very dark, alot of face hair, but you should have seen her breasts. Unbelievable. And there was something dark, musky about her. She slithered, slow, silky, she oozed sex. Well right from the very beginning she was sleeping with the lifeguard, the only male staff member with his own room. He had this great little cabin, down by the waterfront and every night she sneaked down there and spend the night, god was that a hot little tryst. Don’t even ask me how I know.”

I couldn’t have gotten a word in with a crowbar, so tightly squeezed together was her narrative. We had rounded the corner, and pushed open the gate when I stopped short. In the driveway was a bright red (what else) four-wheel drive Mitsubishi. Daniel was home. But Dena just turned to face me, placed a finger to her lips, winked and tiptoed into the house. She indicated that I should go to her study. She paused at the bottom of the stairs, and yelled up,

“Dan? I’m home. Dee, computer Dee, is here with me. We’ll be in my office working. OK?”

I strained to hear his reply, but there was none. Dena, came up behind me, placing her hands on the small of my back and gently shoved me through dining room, through the kitchen, the blackened tea pot poking it’s spout out of the sink where we left it, and into Dena’s office. Dena turned abruptly, closed and locked the door behind us and went on with her story as if nothing had happened.

“This one night me and my best friend Marlene followed Doris down the damp grassy hill to the waterfront. We crept under the window sill, and sat, our backs up against the cool stones of the cabin foundation, staring out into the night. We didn’t dare look in the open window, what

if they saw us? It was hot, the peepers were wild and the first sound that wafted over the window sill was the creaking of the ancient springs that supported one of the lumpiest mattresses known to campkind. It's a wonder any of us slept at all that summer."

At that moment I was mesmerized and terrified, a poor old mangy dog, salivating in front of a thick juicy bone. Dena's voice beckoned me closer, closer, and all the while I knew that if I opened my mouth to snatch it, swish down would come the dog catcher's net, and I'd be a goner. I couldn't get this picture out of my head: Daniel, jauntily trotting down the steps from his study innocently tapping at Dena's door, trusting, calling, "How's it going in there hon,?" and bursting in to find us naked, entwined, greased with sweat, saliva and other bodily fluids too delicious to name, because I knew, as surely as I knew that I never wanted her to stop telling this story, that that was where we were headed. Call me smart, call me psychic, but I swear it was not just the fact Dena had, without breaking her rhythm, managed to remove my jacket, my boots, my 501's, and my body suit that made me suspect she was seducing me. I sat there in my black silk undies, matching silk socks, and my goddamned silk scarf wrapped around my neck, as if I had been bewitched. Dena, completely dressed, and pausing uncharacteristicly to catch her breath, had led me over to her leather reclining chair. I gasped as she lowered herself into my lap and resumed her tale. Dena was wearing no underwear.

"So, you can imagine, we could hardly breathe we were so terrified, Doris would have made our lives hell if she had caught us, but we were so excited, we were only twelve, what did we know from sex? Nothing. At least I knew nothing. Oh, I had thumbed through my father's

Playboys, but real sex? This was our first experience. We clung to each other, suppressing our own heavy breathing, in an effort to hear theirs. Because that was all there was at first. Soft unintelligible whispers, quiet laughter, the rustling of clothing, the incessant creaking of the bed. The peepers in the pond weren't as loud as at dusk, but they steadily underscored the building crescendo above our heads. When Doris talked she whined, but when she made love, she sang, sweet mmms that turned into ahs that became ohs that became..."

She stopped because my mouth on hers, hard, insistent, desperate, made it impossible for her to continue. But only for a minute. She moved her mouth from mine, around to my neck, pressed herself up against me, and continued whispering in my ear.

"So then of course we figured this, we've got to try. As soon as Doris and Lenny had drifted off to sleep we dashed back to our bunk. That night everyone was already asleep. Marlene crawled into the bottom bunk with me, for some reason, the bottom ones didn't make as much noise, did you ever notice that? We pulled our nightshirts over our heads and felt every square inch of available skin. The rest of the bunk didn't wake, but the next night, after Doris split, we told them all what had happened and then of course they wanted to hear exactly what it was that we heard, so this time, six of us tiptoed after Doris and hid beneath the window sill, listening with our breath held tight. Rebecca and Lois stayed back in the bunk, and they'd pretend, for the rest of the summer that they were asleep, but we knew that they were listening to everything that went on."

As Dena reached back into her memories she reached into parts of me that I never even knew I had. Her narrative was punctuated with licks and sucks and her body fitting itself into the spaces mine created.

“Six nights a week our bunk was an orgy. We switched partners, shared what we were learning, experimented, compared the length, quality and quantity of our orgasms. Once we even all...”

I never did hear what they all had done. At that moment I was in a spasm of multiple orgasms that appeared nowhere in Masters and Johnson. In some altered reality, my worries about Daniel disappeared. In fact everything disappeared. I passed out. Now I’m not exactly proud about this. I could have lied. In retrospect, I realize it could’ve been a lot of things: a wicked case of Amelia’s flu, hunger, (I hadn’t eaten more than one bit of a half sour pickle all day), the room was hot, I hyperventilated. But the plain and honest truth of it was that she just knocked me out. The waves of pleasure subsided, and the next thing I remember was staring out of a really small tunnel at the night sky. As the tunnel slowly widened I could see a window frame beyond which stars were twinkling and a familiar skyline formed before my very eyes. Where was I? What city was this that I knew so well but couldn’t name? Then it dawned on me. It wasn’t a city at all. It was another one of those Afterdarks on Dena’s computer. Dena. Where was she? I heard the click click sound of her keyboard before I could locate her in my visual field. As I watched her work, I recognized the esoteric key commands she used, known to only the most serious Word nerds. There was nothing I could teach Dena. I lay back on the floor and

moaned. My head hurt, had I hit it on the way down? Dena turned to me and without looking at her hands saved what she had written.

“I’m so sorry. I knew you’d come to in a minute, you were breathing and everything, and I just had to get this down. Sometimes things come at the most inopportune times and you’ve just got to get them down. Are you alright?”

I nodded hoping to explain, but before I could speak she was at my side, her cool long fingers on my bare back. I leaned on her as we made our way to the couch on the far wall under the bookcase. I was chilled and sweating and a little bit shaky all at the same time. She fetched my silk jacket, wrapped it around my shoulders, and then, in a move that can only be described as motherly, she pressed her lips to my forehead.

“Oh my, you have a fever. You aren’t alright at all. Here, let me help you get dressed, and then we’ll get you some echinacea, and some homeopathic remedies and I’ll make you some garlic tea with ginger and cayenne and lemon, it must be that horrible spring flu that everyone’s got. Well you’ll just have to stay here and I’ll look after you, you can borrow one of my nighties, I have the most amazing collection of flannel night shirts, although, it is rather warm for flannel, but there is nothing like the feel of soft flannel against your skin to make you feel better.”

Was this woman for real? I had managed to pull on my jeans and my body shirt and wrapped my jacket around me. She was right. I was sick. My throat felt like a new layer of skin ripped off each time I tried to swallow. I had feverish chills so bad my teeth were chattering. But one thing was for certain. No matter how sick I was I could never stay

there. Not in Daniel's house. A girl may be a sleaze bag, but she has limits to how low she can go.

"I can't." I croaked. But when I tried to stand and get my boots from the other side of the room, I almost passed out again.

"But, darling, oh you are worried about Daniel. Don't be, really. Things, well, things aren't always what they seem. Here sit back down and I will tell you a story."

I wasn't sure I could survive another one of Dena's stories. I forced myself back up onto my feet, fetched my boots from under the Levinger chair, kissed my index finger and touched it to Dena's lips and through sheer will power forced myself to leave her house. In a sweaty, weak delium I made it home. I got into bed, pulled the covers up to my chin and passed out.

It was night, really night this time, and my head was pounding. Only it was outside my head, not inside. I dragged myself into the bathroom and grabbed the tylenol off the shelf in the medicine chest. I downed three extra strength, extended play caplets before I noticed that it wasn't my head that was pounding but someone at the back door. There was only one person who used my back door. Sure enough when I undid the deadbolt lock and opened the door, there was Laura.

"Laur- hey," I whispered, flames scorched my throat with every word.

"Hey? That's all you can say is 'Hey?' I'm half out of my mind with worry, thinking that you're lying dead somewhere or in the morgue, unidentified, and you come to the door looking like the morning after and say 'Hey?'"

Ordinarily I would have been right back at her, but I hadn't the energy. And I was puzzled. Why was she so worried?

"What?" I could barely get the word out.

"What? Who promised to take Amelia to opening day today? And then out for those disgusting hotdogs you let her eat? And who didn't call, didn't make any attempt to apologize, the poor girl is heart broken. And who didn't even answer her phone, and what the hell is the matter with you, why are your clothes all rumpled and what's wrong with your voice?"

Shit. Amelia's flu. That's what I had. I felt terrible for disappointing the kid but the effort it took to stand there in the door listening to Laura was killing me. I turned my back and shuffled off to bed without a word. Laura stormed in after me ranting and railing about what kind of a friend was I, and what a poor role model I was and how Amelia had been let down and on and on, and all I could do was lie there and take it. Finally, several paragraphs along, it occurred to me that this was Laura, my very best friend, who knew me better than anyone, and with whom I used to be able to communicate telepathically. As kids we would practice. I would think a thought, really hard, over and over again, like, "Did you see that stupid red jumper Elise wore today?" And she would get it. Okay, maybe not always the very first time, and maybe sometimes I would have to give her hints, but sometimes she would just clean get it. I tried to concentrate.

"I'm sick Laur. I got this really bad flu. I passed out. I can hardly talk my throat hurts so much. Soup, I need soup, desperately. Please Laur-please, chicken soup. Please. Hot greasy, salty chicken soup. I need it or I'll die. Please. Soup."

“What’s the matter with you? Why aren’t you fighting back? Don’t you even have an excuse all ready? Some little chicky?”

I concentrated and sent my thoughts. “Close Laur, not chicky. Chicken. Soup. Soup.”

“You know, Dee, you’re not looking very well. Your eyes are all glassy and your cheeks are flushed and ohmygod, your sick! Why didn’t you tell me. Oh you poor thing you’ve got the flu. You look just like Amelia did. Oh you poor dear. Wait right here.”

Where would I go? Thank God, she heard me.

“I’ll run out and get you some soup, if anything’s open. Oh the all night market must have soup. Let me call home and let Mrs. Schultz know everything’s okay. She came downstairs to stay with Amelia, oh shit Dee, and I so wanted to be mad at you and now you’re just sick.”

I was feverish, but she was delirious. But she was here, and she was getting me soup and that was all that mattered.

For three days, Laura came, like Clara Barton, to nurse me during her lunch breaks and after work. I floated in a feverish haze peopled by giant Daniels intoning the ten commandments in my face, dancing Denas lifting her flowing skirts and mooning me, and infuriated little Amelias tantruming wildly, swinging her plastic wiffle ball bat precariously close to my head. I surfaced to Laura, sponging me down with alcohol, bringing me my warmed soup and saltines, my Tylenol and juice. On the third day the fever broke and when Laura arrived I was sitting up and actually capable of speech.

“Well, look at you. God Dee, you had me scared there.”

“Nurse Nancy. Come here.”

“No way. You think I want that flu? Although I suppose, if I didn’t get it from Amelia, I won’t get it from you either. Okay. One quick hug. Then if you’re okay, I’ll head on back to work. They’re not too happy with my extended lunch hours.”

Laur, like most straight women I know, hugs with a safety gap of air between bodies. That’s okay. She saved my life. I’ll hug anyway she likes.

“Marry me, Laur. You’re the best. I’ll even grow a penis if you like.”

“Sondra.” I knew that’d get her. She hates it when I talk dirty.

Laura headed back to work, and clear headed for the first time since I got sick, I had to turn my attention to the rabbi’s wife. Had I made the whole thing up? Was it delirium?

But no. The light on my answering machine which had been blinking steadily for days beckoned. It took forever to rewind. But finally there was her very real voice, concerned, non-stop, asking me to call her, winding her wild narratives around my heart. Dena was a dream, and if these messages she left are to be believed, she will soon be my very own delicious dream, sweeter than any I could have conjured up, I thought, punching in her phone number, determined to enjoy every last bit of it.