

The Prayer

SHE IS ONE OF only five people at her *shul* who can lead the High Holyday services, and the only one out of these five prayers who is a woman. She sits in the front row and awaits her turn. The man who is currently leading rushes through the introductory prayers, mumbling long passages in an incomprehensible monotone, and periodically looking up at the clock as if racing against time. Laura tries to restrain her annoyance. After all, this is not a day for anger, for rebellion: Today is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the day on which one's fate is decided—"who shall live, and who shall die." One can try to tip the balance, of course, with prayer, and charity, and deeds of kindness during the ten preceding days, but Laura hasn't bothered. And even today, on

the final day for soul-searching, for repentance, she still resists. She has had a bad year, and has no energy left over for thinking about her and God, plumbing her depths, reflecting on body and soul. God has done what God has done, she has done what she has done. She presumes they both have done their best.

The morning prayers, the ones she is about to sing, are the ones that once she loved the most. She loved the morning, when the day was still fresh, the time before anything bad had happened yet. She used to feel, leading prayers, like a robin on a branch, warbling brightness and joy; and somehow she was able to magically infect the listening congregants with her chirpy shining love of the world. But today she will not warble, today there is no freshness. She feels dirty: On Yom Kippur it is forbidden to wash; and in the hot room she can feel the sweat on her body and smell her own sour smell. She smells also of Burt last night (and that too is forbidden on this day). After they ravished each other, she refused to shower, asking him belligerently, "Why add insult to injury?" He laughed at her savagely, said he liked it when she got pious on him. Then he quickly showered and went home to his wife and son.

Automatically, without thought or intention, Laura is responding to the prayers: "Amen," "Blessed be God," "Blessed be God and God's name," "Amen." She can feel, through the eyes sliding in her direction, the other women's approval, their recognition of her. Some of them even smile at her respectfully, or nod. She knows how she looks to them: *A Woman of Knowledge*. A philosophy professor; someone who knows the right responses at each point in the service without even having to look at the *machzor*, the High Holyday prayer book; and the only woman able to lead the service. In these times of feminist hope, this is nothing to sneeze at.

But of course they don't really know her at all. Her admirers are a lawyer, a psychoanalyst, and a film-maker. The psychoanalyst is wearing a ridiculous hat with a large purple plume. She looks for all the world like the Cat in the Hat, the character in the children's book and the beloved imaginary playmate of Laura's childhood, who comes in times of boredom, wreaks havoc, breaks all the rules, and restores order only at the very last moment before Mother returns. Laura realizes she must have been staring because the psychoanalyst flashes her a big smile and wiggles two of her fingers in a wave. Laura, embarrassed, looks away.

She tries to listen to the man who is leading. *Good God*, she thinks, *what a butchery*. She may not believe much of anything any more, but still she has some respect for the prayers. How, she wonders, can one mumble-race through words like "God, the soul you have given me is pure...You have breathed it into me," or melodies that long to be lingered over, that melt as sweet as chocolates on the tongue. As if these prayers were not the language of the soul of an entire people, sung year after year across centuries, across millennia, like wooden carts rolling over fertile fields, leaving deep, freshly ploughed tracks.

These prayers once meant something to her. In another life, when Michael was alive, Laura sat patiently at the kitchen table each night after supper, practising, while he lay half-listening on the couch, flipping through the sports pages. She learned the Yom Kippur melody, sung only once a year, as if learning a great secret, entering a secret society which until only recently was forbidden to women, and where every wisdom must be passed in whispers, treasured, held to the heart. Occasionally Michael interjected with a comment, his feet raised and crossed on the arm of the couch. He thought it "neat" that Laura was doing this; he accepted it in his good-natured, easy-going way, his loose grin

sprawled over everything, over their whole life together. His quiet warmth, like his long lazy body, was something you got used to, something you couldn't imagine life without: as natural as joking, as stroking, as warm coffee and milk in the mornings brought to her in bed. Sometimes he fell asleep on the couch like a lanky teenager, to the sound of her chanting the strange old tunes.



Laura rises and goes toward the back room. On the way she passes the women, and the Cat in the Hat reaches out a limp sweaty hand which Laura briefly clasps, avoiding the pitying eyes. As she continues walking, she hears them whispering behind her that this is her first time back since Michael's death a little over a year ago. "So young. So brave," etc. In the back room, she goes to the east wall, as naturally as if a year hasn't passed, as if things are still the way they used to be, when she came back here every few months, lifted the *kittel*, the special robe of the prayer, from the old brass hook, and donned it slowly and with dignity. The room now doubles as a playroom, and the children on the floor are playing checkers and Scrabble as intensely as if these will decide their fate. The teenage babysitter is over in the corner preparing a snack for the children too young to fast, and she sneaks a chocolate cookie into her mouth on its way from the package to the plate. Laura watches her chomp on it happily while pouring the apple juice into little paper cups. The girl flushes when she turns around with the juice and cookies and notices Laura, but Laura lowers her eyes, pretending not to have seen, and turns toward the *kittel*. A smile plays on her lips, though; it cheers her, somehow, this transgression, so human, almost likable. She feels a sudden bond with this teenager with the stringy hair, whom she has never seen here before. She almost wants to wink at her: a co-conspirator, a partner in crime.

The children jump up for their snack, and Laura shrugs herself into the communal *kittel* and ties it around the waist. It is white, signifying the gown of one's wedding and the shroud of one's death. These two opposing images, the subject of much rabbinical commentary, do not seem strange to her at all. She has always mixed up weddings and funerals, calling funerals weddings and weddings funerals, ever since she can remember. More precisely since she was seven, when her grandmother died at the first wedding Laura ever attended, falling down the stairs at the *shul*, and dying within minutes (an old woman in a black dress) of a heart attack. Laura's uncle, a doctor, whose wedding it was, tried to resuscitate her, breathing from his mouth into hers to bring her back to life. She remembers her uncle's mouth on her grandmother's, and when he stood up, when even he could see there was no use trying any more, his face was white and filled with horror, and his mouth was smeared with her red old-lady's lipstick. She understood it at the time as a sleeping beauty story where the beauty didn't wake. The grown-ups were completely at a loss—screaming and weeping—and someone was rushing around with a hypodermic needle, stabbing the other grown-ups "to calm them down." Upstairs, the musicians didn't know what was happening, and the wedding music played on.

"We're not going to not marry because of your grandmother," Michael said one day with uncharacteristic sharpness, after four years of waiting for her. They did marry soon after that, but throughout the whole ceremony Laura was rigid with fear, misinterpreted by some present as a clichéd fear of commitment, fear of the married life. She couldn't take her eyes off her father, certain he would clutch his chest, turn white, and fall to the floor like her grandmother. Nothing happened. But at Michael's funeral, after throwing the earth on his coffin, as she walked toward

the car down the aisle formed by the two straight lines of funeral guests, she found herself humming the tune that they had made the theme song of their wedding and taught to all the guests: the prayer, "Bless us, Father, together as one."

"For Christ's sake, Laura, be quiet," said Burt, Michael's best friend, walking by her side, holding her elbow. She was singing it loudly and proudly as though walking down the aisle at her wedding. She stared at him for a moment in shock. She didn't know she'd been singing. She hadn't realized that she'd been praying to be "together-as-one" again with Michael, dead with him in the ground.



Laura, robed in the *kittel*, leaves the playroom and returns to her seat. *I'd better prepare for my performance*, she thinks. *Because that is what it will be*. She has no faith any more, she believes in nothing since Michael's death—certainly not the possibility of influencing her own fate, of begging or bribing her way to safety. (*If I'm a good girl and fold down the biggest flap on my donation card, then I'll be "inscribed in the good book of life": no death, no loneliness for the coming year.*) She is here only because she promised to come, because last month, after three phone calls, she gave in to the urging of Ted, the president of the *shul*, and agreed to lead this morning's prayers. But she hasn't prepared at all, she hasn't even glanced at the *machzor*. She's assumed it will come back to her when she needs it, like riding a bike, that she can rely on having done it six times before. She reaches out her hand and lifts the *machzor* from the rack in front of her, brushing it automatically with her lips on its way to her lap. Then she opens it.

To her horror, none of it looks the least bit familiar. Not the Hebrew, not the English: The words make no sense to her at all. Then the letters begin to move on the page, and as she stares at

them, they bow to her like the Cat in the Hat: gallantly, deeply, dangerously. *It must be the fasting*, she thinks, *I'm losing my mind*. The letters begin to dance. They extend elbows to each other, they twirl and do-se-do, they exchange partners. Next they form into straight lines, each line makes a word, and then trading begins between the words. *Light* trades its "l" for an "n", making it *night*. Night light. A light night. Didn't Maimonides write about this? She remembers something vaguely. *Dat* (knowledge) became *edat* (community), just by switching the *daled* and the *ayin*, giving "knowledge" another layer of meaning, pointing to its deeper truth. The rabbis knew this: That the order of the letters is random; the secret meaning of a word lies buried in its core.

Laura looks more closely at the words on the page.

Grief, she sees, contains *fire*.

Scared and *sacred* are the same.

Love and *evil* are only one letter apart.

But *evil* is the same as *vile*.

And *evil* is the same as *live*.

She laughs aloud. A few eyes turn in her direction. She looks down piously, as though praying. Should she go further? Should she go on?

Sure, she thinks wildly, *Why not? I can no longer pray; but at least I can play*. Randomly she selects words off the page. Word-pairs, because she and Michael were a pair. Because even now, after a year, she still can't bear to be alone. But she picks pairs not like her and Michael (harmonious, converging, making sense) but word-pairs like her and Burt (opposing elements) that rub against each other, flint into fire, and yield light:

<i>Torah lost</i>	<i>Laura tossed</i>
<i>ashes love</i>	<i>lashes of</i>
<i>body mind</i>	<i>muddy bind</i>
<i>free why?</i>	<i>we fry</i>

She laughs again, unaware this time of the looks she is attracting, and does a few more. But now the words of the *machzor* have begun to mingle with other words, with her own words, from her thoughts and memories. She feels angry, irreverent, alive.

<i>pain kiss</i>	<i>Cain piss</i>
<i>lark dust</i>	<i>dark lust</i>
<i>cancer holy?</i>	<i>answer slowly</i>
<i>Michael soon</i>	<i>cycle moon</i>

Laura stops, looks at the clock.

Only minutes have passed. But it seems longer, and she is panting a little, as though she's run a race. She looks around the room. Everything in it seems the same as before: the congregants sitting passively in their seats, and the tuneless, toneless droning from the podium. Soon it will be her turn. She thinks now she'll be able to manage the prayers.

A hand is extended to her; she looks up, and takes it. In spite of herself, she is moved: Ted, a kind man. Although they've spoken on the phone, the last time she saw him face-to-face was a little over a year ago at the *shiva*. In her first week of mourning, he came to her home almost every day to comfort her, often bringing food—a curried chicken dish she recalled, that his wife had made. It was tasty the first time she ate it, less so the second. After a week of this chicken curry, she swore she'd never eat it again as long as she lived.

The *shiva*: She remembers feeling nothing, just a dizzy giddy feeling, the same way she feels now from the fasting and the spinning

words. Until it was drawing to its end: On the seventh day, following the morning prayers, she was gripped by panic, by terror as unscalable as a vertical wall of glass. Her house, for seven days full of people, would now be empty; she would be, for the first time since Michael's death, alone. Everyone was already gone but Burt. He and Michael had been frat brothers at U of T and like real brothers ever since; and only his grief equalled, or approximated, Laura's. They were left alone after all the other people had wolfed down the lox and bagels, and said their sincere but relieved good-byes. ("A pity there are no children," people kept whispering to each other, as if she couldn't hear. "It would be a comfort to her, take her mind off herself. But they waited so long. You know, her *career*...")

She and Burt sat in silence on the low chairs; and then when Burt rose, he said in a choked voice, "I hate to leave you," and she stood up and leaned against him and they held each other. He had stayed by her side through everything: He was the one, not her father, not her brother, who held her hand as they lowered Michael's coffin into the ground; who growled at the people to leave her alone, to stop grabbing at her, and to make way, as she turned away from the grave and sang her way, Ophelia-like, down the aisle. Now they felt for each other, and she clung to him, he kissed her cheeks out of tenderness and grief; and it hadn't felt wrong at that time—only later, when he began coming over regularly, and it became a routine: Tuesday evenings, the night that Frances teaches late. It has changed on them somehow: tenderness, shared love for Michael, gone terribly wrong, twisted into its opposite, into betraying him, into defiling the friendship and the love.

And worse than that, harder still to understand: She has never felt such desire in all her life. So unlike the quiet love with Michael, this raging passion, this side of herself she had known

nothing about. A need so intense, it tears her from her own mind, from her ability to think, to talk, to smile in a normal everyday way. Last week, she was sitting at her desk at work, reliving the night before with Burt, when she heard a knock at her door. She knows how she must have looked to the poor student standing there. She has seen this face of hers in the mirror: white, torn ragged, haggard with desire. "Did I disturb you?" asked the student anxiously, seeing that face, as Laura tried quickly to fix it; but it was no use. She couldn't. It was stuck on like a mask. The student left, promising to return.

There is no longer any pretense: Tuesdays Burt comes over, throws his jacket on the chair, and they go straight for each other, mouths clinging, lips and breath and tongues entwined, like saving a life—"To save a life is to save the whole world"—and the rest just follows while their mouths stay glued. She clings to life, she claws at it with her fingernails. She will wrest from it its secret, tear out its heart and swallow it slithering like an oyster, to keep up the beating of her own frail heart. This is how it is with Burt: furious, elemental, insistent. Loveless but something as strong as love.

No, Laura decides, shifting in the pew, crossing her legs. *I will not give this up.* She doesn't care that it's Yom Kippur and she is supposed to give up her body to find her soul. Her body is all she has left. Everything she feels now, everything she knows, runs through her body and into sex, like a current running through a river and into the sea. At first she felt guilty about this. In the months after Michael died, she sometimes woke up at night and saw his face before hers; and in the morning, she would vow to break it off with Burt. But now she no longer makes these promises—to Michael, to herself, or to God. Instead, she has recently published an essay, praised as "groundbreaking," entitled

"Moral Ambiguity In Our Time." She could never have written this paper a year ago, before anything was ambiguous: when good was good (and *she* was good), and evil something unknown. Her essay concludes: "For who of us can ever break with life? With the only living branch within reach? That branch that contains everything, till the thaw of spring?"



The introductory prayers are almost over. Laura watches the praying man. A praying mantis, that's what he looks like, with his long insect neck and the little round head on the top. A lower form of life: a creature with no music in him, and no love of words—a creature of no ambiguity. A man who is doubtless, faithful: who has never tasted bacon, or the breasts of anyone but his wife. *But oh!* thinks Laura, *the dullness, the worthlessness, of virtue untried!*

Now he has finished and there is silence in the *shul*. The man turns around, craning his neck in all directions as he looks for Laura; and when he finally spots her, he signals to her emphatically, almost with anger. She rises stiffly and ascends the stairs, shaking his hand without looking at him as they pass.

Up on the podium, her back is to the people, and all she can see before her is the closed ark containing the holy Torah. *What am I doing up here?* she wonders. *Who am I to lead the people? I, who believe nothing...* She pulls the *kittel* tighter around her, and stares, as though they will help her, at the ten commandments inscribed on the tablets above the ark—the same commandments she wore for years around her neck, a gift from her grandmother, until she broke the chain. Again the fasting madness strikes: Floating vaporously in front of the tablets, she sees the face of her childhood rabbi. He floats down towards her and whispers into her ear: "You shall do, *then* you shall hear.' Jews act first. We are not

Christians who need faith before we can act. We do. And faith will come later, if at all.”

If at all. How amazing to think that this might be all right, that others before her have also faithlessly led the congregation in prayer. She thinks of all those who have worn this *kittel*, some of them maybe no better than she. Perhaps some of them, like her, also felt ridiculous praying when there’s no one to hear. She feels a little lighter than before. She takes a deep breath. *Don’t think. Just do. Open your mouth. Sing.*

She opens her mouth and sings. She begins with the wordless opening melody, singing in a normal voice, just an everyday voice, as though she were humming Yankee Doodle in the shower. Though of course what she is singing is different; she can sense this, she can feel its power creeping up on her, even while she tries to ignore it. These are old, cracked tunes, antique and fragile as vases, but very strong. They can tolerate her flippancy, her indifferent holding of them. She looks at them, looks them over, as she meets them again.

Then words join the music, and she goes on singing in a clear ringing voice, about angels, and holiness, and God. Now the words begin to enter her, and the melody is weaving its way in through her ears, in one, out the other. She picks her way carefully, cautiously, like approaching a tiger, gentling it, circling it, sizing it up. Yet in spite of herself, in spite of her lack of belief, the prayers move her; and by the time she reaches the beginning of the *Sh’ma*, she has become a cantor, swaying to the music. She has become half-man, because all the cantors she’s ever seen have been men, swaying forwards and backwards, their bodies rigid, their legs glued together as instructed. But always a part of her remains a woman, too, and she sways side to side, or in circles. She would say that she can’t dance and never was graceful, but

when she doesn’t know she is moving, she hypnotizes with her rhythm and grace. The prayers fill her body. They have become the language of her breath: They have entered her hips, and knees, and shoulders, her thighs, and waist, and head. All of her is swaying now.

Then what always used to happen to her happens again, in spite of who she has become, in spite of what she has learned about herself, despite how she has betrayed Michael, the only man she has ever loved. The prayers take her deeper, and deeper, until by the time she reaches the *Amidah*, the central prayer, she is in the centre of her soul and could no more speak about normal things (like telling the congregation to rise or be seated) than she could pull out a vacuum cleaner and begin hoovering the podium. There are directions about this to the prayer leader: Not to speak while leading prayers, not to separate your legs except when stepping back and forth for the silent *Amidah*; kiss your prayer shawl at each of these points; bow at all of these, but always make sure you are standing upright, with legs together, for the word “God.” These instructions—which eight years ago, fearful of making mistakes, she laboriously memorized—are now etched on her body. She is no more aware of them than she is of the gradual change in her voice: It has deepened, it has become powerful, like a tiger stretching. It is no longer her voice, it is the voice of her people.

The rest of the prayers she leads in a trance. She has no real awareness of what’s around her, she turns the pages of the *machzor* but sings most of the prayers with her eyes closed; and at the end, when it is suddenly finished, and she is supposed to leave her place and walk up to the ark, she is white and stunned, and trembling. Somehow she manages to get there, and the congregation remembers now, from all the times this has happened in the past,

that she always needs help at this point in the service. As she stands, confused and helpless, before the open ark, Ted rushes over, reaches inside the ark, lifts out the *Torah* from its dark interior, and places it in her arms. She stares at it, cradles it, amazed that it has happened again, that something still means something to her, that something still remains of who she used to be. When she carries the silver-gilded *Torah* around the room, to be kissed like a baby by the gentle touch of prayerbooks or the silky threads of prayer shawls, many people smile at her or whisper to her how beautiful her singing was. Some even try to do a little socializing, whispering, "So nice to see you back, Laura. Do you have somewhere to break the fast?" But she can't understand them very well, there is a fog between her and everybody else, and she cannot form her mouth into a smile. Where she is there are no smiles. She has heard that in scuba diving the first thing you learn is how to surface slowly, so as not to burst your lungs by racing too quickly up from the depths to the sunny surface of the water. Maybe the cantors lived in the depths all the time, or halfway up; she can't imagine that they sang these songs from anywhere but the bottom. And it's a long trip up.

For fifteen minutes at least, she sits trembling in her seat, smiling wanly, painfully, to those who rush over and take her hand. Some people say they were "moved." Others kiss her and call her an angel, and she still feels a pounding in her head the way she did when she bounced on her heels three times for "Holy Holy Holy," and on the last one felt herself springboarded upward, her head aiming like a cannonball for the two tablets over the ark. A few people evaluate it as a performance, with words like "stellar" and "triumphant." But as soon as she can, Laura hurries off by herself, down the stairs and out the door.

Outside on the stoop, Laura leans back her head, shuts her

eyes, and cools her face in the strong cold wind. Something has eased in her, something she can barely name. But she feels lighter now, and for the time being at least, some of the terrible deadness in her is gone. She stands slightly trembling, vibrating like a violin string continuing to resound; and as though she's been tuned to a higher pitch, she feels incredibly, wonderfully alive. She feels open now, like a string waiting to be played.

Laura raises her head, looks down the street, and then turns her face slightly to catch more of the wind. The wind plays upon her, gently breezy at first and then with a harsh whiff of autumn warning. She does not flinch; just shuts her eyes, opens herself to it, and feels the moment, the incredible joy of being alive. She stays there for a while, feeling; and by the time she opens her eyes, ready to go back inside, she has the wondering look of a young girl surprised by her very first kiss.