

Marrow

Marrow and Other Stories

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SHE LOST HER BABY in Hebrew. That is, she lost her baby in a hospital in a foreign language. That is, she can't talk about the death of that baby since it happened in Hebrew, in a language that made no sense. In Hebrew they explained to her what procedures were going to be done to her: "*Achshav anachnu nazrik lach chomer.*" And then an enormous needle, something ridiculous and exaggerated, something from a children's cartoon, descended from the ceiling. And as they were sticking it into her—into *her*, into her vagina—she screamed "What are you doing to me?" And they continued what they were doing, and she felt a cold liquid travelling up inside her, numbing muscles and senses she hadn't known she had, and they answered her impatiently, dismissively,

like dealing with a detail, "*Hisbarnu lach, hisbarnu lach*"—louder and louder, as if explaining it louder would help.

They knew she spoke no Hebrew. She had told a bald-headed man with a skullcap at Admissions, a man named Benny, formerly from Brooklyn. And they knew, because she had told them, that she was a tourist, whose baby had exploded, and begun bleeding out of her, unexpectedly, inconveniently, while she was in her hotel, undressing to go down to the pool. But they still explained everything to her anyway, calmly, patronizingly, as though she were slightly retarded. Everyone on some level believes that their own language makes sense to everyone else.

Lying there, she left her body, which was freezing and filled with death, and she left the Babel babble all around her and clung to words. She remembered that in her purse she still had her Hebrew-English English-Hebrew pocket dictionary. It had told her how to find bathrooms, once Brian had gone home and she was suddenly alone in this language, it had kept her from being taken advantage of by sales clerks giving change. She flipped through: What word did she want? What word could help her? "Get me out of here?" Surely not—she could barely walk, she had nowhere to go but back to the hotel or onto a plane, and neither of these was possible now. She looked up "fetus," a straightforward word, no choices or multiple meanings, not like "*shomer*" which means guard, protect or keep, take your pick, none of which, in her mind, had any relation to each other. Fetus: *Ubar*. She checked it in the Hebrew-English—*Ubar*. Fetus. Further down, she saw the word: *Achbar*. *Achbar*, she read, meant mouse. *Ubar-Achbar*. Inside her lived a mouse, a fetus-mouse. That cold stuff they'd injected into her would freeze it, kill it like those cans of stuff you sprayed on mice at home. Some of these solutions

dehydrated the mice, flattening them out like paper, and you found little flaccid mice-skins lying all over your house. Other solutions chased them away with aversive smells, or poisoned them slowly. But, Hannah remembered, this was not Canada. Here they freeze their vermin, even in the womb.

They had gone for a drive, two days before this happened. It was the last day they would be together. They were at the end of a two-week holiday, and now Hannah was staying on for a five-day conference, while Brian and Jake flew home. She had insisted they go together to the Old City, at least once on this trip, her first time back in eighteen years.

"I'm aware there's an *intifada*, but don't worry," she told Brian, again. "I know this part of Jerusalem like the back of my hand. I walked it dozens of times the year I was here." Brian was driving but his right eye, the one she could see, had travelled toward her, and she read his anger. He resented her attachment to the past, to the life she'd had here, before him. And the *intifada* was in full swing, and he didn't...like...risks.

"I won't endanger Jake," he said.

"Of course not!" said Hannah. "For Christ's sake, Brian."

They decided to just drive to the Old City and around it, not stop at all, not get out even once from their yellow rental car. She also promised not to slow him down to point things out all the time. She didn't tell him as they sped past that here King David had built an underground tunnel so the people could still live within the walls while under siege, by draining water from the hidden pool in the valley.

They were proud of themselves for this decision. They were realists, competent. Canadian.

They took a wrong turn, and as they entered the village, Hannah recognized it, remembering how her lover Merom,

lanky, tanned, and barefoot, had brought her here to this village nearly two decades before, both of them dangling their sandals from their fingers, indolent from love, from the beach, from love on the beach. They had stopped here on their way back from the sea to visit an Arab guy whom Merom knew from the university, and they sat on the floor with Mohammed and his parents and drank sweet, mud-like coffee. Now as they drove, she looked out towards the left, and was admiring the stands of fruit piled high—figs, dates, pomegranates—and the squatting old men playing a game with sticks, when she saw him. A young man, eighteen or twenty, was running towards them, his hand raised high, and he was spinning something around and around, like a slingshot. “Hurry!” she said to Brian. “Faster.” But it was too late. She heard the sound of a tire exploding, and turned round to see Jake in his carseat covered in glass and a huge jagged wound in the rear window. Jake stared at her blindly for a moment and then burst into tears. Another stone followed a second later.

They turned right at the fork in the road, her instinct taking them out onto Hebron Street rather than back into the village. None of them, miraculously, seemed hurt. At the police station, a detective and his assistant stared at Hannah’s swollen belly and offered her a chair. While Brian took Jake and left to get the car repaired (at the government’s expense, under a clause called “Acts of God”), Hannah told the officer what had happened. His spoken English was terrible, but he seemed to understand her. At any rate, he filled out many forms, which took an hour-and-a-half. Later, Hannah made light of the incident for Jake’s sake, saying it had been a bad car, but now it was fixed, and there was nothing left to be afraid of. That evening, they drove the car again with the rear window fixed, their last night together, to a restaurant with a hanging garden that they couldn’t quite afford.



The bald guy from Admissions, from Brooklyn, drops in to see Hannah. She knows that for Orthodox Jews like Benny, each good deed, each *mitzvah*, scores them a point or two in the world to come, and visiting the sick is a special one, worth three or four points at least, especially when visiting a woman who is alone, without a man. But even so she is happy to see him.

“How are ya?” asks Benny, sitting down on the chair near her bed.

She smiles at him. She wants to tell him that they froze her insides, she wants him to know that now not only is her baby dying, but so is her love of this land, and so is she. But she feels confused now even in English, as though she’s forgotten how to speak altogether. She just looks at him.

“They want me to tell you,” says Benny, “that it’s all going very well. It’s taking effect. Soon you’ll go into labour.”

“Labour?” she says dumbly. “Labour?”

“Yeah, you gotta go into labour to get out the...” He hesitates here, his religious sensibilities alert. Is it a life? Is it a human thing? It may be in God’s image, it must not be insulted.

“...my baby,” she concludes for him, staring at his skullcap.

“Well, it’s not alive, you know,” he says, looking away. Hannah feels sorry for him, he is so embarrassed in his errand of mercy. But she feels stupid again, too. She doesn’t know what he is talking about.

“My baby,” she says like a moron. “My baby’s inside.”

“It’s God’s will,” says Benny. “You have to accept...”

At home Hannah would have told him to fuck off. She knows from the kind of skullcap he wears, and from a remark she overheard him make, that he is a Jew who believes (in addition to his belief in God) that Arabs are animals, that the only good Arab is

a dead Arab, and that we are entitled to all the land and all their homes and all the good jobs, and if they behave they can live here and serve us and clean our houses and empty our bedpans. (Yesterday a young Arab girl, no more than sixteen, had emptied Hannah's bedpan. What does it feel like, Hannah had wondered, to be sixteen and to be grateful to have a job emptying other people's excrement?) She knows Benny's politics without their ever having discussed them, and she blames him for everything.

Hannah starts to laugh. Her uterus is frozen, there is a half-dead mouse-fetus stuck inside her, and she is getting all worked-up about politics. At that moment the first spasm strikes. Her face is twisted, half in a laugh, half in the pain of labour.

"Get the nurse," she says.

By the time the nurse arrives, Hannah is sitting cross-legged on the bed, looking into the bedpan. Her baby is the colour of liver, the same red-brown colour as the earth of this land, the blood-drenched land that she tried to make her own. She has failed. It is lying on its side, and its embryo arm, too skinny, is bent at the elbow, as if sleeping, and the hand has already begun to separate from the arm. A branch, but a broken one. It is her baby and she longs to pick it up and hold it; but it is a dead thing and it repulses her. With one finger, she reaches out and strokes its upper arm, and it is clammy, like touching meat, but warm, like the warm places in her own body. She shuts her eyes and nods and the nurse takes it away.

As she drifts into sleep, unexpectedly the nonsense babble around her begins to make sense. The woman in the bed next to Hannah is telling her husband that she loves him; the nurse is complaining to somebody about her long hours; and a woman farther down is sobbing, and between the sobs Hannah hears the phrase over and over "a curse, a curse on us all." All women's voices, the

voices of other almost-mothers, all bleeding, all with empty, aching uteruses. In her half-state she realizes that now she understands Hebrew again, it has all come back to her. But what she understands, somehow, is another language altogether. It is the language of the body that she lived in back then, when she first learned Hebrew, when she first had her body loved, when she first felt the soft marrow inside her own bones and heard the strumming drumming streaming of her blood. She has forgotten all this in her married years: the language of desire and loneliness, and more loneliness, and more desire.