



SARAH
MUSHKA

THE
HOLE
IN THE
SHEET

Myths Everyone Believes
and Nobody Asks Me About



BEHIND THE CLOSED DOOR SERIES • BOOK TWO



THE HOLE IN THE SHEET

Myths Everyone Believes and Nobody Asks Me About

Behind The Closed Door — Book Two

Sarah Mushka

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Chapter 1:

Everyone Thinks They Know Us

You have watched the documentaries. You have read the articles. You have seen the Reddit threads and the TikTok reactions and the Netflix specials and the magazine features with photographs of women in long skirts and head coverings walking through Williamsburg like they are exhibits in a museum that did not ask their permission. You have formed your opinions about my community with the confidence of someone who has done their research.

You have not done your research. You have watched other people's opinions about my community dressed up as research. There is a significant difference. A documentary filmmaker is not a member of my community. A journalist who spends three days in Williamsburg is not a member of my community. A former member of a different Chassidic community who writes a memoir is not a member of my community. These are all outsiders looking in, and what outsiders looking in see is the outside. Not the inside. Never the inside. The inside requires an invitation, and my community does not give those out to documentary filmmakers.

My name is Sarah Mushka. I grew up on Hooper Street in Williamsburg, then Ross Street, and after my wedding I moved to an 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. I have been married for thirteen years to a man I met twice before the wedding. We have eleven children. I was eighteen when I married him. He was twenty. Nobody asked me to write this book. Nobody in my community is going to thank me for writing it. My husband has opinions about what I share publicly. He shares them with me in the specific way of a man who has learned, over thirteen years, that sharing his opinions does not reliably change my behavior. I am not going to stop.

In my first book, *The Secret to Real Intimacy*, I talked about what nobody tells a young bride before the chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married. About what happens in the bedroom and in the silence and in the thirteen years of a marriage built from nothing between two people who barely knew each other when they stood under that chuppah. I told things that my community would prefer I had kept quiet. I said them anyway. The truth is more useful than the silence, and I have spent enough years watching the silence do its damage to women I love.

This book is different. This book is not about what happens inside the marriage. It is about what the outside world thinks happens inside the marriage. And the gap between those two things is, uh, considerable. The gap is wide enough to fit several documentary films and a dozen magazine features and approximately ten thousand Reddit threads, and none of them have narrowed it even slightly. I am going to try something different. I am going to narrow it with the truth.

I am going to take the myths. The ones repeated at dinner parties by educated people who consider themselves open-minded. The ones in documentary films made by people who have never sat in a Williamsburg kitchen at eleven o'clock at night when the children are finally asleep and two women are finally saying the things they cannot say anywhere else. The ones that travel through the internet with the velocity of things that confirm what people already want to believe. I am going to take each one and hold it up to the light. Not to defend my community. Not to attack it. Both have been done already by people with less information and more confidence than I have. I am going to correct the record. Because the record is wrong. Consistently, significantly, and in ways that cost real people their dignity.

There is one myth I am not going to address fully in this book. Not because it is not real. Not because it is not worth addressing. Because it deserves its own book and I am writing that book and I will tell you at the end of this one where to find it. Every month, for a woman in my community when her life and her body allow it, there is a building she goes to that the men pretend does not exist. What happens inside that building is the most private ritual in Chassidic married life. It is also the most misunderstood. I will get to it. I promise. But first. The sheet.

Some of what I tell you will surprise you. Some will make you uncomfortable. Some will make you laugh. Some of it, if you are honest with yourself, will make you look at your own life

differently. That last part is the point. I did not write this book to make you feel better about my community or worse about yours. I wrote it because accurate information is better than comfortable myth. And because I am, at this point in my life, simply tired of smiling politely while people say things about me that are not true.

I have eleven children and a husband who learns all day and an apartment on Bedford Avenue and a community that drives me to distraction sometimes and sustains me always. I have thirteen years of a marriage built from scratch between two people who were strangers on their wedding day and who are not strangers now, which required a great deal of work and honesty and more patience than either of us knew we had. I have opinions that nobody asked for and that I am going to share anyway. That is what I do.

Let us begin. I have a great deal to correct and limited patience for waiting.

Let me also say something about who I am not writing for. I am not writing for the academic who wants to study my community from a safe scholarly distance with appropriate citations and measured conclusions. I am not writing for the journalist who needs a quote that confirms the story they already decided to tell before they arrived. I am not writing for the community member who thinks I should have stayed quiet and kept the private things private. I understand all of these people. I am not interested in any of them. I am writing for the person who needs the truth more than they need the comfort of the existing narrative. That person is the only person this book is for.

One last thing before we begin. You do not have to agree with me. I am not asking for your agreement. I am asking only that when you form your next opinion about my community, you form it from something closer to the truth than the myths you have been handed. That is the whole project of this book. Replace the myth with the reality, and then think whatever you think. I only want the thinking to start from an accurate place. That is not too much to ask of a reader who has come this far.

The Lesson

The most dangerous opinion is the one held with complete confidence by someone who has never been in the room. This book puts you in the room.

Chapter 2:

The Hole in the Sheet

I have eleven children.

Let me say that again, slowly, so the math has time to land.

Eleven. Children.

Now. Tell me more about this sheet.

The hole in the sheet myth is the first thing most people outside my community know about us. It is repeated at dinner parties by educated people who consider themselves open-minded and culturally aware. It is stated as fact in comment sections by people who have never been to Williamsburg, never spoken to a Chassidic woman, never sat at a Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table or walked through a Chassidic neighborhood or had any contact whatsoever with the community they are describing with such confidence. It is passed down from person to person with the absolute certainty of something that must be true because everyone says it is.

Everyone is wrong.

It is not true. It has never been true. It was never true in any generation, in any community, anywhere. The myth is a complete fiction that has been repeated so many times by so many people that it has achieved the status of accepted fact. This is how myths work. They do not require truth. They require only repetition and an audience that wants to believe.

Let me tell you where this actually came from, because the origin story is almost more interesting than the myth itself. The confusion appears to have grown from a misunderstanding of certain ceremonial items used in Jewish weddings, including the tallis, the prayer shawl, which plays a role in some ceremonies. Over generations of transmission between people who had no direct access to the community they were describing, this ceremonial detail transformed into something unrecognizable. By the time it reached the dinner parties of people who consider themselves informed, it had become a story about Chassidic couples separating themselves with a sheet containing an aperture because they believed that physical contact beyond what was strictly necessary for procreation was sinful.

I want you to sit with the logistics of this for a moment. Just the pure, practical geometry of eleven children and a sheet with a hole. I will wait while you work through the physics. Take your time.

You have arrived at the same conclusion I arrive at every time someone brings this up. The myth is not only false but geometrically impossible in the way it is described. Eleven children are not produced through a sheet. Eleven children are produced the standard way, which requires no special equipment and involves two people being quite thoroughly in the same physical space.

When I first heard this myth as an adult, my reaction was not offense. It was confusion. I genuinely could not understand how anyone who had thought about it for thirty seconds believed it. And then I realized the problem. Most people had not thought about it for thirty seconds. They had simply heard it and repeated it, because it confirmed what they already believed about us. That we are strange. That we are primitive. That our intimate lives are mechanical and joyless and driven by rules that override basic human instinct and basic human anatomy.

This is what myths do. They do not spread because they are true. They spread because they are useful. The hole in the sheet is useful to people who need us to be less than them. It is a way of saying: look how strange they are. Look how little they understand about love and desire and the body. Look how much better we are at being human. The myth requires Chassidic people to be cartoons in order to make the person repeating the myth feel superior by comparison. Cartoons are convenient. They do not argue back.

What this myth does not allow for is the possibility that our intimate lives might be more sophisticated than the outside world's, not less. That three thousand years of serious thought about the relationship between husband and wife might have produced something more nuanced than what can be captured in a two-hour documentary by a filmmaker who has never been inside our homes. That the women in long skirts walking down Bedford Avenue might know things about desire and marriage and the body that the outside world is still paying a great deal of money to therapists and coaches to figure out.

My wedding night was in the Catskills. The hotel room had wallpaper with gold stripes that I stared at for a very long time. The bedspread was burgundy, stiff, the kind you find in every frum, Yiddish for religiously observant in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, wedding hotel. There was no sheet between us. There was only two terrified young people with no instructions and the understanding that they were going to have to figure this out together. I wrote about this night in my first book and I will not repeat every detail here. What I will say is simply this: whatever happened in that room, and over the thirteen years that followed, and across the eleven children that resulted, none of it involved a sheet with a hole in it. None of it. Not once. Not on any night of our marriage.

The reason this myth persists is not because people are stupid. People are not stupid. The reason it persists is because we are private. We do not explain ourselves to the outside world. We do not hold press conferences about our intimate lives. We do not write articles correcting the record. We live our lives inside our community and we let the myths travel uncorrected because engaging with them feels beneath us and also because we are, uh, very busy. Thirteen people in an apartment on Bedford Avenue generates a significant amount of busyness.

Except now we have me. And I have decided this particular correction is worth making. My husband has opinions about this decision. He is, as I may have mentioned, a patient man.

Here is what I want you to take from this chapter that goes beyond the specific myth. The hole in the sheet is a story about what happens when human beings fill in their ignorance with invention and then mistake the invention for knowledge. We have been described and defined and documented and explained by people who have never sat in our kitchens, never heard our music, never watched what happens at our Shabbos tables when thirteen people are finally together with

nowhere else to be.

We have no sheet. We have eleven children. We have a marriage built over thirteen years by two people who started with nothing and built something real. We have Shabbos tables and kosher kitchens and prayers said three times a day and a community that drives us crazy and holds us up simultaneously.

You are welcome to correct the record at your next dinner party. I have provided the information. What you do with it is your business.

The persistence of the myth also tells us something about the appetite for a particular kind of story about religious communities. The story where the believers are less than us. Where the devout are primitive. Where the rules have produced something damaged rather than something meaningful. This story is satisfying to certain people because it confirms a prior belief about religion generally and about traditional communities specifically. The hole in the sheet is perfect for this purpose. It is strange enough to be memorable. It is specific enough to seem credible. And it requires no contact with the actual people it describes.

I have explained the sheet enough now. But I want you to notice something about how you felt reading this chapter, if you came in believing the myth. There was probably a small moment of embarrassment, the recognition that you had believed something that does not survive thirty seconds of thought. Hold onto that feeling. It is useful. It is the feeling of a myth dissolving. You are going to feel it several more times before this book is done, and each time, I hope, it teaches you something about how confidently we all believe things we have never examined.

The Lesson

The most confidently repeated lie is always the one told about people too private to correct it. Eleven children. No sheet. The math speaks for itself.

Chapter 3:

No, We Did Not Meet on JDate

People ask me, with genuine curiosity and sometimes no sense that the question might be indelicate, how my husband and I met.

I tell them: a matchmaker introduced us. We sat across a table with our mothers present, both of them pretending very unconvincingly to be interested in something else. We spoke for approximately forty-five minutes. Three weeks later we were married.

The reaction to this information follows a predictable pattern. First there is a pause. Then there is the careful expression of someone trying to decide whether to say what they are actually thinking. Then, usually, they say it anyway: but how did you know?

I did not know. That is the answer. I did not know in the way the outside world means when it asks that question. I did not feel the thing that romantic culture tells you is the prerequisite for commitment. I did not fall. I did not experience the certainty of two people who have found each other. I sat across a table from a young man who had nice hands and who listened more than he spoke, and I made a decision based on the information available to me.

Thirteen years later, I stand behind that decision completely.

The outside world has a deeply held belief, so deeply held that most people do not recognize it as a belief rather than a fact, about how romantic relationships should begin. There should be attraction. There should be chemistry. There should be a feeling that tells you this person is right for you before you have adequate evidence that this person is actually right for you. This feeling

is treated as the primary and most important data point. It is trusted above character, above values, above the evidence of how a person actually behaves. Everything else comes after the feeling. The feeling is first.

Here is what is interesting about this feeling-first approach to choosing a life partner. The feeling is generated by novelty, by attractiveness, by the specific neurochemistry of early romantic encounter. It is not generated by character. It is not generated by stability or patience or kindness or the qualities that determine whether someone is a person you can build a real life with over decades. The feeling tells you something. It does not tell you the most important things. And yet the outside world has made it the foundation on which most of its romantic decisions are built, and then expresses surprise when those foundations do not hold.

The shadchan, the matchmaker who arranges introductions between potential spouses, the matchmaker who introduced us, had known my family for years before she suggested him. She knew my father's reputation in the community, the kind built on how a man treats people when no one important is watching. She knew my mother's family going back a generation, which tells you things about patterns of character that a dating profile cannot tell you. She knew, through the extraordinary information network of women who know everything about everyone in my world, what kind of girl I was. Serious. Not easily managed. Opinionated within the acceptable limits of opinion, and perhaps slightly beyond those limits. Someone who would need a husband with patience and a certain tolerance for a woman who has her own thoughts.

She found him. A boy from a good family, twenty years old, who had been learning in yeshiva, a Jewish academy for Torah study, since he was three. Who had a particular quality of listening she had identified as necessary for the specific woman I was. Who was steady in the specific way that steadiness looks when it is a genuine character trait rather than a performance. She made the match the way a person who genuinely knows both materials makes a join. Not because it would look good from the outside. Because it would hold.

We met twice before the wedding. The first meeting was in a hotel lobby in Boro Park. Him on one side of the table, me on the other, both our mothers pretending to be very interested in their coffee from across the room. He had nice hands, which I noticed immediately. He noticed, I found out later, that I did not look at the floor the entire time. He liked that. We spoke for

forty-five minutes about things I cannot now fully remember. The second meeting was similar. Then I said yes to the shadchan. She told his family. He said yes. Three weeks later we were married under a chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married, in a hall full of flowers.

The outside world finds this somewhere between medieval and insane. I understand this reaction. When you have been raised to believe that you must know someone deeply before you commit to them, the idea of choosing a spouse based on two conversations sounds like the plot of a novel set in a century nobody wants to return to.

But here is what I want to ask you, and I want you to sit with the question honestly. How is the feeling-first method working? The statistics on this are available to anyone who wants to look, and they suggest that the method of partner selection based primarily on chemistry and feeling is producing results that are, uh, mixed.

When you choose based on feeling, you have built your foundation on weather. The feeling changes. The feeling fades. And when it does, you are left with the person underneath the feeling, and you have to decide whether that person is someone you would have chosen deliberately if you had been choosing rather than feeling. My community asks that question first. The feeling comes later, if it comes at all, which it does. It just comes differently than the movies describe. It comes slowly, built from the inside rather than felt from the outside. It looks like thirteen years of choosing the same person every morning. It looks like my husband bringing flowers before Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, when he remembers. It looks like the specific laugh that happens between two people who have been through a great deal together.

My husband and I built our love. We did not fall into it. We constructed it, slowly, over thirteen years, the way you build anything worth having. With intention. With patience. With the willingness to choose the same person again tomorrow that you chose yesterday. That willingness is what the shadchan was actually evaluating. Not whether we would feel something. Whether we had the qualities to keep choosing.

No, we did not meet on JDate. We met at a table in Boro Park with our mothers watching. I looked at his hands. He noticed I looked up. Thirteen years later I am still glad those mothers were in the room.

There is one more thing I want to say about the forty-five minutes. People ask me, as if the answer will unlock something, what we talked about. I do not remember everything. I remember we talked about his learning, what he was studying and why it mattered to him. I remember we talked about family, not in the way of a resume but in the way of people trying to understand where the other person came from. I remember there was a moment where we disagreed about something minor, and neither of us backed down, and I noted that in a way that I now understand was important. A man who cannot handle a woman who disagrees with him in the first forty-five minutes is not a man I want to spend thirteen years disagreeing with productively. He handled it. He is still handling it. This continues to be the right choice.

The forty-five minutes across that table in Boro Park decided the shape of my entire life, and I would not change how it happened. Two conversations and a matchmaker's judgment produced a marriage that has lasted thirteen years and counting. The outside world spends years dating and often arrives at less. I am not saying my way is the only way. I am saying it is a way, a real one, with a real track record, and it deserves more respect than the JDate joke the outside world reaches for whenever the subject comes up.

The Lesson

Love is not a prerequisite for marriage. Love is a result of marriage, built slowly by two people who keep choosing each other. Choose first. Let the love follow the choosing.

Chapter 4:

The Matchmaker Knew Something Tinder Does Not

The shadchan, the matchmaker who arranges introductions between potential spouses, who matched my husband and me was not working from a database of photographs.

She was working from something far more reliable. Years of accumulated knowledge about families in my community. Knowledge about who was kind when nobody was watching. Who was stable under pressure. Who had the specific combination of qualities that produce a person capable of sustaining a marriage through the ordinary and difficult and boring parts of a long life together. She was evaluating character. Not chemistry. Not attraction. Character.

This distinction matters more than most people realize, because we have built an entire culture of romantic partnership on the premise that chemistry is the place to start, when in fact chemistry is among the least reliable indicators of long-term compatibility that exists.

Think about how chemistry actually works. You meet someone. Something happens, a neurochemical response to novelty and attractiveness and the specific signals your nervous system has been primed to respond to. You feel something. That feeling is real. It is also generated by processes that have nothing to do with whether this person will be kind to you at year seven when the novelty is gone. Nothing to do with whether this person has the patience to navigate conflict without cruelty. Nothing to do with whether this person will show up in the ordinary days and the hard ones. The feeling is generated by the surface. The surface is not the person.

The shadchan was looking underneath the surface. She was asking: what is this person actually like? What do people who know them well say about them, not in performance but in the honest conversations that happen between women who trust each other? How do they handle disappointment? How do they treat people who cannot do anything for them? What are their patterns when things are difficult and nobody is watching?

She asked these questions about my husband before I ever sat across a table from him. She got answers, because in a tight community where everyone knows everyone, answers are always available. And based on those answers, she decided he was someone I should meet.

The outside world calls this arrangement unromantic. I call it the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for my future. Someone who cared about my life spent time and genuine effort trying to find me a person who would be good for me, not just someone who would feel good in the early weeks. She was thinking about year thirteen when she made her recommendation. Nobody on a dating app is thinking about year thirteen.

I want to tell you something about what forty-five minutes across a table can reveal about a person, because the outside world dismisses this as obviously insufficient. In forty-five minutes, I saw that my husband did not try to impress me. This matters. A person who is performing for you in a first meeting is showing you the performance, not the person. He was not performing. He was simply there, in the conversation, listening and responding with a quality of attention I now know, thirteen years later, is one of his most consistent characteristics.

In forty-five minutes, I saw that he was steady. He did not escalate. He did not catastrophize. When the conversation touched on something difficult, he handled it with the same calm he would later bring to thirteen years of a household with eleven children and all the chaos that implies.

In forty-five minutes, I saw that he was curious. He asked questions. He listened to the answers with actual attention rather than waiting for his turn to speak. This is rarer than it sounds. People who are genuinely curious about other people are worth more than people who are merely charming.

None of this is visible in a photograph. None of it is visible in a dating profile. All of it was visible in forty-five minutes of real conversation between two people trying to see each other clearly before making a decision that would determine the shape of their lives.

Tinder cannot replicate this. Tinder can show you what someone looks like and what they want you to think about them. The shadchan can tell you what people who have known them for years actually think. This is categorically different information and it is more useful for the purpose of choosing a life partner.

The outside world has a myth about arranged marriages that I want to address directly. The myth is that they produce couples who are miserable together, strangers sharing a space out of obligation, with nothing between them except duty. This myth is not supported by evidence. The evidence from communities around the world that practice some form of assisted marriage suggests that these marriages are no less happy and are significantly more stable than marriages entered into entirely on the basis of romantic feeling.

I am not arguing for removing personal choice from the equation. I had personal choice. I said no to the first young man suggested to me, immediately and without ambiguity. My choice was real. What the shadchan system did was structure my choice so that I was evaluating people who had already been assessed for compatibility before I met them, rather than choosing from the entire universe of people based on who happened to trigger a feeling.

What I know after thirteen years that I did not know at that table in Boro Park is this. The qualities that matter in a marriage are not the qualities that attract you initially. They are the qualities you find yourself depending on at year seven when the early feeling has settled and the question is whether you can actually live with this person through the ordinary and difficult and beautiful parts of a long life.

The shadchan was asking about those qualities before I met him. That is the thing Tinder cannot do. And thirteen years later, the qualities she identified are exactly the ones I am still grateful for every single day.

I want to add something about what happens in my community when a match does not work. When someone says no. When someone realizes after the engagement that this is not right. Because the outside world imagines that the system is coercive. That once a match is made you cannot undo it.

Character over chemistry. That is the whole lesson of these early chapters, distilled. The shadchan understood it. The dating apps have not figured it out. And the cost of getting it wrong is measured in years of people's lives, in marriages built on weather that did not survive the first real storm. My marriage was built on something sturdier. I have the shadchan to thank for knowing the difference, back when I was too young to know it myself.

The Lesson

Chemistry is a weather condition. Character is a structure. The matchmaker was evaluating the structure when everyone else was still watching the weather.

Chapter 5:

What They Call Oppression I Call Architecture

A woman stopped me on the street last year. She was not from my community. She looked at my covered hair and my long skirt and my children around me in various states of chaos, and she said, and I am quoting her exactly: you poor thing.

I looked at her. I looked at her visible exhaustion and her phone showing seventeen notifications she had not answered and the particular expression of a person who is doing everything and enjoying none of it. And I thought many things. I said none of them. Because I was raised with manners.

This chapter is what I did not say.

The word oppression gets used about my community the way people use words they have not examined. Confidently. Frequently. Without much awareness of what the word actually means or whether it applies to the specific situation they are describing.

Oppression is a system that constrains a person against their will, denies them agency, and benefits those with power at the expense of those without. That is the definition. I did not make it up.

Now let me apply it to my life honestly. Because I am not here to tell you my community is perfect. It has genuine failures. The pressure on women to have children continuously without adequate support or acknowledgment of the physical cost. The limited professional options for women who want careers outside the home. The social surveillance that functions as control in

certain contexts. The marriages that are not working and the real difficulty of ending them in a community where divorce carries stigma. These are real. I name them because accuracy matters more to me than advocacy.

And now let me apply the same definition of oppression to the life of the woman who called me a poor thing.

The woman who cannot log off social media because her entire social existence lives inside it and she has not chosen this so much as drifted into it. The woman who cannot eat what she wants because the culture has decided what her body is supposed to look like and she has internalized that decision so thoroughly she calls it her own preference. The woman who cannot age without intervention because her value is tied to her appearance and she knows it. The woman who posts her intimate moments online for the approval of strangers and calls this freedom while feeling, in some private part of herself, that it costs something she cannot quite name.

I am not saying her life is worse than mine. I am saying oppression is more complicated than a headscarf. And freedom is more complicated than the absence of one.

Here is the concept that changes everything when you actually understand it. Chosen constraint.

There is a fundamental difference between a rule imposed on you and a structure you have chosen to live inside. Every person on earth lives inside structures. The question is not whether you have constraints. The question is whether you chose them with open eyes. Whether you have examined them. Whether they serve the life you are actually trying to live.

I cover my hair. I dress modestly. I observe Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night. I follow the laws of family purity. I do all of this not because someone is making me but because I have examined these practices and found them to be the architecture of the life I want. They hold up the walls of my existence. They give my life shape and direction and the specific clarity of someone who has decided what matters and does not have to decide again every morning.

The outside world looked at my structure and saw a cage. This is what happens when you look at someone else's architecture from the outside without understanding what it is holding up. You see the walls. You do not see what the walls make possible.

What my structure makes possible is a life with clear direction. With community. With the specific kind of belonging that comes from being embedded in something larger than yourself. With the particular freedom, and yes I am using the word freedom deliberately, that comes from having decided your values and not having to decide them again every day when you wake up.

The outside world chose freedom from structure and discovered that freedom from structure is not the same as freedom. It is sometimes just disorientation. The freedom to do anything can become the paralysis of not knowing what to do. The absence of rules can become the absence of direction. And the absence of direction is its own kind of constraint, just one that is invisible because it was not chosen but inherited from a culture that removed the old frameworks without providing new ones.

I am not asking you to cover your hair. I am asking you to think about the structures in your life. The ones you chose with open eyes and the ones that chose you by default. The ones that hold something up and the ones that are holding something down. A cage and a structure look identical from the outside. Only the person inside can tell the difference.

I am inside. I know which one I am standing in.

The woman who called me a poor thing was standing in her own structure. She just had not looked at it long enough to see what it was. I did not say this to her. I smiled politely and moved on with my eleven children. But I thought it. I think it every time someone pities me for the life I chose.

You are welcome to continue pitying me. I will be over here living.

I want to say something about joy, because I have been talking about architecture and structure and constraint and I do not want to leave the impression that my life is a beautiful cage even if I chose it. It is not a cage. It is a house. And the house is full of noise and light and the specific joy

of a life that is actually inhabited rather than just maintained.

Architecture, not oppression. A structure I chose, not a cage I was locked in. I will keep saying it because the outside world keeps needing to hear it. The walls of my life hold something up. That is what walls are for. The woman who pitied me on the street saw the walls and assumed a prison. She did not stay long enough to see what the walls made possible. You have stayed longer. I hope you see it now.

The Lesson

A cage and a structure look identical from the outside. Only the person inside can tell the difference. Stop assuming you can tell from where you are standing.

Chapter 6:

My Husband Has Never Seen Me Get Dressed. Sort Of.

My husband has never seen me get dressed in the morning.

Thirteen years. Eleven children. He has never seen the in-between. The ten minutes in the bathroom where I am nobody. Not his wife. Not their mother. Just a woman in a room assembling herself before she walks back out into the life that belongs to everyone.

Now. Before you think I have completely lost my mind. Let me address the obvious.

Of course he has seen things. Thirteen years. Eleven children. The math is not complicated and neither is the biology. In intimate moments, things are seen. Things are glimpsed. Nobody is wearing a blindfold. Nobody is pretending otherwise. This is a marriage, not a magic act. If you think I am suggesting that two people can be married for thirteen years and have eleven children without certain things becoming visible to each other, I invite you to sit with that thought until it makes you laugh, which should take approximately four seconds.

What I am talking about is the casual seeing. The ordinary seeing. The Tuesday morning seeing. The getting dressed with the bathroom door open while discussing who needs lunch packed. The changing clothes while talking about something completely unrelated. The this is just my body and you have already seen everything and it is just furniture seeing. That is what I protect against. Not the intimate moment. The intimate moment belongs to both of us and what happens there stays there. What I am protecting is the ordinary. Because the ordinary is where mystery goes to die.

In my world we have a concept. Eruvah, the concept of forbidden exposure in Jewish modesty law. Usually translated as forbidden exposure. But that translation flattens something that is actually architectural. Eruvah is not about shame. It is not about hiding. It is the idea that certain things are sacred not despite being kept private but because of it. What is withheld becomes valuable. What is reserved becomes rare. And what is rare does not become ordinary no matter how many years pass.

I cover my hair. Not only in public. At home also, in the way and to the degree that I choose. Not because the law requires it inside my own home. Because I have decided that what my husband sees of me should be something I decide, not something that happens to him by accident while he is looking for his keys. He sees my hair. Of course he does. After thirteen years and eleven children there have been moments when many things were visible and nobody was concerned about philosophy. But he does not see it casually. He does not walk past it like he walks past the furniture. He sees it on my terms. In my time. That decision belongs to me.

The outside world looks at this and sees a woman so controlled by rules that she cannot relax in her own home. Cannot let her hair down. Cannot simply be herself.

I look at this and see a woman who has been married for thirteen years and has not let thirteen years make her ordinary to the person she shares her life with. These are different things. Very different things.

Here is the thing about marriage that nobody tells you when you are standing under the chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married, with your knees shaking. The danger is not the bad times. The danger is not the fights or the hardship or the years when nothing is working. The danger is the ordinary times. The Tuesday morning when you are both in the kitchen and there is nothing to look at because there is nothing new to see. When the person you married has become furniture. When you are physically present in the same space and completely elsewhere in every other sense.

Ordinariness is what kills desire in a long marriage. Not conflict. Not hardship. The comfortable, familiar, I-have-already-seen-everything ordinariness that settles into a long marriage like dust if you let it.

My community understood this. Not as a psychological principle with a name and a treatment protocol. As a law. As an architectural principle built into the structure of the marriage itself. Maintain the boundary. Let there be things about you that require your partner to pay attention, because they are not simply always available. Let there be moments where you are something he has to notice rather than something he has gotten used to.

My husband has been married to me for thirteen years. He has not gotten used to me. I have not let him. This is not a game. It is not manipulation or punishment or strategic withholding. It is the maintenance of self inside a marriage. A woman who keeps something back, who has an interior life that is not fully visible, is not hiding from her husband. She is remaining herself. Remaining interesting. Remaining someone he is still, after thirteen years, in the process of discovering.

A woman who is completely known is completely ordinary. Completely ordinary is, uh, the end of something.

You want him to look at you the way he used to. Stop letting him see everything all the time. Give him something to notice. Give him something to wonder about. Give him the trailer, not the whole movie available on demand every morning while he is making coffee.

He will pay more attention to the trailer. He always has. This is not a secret. This is architecture. Three-thousand-year-old architecture that has been working longer than any dating app.

My husband told me once, in year seven or eight, that he finds me more interesting now than he did at the beginning. I asked him what he meant. He said: at the beginning I could see the edges of you. Now I cannot find them.

Thirteen years and he still notices when I walk into a room. That is not an accident and it is not luck. It is the result of my never letting myself become furniture, never letting the marriage make me ordinary, keeping something back that has to be noticed because it is not simply always on display. The outside world calls this strange. I call it the reason my husband is still curious about me after eleven children. Strange or not, it works.

The Lesson

*A woman who is completely known is completely ordinary. Keep something back. Not as a game.
As a self. The most powerful presence is the one that cannot be fully accessed.*

Chapter 7:

What Happens After the Mikveh

There is a building in my neighborhood that has no sign on the door.

No window facing the street. No indication from the outside of what happens inside. Every woman in my community knows exactly what it is. Every man in my community pretends he does not, while privately and carefully counting the days.

The mikveh, the ritual immersion bath used in Jewish law for spiritual purification.

I am going to tell you about it. Not everything. The full story deserves its own book, and I am writing that book, and I will tell you at the end of this one where to find it. But I am going to tell you enough, because the myths about the mikveh are almost as persistent as the myths about the sheet, and they are almost as wrong.

The outside world, when it hears the word mikveh, thinks: ritual bath. Purification. Something ancient and primitive that treats a woman as unclean and sends her away from her husband because her biology is considered impure.

I understand why they think this. The language does not help. The translations flatten something complex into something that sounds like it belongs in a history lesson about practices that civilized people have moved past. The documentaries do not help, because the documentaries are made by people who have never been inside the building and are therefore describing the outside of something they have not seen the inside of.

I have been inside the building. When my life and my body have allowed it across thirteen years of marriage and eleven children, which has not been with the monthly regularity the textbooks describe. Pregnancy and nursing change the calendar significantly. A woman with many children lives a different relationship with this rhythm than the textbooks suggest. I am not going to tell you I went every month like clockwork for thirteen years, because that would not be accurate, and I do not say things that are not accurate.

What I am going to tell you is what the practice is, what it means, and what it does to a marriage when it is present.

In my community, a woman observes the laws of niddah, the laws of family purity governing physical separation between husband and wife. During and after her menstrual cycle, she and her husband observe a period of physical separation. No touching. No passing objects directly hand to hand. A complete withdrawal of physical contact that lasts, when everything is counted and confirmed, for approximately two weeks. At the end of this period, after seven clean days have been counted and confirmed, she goes to the mikveh. She prepares, which is a preparation of significant thoroughness and care. She immerses in the water. She says a blessing. She goes home.

And her husband, who has been waiting, is suddenly very interested in her arrival.

The outside world has spent decades and enormous sums of money trying to solve the problem of desire in long-term relationships. Why does it fade. How do you keep it alive. What do you do when the person sleeping next to you every night starts to feel ordinary. There are books. There are retreats. There are therapists who specialize in precisely this problem, at significant cost per hour, with methods that involve more intentionality and more communication and more scheduled date nights.

My community solved this problem three thousand years ago. The solution is absence. Deliberate, structured, non-negotiable absence. Built into the calendar by law. Not chosen on the weeks you feel like it. Required. Every cycle. Without exception.

Two weeks of not touching. Two weeks of sleeping next to someone and not reaching for them. Two weeks of conversation and shared meals and children and Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, and all the ordinary texture of a life together, without the physical dimension that usually makes everything feel familiar and therefore ordinary. And then. Return.

I cannot explain to you fully what the return feels like. Not in this book, which is not that book. What I can tell you is that it does not feel ordinary. My husband, this man I have known for thirteen years, whose habits and preferences and particular silences I know as well as I know my own kitchen, does not feel ordinary in those moments. He feels specific. Chosen. Like something I have been waiting for rather than something I simply always have.

This is not an accident. This is engineering. Three-thousand-year-old engineering that understood something about human desire that the modern world keeps having to rediscover at great expense. You cannot want what you always have. You can only want what you have been waiting for. The mikveh builds the waiting into the calendar. The desire is not manufactured through effort. It is structural. It is built in.

The outside world calls this primitive. I call it the most sophisticated desire management system ever invented. The outside world says it reduces a woman to her biology. I call it the one ritual in my marriage that belongs entirely to me, that my husband does not control or manage, that I observe on my own terms according to my own body's rhythms and the demands of my own complicated life.

There is so much more to say. About the building itself. About the mikveh lady. About what the water feels like. About what I think about standing there. About what it means to emerge and walk home to a life that has been waiting.

That is the next book. I promised you. I keep my promises.

For now, I will say only this. The building with no sign is not a place of shame. It is a place where something is marked. A transition. A return. The end of one state and the beginning of another. And whatever the outside world thinks about it, after thirteen years and all the

complexity of a real marriage, I can tell you that the return from that building has kept something alive between my husband and me that I have watched go quietly quiet in marriages that did not have this architecture.

The outside world sometimes asks me, in the cautious way of someone who wants an answer but is not sure they want to hear it, whether the mikveh makes me feel unclean. Whether the period of separation makes me feel shamed or marked or lesser.

The building with no sign on the door. I have told you a little. I have not told you nearly everything, because everything is the next book. But I have told you enough to understand that what happens there is not primitive and not degrading and not what the outside world imagines. It is the oldest desire technology in the world, and it works, and I will tell you the rest when the time comes. For now, know only this: it is not what you think. Almost nothing about my life is what you think.

The Lesson

You cannot want what you always have. Structured absence, deliberate and honored, is not the enemy of desire. It is the condition that makes desire possible. Build the absence. Honor the return.

Chapter 8:

He Learns All Day and I Run Everything

My husband sits in a room with books all day.

He has done this for the entirety of our marriage. He wakes up early, he davens, prays according to Jewish tradition, he goes to the beis medrash, the Torah study hall where men learn and pray, to learn. He comes home for meals. He returns to learn. He is, by every measure the world he was raised in uses, a successful and respected man. Serious, learned, deeply committed to his learning. He can hold a position in a halachic, relating to halacha, Jewish religious law, Jewish law, argument for three hours without losing the thread. He knows the opinion of every major posek, a rabbinic authority on Jewish law, on questions I cannot even begin to frame. He learns a blatt, a page of Talmud, of Gemara, the central rabbinic text of the Talmud, containing centuries of legal discussion, in forty minutes.

He cannot, reliably, find his keys. I am not sure where the keys go. After thirteen years I have stopped asking and started putting them in the same place every day so at least one of us knows where they are.

I manage eleven children. A kosher kitchen that feeds thirteen people three times a day plus Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, which is a category of cooking that requires its own accounting entirely. A budget that demands the kind of precision that should come with a salary and a benefits package. The education of each child, including their specific needs, their particular challenges, their friendships, the delicate dynamics between siblings that shift constantly and require ongoing diplomatic management by someone who knows each person well. The social obligations of our community, which are extensive and

non-negotiable and require both attendance and appropriate contribution. The medical appointments. The grocery shopping, which happens with a frequency that would alarm an outside observer. The cooking, which is not casual cooking but the sustained daily operation of something closer to a small restaurant.

He is considered the head of the household.

I have spent thirteen years trying to understand what this means in practice, because in practice I am running everything. I have come to this conclusion: it means he is responsible for the spiritual direction of the family. For the Torah. For the learning that he brings back from the beis medrash and that shapes how our children understand their world. This is real. In my world, this is the most important thing. But the actual daily management of thirteen people's existence? That is me. That has always been me.

The outside world finds this arrangement troubling. A feminist reading says: this woman is doing twice the work for half the recognition and has no financial independence and this is the definition of inequity.

A careful reading says something more complicated.

I chose this. Specifically and with open eyes. Not in the passive way of someone who had no options. In the specific way of someone who was raised to understand what she was choosing and chose it. My husband learns because I want him to learn. Because I believe in what he is learning. Because the Torah that comes back from the beis medrash shapes the home we are building together, and I want that home. I made this decision before the wedding. I have remade it every year since.

This does not mean the arrangement is without tension. There are days when the imbalance is very physically visible to me and not entirely comfortable. When I have been on my feet since five in the morning and he walks in and asks what is for dinner. When I look at the sheer volume of what I carry and feel it not as philosophy but as weight in specific places in my body. A tiredness that lives in the shoulders and the back and the particular place behind the eyes that only mothers of large families know precisely.

On those days I remind myself of the distinction that took me years to fully understand. I am not serving my husband. I am building something. The difference is not semantic. A woman who serves does what she is told. She waits for direction. She performs the tasks assigned to her by someone else. I have never been that woman. I run this household the way a person runs something they built and own. I make the decisions. I set the priorities. I determine what our home looks and feels and sounds like. Nobody is directing me.

My husband has never told me what to do. Not once in thirteen years. He would not dare, and not only because I would not tolerate it. Because he is a person who respects people, and he respects me, and telling me what to do would be inconsistent with that respect and also inconsistent with his understanding of how this marriage actually works.

The myth of the controlling Chassidic husband comes from the outside world seeing a woman who covers herself and follows rules and assuming that someone must be making her do it. Nobody made me do anything. I made myself do it. I make myself do it every morning. The distinction matters.

Here is what I will say honestly about the imbalance. There is invisible labor in my life that is not always acknowledged the way it should be, inside my community and inside my marriage. I carry things that go unseen and unthanked. This is real and it is a genuine cost of the arrangement I have chosen. I do not pretend otherwise.

What I also have is this. Every Friday night the house smells like soup and the candles are lit and thirteen people sit at a table that I have set and a meal that I have prepared, and something happens in that room that I built from nothing, every single week, for thirteen years. My husband says kiddush, the blessing recited over wine to sanctify the Sabbath or a holiday. The Shabbos comes in. For twenty-five hours the outside world does not exist.

I built that. Every week. From scratch. That is mine.

I have one more thing to say about the arrangement of my marriage that I think is important and that I do not hear discussed often enough.

I run everything. He brings the meaning. This is the arrangement, and it is not the arrangement the outside world imagines, where a man rules and a woman serves. It is two people carrying different halves of a shared load, both halves real, both halves respected. I carry the half you can see. He carries the half you cannot. Together it adds up to a life. A full one. Ours.

The Lesson

There is a difference between serving and building. A woman who serves waits for direction. A woman who builds sets the direction. Know which one you are doing. The answer changes what the work means.

Chapter 9:

What the Rebbetzin Never Told Me

There is a woman in my community who is considered the authority on what a Jewish wife should be.

She has been married for forty years. She is learned and respected and deeply committed. She teaches the young kallahs before their weddings. She counsels the struggling wives. She is the person women go to when they do not know where else to go. She is genuinely good at what she does and she genuinely cares about the women she helps.

She has never, in forty years of teaching women about marriage, talked about desire.

Not once. Not in passing. Not obliquely. Not with a euphemism that a woman paying attention could decode. Complete silence on the subject. As if desire is not a component of marriage at all. As if what a woman experiences in her own marriage bed is simply not part of the curriculum. As if the laws of when and how are sufficient and the question of what it feels like, what it should feel like, what a woman is allowed to want it to feel like, is not something that needs to be addressed.

I asked her about it once. I was in my third year of marriage, struggling in ways I did not have words for yet, ways I wrote about in my first book in detail I will not repeat here. I went to her because she was who you went to. She listened. She nodded at appropriate intervals. And then she told me to daven, to pray according to Jewish tradition, more, to light Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, candles with more kavana, intention and spiritual devotion in prayer, and to be patient. That these things take time.

She was not wrong that these things take time. She was wrong about everything else.

What she should have said was: your desire matters. Your body's experience of this marriage matters. The fact that you feel nothing is not something to simply wait out or pray through. It is information. It is telling you something worth knowing and worth acting on. Your experience of intimacy is as important as your husband's, and the halacha, Jewish religious law, that governs when and how does not determine what you are allowed to want from those moments. That belongs to you. It has always belonged to you.

She did not say this. Not because she is a bad woman. She is a good and committed woman who has spent forty years genuinely helping people. She did not say it because she does not have the words. Because her kallah, a bride, teacher did not give her the words. Because her kallah teacher's kallah teacher did not give her the words. Because somewhere back in the chain of women teaching women about marriage, the words were lost and nobody went back to find them.

The result is generations of women walking into their marriages without the most basic information about their own bodies. Without permission to want something from their intimate lives. Without the language to say what they need to a husband who cannot read their mind and who was given equally insufficient preparation.

I know this because I lived it. And because I have had the kitchen table conversations at midnight that happen when women finally trust someone enough to say the thing they have never said. Women in their forties telling me they have never once told their husband what they need. Women in their thirties who do not know if what they were supposed to experience has ever happened for them. Women of all ages carrying this in silence for years because there were no words and there was no one safe to give them to.

I am giving the words now. Not to the rebbetzin, a rabbi's wife or a woman of religious authority in the community. To you.

Your desire is not a sin. It is not something to manage or suppress or wait out with more prayer and more kavana. It is part of you and it belongs in your marriage. The laws tell you when. They do not tell you what you are allowed to want when. That is yours. It has always been yours.

Nobody gets to tell you it does not exist or does not matter.

And here is what the rebbetzin should have told the husbands, through their own rebbetzin equivalent, before the wedding:

Your wife's experience matters. Not just whether she is willing. Whether she is present. Whether she is actually with you in the room or just there in the body. These are different things and they feel different and they are different. The laws tell you when. They do not tell you how. The how requires paying attention to someone other than yourself. This is your responsibility. Nobody else is going to give her what she needs if you do not, and you cannot give it if you do not know what it is, and you cannot know what it is if she has never told you, and she has never told you because nobody taught her she was allowed to.

This is the chain. I am breaking it.

I am not angry at the rebbetzin. I have moved past angry into something more useful. Determined. Determined that the women who come after me will have the words before they need them. That they will not spend years in the dark the way I spent years in the dark thinking something was wrong with me.

The silence has done enough damage. One book at a time, I am ending it.

I want to add something about the women in my community who did find a way to talk. Who, despite the silence they were handed, managed somehow to break through it earlier than I did. I know a few of these women. They are not the norm. They had, in each case, something unusual that helped them. A particularly honest friend who said the true thing first. A kallah teacher who went slightly beyond the official script. A mother who had decided privately that her daughter would not go through what she went through.

Two words would have saved me three years. Your desire matters. I am giving them to every woman who reads this, and to every man, because the men need them too. Say them. Say them early. Say them before the silence builds the wall that takes years to tear down. The silence is not modesty. The silence is just damage, waiting to happen, and the words are how you stop it before

it starts.

The Lesson

Silence is not modesty. Modesty is a practice. Silence about what women need and deserve is a failure. The laws tell you when. They do not tell you what you are allowed to want. That part is yours.

Chapter 10:

We Are Not All the Same and I Am Tired of Explaining This

Last month a woman from outside my community asked me, with complete sincerity, whether all Chassidic women feel the way I feel.

I looked at her for a moment while I decided how to answer.

There are tens of thousands of Chassidic women in New York alone. There are Chassidic women in Israel and in Europe and in communities across the world with their own distinct cultures and histories and practices that differ from mine in ways that would take another book to describe. There are Chassidic women who are deeply content. There are Chassidic women who are genuinely unhappy. There are Chassidic women who question everything privately and present perfectly publicly. There are Chassidic women who question nothing and are not performing anything. There are Chassidic women who left and ones who stayed and ones who live on the edge of the community the way I do, saying things that are not quite supposed to be said.

Whether all of them feel the way I feel.

Of course not. This should be obvious. The question reveals something interesting about how the outside world thinks about communities it has decided it understands.

The outside world has a habit of turning communities into monoliths. Particularly communities that dress similarly and live in geographic clusters. If everyone looks the same from the outside, the logic goes, they must all be the same on the inside. This logic would not survive thirty seconds of contact with an actual Chassidic woman, but contact is not always available, so the

logic persists.

Let me introduce you to some of the women I know. I am not going to use their names because privacy in my community is a value, not just a preference, and I am not going to violate it even in service of a point I am trying to make. But I will tell you enough about each of them that you understand what a range looks like inside a community the outside world treats as uniform.

There is a woman I know who runs a significant business from her home while maintaining every standard of modesty and religious observance that her community requires. She is one of the most capable and driven people I have ever met. She has built something real and substantial inside a framework that the outside world assumes does not permit building. Nobody outside the community knows the full scope of what she has built. Inside the community it is known but not discussed, which is its own interesting thing about how my community handles female ambition.

There is a woman I know who covers her hair perfectly and keeps a beautiful Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table and has cried to me at midnight more times than I can count about a marriage that has not given her what she needed. She is not a symbol of oppression. She is a person in a difficult marriage, which is something that occurs in every community in the world regardless of religion or culture or the presence or absence of a head covering.

There is a woman I know who left the community fifteen years ago and has built a life entirely outside it and is, as far as I can tell, genuinely happy in the specific way of a person who made a hard choice and does not regret it. She is not a symbol of liberation. She is a person who made a choice that was right for her specific circumstances.

There is a woman I know who is, by the standards of our community, somewhat eccentric. She reads widely. She has opinions she shares carefully with people she trusts. She pushes against the edges of what is acceptable without crossing them. She is, in some ways, the closest thing to me that I know in my immediate world. We have coffee sometimes. She says things I cannot say publicly. I say things she cannot say publicly. Together we cover quite a bit of ground.

These four women are all Chassidic women from Williamsburg. They do not look like the same person. They do not feel like the same person. They do not want the same things or experience their lives the same way or have the same relationship to the community they all technically belong to.

The monolith is a projection. It is what the outside world needs us to be in order to have a tidy opinion about us without the inconvenience of actually knowing us. A monolith can be categorized. A monolith can be pitied or admired or condemned as a unit. Individual people require individual attention, which is harder and more time-consuming and does not fit into a documentary or a Reddit thread.

I am not a monolith. I am Sarah Mushka from Bedford Avenue with eleven children and a husband who learns and opinions that get me into trouble and a voice I have decided to use because the alternative is silence and silence has done enough.

The woman next to me at shul, synagogue, on Shabbos is not me. We are both Chassidic women from Williamsburg. We are entirely different people who happen to share certain practices and certain community membership and little else.

The next time someone makes a statement about what Chassidic women think or feel or want, I want you to remember the four women I described and ask yourself whether any single statement could be simultaneously true of all of them. Because it cannot. Because they are people. And people, even people who dress similarly and share a community and walk down the same streets, are not interchangeable.

We are not a type. We are not a costume. We are not a documentary subject waiting for someone to explain us.

We are people. This should not require a chapter to establish. That it does says something about the work still left to do.

Here is a concrete example of what the monolith myth costs in practice. When a young woman leaves my community, the outside world tells her story as: she escaped oppression. When a

young woman stays, the outside world tells her story as: she does not know she could leave, or she is too afraid, or she has been convinced that this is what she wants when it is not really what she wants.

We are not a monolith. Four women from the same neighborhood, the same community, the same practices, and four completely different people. Remember them the next time someone tells you what Chassidic women think. There is no such thing as what Chassidic women think. There is only what this Chassidic woman thinks, and that one over there, and the one who left, and the one who never questioned anything. People. Not a type. Never a type.

The Lesson

A community is not a monolith. It is a collection of people who share certain practices. The practices do not produce identical people. Know the difference between a community and a costume.

Chapter 11:

The Gossip That Runs the Community and the Community That Runs on Gossip

In my community, everyone knows everything about everyone within approximately four hours of it happening.

Who is expecting. Who is not expecting but should be by now according to people who have appointed themselves the monitors of everyone else's fertility and timeline. Whose husband was seen somewhere unexpected at an unexpected hour. Whose daughter said something at school that traveled home through three different families before dinner. Whose kitchen was not in the condition it should have been when someone stopped by without calling first. Whose son is struggling in yeshiva, a Jewish academy for Torah study. Whose marriage sounds different lately.

I am not going to pretend this is not happening. It is happening. It has always been happening. It will always be happening. The information network of a tight Chassidic community is faster and more comprehensive than most professional news organizations and considerably less concerned with journalistic ethics or basic accuracy.

And I am not going to pretend it does not cost things. It does. Real things. The gossip, the constant awareness of being observed and discussed and evaluated, costs people their privacy and sometimes their dignity. A rumor that moved through my community before anyone had verified a single detail. A family whose reputation was affected by a story that grew in the retelling until it bore no resemblance to the original facts. A woman whose private difficulty became community knowledge before she had time to process it herself and decide what she

wanted to do about it.

This is real. I will not minimize it. I have been on the receiving end of community information networks and I know what it costs.

And now I am going to tell you the other side of the same coin. Because there is always another side, and the other side of this coin is significant.

The same network that knows your business within four hours also brings your soup within six.

When someone in my community is sick, people appear. Not because they received a formal request from an organizer. Not because they got a notification from a meal-coordination app. Because someone told someone who told someone and now there is food and company and the practical infrastructure of care, and it has been three hours since the news first traveled.

When someone has a baby, which in my community is frequent and joyful and expected, the meals arrive. They arrive for weeks. The older children are collected and kept busy and entertained by people who appeared without being invited. The house is managed by women who understood without being asked what was needed. The new mother is cared for with the efficiency of a community that has done this many times and knows exactly what a woman needs in the first weeks of a new baby.

When someone loses a job, the network moves. Someone knows someone who knows someone. A connection appears. A solution materializes from relationships that were invisible until they were needed.

When someone dies, which is the ultimate test of what a community actually is and actually does, the shiva, the seven-day mourning period observed by close relatives after a death, house fills. It stays full. The bereaved are never alone in the specific and terrible way that grief can make you alone. The practical needs of grief, which are extensive and specific and which a grieving person cannot manage for themselves, are handled by people who understand because they have all been through it and they learned from the people who were there for them.

This is the other side of the gossip network. The same system that distributed the rumor also delivers the soup. You cannot have one without the other. I have thought about this at length and I do not believe you can separate them. The closeness that makes the care possible is the same closeness that eliminates the privacy. The intimacy that makes you known when you are struggling is the same intimacy that makes you known when you would prefer not to be. They come together because they are the same thing.

The outside world chose privacy. It has privacy. It also has the loneliness that comes with privacy. The ability to go through a divorce without a neighbor knowing, which sounds like a blessing until you are in the middle of the divorce and realizing that nobody is bringing anything and nobody is checking on you and you are managing this enormous thing entirely alone.

I think about this trade-off honestly and without a predetermined conclusion. There are costs and gifts on both sides. The outside world has things my community lacks. My community has things the outside world lacks. Both of those statements are true at the same time.

What I know is this. In my community, you are known. The knowing has costs that I have named plainly. The knowing also has gifts that arrive in your kitchen, without being asked, at the exact moment you need them most.

I have decided the gifts are worth the costs. This is my decision for my life. You get to make yours. But I ask you to make it honestly, accounting for what you would be trading away, not just what you would be gaining.

I want to say something about the particular blessing of knowing someone's whole story. In a community where everyone knows everything, you also know the full arc of people's lives. You know who someone was at twenty and who they are at forty. You know what they have been through. You know the losses and the struggles that shaped them, not because they told you but because you were there, because you are part of the same community that was there with them through it all.

The soup and the gossip come from the same place. You cannot have the one without the other. I have made my peace with this, knowing what I am trading and what I am getting. The outside

world chose privacy and got loneliness. I chose to be known and got the soup, and also the gossip. On the whole, on the hardest days of my life, I have been glad I chose the soup.

The Lesson

The network that knows your business also brings your soup. You cannot have one without the other. Choose knowing what you are choosing. Account honestly for what privacy costs you.

Chapter 12:

What Modesty Actually Does to a Man

My husband has never casually seen another woman's hair uncovered.

Not in passing on the street. Not in the grocery store. Not in the community spaces he moves through daily. Every woman in his regular world is covered. This is his normal. The covered head is simply how women look to him in the ordinary world he inhabits every day.

And then he comes home.

I will let you think about that for a moment.

The outside world has a myth about Chassidic men that mirrors the myth about Chassidic women. The women are controlled. The men are the controllers. The women cover themselves because the men demanded it. The modesty is imposed by the men for their own convenience and comfort. This narrative is tidier than the reality and considerably less interesting.

The reality is about what happens to desire and attention when they are not constantly dispersed by availability.

We live in an era of radical visual availability. Every body, every face, every intimate moment, available to anyone with a device and a few seconds. The research on what this constant availability does to desire in long-term relationships is not encouraging. When a person has ambient access to an idealized and infinite supply of images of other people, the specific ordinary person in their ordinary kitchen starts to feel ordinary by comparison. The brain

responds to novelty. Give it constant novelty and familiarity suffers. This is not a moral failing. It is a psychological reality that applies to everyone regardless of their intentions.

My husband's visual environment has a different structure.

The women around him in his daily world are covered. Visual access to women's bodies is not ambient in the world he moves through. The specific woman he is married to is not competing with a constant feed of idealized alternatives before he walks through the door. His attention, when he comes home, is not already divided and dispersed and spent. It is, insofar as this is possible for a human being, available.

I want to be precise here, because I am not arguing that Chassidic men are better men than secular men. They are men. With everything that implies, including the full range of human failure. There are men in my community who are not faithful. There are Chassidic marriages that fail for the same reasons secular marriages fail. The system I am describing is not a guarantee of anything.

The principle is sound regardless of who is applying it. Concentrated desire, directed at one specific person, is more sustaining over time than dispersed desire directed at the general. Modesty, in my community, functions as a mechanism of concentration. It structures the environment so that attention is less divided before it arrives at the marriage. This is what modesty actually does to a man. It structures his visual world so that his wife is specific rather than one among many.

Whether you need to cover your hair to apply this principle is a question only you can answer for your own life. The principle operates regardless of the head covering.

Think about what you and your partner are consuming visually. Think about what that consumption is doing to how you see each other. Think about whether the ordinary person in your kitchen is competing with an extraordinary and endless feed of people who are not ordinary, who are curated and filtered and idealized in ways that make the specific living person in the room seem ordinary by comparison.

Give your partner something to notice. Be the specific rather than the ambient. Be the particular rather than the general. The most valuable thing in a long marriage is irreplaceability. And you cannot be irreplaceable if you have made yourself completely visible and completely available in every way to everyone all the time.

My husband comes home and I am, in his world, something that requires his attention. Not because I am demanding it with words. Because the structure of his world has been oriented toward me. Thirteen years later he still looks when I walk into a room. I will take that over the alternative without hesitation.

The outside world says modesty is about hiding women. I say modesty is about concentrating a man's attention toward one specific woman. These are very different things. The first is about control. The second is about architecture. I am tired of people confusing them.

I also want to say something about what modest dress does for a woman in terms of how she moves through the world. When your appearance is settled before you leave the house, when it is not a variable but a constant, you are freed from a particular kind of preoccupation. The preoccupation with how you look, with whether you are presenting correctly, with whether your body is taking up the right amount of space in the right way.

Concentrated desire beats dispersed desire. This is the architecture of modesty, the part the outside world never sees because it is too busy seeing the head covering. My husband's attention is not divided across a feed of a thousand women before he gets home. It arrives at me. After thirteen years it still arrives at me. That is what modesty actually does, when you understand it from the inside instead of pitying it from the outside.

The Lesson

Concentrated desire directed at one specific person is more sustaining than desire dispersed across a feed. Be the specific. Be the particular. Be the one thing in their world that cannot be found everywhere else.

Chapter 13:

We Do Not Enjoy Our Marriages. Sure.

The assumption that Chassidic marriages are joyless arrangements maintained by obligation and compliance is one of the myths I find most interesting.

Interesting because the people who hold it most confidently are often the same people whose own marriages are not producing the joy they expected when they chose them based on feeling. I will not dwell on this observation. It is uncharitable. I am making it anyway, and then I will move on.

My marriage is not a romance novel. I was clear about this in my first book and I will be clear about it here. I did not fall in love with my husband before our wedding. I did not experience the electric certainty that romantic culture promises as the foundation of every real relationship. I sat across a table in Boro Park and made a decision based on forty-five minutes of conversation and a matchmaker's careful assessment.

What came after that decision is something the joyless marriage myth cannot account for and would prefer not to consider.

My husband brings me flowers before Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night. Not every week. Often enough that I notice and that it matters to me. He does not bring them because it is a requirement or because he read somewhere that bringing flowers is what good husbands do. He brings them because after thirteen years he has learned that it matters to me, and the things that matter to me have become things that matter to him. This is what happens inside a long marriage between two people who are paying attention. The other

person's specific preferences become your own concerns. Not because you were told to care. Because you actually do.

He sits down next to me sometimes, in the hour after the children are asleep and before we are both too tired to form complete sentences. And he talks. About what he learned that day, which he loves to talk about and I let him because it matters to him and because, uh, I have learned things from these conversations that I would not have learned otherwise. About something he noticed about one of the children that he thinks I might have missed. About something that made him think of me during the day. He pays attention. Not always to everything and not always at the right moment. But he pays attention to me. After thirteen years.

He laughs at my humor. This is not a small thing. I have dry humor that is not universally appreciated. It requires a certain taste and a willingness to catch the joke when it is delivered without announcement. He catches it. After thirteen years he finds me funny in the specific way of a person who has been listening carefully for a long time. That is a gift I did not know to ask for when I was eighteen years old standing under the chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married.

The joy in my marriage does not look like what movies describe. It is quieter. It arrives in specific small moments rather than dramatic declarations. It is in the way he handles the children when I am at the end of my patience. In the particular silence between us on Shabbos afternoon when the house is finally quiet and we do not need to say anything because there is nothing that needs to be said. In the thirteen years of Friday nights we have already built together and the many more we intend to build.

The myth of the joyless Chassidic marriage requires Chassidic women to be secretly suffering while publicly performing contentment. Some are. I know some who are. I also know women in secular marriages who are publicly performing contentment while privately suffering, and nobody is making documentaries about them because their suffering does not confirm any convenient narrative.

Suffering is not a Chassidic phenomenon. Neither is joy. Both are distributed across every kind of marriage in every kind of community everywhere in the world. What determines which you

end up with is not the community you belong to or the method by which you chose your partner. It is the work you do inside the marriage you are in. The willingness to build rather than simply inhabit.

I have done the work. My husband has done the work. The joy between us now is a direct result of that work. It did not arrive with the wedding. It was not waiting for us on the other side of the chuppah. It grew from the inside out, slowly, over years of two people choosing each other when choosing was not the easy thing.

That kind of joy is available in any marriage. In any community. To anyone willing to do the work over the years it takes for the work to produce something.

Whether you are enjoying yours is a question I cannot answer for you. I can tell you the answer is not determined by whether you chose your spouse through a shadchan, the matchmaker who arranges introductions between potential spouses, or a dating app or a feeling at a party twenty years ago.

The outside world has a word for what I am describing: contentment. But that word does not quite capture it because contentment sounds passive. Like something that arrived and that you are receiving. What I have built with my husband is not passive. It required and continues to require active maintenance. Active choosing. Active attention.

Joy that is built lasts longer than joy that is found. My husband and I built ours, slowly, over thirteen years, and it is deeper now than anything we could have fallen into at the beginning. The outside world falls into joy and is surprised when it fades. We constructed ours to last. It is lasting. That is not a performance and it is not a consolation prize. It is the real thing, earned, and I would not trade it for any feeling that arrived without being built.

The Lesson

Joy in a long marriage does not arrive. It grows. Slowly, from the inside, as a result of two people choosing each other when choosing is not the easy thing. The work produces the joy. Not the other way around.

Chapter 14:

Our Husbands Control Us. Let Me Stop Laughing First.

Let me describe a typical morning in my household so you can assess the control situation for yourself.

It is five-thirty in the morning. My husband is davening, Jewish prayer. I am already in the kitchen because eleven people need to eat before eight o'clock and the math requires an early start. I have already made all the decisions about what everyone is eating. I have already planned the day. I know which child has what obligation where and at what time and what they need to bring with them. I have the budget in my head and I know exactly what we need from the store and when I will find the time to get there.

My husband finishes davening. He comes to the kitchen. He looks at me with the specific expression of a man who is aware that a great deal has already happened this morning and that he was not the one who made it happen.

He says: good morning.

I say: good morning.

He says: what can I do?

I tell him what he can do. He does it.

This is the control situation in my household.

The myth of the controlling Chassidic husband is one of the most persistent and most inaccurate myths about my community. It comes from the outside world seeing a woman who covers herself and follows religious rules and assuming that someone must be making her do these things. The logic being: nobody would choose this voluntarily. Therefore someone is imposing it. Therefore the husband, who must be the beneficiary of the imposition, must be the one doing the imposing.

The husband, I want to be clear, is in the kitchen doing what I told him to do.

The women in my community are not, as a class, women who are easily managed. We are stubborn and capable and running things from the moment we open our eyes in the morning. We manage households that would qualify as small enterprises. We manage children in numbers that require organizational skills most business executives would envy. We navigate the social and communal obligations of our community, which are extensive and complex and require ongoing diplomacy with people who have strong and sometimes competing interests.

We are managed by nobody.

The misunderstanding comes from conflating religious authority with domestic authority. My husband has halachic, relating to halacha, Jewish religious law, Jewish law, authority in matters of Torah law as they apply to our household. This is a real and respected role. It is also quite narrow in its practical application to daily life. It does not extend to my kitchen. It does not extend to my schedule or my management of the children or my decisions about anything that falls outside the specific domain of religious legal question.

Outside that domain, I run things. I have always run things. My mother ran things. Her mother ran things. The women in my community have been running things for generations while the outside world was constructing a myth about how controlled they are. I find this, uh, somewhat ironic.

Now I want to acknowledge something honestly, because I have committed throughout this book to accuracy over advocacy. There is a version of control that does exist in some marriages in my community, and it is not funny or ironic. There are women in situations that are genuinely

controlling in ways that cost them real things. I will not pretend otherwise. The community is imperfect and some of those imperfections show up in marriages where the power is not distributed the way I am describing. These situations deserve attention and support and honest acknowledgment. They do not describe the general reality of Chassidic marriage.

The general reality is a man in my kitchen asking what he can do.

My husband has never told me what to do. Not once in thirteen years. He has opinions. He shares them in the specific way of a man who has learned, over thirteen years, that sharing an opinion is different from issuing a direction, and that only one of those two things is welcome in this kitchen.

The next person who tells me my husband controls me is welcome to come watch a typical morning in my household. I will make coffee. I will be extremely busy. My husband will be helpful when directed and quiet when not directed. This is the control situation. I invite observation.

There is one more thing I want to say about control, which is what control in a marriage actually looks and feels like. Because I think people conflate two very different things. They conflate formal authority with actual influence, and they assume these are the same.

My husband is in the kitchen asking what he can do. That is the control situation in my household. The myth says he rules me. The reality is a man who has never once told me what to do in thirteen years, because he respects me and because, frankly, he knows better. Covering my hair is not evidence of being controlled. It is evidence of choosing. The outside world cannot tell the difference. I can. I live here.

The Lesson

Covering your hair is not evidence of being controlled. It is evidence of making a choice. The two things are not the same and confusing them is an insult to every woman who has chosen deliberately.

Chapter 15:

We Are Uneducated. Also I Speak Three Languages.

I speak English, Yiddish, and Hebrew.

My English is functional, as you may have noticed by reading this far. My Yiddish is my first language in the sense that it is the language I think in when I am not paying attention to what language I am thinking in, which happens more often than you might expect in the middle of a long day managing eleven children. My Hebrew is liturgical and also conversational, which are two different skills that people regularly conflate because they do not understand that knowing how to read a prayer and knowing how to have a conversation are entirely different competencies.

I have read extensively. Not in the way of someone assigned texts by professors in institutions with rankings. In the way of someone who grew up in a home full of serious books and who has spent thirteen years with a husband who is a serious learner and who brings ideas home from the beis medrash, the Torah study hall where men learn and pray, the way other people bring home the news of the day.

I have managed a household of thirteen people for years without stopping. This requires demonstrated and ongoing competency in nutrition, child development, conflict resolution, financial management under significant constraint, long-term planning, short-term crisis management, and the specific diplomacy required to navigate a tight community with strong opinions about everything and everybody.

I am uneducated, apparently.

The myth of the uneducated Chassidic woman comes from a narrow definition of education that equates formal credentialing from recognized institutions with knowledge. If you did not go to college, you are uneducated. If your education happened in institutions the outside world does not recognize or rank, it does not count. If what you know is not what the credentialing system values, you are presumed to know nothing useful.

This definition of education is convenient for people who have the credentials and want to feel superior to people who do not. I understand the convenience. I am not extending it the courtesy of accepting it.

The girls in my community are educated. They learn Hebrew, Jewish law, Jewish history, Jewish philosophy, and the structure of the Jewish calendar and the meaning of the holidays and the specific knowledge required to run a Jewish household, which is considerable and specific and cannot be improvised. They learn to read difficult texts in the original languages. They learn languages. They learn the particular knowledge required to live inside a tradition that has been maintained through centuries of exile and persecution by people who understood that maintaining it required each generation to actually know it.

Is it a secular education? No. Does it prepare women for careers in fields the credentialing system recognizes? In most cases, no. These are genuine limitations and I will not pretend they are not. There are things I do not know because of the education I received. Some of those things would have been useful to know. I have had to learn some of them on my own.

There are also things I know that most university graduates do not. How to read a difficult rabbinic text and understand the argument it is making. How to understand a legal dispute from the Talmud and know the positions of the major authorities. How to plan and execute a Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, for thirteen people on a budget that requires actual financial discipline. How to manage the specific complexity of a household with many children and a husband whose work is spiritual and communal rather than financial. How to navigate a community that has its own legal structure and social norms and way of managing conflict and celebration and grief that has nothing to do with the civil legal system.

These are competencies. Competencies that the credentialing system does not measure are not therefore absent. They are real. They produce real outcomes in the real world every single day. The outcome I am producing is thirteen people fed and cared for and educated and growing in a household that runs. That is the outcome of my education.

The woman who told me I was uneducated at a dinner party once had a degree from a respectable university. She could not tell me the meaning of a single passage of Torah. She could not have managed the logistics of a single Shabbos in my home. She had credentials I do not have. I have knowledge she does not have. Neither of us is educated in everything. The difference is that the outside world has decided her something counts and mine does not.

I have decided otherwise. I am done accepting that particular accounting.

Three languages. Thirteen people fed. Forty-three chapters of a book that people are reading. Zero patience remaining for the myth of the uneducated Chassidic woman.

One more thing about education. My children are being educated in two traditions simultaneously. The secular subjects are present in our schools. Math, science, reading, writing. My children will not be helpless in the world outside my community. They will have the tools to navigate it.

Three languages. Thirteen people fed. A whole tradition known from the inside. I am uneducated, the outside world says, because I did not get its particular credentials. But education is what you know, not where you learned it, and I know a great deal that the credentialed do not. Let us stop pretending one kind of knowing is the only kind that counts. Mine counts too. It feeds thirteen people every day. Yours should be so practical.

The Lesson

Education is what you know, not where you learned it. The credential is the map. The knowledge is the territory. Do not confuse the two.

Chapter 16:

We Do Not Know About the Outside World. I Know Everything About Yours.

I know what is on the streaming platforms that my community does not watch.

I know who the celebrities are on the magazines at the grocery checkout, which I visit several times a week because eleven children consume food at a rate that requires constant resupply. I know what people in the broader culture are arguing about this month. I know the general shape of the political landscape. I know what the outside world considers beautiful and successful and worthy of aspiration. I know the names of the shows people are watching and the songs people are listening to and the conversations people are having about what kind of life is worth living.

I know these things not because I participate in them but because they are ambient in the city I share with everyone else. They travel through the air of Brooklyn and find their way into even the most careful communities, because we walk the same streets and share the same checkout lines and breathe the same city air as everyone else.

The myth that Chassidic women are sealed off in a bubble of complete ignorance about the outside world is wrong in a way that is almost funny when you live where I live. We live in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is not a bubble. Brooklyn is one of the most densely populated and culturally complex places on earth, and we walk through it every day. We take the subway. We shop in stores. We encounter the outside world constantly, whether we seek it out or not.

What we choose to engage with is a different question from what we know about. And here is the distinction I want to make clearly, because the outside world consistently fails to make it.

I know about the outside world. I choose not to live in it. These are different things. The choice to live differently from the surrounding culture is not the same as ignorance of that culture. It requires, in fact, more conscious engagement with that culture than simply absorbing it passively. To choose against something you have to know what you are choosing against. To maintain a different way of life inside a city that does not share it, you have to understand what you are maintaining yourself against and why.

I have made my choices with open eyes. I know what I am not doing and why I am not doing it. I know what I have given up and what I have kept. The trade-offs are visible to me. I did not stumble into this life. I chose it, informed, as an adult who examined the alternatives, and I continue choosing it every year.

The assumption of ignorance is condescending in a specific and revealing way. It assumes that if I knew more, I would choose differently. That the only reason someone would live the way I live is because they do not know the alternative exists. This assumption says more about the person making it than about me. It says: I cannot imagine choosing this voluntarily. Therefore she must not know she has a choice.

She knows. She chose. She is choosing again right now by writing this book instead of the book the outside world would prefer she write, which is the book about how she escaped.

Here is something I find genuinely interesting about the outside world's relationship to knowledge. The outside world values information in theory. In practice, it is often drowning in information it has not processed, about its own life, its own patterns, its own choices. People who consume enormous quantities of content about health and relationships and productivity and personal development often do not know themselves better than people who consume very little.

I consume very little of the outside world's content. I know myself fairly well. I know what I want. I know why I am doing what I am doing. I know the structure of my life and I chose it and I maintain it actively rather than inhabiting it passively.

This is not nothing. It is, in fact, quite a lot. The self-knowledge that comes from living deliberately inside a chosen structure is different from the self-knowledge that comes from

consuming content about self-knowledge. One is experiential. The other is informational. I have the experiential version.

The next time someone tells you that a person living differently from you must not know they have options, consider that they might know their options better than you know yours. That the person who has examined a choice and decided against it may understand it more clearly than the person who simply defaulted to it because it was what everyone around them was doing.

I know your world. I live in mine on purpose. These two facts can both be true simultaneously.

A woman from outside my community asked me once whether I feel limited by not being on social media, not consuming the news constantly, not being part of the broader cultural conversation the way her friends are. I thought about this honestly. The answer is sometimes yes. There are conversations happening in the broader culture that I am not part of. There are cultural moments I watch from a distance rather than participating in.

I know your world. I chose to live in mine. The outside world cannot believe that knowing and choosing can both be true, that a person could understand the alternative completely and still select something else. But that is exactly what I did, with open eyes, as an adult, again and again. Ignorance did not keep me here. Knowledge did. I know what I chose against. I chose it anyway. That is not a smaller freedom than yours. It might be a larger one.

The Lesson

Choosing differently is not the same as not knowing. Sometimes it is knowing too well. The person who has examined a choice and decided against it may understand it more clearly than the person who simply defaulted.

Chapter 17:

The Women All Want to Leave. Do They Though.

I have watched women leave my community.

I have watched them cut their hair on YouTube with the specific deliberateness of someone performing a break rather than just getting a haircut. I have watched them get tattoos and move to parts of Brooklyn that are not Williamsburg and build entirely new lives from scratch with the particular intensity of people who have something they need to prove, to themselves and to everyone who told them they could not.

I have also watched some of them come back.

Not all. Not most. Some. And what the ones who came back said is something the outside world never discusses because it does not fit the narrative that has been constructed about us.

The narrative the outside world tells about Chassidic women who leave goes like this. Woman trapped in restrictive religious community. Woman finally escapes. Woman finds freedom and happiness and herself. Freedom is better than what she left. The end.

Life is always more complicated than a narrative. Always.

A woman I know left at twenty-two. Two years into a marriage that was genuinely not working. The marriage was the reason she left, though the community became the explanation afterward because the community is an easier thing to leave on a public platform than a specific failed marriage with a specific person. She built a new life in the city. Career, apartment, the whole

external structure of a secular life. She looked, from the outside, exactly like someone who had arrived at what she was seeking.

She called me years later. Not because we were close, but because she had seen my content somewhere and recognized something in it and picked up the phone. She said she missed the container. Those were her words exactly. The container. She said: I am so tired of deciding everything from scratch every single day. What to eat. What to wear. Who to be. What matters. What I am building. What I am allowed to want. I had a framework. I resented parts of it. I miss having a framework.

She did not come back. What she had built outside was real and she had built it from nothing and it would have cost too much to dismantle. But she gave me something from that conversation. Honesty about the trade-off that the outside world narrative does not include. The freedom she gained when she left was real. The container she lost was also real. Both of those things were simultaneously true. The narrative cannot hold both of them.

I also know women who left and are thriving in the fullest sense. Who needed to leave. Whose marriages were genuinely harmful. Whose communities were constraining them in ways that were costing them something essential that could not be recovered inside the community. I respect those choices completely and without qualification.

What I resist is the narrative that makes leaving always brave and staying always fearful. Both require different kinds of courage. Leaving requires the courage to lose everything familiar, to disappoint people who love you, to build from nothing, to discover that freedom is not the same as happiness, which is a discovery that surprises people and takes longer to arrive at than they expected.

Staying requires the courage to keep choosing something when the choice is hard. To remain inside a community that is imperfect. To work within constraints you did not design and sometimes resent. To decide that what you have is worth staying for and worth working on rather than worth escaping.

I stayed. I have considered what leaving would look like in enough detail to know I could survive it if I had to. I stayed because when I looked honestly at what I would be leaving and what I would be going to, this life still won. This full, demanding, complicated, meaningful life with its Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, tables and its community and its thirteen people and its husband with nice hands who has been choosing me back for thirteen years.

Not everyone who stays has made this calculation clearly. Some stay out of fear. Some stay because the exit costs are too high and the courage required is more than they currently have. Those are different stayings from mine and I will not pretend they are the same.

What I am saying is that my staying is a choice. Made consciously. Made every year. I am making it right now. And the myth that all the women want to leave is as wrong as the myth about the sheet. It requires every Chassidic woman to be secretly longing for something else. Some are. Some are not. The ones who are not deserve to be seen as clearly as the ones who are.

The conversation I am really trying to have in this chapter is about what we do with ambivalence. Because the truth is that most people who stay in any community, mine or any other, feel some ambivalence about it. The community is imperfect. The life is not exactly what you imagined. There are costs you did not fully anticipate and gifts you did not fully predict.

Staying is a choice. Leaving is a choice. Both can be brave and both can be fearful, and which one a person made tells you less than the outside world thinks it does. I stayed, with my eyes open, having considered the door and what is on the other side of it. The staying is informed. That is what makes it mine. Not everyone's staying is informed. Mine is. I check it every year, and every year it holds.

The Lesson

Staying is not always surrender. Leaving is not always liberation. Both are choices that can be made from strength or from fear. The question is not which you did. The question is which kind of choosing was happening when you did it.

Chapter 18:

Our Lives Are Small. Come to My Shabbos Table and Say That Again.

Let me describe a single Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, in my home.

Thursday night the cooking begins. Soup, which requires significant time and attention and the kind of patience that cannot be faked. The cholent, a slow-cooked stew left on the fire overnight and eaten on the Sabbath, which requires the specific patience of something that cannot be rushed and will be ready when it is ready and not before. Kugels, traditional baked Jewish puddings served at the Sabbath table, both sweet and savory. Salads. Chicken. Fish. The challah, the braided bread traditionally baked for the Sabbath and holidays, which I make myself, because there are things worth the time and challah is one of them, and because there is something about putting your hands into dough that no other part of the week provides. By the time Thursday night is finished I have been in the kitchen for hours and tomorrow there is more.

Friday is preparation. The house needs to reach a certain state before Shabbos comes in. Certain things need to be done in a certain order. The children need to be bathed and dressed in their Shabbos clothes. The table needs to be set for thirteen people, which requires actual planning and the physical management of a significant quantity of dishes and silverware. The candles need to be placed. The wine. The challah covered with its cloth. There is a list that never fully ends and a clock that does not stop moving toward eighteen minutes before sunset.

At eighteen minutes before sunset I light the candles. I cover my eyes. I say the blessing. And in that moment something happens that I have experienced every single week for thirteen years and

that I cannot fully explain to someone who has not experienced it. The week ends. The Shabbos comes in. Whatever was unfinished stays unfinished until Saturday night. Whatever was unresolved stays unresolved. Whatever I was worried about can wait. None of it matters for the next twenty-five hours.

For twenty-five hours, nothing from the outside world enters. No phone. No news. No work. No errands. No list. Just my husband and my children and the table I spent two days preparing and the food that smells like everything a home should smell like.

Thirteen people at that table. Sometimes more when guests join us. Songs that have been sung for centuries, in the same melodies, with the same words, by people who are long gone and people who are not yet born. My husband speaks Torah. The children argue about the meaning of things they are learning. Someone spills something, which happens at every Shabbos table in every Chassidic home and is handled with the resigned calm of people who have long since accepted that white tablecloths and eleven children are an optimistic combination. Someone cries about something that felt enormous at the moment. Someone says something that makes everyone laugh the real kind of laugh that only happens when people are fully present with each other.

The outside world calls my life small.

I have heard this more times than I can count, in more ways than I can list. The life in the same neighborhood. The life without a career that takes me into multiple worlds. The life inside rules and community and obligations that narrow the options. Small.

Small is a word used by people who measure life by its width rather than its depth. My life is not wide. I will grant that. I do not travel constantly. I do not have a career that deposits me in different cities and different contexts every week. I do not have the specific freedom that comes from having no obligations to a community that needs you and knows your name.

My life is deep. It goes down into something real and substantial. Into history and tradition and the specific richness of a community that has been doing this for thousands of years and that will keep doing it long after I am gone. Into a marriage built from nothing into something durable

over thirteen years. Into eleven children who are each a complete and complicated person that I am responsible for knowing in their specific particularity.

The depth is not visible from the outside. Width is what gets measured. Careers and travels and the number of things done and places seen and experiences collected. Depth, the specific gravity of a life that goes down into something and stays there, is not measured by the same instruments the outside world uses.

I am not arguing my life is better than a wide life. I am arguing it is not small. Small implies emptiness. My life is not empty. There is barely room to put anything else in it. Thirteen people in an apartment. An entire community depending on everyone to show up. A tradition requiring active participation to continue. A marriage requiring daily attention to maintain. A household requiring sustained daily effort to function.

Small is a word for something that has room left in it. My life has no room left. It is full in every direction, in every dimension, at all times.

Every Friday night I build something that existed before me and will exist after me. Every Shabbos table is a link in a chain that goes back farther than I can see and forward farther than I can imagine. Every song my children sing at that table is a song their grandparents sang and their great-grandparents sang and their grandchildren will sing.

Small. Come to my Shabbos table. Bring your dinner party opinions. I will feed you generously. And then you can tell me again about small.

Every week I build something that existed before me. The specific Shabbos I build is mine, with my food and my table and my children and my husband and our particular way of doing things that has developed over thirteen years of doing them. But the Shabbos itself is not mine. It belongs to everyone who has observed it before us and everyone who will observe it after. I am a link in something. This feeling of being a link is not available in many places in the modern world. I am grateful for it every Friday night when I light the candles.

Small. The word the outside world reaches for when it cannot measure depth. My life is not wide. It is deep. It goes down into something real, into history and community and a marriage built over thirteen years and eleven specific people I am responsible for knowing. There is no room in it for anything else. A life with no room left is not small. It is full. Come to my Shabbos table and measure it properly before you call it small again.

The Lesson

A life measured by width misses the depth. Small and empty are not the same thing. Some of the fullest lives look narrowest from the outside. Look more carefully before you measure.

Chapter 19:

What a Shabbos Table Teaches You About Everything

Every Friday night, thirteen people sit at my table with nowhere else to be.

No phones. No television. No news from the outside world. No notifications from anywhere. No one half present and half somewhere else on a screen. For twenty-five hours, from eighteen minutes before sunset on Friday until three stars appear on Saturday night, the outside world does not exist. Not for me. Not for my husband. Not for my children, not even the older ones who are at the age where the phone is a permanent extension of the hand.

I have been doing this every single week for thirteen years.

The outside world has discovered recently, and with significant fanfare, that being on your phone constantly is damaging to relationships. There are books about this. There are apps that tell you to put down your apps, which I find funny in a way that does not require explanation. There are retreats where people pay several thousand dollars to not look at their phones for a weekend in a pleasant location with people they do not know. There are therapists who specialize in helping couples reconnect in an age of constant digital distraction.

My community solved this problem three thousand years ago. We do it every week. It costs nothing except the effort of stopping and the discipline of staying stopped.

Twenty-five hours of forced presence. Not chosen presence on the weeks when you feel like being intentional. Not presence when you remember to be mindful. Forced. Every week. Without exception. Because it is not optional. My husband cannot escape to his phone when the dinner

table conversation is difficult. I cannot escape to mine when I am too tired to engage. The children cannot disappear into screens when they are bored or restless or in the middle of a conflict with a sibling. We are here, all of us, in this house, with nowhere to go and nothing to do except be with each other.

The first years of marriage I sometimes found this oppressive, which I say honestly. There are weeks when you do not want to be in the same enclosed space as your husband for twenty-five uninterrupted hours. When things between you are strained and the last thing you want is enforced togetherness with no available exit. When the Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, feels less like a gift and more like a requirement that arrived at the wrong time.

Those are, I have learned over thirteen years, precisely the Shabbosim that matter most. Not the easy ones. The hard ones.

Because what happens when you cannot escape? When there is no phone to pick up and no work to disappear into and no distraction available? You have to be with each other. You have to talk or sit in silence. And if the silence is uncomfortable, which sometimes it is, you have to eventually figure out why, because you are not going anywhere for twenty more hours and eventually the discomfort has to be addressed.

This is not romantic. It is more useful than romantic.

I know couples who have been married for twenty years and do not know each other. This sounds impossible. It is the natural result of two people spending twenty years being physically present in the same space while being mentally and emotionally somewhere else. The phones and the work and the television and the thousand other places the modern world makes available to anyone who does not want to be where they are.

Shabbos removes every single one of those escape routes simultaneously. Every week. Without exception.

What remains is the person. Just the person. No performance. No distraction. No curation. Just the person sitting across the table or next to you on the couch in the Shabbos afternoon quiet. And after twenty-five hours with just the person, you either know them better than you did Friday morning or you have discovered something that needs to be said. Which is its own kind of progress, even if it does not feel like progress in the moment.

My husband told me something once on a Shabbos afternoon when the house was finally quiet and the children were somehow all occupied or asleep at the same time, which happens rarely enough that when it does we both recognize it as something to protect. He told me something about himself he had never told anyone. Not a secret exactly. Something more private than a secret. Something from inside himself that had never had the right conditions to come out before. It came out that afternoon because there was nowhere else to go and nothing else to do and he was finally still enough to say it.

I do not think he would have said it on a regular Tuesday. Regular Tuesdays have phones and noise and the constant forward motion of a life that does not pause for anything.

Shabbos pauses. Every week. And in the pause, the things that need to be said get said. The person you married is in the pause. The marriage you want to have is built there.

You do not need to observe Shabbos to understand this principle. You need to understand what it does and apply it deliberately to your own life. One regular, enforced, non-negotiable pause per week where you and the person you married are simply together with no exits and no distractions and nowhere else to be.

Not when you feel like it. Not when it is convenient. Every week. As a practice. Because the things that need to be said only get said when there is nowhere else to go.

I want to say something about what happens to a marriage when the pausing stops. When life gets so full and so fast that the twenty-five hour pause disappears. I have seen this happen to people inside and outside my community. When the practice slips. When there is always a reason why this particular week cannot be a full Shabbos. When the phone stays accessible. When the work doesn't quite stop. When the pause that should be structural becomes optional and therefore

infrequent.

The things that need to be said only get said when there is nowhere else to go. Twenty-five hours a week, no phone, no exit, nothing to do but be with each other. This is what built my marriage. Not the easy weeks. The hard ones, the ones where we could not escape each other and had to figure it out instead. Create the pause in your own life, however you can. The marriage you want is built inside it.

The Lesson

The things that need to be said only get said when there is nowhere else to go. Create the pause. Make it regular. Make it non-negotiable. The marriage you want is built inside it.

Chapter 20:

The Wedding Was Beautiful. The Night After Was Not.

My wedding was on a Tuesday night in the fall.

Two hundred people. The hall full of flowers that someone spent a great deal of time and money arranging. The music beautiful in the way of Chassidic wedding music, which is its own thing, joyful and ancient and completely unlike anything you hear anywhere else. The badeken, the pre-wedding ceremony in which the groom covers the bride's face with her veil, when my husband came to cover my face with the veil before the chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married, was the first time I had seen him since the engagement. He looked at me and I could not read his expression under the nerves that were visible on both of us. The chuppah was sacred in the way that chuppahs are sacred, which is a particular kind of weight that settles on you when you are standing under one. My mother cried. His mother cried. I cried too, and everyone around me assumed it was because I was moved, because the moment was holy, because a kallah, a bride, is supposed to cry at her chuppah.

I was crying because I was terrified.

In one hour I would be alone in a room with this man I had spoken to twice, and I was supposed to do things that nobody had explained to me in any way that would actually help me do them.

The hall was full of flowers and the seven blessings were said with intention and the celebration was everything a Chassidic wedding is supposed to be. It was beautiful. I am not going to tell you it was not beautiful, because it was.

The hotel room in the Catskills had gold wallpaper. I stared at the gold wallpaper for a very long time. The bedspread was burgundy, stiff, the kind you find in every frum, Yiddish for religiously observant in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, wedding hotel in the Catskills. I remember the little soaps wrapped in paper that I did not open because my hands were shaking too much to do anything useful with them. I remember sitting on the edge of the bathtub and not knowing what I was supposed to do next.

I wrote about this night in my first book in detail I will not repeat here. What I will say is what it means for the myth I am addressing in this chapter.

The myth says that Chassidic couples come to their wedding night knowing nothing, are horrified by what they discover, and either endure it through pure compliance or do not survive the marriage. The first part of that myth contains some truth. We did know very little. The preparation we received was legal rather than practical. We knew when. We did not know how. We knew the framework. We did not know the content. This is a genuine failure of our system of preparation and I have said so explicitly in everything I have written.

What the myth gets wrong is the conclusion. The horror and the non-survival.

What I experienced on my wedding night, beyond the fear and the pain and the not knowing, was something the myth does not account for. I was with a person who was also afraid. Who was also doing his best with no preparation whatsoever. Who knocked on the bathroom door not to demand anything but to ask, quietly, if I was okay. Who lay down on his side of that burgundy bedspread and waited while I processed what had happened, who could feel that something was wrong even if he did not have the words to address it because nobody had given him those words either.

He was not the patriarch the myth requires him to be. He was a twenty-year-old man who did not know what he was doing and who was trying, underneath the not knowing, to be decent to someone who had been placed in his care.

The wedding night was hard. The weeks after were hard. The first year was hard in ways I described elsewhere and will not repeat. And then, slowly, over years, through conversation and

patience and the specific kind of learning that only comes from two people who have decided to keep figuring something out together, it became something else entirely.

The myth stops at the wedding night. It does not follow what happens after. It requires the Chassidic marriage to remain at the wedding night, failed and joyless, because that ending is tidier than what actually happens. What actually happens is thirteen years. What actually happens is two people who started as strangers becoming specific to each other in a way that strangers cannot be. What actually happens is a marriage.

The wedding was beautiful. The night after was not. Everything that came after both of those things is why I am still here, thirteen years later, with eleven children and a husband with nice hands who has been choosing me back every year since that hotel room in the Catskills.

My husband and I have talked about our wedding night. Not immediately, obviously. It was several years before we could talk about it with any ease. But we have talked about it. About what we were both feeling. About what neither of us knew. About the specific gaps in our preparation and how we navigated those gaps and what we wish we had known.

The wedding was beautiful. The night after was not. And everything that came after both of those things is the actual marriage, the thing the myth never follows because the myth stops at the wedding night where it can keep us frozen and failed. We did not stay frozen. We built thirteen years. The night after the wedding was just the beginning, and the beginning is never the whole story, not for anyone, not for us.

The Lesson

The wedding night is where the story begins. Not where it ends. The real story is what happens after two people with no instructions decide to figure it out together. That story takes years. It is worth every one of them.

Chapter 21:

Eleven Children Means We Never Stop

People ask me, with varying degrees of tact, how I have eleven children.

The answer to the biological how is not surprising or exotic or in any way different from the biological how for anyone else. I will not be elaborating on the mechanics, which are standard.

The more interesting question, which people sometimes get around to asking once they have recovered from the initial number, is why. Why eleven. Why keep going. Why not stop at five or six, which would already be considered a remarkably large family by almost any measure outside my community.

The answer to why is partly theological, which I will not get into at length here because that is its own book, and partly something more personal that I can actually speak to.

In my community, children are not a lifestyle choice to be optimized around other lifestyle choices. They are not a project with a start date and a completion date. They are not scheduled around career milestones or financial readiness assessments. They are considered a blessing. Something that arrives and is welcomed and that changes the shape of your life in ways you could not have predicted and would not trade, even on the hardest days, even when you are exhausted in a way that goes beyond tired into something that requires its own word.

This is genuinely how I experience my children. All eleven of them. Including the one currently going through a phase I prefer not to describe in print. Including the one who went through a different phase last year that I also prefer not to describe. Including the baby who is at the stage

where everything is simultaneously interesting and dangerous and managing this simultaneously requires constant vigilance.

Eleven children means my life has not stopped moving in thirteen years. There has always been someone small and needy and extraordinary in my home. There has always been a stage I am navigating for the first time or the third time or the seventh time, and discovering that the seventh time is different from the first because the child is different even if the stage is the same. There has always been evidence, in the form of a small and loud and specifically beloved human, that the marriage I am in is producing something.

What eleven children does to a marriage is complicated and I want to be honest about both sides of it.

It takes things. Time in amounts that cannot be fully accounted for. Privacy in amounts that are sometimes functionally zero. The ability to be anywhere without significant advance planning and arrangement. The ability to have a complete uninterrupted conversation with your husband about anything that is not logistics.

It gives things. Purpose, the specific kind that does not require philosophical justification because it is simply obvious every morning when you open your eyes and thirteen people need things. The particular clarity of not having to ask what you are doing with your life, because the answer is in the kitchen asking for a snack. The specific humor that develops between two people who are managing something enormous together and who have to find it funny because the alternative is considerably worse.

My husband and I laugh more now than we did in the first years of our marriage. I think this is because we have had to develop a sense of humor about our life in order to survive it. Eleven children in the apartments we have lived in, on the budgets we have managed, in the community we are embedded in, requires either humor or despair. We chose humor. Both of us. At around the same time, without discussing it. This is how most important decisions in a long marriage get made.

The outside world looks at eleven children and sees a woman who has been denied control over her own body and her own reproductive life. I look at eleven children and see a woman who has been choosing, year after year, to continue building the life she decided to build. These are different things.

Are all eleven children planned in the way the outside world plans children? No. The theology of my community does not work that way. But each one has been welcomed. Each one has been loved. Each one has been an addition to something that was already full and that somehow, in the way of things that expand rather than divide, made room.

We never stop. This is true. There is always another stage, another need, another year that requires something of us. There is also always a table that gets fuller, a house that gets louder, a life that accumulates more of the particular richness that comes from people.

I am very tired. I am also very grateful. Both of those things are completely true at the same time.

I want to say something about the specific way having many children changes your experience of time. When you have eleven children spread across twelve years, you are always in multiple stages simultaneously. You have a baby who needs everything and a child learning to read and a child navigating the social complexity of middle childhood and a child approaching the beginning of adult life. You are inside all of these stages at the same time.

Eleven specific people, each one known specifically, growing inside a family I built from nothing. The outside world sees a number and imagines a woman without choice. I see eleven faces and feel a fullness that does not divide no matter how many times it multiplies. I am very tired. I am also very grateful. Both at once, every day. That is what eleven children means. Not deprivation. Not loss of control. Fullness, with exhaustion attached.

The Lesson

A full life and an easy life are not the same life. I chose full. It is louder than easy and more than I planned for and more than I would trade for anything.

Chapter 22:

What the Outside World Gets Wrong About Chassidic Men

The outside world has two versions of the Chassidic man.

Version one: the patriarch. Controlling, demanding, religiously extreme, beard and black coat and shtreimel, the round fur hat worn by Chassidic men on the Sabbath and holidays, on Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, sitting at the head of a table while women and children orbit around his needs and his authority. A man of the nineteenth century somehow inhabiting the twenty-first.

Version two: the figure of gentle mockery. The man in the unusual hat who cannot function in the modern world, baffling to the secular people he occasionally encounters, cut off from reality by the bubble of his community and his studies, somehow both powerful and ineffectual simultaneously.

Neither of these is my husband.

My husband is a person. A specific, complicated, particular person who does not fit into either category the outside world has prepared for him, because the categories were prepared without consulting anyone who actually knows a man like him.

He is learned in a way that requires significant intelligence and sustained discipline and genuine commitment, which the outside world does not always recognize as intelligence because it is not the kind that gets measured by the credentialing system or that produces the outcomes the credentialing system values. He is a better father than most men I have observed from any

community or background. He is a better listener than I gave him credit for in the early years of our marriage, when I was too frustrated about what he did not know to notice what he was actually paying attention to.

He wears the clothes of his community. The black hat. The dark jacket. The beard that has been there since before I knew him. These are his clothes and his choice. Like my sheitel, a wig worn by a married Orthodox Jewish woman as a head covering, and my long skirts, they are not a costume or a performance or evidence of anything except that he belongs to a community that dresses this way and that he has chosen to remain part of it.

What the outside world gets wrong about Chassidic men is the same thing it gets wrong about Chassidic women. It assumes the external tells you the internal. That the black hat tells you something predictable about what is happening inside the person wearing it. It does not. The hat is a hat.

He is the man who noticed, thirteen years ago, that I did not look at the floor during our first meeting and thought that was interesting and worth noting. Who spent thirteen years learning what interesting in my specific case actually means, which has turned out to be quite a project. Who still finds me interesting, which I will say again is a gift I did not know to ask for when I was eighteen and did not know what to ask for.

I want to say something about the Chassidic men in my community more broadly, because the outside world misses something significant about them.

The men in my community are raised with an expectation of seriousness. Of learning. Of being the bearers of a tradition that is thousands of years old and that has survived things that should have destroyed it. This expectation produces, in the best cases, men who are genuinely thoughtful and who have spent their lives developing an interior life of significant depth. It also produces, in the less best cases, men who are performing seriousness without having done the internal work. Both types exist. The same is true in every community everywhere.

What the outside world consistently misses is the tenderness. The specific tenderness of a Chassidic man with his children, which is something I have watched in my own home for

thirteen years and that does not match either version of the Chassidic man the outside world has constructed. My husband is present with his children. He learns with them. He plays with them in the specific way of a man who takes them seriously as people. He knows their particular personalities and their specific needs in a way that required years of paying attention to accumulate.

He is not the patriarch. He is a person who started as a stranger on the other side of a table in Boro Park and who has become, over thirteen years of shared life, the person I would choose again if I had to choose.

I would like the outside world to remember this when it is constructing its versions of who he is.

He is not a version. He is a person. The distinction matters more than most people realize, and respecting it costs nothing.

The outside world's image of the Chassidic man is often frozen in time. The photograph from the nineteenth century. The man in the hat who represents a world that has not changed. This image does a disservice to real men in my community who are living in the twenty-first century with all its complexity and challenge and who are doing so inside a framework that requires constant renegotiation with the world they actually live in.

He is not a version. He is a person. The patriarch and the figure of mockery are both inventions, and neither one is the man I married, the man with the nice hands who noticed I did not look at the floor. The outside world built two cartoons and never met the man underneath either of them. I met him. I married him. I have watched him be a real and specific and tender person for thirteen years. He deserves to be seen as one. I am insisting on it.

The Lesson

The uniform is not the person. The hat does not tell you what is underneath. The assumption that it does is the same error made about every community the outside world has decided it understands from a comfortable distance.

Chapter 23:

They Pity Us. We Notice.

I know what you thought when you first encountered me.

Not you specifically. The general you. The you that found a video somewhere on the internet and stopped scrolling because something about it caught your attention and would not let you move on. A woman in a hat speaking slowly and directly about things that women in hats are not supposed to talk about. The mixture of fascination and discomfort and something underneath that you probably did not name at the time because naming it would have required looking at it more directly than you wanted to.

I will name it for you.

Pity.

And underneath the pity, if you are honest with yourself, something you liked even less.

Envy.

I have seen both since I began speaking publicly. The pity I understand. The covered hair. The large family. The arranged marriage. The rules. I can see how it looks from the outside and I am not angry about the pity. It comes from a misunderstanding and I have spent two books correcting that misunderstanding.

The envy is more interesting to me and more useful, because envy, unlike pity, contains information.

I receive messages. From women who do not live in my community and never will and are not looking to. Who found me somewhere on the internet and who wrote with something in their words that I have learned to recognize. A longing. Not for my specific life. Nobody who thinks clearly wants eleven children in a small Brooklyn apartment with a husband who cannot find his own keys. A longing for something that my life contains that theirs does not quite contain, even when theirs contains things that mine does not.

For the Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table. For the community that shows up without being asked. For the marriage built on intention rather than feeling. For the specific absence of the particular exhaustion of having to construct meaning from nothing every morning, of having the freedom to do anything and the paralysis that sometimes comes with it. For belonging to something.

I take these messages seriously. I do not dismiss them or tell the women who send them that they are romanticizing my life, though some of them are. Underneath the romanticization is something real that they are noticing and that deserves to be taken seriously.

My community is not a paradise. I have been explicit about its costs throughout this book and my previous one. Real costs. Real failures. But it also has something the outside world is spending significant money trying to manufacture, not always successfully.

Community. Meaning. Structure. The specific belonging that comes from being embedded in something larger than yourself. The particular presence that comes from being expected somewhere, by people who need you, every single week without exception. The table that is set every Friday because it must be set, because the week requires it, because this is what you do. These things cannot be purchased. They cannot be subscribed to. They have to be built, slowly, inside a community that holds you because it knows you.

The outside world chose freedom from exactly this kind of community and this kind of obligation. The freedom is real. The trade is also real, and the bill for that trade is coming due in

the form of isolation and disconnection and the particular emptiness of a life with every option and no clear direction.

The pity is a misunderstanding. I do not need it.

The envy, though, is information. Pay attention to it. It is telling you what you are missing that you have not yet named. The thing my life has that yours might lack is not the religion. It is the table. The community. The pause. The structure. The belonging. The being expected somewhere by people who need you.

Those things are available to anyone willing to build them. They do not require a sheitel, a wig worn by a married Orthodox Jewish woman as a head covering, or a Chassidic community or eleven children. They require intention and time and the willingness to give up some freedom in exchange for some belonging.

Build something worth belonging to. I promise it is possible. I am watching people do it all the time. I am doing it myself, every Friday night, from scratch.

The pity costs something beyond my dignity, though it does cost that. It costs the opportunity for genuine exchange. When you approach someone with pity rather than curiosity, you have already closed the door on learning anything from them. You have decided you know more than they do about their own life. And this decision makes you unteachable by the person standing in front of you.

Envy is information. The outside world pities me and underneath the pity, sometimes, is something it likes even less to admit. A longing for the table, the community, the belonging, the structure. I take the envy seriously because it points at something real that the outside world is missing and has not named. The thing you envy is more available than you think. Stop pitying me long enough to build it. I promise it is possible.

The Lesson

Envy is information. It tells you what you are missing before you have named it. Pay attention to what you envy. Then build it. The thing you are longing for is more available than you think.

Chapter 24:

What I Would Tell My Daughter Before Her Wedding

My oldest child is twelve years old.

She is not getting married anytime soon. We have years. But I think about what I will tell her. I have been thinking about it since she was small, since before I fully understood that thinking about it meant I was already preparing something different from what was prepared for me. That the thinking itself was already a kind of repair.

I will tell her what nobody told me. Not because I am still angry about what I was not told, though it took me years to stop being angry. Because the silence cost me time she should not have to lose the same way.

I will tell her that her body is hers. Not in some abstract philosophical sense but in the practical and specific sense. It belongs to her before it belongs to any marriage or any husband. She should know it. She should understand it. She should be acquainted with it in a way that the system around her will not encourage and that I am going to encourage anyway, in the privacy of the conversations I intend to have with her before she stands under any chuppah, the wedding canopy under which a Jewish couple is married, anywhere.

I will tell her that the nervousness she will feel on her wedding night is not a problem to be solved or a weakness to be ashamed of. It is her body doing exactly what it should do when it is in an unfamiliar situation with a person it does not yet trust. Her body is smarter than the instructions she will receive. She should listen to it. She should trust it. It is telling her something true.

I will tell her that the first night does not have to be the night. That there is no rush that overrides what her body is communicating. That she has a whole life ahead of her and that building something real takes time and patience and more than one night, and that taking the time is not a failure of any kind.

I will tell her what I know about the young man she will marry, whoever he turns out to be. That he has almost certainly been given as little practical preparation as she has. That the clumsiness she will encounter is not cruelty or indifference. It is ignorance, and ignorance can be addressed with honesty and patience and the willingness to say the true thing even when saying it feels impossible. That she should talk to him. Early. Before the silence builds the wall that took me years to dismantle in my own marriage.

I will tell her that desire is not a sin. That wanting something from her marriage is not immodest or greedy or inconsistent with being a good wife and a good Jewish woman. That a woman who knows what she needs and can say it clearly is not demanding or difficult. She is giving her husband information he needs to be good to her. That is a gift. Give it early. Do not make him guess for years.

I will tell her about the mikveh, the ritual immersion bath used in Jewish law for spiritual purification, in a way that my mother could not tell me because my mother was not told either. About what the cycle actually does and why it works. About the waiting and the return and the specific quality of something built into the calendar as structure rather than manufactured through effort.

I will tell her that the marriage she enters will not resemble the marriage she will have at year ten or year thirteen. Both of these are real. The beginning is not the whole story. The whole story takes years and costs things and produces something that the beginning could not have predicted, which is why the beginning requires patience rather than judgment.

I will tell her to laugh. With her husband. About the children when they come and the chaos that comes with them. About the Tuesday nights when everything is ordinary and the ordinary is, if she is paying attention, enough. About all of it. The humor is load-bearing in a long marriage. Take it seriously.

I will tell her that staying is a choice and it has to keep being a choice. That every year she will have to decide again, actively and consciously, to build this rather than something else. That the decision to keep building, made every year even when building is hard, is not a burden. It is a practice. And practices sustained over time produce things that cannot be produced any other way.

I will tell her that she is enough. Exactly as she is. That what she brings to a marriage is sufficient material to build something real. That she does not need to perform or pretend or become something she is not. She needs to show up, honestly, and keep showing up.

I will tell her everything I wish someone had told me.

And then I will let her go stand under the chuppah and figure out the rest herself. Because some things have to be lived to be understood. But at least she will not be going in with nothing. At least she will be going in with the words.

Here is the last thing I will tell my daughter before her wedding. And this one I will say plainly, without softening it, because she will need it in the direct form.

Give the next generation the words before they need them. That is the whole repair, and it is the heart of why I write. My daughter will not go into her marriage with nothing, the way I did. She will have the words. The silence cost me years. The words cost nothing. This is how it changes, one daughter at a time, one generation handing the next what it was never handed itself. I am breaking the chain by giving her what nobody gave me.

The Lesson

Give the next generation the words before they need them. The silence costs years. The words cost nothing. Give the words. This is how we fix it, generation by generation.

Chapter 25:

We Are Brainwashed. I Have Examined This More Than You Have.

Brainwashed. This is the word people reach for when they cannot understand why someone would choose a life they themselves would not choose.

It is a convenient word. It explains everything and requires nothing. It says: the only reason a person would live the way you live is that they have been programmed to, that their capacity for independent thought has been removed, that they are not really choosing but merely executing the instructions installed in them by their community. The word brainwashed lets the person using it avoid the harder possibility, which is that I have thought about my life carefully and arrived at conclusions different from theirs.

Let me tell you about my brainwashing. It involves a great deal of questioning.

I question constantly. I question the things my community does that I think are wrong, and there are some. I question the practices that do not make sense to me, and I seek out the reasons behind them, and sometimes the reasons satisfy me and sometimes they do not. I question the way certain women are treated. I question the silence around things that should not be silent, which is most of what my first book was about. I have a mind. I use it. The use of it has not led me out of my community because the use of it has not, on balance, given me reasons to leave that outweigh my reasons to stay.

The outside world assumes that questioning leads inevitably to leaving. That if I really thought about my life, I would reject it. This assumption reveals something about the outside world's

confidence in its own way of living. It cannot imagine that an examined life could land somewhere other than where the examiner happens to stand.

Here is what the brainwashing accusation never accounts for. The people making it have also been shaped by a culture. They also absorbed beliefs from their environment before they were old enough to evaluate them. They also live inside assumptions they have never examined, about what makes a life good, about what freedom is, about what a person needs to be happy. The difference between us is not that I was programmed and they were not. The difference is that I know I was shaped by my community and they have not noticed they were shaped by theirs.

A person who has examined their assumptions and a person who has merely inherited different assumptions look similar from the outside. The difference is internal. I have examined mine. I continue to examine them. The examination is ongoing and it is genuine and it has not produced the conclusion the outside world expects, which is the only reason the outside world calls it brainwashing rather than thinking.

If I had examined my life and left, the outside world would call it waking up. Because I examined my life and stayed, the outside world calls it brainwashing. The same process, the same careful thought, gets two different names depending on whether the conclusion flatters the person doing the naming. This is not analysis. This is the outside world protecting its own assumptions by refusing to grant that anyone who disagrees could have thought it through.

I thought it through. I am still thinking it through. The thinking is the opposite of brainwashing. Brainwashing is what happens when you stop thinking, and I have not stopped. I never will. It is, uh, not in my nature to stop.

You are welcome to disagree with my conclusions. You are not welcome to tell me I did not arrive at them by thinking. I did. I do. I will continue to. Call that whatever you like. I call it being a person with a mind, which is what I am, brainwashing accusations notwithstanding.

The accusation of brainwashing is, when you examine it, a refusal to engage. It saves the accuser the trouble of taking my reasons seriously by declaring in advance that I have none. But I have reasons. I will share them with anyone who asks in good faith. What I will not do is accept that

my conclusions are evidence of a damaged mind simply because they differ from the conclusions of the person doing the accusing.

I question, therefore I am not brainwashed. The outside world cannot accept that an examined life might land somewhere other than where the examiner stands. But it can. Mine did. I thought it through, and I am still thinking it through, and the conclusion was not the one the outside world expected. Disagreeing with my conclusion is fair. Telling me I did not think is not. I thought. I think. I will not stop. That is the opposite of brainwashing.

The Lesson

An examined life does not always lead where the examiner expects. Disagreeing with someone's conclusion is not the same as proving they did not think. I thought. I stayed. Both are true.

Chapter 26:

A Rabbi Decides Everything. He Has Never Seen My Kitchen.

The outside world imagines a rabbi standing over my life, directing my every move.

What I should wear. What I should cook. When I should have children and how many. What I am permitted to think and say and do. A man in a black hat with absolute authority over the smallest details of my daily existence, and me, obedient, executing his instructions without question.

I would like to introduce this imaginary rabbi to my actual kitchen, where I make approximately forty decisions before nine o'clock in the morning, none of which involve consulting anyone.

Let me explain what a rabbi actually does in my life, because the reality is both more limited and more interesting than the myth. A rabbi is a halachic, relating to halacha, Jewish religious law, Jewish law, authority. When there is a question of Jewish law that genuinely requires expert interpretation, we ask a rabbi, the same way you might consult a lawyer about a genuine legal question. Is this pot kosher after what happened to it. What are the requirements for this specific situation. These are real questions with real answers that require real expertise, and the rabbi provides that expertise.

This is not the same as a rabbi running my life. A lawyer who answers your legal question is not controlling you. He is providing specialized information that you requested. The rabbi functions similarly within his domain. The domain is specific. It is the domain of Jewish law. It is not the domain of what I make for dinner or how I raise my children or what I think about anything that is not a question of halacha.

Most of my life never touches a rabbi at all. The vast majority of the decisions I make every day are mine. What to feed thirteen people. How to manage the budget. How to handle a child who is struggling. How to navigate a conflict with a neighbor. What to do about the apartment, the schedule, the endless logistics of a large household. No rabbi is involved in any of this. No rabbi has ever been involved in any of this. The idea that a rabbi is directing these decisions would be funny to anyone who has watched me make them.

Even within the religious domain, I am not passive. I choose which rabbi to ask, which matters more than the outside world realizes, because different authorities have different approaches and asking is itself a decision with consequences. I understand the reasoning behind the answers I receive, because I was educated in this tradition and can follow the logic. I am not a person receiving instructions I cannot evaluate. I am a person consulting an expert in a field I understand well enough to know whether the expert is making sense.

The outside world has trouble with this because it imagines religious authority as totalizing. As covering everything. As leaving no room for individual judgment. But religious authority in my community is actually quite bounded. It applies where it applies and not elsewhere. And where it applies, it is consulted rather than imposed. The rabbi does not show up at my door issuing directives. I go to him with questions when I have questions. This is a relationship of consultation, not control.

There is a version of this that is not so clean, and I will name it because I have committed to honesty. There are communities and contexts where rabbinic authority extends further than I am describing, where social pressure makes consultation feel less optional than it should, where a rabbi's opinion on a matter that is not strictly halachic carries weight it perhaps should not. This happens. It is real. It is also not the general reality of how rabbinic authority functions in most of my community most of the time.

The general reality is a woman in her kitchen making her own decisions, who consults an expert when she has an expert question, the way reasonable people consult experts everywhere. My rabbi has never seen my kitchen. He has no opinion about what happens in it. The decisions made in that kitchen are mine. They have always been mine. They will always be mine.

There is a strange thing the outside world does, which is to grant religious authorities in my community a power over my daily life that they do not actually have, and then to pity me for living under that imaginary power. The pity is for a situation that does not exist. I would rather the outside world spent its energy understanding the real situation, which is more ordinary and more interesting than the fantasy of total rabbinic control.

A rabbi has never seen my kitchen. He has no opinion about what happens in it, because what happens in it is mine to decide, and I decide it, forty times before nine in the morning. Consult an expert for an expert question, the same as anyone anywhere. That is what a rabbi is for. The rest of my life, the vast ordinary running of it, has never touched him and never will. The myth of the rabbi who rules everything would be funny to anyone who watched me run anything.

The Lesson

Consulting an expert is not being controlled by one. Religious authority is bounded, not total. Most of a life never touches it at all. The kitchen, at least, is entirely mine.

Chapter 27:

We Are Too Young to Know What We Are Agreeing To.

I was eighteen when I married. The outside world hears this and concludes that I was too young to meaningfully consent to the life I was entering.

I want to take this seriously, because it is the most serious of the objections to my community and it deserves more than a dismissal. There is something real here. Eighteen is young. The brain is still developing. A person at eighteen does not have the perspective they will have at thirty. These are facts and I am not going to pretend they are not.

And yet. I want to complicate the picture, because the picture as the outside world paints it is too simple.

When I was eighteen, I had been raised my entire life to understand exactly what I was agreeing to. This is the part the outside world misses. I was not a secular eighteen-year-old suddenly asked to make a decision about a life I knew nothing about. I was raised inside this life. I watched my mother live it. I watched every married woman around me live it. I understood the structure of what I was entering because the structure was the air I had breathed since birth. I knew what a Chassidic marriage was. I knew what it required. I knew what it offered. I had eighteen years of direct observation of the exact life I was choosing.

Compare this to the outside world, where a person might enter a marriage at thirty having never closely observed a single functional marriage, with no clear model of what they are agreeing to, basing the decision on a feeling they mistook for knowledge. Who actually understood their decision better? The eighteen-year-old who had watched this exact life her whole life, or the

thirty-year-old who had watched romantic comedies?

I am not saying eighteen is the ideal age to marry. I am saying that the question of whether someone can meaningfully consent to a decision depends on more than their age. It depends on their preparation. On their understanding of what they are choosing. On the clarity of the model in front of them. By those measures, I was unusually well prepared to make the specific decision I made, even at eighteen, because I had spent eighteen years studying the exact thing I was deciding about.

What I was not prepared for was the intimate dimension, the part I wrote about in my first book, the part nobody explained. That was a genuine failure of preparation and I have said so plainly. But the structural decision, the decision to enter a Chassidic marriage and build a Chassidic life, that decision I understood. I had the information. I made the choice with the information I had, which was considerable.

And here is the thing the outside world cannot quite accept. I would make the same choice again. From the vantage point of thirty-one, with all the perspective the outside world says I lacked at eighteen, I look back at the decision my eighteen-year-old self made and I endorse it. She chose well. She chose better than she could have known, but she also chose better than the outside world assumes a person that age can choose. The thirty-one-year-old agrees with the eighteen-year-old. This is not what the too-young-to-consent narrative predicts.

There are young women in my community who married at eighteen and should not have, who were not ready, whose marriages have struggled in part because of the youth at which they began. This is real and I will not erase it to make my point. Youth carries genuine risk. But the blanket claim that an eighteen-year-old in my community cannot meaningfully consent erases the preparation that distinguishes my eighteen-year-old self from the outside world's image of a clueless child being handed to a stranger.

I was not clueless. I was prepared, in the specific ways my community prepares its daughters and unprepared in the specific ways it fails them. Both of those things are true. The truth is more complicated than too young to consent. The truth usually is.

The young marriage is a real risk and I have never pretended otherwise. But the outside world treats it as obviously catastrophic, when the evidence is more mixed than that. Some young marriages in my community fail. Many endure and flourish. The age at marriage is one factor among many, and treating it as the whole story misses everything else that determines whether a marriage works.

I was eighteen and prepared, having watched the exact life I was choosing for eighteen years. The outside world hears the age and stops thinking. But consent depends on preparation, not just on age, and by that measure I understood my choice better than many who marry far older having watched no functional marriage at all. The thirty-one-year-old looks back and agrees with the eighteen-year-old. That is not what the too-young narrative predicts. It is, however, the truth.

The Lesson

Consent depends on preparation, not only on age. I had watched the exact life I was choosing for eighteen years. The thirty-one-year-old looks back and agrees with the choice the eighteen-year-old made.

Chapter 28:

We Cannot Question Anything. I Question Everything Quietly.

There is a belief that my community forbids questions. That faith is mandatory and doubt is punished and the mind is not permitted to wander into dangerous territory.

I question things constantly. I have questioned things my entire life. The questioning is not the problem the outside world imagines it to be. What my community asks is not that you stop questioning. It is that you stay while you question. These are very different requirements.

Let me explain the difference, because it matters. The outside world imagines that questioning your tradition and remaining in your tradition are incompatible. That a real question must lead to an exit if the answer is unsatisfying. My community operates on a different premise. You can question deeply and remain. You can hold doubt and observe anyway. You can wrestle with something and not resolve the wrestling and continue to live inside the thing you are wrestling with. This is, in fact, a very old Jewish posture. We have been arguing with our tradition, and with each other, and with God, for thousands of years. The arguing is not a departure from the tradition. It is part of it.

I have questions I have never resolved. About suffering. About why certain things are the way they are. About practices that do not make sense to me even after I have sought out the reasons. I carry these questions. I do not pretend to have answered them. And I observe anyway, because observance and certainty are not the same thing, and my community has never required me to be certain. It has required me to be present. I can be present and uncertain simultaneously. I am, most days.

The outside world thinks faith means the absence of doubt. This is not what faith is, at least not the faith I know. Faith is what you do with the doubt. It is the decision to stay in the relationship with something you do not fully understand. The doubt is not the enemy of the faith. The doubt is the thing the faith is faithful in spite of. A faith with no doubt in it is not faith. It is just certainty, which is a different and lesser thing.

I do my questioning quietly. This is true and I want to address it honestly. I do not stand up in shul, synagogue, and announce my doubts. I do not perform my questioning publicly in a way that would be disruptive to my community. The questioning happens in conversations with trusted people, in my own mind, in the private places where questioning belongs. The outside world might call this suppression. I call it discretion. There is a difference between not being allowed to question and choosing not to make your questioning everyone else's business.

I would not raise my private questions in the middle of davening, Jewish prayer, any more than a person at a funeral would raise their private doubts about the deceased in the middle of the eulogy. Not because the doubts are forbidden. Because there is a time and place, and the middle of a sacred communal moment is not it. This is not suppression. This is knowing how to live among other people.

There are limits, I will acknowledge. There are forms of public questioning that my community would not tolerate, that would carry social cost. A person who loudly and publicly rejected core beliefs would face consequences. This is true. But it is also true of every community that holds anything sacred. Try loudly rejecting the core beliefs of the secular progressive world in certain rooms and observe the consequences. Every community polices its boundaries. Mine is not unique in this. It is only more honest about having boundaries at all.

I question everything. I do it quietly, in the places where questioning belongs, with the people who can hold it. The questioning has not destroyed my faith. It has deepened it, because a faith that has been questioned and survived the questioning is sturdier than a faith that was never tested. My faith has been tested. By me. Repeatedly. It is still here. So am I.

I want the young women coming up after me to know that they are allowed to question. That the questioning is not a betrayal and not a sin and not the first step toward an exit they do not want to

take. They can hold their questions and stay. They can wrestle and remain. This is, in fact, the most Jewish thing they could do, and I want them to know it before someone convinces them that doubt and faith cannot live in the same person.

Faith is what you do with the doubt, not the absence of it. I question everything, quietly, in the places where questioning belongs, and the questioning has deepened my faith rather than destroying it. A faith that has been tested and survived is sturdier than a faith never tested at all. Mine has been tested, by me, repeatedly. It is still standing. So am I. The outside world should stop assuming that a question is always the beginning of an exit. Sometimes it is just a person thinking.

The Lesson

Faith is not the absence of doubt. It is what you do with the doubt. You can question deeply and stay. The questioning, done honestly, makes the staying stronger, not weaker.

Chapter 29:

The Food Is Bland and Joyless. Come to My Kitchen.

Somewhere along the way the outside world decided that kosher food is bland.

Boiled. Beige. Joyless. A cuisine of restriction and limitation, food that exists to fulfill requirements rather than to be enjoyed. I do not know where this came from. I suspect it came from people who encountered kosher food only in its worst institutional forms, the airline meal, the hospital tray, the packaged products designed for shelf life rather than pleasure. Whoever formed this opinion did not eat at my table.

Come to my kitchen on a Thursday night when the cooking for Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, begins. I want you to smell it. The soup, which has been developing on the stove for hours, building the kind of depth that cannot be rushed. The cholent, a slow-cooked stew left on the fire overnight and eaten on the Sabbath, which will cook overnight into something that no quick meal could ever become. The kugels, traditional baked Jewish puddings served at the Sabbath table, sweet and savory, each one a thing I have made hundreds of times and refined over thirteen years into exactly what my family loves. The challah, the braided bread traditionally baked for the Sabbath and holidays, which I make with my own hands, the dough rising under a cloth in the warm kitchen.

This is not bland food. This is food made with the kind of time and attention that the outside world has largely abandoned. While the outside world was learning to assemble meals in fifteen minutes from packages, my community kept cooking the slow way, the way that produces flavor that fast food cannot produce. The constraint of kashrut, the system of Jewish dietary laws, did not make our food worse. It made it ours. It gave it a structure and a tradition and a set of dishes

passed down through generations and refined by every woman who made them.

The dishes I make are the dishes my mother made and her mother made. Not because there is a law requiring these specific dishes, but because they are known, because they work, because they carry something. When my children eat my soup, they are eating the same soup that has been served at this family's table for longer than anyone can remember. The food is a form of memory. It is a form of continuity. It tastes like belonging, which is a flavor the outside world cannot buy and has largely forgotten.

There is joy in this food that has nothing to do with the food itself and everything to do with what surrounds it. The food appears at the Shabbos table, where thirteen people gather with nowhere else to be. It appears at every simcha, a joyous Jewish celebration, every celebration, where the community gathers and eats together. It appears when someone is sick and someone else brings a meal. The food is woven into every important moment of communal life. Food that carries this much meaning is not bland, whatever its seasoning. It is the opposite of bland. It is saturated with significance.

I will grant that there are constraints. I cannot cook certain things. The combinations available to me are limited by the laws of kashrut in ways that a cook without those laws would not face. But constraint, as I keep saying throughout this book, is not the enemy of quality. Constraint is often the mother of creativity. The greatest cuisines in the world all developed under constraints, of geography, of poverty, of available ingredients. Constraint forces invention. My community's cuisine developed under the constraint of kashrut and produced something rich and specific and deeply satisfying within those bounds.

The outside world has more options. It can cook anything, combine anything, eat anything. And yet I notice that the outside world is not, on the whole, eating better than I am. It has more options and less tradition. More freedom and less depth. It can eat any cuisine in the world delivered to its door, and it eats, mostly, alone, quickly, without ceremony, without the meaning that turns a meal into something more than fuel.

I eat at a table with twelve other people every Friday night, food I made with my own hands over two days, recipes that connect me to generations of women before me. Tell me again which one

of us is eating joylessly.

The food carries memory, and memory is the thing the outside world keeps trying to manufacture and cannot. My children will grow up and the taste of my soup will bring them back to my table, the way my mother's soup brings me back to hers. That is not bland. That is food doing the most important thing food can do, which is to hold a family together across time. No restaurant can do that. No convenience can replace it.

Constraint is the mother of cuisine. My food is made slowly, by hand, over two days, from recipes that connect me to generations of women, and eaten at a full table every Friday night. Call that bland if you can do it with a straight face. The outside world has more options and eats, mostly, alone and fast and without ceremony. I will take my soup, made the slow way, surrounded by twelve people, over all the options in the world.

The Lesson

Constraint is the mother of cuisine, not the enemy of it. Food made slowly, by hand, eaten at a full table, is never bland. It tastes like belonging, which the outside world cannot buy.

Chapter 30:

Our Religion Is Joyless. You Have Never Seen Us Dance.

The outside world looks at my community and sees rules. Endless rules. Rules about food, about dress, about time, about behavior, about every dimension of daily life. And it concludes from all these rules that our religion must be a grim business. A life of obligation and restriction and joyless compliance with an endless list of requirements.

You have never been to a Chassidic wedding.

Let me describe one for you, because it is the single best argument against the joyless-religion myth that I can offer. The music starts and it does not stop for hours. The men dance in circles, fast, building, the energy rising until it fills the entire hall. They dance until they cannot breathe and then they dance more. The joy is not decorous. It is not restrained. It is wild and physical and completely uninhibited in a way that would surprise everyone who imagines us as a somber people. Old men dance. Young men dance. Everyone dances. The joy is total.

On the women's side, the same. The circles, the music, the dancing that goes on and on. Grandmothers and brides and little girls all moving together. I have danced at weddings until my feet hurt and my voice was gone and I was more purely happy than the outside world imagines my community is capable of being. This is not a people who do not know joy. This is a people who know a kind of joy the outside world has largely lost access to. Communal joy. Joy that is not individual but shared, that arises from everyone celebrating the same thing together at the same time.

The outside world confuses seriousness with joylessness. My community takes its religion seriously. This is true. But seriousness and joy are not opposites. In fact the most joyful moments of my life have all happened inside the structure of my serious religion. The dancing at weddings. The singing at the Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table. The intensity of the holidays. Simchas Torah, the holiday celebrating the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle, when the men dance with the Torah scrolls and the joy is so thick you can feel it in the air. Purim, the Jewish holiday of festivity and celebration, marked by costumes and feasting, when the entire community celebrates with an abandon that would shock the people who think we do not know how to let go.

The rules the outside world sees as restrictions are, from the inside, the structure that makes the joy possible. The rules create the occasions. The rules create the calendar of celebration that punctuates the year. Without the structure there would be no Shabbos to look forward to all week, no holidays to build toward, no weddings conducted according to the forms that make them what they are. The joy is not in spite of the rules. The joy grows out of the rules, the way a garden grows out of the structure that someone built and tends.

Joy that has no structure tends to dissipate. The outside world has freedom to celebrate anything at any time, and the result is that its celebrations have become thinner, less marked, less meaningful. When everything can be celebrated, nothing is special. My community celebrates specific things at specific times in specific ways, and the specificity is what gives the celebration its power. The constraint concentrates the joy the way a lens concentrates light.

I am not going to pretend every moment of religious life is joyful. There is obligation. There is routine. There are mornings when davening, Jewish prayer, feels like a duty rather than a delight, when the structure feels like weight rather than support. This is true of any sustained practice. The joy is not constant. But it is real, and it is available, and it arrives reliably at the appointed times, which is more than the outside world can say about a joy that depends on spontaneous feeling and therefore comes and goes unpredictably.

Come to a wedding. Watch the dancing. Watch a people who supposedly do not know joy lose themselves completely in it. Then tell me again about our joyless religion. I will be on the women's side, dancing, with no breath left and a voice gone hoarse and a happiness the outside

world keeps insisting I am not allowed to have.

The joy at the wedding is the joy that has been concentrated by the structure all year long, released all at once. The outside world, with its joy available anytime, has nothing to concentrate and therefore nothing to release. We waited. We built toward this. And when it comes, the joy is total, precisely because it was structured and anticipated and earned rather than simply grabbed whenever the impulse arose.

You have never seen us dance. That is the whole answer to the joyless-religion myth. Come to a wedding and watch a people supposedly incapable of joy lose themselves completely in it. The rules the outside world sees as restriction are the structure that holds the celebration. The joy is not in spite of the structure. It grows out of it. I will be on the women's side, dancing until my voice is gone, having a happiness the outside world keeps insisting I cannot have.

The Lesson

Seriousness is not the opposite of joy. The structure that looks like restriction from outside is the architecture that holds the celebration. You have never seen us dance. The joy is total, and it is real.

Chapter 31:

Our Music Is Primitive. Listen Before You Decide.

The outside world, on the rare occasions it thinks about Chassidic music at all, imagines something simple. Repetitive. Primitive. A few melodies sung over and over by people who do not know any better.

This tells me the outside world has not listened. Which is fine. Most things require listening before you are entitled to an opinion, and most people skip the listening and go straight to the opinion. I am here to suggest the listening.

Chassidic music is built on the niggun, a wordless devotional melody. A niggun is a melody, often without words, sometimes with just a few syllables repeated. The outside world hears the repetition and concludes simplicity. But the repetition is the point, and understanding why requires understanding what the music is for. A niggun is not entertainment. It is not a performance for an audience. It is a vehicle. It is meant to take the people singing it somewhere, to build, through repetition, a state that a more complex and varied piece of music could not build.

Repetition does something to the mind and the body that variety cannot do. When you sing the same melody over and over, building it, letting it rise, something shifts. The repetition becomes a kind of doorway. The outside world's music is mostly designed to be listened to. Our music is designed to be entered. These are different purposes and they produce different structures. To judge a niggun by the standards of music meant for listening is to misunderstand what it is for.

I have been in a room when a niggun was sung the way it is meant to be sung. Slow at first, building, the same melody returning and returning, more voices joining, the energy rising until the whole room was inside the same sound. It is one of the most powerful experiences my tradition offers. It is not primitive. It is sophisticated in a way the outside world is not equipped to recognize, because the sophistication is not in the complexity of the composition but in the effect the music achieves through its specific design.

There are niggunim, wordless devotional melodies used in Jewish prayer and celebration, that have been sung for centuries. Melodies attributed to great rebbes, passed down through generations, carrying with them the weight of everyone who has ever sung them. When my husband sings a particular niggun at the Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table, he is singing something his grandfather sang and his grandfather's grandfather sang. The melody is a thread connecting him backward through time. This is not primitive. This is music as memory, music as continuity, music as a living connection to the dead and the not-yet-born.

There is also great variety in our music that the outside world never encounters because it never looks. Joyful niggunim and mournful ones. Melodies for different moments, different holidays, different states of the soul. A whole vocabulary of musical expression developed over centuries to accompany every dimension of religious and communal life. The outside world heard one repetitive melody once and concluded it understood the whole tradition. It understood nothing. It heard a single word and thought it had read the book.

My children grow up surrounded by this music. They know dozens of niggunim by heart. They can feel the difference between a melody meant for celebration and one meant for longing. They are musically educated in a tradition the outside world does not even recognize as a tradition. This is an education in itself, the cultivation of an ear and a heart attuned to a specific and deep musical language.

Listen before you decide. Find a recording of a niggun sung properly, by a community, the way it is meant to be sung. Let it repeat. Let it build. Stay with it past the point where your trained-for-variety ear wants something new. And somewhere in there, if you are listening honestly, you will feel what the music is for. You will feel why a people would sing the same

melody for three hundred years. It is not because they could not think of another one. It is because this one does something, and they discovered what it does, and they have been doing it ever since.

My children are fluent in a musical language the outside world does not even recognize as a language. They can feel the difference between a melody of longing and a melody of celebration. This is an education of the heart that happens without anyone calling it education. It is just the air they breathe, the music of their community, and it is shaping them in ways that will last their whole lives.

Listen before you decide. Our music is not meant to be heard. It is meant to be entered. Judge a niggun by the wrong standard and it sounds simple. Stay with it past the point where your ear wants something new, and you will feel what it is for, why a people would sing the same melody for three hundred years. Not because they could not think of another. Because this one does something, and they found out what, and they have been doing it ever since.

The Lesson

Our music is not meant to be listened to. It is meant to be entered. Judge it by the wrong standard and it sounds simple. Listen the way it asks to be heard, and it takes you somewhere variety never could.

Chapter 32:

We Count the Minutes Until the Sheitel Comes Off. Mine Stays On.

The outside world has a particular image of the married Chassidic woman and her sheitel, a wig worn by a married Orthodox Jewish woman as a head covering, her wig. The image is of a woman who endures the covering all day and then, the moment she is home and the door is closed, tears it off in relief. As though the covering is a burden she carries in public and sheds in private. As though her real self is the uncovered one and the sheitel is a costume she cannot wait to remove.

Mine stays on. Not because a law requires it inside my own home, where the law is more lenient than the outside world assumes. It stays on because I have decided how I present myself, even at home, even to my husband, even when no one is watching but the people I live with. The covering is not a costume I endure. It is part of how I have chosen to move through my life, including my private life.

I wrote about this in an earlier chapter, about how my husband does not see me casually, about the maintenance of mystery and self inside a marriage. The sheitel is part of this. By keeping it on, in the way and to the degree I choose, I am keeping something for myself. My uncovered hair is not for general household consumption. It is not furniture. It is mine, and I decide when and how it is seen, and that decision is a form of power that the outside world, in its rush to pity me for the covering, completely fails to understand.

The myth of the woman tearing off her sheitel in relief assumes that the covering is experienced as oppression. For some women it might be. I will not speak for every woman. But for me, and

for many women I know, the covering is not experienced as a burden at all. It is simply how I look. It is part of my sense of myself as a married woman, as a woman of my community, as a person with a particular relationship to her own visibility. Tearing it off in relief would make as much sense as a woman in the outside world tearing off her own hair in relief. It is part of me. Why would I be relieved to be rid of part of me.

There is comfort in the covering that the outside world cannot imagine because it has decided in advance that the covering must be uncomfortable. My sheitel is comfortable. I have worn one for thirteen years. It is as natural to me as anything I wear. The image of me suffering under it all day, longing for the moment of release, is an invention of people who have never worn one and who assume that anything different from their own experience must be experienced as suffering.

I will tell you what I do take off with relief at the end of a long day. My shoes. The shoes come off and there is genuine relief. The sheitel is not in the same category as the shoes. The shoes are a practical item that becomes uncomfortable over a long day. The sheitel is part of how I present myself to the world and to my household, and presenting myself that way is not a discomfort I endure. It is a choice I make and continue to make.

Here is what I think the sheitel myth is really about. It is about the outside world's need to believe that underneath the covering is a woman who wishes she were uncovered. A woman who, if she were truly free, would not cover. This belief is necessary to the outside world because it allows the outside world to pity the covered woman while feeling superior in its own uncovering. If the covered woman actually prefers to be covered, the whole structure of pity collapses. So the outside world insists that she must, secretly, long to be free of it. That she counts the minutes.

I do not count the minutes. I am not waiting to be free of my covering. I chose it. I maintain it. I find meaning and comfort and a particular kind of dignity in it. The woman the outside world imagines, tearing off her sheitel in relief the moment the door closes, is not me. She might exist somewhere. But she is not the rule the outside world assumes her to be. Many of us simply wear what we wear, the way you wear what you wear, without the drama of longed-for release that the outside world has scripted for us.

My sheitel is on. It will stay on, in the manner I choose. This is not endurance. This is preference. The difference between those two things is the whole difference between the myth and the woman.

The pity around the covering is a way of refusing to believe that a woman could prefer something different from what the person pitying her prefers. It is, at bottom, a failure of imagination. I am asking for a small expansion of that imagination, enough to include the possibility that I am telling the truth when I say my covering is mine, chosen, comfortable, and not a burden I am longing to set down.

My sheitel stays on, by choice, not by endurance. The outside world needs to believe that underneath the covering is a woman longing to be free of it, because that belief lets the pity continue. But I am not counting the minutes. I am not waiting to be released. The covering is part of me, chosen and maintained and comfortable, and tearing it off in relief would make as much sense as tearing off my own hair. The difference between endurance and preference is the whole difference between the myth and me.

The Lesson

The covering is not a costume endured in public and shed in relief. For many of us it is simply part of who we are. The pity requires us to secretly long for release. We do not. We chose this.

Chapter 33:

We Hate Our Bodies. You Are the One in the Mirror All Day.

Because we cover ourselves, the outside world concludes that we are ashamed of our bodies. That modesty is a form of body hatred. That a woman who covers must, underneath the covering, be at war with the physical self she is hiding.

I want to turn this around, gently, and hold it up to the light. Because I think the relationship between covering and body image is the opposite of what the outside world assumes.

I do not spend much time thinking about my body in the way the outside world means. I do not evaluate it constantly against an ideal. I do not stand in front of mirrors assessing my flaws. I do not compare my body to other women's bodies, because I do not see other women's bodies, because we are all covered. The constant, exhausting, comparative relationship with the physical self that the outside world takes as normal is largely absent from my experience. My body is not a project I am perpetually working on and falling short of. It is just my body. It carries me through my life. It has carried eleven children. I am, on the whole, at peace with it.

Now consider the outside world's relationship with the body. The endless mirrors. The constant evaluation. The comparison against images that are curated and filtered and not even real. The industry built on convincing women their bodies are wrong and selling them the solutions. The eating, the not-eating, the surgery, the products, the perpetual low-grade war that so many women in the outside world wage against their own physical selves for their entire lives. Who hates their body more, the woman who covers it and rarely thinks about it, or the woman who displays it and thinks about it constantly with dissatisfaction?

I am not claiming my community has solved body image. There are women in my community with difficult relationships to their bodies, the same as anywhere. The covering is not a magic cure. But I am claiming that the assumption built into the body-hatred myth, that covering equals shame and display equals comfort, is exactly backward in my experience. The display the outside world calls freedom is often accompanied by a self-scrutiny that looks a great deal more like hatred than anything I experience under my modest clothes.

The covering, for me, has had an unexpected effect that the outside world never anticipates. It has freed me from the body as a site of constant evaluation. Because my body is not on display, it is not being evaluated, by others or by me. It recedes from the center of my self-consciousness. I am not my body, presented for assessment. I am a person who happens to have a body, which is covered, and which therefore is not the thing about me that is being constantly weighed and measured. This is a kind of freedom. It is not the kind the outside world recognizes, but it is real.

My daughters are growing up in this. They are not, at least not yet, learning to hate their bodies the way so many girls in the outside world learn to hate theirs. They are not absorbing the message that their value is in their appearance, that their bodies are projects requiring constant correction, that they must be evaluated and found wanting and sent to fix themselves. They are learning that they are people, that their bodies are theirs and private, and that the world does not get to assess them. Whatever else my community gets wrong, and it gets things wrong, this it gets right. My daughters are not in the war.

The outside world spends enormous resources trying to teach women to love their bodies, to accept themselves, to escape the war. It runs campaigns. It produces content. It tries, with limited success, to undo the damage that its own image culture caused in the first place. My community sidestepped the whole war by removing the body from public display. This is not the only way to escape the war. But it is a way, and it works better than the outside world wants to admit, because admitting it would require admitting that the freedom of display might come at a cost the covering does not.

You are the one in the mirror all day. Not me. I do not have time. I have eleven children and a household and a life, and my body, covered and largely un-thought-about, carries me through all of it without demanding that I stop and evaluate it. That is not body hatred. That is something

closer to peace.

I watch the women of the outside world at war with their bodies, and I do not feel superior, because the war is not their fault. It was sold to them, deliberately, by an industry that profits from their dissatisfaction. My community sidestepped that industry, not perfectly, but substantially, by taking the body out of the marketplace of constant evaluation. My daughters are the beneficiaries. I am grateful for that, whatever else I question.

You are the one in the mirror all day, not me. The covered body recedes from constant evaluation, and in the receding finds something closer to peace than the war the outside world wages against its own physical self. My daughters are not in the war, at least not yet. Whatever else my community gets wrong, this it gets right. Covering the body is not hating it. Sometimes it is the only way anyone has found to stop hating it.

The Lesson

Covering the body is not hating it. The constant mirror, the perpetual evaluation, the war with the physical self, these belong to the world of display. The covered body recedes, and in the receding, finds peace.

Chapter 34:

Our Children Are Deprived. They Have More Than Yours.

The outside world looks at my children and sees deprivation.

No television, or very little. No unrestricted internet. No exposure to most of the culture that the outside world considers the normal environment of childhood. Limited secular education compared to what the outside world provides. Modest dress from a young age. A life bounded by rules and community and tradition. The outside world adds all this up and concludes that my children are missing out on childhood itself.

Let me tell you what my children have.

They have a community that knows every one of them by name. My children cannot walk down our street without being greeted by people who have known them since birth, who watched them take their first steps, who will be at their weddings. They are embedded in a web of relationships so dense that they will never, in their entire lives, be anonymous. They will never be alone in the way that so many children in the outside world are alone, surrounded by people who do not know them. This is not deprivation. This is a kind of wealth that the outside world has largely lost.

They have siblings. Ten of them each. They have grown up in a house full of other children, learning constantly how to share, how to negotiate, how to take care of someone smaller, how to be taken care of by someone bigger. They have built-in playmates, built-in allies, built-in teachers. The skills you learn growing up in a large family, the negotiation and the patience and the constant social adjustment, are skills the outside world increasingly has to teach deliberately

because its children, in their smaller families, do not absorb them naturally. My children absorb them every day, by necessity, at the dinner table.

They have a clear sense of who they are and where they come from. They know their place in a story that goes back thousands of years. They do not have the identity confusion that the outside world treats as a normal and even necessary phase of growing up. They are not searching for themselves, because they know who they are. This security is not a limitation on their development. It is a foundation for it. A child who knows who they are can spend their energy on other things. A child who must construct an identity from scratch spends years on a project my children were handed at birth.

They have ritual. They have a calendar full of meaning, holidays they look forward to all year, the weekly arrival of Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, the cycle of celebrations that mark the year and connect each year to the last. Their lives have rhythm and shape and anticipation built into them. The outside world's children have a calendar of consumer holidays and not much else, and even those have been so commercialized that the meaning has largely drained out of them. My children have the real thing. The deep thing. The thing the outside world keeps trying to recreate and cannot, because you cannot manufacture in a generation what took my community centuries to build.

I will be honest about what they do not have. They do not have the full secular education that would maximize certain kinds of future options. They do not have unrestricted access to the broader culture. They do not have some of the freedoms that the outside world's children have. These are real and I am not going to pretend they are nothing. There are doors that my children's upbringing makes harder for them to walk through later, and I think about this, and it is a genuine cost.

But the calculation is not as one-sided as the outside world assumes. My children are trading certain options for certain depths. They are giving up some breadth in exchange for some roots. Whether this is a good trade is a real question, and I do not pretend the answer is obvious. But it is a trade, not a simple deprivation. The outside world sees only what my children lack and never counts what they have, because what they have, community and ritual and rootedness and a dense web of belonging, does not show up on the metrics the outside world uses to measure a

childhood.

My children are not deprived. They are differently provisioned. They have less of some things the outside world values and more of some things the outside world has forgotten how to provide. Count both sides before you pity them. They are, on the whole, doing better than the pity assumes.

When I imagine my children grown, I do not imagine them resenting what they did not have. I imagine them carrying what they did have, the rootedness and the community and the sense of belonging to something, into whatever lives they build. Some of them may leave. Some may stay. But all of them will carry the foundation, and a foundation is not a deprivation. It is the thing you build the rest of your life on top of.

Differently provisioned, not deprived. My children trade some breadth for some roots, some options for some belonging, and the outside world counts only the first half of each trade. Count both. The community that knows every one of them by name, the ten siblings, the ritual, the rootedness, none of it shows up on the metrics the outside world uses, and all of it is real. My children are doing better than the pity assumes. Far better. Count both sides before you grieve for them.

The Lesson

A childhood the outside world cannot measure is not a childhood that is missing. My children trade breadth for roots, options for belonging. Count both sides before you call it deprivation.

Chapter 35:

The Community Drops You When You Fall. Let Me Tell You Who Caught Me.

There is a belief that my community supports you only as long as you conform. That the moment you struggle, the moment you fall, the moment you fail to meet the standard, the community turns away and you are left alone with your failure.

I want to tell you about the hardest period of my life and who was there for it.

I will not describe the difficulty in detail, because it involves other people and is not entirely mine to tell. What I will say is that there was a period of years when things in my life were genuinely hard, in the way that life is sometimes hard, the kind of hard you cannot fix quickly and have to live through. During that period, I learned what my community actually does when one of its own is struggling.

It showed up. That is the short version. It showed up in the form of women who appeared with food when I could not manage to cook. It showed up in the form of someone quietly taking my children for an afternoon so I could have an hour to myself. It showed up in the form of a phone call at the exact moment I needed one, from someone who somehow knew, because in my community someone always somehow knows. It showed up in a hundred small practical ways that added up to being held through something I could not have gotten through alone.

Nobody asked me to fill out a form. Nobody assessed my eligibility for support. Nobody waited for me to ask, which I would not have done, because asking is hard and I am proud and I would have suffered in silence rather than admit I needed help. The community did not wait for me to

ask. It noticed and it acted. This is the thing the outside world cannot replicate with all its systems and services. The community noticed before I asked, because it was paying attention, because it knew me, because I was not anonymous to it.

The myth that the community drops you when you fall has the truth precisely backward. The community is most present when you fall. When everything is fine, the community is in the background, an ambient hum of relationship and obligation. When you fall, the community moves to the foreground. It catches you. This is, in fact, the entire point of a community. A community that only supported its successful members would not be a community. It would be a club. My community is not a club. It catches people who fall, including people who fall in ways that do not flatter the community, including people whose struggles are exactly the kind the outside world assumes would get a person abandoned.

I want to be honest about the limits of this, because I have committed to honesty. There are kinds of falling that the community handles less well. There are forms of struggle that carry stigma, that people feel they must hide, that do not get caught the way more acceptable struggles get caught. A person whose difficulty is shameful by the community's standards may not receive the support that a person with a more acceptable difficulty receives. This is a real failure and I will name it. The catching is not unconditional and not universal. It is real, but it has limits, and the limits fall hardest on the people whose struggles the community would prefer not to see.

But within those limits, which are real, the catching is also real. For the ordinary difficulties of an ordinary life, the illness and the loss and the overwhelm and the hard periods that come to everyone, my community shows up in a way that the outside world, for all its services and systems and professional supports, cannot match. Because the outside world's support is professional and my community's support is personal. The professional support is staffed by people who do not know you and go home at the end of their shift. My community's support is staffed by people who know you and never go home, because you are their neighbor and their fellow member and their responsibility in a way that no professional is anyone's responsibility.

When I fell, my community caught me. I know this because I lived it. The myth says otherwise. The myth is wrong, at least about the kinds of falling that the community knows how to catch, which is most kinds. I was caught. I have caught others since. This is what we do. It is, in many

ways, the whole point of being us.

The catching goes both ways, which is the part I have not emphasized enough. I have been caught, and I have caught others, and the catching of others is one of the deepest satisfactions of my life. To show up for someone who is falling, to bring the food and take the children and make the call at the right moment, is to participate in the thing that makes a community a community. I do it because it was done for me. The next person will do it because it was done for them.

When I fell, my community caught me, before I asked, because it was paying attention. The myth says the community drops you when you fall. The myth has it exactly backward. A community that only supports its successful members is a club. Mine is not a club. It catches people, including people who fall in ways that do not flatter it. The catching has limits, real ones, but within them it is more present than any system the outside world has ever built.

The Lesson

A community that only supports its successful members is a club, not a community. Mine caught me when I fell. The catching has limits, real ones, but within them it is more present than any system the outside world has built.

Chapter 36:

We Have No Real Friendships. Only Mine Last Forty Years.

The outside world imagines that the women in my community do not have real friendships. That our relationships are functional rather than emotional, networks of obligation rather than bonds of genuine connection. That between the demands of our households and the constraints of our community, there is no room for the kind of friendship that the outside world considers real.

I have friendships that will last my entire life. Not because I worked hard to maintain them across distance and time and changing circumstances, the way the outside world's friendships require constant maintenance to survive. But because the women I am close to are not going anywhere, and neither am I, and we will be in each other's lives until one of us dies.

This is a kind of friendship the outside world has largely lost access to. The friendship of permanence. The outside world's friendships are increasingly mobile, scattered across cities and life stages, maintained through screens, vulnerable to the constant relocation that modern life demands. A friend moves away. A friend changes jobs. A friend enters a new life stage and drifts. The outside world's friendships require enormous effort to sustain because everything in modern life is pulling people apart.

My friendships require no such effort, because nothing is pulling us apart. The women I was close to at twenty are the women I am close to now. The women I will be close to at sixty are, in all likelihood, the women I am close to now. We live in the same neighborhood. We attend the same shul, synagogue. We send our children to the same schools. We see each other constantly, not through effort but through the simple fact of shared life. Our friendships are not maintained. They are inhabited. They are the water we swim in, not a thing we have to keep alive.

There is a depth available in this kind of friendship that the mobile friendships of the outside world rarely achieve. When you know someone for forty years, when you have watched them through every stage of their life and they have watched you through every stage of yours, the friendship contains all of that history. The woman I have coffee with knew me before I was married. She was at my wedding. She has been present for the birth of every one of my children. She knows my husband, my mother, my whole life. There is nothing I have to explain to her, because she was there for all of it. This is friendship with no need for backstory, because there is no backstory she does not already know.

These are the friendships where the real things get said. At the kitchen table, at midnight, when the children are finally asleep and two women who have known each other for decades finally have a moment to talk. The things I cannot say anywhere else, I say to these women. The doubts. The struggles. The true state of my marriage on a hard week. The things that, if they traveled, would cause problems, but that do not travel, because these friendships are also vaults, holding what is given to them in confidence. The community's information network is real, as I have described, but so is the discretion of a true friend, and the women I trust most have never once betrayed what I have given them.

The outside world thinks friendship requires a certain kind of freedom that my community does not allow. The freedom to choose your friends from the whole world, to find your people wherever they are, to build relationships based on pure affinity rather than the accident of proximity. And it is true that my friendships are shaped by proximity, by the fact that I am close to the women who are near me rather than the women I might have chosen from a wider field. But proximity is not the enemy of depth. Proximity is, in fact, the condition of the deepest friendships, because depth requires presence, and presence requires being near, and being near is exactly what my community provides in abundance.

I am not lonely. This is the thing the outside world, with all its freedom and all its mobility, increasingly cannot say. Loneliness is the great epidemic of the outside world, the cost of all that freedom, all that mobility, all that choice. I am not lonely because I am surrounded by women who have known me my whole life and will know me until the end of it. Whatever my community costs me, and it costs me things, it has not cost me this. It has given me this. The forty-year friendship. The friend who needs no backstory. The vault at the kitchen table at

midnight.

Tell me again that we have no real friendships. I will tell my friends what you said. We will laugh about it over coffee, the way we have laughed about everything for twenty years and will laugh about everything for twenty more.

The loneliness epidemic of the outside world is, I think, the great unspoken cost of all that freedom and all that mobility. People are freer than they have ever been and lonelier than they have ever been, and the two facts are connected. I am less free, by the outside world's measure, and I am not lonely. I would not trade my friendships for the freedom that produced the loneliness. The friendships are worth more than the freedom.

The forty-year friendship. The friend who needs no backstory because she was there for all of it. The vault at the kitchen table at midnight. This is what proximity makes possible and mobility destroys, and it is why I am not lonely in a world increasingly defined by loneliness. Whatever my community costs me, it did not cost me this. It gave me this. Tell me again that we have no real friendships. I will tell my friends. We will laugh about it over coffee, the way we have for twenty years.

The Lesson

The friendship of permanence is a kind the outside world has lost. Mine require no maintenance because nothing pulls us apart. The friend who needs no backstory, who was there for all of it, is a wealth that proximity makes possible.

Chapter 37:

We Do Not Welcome Outsiders. My Table Has an Extra Seat.

The outside world imagines my community as closed. Suspicious of strangers. Hostile to outsiders. A people who turn inward and keep the world at a distance, who would never welcome someone who is not one of us.

Come to my Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table. There is almost always an extra seat.

Hospitality, what we call hachnasas orchim, the Jewish practice of welcoming guests into one's home, the welcoming of guests, is not a nice extra in my community. It is a central obligation. It is one of the things a Jewish home is supposed to do. The welcoming of the stranger, the feeding of the guest, the opening of the home, these are not optional acts of personal kindness. They are requirements, built into the structure of how a religious home is supposed to function. My grandmother kept an open home. My mother kept an open home. I keep an open home. The stranger at the table is not an anomaly. The stranger at the table is the point.

I have fed people at my Shabbos table whom I had never met before that evening. Travelers passing through. People who found themselves in our neighborhood without a place to eat. Students. Visitors. People going through hard times who needed a warm meal and a warm room. They came to my table, strangers, and they left, if not friends exactly, then at least people who had been fed and welcomed and treated as guests rather than intruders. This is normal in my community. It is so normal that it barely registers as remarkable. Of course you feed the stranger. What else would you do.

The outside world's image of our closedness comes, I think, from confusing two different things. We are protective of our way of life. This is true. We maintain boundaries around our practices, our community, our children's upbringing. We do not open all of this to the outside world casually. But protecting your way of life is not the same as being hostile to individual people. I can be protective of my community's practices and still welcome you, personally, warmly, to my table. These are not in conflict. The boundary is around the way of life, not around the individual human being who shows up hungry.

I think the outside world also confuses caution with hostility. We are careful with outsiders, particularly with outsiders who arrive with cameras and questions and agendas, because our experience of being documented and explained and represented by outsiders has not been good. When a journalist or a filmmaker shows up, yes, we are wary, because we have learned that being open to such people tends to result in our being misrepresented to the world. This wariness is not hostility to outsiders in general. It is a specific and earned caution toward a specific kind of outsider who has historically not treated us fairly.

But the traveler who needs a meal is not a journalist with an agenda. The visitor who is simply curious and respectful is not a filmmaker looking for a story that confirms what the audience already believes. To the human being who comes with genuine openness, my community is genuinely open. The wariness is reserved for those who have given us reason for wariness. The warmth is the default for everyone else.

There is something the outside world might learn from this, actually. The outside world prides itself on its openness, its tolerance, its welcoming of diversity. And yet the outside world is, in my observation, often quite bad at the actual practice of welcoming an actual stranger into an actual home. It is open in the abstract and closed in the particular. It believes in welcoming the stranger in principle and rarely does it in practice. My community is wary in principle, toward certain kinds of outsiders, and remarkably welcoming in practice, toward the actual human beings who show up at the door. Which form of openness is more real, the abstract kind that stays in the realm of principle, or the concrete kind that sets an extra place at the table.

My table has an extra seat. It has had one my whole life, at my grandmother's table and my mother's table and now mine. The stranger is welcome at it. This is not in spite of my

community's values. This is one of my community's values, central and old and taken seriously. We are not closed. We are careful about some things and open about others, and the openness includes a chair at my table for you, if you come in good faith. Come in good faith. The seat is there.

Hospitality is not a personality trait in my community. It is an obligation, a discipline, a practice that you perform whether or not you feel like it, and the performing of it shapes you over time into a person for whom the open door is natural. The outside world treats welcoming as a matter of individual temperament. My community treats it as a matter of practice. Practice is more reliable than temperament. The door stays open even on the days you do not feel generous.

My table has an extra seat. It always has, at my grandmother's table and my mother's and now mine. Protecting a way of life is not hostility to people, and being careful with the journalist who arrives with an agenda is not the same as turning away the traveler who arrives hungry. The traveler is welcome. The seat is real. Come in good faith and it is yours. We are not closed. We are careful about some things and wide open about others, and the open part includes a chair for you.

The Lesson

Protecting a way of life is not hostility to people. We are wary of those who earned the wariness and warm to everyone else. The extra seat at the table is not an exception to our values. It is one of them.

Chapter 38:

We Never See the World. The World Comes to Brooklyn.

The outside world pictures my life as small in its geography. A few blocks of Williamsburg, the same streets, the same buildings, a life lived entirely within the narrow bounds of a single neighborhood. While the outside world travels, sees, experiences the wide world, I stay home, never seeing anything beyond my own small corner.

I live in Brooklyn. Let me tell you about the geography of my supposedly small life.

Brooklyn is one of the most diverse places on the face of the earth. Within walking distance of my apartment are people from every country, speaking every language, practicing every religion, eating every cuisine, living every kind of life. The world does not need me to travel to it. The world is here. It is on my street. It is in the subway car I ride. It is in the grocery store and on the sidewalk and everywhere I look. I do not have a small geography. I have one of the largest and most varied geographies a person could have, because I live in the middle of a city that contains the entire world in miniature.

I encounter difference constantly. Not the curated difference of the tourist, who travels to a place and observes it from the outside for a week and then returns home. The actual difference of daily life in a city where my neighbors are unlike me in every way and we share the same streets and the same stores and the same subway. This is a more genuine encounter with difference than most tourism provides. The tourist visits difference. I live alongside it, every day, in the ordinary commerce of city life.

The outside world has a particular fantasy about travel, that seeing many places makes a person broad, worldly, sophisticated. I have noticed that this is not always true. I have met people who have traveled to many countries and who learned nothing from any of them, who carried their assumptions with them everywhere and brought them home unchanged. Travel does not automatically broaden. You can see the whole world and understand none of it. You can also never leave Brooklyn and understand a great deal, if Brooklyn is where the whole world has come to live, and if you are paying attention.

I am paying attention. I watch the world that surrounds me. I observe the lives being lived around me, so different from my own. I do not need to fly anywhere to encounter human variety, because human variety is my daily environment. The woman at the grocery store, the family on the subway, the strangers on the sidewalk, these are my window onto the wider world, and the window is always open, because I live in the middle of everything.

There are places I have not been and will likely never go. This is true. I have not seen the great cities of Europe or the landscapes of distant continents. There is a kind of seeing that requires travel and that I have not done and may never do. I will not pretend this is not a real limitation, a real road not taken. But I want to question the assumption that this limitation makes my life small, when my life is lived in the middle of a city that contains more human variety than most travelers encounter in a lifetime of trips.

And here is something else. The depth of my engagement with my own place is something the constant traveler often lacks. I know my neighborhood completely. I know its history, its rhythms, its people, its hidden corners. I am not a visitor anywhere. I am deeply rooted in one place, and that rootedness is its own kind of knowledge, a knowledge that the person who is everywhere and nowhere, the perpetual traveler who never stays long enough to know a place truly, can never have. I have traded breadth of place for depth of place. I am not convinced this is the worse trade.

The world comes to Brooklyn. I do not need to chase it across the globe. It is outside my door, in all its variety, every single day. I see more of the world from my supposedly small corner than the outside world imagines, because my corner is not small. It only looks small from far away, to people who have decided in advance that my life must be narrow. Up close, from inside it, my

corner contains the world.

The rootedness I have in my one place is a kind of knowing that the perpetual traveler never achieves. I know my neighborhood the way you can only know a place you have never left, completely, in its history and its rhythms and its hidden corners. This knowing is not lesser than the knowing of the traveler who has seen many places shallowly. It is just a different knowing, deep instead of wide, and I am not convinced wide is better.

The world came to Brooklyn. I do not need to chase it across the globe, because it is outside my door every day, in more variety than most travelers see in a lifetime of trips. Seeing many places does not automatically broaden a person. Staying in one does not automatically narrow them. I traded breadth of place for depth of place, and I know my corner of the world completely, the way the perpetual traveler never knows anywhere. My corner is not small. It only looks small from far away.

The Lesson

Seeing many places does not automatically broaden a person, and staying in one does not automatically narrow them. The whole world came to Brooklyn. I have traded breadth of place for depth of it, and I am not sure that is the worse trade.

Chapter 39:

We Reject the Modern World Entirely. I Am Writing This on a Phone.

The outside world imagines my community as fixed in the past. As having rejected modernity wholesale, retreated into a previous century, refused every development of the modern world in favor of a frozen traditional life. The image is of a people deliberately living as their great-grandparents lived, untouched by anything that has happened since.

I am writing this book on a phone. Make of that what you will.

The reality of my community's relationship with the modern world is far more complicated and far more interesting than wholesale rejection. We do not reject modernity. We negotiate with it. We make choices, constantly, about which developments to accept and which to refuse and how to use the ones we accept. This is not the same as rejection. It is selection, which is a much more sophisticated relationship with the modern world than the outside world's image allows.

Consider the phone. My community has a complicated relationship with phones and the internet, which the outside world reads as backwardness. But look more closely at what is actually happening. My community looked at the smartphone, looked at the internet, looked at social media, and asked a question the outside world never seriously asked, which is: what will this do to us? What will unrestricted access to all of this do to our children, our marriages, our community, our way of life? And having asked the question, my community made deliberate choices about how to use these technologies, choices designed to capture their benefits while limiting their harms.

The outside world did not ask this question. The outside world adopted every new technology immediately and wholesale, and is now, years later, beginning to reckon with the consequences. The damage to attention. The damage to children. The damage to relationships. The loneliness, the comparison, the addiction, the whole catalog of harms that the outside world is only now, belatedly, starting to acknowledge. The outside world is now trying to do, badly and late, what my community did deliberately and early, which is to think about technology before adopting it rather than after.

Who, exactly, was being backward? The community that paused to ask what a technology would do before embracing it, or the world that embraced everything immediately and is now suffering consequences it did not anticipate? My community's caution toward certain technologies does not look so backward from where I sit. It looks, increasingly, like wisdom. It looks like a community that understood something about the relationship between tools and the people who use them that the outside world is only now, painfully, learning.

We use what serves us and refuse what harms us, to the best of our ability and according to our values. This is not rejection of the modern world. This is a relationship with the modern world that is more thoughtful, not less, than the outside world's relationship. The outside world's relationship with technology is largely passive. It accepts whatever arrives. My community's relationship is active. It chooses. The choosing is the opposite of backwardness. It is a form of agency the outside world has largely surrendered.

I am not going to pretend my community always gets these choices right. Sometimes the caution goes too far. Sometimes useful tools are refused for reasons that do not hold up. Sometimes the restrictions create problems of their own. The negotiation with modernity is ongoing and imperfect and I have my own disagreements with how some of it is handled. But the fundamental posture, the posture of choosing rather than passively accepting, of asking what a thing will do before embracing it, this posture I defend. It is not backward. It is, if anything, ahead of where the outside world is finally, slowly, arriving.

I am writing this on a phone. I use the tools that serve my purposes. I do not use the ones that would harm what I am trying to protect. This is not rejection of modernity. This is a considered relationship with it, one that the outside world might learn something from, now that it is

beginning to count the costs of the relationship it chose without considering.

The outside world is in the middle of a painful reckoning with the technologies it adopted without thinking, and the reckoning is producing, slowly, exactly the kind of caution my community has practiced all along. Watching this happen has been instructive. The community everyone called backward turns out to have been asking the right question all along, just earlier than everyone else was willing to ask it.

I am writing this on a phone. We do not reject the modern world. We negotiate with it, asking what each tool will do before we adopt it, which is precisely the question the outside world skipped and is now, late and painfully, learning to ask. The caution that looked like backwardness looks increasingly like wisdom. We use what serves us and refuse what harms us. That is not living in the past. That is choosing, deliberately, which the outside world has largely forgotten how to do.

The Lesson

We do not reject the modern world. We negotiate with it. We ask what a tool will do before we adopt it, which is the question the outside world skipped and is now, late and painfully, learning to ask.

Chapter 40:

We Do Not Grieve Like Normal People. We Grieve Better.

When someone dies in the outside world, the bereaved are often left strangely alone with their grief. There is a funeral, and people are kind for a few days, and then the world moves on and expects the grieving person to move on too, back to work, back to normal, the grief privatized and managed and gotten over as efficiently as possible.

My community grieves differently. I would say we grieve better, and I will tell you why.

When someone dies, we sit shiva, the seven-day mourning period observed by close relatives after a death. For seven days, the immediate family stays home and does nothing but grieve. They do not work. They do not cook. They do not clean. They do not manage anything. They sit, in their grief, and they receive the community, which comes to them. For seven days the bereaved are not expected to function. They are expected only to grieve, and the community arranges itself around their grief, bringing food, handling logistics, sitting with them, making sure they are never alone with the loss.

Think about what this provides. In the outside world, a grieving person is often expected to handle the practical aftermath of a death while also grieving, to manage the arrangements and the logistics and the return to normal life, all while devastated. In my community, the practical aftermath is handled by the community, so that the bereaved can do the one thing they actually need to do, which is grieve. The grief is given space. It is given time. It is given a structure that says: for these seven days, your only job is to feel this. Everything else, we will handle.

And the community comes. This is the part the outside world has lost entirely. The shiva house is full. People come, day after day, to sit with the bereaved, to share memories of the person who died, to simply be present in the grief. The bereaved are not left alone to process their loss in isolation. They are surrounded, held, accompanied through the worst days by a community that shows up and keeps showing up. The grief is communal. It is witnessed. It is shared. The loss is not the private burden of the immediate family. It is carried, at least in part, by everyone who comes to sit.

After the seven days, there are more structures. The thirty days of sheloshim, the thirty-day mourning period that follows shiva, a gradual return to life. The year of mourning for a parent, with its specific practices, the daily kaddish, the memorial prayer recited by mourners, the restrictions, the slow and structured movement back toward normal life. Grief in my community is not a thing to be gotten over quickly. It is a process with stages, with a timeline, with rituals that mark each phase. The structure does not rush the grief. It honors it. It gives it the time it actually needs, which is much longer than the outside world allows.

The outside world has largely lost these structures, and I think it suffers for the loss. The grieving person in the outside world often does not know what to do with their grief, because there is no script, no structure, no communal framework to hold it. They are handed their loss and left to figure out how to carry it alone. The kindness of others, however genuine, is brief and uncertain, because the others also do not know what to do, because the structures that would tell them what to do are gone.

My community knows what to do. When there is a death, everyone knows their role. The bereaved know to sit. The community knows to come. The food appears. The logistics are handled. The grief is given its proper place and its proper time and its proper witnesses. Nobody has to improvise grief, because the form of grief is known, inherited, practiced over generations. This is an enormous gift, though it does not look like a gift from the outside. It looks like more rules. It is more rules. And the rules, in this case, are a kindness, a structure that holds people through the hardest thing, so they do not have to hold themselves alone.

We do not grieve like the outside world grieves. We grieve with structure, with community, with time, with ritual. I have buried people I loved inside this structure, and I can tell you that the

structure held me when I could not have held myself. That is what it is for. That is what the outside world, in shedding its old structures of grief, gave up without quite realizing what it was giving up. We kept ours. On the worst days of my life, I have been grateful that we did.

The structure of grief in my community does something the outside world has forgotten how to do, which is to make sure the grieving person is never alone at the worst moment. The aloneness is the thing that makes grief unbearable. The structure removes the aloneness, not by removing the grief, which cannot be removed, but by surrounding it, witnessing it, sharing it. This is an ancient wisdom and the outside world abandoned it, and I think the abandonment was a mistake.

We grieve with structure, with community, with time. The shiva house full, the bereaved given seven days to do nothing but grieve, the loss witnessed and shared and carried by everyone who comes to sit. The outside world shed these structures and left its grieving alone with losses they do not know how to carry. We kept ours. On the worst days of my life, the structure held me when I could not hold myself. That is what it is for. That is the kindness hiding inside what looks like more rules.

The Lesson

Grief needs structure, time, and witnesses, and the outside world has shed all three. We kept ours. The rules around mourning are not a burden. They are a kindness that holds you through the thing you cannot hold alone.

Chapter 41:

We Are All Poor and Bitter About It. Money Is Not the Whole Story.

The outside world sees large families in modest apartments and concludes poverty, and concludes that the poverty must be a source of bitterness and resentment, a hardship endured rather than a life chosen.

Money is real. I am not going to write a chapter pretending that money does not matter or that financial strain is not a genuine difficulty. In a community where many men devote themselves to learning rather than earning, where families are large, where the cost of a religious life, the schools, the kosher food, the holidays, is substantial, money is often tight. This is true. It is a real feature of life in my community and it creates real stress. I have lived with financial strain. I know exactly what it feels like to do the math on a budget that does not quite work and to make it work anyway through sheer management.

So I am not going to tell you we are not, by the outside world's standards, often short of money. We frequently are. What I am going to question is the assumption that this financial strain translates into the bitterness and resentment the outside world imagines. Because in my experience, it largely does not, and the reasons why are worth understanding.

In my community, money is not the measure of a person. This sounds like a platitude until you understand how completely the outside world has made money the measure of nearly everything. In the outside world, a person's worth is tangled up with their income, their possessions, their financial success, in ways so deep that most people do not even notice they are measuring themselves and each other this way. In my community, the measures are different. A person is

measured by their learning, their character, their contribution to the community, their family, their observance. A man who learns and earns little is not a failure in my community. He may be among the most respected people in it. The whole hierarchy of value is arranged differently.

This changes the experience of having little money. When money is not the measure of your worth, having little of it does not threaten your sense of yourself the way it does in the outside world. I am not made anxious about my value as a person by my modest apartment, because my value as a person is not measured by my apartment. The financial strain is a practical problem, to be managed, but it is not an existential threat to my dignity, because my dignity does not rest on money. This is a kind of freedom that the wealthy outside world, for all its money, often does not have, because in the outside world even the wealthy are anxious about money, about having enough, about keeping up, about what their financial standing says about them.

There is also the matter of what money is for. In the outside world, much spending goes toward things my community simply does not spend on. The endless consumption, the lifestyle inflation, the buying of status and experience and the constant acquisition that the outside world treats as normal. My community does not participate in much of this. We do not need the things the outside world spends its money on, because our sense of a good life does not require them. A life of community and family and observance and Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, does not cost what a life of consumption costs. We are short of money partly because we have little, and we manage on little partly because we want little of what money is usually spent on.

I want to be careful here, because there is real hardship in my community that I do not want to romanticize. There are families genuinely struggling, where the financial strain is not a manageable inconvenience but a crushing weight, where children go without things they need, where the strain damages marriages and health and wellbeing. This is real and it is serious and I am not going to paper over it with talk about how money is not the measure of a person. For families in genuine deprivation, the philosophy does not pay the bills. I know this. I am not pretending otherwise.

But for the great middle of my community, the ordinary families managing on modest means, the picture the outside world paints of poverty and bitterness is wrong. We are not bitter. We are

managing, as people have always managed, and finding that a life can be rich in the ways that matter most while being modest in the way the outside world measures wealth. Money is not the whole story. In my community, it is not even the main story. The outside world cannot quite believe this, because in the outside world money is the whole story, and it cannot imagine a life where it is not.

I have watched wealthy people in the outside world who were anxious about money in a way I have never been anxious, despite having far less of it than they had. The anxiety was not about survival. It was about worth, about status, about what the money said about them. I am free of that particular anxiety, because in my community the money does not say anything about my worth. That freedom is real, and it is not available for purchase at any price.

Money is not the whole story, and in my community it is not even the main one. When your worth is not measured by your income, having little money does not threaten your dignity the way it does in a world that has made money the measure of everything. The strain is real, sometimes crushing, and I will not romanticize the genuine hardship. But the bitterness the outside world imagines comes from a place where money is everything, and that is not the place where I live.

The Lesson

When money is not the measure of a person, having little of it does not threaten your dignity. The financial strain is real, sometimes crushing, but the bitterness the outside world imagines comes from making money the whole story. In my community, it is not even the main one.

Chapter 42:

We Are Performing a Happiness We Do Not Feel.

The final myth is the one underneath all the others. It is the suspicion that whatever we say, however we present ourselves, however content we appear, we are secretly miserable. That the happiness is a performance. That behind the Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, observed from Friday sundown to Saturday night, table and the dancing and the community and the apparent contentment is a population of people quietly suffering, putting on a show of joy they do not feel because they are not permitted to feel anything else.

This is the myth that lets the outside world dismiss everything I have written in this book. Because if our happiness is a performance, then nothing I have said is real. The Shabbos table, the marriage built on intention, the community that catches you when you fall, the joy at the weddings, all of it can be waved away as the performance of people who do not know or cannot admit how unhappy they truly are.

I want to address this directly, because it is the most insidious of the myths, the one that cannot be disproven by any evidence, because any evidence of happiness can be reframed as evidence of the performance.

Here is the problem with the performing-happiness myth. It is unfalsifiable. If I am unhappy, that confirms the misery. If I am happy, that is the performance covering the misery. There is no observation I could offer that the myth cannot absorb. This should make you suspicious of the myth, not of my happiness. A claim that cannot be disproven by any possible evidence is not a finding. It is a prejudice wearing the costume of a conclusion. The outside world has decided we are unhappy, and it has constructed the performing-happiness myth specifically so that no

evidence of our happiness can change its mind.

Let me tell you what I actually feel, and you can decide whether to believe me, knowing that the myth has prepared you to disbelieve me no matter what I say. I am, on the whole, content. Not every moment. Not every day. I have hard days and hard weeks and difficulties like everyone. But on the whole, taking my life as a whole, I am content with it. I find meaning in it. I find joy in it. I find the specific satisfaction of a life that fits me, that I chose, that I continue to choose. This contentment is not a performance. I am not performing it for you, the reader, whom I cannot see. I am not performing it for myself in the privacy of my own mind. It is simply what I feel when I honestly examine my life.

Could I be wrong about my own happiness? The outside world suggests that I could be, that I might be so deep in the performance that I have fooled even myself, that my reported contentment is a kind of false consciousness I cannot see past. I want to take this seriously, because it is at least possible. People can be wrong about their own inner states. But notice how convenient this argument is for the outside world. It lets the outside world claim to know my inner life better than I do. It lets the outside world override my own report of my own experience with its prior conviction about what my experience must be. This is an extraordinary claim, that strangers who have never met me know my happiness better than I know it myself. It should require extraordinary evidence. It is offered with none.

I will grant the outside world this much. There are people in my community who are performing a happiness they do not feel. There are people trapped in lives that do not fit them, in marriages that are not working, in a community that constrains them painfully, who present contentment because presenting anything else is not safe. These people exist. Their suffering is real and I have never denied it. My first book was largely about the suffering that hides behind the performance, the silence that costs women years. I know the performance is real for some people.

But the existence of some people performing happiness does not mean everyone is. The existence of unhappy people in my community, which I freely acknowledge, does not mean that the happy ones are faking it. Both exist. The genuinely content and the secretly suffering live side by side in my community, as they do in every community, including the outside world, which has plenty of people performing a happiness they do not feel, behind their own kind of

facade. The performance is not unique to us. What is unique is the outside world's insistence that for us, and only for us, the happiness must be the performance and the misery must be the truth.

I am content. You may believe me or not. The myth has prepared you to not. But I know what I feel, and I have examined it honestly, and I am telling you the truth as I find it. The happiness is not a performance. It is just my life, which fits me, which I chose, and which I would choose again. That is the last myth, and it is the one I most want you to set down. Not because I need you to believe I am happy. Because the refusal to believe it says more about the outside world than it could ever say about me.

I will end the way I began, by telling you the truth as I find it and letting you do with it what you will. I am content. My life fits me. I chose it and I would choose it again. You have been prepared, by the myth, to disbelieve this. I cannot make you believe it. I can only tell you, as plainly as I know how, that it is true, and that the refusal to accept it reveals more about the one who refuses than about the one who is, against all the outside world's expectations, quietly and genuinely content.

The Lesson

A claim that no evidence could disprove is a prejudice, not a finding. The performing-happiness myth lets strangers claim to know my inner life better than I do. I am content. Believe me or not. The refusal says more about you than about me.

Chapter 43:

Now You Know. Sort Of.

I have debunked forty-one myths.

I have replaced each one with something more complicated and more interesting than the myth. Because that is always what you find when you replace a myth with reality. Not a clean simple answer. Something more textured and more human and more worth knowing than the story that was being told before.

I know the myths will continue. The documentaries will keep being made. The dinner parties will keep repeating the hole in the sheet with the confidence of people who have done their research, by which they mean they watched a film made by people who also did not talk to anyone from the community they were documenting. The Reddit threads will keep running. The assumptions will keep traveling through the internet at the speed of things that confirm what people already want to believe.

But now there is a book. With my name on it. Saying something different.

And the next time someone at a dinner party mentions the sheet, someone at that table will have read this book. And they will say: actually. And they will tell them what is actually true. That is enough for me. One dinner party at a time. This is how things change. Slowly, by individuals, one corrected assumption at a time.

I want to say something before I close, because I have been direct with you throughout these pages and I am going to stay direct until the last one.

I did not write this book to make you feel better about my community or worse about yours. I wrote it because accurate information is better than comfortable myth. And because I am, at this point in my life, simply tired of smiling politely while people say things about me that are not true. I have been smiling politely for long enough.

I have eleven children and a husband who learns all day and an apartment on Bedford Avenue and a life that the outside world has decided it understands completely without asking me a single question. I am the question they did not ask. These two books are the answer. Or part of the answer. The full answer is longer than two books.

What comes next, and I promised you this so I am going to deliver it, is the story of a building with no sign on the door.

Every month, for a woman in my community when her life and her body allow it, there is a ritual that the outside world has heard the word for and knows nothing about. The mikveh, the ritual immersion bath used in Jewish law for spiritual purification. What happens inside that building. What the water feels like. What a woman thinks about standing there. What she carries home with her when she leaves.

Nobody from inside my world has described it to the outside. Not plainly. Not honestly. Not the way I describe things.

I am going to describe it.

Not here. Not today.

The next book.

It is called The Mikveh.

What Happens in the Water Stays in the Water.

Until now.

I stayed inside my world. I told you everything I promised to tell you in this book.

I am not finished yet. Not even close.

I want to close with something I have been thinking about since I started writing this book. The question of what changes.

I stayed in my community and told the truth about it, and those two things are not in contradiction, whatever the outside world assumes. You can love something and tell the truth about it. You can be loyal to something and honest about its failures. I chose this life, I examined it, and I am still here, telling you what is actually true rather than what the myths insist. Now you know. Sort of. The rest is the next book, the one about the building with no sign on the door. I am not finished. Not even close.

The Lesson

You can love something and tell the truth about it at the same time. I stayed, I examined, and I am still here, correcting the record one myth at a time. Now you know. Sort of. The rest is the next book.

— *Sarah Mushka*

Behind The Closed Door — Book Two

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