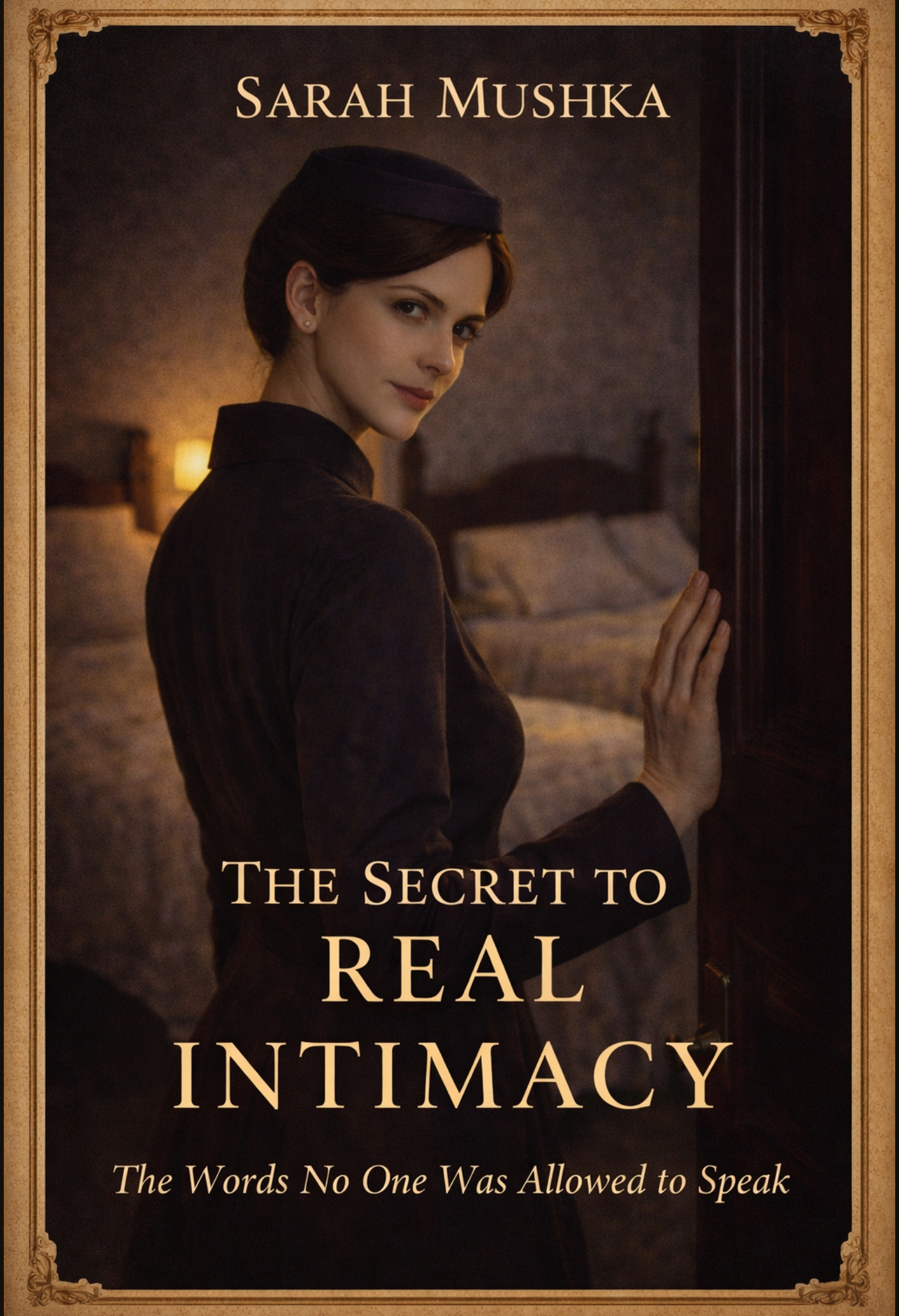
Sarah Mushka



The Secret to Real Intimacy

The Words No One Was Allowed to Speak

THE SECRET TO REAL INTIMACY

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Chapter 1:
I Am Sarah Mushka

My name is Sarah Mushka and I have eleven children and a husband I saw twice before I married him. Twice. The first time was in a hotel lobby in Boro Park, him on one side of the table, me on the other, both our mothers pretending not to listen from across the room. He had nice hands. That is what I noticed. He noticed, I found out later, that I did not look at the floor the whole time. He liked that. I do not even know if this man snores. Three weeks later I am his wife.

I was eighteen. He was twenty. We stood under the chuppah and I cried and everyone thought it was because I was moved, because the moment was holy, because a kallah is supposed to cry. I was crying because I was terrified. Because in one hour I would be alone in a room with a man I did not know, and I was supposed to do things with him that nobody had ever explained to me in words that made sense.

I am from Williamsburg. I grew up on Hooper Street, then Ross Street, then after the chasunah we got the apartment on Bedford Avenue, third floor, the one with the kitchen so small you cannot open the oven and the refrigerator at the same time. Eleven children I raised in apartments like that. Not because I am a saint. Because this is what you do. You get married, you have children, you figure it out, and you do not complain, at least not to anyone outside your own kitchen.

But I am writing this book because someone has to say what nobody says. And I am tired of watching young kallahs walk to the chuppah with the same terror I had, and nobody is doing anything about it. I had a kallah teacher. She was a nice woman. She taught me the halachos of niddah. She taught me when I can touch my husband and when I cannot. She taught me to count the days, to check, to go

to the mikveh. She taught me the laws. She did not teach me what it feels like.

She did not teach me about desire. She did not teach me about fear. She did not teach me that the first time would hurt, that I would bleed, that I would lock myself in the bathroom of the hotel room and sit on the edge of the bathtub with my knees shaking. She did not teach me that my husband would knock on the door and ask if I was okay, and I would say yes, and we would both know I was lying.

Nobody tells you these things. Not your mother, because her mother did not tell her. Not your teacher, because she does not have the words. Not your friends, because they are all pretending the same as you. So you walk into marriage blind and you stay blind for years, bumping into walls, and you think this is normal because everyone around you is also bumping into walls and nobody is talking about it.

I stayed. Thirteen years now. I am still married to this man with the nice hands. And I will tell you something — I love him. Mamash, I love him. But it took me a long time to get here, and the road was not what anyone told me it would be, because nobody told me anything about the road at all.

This book is what I wish someone had given me. Not a halacha book. Not a book about being a good wife. Not a book that tells you to light candles and smile and everything will be fine. This is a book about what happens in the bedroom and in the silence and in the fights and in the moments when you are lying next to a man in the dark and you do not know how to reach him and he does not know how to reach you and you are both pretending to be asleep.

I am going to say things in this book that will make people uncomfortable. Good. Someone should be uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable for years and nobody cared. I am going to talk about the things that happen between a husband and wife because if I do not, who will? The rabbis are not going to write this book. The

rebbetzins are not going to write this book. The therapists will write a book but it will cost you forty dollars and use words like "emotional regulation" and you will fall asleep by page three.

I am not a therapist. I am not a rebbetzin. I am a woman from Williamsburg with eleven children and a husband and a sheitel that is always on the doorknob because I pull it off the second I walk in the door. I am a woman who has been through it. All of it. The bad nights and the good nights and the nights where nothing happens and the nights where everything changes. And I am going to sit here and tell you everything, because you deserve to know.

If you are a woman reading this, I am talking to you. If you are a man reading this — good. Stay. You need to hear this too, maybe more than she does.

I am Sarah Mushka. I do not have all the answers. But I have the truth. And the truth is better than silence.

The Lesson

Nobody is coming to save you from your own wedding night. So someone better start talking before you get there.

Chapter 2:
They Taught Me Modesty but Forgot to Teach Me About My Own Body

I was seven years old the first time I understood that my body was something to hide. My mother pulled my sleeve down at a Shabbos table — I was reaching for the kugel and my elbow was showing. My elbow. I am seven. She did not say anything, just pulled the sleeve down with two fingers like she was adjusting a curtain, and kept talking to my aunt about who was sick in the neighborhood.

I learned fast. Collarbone, covered. Knees, covered. Elbows, covered. Singing voice, do not let a man hear it. Hair, after you are married, cover it. Your body is a private thing, a holy thing, a thing that belongs to Hashem and then to your husband and maybe last of all to you, if there is anything left.

I am not here to argue with tznius. I cover myself. I believe in it. But I am telling you what happens when you teach a girl for eighteen years that her body is dangerous, and then on one night you tell her to take off her clothes in front of a stranger and enjoy it. You cannot raise a girl in a locked room and then be surprised when she does not know how to walk outside.

I did not know my own body. I am not talking about something small. I mean I did not know. I never looked at myself. I never touched myself with curiosity, with interest, with anything other than washing in the shower as fast as possible because the body was not something you lingered on. I did not know what things looked like. I did not know what things felt like. I had a body the way you have a suitcase — it carried me from place to place and I did not open it to see what was inside.

My kallah teacher, three weeks before the chasunah, she tells me about the physical part of marriage. She uses clinical words. She draws nothing. She explains nothing about how it feels. She tells me what goes where, like she is giving me directions to a grocery store. Turn left, then right, you will find it. She does not tell me that my body has places that feel good when they are touched. She does not tell me that I am allowed to feel good. She does not tell me what to do if it hurts. She says "the first time can be uncomfortable" the way you say "the dentist might pinch a little," and then she moves on to the halachos of checking for stains.

So I go to my wedding night and I do not know my own body. Think about this. I do not know what feels good to me. I do not know what I like. I do not know where to be touched or how. And he does not know either — but I will talk about him later. Right now I am talking about me. About what it is like to be a stranger in your own skin.

For years after I got married, I did not look at myself. I changed clothes in the dark. I showered with the light dim. I had eleven pregnancies and I could not have told you what my body looked like because I did not look. I thought this was modesty. I thought this was what Hashem wanted. That a woman should be so removed from her own body that she does not even know it.

But here is what I learned, and it took me too long to learn it. You cannot give something you do not have. You cannot share your body with a man if you do not know your body yourself. You cannot tell him what feels good if you have never figured out what feels good. And you are not going to figure it out in the dark with a stranger while your heart is pounding and your hands are shaking.

A girl should know herself before she knows a man. I am not saying anything scandalous. I am saying she should look at herself. She should understand herself. She should know her own body like she knows her own kitchen — where everything is, what everything does, what she likes, what she does not. This is not

immodesty. This is preparation. This is basic human information that we are keeping from our daughters and then blaming them when the marriage bed is cold.

My daughter is fourteen now, my oldest girl. She is already learning the same things I learned — cover, hide, do not draw attention. And I will teach her tznius because I believe in tznius. But I will also sit with her before her chasunah, and I will tell her what nobody told me. I will tell her that her body is hers. That she should know it. That knowing your own body is not a sin, it is a gift you bring to your husband on your wedding night. Because the alternative is two people in the dark, and nobody knows anything, and that is not holiness. That is just confusion.

They taught me modesty. They forgot to teach me that modesty and ignorance are not the same thing.

The Lesson

You cannot share what you do not know you have. A woman who has never met her own body cannot introduce it to anyone else.

Chapter 3:
The First Night Was Not What Anyone Promised

The hotel room had wallpaper with gold stripes. I remember this because I stared at that wallpaper for a long time. I remember the bedspread was burgundy, stiff, the kind you find in every frum wedding hotel in the Catskills. I remember the bathroom had those little soaps wrapped in paper that I did not open because my hands were shaking too much.

He came out of the bathroom first. He was wearing a white undershirt and his tzitzis and his pants. I went in after him. I changed into the nightgown my mother had bought me — white, long, with a ribbon at the neck that I tied and untied three times because I did not know if it should be open or closed. I looked at myself in the mirror under that fluorescent light and I did not recognize the woman looking back. She looked scared. She was scared.

When I came out he was sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked at me and he said something, I think he said I looked nice, but I cannot be sure because there was a roaring sound in my ears like standing next to the BQE. I sat next to him. There was maybe a foot of space between us. This was the closest I had ever been to a man who was not my father or my brother.

He touched my hand. His hand was damp. I realized he was sweating. This man who I was supposed to build a bayis ne'eman with, his palms were as wet as mine. He said something about it being a beautiful chasunah. I said yes. We sat there. I do not know how long. It felt like an hour. It was probably four minutes.

Then he kissed me and I did not know what to do with my mouth. Nobody teaches you this. Nobody sits you down and says here is how a kiss works. I had seen nothing, read nothing. I grew up in Williamsburg, not on the internet. I pressed my lips together like I was eating something sour and he pressed his lips together and we bumped faces like two people reaching for the same door handle.

I want to tell you the rest because the rest is what nobody talks about. He tried. I tried. It hurt. Not a little. A lot. Like something was tearing. I made a sound and he stopped and I could see in his face that he was horrified. He asked if I was okay. I said yes because what else do you say. He tried again. I bit the inside of my cheek so hard I tasted blood. This went on. I will not give you every detail because some things belong to that room with the gold wallpaper, but I will tell you this: it was not what anyone promised.

Nobody told me it would hurt like that. My kallah teacher said "discomfort." Discomfort is when your shoes are too tight. This was not discomfort. And nobody told me there would be blood and I would not know if the blood was normal or if something was wrong, and I would be too embarrassed to ask, and he would be too embarrassed to look. We were two children. I was eighteen. He was twenty. We were playing house with real consequences.

After, I went to the bathroom. I locked the door. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and I cried. Not loud. Quiet, the kind of crying where you press your face into a towel so nobody hears. I ran the water so he would think I was washing. I sat there and I thought: this is what everyone was so excited about? This is what the whole wedding was for? The flowers and the badeken and the dancing and the seven brochos — for this?

He knocked on the door after a few minutes. "Sarah Mushka, you okay?" I said yes. I washed my face. I came out. He was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling. I lay down next to him. There was that foot of space between us again. We did not touch. We did not talk. I listened to him breathing. He listened to me breathing.

Somewhere outside the window a car alarm was going off and nobody was turning it off.

I did not sleep that night. I do not think he did either. I lay there in that hotel bed with the stiff burgundy bedspread and I thought about my mother and what she knew and did not tell me. I thought about my kallah teacher and her clinical directions. I thought about every woman I knew — my aunts, my cousins, my married friends — and I wondered if they had all gone through this same night and just never said a word.

In the morning he davened and I got dressed and we went down to breakfast and smiled at each other over orange juice and rugelach and we pretended that everything was fine. We pretended for a long time after that. We got very good at pretending.

The Lesson

The wedding night is not a fairy tale. It is two strangers in a room with no instructions. And the ones who survive it are not the ones who got it right — they are the ones who did not let it break them.

Chapter 4:
I Married a Stranger and So Did He

For the first year of my marriage I was so busy being terrified that I forgot to notice he was terrified too.

I would lie in bed at night, stiff, my nightgown pulled down to my ankles, my hands flat at my sides like I was lying in a coffin, and I would think about what was wrong with me. Why was I not enjoying this. Why was I not the blushing young kallah who could not wait for her husband. Why did my stomach drop every time he reached for me in the dark. Something is broken in me, I decided. Something is missing.

It did not occur to me — not for a long time — that the man lying next to me was having the same thoughts.

I married a stranger. Yes. But he also married a stranger. He also stood under that chuppah across from a girl he had met twice and thought: I am going to spend the rest of my life with this person. He also walked into that hotel room with no idea what he was doing. He also lay awake that first night staring at the ceiling.

I know this because eventually, years later, he told me. But I will get to that.

In the beginning I saw him as someone who was doing things to me. He was the one who reached over in the dark. He was the one who initiated. He was the one who wanted something. And I was the one who had to figure out how to give it. That is how I understood marriage for years — he wants, I give. He reaches, I respond. He is the subject of every sentence and I am the object.

But here is what I did not see. I did not see his hand hesitate in the air before it touched me. I did not see him pull back when I flinched, and what that did to his face. I did not see that every time I went stiff, he felt like a monster. He told me this. Years later, sitting at our kitchen table at one in the morning after everyone was sleeping. He said, "I could feel you holding your breath. Every time. And I did not know what I was doing wrong."

He was a boy from Williamsburg. He learned in yeshiva since he was three years old. Gemara, Chumash, halacha, chassidus. He could learn a blatt in forty minutes. He could not tell you one thing about a woman's body. Not one thing. His rebbe did not teach him this. His father did not teach him this. His chassan teacher — yes, he had one too — told him the same halachos my kallah teacher told me, from the other side. When you can, when you cannot, how to count. Nobody told him how to touch a woman. Nobody told him that the first time she might freeze or cry. Nobody told him what to do with his hands, with his mouth, with his fear.

He walked into that room as blind as me. Maybe more blind, because at least I knew I was afraid. He did not even have permission to be afraid. He was the man. He was supposed to know. He was supposed to lead. Where? How? Nobody gave him a map. Nobody even told him there was a territory to cross.

For years I was angry at him. Not screaming angry. The quiet kind. The kind where you hand him his plate at dinner and you do not look at his eyes. The kind where he says "good Shabbos" and you say "good Shabbos" back and there is nothing behind it. I was angry because the nights were not getting better, because I was still stiff, because I was still pretending, and I thought it was his fault.

It was not his fault. It was not my fault either. It was the fault of a system that takes two young people who have never touched another human being, puts them in a room, and says: now be married. Now be intimate. Now build a Jewish home. Without giving them a single tool.

I look at him now, thirteen years later, and I see the twenty-year-old boy he was. Thin. Nervous. His glasses slightly crooked because he pushes them up with his whole hand instead of two fingers. That boy did not know how to hurt me on purpose. He did not know how to please me either. He was stumbling around in the same dark room I was, bumping into the same furniture, and neither of us thought to turn on a light.

If you are a young wife reading this and you are angry at your husband because the nights are not what they should be — stop for a minute. Look at him. Not at the man who is failing you. At the boy who was never taught. He is doing his best with nothing. Same as you.

And if your husband is reading this — tell him I said he is not a monster. He is not broken. He just was never given the words. Nobody's son was.

The Lesson

You married a stranger. But so did he. And the sooner you realize you are both lost, the sooner you can stop blaming each other and start finding your way together.

Chapter 5:
Your Nervousness on the Wedding Night Is Not a Problem, It Is a Message

Every kallah I have ever spoken to — every single one — tells me the same thing. "I was so nervous." And then she says it like it is a confession. Like she is admitting something shameful. Like being nervous on the night you are supposed to be intimate for the first time with a man you barely know is some kind of personal failing.

I want to say this very clearly: your nervousness was not a problem. Your nervousness was the smartest thing about you.

When I stood in that hotel bathroom in my white nightgown, shaking, my body was not malfunctioning. My body was doing exactly what it was designed to do. It was saying: I do not know this person. I am not safe yet. I am not ready. My body was protecting me. And instead of listening to it, I overruled it. I walked out of that bathroom and I lay down and I let things happen because I thought that is what you do. You push through. You are a wife now. Wives do not get to be nervous.

I wish someone had told me that night: the shaking is not weakness. The shaking is wisdom.

Think about what we ask of a frum girl on her wedding night. Twenty-four hours ago she was not allowed to be in a room alone with this man. She could not touch him. She could not even hand him a plate directly. And now — now she is supposed to take off her clothes, lie in a bed, let him see her, let him touch her, let him inside her body. In one day she goes from zero to everything. And if her body says wait, we tell her something is wrong with her.

Nothing was wrong with me. Nothing is wrong with you. A body that freezes when it is overwhelmed is a body that is working. A body that clenches when it is scared is a body that is doing its job. You are not broken because you tensed up. You are not frigid because you could not relax. You are a human being with a nervous system that was screaming at you, and nobody taught you how to listen to it.

I froze on my wedding night. My whole body went rigid, like a board. My husband touched my arm and every muscle from my neck to my feet locked up. He thought I did not want him. I thought I was defective. We were both wrong. I was just not ready, and my body knew it before my mind did.

Here is what I have learned in thirteen years: the body does not lie. Your mind can talk you into anything. Your mind can say: this is your husband, you love him, you should want this. Your mind can say: other women do not have this problem, what is wrong with you. Your mind can make you lie down and go through the motions and pretend everything is fine. But your body will tell you the truth. And if the truth is "not yet" — that is not a failure. That is information.

What should have happened on my wedding night is this: someone should have told me, before, that it is okay to wait. That you do not have to do everything the first night. That you can lie next to each other and talk. That you can hold hands. That you can kiss and stop there. That the first night does not have to be the night. That you have a whole life ahead of you and there is no rush, not really, not even if you feel pressure from every direction.

But nobody told me that. And I think I know why. Because in our world there is a halacha, a mitzvah, and people think the mitzvah means the first night, and nobody wants to say out loud that maybe the mitzvah can wait a day or two or a week until both people are ready. I am not a posek. I am not going to tell you the halacha. But I am going to tell you what I know from being a woman: you cannot do a mitzvah with a body that is screaming no. That is not a mitzvah. That is survival.

After the first night, the nervousness did not go away. It stayed. Every time he reached for me, my body braced. For months, maybe longer. And every time I forced myself past it, the nervousness got worse, not better. Because my body was learning something: she does not listen to me. She will override me every time. And a body that learns it will not be heard eventually stops sending messages altogether. That is when you go numb. That is when you feel nothing. And then you think you are really broken, when the truth is you just stopped listening to the only part of you that was telling the truth.

I started listening in my fifth year of marriage. I started paying attention to what my body was saying. When it said not tonight, I said not tonight. When it said slower, I said slower. When it said I need something different, I said I need something different. And slowly, very slowly, the nervousness became something else. It became a guide. It told me what I needed. It told me when I was safe enough to open and when I was not. It was never my enemy. It was always my friend.

Tell your daughter this before her chasunah. Tell her the nervousness is not something to push through. It is something to listen to. It is her body's way of saying: take care of me. And she should listen. Because nobody else is going to.

The Lesson

Your body was never the problem. It was the only one in the room telling the truth.

Chapter 6:
Nobody Teaches a Boy How to Touch His Wife

I was angry at my husband for six years. Not about the dishes, not about money, not about the children, though we fought about all of those things. I was angry about the way he touched me.

He was not rough. I want to be clear. He was never rough. He was something worse. He was clueless. He touched me the way you touch a door handle — grab, turn, push. Like my body was a thing to be operated. He did not know where to put his hands. He did not know how long to keep them there. He did not know that there are places on a woman's body that need time, that need softness, that need patience. He went straight to where he wanted to go like a man driving to shul — shortest route, no stops.

And I lay there, year after year, wondering why I felt nothing. Wondering why this thing that is supposed to be beautiful felt like a medical procedure. Quick, clinical, and then he would roll over and fall asleep in three minutes and I would stare at the ceiling and think: is this it? For the rest of my life, is this it?

I blamed him. Of course I blamed him. He was the one touching me. He was the one who should know better. He was a grown man. How does a grown man not know how to touch his own wife?

But here is the answer, and it is not a comfortable answer: nobody taught him.

Nobody. Not one person. His father did not take him aside and say: a woman needs time. His rebbe did not say: slow down, be gentle, learn her body. His chassan teacher told him the same halachos everyone gets — when you can, when you cannot, the brachos, the kavanos. Nobody told him that a woman's

body is not the same as his. That what works for him does not work for her. That she needs twenty minutes before he needs five. Nobody told him any of this because the men who were supposed to teach him did not know it themselves.

I think about this sometimes and it makes me want to cry. Generations of men who do not know how to touch their wives. Generations of women lying in the dark feeling nothing. And every generation passes down the same silence, the same ignorance, the same fumbling in the dark, and calls it modesty.

There is nothing modest about ignorance. Modest is covering your hair. Modest is dressing tznius. Modest is not talking about your intimate life at the Shabbos table. But sending a boy to his wedding night without telling him the first thing about a woman's body — that is not modesty. That is cruelty.

My husband, he is a good man. I am telling you, he is a good man. He learns every day. He davens three times a day. He is a good father. He brings me flowers before Shabbos, not every week but enough. He is not the kind of man who does not care. He cared. He always cared. But caring and knowing are not the same thing. He cared about me and did not know what to do with his caring. So he did the only thing he knew — the fast thing, the direct thing, the thing his body wanted — and he thought because he felt good, I felt good too.

It took me six years to open my mouth. Six years. And when I finally did — I will tell you that story later, because it deserves its own chapter — when I finally did, the look on his face was not anger. It was not defensiveness. It was shame. Pure shame. Like someone had pulled a curtain open and shown him something he did not want to see. He said, "Why did you not tell me?" And I said, "Why did nobody tell you?"

If you are a woman and your husband does not know how to touch you — it is not because he does not love you. It is because he was raised in a world where boys learn Gemara for fifteen years and nobody spends fifteen minutes teaching them

about their wife's body. He can tell you every opinion on a sugya in Bava Metzia. He cannot tell you where to touch a woman so she feels something. This is what we have done to our sons.

And if you are a man reading this — and I hope you are — I am not here to shame you. I am here to tell you what you were not told. Your wife's body is not your body. What feels good to you in three minutes takes her much longer. She needs your hands before she needs anything else. She needs you to slow down. She needs you to ask. She needs you to stay in one place long enough for something to build instead of rushing like you are late for Maariv.

I am not a doctor and I am not going to draw you a diagram. But I will say this: learn. Ask her. If she cannot tell you — and she might not be able to, because nobody taught her either — then learn together. Slowly. With the lights on if you can manage it. Like two people who actually want to know each other, not two people performing a mitzvah in the dark.

My husband learned. It took time. It took me speaking up and it took him listening and it took both of us being embarrassed and doing it anyway. And now, thirteen years in, this man who used to touch me like a door handle — he touches me like he knows me. Because he does. But nobody handed him that knowledge. We had to build it from nothing. In the dark. With no instructions.

That is a terrible way to learn anything. But it is the only way we had.

The Lesson

A man who does not know how to touch his wife is not a bad husband. He is an untaught one. And the system that failed to teach him owes her an apology.

Chapter 7:
The Silence in Our Bed Was Louder Than Any Fight We Ever Had

We had fights. Real ones. About money, about his mother, about whether the baby should go to the doctor or if I was overreacting. I once threw a wooden spoon at the wall — not at him, at the wall, but still. He once walked out of the apartment and did not come back for three hours and I sat in the kitchen feeding the baby and planning what I would say to the shadchan who matched us. We fought like normal people. Like married people. The fights were loud and messy and then they ended and we went on.

But the silence in our bed — that was something else. That silence did not end. It lived there. It moved in like a tenant who does not pay rent and you cannot get rid of.

I am talking about the nights when we lay next to each other and said nothing. Not angry nothing. Not cold-shoulder nothing. Just — nothing. Empty. Two people in the same bed with a canyon between them and neither one knows how to cross it. He breathes. I breathe. The baby monitor crackles. A siren goes somewhere on Bedford Avenue. And we lie there, both awake, both knowing the other one is awake, and nobody says a word.

How does this happen? How do two people who share a bed, who share children, who share a bathroom and a bank account and a life — how do they become strangers under the same blanket?

I will tell you how. It happens one night at a time.

The first night you say nothing, it is because you are tired. The baby was up three times. You have nothing to give. Fine. Normal. The second night you say nothing, it is because the first night set a precedent and now you do not know how to break it. The third night, the silence has a shape. It is a thing between you, solid, like a bolster pillow that someone put down the middle of the bed. By the tenth night, by the fiftieth night, the silence is the loudest thing in the room.

We did not have the words. That was part of it. In Yiddish, in our world, you do not have a vocabulary for what happens between husband and wife. You do not say "I need you to touch me" or "I want you tonight" or "I do not want you tonight." You do not say "that felt good" or "that did not feel good." You have no words because nobody gave you words. So the silence is not just absence of talking — it is absence of language itself. You are two people in a country with no dictionary.

I wanted him to reach for me. Sometimes. Not always. But sometimes I would lie there and I would want him to put his hand on my hip or my shoulder or anywhere, just to say I am here, I know you are here, we are still us. But he did not reach because the last three times he reached I went stiff and he took that to mean I did not want him. So he stopped reaching. And I took his not reaching to mean he did not want me. So I stopped hoping.

You see how this works? Silence breeds silence. He pulls back because he thinks she does not want him. She pulls back because she thinks he does not want her. And the space between them grows, night by night, until they are sleeping in the same bed the way strangers sleep in a hotel — polite, distant, careful not to touch.

The silence got into everything. It was not just in the bed. It followed us to the kitchen. To Shabbos. To the car. We could talk about the children. We could talk about groceries. We could talk about who is picking up the dry cleaning. But underneath all that normal talking was this other silence, this unspoken thing, this giant fact of our life that we could not say out loud: we are not connecting. We are not reaching each other. We are roommates with a kesubah.

I remember one night — this was maybe year four or year five — I was lying in bed and he was lying next to me and I could hear him swallow. That is how quiet it was. I could hear him swallow. And I thought: I could reach over right now. I could touch his arm. I could say his name. I could say anything — how was your day, I missed you, I am lonely, I am here. One sentence would break this. One word would crack the wall.

I said nothing. He said nothing. We fell asleep. In the morning we ate breakfast with the children like everything was fine because that is what you do. You put on the sheitel, you pack the lunches, you are fine. You are always fine.

The silence was louder than the fight about money. Louder than the wooden spoon hitting the wall. Louder than any words we ever yelled at each other. Because at least in a fight, you are talking. At least in a fight, the other person exists. In the silence, you are alone. You are married and you are alone and that is the loneliest kind of alone there is.

It took us years to break the silence. I will tell you how later. But I want you to know something first: if you are lying next to your husband right now, in the dark, saying nothing — you are not the only one. And the silence does not have to win. But someone has to speak first. Someone has to be brave enough to say the thing that cannot be said.

The Lesson

A fight means you still care enough to yell. Silence means you have given up. And giving up is quiet enough that nobody notices until it is almost too late.

Chapter 8:
I Thought Something Was Wrong With Me

For four years I thought I was broken.

Not broken like a plate, where you can see the crack. Broken like a clock that looks perfect on the wall, the hands are there, the numbers are there, but something inside is not working and you cannot figure out what it is. From the outside I was fine. Better than fine. I had children, baruch Hashem, one after the other. I kept a clean apartment. I cooked. I hosted. I was the wife everyone thought was doing well because I smiled at the right times and my sheitel was always straight.

But in the bedroom, I felt nothing.

Not pain anymore — that had gotten better after the first few months. Not fear exactly, though the nervousness never completely left. Just — nothing. He would touch me and I would lie there and I would feel his hand on my body the way you feel a blanket on your leg. It was there. It was not unpleasant. But it was not anything. Nothing stirred. Nothing woke up. Nothing moved in me. I was present the way a table is present — physically there, taking up space, not participating.

And I thought: something is wrong with me.

I thought this every single time. He would finish and I would go to the bathroom and wash my face and look at myself in the mirror and think: what is wrong with you. Other women feel something. Other women want this. You are supposed to want this. What kind of wife does not feel anything. What kind of woman are you.

The problem is, I had no one to compare to. In our community you do not talk about this. You do not sit with your friends over coffee and say "so, how is it in the bedroom?" You do not. Not ever. So I had no idea if what I was experiencing was normal or abnormal. I had no reference point. I was alone with my own body and my own silence and my own conclusion, which was: everyone else is fine. I am the broken one.

I know now that I was not alone. I know now because I have talked to women — quietly, carefully, in kitchens and on park benches and in the mikveh preparation room when nobody else is there. And almost every woman I have spoken to has said some version of the same thing: "I thought it was just me." Every single one. We are all walking around thinking we are the only one who feels nothing, the only one who is pretending, the only one who lies there and waits for it to be over. And because nobody talks, nobody finds out that the woman next to her at the PTA meeting is having the same experience.

This is what silence does. It does not just keep you quiet. It makes you believe you are alone. And believing you are alone in something like this — it eats you. Slowly, year by year, it eats at your sense of yourself as a woman, as a wife, as a person. You start to think there is something fundamentally wrong with your body, with your wiring, with the way you were made. You start to think Hashem made everyone else normal and you are the mistake.

I was not a mistake. And you are not a mistake. What I was, was a woman who had never been taught about her own pleasure. Who had never been told that feeling something requires conditions — safety, knowledge, time, patience, a man who knows what he is doing and a woman who knows what she needs. I had none of those things. I was trying to feel something in a situation that was set up for me to feel nothing. And then blaming myself for the results.

It is like someone hands you a violin and says play. You have never seen a violin. You do not know how to hold it. You do not know where to put your fingers. You

draw the bow across the strings and it makes a terrible sound. And then everyone looks at you and says: what is wrong with you? Why can you not play?

Nothing is wrong with me. I was never taught. He was never taught. We were two people with an instrument neither of us knew how to play, in a room with no music teacher, and we were supposed to make something beautiful. And when we could not, I thought it was my fault.

Four years I carried this. Four years of thinking I was defective. Of wondering if I should see a doctor. Of lying in bed after and pressing my hand against my stomach and thinking: is there something physically wrong in there? Am I built differently? Is my body broken?

My body was not broken. My body was waiting. It was waiting for safety. It was waiting for knowledge. It was waiting for someone — him or me or anyone — to figure out that there is more to this than the mechanical act. That a woman's body needs more than just contact. It needs connection. It needs warmth before heat. It needs to be woken up slowly, not switched on like a kitchen light.

When I finally started to feel something — and I will tell you about that too, later — it was not because something in me was fixed. It was because something in my marriage changed. The conditions changed. The safety changed. And my body, which had been waiting all along, finally said: okay. Now. Now I can feel.

The Lesson

You are not broken. You were just never given the instructions, the safety, or the time. And a body that feels nothing is not dead — it is waiting for a reason to come alive.

Chapter 9:
Mikveh Night and the Pressure Nobody Admits

The parking lot of the mikveh on a Thursday night at ten o'clock in winter. That is where I sit in my car with the engine running and the heater on and I do not go inside. Not yet. I just sit. My bag is on the passenger seat — towel, comb, soap, nail clipper, the whole preparation kit. The radio is off because I cannot listen to music right now. I just sit and I watch the other women go in and I think: they look calm. They look like they want to be here. Maybe they do. Maybe I am the only one sitting in this car trying to talk myself into going inside.

Tonight is mikveh night. Which means tonight I go home and I am available to my husband. After two weeks of not touching, two weeks of niddah, tonight the wall comes down and we are supposed to come together and it is supposed to be this beautiful reunion. The holiest night. The freshest night. The night that is supposed to feel like a wedding all over again.

That is what they tell you. Every shiur, every book, every rebbetzin who talks about taharas hamishpacha — they tell you that the separation makes the reunion sweeter. That two weeks apart builds desire. That mikveh night is the crown jewel of a Jewish marriage. And for some women, maybe it is. But for me, for years, mikveh night was a deadline.

A deadline. Like taxes. Like a bill that comes due. You have been away from each other for two weeks and now tonight — tonight you must. Not "you may." Must. Because he has been counting the days. Because he has been waiting. Because you both know what tonight means and if you come home from the mikveh and say "not tonight," his face will do something that will make you feel guilty for a

week.

I am not saying he pressured me. My husband is not that kind of man. He never said "you have to." He never said anything, really. But the pressure is not from him. The pressure is from the system. From the calendar. From the knowledge that this is the night, and if not tonight then when? Tomorrow you are tired. The next day the baby is sick. Shabbos you are exhausted from cooking. By Tuesday you are back in niddah. There is a window and the window is small and mikveh night is the opening of that window and everyone knows it.

So you go. You go inside the mikveh. You prepare. You check every nail, every hair, every surface of your body. You soak. You dunk. The mikveh lady watches you go under and come up and she says "kosher" and you get dressed and you drive home and you walk in the door and your husband is waiting.

He has been waiting. He is happy to see you. He smiles. Maybe he cleaned up the kitchen while you were out. Maybe he put the children to bed. He is trying. He is doing his part. And you stand there in the hallway with your wet hair and your bag and you think: I should want this. I should feel excited. Two weeks we have not touched. This should be the moment where I run to him.

But sometimes I did not want to run. Sometimes I stood in that hallway and I felt heavy. Not sick, not angry, not in pain. Just heavy. Like something was pressing on my chest. The weight of expectation. The weight of performance. The weight of having to transform from a woman who has been untouched for two weeks into a woman who is ready, willing, warm, open — in the time it takes to walk from the front door to the bedroom.

For years I performed on mikveh night. I am not proud of this. I went through the motions. I made the right sounds. I said the right things. I let him believe that I was there, fully there, when half of me was somewhere else — in the kitchen thinking about tomorrow's lunches, in the parking lot of the mikveh where I

should have stayed longer, in that part of my mind that goes somewhere far away when my body is doing something it does not want to do.

The guilt was the worst part. Because I felt guilty for not wanting it, and then I felt guilty for pretending I wanted it, and then I felt guilty for feeling guilty because what kind of frum woman does not want to be with her husband on mikveh night? The guilt went in circles. It never stopped. It never resolved. It just spun and spun and I smiled and got dressed and made breakfast the next morning.

I want to say something to the woman sitting in the mikveh parking lot right now. The one with the heater on and the bag on the seat and the feeling in her stomach like a stone. You are normal. You are not a bad wife. You are not a bad Jew. You are a woman who has been given a beautiful system without being given any of the tools to actually live inside it. Taharas hamishpacha is a beautiful thing — I believe this, I really do. But it was designed to work when both people are connected, when both people know how to come together, when the reunion is real and not a performance. When it is a performance, the system becomes a cage. And nobody talks about the cage.

What helped me — and this took years — was telling him. Telling him that sometimes I come home from the mikveh and I am not ready. That I need thirty minutes. Or an hour. Or just to sit with him on the couch and drink tea and talk about nothing until my body remembers that this man is safe. He did not love hearing it. But he listened. And slowly, mikveh night stopped being a deadline and started being a door. A door I walked through when I was ready, not when the calendar said I should.

The Lesson

Mikveh night is not a deadline. It is a door. And a door you are shoved through is not the same as a door you choose to open.

Chapter 10:
The Lie of "Just Relax"

If one more person tells me to "just relax," I am going to throw something. Not a wooden spoon this time. Something heavier.

My mother said it. My kallah teacher said it. The book my friend lent me — the one with the pastel cover and the soft language that said nothing — said it. Just relax. Relax your body. Relax your mind. Breathe deeply. Let go. As if relaxation is a faucet you can turn. As if you can lie next to a man in the dark with your heart pounding and your jaw clenched and someone says "relax" and your body says "oh, okay, I did not think of that. Thank you."

I tried to relax. For years I tried. I would lie in bed and I would think: relax. Relax your shoulders. Relax your stomach. Relax your legs. And the more I tried to relax, the tighter I got. Because that is how it works. Telling yourself to relax is like telling yourself not to think about an elephant. The second you try, it is all you can think about. My body heard "relax" and translated it as "something is about to happen that you need to relax for" and then it did the opposite. It braced.

Just relax. Like it is simple. Like the woman lying in bed with her nightgown twisted around her knees and her fists clenched under the pillow has not thought of this. Like the solution to years of tension and fear and feeling nothing is a two-word instruction. You might as well tell a drowning person to just swim. If she could swim, she would not be drowning.

Nobody who said "just relax" to me ever explained how. That is the part that makes me angry. They give you the instruction and not the method. They say "relax" the way you say "turn right" — as if the ability is obvious, as if everyone knows how, as if the problem is that you just were not trying hard enough. You

were trying. You were trying so hard that the trying itself became the problem.

Here is what I have learned about relaxation after thirteen years: it is not something you do. It is something that happens to you when conditions are right. Like sleep. You cannot force yourself to sleep. You can lie down, turn off the lights, close your eyes, but you cannot make sleep come. Sleep comes when your body feels safe enough to let go. Relaxation is the same. It comes when your body trusts what is happening. And trust is not an instruction. Trust is built.

My body did not trust what was happening. For years. Because what was happening was fast and confusing and nobody asked me if I was okay and I did not know how to say I was not. My body learned that this thing that happens in bed is something to survive, not something to enjoy. And you cannot relax into something you are surviving. You brace for survival. You clench. You hold your breath. You leave your body and go somewhere in your head where it is safe — the kitchen, the grocery list, the children's schedule for tomorrow. Anywhere but here.

The first time I actually relaxed was not because someone told me to. It was because something changed. My husband, this was maybe year seven or year eight, he did something different. I do not even think he did it on purpose. He was lying next to me and instead of reaching for me the way he usually did — fast, direct, the way I described before — he just put his hand on my back. That is all. His hand. Flat. On my back. And he left it there.

He did not move it. He did not slide it anywhere. He just left it there, warm and heavy, between my shoulder blades. And I lay there waiting for the next thing, the thing that always comes next, and it did not come. He just breathed. I breathed. His hand stayed. And after a while — I do not know how long, maybe five minutes, maybe ten — something in me let go. Not because I decided to. Because something in my body said: oh. Nothing is being asked of me right now. Nothing is expected. I can just be here.

That is what nobody tells you. Relaxation is not the thing you do before intimacy. Relaxation is what happens when you stop demanding things of yourself. When the pressure is gone. When nobody needs you to perform, to respond, to feel something on command. When you are allowed to just lie there with a hand on your back and the sound of breathing and nothing else.

What actually helped me was not the instruction to relax. What helped was permission to not do anything at all. When my husband learned — and I had to teach him this, word by word, night by night — that sometimes the best thing he could do was nothing, that is when my body started to come back to me. Not every time. Not like magic. But slowly, the way a cat comes out from under a bed when the room has been quiet long enough. My body crept back out. It unclenched. It started to feel things again. Not because I forced it. Because it was finally safe enough to.

If you are reading this and you have been told to "just relax" and you want to scream — I understand. The people who tell you this mean well. They do not know what else to say. But the advice is useless because it puts the burden on you, as if you are the problem. You are not the problem. The conditions are the problem. Fix the conditions and the relaxation takes care of itself.

Tell your husband this tonight. Not "help me relax." That puts pressure on both of you. Tell him: "Tonight, do not ask anything of me. Just be next to me. Put your hand on my back and leave it there. And let us see what happens." That is the beginning. That is where it starts. Not with trying harder. With trying less.

The Lesson

Relaxation is not an instruction. It is what your body does when it finally believes that nothing is being demanded of it.

Chapter 11:
What My Kallah Teacher Should Have Said but Could Not

My kallah teacher was a woman named Mrs. Friedman. She had a wig that did not move and a kitchen table covered in plastic and a way of talking about the female body like she was reading instructions for assembling a bookshelf. Insert tab A into slot B. Wait the required number of days. Immerse in the mikveh. Return to your husband. She said return to your husband like I was a library book being checked back in.

She taught me the halachos. She was thorough, I am giving her that. She knew every detail of niddah, every counting rule, every bedikah cloth situation you could think of. She had charts. She had a calendar with little stickers. She could answer any shaila about stains on fabric like she was a forensic scientist. But when it came to what actually happens between a man and a woman in a bed, she went quiet. Not silent exactly. More like she started speaking in code. She said things like "and then you will be together" and "he will come close to you" and "it is a mitzvah and you should approach it with simcha." Simcha. Like I was supposed to feel joyful about something I could not even picture in my head.

I sat in her living room every Sunday for six weeks before my chasunah. I was seventeen, almost eighteen. I did not know what an orgasm was. I am not being dramatic, I am telling you a fact. I did not know. Nobody had ever said that word in my presence, not in English, not in Yiddish, not in any language. I knew that relations existed because obviously children exist and they come from somewhere. But the mechanics, the feelings, the parts of my own body that were involved — this was a blank page. And Mrs. Friedman was not going to fill it in.

She could not. I know that now. She was a good woman doing her best with what she had, and what she had was the same empty education she received thirty years before from her own kallah teacher, who received it from hers. A whole chain of women handing down the laws without the life inside the laws. Like giving someone a recipe with all the measurements but no description of what the food is supposed to taste like. You follow every step and you still do not know if you did it right.

What she should have said is this: your body is going to feel things you have never felt. Some of those things will be confusing. Some will be frightening. Some, eventually, will be mamash beautiful if you give yourself permission to be patient. She should have said: there will be nights when you do not want to be touched and that is not a sin, that is your body talking to you, and you should listen. She should have said: your husband is also terrified and he also does not know what he is doing and the two of you are going to figure this out together, slowly, clumsily, and that is actually how it is supposed to work.

She should have said: desire is real. It is not something that only men feel. You will want things and that wanting is from Hashem and it is good. She should have said: if something hurts, stop. Do not push through pain for the sake of the mitzvah. The mitzvah is not supposed to hurt. She should have said: talk to him. Use your mouth for words before you use your body for anything else. Tell him what feels good. Tell him what does not. He cannot read your mind and you cannot read his and the two of you sitting in silence trying to guess is how marriages go cold.

But she did not say any of this. She could not. Because saying it would have meant she had the vocabulary, and she did not have the vocabulary because her teacher did not have the vocabulary. Is like asking someone to teach French when they only know the alphabet. She could give me the letters. She could not give me the language.

So I walked into my wedding night with a head full of laws and an empty chest. I knew when I could go to the mikveh and when I could not. I knew which days were clean and which were not. I knew the brachah my husband would say. I did not know what my own body wanted. I did not know I was allowed to want. I did not know that the space between halacha and desire is where the whole marriage lives, and nobody had built me a bridge to get there.

I am not angry at Mrs. Friedman. She gave me what she had. But I am writing this chapter for every kallah sitting in a plastic-covered kitchen right now, learning the laws and feeling like something is missing. Something is missing. And it is not your fault that you can feel the hole. It means you are paying attention.

The thing nobody will say out loud is that kallah classes teach you how to be permitted to your husband. They do not teach you how to be present with your husband. Permitted is a status. Present is a practice. And the distance between those two things is where most of us get lost, wandering around in the dark for years, wondering why we followed all the rules and still feel so alone in our own beds.

I am not saying throw out the halachos. Chas v'shalom. The halachos are the frame. But a frame without a picture inside is just an empty rectangle on the wall. Somebody needs to teach the picture. Somebody needs to sit with a young woman and say: this is what it feels like. This is what you might feel. This is normal. This is also normal. And this, this thing you are afraid of — this is the most normal thing of all.

Mrs. Friedman, if you are reading this, I hope you understand. I am not blaming you. I am finishing the sentence you started.

The Lesson

She taught me the laws of the body but not the language of the body. The laws keep you kosher. The language keeps you close.

Chapter 12:
My Mother Did Not Teach Me This Because Her Mother Never Taught Her

I tried to talk to my mother once. Once. I was maybe four months married, standing in her kitchen on a Thursday afternoon while she rolled out dough for challah. The children were in the other room. The house smelled like onions and yeast. I opened my mouth to say something about my husband, about nighttime, about the fact that I was lying next to a man every night and feeling like I was doing something wrong even though everything was technically permitted. I got as far as "Ma, I wanted to ask you about—" and she looked up from the dough with an expression I will never forget. It was not anger. It was fear. Like I was about to open a door she had spent her whole life keeping shut.

She said, "Sarah Mushka, you want I should show you how to fold the challah into six strands?" And that was it. Conversation over. She went back to the dough. I went back to my silence. And we never tried again.

I used to be angry about this. I carried it around for years like a stone in my pocket, this feeling that she had failed me. That she knew things and chose not to share them. That I was sent into marriage blind because my own mother could not be bothered to tell me what to expect. But I was wrong. She was not withholding. She did not have it to give. Her mother never told her. And her mother's mother never told hers. This is not one woman's failure. This is a system. Generation after generation of women who survived marriage without ever talking about it.

My grandmother, aleha hashalom, married at seventeen in a displaced persons camp. She had already lost most of her family. She did not have time to think

about intimacy or pleasure or emotional connection. She had time to survive. To make children. To rebuild something from ashes. I do not judge her for not passing down wisdom about marriage. She was passing down life itself, and that was enough for what she carried.

But her silence became my mother's silence. My mother grew up in a home where the bedroom door was shut and nothing that happened behind it was discussed, ever. She learned that a wife's body belongs to the night and the night belongs to no one's conversation. She learned that you do what you do and you do not talk about it and you certainly do not complain. So when she became a kallah, she knew nothing. And when she became a mother, she passed on exactly what she received. Nothing.

I am not being dramatic when I say this is a chain. Is mamash a chain. Link by link, generation by generation, each woman handing the next woman the same sealed envelope with nothing inside. Here, this is what I know about being a wife. Open it later. And when you open it, there is nothing there. Just air. Just the echo of all the words that should have been spoken and were not.

You know what breaks a chain? One person. One woman who says, I am not passing this along. I am not handing my daughter an empty envelope. I am going to fill it with something real even if my voice shakes, even if I blush so hard my sheitel feels hot, even if I have to say words I have never said out loud in my life.

I decided this when my oldest daughter was ten. She asked me a question about where babies come from and I watched myself start to do what my mother did. I felt my mouth forming some nonsense about how Hashem gives families brachos and when the time is right — and I stopped myself. I stopped. Because I could see the chain in my own hands, one end connected to my grandmother and the other end reaching toward my daughter, and I thought: no. Not this time. Not with her.

I did not give her the whole story. She was ten. But I did not lie. I did not change the subject. I did not make her feel like the question was wrong. I said, "That is a very good question and I am going to answer it honestly, and if you have more questions after, you can always ask me." Her eyes got wide. Not because what I said was shocking but because she could not believe I was willing to say it at all.

That is the thing about breaking generational silence. The first word is the hardest. Not because the word itself is so difficult but because you are pushing against the weight of every woman who came before you who could not say it. You are speaking into a silence that is decades old, maybe centuries old, and the silence does not want to be disturbed. It pushes back. It makes you feel like you are doing something wrong, something immodest, something dangerous. But the danger is not in speaking. The danger was always in the silence.

My mother is still alive, baruch Hashem. She still cannot talk about this. I have made peace with that. She is not going to change at seventy-two, and I do not need her to change. What I needed was to stop waiting for her to give me permission to know my own body, to feel my own feelings, to talk honestly with my husband about what happens between us. That permission was never going to come from her because it never came to her.

So I gave it to myself. Hardest thing I ever did. Harder than labor, harder than the first night, harder than any fight I have ever had with my husband. Giving yourself permission to know what no one taught you — that is a kind of bravery that does not look like bravery from the outside. From the outside it looks like a woman reading a book at her kitchen table. From the inside it is a revolution.

The Lesson

My mother's silence was not a choice. It was an inheritance. I am choosing to leave my daughters a different one.

Chapter 13:
When His Touch Started to Feel Like an Obligation

There was a period — I think it was around the fourth child, maybe the fifth, the years blur together when you are pregnant or nursing or both at the same time — when my husband would put his hand on my shoulder and my first thought was not yes or no. My first thought was: what does he want now. Not in a mean way. In a tired way. In a way that came from a body that had been touched all day long by small hands pulling at my skirt, a baby attached to my chest, a toddler climbing my legs, a six-year-old who needed me to hold her while she cried about something I already forgot. By the time my husband reached for me at night, I was touched out. I had nothing left. His hand on my shoulder felt like the last person in line at a bakery that ran out of bread an hour ago.

I did not tell him this. I just moved. Shifted slightly. Turned toward the wall. Pulled the blanket up. Small movements that said no without me having to say no. And he felt it. Of course he felt it. A man is not stupid. He knows the difference between a wife who is turning toward him and a wife who is turning away. But he did not say anything either, because what is he going to say? Why don't you want me to touch you? That is a question nobody wants to ask because nobody wants to hear the answer.

So we entered this phase. This quiet, careful phase where touch became something that had to be negotiated without words. He would reach, I would stiffen, he would pull back, I would feel guilty, he would feel rejected, I would feel resentful that he could not see how tired I was, he would feel confused because I used to reach back and now I did not. And the gap grew. Every night, a little wider.

The thing about obligation is that it kills something in you so slowly you do not notice it dying. Is not like a switch that flips. Is like a plant you stop watering. For a while it still looks green. Then one day you realize it has been brown for months and you cannot remember the last time you gave it anything.

I started going through the motions. Mikveh night came and I went to the mikveh and I came home and I did what I was supposed to do because it was what I was supposed to do. Not because I wanted to. Not because my body wanted anything. Because the calendar said it was time and the halacha said this is a mitzvah and I was a good wife, wasn't I? A good wife does not say no. A good wife does not complain. A good wife lies down and lets her husband come close and thinks about the grocery list or the pediatrician appointment or whether she switched the laundry.

I am telling you this not because I am proud of it. I am telling you because I know I was not the only one. Every woman reading this just felt something in her chest, a recognition, a little flash of oh, she knows. Because we all know. We all had that season where touch became a transaction. Where your body stopped being yours and became something you lent out because it was expected.

The resentment is the worst part. Not the tiredness, not the going through the motions — the resentment. Because resentment is anger that has nowhere to go. You cannot be angry at your husband for wanting you. That is what he is supposed to do. You cannot be angry at the children for needing you. They are children. You cannot be angry at the halacha for telling you when to come together. It is the law. So who do you get angry at? Yourself. You turn the resentment inward and you start to think something is wrong with you. That you are broken. That a normal woman would want this. That you are failing at the one thing everyone says is supposed to come naturally.

But nothing about this comes naturally. Not when you have been up since five thirty, not when you have nursed a baby three times since dinner, not when your

body feels like public property. What comes naturally is exhaustion. What comes naturally is wanting five minutes where nobody touches you, where your skin belongs only to you, where you can breathe without someone needing something from your breath.

I found my way back. Not all at once. It started the night I said to my husband, "I need you to know that when you touch me and I pull away, it is not about you. My body is just empty right now." He did not understand at first. He thought empty meant I was sick. I said, "No, I am not sick. I am touched out. I have been held and grabbed and pulled on all day and by nighttime I have nothing left." And he looked at me and he said something I did not expect. He said, "So what do you need?" Not what do you need from me, which would have meant give me instructions so I can get what I want. Just: what do you need. And I started to cry. Because nobody had asked me that in so long. What do I need. I did not even know.

That question was the beginning of touch becoming something other than obligation. Not right away. But the door opened that night. And slowly, slowly, I started to walk back through it.

The Lesson

When touch becomes a chore, the problem is not your body. The problem is that nobody asked your body what it needed.

Chapter 14:
I Faked It for Three Years and It Almost Broke Me

I am going to tell you something and I need you to not look away. For three years of my marriage — the second, the third, the fourth year — I pretended. I pretended that everything in the bedroom was fine. I made the right sounds. I moved the right way. I said the right things afterward. Is fine, is good, I am happy. I smiled. I performed. And my husband believed me because why wouldn't he? I was giving an Oscar-worthy performance every mikveh night, and he was not trained to look for the cracks.

It started small. The first time was maybe six months in. He asked me if it was good and I said yes because the alternative was explaining something I did not have words for. What was I going to say? No, it was not good, but I do not know why, and I do not know what good is supposed to feel like, and also I am not sure my body works the way everyone says it should? That is not a sentence a nineteen-year-old girl can say to her husband in the dark. So I said yes. And the yes became a habit. And the habit became a cage.

Here is what nobody tells you about faking: it works. That is the problem. It works beautifully. Your husband is happy. The marriage looks fine. Nobody asks questions. You fulfill the mitzvah on the nights you are supposed to, you do not cry, you do not make trouble, everything runs smooth like a train on its tracks. And meanwhile, inside, you are disappearing. Piece by piece, night by night, you are becoming someone who does not exist. Because the woman in that bed is not you. She is a character you invented to survive.

I got so good at it that I scared myself. I could be completely disconnected — planning tomorrow's lunches in my head, thinking about whether the baby's fever needed a doctor — and still perform perfectly. My body was there but I was somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Somewhere far away from what was actually happening. And the more I did it, the easier it became to leave my own body, and the harder it became to come back.

The cost. I want to talk about the cost because nobody talks about the cost. When you fake intimacy, you lose the ability to feel real intimacy. Is like burning your tongue — at first it hurts and then everything just goes numb and you cannot taste anything anymore. I stopped being able to feel pleasure, not because my body was broken but because I had trained it to shut down. I had taught it that what happens in bed is a performance, not an experience. And my body learned the lesson too well.

I also lost trust in myself. When you lie to someone every night — and faking is lying, I am sorry but it is — you start to lose track of what is real. Am I happy? Am I pretending to be happy? Do I actually want this or am I just playing the part? I could not tell anymore. The line between real and performance got so blurry that I did not know which Sarah Mushka was the real one. The one who smiled in the dark or the one who stared at the ceiling afterward wondering if this was going to be the rest of her life.

Year three was the worst. My husband had no idea anything was wrong. He would tell people, friends, family, "Baruch Hashem, we are doing good." And I would nod. And inside I was screaming. Not at him. At myself. At the fact that I had built this beautiful lie so carefully that I could not find my way out of it. If I told the truth now, what would happen? He would feel betrayed. He would wonder what else I had lied about. He would question everything. And maybe, I thought, maybe the lie is kinder. Maybe what he does not know cannot hurt him.

But it was hurting me. Mamash killing me. I started getting headaches. My stomach hurt all the time. I could not sleep even when I was exhausted. My body was rebelling against what I was making it do, and the rebellion was not in the bedroom — it was everywhere else. You cannot shut yourself down in one part of your life and expect the rest to keep working. The body does not have compartments. What you numb in the dark follows you into the light.

I stopped faking on a Tuesday night. Not because I had some big revelation. Because I was too tired to keep the act going. He reached for me and I just said, "Not tonight. I am not — I cannot." And he looked at me and said, "Okay." And then, because he is the man he is, he said, "Are you okay?" And instead of saying yes, which is what I had said ten thousand times before, I said, "No." Just no. One word. The truest word I had spoken in three years.

That no broke something open. We did not fix everything that night. We did not fix everything that month. But the performance was over. I was done pretending. And the strange thing, the mamash strange thing, is that the moment I stopped faking, I started to feel something real. Not right away. But slowly. Like blood returning to a limb that has been asleep. Pins and needles at first. Then warmth. Then feeling.

Three years. Three years I gave away because I was too afraid to say one honest sentence. I am writing it here so maybe you do not have to give away three years of your own.

The Lesson

Faking protects him from the truth. It does not protect you from anything.

Chapter 15:
Wanting Him Is Not a Sin

I am going to say something now that I was taught my whole life not to say. I want my husband. I want him. Not just on mikveh night because the halacha says I can. Not just as a duty. I want him the way a person wants water when they are thirsty. I want his hands on me. I want to be close to him. And for years I thought there was something wrong with me for feeling this.

Because here is what I was taught, what every frum girl is taught from the time she is old enough to understand: wanting is dangerous. Desire is something you control. You push it down, you cover it up, you pretend it is not there. Tznius is not just about the length of your skirt. Tznius is about the size of your feelings. Keep everything small. Keep everything quiet. Do not want too much. Do not feel too much. Be modest in your body and in your heart and in your desires.

So I learned to be modest about wanting my own husband. I learned to wait for him to reach for me instead of reaching for him. I learned that a good wife receives, she does not initiate. I learned that if I wanted him too much, too often, too openly, something was wrong with me. Nice girls do not burn like this. Frum women do not feel this kind of hunger. That is for the goyishe world, for the movies and the magazines, not for us. We are above it.

Except I was not above it. I was in it. I was drowning in it. And the worst part was the shame. Because when you want something you have been told you should not want — even when that something is your own husband, which is mamash the most permitted thing in the world — you feel like a fraud. Like everyone would be shocked if they knew. Like the rebbetzin who teaches your daughter would look at you differently if she could see inside your head on a Wednesday afternoon

when your husband comes home and takes off his hat and you think, I wish the children were not here right now.

I carried this shame for years. I carried it like something heavy in my chest that I could not put down. And then one day I was learning with a friend, and we were going through a section about the mitzvah of onah, and I read something I had read before but never really heard. That a husband is obligated to give his wife pleasure. That it is her right. That the Torah itself says this is something she deserves. Not something she tolerates. Not something she endures. Something she is owed.

I put the sefer down and I stared at the wall for a long time. Because if the Torah says I deserve pleasure, then wanting pleasure is not a sin. If Hashem built this desire into the mitzvah itself, then the desire is not something to be ashamed of. It is part of the design. It is like being ashamed of being hungry. You were built to eat. You were built to want.

That night I did something I had never done in my marriage. I reached for him first. I put my hand on his arm in the dark and I did not wait for him to come to me. And he was surprised. I could feel it in the way his body stiffened for a second, because this was not what we did. I waited and he initiated. That was the pattern. But I broke the pattern and I said, very quietly, "I want to be close to you tonight." And he turned toward me and he said, "Okay." And it was different. Mamash different. Because for the first time I was not performing. I was not enduring. I was not lying there while things happened to me. I was choosing. I was wanting. I was there.

I cried afterward. Not sad crying. The other kind, the kind that comes when you finally let go of something you have been holding for so long your hands forgot they were clenched. I cried because I was thirty years old and this was the first time I had let myself want without guilt. Thirty years. Married for twelve of them. And this was the first time.

I need every woman reading this to hear me. Your desire for your husband is not a problem. It is not an aveirah. It is not something to be managed or minimized or hidden away like it is something dirty. It is a gift. It is literally written into the Torah as something you are entitled to. The system that taught you to suppress it was trying to protect you, I understand that, but it overcorrected. It took the fire and smothered it completely instead of teaching you how to let it burn in the right place.

Wanting him is not a sin. Not wanting him — that is also not a sin. But being taught that your own desire is shameful? That is a tragedy. And it is one you can walk away from tonight.

The Lesson

The Torah says pleasure is your right. Your shame is the only thing standing between you and it.

Chapter 16:
He Thought Everything Was Fine Because I Never Opened My Mouth

My husband is not a mind reader. I need to say this again because I did not believe it for the first eight years of my marriage. My husband is not a mind reader. He cannot sense what I am feeling. He cannot hear the argument I am having with him inside my head at two in the morning while he sleeps like a baby next to me. He does not know that when I said "fine" I meant the opposite of fine. He does not know that when I turned away from him last Tuesday, it was not because I was tired, it was because he said something at dinner that cut me and I could not explain why it cut me because I did not fully understand it myself.

For years — I am embarrassed to tell you how many years — I operated on the belief that if he loved me, he would know. He would sense that I was unhappy. He would feel the distance growing between us and come running to close it. He would notice that I had not initiated anything in months and he would sit me down and say, "Sarah Mushka, tell me what is wrong." I waited for this conversation like it was Moshiach. And it never came. Not because he did not love me. Because he had no idea anything was wrong.

I asked him about it once, years later, after we had learned to actually talk to each other. I said, "Those years when I was so unhappy, did you not notice?" And he looked at me, genuinely confused, and said, "What years? I thought we were doing good." And I wanted to scream. But he was telling the truth. From his side, everything was fine. I never complained. I never cried in front of him. I never said I need something different. I smiled. I cooked dinner. I went to the mikveh. I lay down when I was supposed to lie down. What exactly was he supposed to notice?

This is the trap. We are taught to be good wives, to keep the peace, to not make trouble. And then we are furious when our husbands do not see the trouble we are hiding so well. We bury something deep and then we are angry that nobody digs it up. But he is not an archaeologist. He is a man who comes home tired and sees his wife making dinner and thinks, baruch Hashem, everything is good.

I used to test him. I am not proud of this. I would leave little clues, little signals, and wait to see if he picked them up. I would sigh heavily. I would answer his questions in one word. I would put extra space between us on the couch. And when he did not react, when he just kept reading his sefer or looking at his phone, I would add it to the list. The list of evidence that he did not care. The list I was building in my head to prove that I was alone in this marriage. But the list was a lie. I was alone because I chose to be alone. Because speaking up felt harder than suffering in silence.

The unfairness of it hit me one night when he said, completely casual, "You know, I was thinking we should go away for Shabbos, just us. My mother can take the kids. I feel like we have not had time together." And I stared at him. Because I had been desperate for exactly this. For months. And I had not said a word. And here he was, offering it on his own, which meant he was paying attention in his way, in his limited, male, not-a-mind-reader way. He was trying. I was just too busy being angry about what he was not doing to see what he was doing.

A man can only work with what you give him. If you give him silence, he has silence. If you give him "fine," he has fine. You cannot hand someone a locked box and then be hurt that they did not open it. You did not give him the key. You did not even tell him there was a lock.

I learned to open my mouth. Not all at once. Not beautifully. The first real conversation we had was ugly. I said things that came out wrong. I cried and could not explain why I was crying. He got defensive because he felt blindsided — how was he supposed to know? We went in circles for an hour. But at the end of

that hour, he knew something real for the first time. He knew I had been unhappy. He knew things needed to change. He had information. And once he had information, he could do something with it.

I am telling you — the thing you are holding in, the resentment, the loneliness, the feeling that he should just know — he does not know. He will not know until you tell him. And I know telling him is terrifying. I know it feels like you are risking everything. But the silence is not safe. The silence is just a slower way of losing him.

He is not your enemy. He is your husband. And he has been walking around your marriage thinking everything is fine because you never once opened your mouth and told him it was not.

The Lesson

He cannot fix what he does not know is broken. And he does not know because you never told him.

Chapter 17:
The Fight About Money Is Never About Money

Last month my husband and I had a fight about a washing machine. The old one broke — it has been making a dying sound for weeks, and with eleven children the laundry situation is, I am telling you, not something you want to think about — and I told him we need a new one and he said we should fix the old one and I said it cannot be fixed, the repairman already said so, and he said we cannot afford a new one right now, and I said so the children should wear dirty clothes? And then we were screaming at each other in the kitchen at ten thirty at night about a washing machine like it was the most important thing in the world.

It was not about the washing machine. Is never about the washing machine.

The fight about money is never about money. The fight about the dishes is never about the dishes. The fight about his mother coming for Shabbos again is never about his mother. Every fight you have ever had with your husband, every single one, if you dig underneath it far enough, you will find the same thing: somebody feels unseen. Somebody feels like they do not matter. Somebody is screaming about a washing machine because they cannot figure out how to say, "I need you to hear me right now."

That night, after we stopped yelling and the apartment got quiet and the children were somehow still asleep, I sat at the kitchen table and I asked myself: what was I actually angry about? Not the machine. We could borrow money from my brother. We could go to the laundromat for a few weeks. The machine was a problem but it was not a crisis. So what was the crisis?

The crisis was that I had been telling him for two weeks that I was overwhelmed. That the house was falling apart around me. That the baby was not sleeping and

the second grader was having trouble in school and I had a pain in my side I had not gone to the doctor about because when was I supposed to go to the doctor? And every time I told him, he nodded. He said, "It will be okay, b'ezras Hashem." And he went back to his Gemara. And I felt like I was talking to a wall. A kind wall. A wall that loved me. But a wall.

So when the washing machine broke, it was not a machine breaking. It was everything breaking. It was me breaking. And the only way I knew how to break was to fight about something concrete, something with a price tag, something I could point to and say: this, fix this. Because I could not point to the invisible thing and say: I am drowning and you are standing on the shore watching.

My husband, after we calmed down, he said something that I think about all the time. He said, "Sarah Mushka, I do not know what you want from me. You say the machine, I try the machine. You say the money, I worry about the money. But I think you want something else and I do not know what it is." And he was right. He was mamash right. I wanted him to see me. Not the list of problems. Me. The woman behind the problems. The woman who was tired and scared and needed somebody to say, "I see how hard this is for you."

Every couple has their version of the washing machine. For some it is the credit card bill. For some it is how much he spends on seforim. For some it is the vacation they cannot take or the apartment they cannot move out of or the seminary tuition for the oldest daughter. The money is always the surface. What is underneath the money is the same thing that is underneath every fight: do you see me? Do I matter to you? Are we in this together or am I carrying it alone?

I learned something from that fight, and from the fifty fights before it, and probably from the fifty fights that are still coming. When I am angry about something small, I need to stop and ask myself what I am really angry about. Because if I fight about the small thing, we will solve the small thing and the real thing will still be there, rotting in the silence between us.

And when he is angry about something small — when he comes home and snaps about the toys on the floor or the dinner being late — I try to remember that he is also not really angry about the toys. He is also carrying something he does not know how to say. He is also a person who feels unseen sometimes, who feels like he works and works and nobody notices, who feels like the house runs without any acknowledgment that he is the one keeping the lights on. His washing machine is different from mine, but it is the same fight underneath.

We bought the new washing machine, by the way. My brother lent us the money. But the real repair happened that night at the kitchen table, after the screaming stopped, when my husband looked at me and said, "Tell me the real thing." And I did.

The Lesson

Every fight about money is a fight about mattering. Stop arguing about the price tag and start saying the thing underneath.

Chapter 18:
When We Stopped Touching We Stopped Everything

It did not happen overnight. Is not like one day we were close and the next day we were strangers. It was slow. So slow that by the time I noticed, I could not remember when it started. When did he stop putting his hand on my back when he walked past me in the kitchen? When did I stop sitting next to him on the couch? When did we start sleeping on opposite edges of the bed like the mattress was an ocean and we were on different shores?

I think it started in the bedroom. Something went cold there — maybe after the fight I wrote about, maybe after the faking, maybe after one of those long niddah stretches where you get used to not touching and then the mikveh comes and you are supposed to start again but you do not quite start again, not all the way. Whatever it was, the bedroom went quiet. And I thought, okay, this is just a phase. Every marriage has phases. It will come back.

But here is what nobody tells you: when the touching stops in the bedroom, it does not stay in the bedroom. It spreads. Like water through a crack in the wall. First the bedroom goes cold. Then the kitchen. He stops touching my shoulder when he reaches past me for a cup. I stop fixing his collar before he leaves for shul. We stop bumping into each other in the hallway on purpose, the way we used to, the little collision that was really an excuse to be close. All of it fades. And what you are left with is two people living in the same apartment who manage not to touch each other for days at a time.

We became roommates. That is the only word for it. We split duties. He did his things, I did mine. We talked about the children — who needed new shoes, who

had a doctor's appointment, who was fighting with whom in school. We talked about Shabbos logistics and bill payments and whether the landlord was going to fix the radiator. We had conversations like coworkers. Efficient, practical, completely empty.

I remember one night, maybe the worst night of this whole period, we were lying in bed and I could hear him breathing. He was not asleep. I was not asleep. And the space between us — maybe twelve inches of mattress — felt like it was miles. I could have reached out. He could have reached out. Neither of us did. And I lay there thinking: this is my marriage now. This is what we are. Two people who cannot cross twelve inches.

The thing about not touching is that it sends a message, and the message is: I do not want you. Even if that is not what you mean. Even if the real message is I am afraid or I am hurt or I do not know how to come back from where we went. The body does not understand nuance. The body understands touch and the absence of touch. And the absence of touch, over weeks and months, rewrites everything. Your husband starts to believe he is not wanted. You start to believe you are not wanted. And both of you are wrong, but neither of you can say it because the silence has grown so thick it has its own weight.

I missed him. That is what surprised me. I missed him and he was right there. Right there in the same bed, in the same kitchen, at the same Shabbos table. And I missed him like he was gone. Because in a way, he was. The man who used to pull me into the pantry when the kids were not looking and kiss me fast and clumsy, where did he go? The man who used to hold my hand under the blanket while we talked about nothing — where was he? He was right here. Twelve inches away. But I could not reach him.

What brought us back was so small it is almost embarrassing to say. One night, a regular nothing night, I was washing dishes and he came up behind me and just stood there. Not touching me, just standing close enough that I could feel him.

And I turned around and I put my wet hands on his shirt — the soapy water soaked right through — and I put my forehead against his chest. Did not say anything. Just stood there. And he put his arms around me. And we stayed like that for maybe two minutes, standing in the kitchen with soap dripping on the floor and children's noise leaking from the other room.

Two minutes. That is all it took to crack the ice. Not fix everything, not solve the big problems, not undo the months of distance. Just crack it. Enough to remind both of us that the person on the other side of those twelve inches was not a stranger. Was still the same person. Was still there.

Touch is not a luxury. I know we treat it like one. We think it is extra, something you get to when the real work is done. But touch is the real work. Everything else — the talking, the listening, the therapy, the fights, the forgiveness — everything else is harder without it. Touch is the foundation. When you stop touching, the whole house starts to shift.

The Lesson

First the bedroom goes cold. Then the kitchen. Then the whole marriage. Twelve inches of mattress can become a distance you never come back from.

Chapter 19:
What Thirteen Years Taught Me That the First Year Could Not

The first year of marriage I thought I was dying. I am not being dramatic. I thought this is it, this is what my life is now, this confusion and loneliness and fumbling in the dark with a man I do not understand who does not understand me, and we will do this until one of us drops. I thought the first year was the whole story. I did not know it was only the prologue.

Thirteen years. Eleven children. I have lost count of how many fights. How many silent dinners. How many nights where I cried in the bathroom with the water running so he would not hear. How many mornings I woke up and thought, I do not know if I can do this anymore. And how many mornings after that I got up, made breakfast, packed lunches, and did it anyway.

Here is what thirteen years taught me that the first year could not: marriage is not the wedding. Marriage is not the first night, or the first month, or even the first year. Marriage is the ten thousand Tuesday nights that come after. The ones where nothing special happens. Where you eat leftover chicken and he learns Gemara and you fold laundry and the baby cries and you argue about who is getting up and nobody gets up for thirty seconds and then you both get up at the same time and bump into each other in the hallway. Marriage is that hallway. Marriage is that bump.

The first year I was looking for fire. I thought marriage was supposed to be intense, electric, full of feeling every minute. When it was not — when most of it was just logistics and awkwardness and trying to figure out how to share a bathroom with another human being — I thought something was wrong. I

thought we were failing. I did not know that the quiet ordinary middle of marriage is where the real thing lives. Not in the highs or the lows. In the middle. In the unremarkable.

Year one, I did not know that a fight could make you closer. I thought every fight was a crack in the foundation. Now I know that a fight is just two people caring enough to be angry. The couples who do not fight are not happier. They are just quieter. And quiet, as I have learned, is not the same as peace.

Year three, I did not know that desire comes and goes like weather. Some seasons you want each other so much you cannot think straight. Some seasons the bed is just a place where you sleep. Both are normal. I wasted so much energy being terrified during the dry seasons, thinking the desire would never come back. It always came back. Not the same as before. Different. Deeper sometimes. Less frantic but more honest.

Year five, I did not know that having children would rearrange my marriage in ways I could not predict. That the love you have for a child is so big it can accidentally crowd out the love you have for your husband. That you have to fight for your marriage the way you fight for your children — with intention, with effort, with the understanding that it will not survive on autopilot. Nobody tells you this. They tell you the children are a blessing, and they are, mamash the biggest blessing. But blessings need tending. A garden does not grow just because the seeds are good.

Year eight, I did not know that forgiveness is not a feeling. I kept waiting to feel forgiving. To feel the anger dissolve and the warmth rush in and the clean slate appear. That is not how it works. Forgiveness is a decision you make on a Monday morning when you are still hurt and you choose to make him coffee anyway. The feeling comes later. Sometimes much later. Sometimes it does not come at all and you have to make the decision again on Tuesday.

Year ten, I did not know that the best thing I could do for my marriage was to stop trying to fix my husband. To stop keeping a mental list of everything he does wrong. To stop treating him like a project. He is not a project. He is a person. And the day I stopped trying to turn him into the husband I imagined and started seeing the husband I actually have — that was the day my marriage got better. Not because he changed. Because I changed what I was looking at.

Now, year thirteen, I know this: the first year teaches you nothing except how to survive. The real lessons come later, in the middle years, the years nobody writes songs about. The years of car seats and tuition payments and that noise the refrigerator makes at three in the morning that you both pretend not to hear. The years when love is not a feeling but a practice. When you choose each other not because your heart is pounding but because your heart is steady and you know, you just know, that this person standing in your kitchen in his socks eating cereal from the box at eleven at night — this is your person. Not because he is perfect. Because he stayed. And so did you.

The first year is the storm. The middle years are the building. And the building, I am telling you, is mamash more beautiful than the storm ever was.

The Lesson

Marriage is not the chuppah. It is the ten thousand Tuesday nights after. And Tuesday is where the real love lives.

Chapter 20:
You Do Not Need a Therapist, You Need Five Honest Minutes

I am not against therapy. I want to say that first because someone is going to read this chapter and think I am telling people not to get help. I am not. If you need a therapist, go to a therapist. If things are really broken, if there is something serious, if you cannot do it alone — get help. Mamash, go.

But.

Most of us do not need a professional. Most of us need five minutes. Five honest minutes at the kitchen table after the children are asleep, where you say one true thing to each other. That is it. One true thing.

I know couples who have been in therapy for two years and have never once sat across from each other at home and said what they actually feel. They will say it to the therapist. They will say it in the office, in the safe room with the tissue box and the neutral-colored couch and the person being paid to listen. But at home? At the kitchen table? With no referee? They cannot do it. They have outsourced their honesty. They have made truth something that only happens on Tuesdays at four o'clock in someone else's building.

I tried therapy once. My husband did not want to go but he went because I asked and he is a man who does what his wife asks even when he does not understand why. We sat in the office and the therapist asked us to share one thing we appreciate about each other. My husband said, "She is a good mother." I said, "He works hard." The therapist smiled like we had accomplished something. We drove home in silence. Nothing had changed. Nothing was going to change

because we were performing honesty instead of practicing it.

The next week I cancelled the appointment. My husband looked relieved. And that night, after the kids were down, I sat at the table and I said, "Sit. I need to tell you something." He sat. He looked nervous. I said, "I am lonely. I am in this house with eleven children and you and I am lonely. And I do not know how to fix it but I needed to say it out loud." And he stared at me. And then he said, "I am also lonely." And that — that — was more than three therapy sessions gave us. Because it was ours. It happened in our kitchen, at our table, in our words. No one mediated it. No one softened it. It was raw and uncomfortable and exactly what we needed.

Five minutes. That is what I am asking you for. Not an hour. Not a deep conversation about your childhood and your attachment style and whatever the books are calling it this year. Five minutes. Sit across from each other. No phones. No children in the room. And say one true thing. Not a complaint. Not "you never" or "you always." A true thing about how you feel.

"I miss you." That is a true thing.

"I am scared that we are growing apart." That is a true thing.

"I do not remember the last time you looked at me like you used to." That is a true thing.

"I want to be closer to you but I do not know how." That is a true thing.

You do not need someone with a degree to tell you how to say these things. You already know them. They are sitting in your chest right now, waiting. The only thing between you and your husband is the fear of saying them. And I understand the fear. I do. Saying a true thing out loud is terrifying because once it is out, you cannot take it back. It lives in the room now. It has to be dealt with.

But the things you do not say also live in the room. They just live there silently, growing bigger, taking up more space, until one day you look across the table and you cannot see your husband through all the unsaid things piled between you.

My husband and I, we have a practice now. Is nothing fancy. Once a week, usually Thursday night, after the house is quiet, we sit at the table. Sometimes we have tea. Sometimes not. And we each say one thing. Not always heavy. Sometimes it is "I liked when you called me in the middle of the day this week." Sometimes it is "I am worried about Shaina's reading." Sometimes it is the hard thing. The thing that has been building all week. But we say it. And the other person listens. Does not fix, does not argue, does not defend. Just listens.

Five minutes. That is all it takes. Not to fix everything. To keep the channel open. To remind each other that we are here, we are paying attention, we are not roommates. Five honest minutes can do what months of avoidance cannot. Months of silence build a wall. Five minutes with a sledgehammer.

You do not need a stranger to teach you how to talk to the person sleeping next to you. You need to sit down and start.

The Lesson

The therapist's couch is fine. But your kitchen table at midnight is where the real work happens.

Chapter 21:
The Most Terrifying Thing in Marriage Is Letting Him See You

I take off my sheitel every night and I hang it on the hook by the bedroom door. This is just a thing I do, a routine, nothing special. But I remember the first time I took it off in front of my husband. We had been married maybe a week. And I stood there with my tichel underneath and then I took that off too and my real hair — short, pinned, nothing like the beautiful sheitel — was just there. And I felt more naked than I have ever felt in my life. More naked than the actual nakedness. Because the sheitel is a costume. The sheitel is the put-together wife, the one who walks down Lee Avenue looking like everything is fine. And underneath is just me. Just the real me with the flat hair and the tired eyes.

He looked at me. He did not say anything for a second. And then he said, "Your hair is nice." That was it. Your hair is nice. And I almost collapsed from relief. Not because I needed the compliment. Because I needed to know that the real me, the underneath me, was not going to make him flinch.

That was the easy vulnerability. The sheitel is nothing. Try letting him see you cry and not knowing why you are crying. Try letting him see you fail at something you were supposed to be good at. Try letting him hear you say, "I do not know what I am doing, I am making it up, I am scared every single day that I am ruining our children." Try that. That is the vulnerability that will mamash break you open.

I spent years curating myself for my husband. Showing him the good parts. The competent mother. The organized wife. The woman who always has it together, who handles eleven children and a household and the finances and Shabbos cooking and school pickups and she does it all with a smile. I showed him that

woman because I thought that was the woman he married. That was the woman he agreed to spend his life with. And if he saw the other one — the one who hides in the bathroom, the one who sometimes looks at her life and thinks how did I get here, the one who is angry and confused and does not always love being a mother even though she loves her children — if he saw her, he would leave. Not physically. But in his heart. He would be disappointed. He would realize he made a mistake.

So I performed. Mamash performed. Every day, the sheitel went on. Not just the one on my head. The emotional one. The one that says I am fine, everything is fine, look how fine I am. And he bought it because why wouldn't he? I was giving a very convincing show.

The night the performance ended was not planned. I did not decide today I will be vulnerable. What happened was I dropped a pot of soup. Full pot, Shabbos soup, Friday afternoon, three hours before licht. It hit the floor and splashed everywhere — on the cabinets, on the floor, on my stockings — and I just stood there. And something in me broke. Not about the soup. About everything. About the years of holding it all together and smiling and pretending I was not exhausted down to my bones. I sat on the kitchen floor in the soup and I started to cry. Not delicate crying. The ugly kind. The kind where your face does things you cannot control and sounds come out that you did not know you could make.

My husband came in and saw me on the floor. He did not say "what happened." He could see what happened. Soup everywhere. Wife on the floor. He just sat down next to me. In the soup. In his Shabbos pants. He sat in the soup and he put his arm around me and he let me cry. He did not try to fix it. He did not say "I will order from the takeout place." He did not say "is okay." He just sat there.

And when I was done crying, when the worst of it had passed and I was just sitting there with soup soaking through my skirt, I said, "I cannot do this anymore. I cannot keep pretending everything is fine." And he said, "I know." Two words. I

know. Which meant: I have seen it. I have seen you struggling. I have been waiting for you to let me in.

He was waiting for me. The whole time I was performing, he was on the other side of the performance, waiting. He knew the sheitel was a lie. Not the one on my head — the one on my heart. He knew. And he stayed anyway. And he waited anyway. Because that is what a good man does. He does not break down your door. He stands outside it and he waits until you are ready to open it.

Letting him see me — the real me, the soup-on-the-floor me, the I-cannot-do-this me — was the most terrifying thing I have ever done in my marriage. More terrifying than the wedding night. More terrifying than the first fight. More terrifying than saying I want you or I am lonely or I need help. Because all of those things, you can say and still keep the mask on. But sitting on the floor crying in soup? There is no mask for that. There is just you.

And here is what I learned: the terror is the door. The thing you are most afraid to show him is the thing he most needs to see. Because on the other side of that terror is the only kind of intimacy that matters. Not the bedroom kind. The kind where another human being knows who you actually are — not the curated version, not the Shabbos version, not the everything-is-fine version — and chooses to sit in the soup with you anyway.

Every woman I know is performing. Every single one. We perform for our husbands, for our children, for the community, for the women at shul, for the mothers at pickup. We are all wearing sheitels on our hearts. And we are all terrified that if anyone sees underneath, they will run.

They will not run. Or at least, the right ones will not. The one who sat in the soup with me — he did not run. He sat down. And that is when my marriage stopped being a performance and started being a marriage.

The Lesson

He does not need the perfect wife. He needs the real one. And the real one is the woman you are most afraid to let him see.

Chapter 22:
The Bedroom Is Not Where Intimacy Starts

I used to think intimacy was something that happened at night. Behind a closed door. After the children were sleeping. I thought it started when the lights went off and two people were lying next to each other in the dark. I was wrong for years.

Intimacy starts at seven in the morning when he is putting on his shoes and he stops and says, "How did you sleep?" Not because he has to. Not because someone told him to ask. Because he actually wants to know. Because he noticed that I was turning all night, that I got up twice with the baby, that I was coughing. He noticed. That is where it starts.

I am telling you, a woman does not need a man who brings flowers. She needs a man who says, "You look tired today," and means it with kindness, not with criticism. There is a difference. You know the difference. Every woman knows the difference. One version makes you want to cry. The other version makes you want to be held.

For so many years in my marriage I could not understand why by the time we were alone at night I felt nothing. Not anger, not sadness, just nothing. Empty. Like I had been standing in a room all day waiting for someone to see me and nobody came. And then at night he would reach for me and I would think — now? Now you see me? Now, when you want something?

Is not fair to say it like that. He was not a bad man. He was just doing what he thought a husband does. You go to shul, you learn, you come home, you eat, you help a little with the children if your wife asks, and at night you are together. That is the marriage. That is what they taught him. Nobody told him that the marriage

was happening all day. Every hour. Every minute I was standing at the sink with my hands in soapy water and he walked past me without a word — that was a moment. Every time I changed my sheitel and he did not notice — that was a moment. Every time I made his favorite food and he ate it without saying anything — that was a moment. And all those moments added up. By nighttime I had already done the math.

I remember one Thursday — I had cut my hair. Not a lot, but enough. I was nervous about it, actually. Stupid, right? Thirteen years married and I am nervous about a haircut. But I was. I came home and he was sitting at the table with his sefer and I walked in and he looked up and said, "You cut your hair." Just like that. Not "it looks nice." Not "why did you do that." Just, "You cut your hair." And something in my chest opened. He saw me. He was paying attention. That night I wanted to be close to him. Not because of obligation. Not because it was mikveh night. Because I felt seen.

That is the whole secret and nobody will tell you because it sounds too simple. A woman who feels invisible all day does not suddenly feel desire at night. It does not work like that. You cannot ignore a person for sixteen hours and then expect them to be open and warm in the seventeenth hour. The body keeps score. I heard that somewhere, maybe from a book, maybe from a friend. But it is true. My body knew exactly how many times he walked past me that day. My body was counting even when my brain was trying not to.

I told him this once. Sitting at the kitchen table, late, after everything was quiet. I said, "When you ask me how I slept, when you say thank you for dinner, when you notice the small things — that is when I start wanting to be close to you. Not at night. In the morning." He looked at me like I was speaking a different language. Maybe I was. Because nobody taught him this language either.

But he listened. He is a good man. He does not always understand but he listens. And slowly, slowly, he started. Not perfectly. Some days he still walks past me like

I am part of the furniture. But other days he comes into the kitchen and puts his hand on my shoulder for one second while I am cutting vegetables. One second. And that one second does more than anything that happens later. That one second is the real intimacy.

I see so many women, good women, frum women, who are frustrated in their marriages and they think the problem is the bedroom. They think something is broken in that part of the relationship. But I want to say to them — go back. Go back to the morning. Go back to the afternoon. Go back to the way he speaks to you in front of the children, or does not speak to you. Go back to the way you speak to him when he comes home, or do not speak to him. The bedroom is just the last room. Everything that happens in it was already decided in all the other rooms.

Is not romantic, what I am saying. Is not the stuff they write about in novels. Nobody is going to make a movie about a man who says, "How did you sleep?" But I am telling you, after thirteen years and eleven children, that sentence in the morning is worth more than anything he could do at night. Mamash more.

The Lesson

Intimacy is not something you do at night. It is something you build all day. By the time the door closes, you already know which marriage you are walking into.

Chapter 23:
The Kitchen Table at Midnight

My favorite place in the whole marriage is not the bedroom. Is not the living room on Shabbos with the candles lit and everyone dressed nice. Is not even the car when we drive somewhere alone, which happens maybe twice a year if we are lucky. My favorite place in the marriage is the kitchen table at midnight.

The children are sleeping. Finally. All eleven of them, keneinehora. The baby had her last bottle at eleven. The three-year-old came out of his room four times for water, for the bathroom, because he heard a noise, because he wanted to tell me something he already forgot. The older ones finished their homework, argued about who gets the bathroom first, slammed two doors. By midnight, the house is quiet. The kind of quiet that makes your ears ring because you are not used to it.

And we sit. Me and him. At the kitchen table. With tea. His is black, no sugar. Mine is with milk and too much sugar because by midnight I deserve it. Sometimes there are cookies. Sometimes just the tea. And we talk.

Not about anything important. That is the thing. We are not solving problems. We are not discussing the bills or which school the six-year-old should go to next year or what the doctor said about the baby's ear infections. We are just talking. He tells me something his chavrusa said that made him laugh. I tell him about the woman at the grocery store who argued about the price of cucumbers for ten minutes. He tells me his back hurts. I tell him I think the washing machine is dying. Small things. Nothing things. Everything things.

This is where the real marriage lives. I am telling you this because nobody tells you this. They tell you about the wedding, the chuppah, the yichud room. They tell you about the bedroom and the halachos and the mikveh. They tell you about

Shabbos and the table and the guests and the zemiros. But nobody tells you about the kitchen table at midnight. Nobody tells you that this is the place where you will fall in love with your husband again and again over the years. Not at some big event. Not on a vacation you cannot afford. At your own table, in your own kitchen, with the dishes still in the sink because you did not have the energy to wash them.

There was a time, maybe around year five or six, when we stopped sitting at the table. I do not remember exactly when it happened. The children were coming fast, one after another, b'sha'ah tovah, and by nighttime I was so tired I would just go straight to bed. He would learn a little more and then come to bed. We stopped having that time. And I felt it. Something between us got thinner. Like a thread stretching. We were still married, still functioning, still doing everything right on the outside. But there was a space between us that was getting wider.

One night I could not sleep. I came out to the kitchen to get water and he was sitting there. Just sitting. With his tea. He looked up at me and said, "Sit." Just like that. One word. And I sat. And we talked for an hour about nothing. And I went back to bed feeling like I had just come home from somewhere far away.

After that, we made it a thing. Not every night. Some nights I am too tired. Some nights he falls asleep on the couch with a sefer on his chest and I do not wake him because he also deserves rest. But most nights, after the house goes quiet, we sit. Sometimes for ten minutes. Sometimes for an hour. Sometimes we do not even talk much. He reads. I sit with my tea and my thoughts. But we are together. In the same room. At the same table. And that is enough.

I know women who say they do not know their husbands. Married ten, fifteen years, and they say, "I do not really know him." And I want to ask — do you sit with him? Not for a purpose. Not to discuss something. Just to sit. Because you learn a person in the quiet. You learn them when there is no agenda. You learn them at midnight when the masks come off and nobody is watching and nobody needs

anything from you and you can just be two people who chose each other.

The kitchen table at midnight is not glamorous. The table has scratches from ten years of children. There is probably a stain from grape juice that will never come out. The chairs are not comfortable. The light is too bright because I keep meaning to buy a softer bulb and I never do. But it is ours. That table has heard more of our marriage than any other place in this apartment. It heard the fights. It heard the crying. It heard the laughing. It heard the silence that is worse than all of those. And it heard the coming back.

Every marriage needs a place like this. Not a fancy restaurant. Not a hotel for anniversary. A place in your own home where you meet each other after the world is done with you for the day. Where you can say stupid things and boring things and real things. Where nobody is performing.

I think Hashem gave us nighttime for this reason. Not just for sleeping. Not just for what happens in the bedroom. But for the sitting. The tea. The nothing that is actually everything.

The Lesson

The best part of your marriage will not happen when everyone is watching. It will happen at your kitchen table at midnight, with cold tea and nothing to say, and nowhere else you would rather be.

Chapter 24:
What I Learned When I Stopped Trying to Fix Him

For the first seven years of my marriage, I had a project. The project was my husband. I was going to make him into the man I wanted.

I wanted him to be more romantic. I read somewhere — probably something I should not have been reading — that husbands should surprise their wives. Leave notes. Say sweet things. Plan things. My husband does not plan things. My husband does not leave notes. My husband shows love by making sure the car has gas and the bills are paid and coming home at the same time every single day so I always know where he is. That is his love language, as they say in the outside world. But I did not want that language. I wanted a different one.

I wanted him to talk more. I am a talker. I can talk for an hour about something that happened in two minutes. He is not a talker. He listens. He nods. He says, "Mm." He says, "That is not good," when I tell him something bad that happened. He says, "That is good," when I tell him something good. He is a man of few words and every single one of those few words used to drive me crazy.

I would hint. I would say things like, "Rivky's husband brought her flowers on Tuesday for no reason." He would look at me and say, "That is nice." And not move. And I would be burning inside thinking, how does he not understand what I am saying? And he did not understand. Because I was not saying anything. I was hinting, which is a language women speak fluently and men do not speak at all. But I will talk about this more later.

I tried to change him in small ways that I thought he would not notice. I bought him a different kind of shirt because I wanted him to dress a certain way. He wore it once and went back to his regular shirts. I suggested we go for a walk and he said, "Where?" and I said, "Just to walk," and he looked at me like I had suggested we fly to the moon. I signed us up for a Shabbos meal at a couple's house who I thought had a good marriage, hoping he would see the husband and learn something. He came home and said the food was good.

I cried about this. Many nights. I cried because I thought I had married the wrong person. I thought somewhere out there was the right husband for me, the one who would talk and surprise and plan and notice. And I got stuck with this quiet, steady, predictable man who loved me in ways I could not see because I was too busy looking for the ways I wanted.

The turn happened — I do not remember the exact day, but I remember the feeling. I was watching him with our fourth child. The baby was colicky, screaming every night for hours. I was finished. Done. Could not hold her anymore without crying myself. And he took her. He walked with her for two hours in the apartment. Back and forth. Back and forth. Did not complain. Did not say, "When is this going to stop?" Did not hand her back. Just walked. And something in me said: look at him. Actually look at him. Not at the version of him you want. At him.

And I saw a man who is not romantic but who would walk the floor with a screaming baby for two hours so his wife could rest. I saw a man who does not write notes but who has never once come home late without calling. I saw a man who does not talk much but who has never said a cruel word to me in all our years. Not one. Not in our worst fights. He has never called me a name. He has never raised his hand. He has never said something designed to break me.

I was trying to fix a man who was not broken. I was trying to turn a table into a chair and being angry that it would not work. He was always a table. A good, strong, solid table. And I kept saying, "Why can you not be a chair?" Because I

wanted a chair. But Hashem gave me a table. And slowly, slowly, I started to see what a table is good for.

When I stopped trying to change him, I started seeing him. When I started seeing him, I started appreciating him. When I started appreciating him, I started telling him. And when I started telling him — something happened that all my years of fixing could never accomplish. He started to grow on his own. Not because I pushed. Because I stopped pushing. He felt safe. And a man who feels safe will give you things you never had to ask for.

Is not what I expected. I expected that if I complained enough, hinted enough, cried enough, he would change. But that is not how people work. People change when they feel loved as they are. Mamash. I learned this the hard way, after seven years of trying the other way first.

The Lesson

You cannot fix someone who is not broken. And the moment you stop trying, you might finally see what was there all along.

Chapter 25:
A Man Does Not Read Minds and You Cannot Be Angry About That

I was furious with him. Mamash furious. The kind of angry where you are slamming cabinets in the kitchen and he is sitting in the other room and he does not even know you are angry. That made me more angry. How can he not know? How can he sit there learning his Gemara while I am in here destroying the kitchen with my feelings? Is he blind? Is he deaf? Does he not feel the temperature drop in this apartment by forty degrees?

He did not know. He genuinely did not know. And this is the thing that took me the longest to understand in my marriage.

I grew up with women. My mother, my sisters, my friends — we communicate in a language that does not require words. My sister can walk into a room and I know from the way she puts down her bag that something is wrong. My mother can say, "Everything is fine," and I know from the third word that nothing is fine. Women read the air. We read silence. We read the way someone chews their food. We read everything.

Men do not read this. I am not saying this to be mean. I am saying this because it is true and the sooner you accept it the sooner your marriage gets better. My husband loves me. He would do almost anything for me. But he cannot read my mind. He cannot look at me slamming cabinets and think, "She is upset because I forgot to ask about the appointment with the pediatrician today and also I did not notice she rearranged the bookshelf and also she is overwhelmed and needs me to take the children for an hour." He hears cabinets slamming and he thinks the cabinets are sticking again.

The fight I remember — the one that changed things — was about a Thursday night. I had been cooking all day for Shabbos. Chicken, kugel, soup, challah, two kinds of salad because his mother was coming. The kitchen was a war zone. Children were everywhere. The baby had a fever. I was drowning. And he came home from kollel and walked past the kitchen, past me standing there with flour on my face and a crying baby on my hip, and went to his room to change. Did not say a word.

By the time he came out I was so angry I could not speak. So I did what I always did. I went silent. Cold. One-word answers. "Fine." "Nothing." "I do not want to talk about it." And he stood there, confused, like a man who walked into a room and everyone is staring at him but he does not know he has toilet paper on his shoe.

He said, "What did I do?"

And I said, "If you do not know, I am not going to tell you."

This is a sentence that has destroyed more marriages than almost anything else. This sentence. Because what it really means is: I need you to prove you know me by guessing correctly. And if you guess wrong, it proves you do not love me enough. It is a test nobody can pass. I was giving him tests and failing him every time and then crying because he failed.

That night, after Shabbos was over, after the food was eaten and the mother-in-law went home and the children were in bed, I sat on the edge of our bed and I said it. Out loud. With real words.

"When you came home and walked past me without helping, without even saying you see me, I felt invisible. I needed you to say, 'What can I do?' That is all. Four words."

He stared at me. Not with anger. Not with defensiveness. With genuine shock. He said, "I did not know you needed help. You always do everything. I thought you had it."

And there it was. The whole problem in two sentences. He thought I had it because I never said I did not have it. I was performing competence while drowning, and then being angry that he believed the performance. Is like putting on a show and then being mad the audience clapped.

I see this everywhere. Women in our community, good women, strong women, carrying everything and saying nothing and then being furious that their husbands do not help. But did you ask? Did you say the words? Not a hint. Not a sigh. Not a look. The actual words. "I need help." "I need you to take the children." "I need you to come home early today." "I am not okay."

We were taught to hint. We were taught that a good wife manages. That asking for help is weakness. That he should just know. But "he should just know" is a fantasy. It is a beautiful fantasy and I held onto it for years, but it is a fantasy.

Now I say it. Not perfectly. Sometimes I still slam the cabinet first and then use my words, like a toddler learning to talk. But I say it. And almost every time — almost every single time — he says, "Okay." Not "you are being dramatic." Not "why did you not say so earlier." Just, "Okay." And then he does it.

All those years of silence and rage. All those fights that started with "nothing" and ended with both of us not speaking for two days. All of that — because I would not open my mouth and say one honest sentence.

The Lesson

He is not ignoring your needs. He does not know your needs. Tell him. With words. Out loud. Like a person.

Chapter 26:
The Night I Told Him What I Actually Needed

I am going to tell you about one night because that night changed everything and if I do not tell you about it then this whole book is just talk.

It was a Tuesday. I remember because we had fleishig leftovers from Shabbos for dinner and by Tuesday the chicken is always a little sad. The children were in bed. He was in the kitchen making tea. I was sitting on the couch and my heart was beating so fast I thought I was going to be sick.

I had been carrying something for years. Not a secret exactly. More like a truth I had never said out loud. About what I needed from him. About what was missing. About the way things were between us at night and how I felt and what I wanted and what I did not want. Things a frum woman is not supposed to say. Things I did not have language for because nobody gave me language for it.

I had practiced in my head a hundred times. In the shower. While folding laundry. While nursing the baby at 3 AM. I would rehearse the sentence and then swallow it. Every time. Because what if he looked at me differently? What if he thought I was not tznius for wanting things? What if he was disgusted? What if he laughed? The what-ifs were louder than the need to speak, so I stayed quiet. For years.

But that Tuesday, something broke. Not in a bad way. In the way an egg breaks when the chick is ready. I was just done carrying it. The weight of the unsaid thing was heavier than the fear of saying it.

He came and sat down with his tea. And I opened my mouth. And I said it.

I am not going to tell you the exact words because they are mine and his and they belong to that Tuesday night in that apartment on that couch. But I will tell you what it was about. I told him that I needed to be touched differently. That what we were doing was fine for him but not for me. That I had been pretending, not every time but many times, and that the pretending was making me disappear. I told him that I needed him to slow down. That I needed him to ask me things. That I needed to feel like what was happening was about both of us and not just about him.

My hands were shaking. My voice was shaking. I was looking at the floor because I could not look at his face.

And he was quiet. For a long time. Long enough that I started to regret everything. Long enough that I thought, this is it, I have ruined it, I should not have said anything, I should have just kept pretending for another thirteen years.

Then he said, "Okay."

One word. That is all. "Okay." Not "why did you not tell me sooner," which is what I expected. Not "what is wrong with you," which is what I feared. Not "I had no idea," though I think that was true. Just, "Okay."

And then he said, "Tell me what to do."

Five words. And I started crying. Not because I was sad. Because for thirteen years I had been sitting across from a man who would have listened if I had spoken. Thirteen years of carrying something alone that I did not have to carry alone. The tragedy was not that he was unwilling. The tragedy was that I was silent.

That night we talked for two hours. I said things I had never said to anyone. He asked questions I did not expect him to ask. Good questions. Careful questions. The kind of questions that told me he actually wanted to understand, not just fix it and move on. We did not solve everything that night. But we started. And

starting is the thing that matters. Starting is the hardest part.

The weeks after that were awkward sometimes. He was trying. I could see him trying. Sometimes he tried too hard and it was not natural and we would both kind of freeze and then laugh a little because it was strange and new after so many years of doing it the old way. But he was trying. And I was trying to tell him in the moment — yes, that, or no, not that — instead of performing and then resenting.

I will tell you what surprised me most. I expected him to be hurt. I expected him to feel like I was criticizing him. Men are sensitive about this, everyone knows. But he was not hurt. He was relieved. He told me, weeks later, that he always felt like something was off but he did not know what and he was afraid to ask. He thought the problem was him. He was carrying his own silence, his own fear. We were two people sitting in the same bed, both afraid to speak, both sure the other person did not want to hear it.

What a waste. What a mamash waste of years. Not because those years were bad. They were not all bad. But they could have been so much more. And all it took was one Tuesday night and one sentence and one "okay."

If you are sitting on something you need to say — say it. Tonight. It will never feel like the right time. Say it anyway. It was never as hard as I thought it would be. The hard part was all the years I did not say it.

The Lesson

The thing you are afraid to say is the thing that will save your marriage. And he is probably just waiting for you to say it.

Chapter 27:
How a Twenty Minute Walk Changed More Than a Year of Crying

We started walking. That is the whole chapter, really. We started walking and it fixed more things than everything else we tried.

It was not my idea. It was his, which surprised me because he is not usually the one with ideas about the marriage. He is the one who shows up and does what needs to be done. But one evening after dinner, a Sunday, he said, "Come. Let us walk." I said, "Walk where?" He said, "Around the block." I said, "For what?" He said, "Just to walk."

I almost said no. I had dishes to do. The baby needed a bath. The seven-year-old had not started his homework. There were a thousand reasons not to go and only one reason to go, which was that my husband was standing at the door asking me to walk with him and he never asks me anything like this. So I told the oldest to watch the little ones. I put on my shoes. And we walked.

It was twenty minutes. Maybe less. Around the block in Williamsburg, which is not exactly scenic. We passed the grocery store, the laundromat, the pizza shop, two shuls, and a woman I know from school pickup who looked at us like we were doing something suspicious. Two married people walking together on a Sunday night — clearly something is wrong.

But something happened on that walk. We talked. Not the way we talk at home, where every sentence gets interrupted by a child or a pot boiling over or a phone ringing. We talked the way we used to talk when we were first married and the world was small and it was just us. He told me about something that was

bothering him at work. I told him about a fight I had with my sister. He laughed at something I said. I laughed at something he said. Twenty minutes. No children. No phone. No interruptions. Just us and the sidewalk and the evening air.

When we came home, something was different. Lighter. Like someone had opened a window in a room that had been closed too long. The children were still screaming. The dishes were still in the sink. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

We started doing it. Not every night. Maybe three or four times a week. After dinner, before the bedtime chaos. Twenty minutes. Same route every time because neither of us is creative with directions. Same block. Same pizza shop. Same woman giving us looks. But different conversations every time. And slowly, slowly, the thing that had been pulling us apart started to push us together.

I want to be honest about what was happening before the walks. We were in a bad stretch. Not the worst we had been through, but bad. We were talking at each other, not to each other. We were coexisting. Two people running a household, managing children, keeping everything moving, but not actually connecting. I cried a lot during that time. I journaled. I davened. I called my sister. I did everything a woman does when her marriage feels like it is slipping and she does not know how to grab it.

And none of that worked. Not because it was wrong. But because the problem was not inside me. The problem was between us. The problem was that we had stopped being alone together. We had stopped being two people. We were just parents. Just partners in a business called Family. The romance, the friendship, the whatever-you-call-it that makes a marriage more than a legal arrangement — it was starving. And you cannot feed it from separate rooms.

The walk fed it. Twenty minutes, three times a week. That is one hour a week. One hour. I spend more time than that choosing tomatoes at the grocery store. And

that one hour did more for my marriage than all the tears, all the fights, all the lying in bed staring at the ceiling wondering what went wrong.

I tell women this and they say, "I cannot leave the children." You can. For twenty minutes, you can. Your oldest can manage. Your neighbor can sit. Your mother can come. And if none of that works, put them in front of a video. I know, I know. Screens are bad. But you know what else is bad? A marriage that is falling apart because two people never spend time alone together. The screen will not ruin your child in twenty minutes. The distance between you and your husband will ruin a lot more.

Other women say, "My husband would not want to." Have you asked him? Because my husband was the one who suggested it. Men want to connect too. They just do not always know how to say it. Sometimes a man says, "Let us walk," and what he means is, "I miss you and I do not know how to fix it but maybe if we are walking next to each other something will open up." Men speak in actions. A walk is an action. Let him take it.

Small, consistent effort. That is what I learned from the walks. Not a grand gesture. Not a weekend away that costs money you do not have. Not a big emotional conversation that leaves everyone drained. Just twenty minutes. A few times a week. Around the block. With the person you married. Showing up. Again and again. That is what makes a marriage.

The Lesson

You do not need a vacation. You do not need therapy. You need twenty minutes and a sidewalk and the willingness to show up.

Chapter 28:
Your Children Know More Than You Think They Know

My eight-year-old daughter said something to me once that stopped me cold. We were in the kitchen, I was making supper, she was sitting at the table doing her homework, and out of nowhere she said, "Mommy, are you and Tatty angry at each other?"

We had not been fighting. Not in front of her. We are careful about that — we do not fight where the children can hear, or at least we try. We save it for after bedtime, behind closed doors, in whispers that sometimes become less than whispers. But we had not fought that day. We had barely spoken that day. And that was the thing. She noticed the silence.

I said, "No, mamaleh, we are not angry." And she looked at me with those brown eyes that see too much and she said, "Then how come Tatty did not say goodbye to you this morning?"

He had left early that day. We had been in one of those cold stretches — not fighting, just frozen. The kind where you hand each other the salt at dinner without making eye contact. The kind where the house functions perfectly and the marriage is barely breathing. I thought we were hiding it well. I thought if we were not yelling, the children would not know.

Children know. I am telling you this so you hear it clearly. Your children know. They may not have words for it. They may not say anything. But they feel it in their bodies the same way you feel it in yours. They feel when the house is warm and they feel when it is cold. They feel when their parents are close and they feel when

they are far. You cannot fake warmth. Children are not fooled by performance.

I think about what my children are learning about love from watching me and their father. This thought keeps me up some nights. Because they are learning everything. My sons are learning what a husband looks like. My daughters are learning what a wife looks like. They are learning how a man treats a woman. How a woman speaks to a man. They are learning what marriage is — not from a book, not from a teacher, not from a kallah class years from now. From me. From us. Right now. Every day. At the dinner table. In the hallway. In the way he comes home and the way I greet him or do not greet him.

When things are good between us — when we are talking, laughing, when he puts his hand on my shoulder in the kitchen and the children see — the whole house changes. I am not exaggerating. The children are calmer. They fight less with each other. They go to bed easier. The house breathes differently. My oldest son, who is twelve, he acts differently when he sees his father being kind to me. He stands taller. He is softer with his younger siblings. He is learning, in real time, what it looks like to be a good man. Not from a mussar sefer. From his father's hand on his mother's shoulder.

And when things are bad — when we are not speaking, when the air is thick — the children absorb it. The little ones act out. The baby cries more. My six-year-old starts wetting the bed again. My daughter asks me if we are angry. They are sponges and they are soaking up everything we spill.

I knew a woman, a neighbor, who used to say, "We stay together for the children." And I understand that. I do. But I want to say something that might be hard to hear. Staying together is not enough. If you stay together and the house is full of ice, the children learn that marriage is ice. If you stay together and you never touch, the children learn that husbands and wives do not touch. If you stay together and every conversation is sharp, the children learn that love sounds sharp.

Staying together for the children only works if you also do the work to make what the children see something worth seeing. Otherwise you are teaching them to endure. And maybe there is some value in endurance. But I want my children to learn more than endurance. I want them to learn that marriage can be warm. That a husband can be gentle. That a wife can be honest. That two people can disagree and come back to each other. That love is not the absence of conflict — it is the presence of repair.

The morning after my daughter asked me that question, I made a decision. I walked my husband to the door. In front of the children. I said, "Have a good day." He looked at me, surprised, because we were still in the cold stretch. But he said, "You too." And my daughter, sitting at the table with her cereal, she smiled. A small smile. Like the world had just been put right.

That smile cost me nothing. Three words at the door. But for my daughter, those three words meant: my parents are okay. My home is safe. Love is real.

Do not underestimate what your children are learning. They are watching you closer than you think. And they will carry what they see into their own marriages someday. Give them something good to carry.

The Lesson

Your children will not remember what you told them about marriage. They will remember what you showed them. Make sure it is something worth remembering.

Chapter 29:
The Woman Who Gives Everything Has Nothing Left for the Bedroom

I want to tell you about a Tuesday. A regular Tuesday, nothing special. I will walk you through it so you understand.

I woke up at 5:45 because the baby was crying. Fed her. Changed her. Put her back down. She did not go back down. Held her while I made lunches for four children with one hand. Cut sandwiches into triangles because the six-year-old will not eat them if they are squares — do not ask me why, I do not know why, nobody knows why. Packed bags. Found one shoe for the three-year-old, the other shoe was under the couch, mamash the last place I looked. Braided two heads of hair. Broke up a fight about who gets the blue cup. Everyone wants the blue cup. We have eleven cups and they all want the blue one. Dressed two children who can dress themselves but will not. Made sure the older ones had their homework. Wiped the table. Wiped a face. Wiped the floor. Everyone out the door by 7:40.

Then: laundry. Three loads. Folding from yesterday that I did not finish. Dishes from breakfast. Grocery shopping with the baby and the toddler, which is like going to war but the enemy is a pyramid of cereal boxes and a child who wants everything on every shelf. Home. Unpack. Cook. The baby naps for forty minutes, which is not enough time to do anything real but I try anyway. More laundry. Pick up children from school. Snacks. Homework. Arguments about homework. The eight-year-old has a project due tomorrow that she is just telling me about now. Drive someone to a playdate. Drive someone else to the dentist. Come home. Start dinner. The toddler is hanging on my leg. The baby is crying again. Dinner. Bath time for the little ones. Stories. Bedtime. Fight about bedtime. Another fight

about bedtime. The three-year-old needs water again. He always needs water.

By 9 PM, every person in this house has taken something from me. A piece of my body, a piece of my brain, a piece of my patience, a piece of my neshama. I gave it. I gave it willingly. I gave it because I am a mother and this is what mothers do and I would not trade it for anything. But by 9 PM, there is nothing left. The cup is not half empty. The cup has been empty since 6 AM and I have been running on fumes since noon.

And then my husband looks at me. With that look. The look that says: the children are asleep. We are alone. And I want to scream. Not because I do not love him. Not because I do not want closeness. But because I have been touched all day. Little hands pulling at me, a baby on my hip, a toddler on my lap, children pressed against me from every direction. My body has been a public resource since dawn. And now, at the end of all that, I am supposed to also be a wife? Also be a woman? Also feel desire?

I have no desire. I have no anything. I am a shell of a person wearing a housecoat and my sheitel has been off since 4 PM and I smell like chicken soup and baby shampoo and I just want five minutes where nobody is touching me. Five minutes where my body belongs to me.

This is the truth nobody wants to say. A woman who gives everything to everyone all day has nothing left for the bedroom. And then she feels guilty. Because the halachos say. Because her husband needs. Because a good wife should. And the guilt piles on top of the exhaustion and the exhaustion piles on top of the guilt and she goes to bed feeling like a failure in every direction.

I lived this. For years. I was the woman who gave everything. I ran the house like a machine. Perfect meals. Clean children. Organized schedules. Everyone taken care of. Everyone except me. I took care of me last, which means I did not take care of me at all.

Something had to change. And what changed was not the nighttime — it was the daytime. I started keeping something for myself. A small thing. Thirty minutes in the afternoon when the baby napped where I did not do laundry. I sat. I drank coffee. I read something. I did nothing. Thirty minutes of nothing. It felt selfish at first. The dishes were in the sink. The laundry was waiting. But I did it anyway.

And then I asked for help. I told my husband I needed him to take the children on Motzei Shabbos so I could take a bath. A bath. Not a vacation. A bath. Forty minutes of hot water and quiet. He said, "Of course." Of course. He said of course, and I had been suffering for years without asking.

I started saying no to things. No, I cannot make three salads for the kiddush. I will make one. No, I cannot drive carpool on Thursday. Someone else can do it. No, I cannot stay up until midnight helping with the project. It needs to be done by 9 PM or it does not get done.

Every no gave me back a piece of myself. And those pieces — those small, stolen, protected pieces — they were what I had to give at night. Not the leftovers of a woman who had been emptied. Something real. Something that came from a person who still existed.

You cannot pour from an empty cup. Everyone says this. But nobody tells you that filling the cup is not selfish. Filling the cup is the most important thing you can do for your marriage. Because the woman who shows up to the bedroom as a person, not a ghost, is the woman who can actually be present. Actually be there. Actually want to be there.

The Lesson

If you are giving everything to everyone, there will be nothing left for the one who chose you. Keep something. It is not selfish. It is survival.

Chapter 30:
Shabbos and What It Does to a Marriage When You Actually Let It

For years, Shabbos was just more work. I know you are not supposed to say that. I know Shabbos is supposed to be this beautiful, spiritual, restful day. And it is. It is all of those things. But for the woman who is cooking since Wednesday, who is cleaning the whole house on Friday, who is bathing children and setting the table and making sure everything is perfect — Shabbos starts as exhaustion.

I would light the candles on Friday night so tired I could barely keep my eyes open for the bracha. I would stand there with my hands over my face and I was supposed to be davening but really I was just leaning on the table trying not to fall over. The house was clean. The food was ready. The children were in their Shabbos clothes looking like little angels which they are not but on Friday night they at least look like it. And I was done. Finished.

The meal would happen. The zemiros, the divrei Torah, the food going back and forth, the children kicking each other under the table when they think I do not see. If we had guests — and we almost always had guests — then I was also performing. The hostess. The smile. The "please have more." The cleaning up while everyone is still singing. By the time I fell into bed on Friday night, Shabbos was already half a chore.

And then something shifted. I do not know exactly when. Somewhere around year ten. Maybe I was just too tired to perform anymore. Maybe I finally heard what Shabbos was actually saying.

Shabbos says: stop. That is it. That is the whole commandment. Stop. Stop working. Stop running. Stop doing. Stop producing. Stop being useful. Just stop. And I realized I was not stopping. I was finishing one kind of work and starting another. I was trading weekday stress for Shabbos stress. I was so busy making Shabbos beautiful that I forgot to let Shabbos make me still.

The first thing I changed was the cooking. I made less. I know this sounds small but in our world it is mamash revolutionary. I made chicken, soup, kugel, challah. That is it. No four salads. No three desserts. No special dish because so-and-so is coming and she does not eat this or that. Simple food. Good food. Enough food. But not a catering event. My mother-in-law noticed. She said, "Only one kugel?" I said, "Yes." She did not die. Nobody died.

The second thing I changed was the guests. We still have guests. But not every week. Some Shabbosim it is just us. Just our family. The door is closed and the world is outside and inside it is just me and him and our children. Those Shabbosim are the ones that heal.

Because here is what Shabbos does to a marriage when you actually let it: it puts you in the same room with nowhere to go. No phone to check. No errands to run. No emails to answer. No car to drive. You are stuck with each other. And for some people, that is terrifying. Because when there is nothing to do, you have to actually be. You have to actually look at the person across the table and see them. You have to sit on the couch on Shabbos afternoon when the children are napping and there is nothing to distract you and it is just two people in a quiet room.

Some of our best conversations have happened on Shabbos afternoon. Not planned. Not because we sat down to talk about the marriage. Because there was nothing else to do. He is lying on the couch. I am sitting in the chair. The house is quiet. And he says something. Or I say something. And it becomes an hour of real talking. The kind we do not have time for during the week. The kind that requires silence first.

Shabbos also does something to the body. When you actually stop — not pretend to stop, actually stop — something in your nervous system settles. The tightness in your shoulders releases. Your jaw unclenches. I did not even know I was clenching my jaw all week until Shabbos afternoon when I realized I was not. And when your body is soft, you are soft. When you are soft, you can be reached. When you can be reached, your husband can reach you.

I started treating Shabbos like medicine for my marriage. Not just a religious obligation. Not just a tradition. Medicine. Twenty-five hours of forced stillness. Twenty-five hours of no distractions. Twenty-five hours where the world cannot get to us and we have to get to each other.

Friday night, after the meal, after the guests are gone — if there were guests — after the children are sleeping, we sit. Sometimes by the candles if they are still burning. Sometimes on the couch. The apartment is dark and warm and quiet. He is relaxed in a way he never is during the week. I am relaxed in a way I never am during the week. And in that quiet, there is space. Space for us. Space that does not exist on a Tuesday.

Hashem knew what He was doing when He gave us Shabbos. I mean this. He knew that without it, we would run ourselves into the ground. We would become machines. We would forget that we are people who chose each other. Shabbos is the reminder. Shabbos says: remember who you are. Remember who he is. Remember why you are here together.

But you have to let it. You have to stop fighting Shabbos with more work and more performance and more perfection. Let the house be a little less clean. Let the food be a little more simple. Let the guests come next week. And let the quiet do what the quiet does.

The Lesson

Shabbos already has the cure for your marriage built in. You just have to stop performing it long enough to actually receive it.

Chapter 31:
The Couple Who Laughs Together Stays Together and I Mean the Real Laughing

I am going to tell you about the night with the chicken.

It was a regular Wednesday. I made a roast chicken, the kind I always make, with the paprika and the garlic and the onions on the bottom. I have made this chicken maybe five hundred times. I could make it in my sleep. I have made it in my sleep, basically, because with a baby waking up all night I am basically sleepwalking through the kitchen most days.

So I take the chicken out of the oven and I am carrying it to the table and I trip on the toddler's shoe — because there is always a shoe in the middle of the floor in this house, always — and the chicken flies off the pan. Mamash flies. Like it has been waiting its whole life to be free. It lands on the floor. On the floor I mopped that morning, which is the only good news. The pan clatters. The onions go everywhere. The baby starts screaming because of the noise. The toddler starts laughing because he thinks it is a game. And I am standing there in the kitchen holding an empty pan looking at a chicken on the floor.

My husband comes in. He looks at the chicken. He looks at me. He looks at the chicken again. And he says — and I will remember this until I die — he says, "She wanted to be free range."

I laughed so hard I sat down on the floor next to the chicken. I laughed until I was crying. I laughed until my stomach hurt and I could not breathe and the children came running in to see what was wrong with Mommy. Nothing was wrong with Mommy. For the first time in weeks, nothing was wrong with Mommy.

We ate the chicken. We picked it up, we washed it off, we ate it. Do not judge me. Five-second rule. In this house, with this many children, the five-second rule has been extended to thirty seconds and sometimes a full minute depending on what fell and how expensive it was.

But that night, that laughing — it did something. It broke open something that had been tight between us. We had been in one of those stretches where everything is serious. Bills. A child who was struggling in school. His mother's health. My exhaustion. Everything heavy, everything important, everything urgent. We had forgotten how to be light. We had forgotten that we are funny people. That we used to make each other laugh until we could not breathe. That this was one of the reasons we worked.

I think about the couples I know who have been married a long time — the ones who actually seem happy, not just the ones who perform happy for Shabbos guests. And the one thing they all have in common is they laugh together. Not polite laughing. Not the kind where you smile because someone made a joke and it is the right thing to do. The real laughing. The kind that is ugly. The kind where you snort. The kind where you have to hold onto the table. The kind that comes from years of knowing a person so well that something no one else would find funny is the funniest thing in the world.

We have inside jokes that are seven, eight, ten years old. Things nobody else would understand. I can say one word — one word — and he will start laughing. He can make a face and I know exactly what he is referring to and I lose it. These are not jokes from a book. These are jokes from our life. From the things that happened to us. From the disasters and the embarrassments and the moments that were terrible when they happened and hilarious when we looked back.

The chicken on the floor. The time he tried to build a bookshelf and it collapsed at 2 AM and we thought someone broke in. The time I accidentally sent a text about my mother-in-law to my mother-in-law. These are the things that become the

glue. Not the serious conversations. Not the deep emotional work, though that matters too. The laughing. The stupid, childish, embarrassing laughing that reminds you that before you were parents and before you were responsible and before the world put all this weight on you, you were two young people who made each other smile.

I am telling you that laughter is intimacy. Mamash intimacy. When I am laughing so hard I cannot breathe and he is the one who made me laugh — that is closeness. That is connection. That is a moment where every wall is down and every mask is off and I am just a woman laughing on a kitchen floor next to a chicken and he is just a man who said something stupid at the perfect time.

There was a time in our marriage when we stopped laughing. I do not know exactly when it happened. It crept in the way everything bad creeps in — slowly, without announcement. One day you realize it has been weeks since you laughed together. Really laughed. And the house feels different. Heavier. Colder. Like someone turned the color off.

If your marriage is heavy right now, I am not going to tell you to have a serious conversation. I am going to tell you to find something funny. Watch something together. Tell him about the ridiculous thing that happened at school pickup. Let yourself be silly. Let him be silly. You married a human being, not a financial plan. Treat him like one. Let him treat you like one.

That night with the chicken, after the children went to bed, we were still laughing about it. Lying in bed, lights off, and one of us would say "free range" and we would both start again. And that was the best intimacy we had in months. Not because of what happened in the bed. Because of what happened on the kitchen floor.

The Lesson

The couples who last are not the ones who cry together. They are the ones who laugh until they cannot breathe over something nobody else would understand.

Chapter 32:
Fighting Is Not the Enemy, Silence Is

I used to think fighting was the worst thing that could happen in a marriage. I thought good marriages did not have fighting. I thought the couples who never raised their voices were the ones who had figured it out. The ones who sat at Shabbos tables looking calm and happy and coordinated — those were the real marriages. And mine, where we fought about money and his mother and the children and who forgot to lock the door and why he said that thing at dinner — mine was broken.

I was wrong. Fighting is not the enemy. Silence is.

I will tell you about two couples I know. I am not going to use their names but they are real people and these are real stories.

The first couple fights. They fight regularly. Not violently, not cruelly, but loudly. She tells him when he is wrong. He tells her when she is being unreasonable. They argue about the big things and the small things. They have fought about which school for the children, about money, about his learning schedule, about her spending, about where to go for Yom Tov, about everything. And after they fight, they make up. Sometimes it takes an hour. Sometimes it takes a day. But they always come back. They are married twenty-two years and they are one of the happiest couples I know. Because fighting, for them, means they still care. They are still trying. They are still engaged with each other enough to disagree.

The second couple does not fight. Ever. They are polite. They are pleasant. They pass each other in the hallway and say the right things. They sit at Shabbos dinner and have appropriate conversation. They never raise their voices. And they are the loneliest two people I have ever seen. I know this because she told me. She sat

in my kitchen one night and she said, "We do not fight because we do not talk. We do not talk because there is nothing left to say. There is nothing left to say because we stopped caring ten years ago." She was not crying when she said this. She was past crying. She was in the place after crying, which is worse.

The first couple is alive. Their marriage has a pulse. It is messy and loud and sometimes the neighbors hear, and it is alive. The second couple is quiet and neat and dead.

I am not saying fighting is good. I am not saying you should go home and start a fight with your husband. What I am saying is that if you are fighting, it means something still matters. It means you are still invested enough to be angry. Anger is not the opposite of love. Indifference is. When you stop being angry, when you stop caring enough to argue — that is when the marriage is in real trouble.

In my own marriage, our worst period was not when we were fighting the most. Our worst period was when we stopped. There was a stretch — maybe four or five months — when we just stopped. I stopped bringing up the things that bothered me. He stopped pushing back when something was wrong. We were polite. We were functional. The house ran smoothly. And I felt like I was dying inside.

Because when you stop fighting, you stop revealing yourself. Every fight, even a bad one, has truth in it. When I yell at him about not helping with the children, the truth underneath is: I am overwhelmed and I need you. When he gets frustrated about how I talk to his mother, the truth underneath is: I am caught between two people I love and it hurts. The fight is ugly. The truth is important. Take away the fight and you take away the truth.

During those silent months, we were strangers. Roommates. Co-managers of a household. I could not have told you what he was thinking or feeling because he was not showing me and I was not asking. We were so careful not to upset each other that we disappeared from each other completely. Politeness is a mask. It is

the nicest, most socially acceptable mask there is. But it is still a mask.

What brought us back was a fight. A real one. I do not remember what started it — something small, something stupid, probably something about his socks on the floor or my tone of voice. But it cracked the ice. I said things that had been sitting in my chest for months. He said things that had been sitting in his. It was not pretty. It was not calm. The children were sleeping and we were whisper-yelling in the kitchen, which is a talent every married couple develops — the ability to have a full screaming fight at the volume of a library.

And after it was over, after we were both sitting at the kitchen table breathing hard and not looking at each other, I felt something. Relief. He was still here. I was still here. We were still fighting for this. Not fighting against each other. Fighting for the marriage. There is a difference and it is everything.

Now I am not afraid of the fights. I am afraid of the silence. When he goes quiet for too long, that is when I worry. When I go quiet for too long, that is when he should worry. Because quiet does not mean peace. Sometimes quiet means someone has given up. And giving up does not slam doors. Giving up closes them gently, so gently you do not even hear it until it is too late.

If you are fighting with your husband, take a breath. But do not stop fighting. Fight cleaner. Fight kinder. Fight without cruelty and without name-calling and without bringing up that thing from six years ago that you swore you would never bring up again. But fight. Because two people who are still fighting are two people who still believe this marriage is worth the effort. And that belief — messy, loud, exhausting as it is — that belief is everything.

The Lesson

A marriage that fights is a marriage that is still breathing. Worry when the house goes quiet. That is when someone has left without leaving.

Chapter 33:
What Happens to a Woman Who Is Never Asked What She Wants

Nobody ever asked me.

I am telling you this not because I am feeling sorry for myself. I am telling you because maybe nobody ever asked you either, and you do not even realize it is a problem because you have never known anything different.

Before the chasunah, my mother asked me what color tablecloths I wanted. That was the biggest decision anyone let me make. Ivory or cream. I picked cream. That was the last time someone asked me what I wanted for a very long time.

The shadchan asked my father what kind of boy would be good. My father told the shadchan. The shadchan found a boy. They told me he was a good learner, from a good family, had nice middos. I said yes. What else was I going to say? I was seventeen. I did not know what I wanted because nobody ever taught me that wanting was something I was allowed to do.

Then we are married. And he is a good man, he mamash is. But nobody asks me. Not him, not my mother-in-law, not the rebbetzin. They tell me. Cook this for Shabbos. Wear this length. Go to mikveh on this night. Have the baby, nurse the baby, have the next baby. When to sleep, when to wake up, when to smile, when to be grateful. I was grateful. I am not saying I was not. But grateful and invisible are two things that can live in the same body at the same time, and believe me, they do.

You know what happens to a woman who is never asked what she wants? She stops knowing. She mamash forgets. Someone puts a menu in front of her, she

cannot order. Someone says what do you want to do tonight, her brain goes blank. Not because she is simple. Because that muscle has not been used in so long it does not work anymore.

I remember maybe year six or seven, my husband and I are walking to a simcha. He says to me, very casual, very normal: "Where do you want to sit?" And I almost cried right there on Lee Avenue. Because he was asking me. Where do I want to sit. Such a small thing. But I could not remember the last time someone asked me what I wanted and then waited for an answer.

I did not cry. I said the back table, near the door, because Moishy was with the babysitter and I wanted to leave fast if she called. But inside something cracked open. Something that had been sealed shut for years.

Here is what happens, and I have seen this in so many women, not just me. When you are never asked, you start to believe your wants do not matter. And when you believe your wants do not matter, you stop having them. And when you stop having wants, you become a very efficient machine. You cook, you clean, you nurse, you fold, you show up, you smile. But you are not there. The neshama is somewhere else. And your husband, he does not understand why you feel far away, because you are standing right next to him. You are right there in the kitchen. But you left a long time ago.

In the bedroom, this is where it shows the most. Because intimacy requires wanting. It requires a woman to know what she wants, to feel safe enough to say it, to believe it matters. And if she has been trained for ten or fifteen years that her wants are irrelevant — that her job is to show up and do what is needed — then the bedroom becomes one more room where she performs. One more place where she gives and gives and nobody asks.

The first person who asked me what I wanted — really asked — was a woman. Not a therapist, not a counselor. A friend. We were sitting at her kitchen table, it was

late, the kids were asleep. She was eating cottage cheese out of the container, which I remember because it was so normal, so unglamorous. And she said: "Sarah Mushka, what do you actually want?"

I stared at her. I laughed. I said what do you mean, what do I want? She said, in your marriage, in your life, what do you want for yourself?

I opened my mouth and nothing came out. Not one word. I sat there for maybe a full minute, saying nothing. And she waited. She did not fill the silence. She just ate her cottage cheese and waited.

And then I said — and this surprised even me — I said: I want him to ask me how my day was. Not because he is supposed to. Because he actually wants to know.

Such a small thing. Such a tiny, ridiculous thing. But I had never said it out loud before. I had never even thought it clearly. It had been living somewhere in my chest for years, this wanting, and it had no words until that moment.

I went home that night and I did not tell my husband about the conversation. But something had shifted. I had been asked. I had answered. I existed as a person with a want. That is not a small thing. That is everything.

Over the next weeks I started noticing. I started asking myself, quietly, in my own head: What do you want, Sarah Mushka? When he reached for me at night, I asked myself: Do I want this right now? Sometimes yes. Sometimes not yet. But the asking changed everything. Because now I was a person in the room. Not a function. A person.

I am not saying my husband was a villain. He was not. He was raised the same way I was. He was told: provide, learn, be a good man. Nobody told him to ask his wife what she wanted either. He did not know. And when I finally, slowly, started telling him — this is what I want, this is what I need — he looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. Maybe he was.

If you are reading this and you realize nobody has ever asked you, I am asking you now. Right now. What do you want? Not what is right. Not what is expected. Not what the rebbetzin would say. What do you, the woman holding this book, actually want?

Say it out loud. Even if it is just to yourself. Even if it is as small as cottage cheese at midnight.

The Lesson

A woman who is never asked what she wants eventually stops wanting. And a marriage without wanting is just a lease agreement with better food.

Chapter 34:
I Stopped Waiting for Him to Understand and Started Helping Him

For years I sat on one side of the bed and resented him for not knowing.

He did not know that when I turned away it meant I was hurt. He did not know that when I said "it's fine" it was not fine. He did not know that when I went quiet after a mikveh night it was because something had felt wrong and I did not have words for it. He did not know any of this, and I was furious at him for not knowing.

I am telling you, I spent maybe four years being angry at a man for not reading my mind. Four years. That is a long time to be angry at someone for a skill that does not exist.

My friend Rivky — different friend, not the cottage cheese one — she said something to me once that I did not want to hear. She said: "You are waiting for him to become a different person instead of showing him who you are." I wanted to throw my coffee at her. But she was right.

Here is what I thought marriage was: two people who understand each other. Naturally. Without effort. Like in the stories. The chassan sees the kallah, their neshamos recognize each other, everything falls into place. Beautiful. Also not true. Maybe the neshamos recognize each other, I do not know. But the man in my bed did not recognize when I was sad. He did not recognize when I needed him to hold me without it going somewhere. He did not recognize that when I cooked his favorite food it was my way of saying I love you because I did not know how to say it with words.

So I made a decision. I do not remember the exact day, but it was a winter. The kids were sick, all of them, one after the other, the stomach thing that goes through a house like a fire. I was exhausted. He came home and asked what was for dinner. And instead of my usual — the tight jaw, the clipped "whatever is in the pot" — I stopped. I looked at him. And I said: "When you come home and the first thing you ask is about dinner, I feel like you do not see me. Like I am the cook. I need you to first ask how I am."

He blinked. He looked confused. Then he said: "How are you?"

It was awkward. It was so awkward I almost laughed. He said it like he was reading from a card. But he said it. And the next night he came home and he asked again, and it was a little less stiff. And by the third night it was almost real.

This is what I learned. Men — I am not talking about all men, I am talking about the man I married and the men I have heard about from women I talk to — they are not stupid. They are not cruel. Most of them, they want to do right. They mamash do. But they were never taught how. Nobody taught them. Their fathers did not model it. Their rabbeim did not discuss it. And then they get married and their wife expects them to know things that nobody ever explained to them, and when they fail she decides he does not care.

He cares. He just does not know.

So I started teaching him. Not lecturing. Not the way I talk to Moishy when he leaves his shoes in the hallway for the tenth time. Teaching. Gently. Like I would teach a child to read, except he is not a child and I had to be careful not to make him feel like one.

I would say: "When you do this, I feel this." Short sentences. No long speeches. No "we need to talk" — those four words, I am telling you, they make a man's soul leave his body. Just small, clear, specific.

"When you roll over after and do not say anything, I feel alone."

"When you touch my hair before you reach for anything else, I feel safe."

"When you ask me about my day, I feel like you see me."

At first he was defensive. Of course he was. Nobody likes being told they are doing something wrong, even gently. He said things like, "I did not mean it that way," and "You are too sensitive." And I had to bite my tongue and not say, "If you tell me I am too sensitive one more time I will put your hat in the cholent." I did not say that. I breathed. I said: "I know you did not mean it. I am just telling you how it lands."

Something changed after a few weeks. He started watching me. Not in a suspicious way. In a learning way. Like he was paying attention for the first time. He noticed when I went quiet. He would say: "You went quiet. What happened?" And sometimes I would tell him and sometimes I was not ready, but the fact that he noticed — that was the whole thing.

I also had to learn something hard. I had to learn that teaching him meant being patient with his learning. He was not going to get it right every time. Sometimes he would try and say the wrong thing and I would want to scream. But if I screamed, he would stop trying. And a man who stops trying is much worse than a man who tries badly.

There was a night, maybe two months into this, where I told him something that scared me. I told him that sometimes in the bedroom I did not feel good and I did not know how to say it. He got very quiet. I thought he was angry. Then he said: "So tell me. When it does not feel good, what should I do different?"

I almost fell off the bed. This man. This man who I had spent years thinking was not capable of understanding. He was sitting there, asking me to teach him. All he needed was for me to open the door. I had been standing at that door for years,

arms crossed, waiting for him to figure out it was there.

The resentment I had carried for so long, it started to drain. Not all at once. Like water going slowly out of a bathtub. Some days it came back. But the more I taught him and the more he tried, the lighter I became. We were not two strangers anymore. We were two people learning a language together. Both of us beginners. Both of us messing up.

If you are sitting in your bed right now, furious at your husband for not understanding, I want to say this to you gently: He is not refusing to understand. He was never given the words. Give him the words. It will feel strange. It will feel like you should not have to. But you do have to, because nobody else is going to, and the alternative is ten more years of silence.

The Lesson

He is not a mind reader. He is a man. Teach him like he matters to you, because he does, and because nobody else ever will.

Chapter 35:
The Smallest Touch Can Open the Biggest Door

I am not talking about the bedroom.

I know, you picked up this book and you think every chapter is about that. Some of them are. This one is not. This one is about a hand.

There was a period — I think it was around year five, maybe six — when my husband and I did not touch at all outside of what was required. We followed the halachos, we kept the niddah times, we came together when we were supposed to. But outside of that, nothing. We did not bump shoulders in the hallway. We did not touch hands when passing the salt. We sat on opposite ends of the couch like two strangers on a bus.

I did not even notice it at first. When you have small children climbing on you all day, touching you, pulling at you, hanging from you like little monkeys, the last thing you think about is being touched by one more person. By the end of the day my body felt used up. Touched out. I did not want anyone near me, including him.

But here is what I did not understand then. When you stop all touch, the only touch that is left is the big one. And when the only touch is the big one, it carries too much weight. Every time he reached for me, it meant something. It meant we were going somewhere. And that pressure, that knowing, it made me tense before he even got close.

I talked to a woman once — older, married maybe twenty-five years, very wise, very blunt. She said to me: "You have to touch him when it means nothing. So that when it means something, it is not so scary."

I thought about that for a long time.

So I started small. So small he probably did not notice at first. I brushed his arm when I walked past him in the kitchen. I let my knee touch his knee when we sat together at a Shabbos meal. I handed him his tea and let my fingers stay on the cup an extra second so our hands would overlap.

Nothing happened. No fireworks. No dramatic moment. That is the point.

What did happen was slow. Over weeks — I am not talking days, I am talking weeks — the space between us got smaller. Physically. We sat closer. He started doing it back. A hand on my shoulder when he passed behind my chair. His foot touching mine under the table. Small things. Things the children did not notice, things nobody would see.

But I noticed. And he noticed. And the air between us changed.

Here is what I think happens in a marriage where touch disappears. The body forgets. It forgets that this person is safe. It forgets that closeness does not have to mean something. And when the body forgets, the heart follows. You look at this man and you feel nothing because your body has not been reminded in months that he is yours and you are his.

Small touch is a reminder. That is all it is. A hand on a shoulder says: I am here. Fingers touching when you pass a plate says: I know you are there. Sitting close when the kids are finally in bed says: I choose to be near you. Not because I have to. Because I want to be.

I remember one night, it was a Thursday, I was standing at the sink doing the dishes. The older kids were doing homework, the babies were down. He came into the kitchen to get water and on his way back he put his hand on the small of my back. Just for a moment. Just a few seconds. He did not say anything. He just touched me and kept walking.

I stood at that sink and I felt something I had not felt in a long time. I felt married. Not legally married. Not technically married. Married. Connected to another person. Reminded that someone in this house was mine in a way that was different from the children, different from the family, different from everything.

That small touch opened something. That night, when the house was quiet, I sat next to him on the couch. Close. Our arms touching. And we did not do anything. We just sat. But it was the most intimate I had felt in months, and nobody took off a single piece of clothing.

I think women especially, we forget this. We think intimacy is the big thing or it is nothing. Either we are together in that way or we are roommates. But there is a whole world in between. A whole continent of small touches that keep the connection alive so that when the big moments come, they come from warmth instead of cold.

If you have not touched your husband in a while — and I do not mean the mikveh night, I mean really touched him, casually, softly, for no reason — try it. Tomorrow. Walk past him and let your hand brush his. Sit next to him instead of across from him. Hand him something and let the moment last one second longer than it needs to.

He might look at you funny. He might not notice at first. That is fine. You are not doing it for a reaction. You are doing it because your marriage is a living thing and living things need to be touched to know they are alive.

I also want to say this to the women who are touched out. Who have babies on them all day and cannot imagine one more person needing their body. I understand. I mamash understand. I have been that woman, with a baby on my chest and a toddler on my leg and my husband looking at me from across the room like he is waiting in line. It is not a good feeling for anyone.

But this is different. This is not someone taking from you. This is you giving something so small it costs you almost nothing. A hand. A shoulder. A moment.

Start there. The biggest doors do not need the biggest keys.

The Lesson

You do not need a grand gesture. You need a hand on a shoulder on a Tuesday night. That is where marriages come back to life.

Chapter 36:
When the Children Are Asleep and the House Is Finally Quiet

Nine thirty at night. Maybe ten. The last child is finally down. The baby needed one more feeding. Moishy needed water. Chaya Leah needed to tell me something that absolutely could not wait until morning — it could wait, but try explaining that to a seven-year-old who has just remembered that her friend said something mean at recess three days ago.

But now. Now it is quiet. The house has that sound it only has at night, that hum of the refrigerator, the ticking of the heater, the occasional creak from upstairs where someone is rolling over in their sleep. This is the most dangerous and most precious time in a marriage.

I say dangerous because this is when you decide. Every night, you decide. You decide if your marriage gets ten minutes or zero. You decide if you sit down next to him or pick up your phone. You decide if tonight is the night you actually look at each other or if tonight is another night where you both collapse into separate corners and call it a life.

For years — I am ashamed to tell you how many years — I chose collapse. I chose laundry. I chose my phone. I chose scrolling through whatever I was scrolling through, looking at other people's kitchens, other people's recipes, other people's lives that looked shinier than mine. My husband would be sitting on the couch and I would be on the other end, folding towels, and we would not say a word to each other for forty-five minutes.

Then I would go to bed. He would come in later. We would sleep. And in the morning we would wake up and do it all again.

This is how a marriage dies, by the way. Not in one dramatic fight. Not in one terrible betrayal. It dies at nine thirty at night, one quiet evening at a time, when two people who are supposed to be partners choose the laundry over each other so many times that the choosing becomes automatic.

My husband is not a big talker. I think I have told you this. He is a quiet man. He does not come home and say, "Let us discuss our feelings." He comes home, he eats, he learns, he helps with bedtime if I ask, and then he sits. He is a sitter. Give the man a couch and a sefer and he is content. He was not asking me for conversation. He was not demanding my attention.

And that was part of the problem. Because if he had demanded, I would have noticed. But he just sat there, quiet, and I just sat there, folding, and the distance between us grew without either of us making a sound.

The night that changed — I keep telling you about these nights, these specific moments, because that is how change works in a marriage. Not gradually. In moments. Specific, stupid, ordinary moments.

This night, the towels were done. My phone was charging in the kitchen because I had left it there by accident. The house was quiet. And I had nothing to do with my hands. So I sat down next to him. Not on the other end of the couch. Next to him. And I did not say anything because I did not have anything to say.

He looked at me. Just looked. Like he was surprised I was there. And he said: "You are sitting with me."

That is all he said. Not a question. A statement. Like he was confirming it was real.

I said yes. I am sitting with you.

We did not talk about anything deep. He told me something about a sugya he was learning. I did not fully understand it but I listened. I told him that Rivky was making a kiddush and I needed to figure out what to bring. We talked about nonsense. About nothing. About the ordinary details of a life shared by two people who made eleven other people together.

But we were sitting together. At ten o'clock at night. With no children between us and no screens between us and no laundry between us. Just two people on a couch.

That night, when we went to bed, something was different. We were warmer. Not because of anything physical — we had not done anything. But because we had spent twenty minutes in the same space, choosing each other, and our bodies remembered. Oh. Right. This person. I know this person. This person is mine.

I started doing it on purpose after that. Every night — not every night, I am not a saint, some nights I am so tired I cannot form words — but most nights, after the children are down, I sit with him. Sometimes for ten minutes. Sometimes for thirty. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we do not. Sometimes I put my head on his shoulder and close my eyes and that is the whole thing.

The point is the choosing. The point is that nine thirty comes and you do not disappear into your phone or your laundry or your exhaustion. You sit down. You are present. You give your marriage ten minutes that nobody else gets.

I know what you are thinking. Ten minutes. That is nothing. That is not enough time to fix anything. And you are right, ten minutes is not enough time to fix anything. But ten minutes, every night, for a month, is five hours. Five hours of sitting together. Five hours of choosing each other. That is more than most couples get in a year.

The house will be dirty. The laundry will not fold itself. Your phone has notifications. I know. I have the same house, the same laundry, the same phone. But the laundry will be there tomorrow. Your marriage might not be, if you keep choosing the towels over the man.

Sit with him tonight. After the kids are down. After the kitchen is quiet. Just sit. You do not have to say anything brilliant. You do not have to solve anything. You just have to be there. That is what he needs. That is what you need. That is where the marriage lives — in the quiet, at nine thirty, when nobody is watching and nobody will ever know except the two of you.

The Lesson

The marriage does not happen during the day. It happens at nine thirty at night. Show up for it.

Chapter 37:
Forgiveness Is Not a Feeling, It Is Something You Do on a Tuesday

He said something to me in year three that I carried for a very long time.

I am not going to tell you exactly what it was. Not because I am being mysterious. Because the specific words do not matter. What matters is that they cut me. Deep. The kind of deep where you feel it in your stomach, where the air leaves the room, where you look at this person you married and you think: I did not know you could say something like that to me.

He said it during a fight. We were fighting about money, or the children, or something — honestly I do not remember what started it. But I remember the words he said. I remember where I was standing. I remember the kitchen light was that yellow color it gets at night. I remember my hands were wet because I had been washing something. And I remember thinking: I will never forget this.

I did not forget it. For months. Every time we were fine, every time things were good, the words would come back. Like a guest who shows up without calling. I would be sitting with him, enjoying a Shabbos meal, and suddenly the words were there again, sitting between us on the table like an uninvited plate. And I would go cold.

He apologized. I will give him that. He knew he went too far. Maybe a day or two later he said he was sorry. And I said okay. But okay is not forgiveness. Okay is just a word you say so the conversation can end.

I held onto it. I held onto it like it was something precious. Which is insane when you think about it — who holds onto pain like it is a treasure? But I did. Because

the pain was proof. Proof that I had been wronged. Proof that I was the victim. And being the victim felt safe because it meant I did not have to be vulnerable again. If I stayed hurt, I stayed protected.

This is what nobody tells you about holding a grudge. It feels like armor. But it is a cage. You are not protecting yourself. You are locking yourself inside a room with the worst moment of your marriage and refusing to leave.

I brought it up. More than once. In fights. When he would say something even a little bit sharp, I would reach back into that drawer and pull out the old words. "Well, you said this that time." Like a receipt I kept for a purchase I never wanted. And he would get that look on his face — that defeated, exhausted look — and say: "I already apologized for that." And he had. He had apologized. But I was not done punishing him.

There was a Tuesday. Regular Tuesday. Nothing special about it. The children were at school. The baby was napping. I was cleaning the bathroom — why do all my revelations happen when I am cleaning? — and I thought about the words again. They floated up like they always did. And for the first time, instead of letting them settle into my chest, I thought: I am tired of carrying this.

That is all. I was tired. Not enlightened. Not holy. Not at peace. Just tired. Carrying a grudge takes energy. Real energy. Every day you wake up and you pick it up and you carry it with you and by the end of the day you are more exhausted than you should be and you do not even know why.

So I put it down. On a Tuesday. While scrubbing a bathtub. Not because I felt forgiving. I did not feel forgiving. I felt tired. And I decided that I was done bringing it up. Done replaying it. Done using it as a weapon.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. I need you to hear this. It is not a warm wave that washes over you and suddenly everything is beautiful. If you are waiting for that,

you will wait forever. Forgiveness is a decision. It is a thing you do on a regular day when nothing special is happening. You decide: I am putting this down. And then the next time it floats up, you put it down again. And again. And again.

It took weeks for the words to stop coming back. Maybe longer. But every time they showed up, I made the same decision. No. I am not picking that up today. I am done. Not because he deserves it. Maybe he does, maybe he does not. Because I deserve to stop carrying it.

My husband noticed. He did not say anything directly, because he is a man and men do not say things like "I notice you have stopped holding a grudge." But the air changed between us. I was softer. He was less guarded. We were lighter.

I think about the women I know who are carrying things from years ago. Year two. Year five. Year ten. Something he said, something he did, something he did not do. They carry it and it sits between them in the bed every night like a third person. And they think they are protecting themselves. But they are just making sure the wound never closes.

You want to know the hardest part? The hardest part is that forgiveness feels like losing. It feels like you are saying what he did was okay. It was not okay. Forgiving does not mean it was okay. It means you are choosing to live in the present instead of the past. It means you are choosing the marriage over the grudge.

I still remember the words. I am not pretending I forgot. I just do not live there anymore. That kitchen, that yellow light, those wet hands — it is a place I visited, not a place I live.

He has hurt me since, in small ways, because that is what humans do. And I have hurt him. But I do not collect the hurts anymore. I do not keep receipts. I deal with it, I say what I need to say, and I put it down.

Tuesday. Not a special day. Not Yom Kippur. Not after a meaningful conversation. A Tuesday. With a dirty bathtub and a sleeping baby. That is when forgiveness happened. That is when it always happens — in the most ordinary moment you can imagine.

The Lesson

You are not waiting to feel forgiving. You are waiting for permission to stop being angry. Here is your permission. Put it down.

Chapter 38:
The Difference Between Staying and Choosing to Stay

There are two women in the same house.

One stays because she has to. Because there are eleven children. Because the community would talk. Because her mother would not understand. Because where would she go? What would she do? She does not have a degree. She does not have a career. She has a husband and a house and a life that was built around her before she even knew what she wanted. So she stays. She stays the way a person stays in a waiting room. Patient. Resigned. Looking at the clock.

The other woman stays because she chooses to. Same house, same husband, same eleven children, same community, same mother. But she wakes up in the morning and she decides: I am here because I want to be. Not because I am trapped. Because this is my life and I am choosing it.

I have been both of these women.

For a long time, I was the first one. Staying because leaving was not possible. And when you stay because you have to, everything feels heavy. The cooking is heavy. The cleaning is heavy. The bedroom is heavy. Everything is obligation. You are serving a sentence, not living a life.

I did not think about leaving. I want to be clear about that. It was not that I stood at the door with a suitcase. I am a frum woman, I believe in marriage, I believe in commitment. But believing in something and choosing it are different. You can believe in something and still feel trapped by it. You can believe that marriage is sacred and also feel like the walls are closing in.

The shift did not happen because he changed. I am telling you this because so many women are waiting for the husband to change so they can be happy. He did not change, or maybe he changed a little, but that is not what made the difference. What made the difference is that I changed. I went from a woman who was here because she had no other option to a woman who looked at her options — really looked, honestly, without fear — and chose this one.

That might sound like the same thing. It is not the same thing. It is mamash not the same thing.

When you stay because you have to, you wake up and the day happens to you. When you choose to stay, you wake up and you make the day. You decide: today I will cook this meal because I want my family to eat well. Today I will sit with him tonight because I want to be close to him. Today I will go to the mikveh and I will come home and I will be present because this is my marriage and I am in it by choice.

The difference is inside. Nobody can see it from the outside. The neighbors see the same woman. The children see the same mother. But the woman inside is standing up straight instead of hunched over. She is breathing instead of holding her breath.

I remember the moment I chose. It was not dramatic. I was folding laundry — again with the laundry, I spend half my life folding — and I was thinking about a woman I know who left her marriage. She left, and she seemed okay, and I thought about her life, and I thought about my life, and I thought: If I could leave, would I?

And the answer surprised me. The answer was no. Not because of the children. Not because of the community. Because of him. Because of this specific man, with his quiet ways and his dry humor and the way he brings me tea without asking and the way he learns with such concentration that the house could collapse

around him and he would not notice. Because of the life we built, imperfect and hard and beautiful in ways I did not expect.

I chose him. Standing there with a pair of his socks in my hand, I chose him. And everything looked different after that. The same socks. The same laundry. But different.

When you choose to stay, the resentment loses its power. It does not disappear — I am not selling you fairy tales. But it shrinks. Because resentment thrives on helplessness. It feeds on the feeling that you are stuck. And when you are not stuck, when you are choosing, the resentment starves.

I want to talk to the woman who feels trapped right now. Maybe you are reading this and you are the first woman. The one who stays because she has to. And you think, easy for you to say choose, you do not know my husband, you do not know my life. You are right. I do not know your life. And I am not telling you that every marriage should be stayed in. Some should not. I am not going to pretend otherwise.

But if your marriage is not dangerous — if it is hard but not harmful — then I am asking you to try something. Stop telling yourself you have no choice. You do have a choice. You are making it every single day. Every morning you wake up in that bed, you are choosing. You just do not realize it because you have been telling yourself the story of being trapped for so long that it feels like the truth.

Choice changes a woman. It changes how she walks, how she speaks, how she touches her husband, how she shows up at night. A woman who is choosing to be there is a different woman than one who is stuck there. And he can feel it. He may not have the words for it, but he feels the difference. The whole house feels the difference.

I chose to stay. And the marriage that came after the choosing was not the same marriage as before. Same man. Same woman. But the woman was standing by the door with her hand on the knob, and she decided to let go and walk back to the kitchen. Not because the door was locked. Because she wanted to be in the kitchen.

The Lesson

The door is not locked. It was never locked. You are here because you are here. Now decide if you want to be.

Chapter 39:
What I Would Tell My Daughter Before Her Wedding

My oldest is not yet at this age, but I think about it already. I think about the night before her chasunah, sitting with her, the last night she sleeps in my house as my child. And I think about what I will say.

The kallah teacher will teach her the halachos. The niddah, the mikveh, the when and how and what is permitted. This is important, I am not dismissing it. But the kallah teacher will not tell her what I am going to tell her. Because the kallah teacher cannot. Because these are things you only know after you have lived them.

Here is what I will say.

My daughter. My beautiful girl. Tomorrow you are getting married to a man you have met maybe six times. Maybe seven if you count the time his mother came over and he was there for twenty minutes being awkward. You think you know him. You do not know him. And this is okay.

He is scared. I know you are scared, everybody knows the kallah is scared. But he is also scared and nobody is talking about that. He is terrified. He is a boy — yes, he is twenty and technically a man, but he is a boy — and tomorrow night he will be alone in a room with a girl for the first time in his life and he has no idea what to do. His friends told him things that are probably not true. His rebbe told him things that are technically true but not helpful. And now he is supposed to be a husband.

Be patient with him. Not because he deserves patience more than you do. Because someone has to go first. Someone has to be the brave one. And I am telling you, my daughter, be the brave one. Not brave like loud. Brave like honest.

When something does not feel right, say so. I know this goes against everything you have been taught. You have been taught to be quiet, to be modest, to not make a fuss. And modesty is beautiful. But modesty does not mean silence. Tznius does not mean swallowing your pain. If something hurts, you say it hurts. If you are not ready, you say you are not ready. A good man — and he is a good man, I would not let you marry him otherwise — a good man will wait.

The first night might not be what you expect. It might be awkward. It might be painful. It might be over very fast or it might not happen at all. All of this is normal. I know you have built this up in your head as a holy, beautiful experience. Maybe it will be. But maybe it will be two confused people in a hotel room who do not know where to put their hands. And that is also okay. That is also the beginning of something holy, even if it does not feel like it in the moment.

Your body is yours. I need you to hear this. Your body is yours. Yes, there are halachos, yes, there are obligations, and I am not telling you to ignore them. But inside those halachos, inside that framework, you are a person with a body that has feelings and responses and needs. Learn your body. What feels good. What does not. And tell him. Because he will not know. He will not know unless you tell him.

Do not compare. Not to your friends, not to what you heard, not to what you imagined. Your marriage is your marriage. Your friend who got married last month and says everything is amazing — she is either lying or she got very lucky or she has a different definition of amazing. Do not measure your first year against anyone else's first year. Your first year will be hard. That is normal.

About his mother. She raised him for twenty years and now you have him. She will have opinions. She will have advice. Some of it will be good. Some of it will make you want to scream. Smile. Say thank you. Then go home and do whatever you were going to do anyway. Do not make an enemy of his mother. You do not need that war. You need an ally and she can be one if you let her.

Cook what you know how to cook. Do not try to be someone else in the kitchen. He will eat what you make. And if he does not like it, he will learn to. My husband ate burned chicken for the first three months and he survived. Your husband will survive too.

There will be a night — maybe not the first week, maybe not the first month, but there will be a night — when you lie in bed next to this man and you think: What have I done? Who is this person? I want to go home. When that night comes, do not panic. Call me if you need to. But know that every married woman in history has had that night. Your grandmother had it. I had it. It does not mean you made a mistake. It means you are married.

Learn to fight well. You will fight. This is guaranteed. Two people in a small apartment with different habits and different families and no experience living together — you will fight about dishes and about money and about how he leaves his towel on the floor like the floor is a towel rack. Fight about the thing. Not about everything. Do not save up six weeks of complaints and release them all at once. Deal with things as they come. Small fires are easier to put out.

And my daughter, one more thing. Do not lose yourself. Not in him, not in the children that will come b'sha'ah tovah, not in the cooking and cleaning and the demands of this life. Keep something that is yours. A thought. A hobby. A friendship. Something that is only yours. Because a woman who disappears into her marriage has nothing left to bring to it.

I love you. I am proud of you. Tomorrow will be beautiful and terrifying and you will be fine. Not right away. But eventually. And I will be here the whole time.

The Lesson

Nobody can prepare you for marriage. But someone can tell you the truth, and that is almost as good.

Chapter 40:
What I Would Tell My Son Before His Wedding

I do not have a son who is old enough for this conversation yet. But I have thought about it. I have thought about what I would say to a boy — to any boy — the night before he stands under the chuppah. Because the things I would say are the things I wish someone had said to my husband before he married me.

My boy. Listen to me carefully because what I am about to tell you, your friends will not tell you, your rebbe probably will not tell you, and your father — your father loves you but he does not have these words.

Tomorrow you are marrying a girl. A real, living, breathing girl who is right now sitting in her room, terrified. You are also terrified, I know. But your terror and her terror are different. You are afraid you will not know what to do. She is afraid of what will be done to her. Do you understand the difference? You need to understand the difference.

Be gentle. I do not mean gentle like weak. I mean gentle like careful. Like you are holding something precious. Because you are. This girl has never been alone with a man. She has never been touched by a man. Whatever happens tomorrow night — and maybe nothing happens, and that is fine — the way you are with her in those first hours will shape how she feels about you for years. I am not exaggerating. Years.

Do not listen to your friends. Whatever Yankel or Shmuel told you about their wedding night, forget it. They were either lying or their wife was pretending or they are a different person than you. This is not a performance. There is no audience. It is just you and her in a room, two people who barely know each other, trying to figure out something that nobody properly explained to either of

you.

Ask her. This is the most important thing I will tell you. Ask her. "Is this okay?" "Do you want me to stop?" "What do you need?" I know these words feel strange. I know you think a man is not supposed to ask, that you are supposed to know, that asking makes you look weak or unsure. It does not. Asking is the strongest thing you can do. Because what you are really saying when you ask is: You matter to me. Your feelings matter to me. I will not do anything you do not want.

She is not your mother. I am sorry to say this so bluntly, but you need to hear it. Your mother cooked for you, cleaned for you, anticipated your needs before you knew you had them. Your wife is not going to do that. Not because she does not love you. Because she is not your mother. She is a girl your age who is also learning. She does not know what you like for breakfast. She does not know how you like your shirts folded. She will learn. But you have to be patient while she learns, and you cannot make her feel bad for not already knowing.

She might cry. Not because you did something wrong. Because everything is overwhelming. The wedding, the new apartment, being away from her mother, the expectations, the fear. If she cries, do not panic. Do not take it personally. Do not say, "What did I do?" Just sit near her. Give her space if she needs it. Give her closeness if she needs that instead. Ask her which one she needs. She might not even know. That is okay too.

Do not rush. Not the first night. Not the first week. Not the first month. There is no deadline. Whatever you think is supposed to happen by when — forget it. Some couples take days. Some take weeks. Some take longer. All of it is normal. If your wife is not ready, she is not ready. You waiting is not a failure. You waiting is love.

Learn to say sorry. You are going to mess up. Not maybe — definitely. You are going to say the wrong thing. You are going to forget something that matters to her. You are going to come home and not notice that she changed something in

the apartment that she spent all day working on. And she is going to be hurt. When that happens, say sorry. Not "sorry but —" Not "sorry you feel that way." Just sorry. Two syllables. Mean them.

Talk to her. Not about Torah — you can talk to her about Torah too, but that is not what I mean. Talk to her about what you are feeling. If you are scared, say you are scared. If you are confused, say you are confused. I know this is hard. Boys are not raised to say these things. But your wife is not your chavrusa. She needs to know what is going on inside you. Not everything. But something. Give her something real.

She is going to change. The girl you married at eighteen will not be the same woman at twenty-five. She will grow, she will have opinions, she will push back, she will want things she did not want before. This is not a problem. This is a person becoming herself. Let her. A wife who grows is a wife who stays.

One more thing. Do not compare what happens in your bedroom to anything. Not to stories, not to what you heard, not to what you imagine is normal. Normal does not exist. There is only what is real between you and her, built slowly, with patience, with honesty, with a lot of awkwardness that eventually becomes something beautiful. But only if you let it be awkward first.

You are going to be someone's husband tomorrow. This is the biggest thing that will ever happen to you. Bigger than any test, any job, any accomplishment. Because this is a person. A whole person, with a whole life, who is trusting you with herself. Do not waste that trust.

I love you. Go be good to her.

The Lesson

She is not a character from a story. She is a real person who does not know you yet. Let her learn you slowly, and learn her the same way.

Chapter 41:
It Is Never Too Late to Start Over Even If It Has Been Years

I know who is reading this chapter.

You are the woman who has been married fifteen years. Maybe twenty. The children are older now, some of them teenagers, and you and your husband have not really talked — I mean really talked — in years. You live in the same house. You sleep in the same bed. You sit at the same Shabbos table. But you are strangers. Polite strangers who share a last name and a mortgage and a set of matching dishes you got for your chasunah that you still have not replaced even though two of the soup bowls are chipped.

You picked up this book and you thought: This is for the young ones. The newlyweds. The women who still have time. Not me. For me it is too late. The concrete has dried. The marriage is what it is. You read the chapters about touch and conversation and sitting together at night and you thought: She does not know my marriage. We are past that.

I am telling you, you are wrong.

I know a woman — I am not going to say her name, she would not want me to — who restarted her marriage at year twenty-two. Twenty-two years. She had given up. Not dramatically, not with tears and declarations. She had just... stopped. Stopped trying, stopped hoping, stopped caring. She described it to me once. She said it was like turning off a light. You do not notice the darkness right away because your eyes adjust. And then one day you realize you have been sitting in the dark for years.

Her husband was the same. He had stopped too. They coexisted. They co-parented. They co-everything except the one thing that matters, which is being together.

And then something happened. Something small. She got sick. Not terribly sick, but sick enough to be in bed for a few days. And he took care of her. He brought her soup. He sat with her. He asked her how she was feeling, and not in the mechanical way he usually asked, but in a way that had worry in it. Real worry. Like he remembered that she was a person he cared about.

When she got better, she told him. She said: "When you took care of me, I felt something I have not felt in a long time." And he looked at her, and he said: "Me too."

That was it. That was the restart. Not a vacation. Not a therapist. Not a dramatic conversation at midnight. One honest sentence. One honest response. And from there, they started over. Slowly. Awkwardly. Like two people learning to walk again after a long time in bed.

I have seen this happen more than once. I have seen couples who were basically roommates find their way back. I have seen women who told me they felt nothing — mamash nothing — for their husband, start to feel something again. Not because the man changed overnight. Because the woman decided to open a door she thought was sealed shut.

Here is what I think happens in a long marriage that goes cold. Both people build walls. Slowly, brick by brick, over years. Every disappointment is a brick. Every unspoken hurt is a brick. Every night of silence, every fight that was never resolved, every time she needed him and he was not there — bricks. And after fifteen or twenty years, the wall is so high you cannot see each other anymore. You forget there is even a person on the other side.

But the wall is not real. That is what I want you to understand. It feels real. It looks real. But it is made of decisions, not concrete. And decisions can be un-decided.

You do not have to tear the whole wall down. You just have to remove one brick. One honest sentence. One vulnerable moment. One night where instead of turning away, you turn toward him and you say something true. Something like: "I miss you." Or: "I do not want to live like this." Or even: "I do not know how to fix this but I want to try."

He might not respond the way you want. He might be shocked. He might be defensive. He might say, "What are you talking about, everything is fine." Because men, especially men who have been married a long time, they build walls too, and sometimes they do not even know the wall is there.

But you said it. And now it is in the room. And you cannot unsay it. And that is where it starts.

I want to be honest with you. Restarting is harder than starting. When you are a newlywed, everything is new and there is hope and there is potential. When you are at year fifteen, you have history. You have scars. You have a catalog of every wrong thing he ever said and did, filed neatly in your brain, alphabetized probably. Starting over means deciding that the catalog matters less than the future. That is not easy. I am not pretending it is easy.

But it is possible. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have sat with women who came back to life inside their marriages after years of being gone. And when I say gone, I mean the body was there but the woman was somewhere else. And she came back. And he was still there, waiting, even though he did not know he was waiting.

You are not too old. You are not too far gone. Your marriage is not too damaged. If both people are alive and in the same house and willing to try — even a little, even

badly — then there is something to work with.

Start tonight. Not with a grand gesture. With one sentence. Sit next to him on the couch and say: "I want us to be closer." That is all. Six words. Let them sit in the air. Let him hear them. And then see what happens.

The Lesson

Twenty years of silence can be broken by one honest sentence. You just have to be the one to say it.

Chapter 42:
This Book Is Only the Beginning of the Conversation

I want to tell you something you probably do not want to hear.

This book is not going to fix your marriage.

I know. You read all these chapters. You stayed up late reading, or you hid it in your nightstand and read it while he was learning, or you read it on your phone during carpool pretending you were looking at a recipe. You read the whole thing and you are hoping that now — now that you have the words, the stories, the lessons — everything will change.

It will not. Not because of the book. Because of how change works.

A book is a door. That is all it is. I opened a door. I showed you what is on the other side. But I cannot walk through it for you. I cannot sit at your kitchen table and have the conversation with your husband. I cannot lie in your bed and say the thing that needs to be said. That part, that part is yours.

I have given you my stories. My kitchen, my bedroom, my mikveh nights, my fights, my failures, my marriage stripped down to the bones. I told you things I was not supposed to tell you. Things that women in my community are not supposed to say out loud. I said them because I believe that silence is what keeps us stuck, and words — even clumsy, awkward, Yiddish-accented words — are what set us free.

But my stories are mine. Your stories are different. Your husband is different. Your kitchen table is different. What works at my nine thirty at night might not work at

yours. The lesson I learned in year six you might learn in year two or year twelve or never, because your marriage is its own animal, with its own rhythms and its own wounds and its own version of beautiful.

What I can tell you is this: Start talking.

Start tonight. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not after the holidays, not after the baby comes, not after things calm down. Things do not calm down. There is always another baby, another simcha, another crisis, another reason to wait. The waiting is the problem.

Sit with him. Say one true thing. It does not have to be big. It can be: "I read something today that made me think about us." It can be: "I want to be closer to you." It can be: "I have been holding something and I need to tell you." One true thing. That is where every honest marriage starts. Not with a book. With a sentence.

I know you are scared. I was scared too. Every single time I opened my mouth and said something real to my husband, I was terrified. Because real is dangerous. Real means he might react badly. Real means he might not understand. Real means you are standing there with no armor and no script and no guarantee.

But real is also the only thing that works. I tried everything else. I tried hints. I tried silence. I tried being so good, so perfect, so accommodating that he would somehow feel my unhappiness through the walls. None of it worked. The only thing that worked was opening my mouth and saying the thing.

Some of you will read this book and change everything. I believe that. Some of you will read it and put it down and nothing will change, and I believe that too. And some of you — most of you, I think — will fall somewhere in between. You will try some things. Some will work. Some will not. You will have good weeks and terrible weeks. You will take two steps forward and one step back. And that is fine.

That is what a real marriage looks like. Not a straight line. A zigzag.

I am not your teacher. I am not your rebbetzin. I am not your therapist. I am a woman who has been married for thirteen years and has made every mistake in this book and some that did not make it in. I am a woman who sat in a mikveh parking lot and cried. A woman who faked it for three years. A woman who screamed at her husband in the kitchen and then made him dinner forty-five minutes later because the children still needed to eat.

I am you. Maybe a different neighborhood, a different sheitel, a different number of kids. But the same fear, the same confusion, the same desperate wish to feel close to the man who sleeps next to me.

The conversation I started in this book, it does not end here. It continues in your house. In your bedroom. In the quiet moments nobody else will ever see. The moments that are just yours and his, that belong to no one else, that will never be in a book or on a stage or in anyone's story but your own.

That is where the real work happens. Not here. There.

So close this book. Put it down. Go find him. And start talking.

The Lesson

A book can open a door. But you have to walk through it yourself. Tonight. Not tomorrow.

Chapter 43:
I Stayed. And Now You Know Why.

I got married on a Tuesday night in June. I was eighteen years old, ninety-three pounds, wearing a sheitel that was too big for my head and a dress that my mother picked out because I did not care about dresses, I only cared about not fainting under the chuppah.

He was a stranger. I am not being dramatic. He was a man I had met a handful of times in a hotel lobby with my parents nearby and his parents nearby and everyone smiling too hard. I knew his name. I knew he learned well. I knew he had nice eyes. That is what I knew about the person I was going to share a bed with for the rest of my life.

The first year was the hardest year of my life. And I say this as a woman who has given birth eleven times, who has been through nights so long I thought morning was a rumor, who has buried people she loved and held babies who were sick and stood in hospital hallways bargaining with Hashem. The first year was harder than all of it. Because all of those things, you endure them. The first year of marriage, you have to build something from nothing while you are enduring it.

There were nights I lay in bed next to this man and thought: I made a terrible mistake. Nights where his breathing made me angry. Where the space between us in the bed felt like a canyon and I did not know how to cross it and I did not know if I wanted to. There were nights I cried so quietly that the pillow was wet but he never heard. And mornings where I got up and made breakfast and smiled and nobody knew.

I wanted to go home. Home to my mother's house, to my old bed, to the place where I was just a girl and not a wife. I wanted to be someone who had not made

this enormous, irreversible decision. I wanted a different life. I wanted to be different.

But I stayed.

Not because I am brave. I am not brave. I stayed because there was nowhere to go. I stayed because the community does not have a place for a girl who leaves after one year. I stayed because my mother said give it time, and I had no better plan than that.

So I gave it time.

And time — time is a strange thing in a marriage. It does not heal. I do not believe that anymore. Time does not heal anything. Time gives you space. Space to learn, space to mess up, space to try again, space to see this person next to you clearly instead of through the fog of expectation and fear.

In year two, I learned that he is afraid of confrontation. That when I yelled, he went silent not because he did not care but because he was terrified. I learned this and it broke my heart a little. This tall man in his black hat, terrified of his ninety-three-pound wife and her sharp tongue.

In year three, I learned that he shows love by doing, not saying. He will never say I love you the way I want to hear it. But he will get up at two in the morning to drive to the pharmacy for Motrin when the baby has a fever. He will carry the stroller up four flights of stairs without being asked. He will bring me tea, always, without me asking, every single night. That is his I love you. It took me three years to learn to read it.

In year four, I told him something real for the first time. Something about the bedroom, something about how I felt, something that had been choking me. And he listened. He did not fix it that night. But he listened. And the listening cracked something open between us that had been sealed.

In year five, we had the worst fight of our marriage. I do not remember about what. I remember that we did not speak for three days, which in a small apartment with small children is its own kind of torture. And on the third day he came to me and said, "I do not want to fight anymore." And I said, "Me neither." And that was enough. It was not elegant. It was not beautiful. It was two exhausted people choosing each other over their pride.

In year six, something shifted. I cannot explain it. Like a lock turning. He went from a stranger to a person I knew. Not fully. You never fully know another person. But enough. Enough that his silence stopped scaring me. Enough that his touch started feeling like home instead of obligation. Enough that when he walked into the room, something in me settled.

And I thought: Oh. This is what they were talking about. This is what they meant when they said marriage is holy. Not the chuppah, not the ring, not the halachos. This. Two people who started with nothing and built something. Brick by brick, fight by fight, night by night.

Now it is thirteen years. Eleven children. A hundred thousand meals. Ten thousand fights. A million cups of tea. And this man — this stranger from a hotel lobby — he is my person. He is mamash my person. Not because he is perfect. He leaves his socks on the floor. He does not notice when I am upset unless I tell him. He falls asleep in the middle of conversations. He has said things that hurt me and done things that confused me and there have been nights where I looked at him and thought, who are you?

But he is mine. And I am his. And that belonging, that knowing — it did not come from the chuppah. It came from the years. From the staying. From the choosing, over and over, on the hard nights when choosing was the last thing I wanted to do.

I think about that eighteen-year-old girl sometimes. The one in the too-big sheitel. I want to go back and tell her: It is going to be so hard. Harder than you can imagine. There will be nights you cannot breathe. There will be years that feel like a sentence. There will be moments where you are so lonely inside your own marriage that you forget loneliness is not supposed to be the whole story.

But then — then there will be a night where he reaches for you and it feels right. A morning where you wake up and his face is the first thing you see and you are glad. A Shabbos table where you look at him across eleven heads of children and something passes between you that nobody else can see. And you will think: I built this. We built this. Out of nothing.

I stayed. Not because I had to. Not because I was trapped. Not because of the children or the community or the expectations. I stayed because somewhere in year four or five or six, the stranger became my person. And that was worth every hard night. Every tear on the pillow. Every fight about nothing. Every silent drive home from a simcha where we did not say a word.

I stayed because this life — this loud, messy, exhausting, beautiful life — is mine. I chose it. And I would choose it again. Every single time, I would choose it again.

This is my marriage. I told you everything. The ugly parts and the holy parts and the parts that are both at the same time. I told you because you deserved to hear it. Because someone should have told me, and no one did, and I will not let that happen to you.

I am Sarah Mushka. I am thirty-one years old. I live in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. I have a husband who brings me tea and eleven children who never sleep.

I stayed. I told you everything.

The Lesson

He was a stranger. Then he was mine. That is the whole story.

This is only the first conversation.

Come back. I have more to tell you.

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