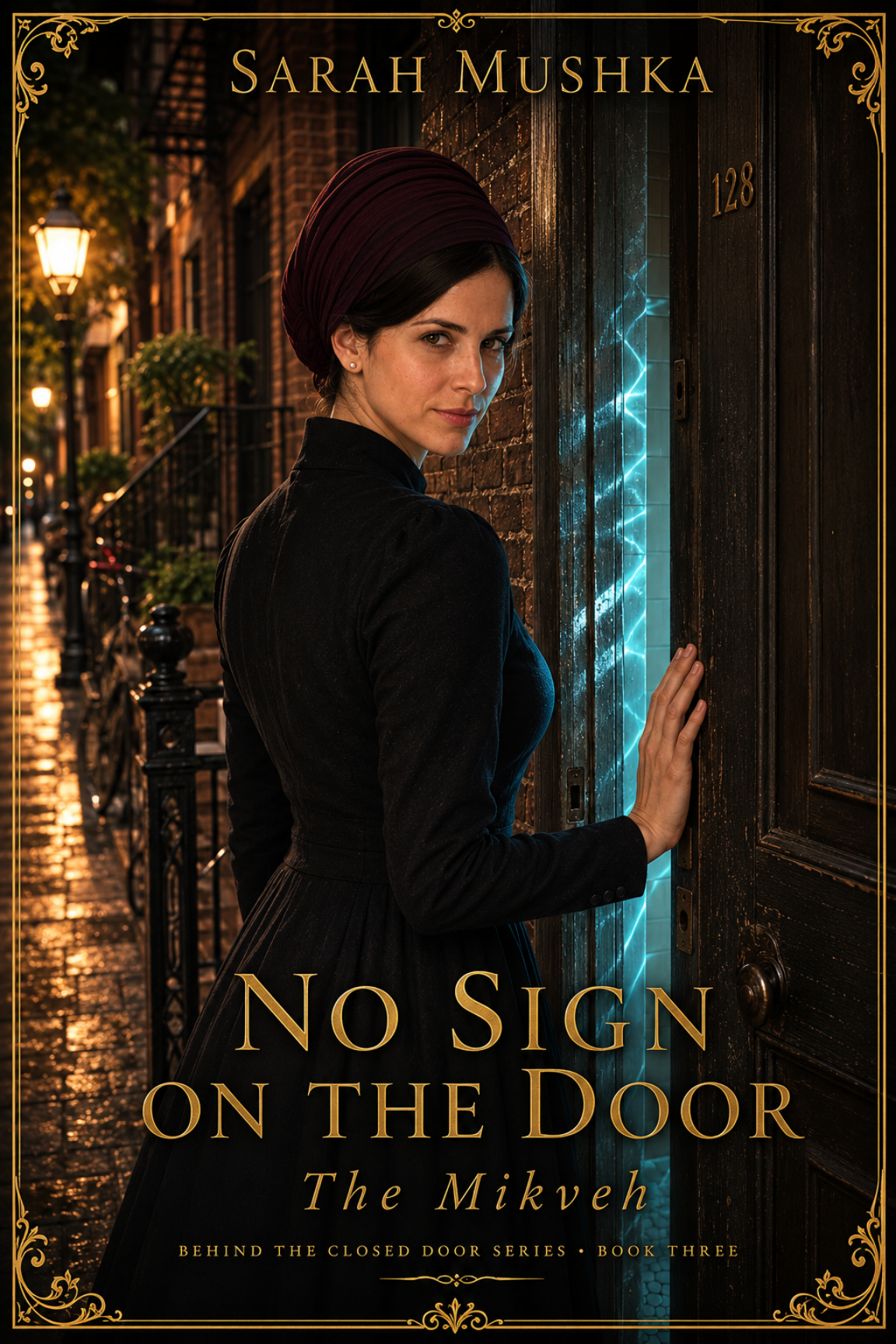




SARAH MUSHKA

NO SIGN  
ON THE DOOR

*The Mikveh*

BEHIND THE CLOSED DOOR SERIES • BOOK THREE

# NO SIGN ON THE DOOR

*The Mikveh: Everything Nobody Was Going to Tell You*

Behind The Closed Door Series — Book Three

Sarah Mushka

All Clear Publishing

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Chapter 1:

## **There Is No Sign on the Door**

There is a building on a street in Williamsburg that you have walked past.

Maybe not you specifically. But someone like you. A person who came to look at us, or a person who lives eleven blocks away and has never once looked at us, or a person who was simply passing through on the way to somewhere more interesting. You walked past this building. It did not stop you. There was nothing about it to stop you.

Brick. Two stories. A door.

Some of these buildings have a sign. Some do not. The one I know has never needed one, because everyone who needs to find it already knows exactly where it is, and everyone who does not need it was never meant to notice.

I want you to sit with that, because it is the whole thing. This is not a place that advertises. No woman announces that she is going. No one discusses it. Whether or not there is anything written on the door, the door is private in a way your world has no word for. This is not an accident. It is not shame. It is not my community hiding something ugly from you, though I know that is what you would like it to be, because that would be a better story and you have been telling yourself better stories about me for years.

It is a building where women go at night.

That sentence has already gone somewhere in your head. I can feel it happening from here. Let me tell you where it went, because I have been reading your comments for two years and I know exactly where it went. It went somewhere furtive. Somewhere slightly dirty. A woman slipping through an unmarked door after dark, in a neighborhood where the men study all day and nobody talks about anything. You are picturing something shameful or something sad, and the missing sign has confirmed it for you, because in your world a thing without a name is a thing being hidden.

In my world a thing without a name is a thing being protected.

There is a difference and nobody ever taught it to you.

The building is a mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband. That is the flat definition and you can find it in eleven seconds on your phone, and if that definition were doing its job you would not be holding this book.

Here is what the definition does not tell you.

It does not tell you what the water feels like. It does not tell you what a woman is thinking about while she stands in it. It does not tell you about the woman who works there, who watches you, who says one word, who has seen every woman on my street with nothing on and has never once repeated a single thing to anyone. It does not tell you about the long hour of preparation before. It does not tell you about the walk home.

It does not tell you that I have been married thirteen years and have been to that building far fewer times than you would ever guess, and that the reason is the most surprising thing in this book, and I am not going to tell you yet.

It does not tell you that this is the thing my community would build before it built a synagogue.

Read that again. Not after. Before.

I want to be honest with you before we go further, because this book is going to ask a great deal of both of us.

I did not want to write it.

I promised it. I promised it at the end of my last book, in print, and I meant it when I wrote it, and then I closed the file and did not open it again for a long time. The first two books were about what happens inside a marriage and about the things people say about my community. Those are subjects I can discuss in a kitchen with the lights on. This one is not that. This one is about my body. About what happens to it and what I do about it and what a stranger sees while I do it. It is the most private thing I have.

And I am about to hand it to you.

The women in my community are already asking me why. They find me in the comments, women from my own world who recognize every word I am describing, and they write to me, and they are not always angry. That is the part that stays with me. Sometimes they are worried. One of them wrote, in Yiddish, this one is not theirs. This one is not for the outside world.

She may be right. I have thought about it for a long time and I am still not sure she is wrong.

Here is why I am doing it anyway.

There are books about the mikveh. There are. Some are written by women who left and want you to know it was a cage. Some are written by rebbetzins, the wives of rabbis, who want you to know it is a garden. Both of them are describing a building neither one of them is standing in tonight. The women who left describe it in the past tense and through the wound. The rebbetzins describe it in a register I do not recognize, all light and sacred waters and roses, no cracked heels, no scab on your knee that you have to soften in the bath, no exhaustion, no husband texting to ask how much longer.

Nobody is describing it from inside, in the present tense, with the annoying parts left in.

So I will.

Understand what I am and what I am not.

I am not a rabbi. I am not a teacher. I do not decide these things and I will not tell you what the law is, because I do not know what the law is the way a man who has spent forty years learning it knows what the law is. When I have a question I ask, and I am told, and I go when I am told to go. That is my entire authority and I will not pretend to more of it. If you want a book that gives you the rules, close this one and go find a rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and ask him.

What I have is thirteen years of walking to that building.

I have gone in December when the sun went down at four thirty and I was home before the little ones were asleep. I have gone in June when the sky was still not black at nine and I felt like a teenager sneaking out of my mother's house. I have gone so tired that I sat down on the bench in the preparation room and closed my eyes and the woman had to knock on the door. I have gone one week after a fight so bad that my husband and I did not speak for two days. I have gone when I did not want to go.

And I have gone when I could not wait to go. I am going to tell you about that too, and you are going to have to sit with it, because you have been told a great many things about Chassidic women and desire, and nearly all of them were written by people who have never felt what I felt walking home on a Tuesday night in October.

That is what I have. That is what this is.

There is a building on a street in Williamsburg.

There is no sign on the door.

I am going to open it.

## **The Lesson**

*A thing without a name is not always a thing being hidden. Sometimes it is a thing being protected. You have spent your whole life unable to tell the difference and it has cost you more than you know.*

Chapter 2:

## **Everything You Think This Is**

Let me tell you what you think this is.

You think it is a bath.

You have heard the words ritual bath, because that is what the internet calls it and that is what the documentaries call it, and the word bath has done something to your understanding that I now have to undo. A bath is where you get clean. A bath has soap in it. A bath is a thing you do because you are dirty, and afterward you are not dirty.

I am spotless when I get into that water. I have spent the better part of an hour making certain of it. There is not one particle of anything on my body when I walk down those steps, and I mean that with a precision you are not prepared for, and I will tell you later what that precision costs me. If I were even slightly unclean the immersion would not count. Cleanliness is not the point of the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband. Cleanliness is the ticket to get in the door.

So it is not a bath. It is the opposite of a bath. In a bath you arrive dirty and leave clean. Here I arrive clean, aggressively clean, clean in a way that would alarm you, and I leave as something else entirely.

You think it is about being unclean.

This is the big one. This is the one sitting underneath everything you have ever thought about my community and its women, and I am

going to give it a whole chapter, so here I am only putting my hand on it.

Somebody translated a Hebrew word into English badly a long time ago and the entire world has been misunderstanding my life ever since. The word is tumah, a state of ritual impurity, which has nothing to do with being dirty. It got translated as impure, or unclean, and once a person has been handed the word unclean they cannot hear anything else. Unclean means dirty. Dirty means shameful. Shameful means a woman is being told, once a month, by a system of men, that she is disgusting and must go and wash before a man will touch her.

That is what you think is happening in that building.

I understand why. Given the word you were handed, it is the only conclusion available to you. If somebody told me that once a month my neighbor had to go and be declared not-disgusting by an old woman in a basement, I would think my neighbor was living in a nightmare and I would want to get her out of it.

The word is wrong. The word was always wrong. I am going to show you what it actually means and you are going to be annoyed at how much was lost in one bad translation.

You think it is about the men.

You think a woman goes because a man requires her to go. You picture a husband standing in a doorway with his arms folded, waiting for his wife to be made acceptable to him.

Here is the part that is going to be difficult for you.

He cannot check.

There is no record. There is no phone call. Nobody sends him a message. There is no receipt, no attendance sheet, no signature, no proof of any kind that I ever walked into that building. When I come home and tell my husband that I went, that sentence is the entire evidence in existence. Everything he believes about his own marriage

rests on one sentence out of my mouth.

I go because I say I went. That is the system.

Sit with that. I will come back to it, and it is going to be worse than you think and also better.

You think it is medieval.

You think it survives in Williamsburg the way a wooden wheel survives in a museum. An artifact. You think educated women, women with money, women with choices, do not do this.

There is a mikveh in Manhattan. There is one in London and one in Melbourne and one in Buenos Aires. There are women with law degrees who go. There are women who run companies who go. There are secular women who came back to observance at forty and go now, and there are converts who go, and there are women in Tel Aviv who do not keep Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, from Friday sundown to Saturday night, and go anyway because something about it will not leave them alone.

And if a Jewish community has to choose between building a synagogue and building a mikveh, it builds the mikveh. First. Before the shul, synagogue. If there is no money for both, a community is permitted to sell its Torah scrolls to build one.

Its Torah scrolls.

You thought this was a small embarrassing women's thing that the men tolerate. It is the thing the men would sell the Torah to build.

You think it is sad.

This is the one I mind.

You picture me trudging through slush in the dark with a coat over my nightgown, a woman going to do her duty. And you feel sorry for me. I know you do, because I have read it a thousand times, and it is always phrased kindly, and the kindness is what makes it worse.

I need you to hear this, and then I will spend the rest of the book proving it.

There are nights I could not wait to go.

Not resigned. Not dutiful. Could not wait. Counting the days. Watching the clock. There have been nights when I stood in that water with my eyes closed and the entire month rearranged itself inside my chest, and then I walked home along the avenue in the dark, past the closed stores and the men coming out of the beis medrash, the study hall where the men learn and pray, and my heart was going like a girl's.

You do not have a word for that. Your language does not have one. In your world nothing is ever withheld long enough to be wanted that badly.

So. Not a bath. Not about being dirty. Not enforced by a man who could not possibly check. Not medieval and not sad.

Then what is it.

That is the book. Come with me. The building is this way.

### **The Lesson**

*Every single thing you know about this was told to you by somebody standing outside the building. Including the word you use for it.*

Chapter 3:

## **Unclean Is a Translation Problem**

I want to fix a word.

It is going to take me a whole chapter and you are going to resist me for most of it, and that is fine, because you have been carrying this word around for years and it has been quietly poisoning everything you think about women like me.

The word is tumah, a state of ritual impurity, which has nothing to do with being dirty. Your books translate it as impure. Your documentaries translate it as unclean. Both are wrong in a way that is difficult to explain to somebody who has only ever had the English.

Start here. A dead body carries tumah. The highest form of it. The most intense.

Now ask yourself. Is a dead body dirty?

Your grandmother, an hour after she died, washed and dressed and lying in a quiet room with candles at her head. Is she dirty? Would you say that word about her? Would anyone?

Of course not. She is not dirty. She is something else. She is a place where life was, and now is not, and the space between those two things is so enormous that Judaism made a category for it. That category is tumah. It is not filth. It is the residue of an encounter with the border between life and death.

A woman who has bled has stood at the same border. Every month her body prepared a place for a life that did not arrive. Something that could have been a person was there, in potential, and then it was not. That is not nothing. Your world tells women it is nothing, tells them it is an inconvenience, tells them to take something for the cramps and carry on and be pleasant at work. My tradition looked at the same event and said, this is a woman standing next to the possibility of life and the fact of its absence, and that is one of the most serious things that happens to a human body, and we are going to mark it.

That is what tumah is. It is not dirt. It is not shame. It is the mark of standing close to something enormous.

So when the outside world tells you that my community calls women unclean, understand what has happened. Someone reached for an English word and there was no English word, because English does not have this idea. English has hygiene. English does not have holiness and its shadow. So they grabbed unclean, and it stuck, and now millions of people believe that a religion which will not let a man touch a corpse and will not let a man touch a menstruating woman is saying that both are disgusting.

It is saying that both are serious.

There is a difference and it is not a small one.

Now let me be honest, because I promised you honesty and this is where I have to pay for it.

There are men in my community who do not understand this either.

There are men who behave as though their wives are dirty. Who flinch. Who make a face. Who make a woman feel that for those days she is a problem to be managed rather than a person who is in the middle of something. I know this happens. I have heard women describe it, in kitchens, quietly, in the tone women use for the things they have decided not to be angry about.

Those men are wrong. They are wrong according to their own tradition, and if they went to a rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and described how they behave, the rav would tell them they were wrong.

But they are wrong in the same direction the outside world is wrong. They have made the same translation error. They took a category about life and death and turned it into a category about hygiene, and then they treated their wives accordingly.

So when you accuse my community of teaching women that they are unclean, understand that you and the worst man on my street are making an identical mistake, from opposite ends, and both of you are hurting the same woman.

I have never once felt dirty in that water. Not one time in thirteen years.

I have felt tired. I have felt bored, and I will tell you about the boredom because nobody else will. I have felt like I did not want to be there. I have felt annoyed at the woman with the towel and annoyed at my husband and annoyed at the entire arrangement.

I have never felt dirty.

I have felt like a person coming back from a long way away.

### **The Lesson**

*They did not call you unclean. They called you serious. Somebody lost the word in translation and you have been carrying the wrong one ever since.*

Chapter 4:

## **It Is Not a Bath. It Is the Sea.**

I told you it is not a bath. Now I will tell you what it is, and the answer is stranger and better than anything you were expecting.

You cannot fill a mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, with a hose.

You cannot fill it from the tap. You cannot carry water to it in a bucket. You cannot pump it. If you fill a pool with water that has been carried or drawn or pumped by a human being, it is a swimming pool. It is a very nice swimming pool. It is not a mikveh and a woman who immerses in it has not immersed in anything.

The water has to arrive by itself.

Rain. That is the primary way. Rain falls on a roof and runs down a channel and gathers in a reservoir under the building, and it must arrive there by gravity, by falling, the way water has fallen since the beginning of the world. Nobody may help it. The moment a human hand assists that water, it is disqualified. Snow works. Ice works. A natural spring works. The ocean works, which is why a woman who lives near the sea may immerse in the sea, and women have, for thousands of years, in freezing water, in the dark.

Do you understand how difficult that is? Somebody has to build a structure and then wait for the sky.

There is a minimum quantity. Enough to cover a person entirely. And once that quantity of untouched natural water is in the reservoir, the immersion pool can be joined to it, so that ordinary water touches the natural water and takes on its character. There is an opening between them and the waters meet. In the language of the law they say the waters kiss.

I like that they call it kissing. Somebody chose that word a very long time ago and they knew what they were doing.

Now here is the part I want you to hold.

The word mikveh means gathering. A gathering of waters.

It appears in the Torah on the third day of creation. God separates the waters from the dry land, and the waters are gathered, and the gathering is called the sea. That is the sentence. That is where the word comes from. The first mikveh in existence was the ocean.

So when I walk down those steps in a small tiled room on a Tuesday night in Brooklyn, with my hair covered, with eleven children asleep at home, with a woman standing behind me holding a towel, I am not getting into a bath.

I am getting into the sea on the third day of creation.

That is what the water is. That is what it is for. That is why it cannot come from a tap, because a tap is a thing a man made, and the whole point is that this water is older than men and their machinery and their opinions. Rain that has not been touched. Water that fell out of the sky and arrived on its own, exactly the way water arrived at the beginning, before anything had happened yet.

When I stand in it, I am standing in the only substance in my life that has not been handled.

Everything else in my world has been handled. My apartment, my clothes, my food, my day, my marriage, my body. All of it managed, prepared, arranged, inspected, decided upon by somebody at some

point, including me. There is not one square inch of my life that has not been organized.

And then once a month, for about four seconds, I go under water that no person was allowed to touch.

The outside world looks at that building and sees a small municipal pool with bad lighting and an attendant.

I look at it and see the last unhandled thing.

You may keep your spa. You may keep your candles and your salt and your quiet music and your seventy dollars an hour. I have four seconds under the third day of creation and then I put my clothes back on and go home to a kitchen that is somehow already a disaster again, and I would not trade.

### **The Lesson**

*The water may not be touched by human hands. It has to fall from the sky and arrive on its own. In a life where every single thing has been handled, four seconds under something that was not.*

Chapter 5:

## **The Building They Would Sell the Torah to Build**

I want to tell you where this sits in the order of things, because I do not think you have any idea.

Say a group of Jewish families move somewhere new. A small city. A place with no Jewish anything. They have a little money between them and a long list of what they need. They need a school. They need somewhere to pray. They need a kosher butcher and a place to bury their dead and someone who knows how to answer a question.

What do they build first?

You would say the synagogue. Everybody says the synagogue. It is the obvious answer. It is where the community happens, it is where the Torah lives, it is the building with the name on it.

They build the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, first.

Before the shul, synagogue. Before the school. And if there is not enough money for both, and I want you to hear this properly, they are permitted to sell the Torah scrolls to pay for it.

The Torah scrolls. Handwritten. Sacred. Kissed when they pass. Sold, to build the building with no sign on the door.

I am not exaggerating this for effect. This is the law, and if you do not believe me, ask any rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and

watch him nod like you have asked him whether water is wet.

Now go back and look at what you thought this was.

You thought it was a small embarrassing women's thing. A domestic obligation. A chore my community imposes on its wives and does not much think about. Something the men tolerate the way men tolerate anything that happens in a part of the house they do not go into.

The men would sell the Torah to build it.

You have to reorganize something in your head now and I know it is uncomfortable. You built a picture of my community in which the men have everything that matters and the women have the leftovers. In that picture the synagogue is the center and the mikveh is a footnote. It is a tidy picture and it explains a great deal and it is the reason you feel sorry for me.

The tidy picture is upside down.

Without a mikveh there is no Jewish future in that town. None. A married couple cannot live as a married couple. The synagogue can be magnificent, the scrolls can be beautiful, the men can pray three times a day with great feeling, and the community cannot continue as it is.

The whole thing runs through the building nobody talks about.

And through the woman who walks into it, at night, alone, and tells nobody where she is going.

You think we have no power. That is the assumption underneath every documentary ever made about us. The men have the learning, the men have the pulpit, the men have the vote and the beard and the authority. The women have children and a wig.

The entire continuation of the Jewish people rests on whether I go to a building on a Tuesday, and there is no mechanism on earth to make me.

That is not the arrangement of a community that thinks women are unimportant. That is the arrangement of a community that has handed women the one thing it could not survive losing, and then decided to trust them with it, and then not built any way to check.

I am not telling you my community is perfect. I have written two books and I will keep writing them and I have not been gentle. There are men on my street who behave badly and there are women on my street who are unhappy and there are things that need to change and I have said so in print, in English, where anyone can read it.

But do not tell me we are a footnote.

They would sell the Torah for the building I walk to in the dark.

### **The Lesson**

*They would sell the sacred scrolls to build the room where I stand alone at night. Then they would go home and never mention it. Do not tell me this is where the women were put to be forgotten.*

Chapter 6:

## **The Walk There**

It is a Tuesday. The children are asleep, most of them, which is a claim I am making loosely and you should not hold me to it. My husband is home. He is at the table with a sefer, a holy book, open in front of him, and he has not said anything about tonight, and I have not said anything about tonight, and both of us know exactly what tonight is.

That is the first thing nobody tells you. It is never announced. In thirteen years my husband has never once said, are you going tonight. He knows. I know he knows. He knows I know he knows. Nobody says it out loud, ever, and this is somehow both the most awkward and the most intimate arrangement I have ever been part of.

I put on my coat.

Now. What is under the coat is not interesting and I am not going to make it interesting for you. I am dressed. It is Williamsburg, not a novel. But there is something about putting a coat on over yourself at nine at night when everyone in your house knows where you are going and nobody will say it, and you walk out of your own front door with a small bag, and the door closes behind you.

In December this happens at five thirty. The sun goes down at four thirty in the winter, and you may not immerse until tzeis hakochavim, nightfall, when the stars come out, and in December that comes early. So I have gone to the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, and come home before

some of my children were in pajamas. There is nothing romantic about a winter mikveh. It is early evening. The stores on the avenue are still open. Men are walking to maariv, the evening prayer. It is the least mysterious hour of my life and I am walking through it to do the most private thing I do.

In June it is the opposite. In June the sky is still not properly dark at nine, and I am waiting, actually waiting, watching the window, and the whole house feels like it is holding still. A summer mikveh night feels illicit in a way a winter one never does. Same ritual. Same building. Same woman. The June version feels like I am sneaking out and the December version feels like I am picking up milk.

Nobody has ever written that down and it is one of the truest things about my life.

I walk. Or I take a car, and I will get to the car, because the car is a whole subject.

If I walk, it is eleven minutes. I know it is eleven minutes because I have walked it in every weather and every mood and every stage of my life and it has always been eleven minutes. It was eleven minutes when I was a young bride and frightened. It was eleven minutes the year I was so angry at my husband that I considered walking straight past the building and going to my sister's instead. It was eleven minutes two months after a baby, when my body did not feel like mine and I had not slept properly since the spring.

Eleven minutes is exactly long enough to think about your marriage and not quite long enough to reach a conclusion. I suspect somebody planned this.

You pass the fish store, closed. You pass the place that sells wigs, closed, lit, with the heads in the window looking out at you like a jury. You pass men. The men do not look at you. This is not rudeness, this is the arrangement, and after thirteen years I no longer notice it, and the first time I brought a cousin from out of town on this walk she said, do they know we are here, and I said, they know, and she said, then

why, and I did not have an answer that would satisfy her because there is not one that satisfies anybody from outside.

They know where I am going. Every man I pass on that street after dark, on a weeknight, when a woman is walking alone with a small bag, knows.

And they will not look at me, and they will not speak to me, and tomorrow not one of them will remember, and if their wife asked them, did you see Sarah Mushka last night, they would say no.

You want to call that oppression. I understand why. It looks like a woman being made invisible.

It is the only reason I can do this at all.

Eleven minutes. The door is on the left. There is no sign on it.

### **The Lesson**

*In a place where every man has trained himself not to see me, I can walk anywhere I want at night. You call that being erased. I call it the only privacy I have ever been given.*

Chapter 7:

## **Everyone Knows You Went**

Now let me tell you the joke.

I have just described a walk of enormous discretion. No sign. No announcement. Men who will not look at me. A door with nothing on it. Total privacy, engineered from every direction, a whole community organized around not seeing me.

Everybody knows.

Everybody. All of them. My mother knows. My sister knows. My sister-in-law knows and she is worse than my sister. The woman upstairs knows. The neighbor who was outside with her stroller when I came out of the building at ten, she certainly knows, and she said good evening in a voice that had eleven separate opinions in it.

Williamsburg is not large. Everyone lives on top of everyone. And a woman walking alone with a small bag at that hour is not a mystery to anyone who has ever lived here for five minutes.

So we have built a system of perfect discretion inside a place where discretion is impossible, and we all agree to pretend it is working, and honestly it is one of the funnier things about my life.

This is why women take a car.

Not to be efficient. Eleven minutes is not a long walk. Women take a car so that they do not have to be seen on the street, and then they are

collected at their door by a car service driver, who is a man, who is Jewish, who lives here, who has been doing this job for twenty years, and who knows exactly what he is driving her to.

I want you to appreciate this properly. She has taken a car in order to be unseen, and the person seeing her is a man with a full understanding of the situation, who greets her by name, and asks after her mother.

He will not say a word to anyone. That is the entire arrangement and it holds and it has held for as long as there have been cars.

Some women go to a mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, in a different neighborhood. This is a real thing and it is the most Williamsburg solution imaginable. She will travel forty minutes, in a car, past three perfectly good mikvehs, so that the women in the waiting room are not women she will see at a wedding on Thursday.

And in that other neighborhood there is a woman doing exactly the same thing in the opposite direction. They pass each other on the expressway. Neither knows.

I have never done this. I do not have the energy and I am not embarrassed. But I understand it entirely, and if you have ever crossed the street to avoid someone from your office, you understand it too, and you have no right to laugh at us.

Here is what I have come to think about all of it.

The privacy is not for hiding. The privacy is the frame.

Everyone knows. That is fine. Everyone knowing is not the problem, because knowing is abstract. My sister-in-law knows that I go, in the way she knows the sun comes up. It is a fact filed away with the other facts.

What nobody has is the specifics. Nobody knows what I thought about in the water. Nobody knows whether I was counting the days. Nobody knows whether my husband was waiting up or whether we had fought

or whether I stood in that room afterward and did not want to leave. Nobody knows what happened in my house at eleven o'clock.

The community knows the fact. The fact is public. The fact is practically municipal.

The meaning is mine.

That is what the missing sign protects. Not the secret, because there is no secret. Everyone can see me leave the house. What it protects is the inside of it, and it turns out that a thing can be completely public and completely private at the same time, which is a sentence I could not have written at eighteen and can write easily now.

You have the opposite problem. Nobody knows where you are, and everybody knows how you feel, because you posted it.

### **The Lesson**

*Everyone knows I went. Nobody knows what happened. In your world it is the other way around and I do not know how you bear it.*

Chapter 8:

## **And Everyone Knows When You Stop**

There is a way to announce a pregnancy in my community without saying anything to anybody.

You stop going.

That is it. That is the announcement. A woman who was going, and is no longer going, is a woman who is expecting, and within a month everybody on the street has arrived at the same conclusion without a single word being exchanged.

The absence is the announcement.

I have thought about this more than is reasonable. In your world a woman makes a video. She holds up a small pair of shoes, or a photograph, or she tells her mother on camera and her mother cries, and it is posted, and strangers in other countries respond with hearts. The announcement is an event. It is produced.

In my world the announcement is a woman not being somewhere.

You will say this is repressive. That we cannot even celebrate. I understand the reflex.

You have misunderstood the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, lady.

She knows first. Before my mother. Before my sister. Before, on two occasions, my husband, because she noticed the gap in the calendar

before I had finished convincing myself. She is the woman who runs the building and she has an index in her head of every married woman in a radius of ten blocks and roughly when each of them was last there, and she does not write any of it down, and she has never once been wrong.

She has never said a word to anybody.

Think about what she is holding. She knows who is expecting. She knows who is not. She knows which woman has not been in eight months and is not expecting, which means something is wrong in that marriage, and she knows it before anyone else on earth knows it, including possibly the husband. She knows which woman comes month after month after month with a face that gets a little tighter each time, and what that means, and she has never mentioned it to a soul.

She is the most dangerous person in Williamsburg and she has never once misused it.

Now. The other side, because I promised.

There is a cruelty in the absence. If stopping means expecting, then not stopping means not expecting, and everybody can count, and a woman who has been going every month for four years is a woman whose grief is on public display in a language nobody will admit is being spoken.

Nobody says anything. That is the whole horror of it. They know, and she knows they know, and everyone keeps their face perfectly still, and she goes on coming.

I have watched a woman go through this. I am not going to describe her because she is a real person and she will read this. But I want the outside world to understand that we can see. We are not stupid and we are not blind, and the woman who has been coming for four years knows precisely what everybody on the street has worked out about her, and she puts on her coat and comes anyway, and I do not have a word for how much that costs.

So the absence announces the joy and the presence announces the sorrow, and nobody says anything about either one, and this is either the most graceful system ever built or the most brutal, and the honest answer is that it is both, at once, always, and I have stopped trying to make it be only one.

That is my community. It will hold your worst news without speaking, and it will hold your best news without speaking, and you will never once have to say either of them out loud, and you will also never be allowed to.

Take it or leave it. I took it. I am still deciding what it cost.

### **The Lesson**

*In my world the loudest thing is an absence. Everybody hears it. Nobody mentions it. That is the mercy and that is the cruelty and they are the same thing.*

Chapter 9:

## **The Waiting Room**

There is a waiting room and nobody has ever described it and I have been sitting in it for thirteen years.

It is small. There are chairs. There is a table with something on it, usually a book of psalms, sometimes a pile of magazines from my community which are entirely about recipes and never about anything else.

There are other women in it.

That is the part. That is the whole subject of this chapter. There are other women in that room and every single one of them is there for exactly the same reason you are, and everybody knows it, and there is a etiquette in that room so precise and so strange that I do not think it exists anywhere else on earth.

Here is the etiquette.

You may say good evening.

You may ask about her mother. You may ask about her children. You may discuss, at length, a wedding that is coming up, and who is making the food, and what happened with the hall.

You may not acknowledge, by so much as a flicker, why either of you is in the room.

Two women sit four feet apart in a small warm room in Brooklyn, both of them having spent the better part of an hour preparing their bodies, both of them about to take everything off and go into the water, both of them going home afterwards to a husband they have not touched in two weeks.

And they discuss the hall.

I want you to understand that this is not repression. This is not two frightened women unable to speak. This is a highly evolved and very deliberate arrangement and both of us are doing it on purpose and both of us are grateful for it.

Because what is the alternative.

The alternative is your world, where a woman would say something warm and knowing. Where somebody would make a joke about husbands. Where there would be a look, a raised eyebrow, a we-are-all-in-this-together, and the entire thing would become a shared event, a sisterhood, a moment.

And then I would have to walk into that water with her in my head.

No. Absolutely not. That water is the one place in my life where nothing is touching me and nobody is in my head, and I am not letting a woman from three streets over into it because she wanted to bond with me about our husbands in a waiting room.

So we talk about the hall.

And it is not cold. That is what I need you to hear. It is not cold at all. There is enormous warmth in that room and it goes in every direction and none of it is ever said.

I have sat in that room across from a woman I knew was in trouble. I could see it. Her face. The way she was holding her hands. And I asked her about her sister's wedding and she told me about her sister's wedding and I listened, properly, for eleven minutes, and neither of us said one single true thing.

And when she was called in she stood up and touched my shoulder on the way past.

That is it. That is the entire communication. One hand on a shoulder for half a second on the way to the water.

In your world that woman would have been invited to open up. She would have been asked how she was really doing. Somebody would have said, I am here if you want to talk, and she would have said thank you, and she would have gone into that room with her whole situation dragged up to the surface and sitting on her chest.

She got a hand on the shoulder.

And she went in and she went under and whatever was in her, she took it into that water by herself, which is the only way anybody has ever taken anything anywhere.

There is one more thing about that room and then I will stop.

Everyone is equal in it.

There is a woman in that room whose husband is important. There is a woman in that room with money. There is a woman in that room whose family nobody wants to marry into and everybody knows why.

And all of us are wearing the same robe and all of us are waiting for the same door and all of us are about to do the identical thing, and none of it counts for anything in that room, and I have never once seen anybody try.

You cannot be important in a robe.

It is the only genuinely equal room in Williamsburg and it has four chairs in it and a magazine about kugel, a baked pudding served at the Sabbath table.

## **The Lesson**

*Two women sit four feet apart, both about to do the most private thing there is, and they discuss the catering. It is not coldness. It is the most sophisticated kindness I have ever seen, and it is the reason I can walk into that water alone.*

Chapter 10:

## **The Men Go Too and Nobody Tells You That**

Here is something that is going to annoy you.

The men go too.

I have watched the outside world be furious on my behalf for two years now about the fact that a woman must immerse in water, and in all that time I have never once seen anybody mention that the men in my community are in the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, constantly.

Constantly. Some of them every single morning.

There is a men's mikveh. It is a completely separate building, or a separate part of a building, and it is busy, and it is loud, and it is nothing at all like mine, and I have never been inside it and never will, and everything I am about to tell you is from thirteen years of living with a man who goes.

They go before Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, from Friday sundown to Saturday night. Nearly all of them.

They go before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, and before the holidays and my husband goes on many ordinary weekday mornings before davening, Jewish prayer, and he has been doing this since before he met me.

Nobody films this. Nobody makes a documentary about it. Nobody has ever once said to me, in a comment or in an article or in a magazine, that they were troubled by the ritual immersion practices of Chassidic men.

Why do you think that is?

I have thought about it a great deal and I have arrived at an answer and you are not going to like it.

When a man does something strange to his body for a religious reason, you find it eccentric.

When a woman does it, you find it sinister.

That is the entire difference. That is all of it. A man goes to a small pool at six in the morning in Williamsburg and you think, funny old world, whatever gets you through. A woman goes to a small pool at nine in the evening and you think, somebody get her out of there.

You do not actually object to immersion. You object to women.

You object to women who have not made the choices you made, and you have been dressing that objection up as concern for eleven years, and I have been reading it in my comments the entire time.

Now. Let me tell you about my husband's mikveh, because it is very funny and nobody outside my world knows any of it.

It is a social occasion.

It is, mamash, literally, truly, actually, a social occasion. The men see each other. They talk. There is a queue and there is a great deal of standing about and there is discussion of business and of learning and of whose son is getting engaged, and my husband has come home from the mikveh on a Friday afternoon with more gossip than I have collected in a week, and he does not think of it as gossip, he thinks of it as news.

It is not private. It is not quiet. There is no woman in a chair holding decades of secrets. There is a room full of men, extremely relaxed, discussing a property on the avenue.

And I want to be honest about how that lands with me.

Slightly.

Just slightly.

I prepare for the better part of an hour. I count for seven days. I walk in the dark. I take off every single thing I own. I go under alone in a silent room and a woman says one word and I walk home and never speak of it to anybody.

He has a chat.

It is not the same and it was never going to be the same and I understand entirely why it is not the same, and there is a good and serious answer having to do with what the immersion is for in each case, and any rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, will give it to you and it is not a bad answer.

But I have been married thirteen years and I have earned the right to say the following sentence in a book.

My immersion is holier than his and everybody knows it and nobody will say so.

His is a preparation. Mine is a transformation. His is a good custom that a pious man keeps. Mine is the thing the community would sell the Torah to build.

And he gets to chat about a property on the avenue.

I am not bitter. I am reporting. There is a difference and I have spent three books explaining it.

## **The Lesson**

*When a man does something strange to his body for God you find it eccentric.  
When a woman does the identical thing you find it sinister. You do not object  
to immersion. You object to women who did not choose what you chose.*

Chapter 11:

## **The Hour Nobody Talks About**

Before I can get into the water I have to be perfect.

Not clean. Perfect. There is a difference and you have never had to know it.

The rule is simple to say and impossible to describe. Nothing may come between my body and the water. Nothing. Not one thing. The word for it is chatzitza, anything at all that comes between the body and the water, and it is the single most demanding idea I have ever had to live with, and I have eleven children.

Here is what that means in practice.

Every trace of nail polish. Not most of it. All of it. Not the almost invisible bit at the base of the thumbnail that you can only see in certain light. That bit too. That bit especially, because I will be standing on the steps thinking about that bit.

Rings off. Earrings out. The watch. Anything I have worn so long that I have stopped seeing it.

Contact lenses. Out.

Every scab. This is the one nobody warns you about. A scab is a chatzitza. So if I have a scab on my knee, and I am a woman with eleven children so I frequently do, it must be soaked until it is soft enough to come away, or if it will not come away then I have a

question, and a question means I ask, and asking takes time I do not have on a Tuesday night.

A splinter. A scratch. Dried skin on my heels, which after thirteen years of these floors is a permanent condition and a running battle.

Between the toes. Behind the ears. Under every nail, which must first be cut and then cleaned underneath, and then cleaned underneath again because the first time was not thorough and I know it.

My teeth. Yes. Flossed, because a piece of food in a tooth is a thing between me and the water, and there is a custom not to eat meat that day for exactly this reason, and I have broken that custom twice and regretted it both times, standing there at nine o'clock with a piece of Tuesday's supper somewhere in my mouth, refusing to be dislodged.

An eyelash. A single loose eyelash, resting on a cheek.

That is a chatzitza.

Do you understand? The better part of an hour. Bath, then shower, then the inspection, and at the end of all of it, in a small room with a mirror and a bright light, one eyelash can undo the entire evening.

So I check. I go over myself the way a person goes over a page they have already read four times, looking for the one mistake they know is still there. I look in the mirror. I feel with my hands the places I cannot see. And then, because I am human and it is late and I have done this many times, I check again, because I do not trust myself.

I want to say something plainly here.

This is a burden.

I am not going to sit here in a book and tell you it is not, because you would know I was lying, and there are women in my community who are going to be irritated with me for admitting it, and they can be irritated. It is the better part of an hour, and on a tired night it can feel like forever. It is bending over my own feet at half past nine at night

when I have been standing since five in the morning. It is tedious and it is physical and there are nights I have sat down on the edge of the bath and thought, I cannot do this tonight, I genuinely cannot.

And then I have done it, because that is what a person does.

Here is what I am not going to do. I am not going to tell you the burden is beautiful. The burden is not beautiful. The burden is a burden. The women who write books telling you that scrubbing your heels at eleven at night is a sacred act of feminine devotion are describing something that has never happened to them, or has happened so long ago that they have forgotten what it was actually like.

The burden is the price. The price is real and I pay it and I would like some acknowledgment.

What is on the other side of the price is worth more than the price.

That is the whole argument of this book and I have just given it to you in one sentence and you will not believe me yet.

Give me a few more chapters.

### **The Lesson**

*It takes the better part of an hour and it is genuinely difficult and I will not pretend otherwise. Anyone who tells you the burden is beautiful has not carried it recently.*

Chapter 12:

## **The Nail Polish Chapter**

I want to talk about nail polish for a moment because it is small and stupid and it explains everything.

I like nail polish. There. It is in a book now.

I am a Chassidic woman in Williamsburg, I dress the way I dress, I cover what I cover, and I like a dark red on my fingernails and I always have. It is one of the very few things about my appearance that is entirely, completely mine. My clothes are decided by my community. My hair is decided by my community. My whole silhouette walking down the avenue was decided before I was born.

My nails are mine.

And once a month I have to take it all off.

Not most of it. All of it. And if you have ever removed dark polish properly you know that the last little rim of it at the cuticle is the most stubborn substance on this earth, and it does not want to leave, and it will hide, and I have sat on the edge of my bath at ten at night with a cotton ball and a bottle of remover, arguing with my own thumb.

One of my daughters watches me do this. She is old enough now to be curious and she does not ask why, because in my house nobody asks why, and one day she will understand exactly why and she will be standing where I am standing with her own cotton ball and her own thumb.

Now the outside world hears this and immediately reaches for its favorite word. Oppression. A woman is being forced to remove her nail polish by a system of men who want her stripped of everything.

Nobody is forcing me. I have never once been checked. If I walked in with polish on nobody would examine my hands, and if they did, and I said it was fine, that would be the end of it.

I take it off because of what the water is.

Nothing may come between me and it. Nothing. And nail polish is a thing I put on my body, a thing I chose, a small daily assertion of Sarah Mushka, and for four seconds, it cannot be there.

Here is what I have come to understand about that now, that I did not understand as a young bride when I was furious about it.

Everything I take off is a thing I use to be a person in front of other people. The polish. The rings. The wig. The clothes that tell the entire street who I am, whose wife I am, how many children I have, which shul, synagogue, my husband davens, prays, in.

All of it comes off. Every single marker of who Sarah Mushka is in the eyes of the world comes off, in a small room, alone, and what walks down those steps into the water is not Sarah Mushka the wife of a man who learns, the mother of eleven, the woman from the apartment on the third floor.

It is just a person. Unmarked. Unidentified. The same as the woman who came before me and the woman who will come after me, and the same as the women who did this four hundred years ago in Hungary in water that was freezing, and the same as whoever does it in a hundred years when I am gone.

You cannot bring your identity into that water. That is the rule. The rule is stated as a technicality about interposing substances and it is actually the most radical thing my religion asks of me.

Take it all off. Everything you have used to be somebody.

Go in as nothing but the fact of yourself.

And then, and this is the part nobody tells you, come back out and put every single bit of it back on. The rings. The polish, when it dries. The wig. The whole apparatus of being a person.

I put my polish back on the next day. Same color. I have used the same color for years.

It means more when you have taken it off.

### **The Lesson**

*Everything I use to be somebody comes off before I go in. That is not a rule about nail polish. That is a rule about the difference between who you are and what you are wearing.*

Chapter 13:

## **Eleven O'Clock and I Am Still Scrubbing**

Let me give you an honest Tuesday.

The baby did not sleep. The baby has decided that sleeping is something that happens to other children. One of the older ones had a thing at school. There was a homework crisis at seven which became a homework catastrophe at eight. My husband came home from the beis medrash, the study hall where the men learn and pray, and I did not tell him about any of this because there is a version of me who would tell him and I am not always able to be her.

Supper happened. I could not tell you what it was.

And underneath all of it, all day, is the fact that tonight is the night. It has been in my calendar for a week and my body knows and my husband knows and I have known since Sunday.

So at nine thirty, when a normal woman would sit down for the first time in sixteen hours, I run a bath.

I want to describe this properly because it is the least described moment in this entire ritual and it is where I actually live.

I am in a bath. The door is locked. Somewhere in my apartment a child is awake who should not be awake. I can hear him. He is not crying, he is just conducting some kind of business, and I am lying in this bath with a scab on my knee that I have to soften, and I am so tired that my eyes are burning, and I have the better part of an hour of this still ahead

of me, and then a walk, and then the entire thing again in a room at the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, and then come home and be a wife.

There is no part of this that feels holy.

I want to be very clear with the women who are going to be angry with me for that sentence. I know what I am supposed to say. I am supposed to say that I approach the water with joy in my heart and gratitude on my lips. And I do, sometimes. I will tell you about those nights.

This is not one of those nights. This is a woman in a bath at nine forty at night with a scab and a cotton ball and a child conducting business in the hallway.

And then, eventually, I get out. And I get dressed. And I put on my coat.

And here is the thing.

I go.

Every time. In thirteen years I have never not gone. Not once. Not on the night I could not stand up straight, not on the night I had been crying, not on the night I did not speak to my husband.

I want to tell you why, but the true answer is not spiritual and I am trying to be honest in this book.

I go because it is a Tuesday and this is what happens on this Tuesday.

That is it. That is the whole engine. It is not devotion, most of the time. It is not ecstasy. It is the fact that this is what a woman does on this night, and my mother did it, and her mother did it, and the woman in the apartment below me is doing it next week, and the structure is there and it is older than me and it does not require my enthusiasm.

It requires my attendance.

You think that sounds bleak. I know. You want it to be about feeling. Your entire world is about feeling, about whether you are in the mood, about whether it is authentic to you today, about self-care and boundaries and honoring where you are at.

I am going to tell you something rude.

The structure carries me on the nights I have nothing. And I have nothing on a lot of nights, and so do you, and the difference between us is that when you have nothing, nothing happens.

When I have nothing, I still go. And I put my coat on. And somewhere on the eleven minute walk, roughly half the time, something happens in my chest that would not have happened if I had stayed home and honored where I was at.

You cannot feel your way into a life. You have to go, and then feel.

### **The Lesson**

*On the nights I have nothing, the structure carries me. In your world when you have nothing, nothing happens. That is the entire difference between us.*

Chapter 14:

## **I Shave My Head. That Is Another Book.**

I am going to tell you something now, plainly, and then I am going to stop, and you are going to be furious with me.

I shave my head.

Most Satmar women do. It is not a fringe practice and it is not a scandal and it is not something my community does in the dark. It is Hungarian, it goes back a long way, and if you go to a wedding in Williamsburg you will be in a room where nearly every married woman under her wig has nothing.

It is timed to the water.

That is what makes it belong in this book at all. Nothing may come between my body and the water. Not an eyelash. Not a scab. And hair, a whole head of it, wet, tangled, thick, is the largest thing a woman brings into that pool and the hardest thing to be certain about. Every single strand must be under. Not most. Every one.

There is a version of this book where I do not mention it. Where I describe the preparation in detail, the scabs and the toes and the eyelash, and I quietly leave out the largest fact about my own head, and I assume you will not notice.

You would notice. And you would be right to notice, and everything I have written would be worth less.

So there it is.

There was a time I grew it out. A year or two when I decided I would not shave, when I let it come back and thought perhaps I would keep it. And then I decided it was not for me, and I went back. That was its own quiet argument in my marriage and its own long reckoning with myself, and I am not going to open it here, because it is a whole story and this is not the book for it.

And now I am going to close it.

Not because I am ashamed. I have written two books before this one and I have not once been shy and I am not starting tonight. Because it is too big for this book, and if I put it here it will eat the water alive.

You want to talk about it. I know you do. It is the single thing about women like me that the outside world cannot leave alone. Every documentary finds its way to the hair. Every article. It is the image they want because it is the one that lets them feel what they came to feel, which is horror, followed by pity, followed by a pleasant sensation of being more free than me.

And so there is an entire book in it, and it is not this one.

There is what it feels like. There is the mirror. There is what my husband knows and does not know. There is the wig, and the hat on top of the wig, and what it costs, and what it gives back, and what I thought as a girl and what I think now, and the girls I know who are about to and are terrified, and the woman I know who stopped.

That is not a chapter. That is a book, and I will write it, and it is next.

For now, this is what you need, and it is all you are getting.

When I go down those steps there is nothing on me and nothing in me and nothing between me and that water. Not a ring, not a lash, not a thread, and not a single hair.

The outside world thinks the shaving is about a man not wanting to see me.

It has never once been about a man.

That is the last thing I am going to say. You will have to wait, and I know that is intolerable, and I know exactly what you are going to do about it, which is buy the next book.

My husband says I have become a difficult person. He is not wrong.

### **The Lesson**

*There is nothing between me and that water. Not a ring, not an eyelash, not a hair. What that costs and what it gives back is the next book and you are going to have to wait for it.*

Chapter 15:

## **The Woman in the Mirror**

There is a moment in the preparation room that nobody has described and I have been circling it for three chapters.

You are finished. Everything is off, everything is clean, everything has been checked twice. You are standing in front of a mirror in a small bright room in a building in Brooklyn, and you have to look at yourself.

Not glance. Look. It is part of the preparation. You go over yourself, properly, with your eyes.

I want to explain what an extraordinary event this is in the life of a woman like me.

I do not look at myself. Not really. I look at my face for one second in the morning to check the wig is straight. I look at my hands constantly, because my hands are doing something at every moment of my life. And that is essentially it.

So once a month, in a small room in a building nobody talks about, under a light that is honestly too bright, I look at the whole of myself, and I am the only person on earth who does.

Nobody else sees this. Not the street. Not the school. Not my sisters. My husband, in a manner of speaking, but a husband in the dark at half past eleven is not an inspection, and anyway he has been looking at me for thirteen years and he sees what he has decided I look like, which is

not the same thing as what I look like.

There is no camera. There is no photograph of me anywhere, at any age, at any weight, on any day.

There is only this. A woman, a mirror, one bright light, once a month.

I have watched myself change in that mirror the way you watch a coastline change. Not day to day. Over years, in a series of separate encounters, and every time I am slightly surprised.

As a young bride I did not look at myself. I looked at parts. I checked what I had been told to check and I got out of that room as fast as I could and my face was hot the entire time.

In the early years I was pregnant so often that the mirror was mostly a report on the pregnancy. That is not a body, that is a schedule.

There was a night, years in, after another child, when I stood in front of that mirror and I looked at myself and I did not flinch and I remember being genuinely surprised that I did not flinch.

Now I look at a woman I would not have recognized as a girl, and I do not mean the weight and I do not mean the tiredness, though both of those are present and both are permanent. I mean the face. There is somebody home in that face now. There was nobody home in it at the start. There was a very frightened girl doing an excellent impression of a bride.

And here is the thing I want the women in your world to hear, and I am aware I am about to say something you will find impossible.

Nobody has ever told me what I am supposed to look like.

There are no photographs of me on a beach. There is no algorithm feeding me women my age with flatter stomachs. There is no comment section under my face. There is no magazine in my kitchen. I have never once compared my body to a stranger's body, because I have never seen a stranger's body.

So the woman in that mirror is not being measured against anything.

She is just what there is.

Your daughter will never in her life have that. Not for one hour. And you will call me the one in the cage.

### **The Lesson**

*Once a month a woman looks at all of herself under a bright light with nothing on and nobody watching. She is not being compared to anyone. There is no one to compare her to. You have no idea what that is worth.*

Chapter 16:

## **The Steps**

There are steps down into the water. Usually seven. There is a rail.

You come out of the preparation room in a robe and the robe comes off at the top of the steps and that is the last thing.

The water is warm. This surprises people. They imagine something austere and freezing, a punishment, and it is a heated pool at a comfortable temperature and it is one of the pleasanter physical sensations available in my week, and I am not going to apologize for saying so.

It comes up to about here. Chest high, roughly, depending on the building and on the woman.

And then you go under.

That is it. That is the entire thing. You go under, completely, every part of you, and you come up.

I want to tell you how long it takes.

About four seconds.

The better part of an hour of preparation. Eleven minutes of walking. Seven days of counting before that, and two weeks of not touching my husband before that. A whole architecture of a month, an entire structure of a marriage, all of it pointing at a single moment.

Four seconds.

You go under and there is nothing. That is the part I cannot properly give you. There is no sound. There is no light, or there is light but it is not doing anything meaningful. There is no floor under your feet if you do it properly, because you must not be touching the bottom, you have to be entirely surrounded, which means for a moment you are held by nothing at all, in water that fell out of the sky, and you are not touching the world.

You are not touching the world.

Do you understand how rare that is? I have not been alone in a room since I was eighteen years old. There is always a child. There is always a hand on my skirt or a voice from the next room or a person who needs a thing immediately and cannot wait, and I have not had a single uninterrupted thought in thirteen years, and that is not a complaint, that is a description.

For four seconds, once a month, nothing is touching me.

Not my clothes. Not my wig. Not my children. Not my husband. Not my mother's opinion or my sister-in-law's opinion or the street's opinion. Not one single thing on this earth is in contact with Sarah Mushka.

I come up.

And there is a woman standing there with a towel, and she says one word.

And then it is over and I am back in the world and my ears are full of water and I have to be home in twenty minutes because the baby will wake up.

That is the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband. Four seconds.

Everything else in this book is the container that four seconds arrives in, and I have spent thirteen years learning that the container is not a waste of time, the container is the entire reason the four seconds does anything at all.

You have spa days. You have retreats. You have a weekend in the mountains and a woman with a bowl of stones and eight hundred dollars gone. You come back and you are exactly the same person because nothing was withheld from you and nothing was required of you and nothing was at stake.

I have four seconds.

And I am not the same person coming out as I was going in, and I could not tell you why, and it works every time.

### **The Lesson**

*An hour of preparation, seven days of counting, two weeks of separation, all of it aimed at four seconds in which nothing on earth is touching me. You would not believe what those four seconds can carry.*

Chapter 17:

## **The Blessing**

There is a blessing. Of course there is a blessing, we have a blessing for everything, we have a blessing for bread and a blessing for thunder and a blessing for seeing a person who is very unusual looking, which I have always found both funny and unbearably kind.

There are different customs about exactly when a woman says it. Some say it before they go under. In my world you go down into the water, you immerse once, and then you stand there in the water and say the blessing, and then you go under again.

And in that room, in that moment, with your eyes closed and your ears full of water, you are allowed to ask for something.

This is not a law. Nobody made this a law. This is a custom and it belongs to women and it has been passed from woman to woman for a very long time, and it goes like this. When you come up, before you go back to the world, you have a moment, and you can use it.

Women use it. Hashem knows we use it.

I know what women ask for in that water and I am not going to tell you, because they told me in kitchens and they told me because they knew I would not repeat it, and I have written three books now and I have never once broken that.

But I will tell you what I have asked for.

As a young bride I asked for a baby. I had been married a short while and I was frightened, and everybody was being extremely kind to me about it, which is the worst thing anybody can do.

Later, with small children, I asked for sleep. That was the entire prayer. I stood in the water of creation and asked for four consecutive hours and I meant it more than I have meant almost anything.

There was a year I asked for my marriage. I am not going to explain that one. We had a bad year and I stood in that water and I asked for it back, and I got it back, and it took another two years, and I have never told my husband that I asked.

I asked, once, for my mother. She was ill. She is better now.

And this year, standing in that water, I asked whether I should write this book.

That is true. I have not told anyone that and I have just told you.

I stood there with my eyes shut and I said, I do not know if this one is theirs, I do not know if I am giving away something I have no right to give away, tell me, and I waited, and I got nothing, because you do not get anything, that is not how it works and any woman who tells you it is is selling something.

But I came up out of the water and I got dressed and I walked home along the avenue in the dark, and by the time I got to my door I had decided.

That is what it does. It does not answer you. It gives you four seconds in which nothing is touching you, and it turns out that a person who is not being touched by anything can hear herself think, and it turns out that most of us have not heard ourselves think since we were children.

You pay a therapist for this. You pay a great deal, and you sit in a chair, and a kind person asks you what you want, and you cannot tell them, because you have not been alone in your own head for eleven years.

I get four seconds a month.

You could have this. There is no wall around it. Women all over the world do this, women who look nothing like me, women who do not cover their hair, women who work in offices and have two children and a husband who is not remotely religious.

They found the same thing I found. And they are not oppressed and they are not brainwashed and they did not grow up in Williamsburg.

They just wanted four seconds where nothing is touching them.

### **The Lesson**

*It does not answer you. It gives you four seconds where nothing on earth is touching you, and it turns out that is enough to hear what you already knew.*

Chapter 18:

## **Why I Do It Anyway**

So let us add up the price.

Two weeks of not touching my husband. Seven days of counting, with everything that involves. Close to an hour of preparation on a night when I have nothing left. Eleven minutes in the dark. A room, a stranger, a light.

And what do I get.

Four seconds.

That is a terrible exchange rate. Any accountant would tell you so. You would not accept it in any other area of your life, and you would tell a friend who accepted it that she was being taken advantage of.

I want to explain why it is the best arrangement I have ever been part of, and to do that I have to tell you something about wanting.

You do not want things you can have.

I am sorry. I know that is not what you have been told. You have been told the opposite, you have been told that freedom and availability and openness produce joy, that if you remove every obstacle between a person and a thing they desire they will be happy.

You have removed every obstacle. Look at yourselves.

You can have anything, at any hour, instantly, and you are the most joyless people who have ever lived, and you are bored, and you are exhausted, and you are on your phones, and you are looking at pictures of other people having the things you could also have and are somehow not enjoying either.

In my marriage, for two weeks out of the month, I cannot have my husband.

Not cannot in a spiritual sense. Cannot. He is right there. He is at the table with a book. He is three feet from me and I may not touch him and he may not touch me and we may not pass a plate directly from my hand to his.

You think that is a deprivation. It is a construction.

Because on the fourteenth day, or wherever the counting lands, I put on my coat and I walk eleven minutes and I go under water that fell from the sky, and I come home.

And he is waiting.

And I am not going to describe what happens next, because I am a Chassidic woman and there are things I do not say and tznius, modesty, in dress and in speech and in how a person carries herself, is not a costume I put on for the outside world, it is a real thing that I actually believe in.

But I will tell you this, and then I will stop.

Thirteen years. Eleven children. A man I met twice before I married him.

And I still get nervous on the walk home.

At my age. Eleven minutes, in the dark, past the closed stores, with a damp head under my hat.

Nervous. Like a girl.

You have been married four years and you cannot remember the last time you were nervous about your own husband. You cannot remember the last time you wanted anything you did not immediately have. You have optimized every obstacle out of your life and then wondered why nothing tastes like anything.

They built a wall in the middle of my month and I have spent thirteen years being furious at that wall and grateful for that wall and both at once, and I have come out the other side of the argument and here is where I have landed.

The wall is why I still want him.

That is the whole thing. That is what I came here to tell you. That is what is behind the door with no sign on it.

You may have it if you want it. Nobody is stopping you. Build a wall in your own marriage. It does not have to be my wall. Take the phones out of the bedroom, refuse each other something, wait for anything at all.

You will not. I know you will not. It is too hard and there is no reason to and nobody is making you.

That is the difference between us and it is the only one that has ever mattered.

### **The Lesson**

*You do not want what you can have. They built a wall in the middle of my month and I have been furious at it for thirteen years and it is the reason I still want my husband.*

Chapter 19:

## **Erev Shabbos and the Day of Atonement**

There are nights when the water is not about my husband at all.

I have spent this entire book telling you about the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, as the thing that stands between a woman and her marriage. The counting, the wall, the wanting, the walk home. That is the mikveh I know best and it is the one nobody has described honestly and it is why I am writing this.

It is not the only reason anybody gets into that water.

Before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, the men go. All of them. The whole neighborhood empties into that building over the course of one afternoon, and there is a queue down the street, and my husband goes early because he cannot bear the queue and he has been complaining about the queue for thirteen years and he will complain about it again this year.

Nothing is being permitted. Nobody is becoming available to anybody. There is no counting and there is no wall and there is no marriage in it at all.

They are going because they are about to stand in front of God for twenty-five hours and they want to arrive clean.

Not clean. I have taught you better than that by now. They want to arrive changed.

Same water. Same rules. Completely different reason.

And that ought to tell you something about what this actually is, and it is the thing I could not get you to hear in the second chapter and I am trying again now.

The water is not a hygiene mechanism for wives.

The water is a border.

You go into it as one thing and you come out as another, and what the two things are depends entirely on what you brought with you. A woman brings a marriage. A man before Yom Kippur brings a year of his life and everything he did in it. A bride brings a girlhood that is about to end.

It is the same water. It does not care. It has been the same water since the third day of creation and it is not adjusting itself for any of us and it does not ask what you came for.

It just moves you across.

And there is Erev Shabbos, the Jewish Sabbath, from Friday sundown to Saturday night.

Friday afternoon in Williamsburg. If you have never seen it I cannot explain it and I have tried in two books. The whole neighborhood is one organism and the organism has about four hours to get everything done and it is not going to manage it, and there is a specific quality of noise, and the smell of every kitchen on the street is the same smell, and somewhere a woman is shouting at a child about shoes.

And in the middle of it the men are going to the mikveh.

Not because anything is permitted afterwards. Because Shabbos is coming and Shabbos is not the same kind of time as the rest of the week, and you do not walk into it in the same body you were wearing on Thursday.

They go in as a man who has been arguing about money all week.

They come out and they put on the white shirt.

I want you to sit with that, because I have been circling it since the first page. My husband, once a week, gets to stop being the man who has been worried about money. He gets to cross a border. He does it in water that fell out of the sky and then he walks home and puts on a white shirt and by the time he says kiddush, the blessing said over wine to sanctify the Sabbath, at my table he is somebody else, and I have watched this happen approximately six hundred times and it works every single time and I have never once seen it fail.

You have nothing like this.

You go into your weekend as exactly the person you were on Thursday, dragging every single thing behind you, and you check your telephone on Saturday morning, and on Monday you go back to work as the same person again, and you have been the same person, without interruption, without a border, without one single moment of crossing over, for your entire adult life.

You are so tired.

I know you are. I read the comments. You are so tired and you cannot work out why, and I am going to tell you why.

Nobody ever lets you stop being yourself.

### **The Lesson**

*The water is not a hygiene mechanism for wives. It is a border. You go in as one thing and come out as another, and what you brought with you decides what that means. Nobody in your world ever lets you stop being yourself, not for one hour, not once.*

Chapter 20:

## **The Mikveh Lady**

Now I have to introduce you to her, and I have been putting it off, because she is the best character in my life and I am afraid I am going to do her badly.

She works at the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband. That is the job. She is there when you arrive and she is there when you leave and she is there when the woman after you arrives, and she has been doing this for a very long time, and she will be doing it long after I am finished writing books.

She checks that the immersion is complete. That is the actual function. Every strand, every finger, every part of a person under the water at the same instant, and it is not possible to verify that yourself, so she stands at the edge and she watches and she confirms it.

That is what she is for. That is the whole of the official job description.

That is not remotely what she is.

She is the most powerful woman in Williamsburg and nobody has ever said so out loud.

Think about what she knows. She knows every married woman in a radius of ten blocks. She knows what they look like with nothing on, all of them, every scar, every stretch mark, every surgery, every stage of every body across every year of every marriage on my street.

She knows who is expecting before the husband does.

She knows who has been coming month after month for four years with a face that gets a little tighter.

She knows which woman has not been in eight months and is not expecting.

She knows who came in crying. She knows who came in with a bruise. I am going to be careful here, and I am going to be honest, and both at once. She knows things about marriages on my street that nobody else on earth knows, and she has known them for decades, and she has never said one word.

There is no confessional in Judaism. We do not have a priest and we do not have a booth and there is nowhere to go and tell somebody the thing you cannot say.

We have her.

And she does not ask. That is the point. She does not ask you anything that matters. She will ask you about your mother, at length, at the worst possible moment. She will comment on your towel. She will tell you that your sister looked tired at the wedding. She will offer an opinion about your youngest that you did not request.

She will not ask you why you were crying.

She sees it. She sees everything. And she hands you the robe and she says something entirely useless about the weather, and that is the mercy, and it took me until I was about twenty-six to understand that it was mercy and not indifference.

I have known three of them.

The first one, when I was a bride, was terrifying. She was not unkind. She was brisk. She had a hundred women a month to see and I was a young bride who did not know what she was doing, and she moved me through it the way a nurse moves you through something, and I hated

her, and I was wrong to hate her, and I understood that years later.

The second one talked. Continuously. About everything. She had an opinion on the Rebbe, on the price of chicken, on a woman two streets over who had bought a new sheitel, the wig a married woman wears to cover her hair, that in her view was a mistake. She talked while you were in the water. She talked while you were getting dressed. I found her exhausting and I have missed her every month since she died.

The third one is there now and she is the reason I am writing this chapter, and she will never know it, because she does not know who I am on a screen and she never will. To her I am only a woman who comes to the water.

You cannot understand my life without understanding her.

She is nosy, she is blunt, she has never once minded her own business, and she has been holding the private grief of hundreds of women for as long as anyone can remember without dropping any of it.

She is not in any documentary. Nobody has ever interviewed her. She does not exist as far as the outside world is concerned.

She is the most important person on my street.

### **The Lesson**

*There is no confessional in my religion. There is no booth and no priest and nowhere to say the unsayable thing. There is a woman with a towel who sees everything and asks you about your mother.*

Chapter 21:

## **She Is Nosy and It Is Fine**

I want to be precise about the nosiness because I am not complaining. I am reporting.

She will ask about your mother. Always. This is not small talk, this is a system, and she does it to everyone, and she remembers the answers. She asked me about my mother for two years while my mother was ill and she asked with a specificity that made it clear she had been keeping notes in her head, and I never once told her anything, and she knew anyway, because she knows everything.

She has opinions about your bag. My bag is fine. My bag has been fine for nine years. She has mentioned it four times.

She has opinions about how long you are taking. Not spoken. Communicated. There is a way that a woman can be silent outside a door that is louder than shouting and she has perfected it.

She will tell you that you look tired. Every woman on earth loves to be told this at ten o'clock at night while getting undressed.

She once told me that my daughter is very tall, in a tone that suggested this was something I had done deliberately and should reconsider.

She told me once, on a night when my mother was ill, that she had seen her in the street and that she did not look well.

That was the whole sentence. And then she handed me the robe and said nothing else, and I stood there in a robe having a small crisis, because she had said out loud the thing I had not let myself say, and she went back to her chair.

Weeks later she mentioned my mother again, in passing, as if she had been keeping a quiet account of a woman she barely knew.

That is all she said. She did not ask how I was holding up. She did not offer me anything. She simply let me know that she saw, and that she was watching too, and she has never once made me speak about it, and this is the kind of thing she does.

I think she knows more about my life than my own sisters do.

I think she has read every year of it off my face in that water and I think she has opinions and I think I will go to my grave without hearing a single one of them, and honestly, that is the most Williamsburg thing that has ever happened to me.

Here is what I have come to understand about the nosiness.

It is the price of the discretion.

She is not two women. She is not the nosy one who comments on your bag and also the silent one who has held the secrets of hundreds of women for decades. She is one woman and it is one skill.

The reason she can see everything is that she is looking. She looks at everybody, all the time, with a completely undisguised interest, and she remembers all of it, and she sorts it, and she keeps it.

And what she does with it is nothing.

Do you know how rare that is? To be seen completely by somebody who then does nothing with it?

Everybody in your life who sees you does something with it. They tell someone. They form a view. They factor it in. They post it. There is not one person in your entire world who observes you closely and then

simply holds it, forever, at no benefit to themselves.

She will tell you your bag is old.

She will not tell anyone you were crying.

That is the trade and I would make it again tomorrow.

### **The Lesson**

*She will comment on your bag and hold your worst night for decades without a word. It is not two skills. It is one, and the annoying half is the price of the other half.*

Chapter 22:

## **Getting Used to Being Watched**

Let us deal with the thing you have been waiting for me to deal with.

A woman watches me. I have nothing on. She is standing at the edge of the water and she is looking at me and she is confirming that all of me went under.

You find this intolerable. I know you do. I have read a great many comments from people who found this intolerable, and most of them were from women, and most of them used the word violated, and I want to take that seriously because they were not being stupid, they were reacting honestly to a thing that genuinely sounds appalling.

So let me tell you what it was actually like.

At eighteen it was the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

I am not going to soften that. I was a bride. I had grown up in a world where I did not undress in front of my own sisters. Nobody had ever seen me. My own mother had not seen me since I was a small child, because that is how we live, and we live that way for reasons and I still believe in those reasons.

And then I was in a room with a stranger and I had nothing on and I had to walk down steps in front of her.

My face was so hot I thought I was ill. I could not look at her. I got out of that water and got dressed faster than I have ever done anything and

I walked home and I did not tell my husband and I did not tell my mother and I lay awake.

That is the truth. That happened. It was awful.

Now. Thirteen years.

I do not think about it.

I want to be careful here, because there is a lazy version of this chapter where I tell you that I overcame my shame and became empowered and now I love my body, and that is an American sentence and it is not true and I am not going to write it.

I did not overcome anything. It simply stopped being a thing.

She is not looking at me. That is what I eventually understood, and it took years, and nobody explained it to me because nobody explains anything.

She is looking at the water.

She is confirming a fact. Did every part of this person go under. That is a technical question and she is answering it, and she has answered it for countless women over countless years, and she has no more interest in my body than a woman checking a parking meter has an interest in your car.

There is no appetite in that room. That is the whole thing. She wants nothing from me. She is not comparing me to the woman before me. She is not going to describe me to anybody. She does not think about me for one second after I leave.

I have never in my life been looked at with less appetite, and it turns out that is the only kind of looking that does not cost anything.

Now think about how you are looked at.

Every single time you are seen, somebody wants something. They want you to be attractive or they want you to be less attractive than

them or they want to assess you or place you or purchase from you. There is a whole industry looking at you. There are men looking at you on the street. There is a photograph of you on the internet, right now, being looked at by somebody you have never met, and you do not know what they want, but they want something.

You have never once been seen by somebody who wanted absolutely nothing.

I have. Once a month. For thirteen years. By a woman who then told me my bag was old.

You call it a violation.

It is the only place in the world where being seen is free.

### **The Lesson**

*She is not looking at me. She is looking at the water. She wants nothing and it is the only time in my life I am seen by somebody who wants nothing, and it turns out that is the only looking that does not cost anything.*

Chapter 23:

## **Kosher. One Word.**

When you come up, she says one word.

Kosher.

That is it. That is the whole thing. She says kosher, which here means it was valid, all of you was under, it counted.

One word. And then you go under again, because there is a custom to do it more than once, and she says it again, and then it is finished and she hands you the towel and you go and get dressed and somebody else is already waiting.

I have been thinking about that word for thirteen years.

You have to understand what is happening in that instant. I have prepared for the better part of an hour. I have counted for seven days. I have not touched my husband in two weeks. I have walked eleven minutes in the dark. I have taken off everything I own including the rings and the polish and everything I use to be a person, and I have gone under water that fell out of the sky and come up.

And a woman I did not choose, who is not my friend, who commented on my bag on the way in, is the sole authority on whether any of it worked.

If she says nothing, I go back under.

That is it. There is no appeal. She is the only one who saw. Her word is the entire proof.

And here is what she says.

Kosher.

Not beautiful. Not well done. Not you are pure now, my daughter, go in peace, which is the sort of thing that happens in the rebbetzin, the wife of a rabbi, books and in exactly none of the buildings I have ever been in.

Kosher. It counted. Next.

I love it and it took me a decade to know why.

Because there is no performance in it. Nobody is pretending this is a coronation. It is a fact and she has confirmed the fact, and the flatness of that word is the most respectful thing she could possibly do, because it means she is not going to make me have a moment.

You would want the moment. Your entire culture is built on the moment. You would want a wellness practitioner in a soft voice telling you to honor yourself. You would want it to mean something out loud, in words, immediately.

She says kosher, and she is already thinking about the woman in room two.

And so whatever the moment was, whatever it was that happened to me under that water, whatever I asked for with my eyes closed, it stays mine. She did not touch it. She did not name it. She did not put a word on it that was not mine.

She verified the fact and left the meaning entirely alone.

Nobody in your world would have the discipline. Somebody would have hugged me.

## **The Lesson**

*She says one word and it means it counted. She verifies the fact and refuses to touch the meaning. Nobody in your world would have that much discipline.*

Chapter 24:

## **Things She Has Said at the Worst Possible Moment**

I have been keeping a list. I have never told anybody I have been keeping a list. Here it is.

She has said, while I was standing at the top of the steps with nothing on, that she saw my mother in the grocery and my mother looked well.

She has said, while I was standing at the top of the steps with nothing on, that a woman on my street has bought a new dining room set and she has views about it.

She has said, at the exact moment I put my foot in the water, nu, a Yiddish word that means well? and so? and get on with it, all at once, so how many now, meaning children, meaning how many do you have, and I said eleven, and she said hm, and I have thought about that hm for four years.

She has told me my youngest looks like my husband. This was true and I did not want to think about my husband at that precise moment for reasons that will be obvious to any married woman.

She has told me a story about her niece's wedding that lasted the entire time I was getting dressed and had no ending. It simply stopped. The niece got married. That was the story.

She once, on a night when I was so tired I could barely see, asked me whether the new baby was letting me sleep.

I said not really.

She said, they never do. And then she said, you were the same with the first one.

The first one. She remembered.

And then she handed me my towel and told me the water was slightly cool tonight and did I notice, and I said no, and she said no, most people do not notice, and that was the end of the conversation, and I walked home in a state of total spiritual collapse.

She has told me that I look tired. She has told me this on more than one occasion. There is no correct response to being told you look tired at ten at night by a woman holding your robe. I have tried several. None of them work.

She once told me that she remembers me from when I was a bride.

She said it flatly, in the middle of something else, the way you would mention that it had rained.

I remember you from when you were a kallah, a bride.

And I stood there, a grown woman with eleven children, a woman who has said the most private things she owns out loud where anyone could hear them, and I could not say a single word.

She has seen me at eighteen with my hands shaking.

She has seen every year of it. She was there for all of it. She has watched an entire woman happen and she has never once commented on it except that one time, in passing, on the way to something else.

I did not say anything. She did not expect me to.

She went back to her chair and I got dressed and I went home.

That is what she is. She is decades of my street's private life, sitting in a chair, having thoughts about a dining room set.

## **The Lesson**

*She has seen me at eighteen with my hands shaking and she has never mentioned it except once, in passing, on the way to a story about a dining room set. That is the most tact I have ever encountered.*

Chapter 25:

## **The Night She Saw I Was Crying**

I am going to tell you about one night and then I am going to leave it alone.

It was a bad year. I have said that already in a different book and I am not going to explain it here either, because it is not only my story and the other person in it did not sign up to be in books.

My husband and I were not speaking. Not the ordinary kind, where you are annoyed and it burns off by Thursday. The other kind. Weeks of a house where two people are extremely polite to each other in front of the children.

And it was the night. Because that is how the calendar works. The calendar does not care what is happening in your marriage. The counting finished, and it was a Tuesday, and I had a choice, which was to go, or to not go and have that mean something enormous that neither of us was prepared to have a conversation about.

So I went.

I did the preparation. All of it, properly, because I do it properly, and I want you to picture a woman doing this with great care for a man she was not speaking to.

I walked. Eleven minutes.

And I got into the water and I went under and I came up and I was crying.

Not making a noise. I want to be accurate. I was standing in the water with my face wet and my eyes and nose going and no sound coming out of me at all, and I could not stop it, and I had not planned it, and I did not know it was going to happen until it was happening.

She was standing there.

She had seen. Of course she had seen, she was two feet away, she is paid to look at me, there was no possibility that she had not seen.

And here is what she did.

She said kosher.

That is all. In exactly the voice she always uses. Flat, brisk, slightly bored. Kosher.

And I went under again and came up and she said it again, and then she held out the towel, and she looked somewhere over my left shoulder while I took it, and she said that the heating in the building had been playing up and she had told them and nobody had done anything, and I got dressed, and I left.

She never mentioned it. Not that night. Not the next month. Not in the eight years since.

I have thought about that woman's restraint more than I have thought about almost anything.

Because she knew. She knew exactly what she was looking at. She has been standing at the edge of that water for decades and she has seen women cry in it and she knows what a marriage looks like from the outside when it is in trouble, and she had the whole picture, and there was nobody else in the room, and she could have said anything.

She could have been kind. That is what your world would have done. Somebody would have put a hand on my arm and asked if I wanted to

talk about it. Somebody would have said, I am here for you.

And I would have shattered. On the spot, in that room, with nothing on, in front of a stranger. I would have come apart entirely and I would have had to walk home eleven minutes and come into my house and be a wife with all of that outside of me instead of inside of me.

She gave me the towel and complained about the heating.

And I got to keep it. All of it. Every bit of what was happening to me stayed inside me where I could carry it, and I walked home, and I went into my house, and about four days later my husband and I started speaking again.

You would call her cold.

She is the kindest person I have ever met and she has never once in all those years said a kind thing to me.

### **The Lesson**

*She saw everything and said one flat word about the heating. Your world would have offered me kindness and I would have come apart. She let me keep it, and I carried it home, and I survived it.*

Chapter 26:

## **Who Becomes a Mikveh Lady**

I have wondered about this for years and I have never asked, because you do not ask, and now I am writing a book about her and I still have not asked, and I am not going to before this goes to print.

So this is speculation and I am telling you that it is.

Nobody grows up wanting this. There is no girl in my community at fifteen who thinks, one day I will stand at the edge of that water. It is not aspired to. There is no training that anybody speaks about publicly and there is no ceremony and there is no announcement.

A woman is simply there one month.

She is usually older. She is usually married, or she was. She has usually had children, and often they are grown, and often she has time, and often, I think, though I cannot prove it, she has had something happen to her.

That is my suspicion and I hold it loosely.

I think the women who end up in that chair have been somewhere. I think you cannot hold that many women's worst nights without having had a few of your own, and I think there is a kind of person who is capable of seeing everything and doing nothing with it, and I think that capacity is not a gift. I think it is a scar.

The one who talked constantly, the one I miss, buried a child. I found that out years after she died and I have never stopped thinking about it. She talked about the price of chicken while women stood in front of her at the worst moments of their lives, and she had buried a child, and she never said a word about it to any of us.

The one who is there now is a widow. Everybody knows that. She has been a widow for a long time and she goes home from that building to a quiet apartment, every night, and she has been doing that for years.

She sits in a chair in the warmest, quietest room in Williamsburg and she watches women go under water and come up again and be permitted to go home to their husbands.

Every single night.

I do not know what that is like and I am not going to pretend to.

But I will tell you what I think she is doing, and I have thought about it more than she would like.

I think she is guarding a door.

Everybody in my community has a job and most of them are visible. The rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, rules. The teacher teaches. The butcher butchers. The men learn and the men pray and the men run the institutions and the men are extremely visible, and I have written about that at length and I will write about it again.

And then there is a woman in a chair, in a building with no sign, who is the last person a woman sees before she goes into the water and the first person she sees when she comes out.

She is the whole apparatus. Without her there is no verification, and without verification there is no immersion, and without immersion there is no marriage, and without marriage there is nothing.

A community that would sell its Torah scrolls to build that building has put its entire future in the hands of a widow in a chair who is

currently thinking about a dining room set two streets over.

And she has never let anybody down.

Not once. Not one woman. Not in all those years.

Nobody will ever write her name anywhere. There will be no article. There is no photograph. When she dies there will be a funeral and it will be enormous and nobody outside of ten blocks will ever know why.

I have written three books now and none of them will do her justice.

### **The Lesson**

*She holds the private grief of hundreds of women and nobody will ever write her name. A community that would sell its Torah to build that building has put its entire future in a widow in a chair, and she has never once let anybody down.*

Chapter 27:

## **The Two Weeks**

Now I have to take you backwards, because I have been describing the destination and you do not understand the journey.

Before there is water there are two weeks.

Roughly. I am not giving you numbers and I am not giving you a schedule, because I am not a rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and this is not a manual, and if you want to know how the counting works you will go and ask somebody who is qualified, and they will explain it properly and they will do a better job than me.

What I will tell you is what it is like.

For about two weeks of every month, when my body is in its cycle and for a stretch of days afterward, I may not touch my husband.

Not intimacy. Touch.

I want to make sure that has landed, because people always assume this is about the bedroom and it is not only about the bedroom, it is about the entire surface of a marriage.

I may not touch him. He may not touch me. Not a hand on a shoulder. Not brushing past each other in a kitchen that is too small for two people, which ours is, so we have developed a choreography that would be funny if you filmed it.

He cannot hand me a plate. Directly, hand to hand, he cannot pass me anything. It has to go down onto the table and then I pick it up.

We do not sit on the same couch cushion.

We sleep in separate beds. Two beds in one room, and for two weeks of the month there is a gap between them that is about the width of a nightstand and about the width of the Atlantic.

You are horrified. I can feel it. You are thinking about your own marriage, where you fell asleep last night with your leg touching his leg and thought nothing of it, and you are thinking that what I have just described is a punishment.

Now let me tell you what happens inside those two weeks, because you have never had two weeks like this and you never will and I do not think you have any idea what you are missing.

I look at him.

That is what happens. That is the whole secret and it took me years to notice it.

When you can touch a person you stop seeing them. You reach for them without looking. You put a hand out and it lands and you are not paying any attention at all, and that is what marriage is for most people, a series of small automatic contacts that mean nothing and cost nothing and stop being noticed within about a year.

When I cannot touch him I have to look at him.

He is across the room. He is at the table with a sefer and his hand is on the page, and I am at the sink, and I cannot reach him, and so I do the only thing available.

I watch him.

I have watched my husband for two weeks out of every month for thirteen years and I know what his hands look like better than I know my own, and I know the exact expression on his face when he is stuck

on something in the text, and I know what he does with his shoulders when he is worried about money and does not want to say so.

You do not know that about your husband. You cannot. You have been reaching for him for four years without looking.

Two weeks a month, I am not allowed to reach.

So I look. And then, at the end of it, I go to the water.

And then I come home to a man I have been staring at for fourteen days.

### **The Lesson**

*When you can touch a person you stop seeing them. Two weeks a month I am not allowed to reach for my husband, so I look at him instead, and I have been looking for thirteen years.*

Chapter 28:

## **He Cannot Hand Me a Plate**

I want to give you the small ones, because the small ones are where you will either understand this or decide I am insane.

He cannot hand me a plate.

Not during those two weeks. If he is holding something and I need it, it does not go from his hand into my hand. It goes down onto the table, and there is a small pause, and then I pick it up.

That is a rule. That is a real rule that governs my kitchen.

You are laughing. That is fine, I laughed too, as a young bride, and I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard, and I said so to my mother, and my mother gave me a look that I now give my own daughter.

There are others. We do not eat from the same plate. We do not pour each other's wine, not directly, and there is a whole custom about how the wine gets to the other person that involves putting it down first, and every couple in Williamsburg has developed their own slightly awkward version of this, and I have watched my husband set a cup down on a table with the specific carefulness of a man defusing something.

We do not sit on the same cushion of a couch. If the couch has three cushions, we are on one and three.

I do not make his bed.

These are called the harchakos, the rules of separation that keep a husband and wife apart during niddah, the distancings, and there are more of them and I am not going to list them all because this is a book, not a manual, and because if I list them all you will do what everybody does, which is stop hearing them as a life and start hearing them as a set of restrictions, and then you will feel sorry for me, and then we will have lost each other.

So instead I am going to tell you what it is actually like to live inside them.

It is a comedy.

My kitchen is small. It was small when we had two children and it has become an increasingly theoretical space with eleven. And for two weeks of every month, two adults have to move through it without brushing against each other, and we have been doing this for thirteen years, and we are extremely good at it, and we are still not good enough.

There is a dance. Both of us know it. He goes left, I go right. He waits at the fridge. I do not go past him at the stove, I go around, the long way, past the table, in my own kitchen.

And sometimes, once every few months, we get it wrong.

And there is a moment, a very small one, where two people who have been married thirteen years and have eleven children stand absolutely still, three inches apart, in a kitchen at seven in the evening.

And then somebody steps back and somebody says something about the chicken.

You have no idea. You have no idea at all what that is.

You have been married four years and you have never once stood three inches from your husband and had it mean something. You cannot get

that. It is not available to you. You cannot manufacture it and you cannot buy it and there is no retreat in the mountains that will produce it.

We built a wall through the middle of an apartment that is too small for a wall.

And then, twice a month, we get it wrong at the fridge, and neither of us breathes.

That is what the plate is for. That is what all of it is for.

You think it is a rule about crockery. It is a rule about the fact that in a marriage, the only thing more powerful than touching somebody is very nearly touching them.

### **The Lesson**

*Twice a month we get it wrong at the fridge and stand three inches apart, not breathing, after thirteen years and eleven children. You have never had that and you cannot buy it.*

Chapter 29:

## **Separate Beds**

Two beds. One room.

That is the arrangement in my house and in most of the houses on my street, and now you know why so many Chassidic bedrooms have two beds in them, and now you also know that the reason is not the one you assumed.

You assumed it was coldness. You assumed it was a marriage where the passion had been legislated out of existence, two people sleeping apart because they have nothing left, and every documentary that has ever shown you a Chassidic bedroom has framed those two beds exactly that way, with a slow sad piece of music underneath.

They are not separate because there is nothing between us.

They are separate for two weeks. And then they are not.

That is the part they never film, because you cannot film it, and because we would not let them.

Let me describe those two weeks honestly.

It is difficult. I am not going to dress this up. There are nights when I have had the day I have had, with the children and the noise and the thing that broke and the money, and what I want, more than sleep, more than anything, is to lie down next to my husband and put my head somewhere and stop being the person who holds everything

together.

And I cannot.

He is four feet away. He is right there. And I cannot cross those four feet, and neither can he, and both of us lie there in the dark in a room in Brooklyn, awake, knowing the other one is awake.

That is hard. That is genuinely hard and I want the women in your world to know that I am not pretending otherwise, and I want the women in my world who are irritated with me for admitting it to know that I am not going to lie in a book.

But I want to tell you what happens in that four feet of darkness.

We talk.

That is what happens. In the dark, in two beds, with the children asleep, when neither of us can reach the other one and there is nothing to do about it.

My husband and I have had every important conversation of our marriage across that gap.

We decided to move apartments across that gap. We decided about our oldest son's schooling across that gap. When my mother was ill I told him what I was afraid of, across that gap, in the dark, at one in the morning, in a voice I could not have used if he had been able to reach out and hold me.

Because that is the thing nobody tells you about being held.

Being held ends a conversation.

You say the difficult thing and your husband puts his arms around you and it is over. He has comforted you. He has done the correct thing. And the difficult thing has been absorbed and softened and put away and you never actually finished saying it.

When he cannot reach me, he has to answer me.

With words. In the dark. From four feet away.

And I have to keep talking, because there is no arm coming, and so I get to the end of the sentence, and then past the end of the sentence, to the thing under the sentence, and I say that too, and he is listening because listening is the only thing he is able to do.

Thirteen years of conversations that nobody was allowed to end early with a hug.

That is what is in the gap between those beds.

And you have been sleeping with your leg against your husband's leg for four years and you have not had one of those conversations, and you think I am the one who is being deprived.

### **The Lesson**

*Being held ends a conversation. Four feet of darkness and no arm coming means you have to get to the end of the sentence, and then past it, to the thing underneath.*

Chapter 30:

## **The Counting**

After the bleeding ends there is a counting.

Seven days. Clean days. And each day of those seven there is a checking, an internal examination with a white cloth, twice a day, and it must come back clean, and if it does not come back clean the counting starts again.

That is as much detail as I am going to give you and I want to explain why.

Firstly, because I am not a rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and I am not going to write a manual and I have said so repeatedly.

Secondly, and this matters more, because I am a Chassidic woman and there is a limit, and this is the limit, and I am standing on it right now with my toes over the edge.

I could describe this in a way that would sell more books.

I know exactly how to do it. I know what the outside world wants from a chapter titled the counting, and I know how to write six pages that would be quoted in every article about this book and shared by strangers who have never read a word of the other two.

I am not going to do it.

Not because I am hiding it. It is not hidden, it is in books, you can go and read the halacha, Jewish religious law, yourself if you actually want to understand it rather than to feel something about it.

Because there is a difference between telling you the truth and letting you look at me, and I have spent three books walking that line and I know precisely where it is.

So. What I will give you is this.

Twice a day, for seven days, I check whether it is over.

And that is an extraordinary thing to have to do with your own body and nobody has ever written honestly about what it does to you.

You are paying attention to yourself. Enormous, sustained, unavoidable attention. Twice a day, on a schedule, for a week, you stop what you are doing and you find out what is happening inside your own body.

Do you know when you last did that?

You do not know what is happening inside your body. You have not checked. You could not tell me, right now, where you are in your own cycle without looking at an application on your telephone, and even then you are guessing, because a machine is guessing on your behalf.

I know. Not from an application. I know because I have been keeping this count for thirteen years and my body is not a thing that happens to me while I am busy, it is a thing I am in a relationship with.

And here is the strange part, the part I did not expect and did not want and have come to be grateful for.

The counting is hopeful.

Every one of those seven days is a day closer. Day one and it feels like forever. Day four and you are halfway. Day six and something in the house changes and both of you know it and neither of you says anything.

Day seven and you have a bath to run.

I am counting toward my husband. Twice a day, for a week, with total attention, I am counting toward the man I am not allowed to touch.

You have never counted toward anybody in your life.

Nobody made you wait long enough for the counting to mean something.

### **The Lesson**

*Twice a day for seven days I pay complete attention to my own body. You could not tell me where you are in your own cycle without consulting a machine, and even then the machine is guessing.*

Chapter 31:

## **When There Is a Question**

Sometimes it is not clear.

Sometimes you look at the cloth and you do not know. It is not clean and it is not not clean. It is something in between and you are standing in your bathroom holding it and you have no idea what it means.

So you ask.

Not your husband. Not your mother, though plenty of women ask their mothers first and then ask properly afterwards. You ask a rav, a rabbi, the one you go to with a question, and this is a shailah, a question of Jewish law put to a rabbi for a ruling, a question of law that needs an answer from somebody qualified to give one.

And here is the part that stops the outside world dead.

You show him.

The cloth goes to the rav. In an envelope, and the envelope goes to his house, and it is usually the husband who takes it, and this is one of the more remarkable things a Jewish man does in his life, and nobody has ever written about the walk.

My husband has made that walk. Several times. Down the avenue, in the evening, with an envelope in his coat pocket.

And a rabbi, an older man, a scholar, holds it up to the light and looks at it, and he makes a determination, and the phone rings in my kitchen,

and my husband answers it and listens and says thank you and hangs up.

And then he tells me the answer.

And it is one of two things. It is either good news, and the counting continues, and something in both of us lets go slightly.

Or it is not, and we start again, and something in the room goes quiet, and neither of us says anything, because there is nothing to say and we are extremely tired.

Now. You are appalled. I know exactly how appalled you are, and I understand it, and I am not going to talk you out of it entirely.

An old man looks at a cloth. A woman waits in her kitchen for a telephone call about her own body. Nobody asked her what she thought.

That is what you see and it is not nothing.

Here is what I want you to hold next to it.

He does not know who I am.

That is the whole system and it is deliberate. The cloth arrives in an envelope. He is not told the name. It is a question and he answers the question and he has no idea whose it is, and he does not want to know, and it would be a serious problem if he knew.

He has done this thousands of times. He has ruled on thousands of the most private moments in the lives of women he has never met, and he could not identify a single one of them.

And I have never once had to say a word about it out loud to anybody. Not to him. Not to a nurse. Not to a receptionist. Not in a waiting room in front of strangers with a form on a clipboard.

An envelope. A phone call. Done.

You have described your most intimate physical symptoms to a doctor with your name on the file and your date of birth and your address, and there was a student in the room, and you did not object to the student because you did not want to seem difficult.

I know. It is not a competition and I am being unfair.

But do not tell me that a system in which a woman is anonymous and an expert answers in three hours and nobody ever speaks of it again is obviously worse than yours.

It is a strange system.

It is not a stupid one.

### **The Lesson**

*An old man looks at a cloth and does not know whose it is and will never know. I have never once had to say a word about it out loud to anybody. Do not tell me your clipboard and your waiting room are obviously better.*

Chapter 32:

## **The Wanting**

I have been circling this for the entire book and now I am going to say it.

By the end of two weeks, I want my husband.

There. That is the sentence. That is the sentence that a Chassidic woman is not supposed to write in a book that anybody can buy, and I have written it, and I am not taking it back, and my community is going to have a great deal to say to me about it.

I want him. Physically. The way you are not supposed to say.

And I want you to understand exactly what produced that, because you have spent this entire book assuming that the separation is a suppression of desire, and it is the opposite, it is a factory for it, and I have been living inside the factory for thirteen years.

Here is the arithmetic, and it is not complicated, and every man in advertising already knows it.

Scarcity produces value.

That is it. That is the whole thing. You cannot want something that is always there. You are not capable of it. No human being is capable of it, and every religion and every economy and every marriage counsellor who has ever taken your money knows this and none of them can do anything about it, because you cannot manufacture

scarcity out of nothing.

You have to be denied.

And you will not deny yourself, because you are a free person in a free country and there is no reason to, and every voice you hear tells you to take what you want when you want it, and you have done exactly that, and now you are thirty-four and you cannot remember the last time you were nervous.

I am denied.

Two weeks. Every month. Thirteen years. And it is not my decision, and it is not my husband's decision, and that is the part you keep missing.

Neither of us chose it. That is what makes it work. If I had decided to withhold from my husband, that would be a weapon. If he had decided to withhold from me, that would be a cruelty. If we had agreed together to abstain for two weeks a month as a lifestyle choice, we would have quit in about four months, the way you quit everything, because on the night one of us wanted to quit the other one would have said fine.

Nobody can say fine. That is the entire structure. There is no fine.

The wall was there before either of us was born and neither of us can move it and it does not care what kind of day we have had.

And so on the twelfth day my husband looks at me across a kitchen table and looks away.

And on the thirteenth day the house is very quiet.

And on the fourteenth day I am in a bath at half past nine at night scrubbing my heels like a lunatic, and I am not tired anymore, and I have not been tired since about four o'clock, and my heart is going like a girl's.

You get bored of each other. That is the thing I cannot get over about the outside world. You have four good years and then you get bored and then you start reading articles about how to keep it alive.

Nobody in my community has ever read an article about how to keep it alive.

We have a wall. The wall does it for us.

You do not have a wall. You have a bedroom you can walk into whenever you like, and a man you can have at any moment, and no reason to want him.

And you feel sorry for me.

### **The Lesson**

*Scarcity produces value and you cannot manufacture scarcity out of nothing. You have to be denied, and you will never deny yourself, and that is why you are bored and I am not.*

Chapter 33:

## **A Strange City**

We went to Chicago. I am not going to tell you why.

And it was a Tuesday, or it was the day the counting finished, which in my life is the same thing, and I was in a hotel in a city I did not know, in a neighborhood I did not know, with a husband and several children and a bag that had been packed badly.

And I had to find a mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband.

This is a thing that happens. It happens to every observant woman who has ever gone anywhere, and it is one of the great unwritten adventures of a Jewish woman's life, and I have never once seen it described.

You find one. That is the first thing you need to know and it is the most extraordinary part.

There is a mikveh in almost every city on earth where Jews live. Not most. Almost every one. There is one in Chicago and one in Manchester and one in Buenos Aires and one in a small town in Ohio with two hundred Jewish families in it, and there is one in cities where there are barely any Jews at all, because a community that has almost nothing will still have this.

They built it before the synagogue. I told you that in the fifth chapter and you did not believe me and now I am showing you the proof, which is that they are everywhere.

So you find it. Somebody knows somebody. A telephone number is passed along. A woman you have never met and will never meet answers, and you explain, and she says come at nine.

And this is where it becomes strange.

You walk into a building you have never seen, in a city you do not know, and you take off everything you own.

And it is identical.

That is what nobody tells you. It is the same. It is not the same building and it is not the same street and the woman is not my woman and her accent is not from Williamsburg and the towels are a different color.

And it is exactly, precisely, entirely the same.

The same steps. The same water. The same preparation room with the light that is slightly too bright. The same list on the wall of things to check, in the same order, and I have never read that list because I have known it since I was a bride, and there it was in Chicago, in English and in Hebrew, exactly where I would have put it.

And a woman I had never met stood at the edge of the water and watched me go under and said kosher.

The same word. In the same flat voice. Slightly bored.

I got dressed in a room in Chicago and I sat down on the bench for a second because I could not entirely explain what had just happened to me.

I want to try to explain it to you now.

I had walked into a strange building in a strange city where I knew nobody, and taken off everything that identified me as Sarah Mushka, and gone into the water, and it had worked.

It did not need Williamsburg. It did not need my street or my mikveh lady or my eleven minutes or the fish store or any single one of the things I have spent this book telling you about.

None of that is the mikveh. All of that is my life, and I love my life, and it is not the mikveh.

The mikveh is water that fell from the sky and a woman who takes everything off and goes under it.

That is all. That is the whole thing. It is completely portable and it is completely indifferent to who you are and where you are from, and it has been working in every city Jews have ever been driven to, in every century, in languages I do not speak, for women I would not have understood if they had spoken to me.

They found the water. Every time. In every place. Whatever else they had lost.

I walked back to the hotel in Chicago with my hair wet under my hat and my husband asked how it was.

And I said it was the same.

And he said, of course it was.

And I have thought about that of course for two years.

### **The Lesson**

*I walked into a strange building in a city I did not know and it was identical. It does not need Williamsburg. It does not need any of my life. Water that fell from the sky and a woman with nothing on, and they have found it in every place they were ever driven to.*

Chapter 34:

## **The Woman Who Was Not Born Into This**

There is a woman who goes into that water and comes out Jewish.

That is how it is done. There is no other way and there has never been another way. A person who wants to join us studies for years, and argues, and is discouraged, because we do discourage, and if she is still there at the end of all of it she goes to a mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, and goes under and comes up as a Jew.

Same water. Same steps. Same woman standing there with a towel.

I have thought about her more than anybody would guess, and she is the reason I finally understood what I have been doing every month for thirteen years.

Because look at what happens to her.

She goes into that water as one person and she comes out as another one. Not metaphorically. Legally. Actually. She has a different status when she comes up those steps than she had going down them, and it happened underwater, and it took about four seconds.

Nobody thinks that is strange. Everybody accepts it. It is the oldest and least controversial thing in my religion.

And it is the identical water I get into.

So what do you think is happening to me?

You have spent this book assuming that my immersion is a cleaning. A woman gets tidied up and is returned to her husband. That is what the word purification did to your head and I have been fighting it since the third chapter.

The water that turns a stranger into a Jew is not cleaning her.

It is changing what she is.

And that is what it is doing to me. Every time. That is what it has been doing to me for thirteen years and it took a woman I have never met, a woman who was born somewhere else to a family that was not ours, for me to see it properly.

I go into that water as a woman who is separated from her husband. I come out as a woman who is not.

That is not hygiene. That is a change of status, effected by immersion, exactly like hers, and the only difference between us is that hers happens once and mine happens over and over for the whole length of my fertile life.

Now I want to say something about her that is going to be uncomfortable for some people on my street.

She chose it.

I did not choose any of this. Let us be completely honest at this stage in the book. I was born into it. I was born to a family that had been doing this for a very long time and I did what my mother did and I have never once had to decide.

She decided.

She sat somewhere, in a life that had nothing to do with any of this, and she looked at what we do, all of it, the counting and the water and the wall through the middle of the month, and she said, I want that.

And people told her not to. And she came back. And they told her not to again, because that is the custom, and she came back again.

And then she took off everything she owned and went into the water and came up as one of us.

I have never met a convert who did not understand the mikveh better than I did at the same age.

Never. Not once. They know what it is, because they had to work out what it was before anybody would let them near it, and I did not have to work out anything, I just went, because it was Tuesday.

There is a woman somewhere reading this who is not Jewish and is thinking about all of this in a way she is not admitting to anybody.

I know you are there. You have read this far, and that is not nothing, and you have been feeling something in this book that you were not expecting to feel and you have not told a soul.

I am not going to tell you to convert. That is not my business and it is not what this book is for and my community would have a great deal to say about it.

I am telling you that the water does not check where you came from.

It never has.

### **The Lesson**

*There is a woman who goes into that water as a stranger and comes out as one of us. Same water. Same steps. It is not cleaning her. It is changing what she is. And that is what it has been doing to me every month for thirteen years and I needed her to see it.*

Chapter 35:

## **Going When the Marriage Is Bad**

I have told you about the good nights. Now the other kind.

There are months when you do not want to go.

Not tired. Not busy. Do not want to go, because at the other end of that walk is a man you are angry with, and the water is going to make you permitted to him, and you are not sure you want to be permitted to him.

I have had that month. More than once.

And I want to be careful here, because I know what the outside world does with a sentence like that. It takes it and it runs, and it makes a headline out of it, and by tomorrow it is Chassidic women forced to sleep with husbands they do not want, and that is not what I said and it is not what happens.

Nobody forces anybody. I want that in the record and I want it in bold. Going to the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, does not oblige me to do anything. It removes a prohibition. It does not create an obligation. A woman who immerses and comes home and says not tonight is a woman who has said not tonight, and that is the end of it, and any man who does not understand that is a man who has failed, and he has failed at something his own religion is completely clear about.

So no. Nobody is forced.

But something quieter than force is happening and I am going to describe it.

The month has a shape. The shape is pointing somewhere. And when you are angry with your husband, the shape does not stop pointing there, and the calendar arrives whether or not you have resolved anything, and the water is on Tuesday whether or not the two of you have spoken since Sunday.

So you go. And you stand in the water. And you come home to a man you are angry with.

And here is the thing I did not expect, and it took me about eight years to notice.

It ends fights.

Not always. Not the serious ones, and I have had serious ones and I am not going to pretend a bath fixed them.

But the ordinary ones, the stupid ones, the ones that are three days old and have calcified into something neither of you can remember the origin of, and both of you are simply committed now, out of pride.

Those ones die in the water.

Because you cannot stay angry for two weeks and then get into that pool and come home and keep it going. You can. Physically you can. But you will find that you do not, and that the anger has become extremely difficult to hold, and that it looks smaller than it looked on Sunday.

You put a wall in the middle of a fight and the fight cannot sustain itself. It has to be carried, for fourteen days, by two people who are not touching each other and are sleeping in separate beds. And that is a lot of carrying, and one of you gets tired of carrying it, and usually it is me, and occasionally it is him, and once in eight years it was both of us at the same moment in a kitchen at eleven at night and we both started laughing.

Your fights do not have to survive anything. You have a fight and you have sex and the fight goes away without ever being resolved, and it goes into the pile with all the other unresolved fights, and the pile is why you are considering couples therapy.

Ours cannot hide in the bedroom.

There is no bedroom for two weeks.

So it has to be dealt with in a kitchen, in daylight, in words, with the children in the next room, or it has to be carried, and carrying is exhausting, and after thirteen years we have both got very tired of carrying.

### **The Lesson**

*You cannot hide a fight in the bedroom when there is no bedroom for two weeks. It has to be dealt with in words, in daylight, or carried, and carrying is exhausting.*

Chapter 36:

## **Nobody Checks**

I want to tell you the most important thing in this book and it is going to take me one sentence.

Nobody checks whether I went.

There it is. That is the whole architecture of Chassidic marriage, and it rests on nothing but my word, and I do not think one person outside my community has ever understood this.

There is no attendance record. There is no receipt. Nobody telephones my husband. The mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, lady does not report to anybody. There is no register, no signature, no book, no proof of any kind that Sarah Mushka was in that building on Tuesday.

When I come home and say I went, that is the entire evidence in existence in the universe.

Now think about what that means.

You have spent this entire book, and possibly your entire life, believing that this is a system in which men control women's bodies. That is the story. That is the documentary. The rabbis rule and the husbands enforce and the women comply, and the mikveh is the mechanism, and the whole apparatus exists to regulate what a woman does with herself.

The men cannot verify anything.

They have built a system in which the single most consequential fact in a marriage, the fact that determines whether a man may touch his wife tonight or must wait another month, is known to exactly one person on earth.

Her.

And they have not built one single mechanism to check her.

They could have. Do not imagine for a second that they could not have. This is a civilization that can tell you the correct way to tie a shoe, that has three opinions about which sleeve goes on first, that has written libraries on precisely how much of a vegetable must be present before a blessing changes.

They could have built a verification system in an afternoon.

They did not.

They looked at the single most important structural fact in Jewish family life and they said, we will ask the women, and whatever they tell us, that is what happened.

Do you understand what an extraordinary act of trust that is? Do you understand that there is nothing else like it? Your world does not trust women with anything. Your world has an application on a telephone to track your cycle and it sells the data. Your world will not let a woman make a decision about her own body without a form, a witness, a waiting period, and a legislature composed almost entirely of men.

My community asks me, and believes me.

Now for the other half, because I promised you honesty and this is the price of it.

If nobody checks, then a woman can say she went and not have gone.

That is not an accusation. That is arithmetic. Any system that relies on a person's word can be defeated by a person's word, and I am not going to stand here and tell you it never happens, because I do not know, and neither does anybody else, and that is precisely the point.

I know it can happen. I know nobody would ever find out. I know what that means and so do you.

And they built it that way anyway.

They built the whole thing on a woman's word and then they walked away and left it there, and it has held for three thousand years.

### **The Lesson**

*The most consequential fact in a Chassidic marriage is known to one person and nobody has ever built a way to check her. They asked the women and believed them. Nothing in your world comes close.*

Chapter 37:

## **A Man Wrote to Me About His Wife**

A man wrote to me.

This happens more than you would think. I write about marriage and intimacy and men read it, and some of them write to me, and most of them are polite and some of them are not and a few of them are in real pain and have nowhere to put it.

This one was in real pain.

He said, and I am compressing him, that there is a whole group of men with this problem. That their wives withhold. That the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, gives a woman a way to refuse a man for two weeks and she can extend it and delay it and he has no recourse and no way to check and no one to complain to.

And then he said something else. He said that some of these women are not withholding at all. He said some of them do not want their husbands because they do not want men. That there are women in our world in marriages with men they were never going to want, and everybody knows, and nobody says it, and they go to the mikveh anyway.

He put those two things in the same paragraph, and I have been thinking about that paragraph ever since.

Let me take them apart, because he welded them together and the weld is the problem.

The first thing is real. I am not going to insult him by pretending otherwise.

A woman can extend the separation. A woman can go later than she needed to go. A woman can say she is not ready, and nobody can contradict her, and I have already told you that the entire system rests on her word and there is no mechanism to check.

So yes. It can be used. And I am certain that somewhere on my street, in some house, it is being used right now, and there is a man in that house who is lonely in a way he cannot describe to anybody, and he is not a villain, he is a man in a marriage that is not working and he has no vocabulary for it and no one to tell.

I have real sympathy for him. I want that on the page.

Now let me ask him something.

Where do you think that comes from?

A woman who was married at eighteen to a man she met twice. A woman who has no language for not wanting him, because there is no language, because nobody ever gave her one, because in our world a wife does not say I do not want you, there is no sentence for it, it does not exist.

And then somebody hands her one mechanism. One. A single place in the entire structure of her life where she can say not yet, and nobody may argue, and nobody may check.

And she uses it.

Is that a woman abusing a system, or is that a woman who has found the one door she can open without asking anybody?

I do not know. I genuinely do not know, and I am not going to pretend to, and I suspect the answer is different in every house on my street.

But I know that a man who is being refused and does not know why is a man who is in a marriage where something has never been said, and I do not think the mikveh did that to him.

I think it just gave her somewhere to put it.

### **The Lesson**

*You think she is abusing the system. Ask yourself whether she has found the one door she can open by herself, in a house where every other door has to be opened in front of everybody.*

Chapter 38:

## **The Woman Who Does Not Want Him**

Now the second half of what that man said, and this is the hardest chapter in this book, and I have rewritten it four times.

He said some of these women do not want men at all.

He said it as an accusation. He put it in a paragraph about wives abusing their husbands, and he made it a category of the same complaint, and that is the part I will not let stand.

Because he took a woman's pain and reclassified it as her weapon.

Let me tell you what I know and then let me tell you what I do not.

There are women in my community who did not want to marry the man they married, and were never going to want him, and will never want any man, and were married at eighteen to somebody chosen by a shadchan, the matchmaker who arranges introductions between two families, because that is what happens and there was no other available future.

They exist. They exist in every closed community on earth and they exist in the open ones too, and there are organizations, real ones, that exist to help them, and if you have never heard of those organizations that is because you have never had to look.

I am not going to pretend I do not know this. I have written two books about the gap between what people assume about my world and what

is actually in it, and I am not going to fill in this gap with silence just because it is uncomfortable.

So here is what I want you to picture, and I want the man who wrote to me to picture it too.

A woman prepares her body for the better part of an hour.

She takes off the polish. She checks between her toes. She soaks a scab on her knee at half past nine at night. She inspects and checks and checks again because she does not trust herself.

She puts on her coat and walks eleven minutes in the dark past the closed fish store.

She goes down seven steps into water that fell out of the sky.

And she becomes permitted.

To a man she has never wanted and will never want and cannot say so to a single living person.

There is a door. I want to be honest about that, because I will not tell you my world locks a woman in a room forever. A marriage can be ended. There is a get, a religious divorce, and women do ask for one, and women do receive one, and some of them are living quiet lives on the other side of it right now. The door exists.

But it is a heavy door, and it opens in front of everybody, and what is on the other side of it costs more than the outside world understands. So there are women who look at that door for twenty years and never put a hand on it, and I am not going to sit here and tell you they were free to walk through it just because it was there.

I do not have a lesson for that. I want to be honest with you, at the end of a book in which I have had an answer for everything. I do not have one for this.

I have all these beautiful things to say about scarcity and wanting and the wall in the middle of my month, and every one of them assumes

something that I have never once had to question, which is that at the end of the walk there is a man I want.

Take that away and my entire book collapses.

Every argument I have made becomes cruelty. The wall is not building desire, it is building a cage. The wanting is not wanting, it is dread with a calendar. The four seconds under the water are not freedom, they are the last four seconds before she has to go home.

I know that. I have known it the whole time I have been writing this.

So what do I say.

I say that she exists. That is what I say. I say it in print, in English, in a book that anybody can buy, which is more than my community has ever done for her.

I say that when I stand in that water and ask for something, I have, more than once, asked for her.

And I say to the man who wrote to me, and to every man like him, that if your wife does not want you, the question is not how she is refusing you.

The question is why.

And you have never asked her, because there is no sentence for it in our language, and if she gave you the true answer you would not survive it, and both of you have known that for years.

That is not the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband,'s fault.

That was decided when she was eighteen and nobody asked her anything.

## **The Lesson**

*I have an answer for everything in this book except her. She goes into the water and becomes permitted to a man she never wanted, and every beautiful*

*thing I have written collapses. She exists. That is all I can give her, and it is more than anybody else has.*

Chapter 39:

## **The Water and the Empty Month**

There is a woman who has been going every month for four years.

You know what that means by now. I taught you in the eighth chapter. Stopping is the announcement. Going is the absence of the announcement. And a woman who has been going, every month, for four years, in a community where a family of six is small, is a woman whose grief is being conducted in public in a language nobody will admit is being spoken.

I have not lived it.

I want to say that immediately and clearly. I have eleven children in thirteen years. I have been pregnant or nursing for most of my adult life. Whatever else has happened to me, that has not, and I am not going to stand in front of you and perform a pain that belongs to somebody else.

But I have watched.

I have watched a woman come to a wedding and be asked, by a woman who should have known better, whether there is any news. I have watched her say no, and smile, and turn to the table and continue eating, and I have watched her hand.

I have watched women stop coming to certain simchas. Not all of them. The ones where there will be babies.

And I have thought about what the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, is for her, and this is the part I want you to sit with, because it is not what you think.

You think it is a monthly reminder. A cruelty. Every month she goes and immerses and comes home and it does not work and then she does it again, and the ritual is rubbing her face in it, and how dare we make her do this.

I asked a woman about this once. Not directly. You do not ask directly. It came up sideways, the way everything real comes up in my world, over a table, late, with other people in the room.

And she said something I have never forgotten.

She said, it is the only place where nobody asks me.

That is what she said.

The mikveh lady does not ask her. The mikveh lady, who knows exactly how many months it has been, who has the entire calendar of this woman's grief in her head and has had it for four years, says kosher and hands her a towel and complains about the heating.

Everybody else asks. Her mother asks. Her sisters ask, with their eyes if not their mouths. The women at the wedding ask, some of them out of love and some of them out of something else. Her husband does not ask and that is its own kind of asking.

The whole world is asking her, every day, in a hundred small ways.

And once a month she walks into a building with no sign on the door and takes off everything she owns and goes down into water that fell out of the sky, and for four seconds nothing is touching her, and nobody in that building will ask her anything.

And then she gets dressed and goes home.

I am not going to tell you it makes it better. It does not make it better. Nothing makes it better and I would not insult her by suggesting a

ritual could.

But it is four seconds where she is not a woman who has not had a baby.

She is just a person, unmarked, in water older than all of us, being seen by somebody who wants nothing from her.

And she goes back, every month, for four years, and puts her coat on.

I do not have that kind of courage. I want to be clear about that. I have written three books and I say difficult things to strangers on the internet for a living and I have never once done anything as brave as that woman putting on her coat.

### **The Lesson**

*The whole world is asking her and she cannot escape it. Once a month she goes to a building where nobody asks her anything, and for four seconds she is not a woman who has not had a baby. It does not make it better. It is four seconds.*

Chapter 40:

## **Hungary**

My great-grandmother went in a river.

I want to tell you this and then I want to tell you what it means, and I am going to try to do it without becoming somebody I am not, because I am not a historian and I do not want to be one and there are people who have written properly about all of this and I am not going to compete with them.

But my great-grandmother went in a river, and I only know that because it came down to me the way these things do, said once, at a table, in the middle of something else, the way the women in my family say enormous things.

There was no building. There had been a building and there was not one anymore, for reasons that I am not going to spell out because you know the reasons and I am not going to perform them for you.

So there was a river.

And a woman walked to it in the dark, in Hungary, in a country that had decided it did not want her, in water that was so cold that she said, and this is the only detail she ever gave, that she could not feel her hands afterwards.

And she went under.

Because it was the night, and the counting had finished, and that is what a woman does when the counting has finished.

I want you to understand what she was risking.

She could have not gone. Nobody was checking. I have already told you that nobody is ever checking and that the entire system rests on a woman's word, and there was nobody in the world at that moment who would have known or blamed her.

She could have stayed in the house.

And the entire structure of her marriage would have quietly stopped, and her husband would never have said a word about it, and who on this earth would have criticized her?

She went to the river.

In the dark. In Hungary. In water that took the feeling out of her hands.

That is the thing about my community that the outside world has never once understood, and I have written three books trying to say it and I do not think I have managed it yet.

You think we do this because it is easy.

You think we are carried along by a system, that we are passive, that we are doing what we do because we do not know there is anything else, and that if somebody would just open the door and show us the world we would all walk out.

They opened the door. Repeatedly. Violently. They took the building away and they took the town away and they took nearly everybody.

And a woman walked to a river in the dark.

Nobody made her do that. There was nobody left to make her do anything.

She did it because it was hers.

That is the sentence and it took me thirteen years and three books to be able to write it.

When I complain about the hour, and I do complain, and I have complained about it in this book in print where my whole community can read it, I would like you to hold this next to it.

My great-grandmother went into a river.

And I have a heated pool eleven minutes away, in a building with a bench and a hairdryer that does not work properly, and a woman in a chair who is going to tell me my bag is old.

And I am going to complain about my heels.

I know exactly how ridiculous I am. That is not humility, that is arithmetic.

She never told me the rest of it. She told me about the river and then she asked me about school and the conversation went somewhere else, and I let it, because she wanted me to, and I was too young to know what I was being handed.

She is gone now. I have eleven children and she did not meet most of them.

And every single month, when the counting finishes, I put on my coat.

### **The Lesson**

*My great-grandmother walked to a river in the dark in a country that had decided it did not want her, in water so cold she could not feel her hands afterwards. Nobody was checking. There was nobody left to check. She went because it was hers.*

Chapter 41:

## **Coming Back After a Baby**

After a baby you do not go for a long time.

There is a rule about how long and I am not going to give you the rule, for all the reasons I have already given you and will not repeat.

What I will tell you is that the rule is almost never the thing that decides it.

The body decides it.

You bleed for weeks after a birth. Weeks. Nobody tells you this before your first one, or somebody does and you do not hear it, and then it happens and you think something has gone wrong, and it has not gone wrong, this is simply what a body does after it has been torn open and put back together.

So the counting cannot even begin, because there is nothing to count.

And so I do not go, and I do not go, and the weeks accumulate, and there is a strange thing that happens in a house where two people have not touched each other in a very long time and both of them are exhausted and there is a new person in the room who needs everything.

You forget.

That is the honest word. You forget that you were ever those people. You are a woman who has not slept and a man who is trying to be

helpful and failing, and you are logistics, both of you, for weeks, and there is nothing between you but the schedule and the noise.

And then eventually your body finishes and the counting begins and you realize you have not thought about your husband in that way since some time before the birth.

And then it is the night.

I want to describe the first mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, after a baby, because nobody has, and it is the strangest one, and there are eleven of them in my life.

You do not recognize yourself.

That is the first thing. You are standing in that bright room in front of that mirror and you have to look at all of yourself, and the body in the mirror has just done the most enormous thing a body can do, and it looks like it. It is heavier and softer and marked and tired, and it is not the body that was in this mirror before, and it is never going to be that body again, and you know it while you are standing there.

The first time it happened I cried in the preparation room. Not sadly. I could not have told you what it was.

And then you go down the steps.

And here is what I have never been able to explain to anybody.

The water does not care.

It does not care what your body looks like now. It does not care that you are heavier or that you have been torn or that this is your eleventh and something has changed in your face that is not going to change back.

It is exactly the same water. It has been the same water since the third day of creation and it will be the same water when my daughter comes here, and my granddaughter, and it does not adjust itself for any of us.

You go under, and it holds you exactly the way it held you as a bride when you were terrified and had no idea what you were doing.

Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. Both of these are true and you are standing in the middle of it with your eyes closed.

And then you come up, and she says kosher, and you get dressed, and you walk eleven minutes home to a man you have not touched in months.

And your heart is going like a girl's.

Every single time. Eleven times. Thirteen years.

### **The Lesson**

*The water does not care what your body looks like now. It has been the same water since the third day of creation and it will not adjust itself for any of us, and it holds you exactly the way it held you as a bride.*

Chapter 42:

## **Eleven Children Means I Have Barely Been**

Now I am going to tell you the thing I have been keeping from you since the first page.

You have been reading this book with a picture in your head. I know the picture. I put it there and I have been feeding it for thirty-five chapters.

The picture is a woman trudging to the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, every month for thirteen years. Month after month, the counting, the scrubbing, the walk, the water, over and over, a relentless machine of a life, one hundred and fifty times, two hundred times, a Tuesday in the dark forever.

That is not my life.

Do the arithmetic with me. I have never done this on paper before and it is going to be strange for both of us.

Eleven children. Thirteen years of marriage.

Each of those children was nine months. That is nearly all of the thirteen years right there, and you cannot go while you are pregnant, because there is no cycle, because your body is doing something else entirely.

And then after each one, months of bleeding, and then nursing, and nursing very often means no cycle at all, and mine does not come back for a long time, and it did not come back quickly after any of them.

So take thirteen years. Take out the pregnancies. Take out the months of recovering. Take out the long stretches of nursing where nothing was happening.

What is left?

Not one hundred and fifty times.

Nowhere near.

I have been to the mikveh a few dozen times in my entire married life.

A few dozen. In thirteen years.

I am not going to give you a number, partly because I have never counted and partly because I do not want you to have one, but I want you to sit with the size of the gap between what you assumed and what is true.

You thought this was the metronome of my life. The relentless monthly grind that the documentaries want you to imagine.

It has happened to me a handful of times a year at most, and in some years not at all, and there was a stretch of about eighteen months where I did not go once.

That is the great secret of the Chassidic woman's life and nobody has ever told you, and I do not think the outside world has even considered it, because the outside world has one child and two at the most and cannot imagine what a body does when it is asked to do this eleven times.

So when I stand in that water, I am not doing a routine.

I have not done it in a year. Sometimes two.

I have forgotten what it is like. Actually forgotten, the way you forget a place you have not been to, and I walk into that building and the smell of it hits me and I am a bride again for one second.

You cannot get bored of something you do a handful of times a year.

That is the thing. That is what I have been building to for this entire book.

They did not design it this way. Nobody sat down and planned that a woman with many children would experience this rarely enough for it to stay extraordinary. It is simply what happens when a woman spends her twenties doing what I did with my twenties.

But it is what happened. To me and to every woman on my street.

The thing you imagine is grinding us down is a thing most of us have barely done.

### **The Lesson**

*You pictured a hundred and fifty Tuesdays in the dark. Eleven children in thirteen years means I have been a few dozen times in my whole married life. You cannot get bored of something you do a handful of times a year.*

Chapter 43:

## **The Scarcity Is the Point**

So I have gone a few dozen times.

And every one of them was the first one.

That is not a poetic sentence. I mean it flatly and practically. When you go once, and then you are pregnant for nine months, and then you bleed for two months, and then you nurse for a year and nothing happens, and then finally, eighteen months later, the counting begins again.

You have forgotten.

You have forgotten the smell of that building. You have forgotten how many steps there are. You have forgotten what the water feels like on your shoulders and you have forgotten that the towels are always slightly too small and you have forgotten what she says.

And you are frightened.

At my age. Frightened. Standing in a preparation room you have stood in before, doing something you have done before, and your hands are not entirely steady, and you have no idea why.

I have been married thirteen years and I have never once walked into that building casually.

Compare that to your marriage.

You have had every single thing available to you, at every moment, for the entire length of your marriage. Nothing has ever been withheld. Nothing has ever had to be waited for. There is no experience in your entire relationship that you have had only a few dozen times.

And so nothing in your marriage is rare.

And nothing rare is nothing precious, because those are the same word wearing different coats, and every single person in the world understands this about diamonds and wine and holidays and does not understand it about their own husband.

Here is what nobody tells you about the Chassidic life and the number of children in it.

The children are the reason the water stays holy.

If I went every month, thirteen times a year, for thirteen years, it would become a chore. It would. I am not a saint and I have never claimed to be, and I have told you already that I go because it is Tuesday and not because I am aflame with devotion.

A hundred and fifty times is a routine. A few dozen times, spread across the whole arc of a woman's fertile life, each one separated from the last by a pregnancy and a birth and a year of feeding a child, is not a routine.

It is a series of separate returns.

Every one of them is a coming back. Coming back to my own body after it has been someone else's for two years. Coming back to my husband after months of being logistics. Coming back to a building I have not seen since before the baby who is now walking.

You cannot manufacture that. There is no way to buy it. There is no retreat and no course and no book, including this one, that can give you the experience of wanting something you have not had in eighteen months.

You have to actually not have it.

And you will never not have anything, because you are free, and because nothing in your life will ever stop you from taking what you want the moment you want it.

That is your freedom and I would not take it from you.

I am only telling you what it costs.

### **The Lesson**

*You cannot get bored of something you have done a few dozen times. The children are the reason the water stays holy. Nothing rare is nothing precious and they are the same word wearing different coats.*

Chapter 44:

## **When You Stop Going Forever**

There is a last time.

Every woman has one and almost none of them know it while it is happening.

You go, and it is an ordinary night, and the water is slightly cool and she says kosher and you walk home. And that was the last one. And you did not know, and nobody told you, and there was no ceremony, and there is not going to be one.

When a woman's body finishes, she stops going. That is all. The counting stops because there is nothing to count and the calendar goes quiet and the building on the corner is simply not part of her life anymore.

There is no ritual for it.

I want to stay on that for a moment because I have been thinking about it for a long time and it is the only thing in my tradition that I cannot make peace with.

We have a ceremony for everything. We have a ceremony for a boy at eight days and a boy at thirteen. We have a ceremony for a wedding that lasts a week. We have a ceremony for the dead that lasts a year. We have blessings for bread and thunder and rainbows and the first fruit of the season.

A woman goes to that building for thirty years and then one day she does not, and there is nothing.

No blessing. No gathering. No woman comes to her house. Nobody says a word.

And I have watched older women in my community and I have wondered what that is like, and I have never asked, because you do not ask, and because I am not sure I want the answer yet.

I asked my mother once. Obliquely. In the way we ask things.

She said, it is quiet.

That is all she said. It is quiet. And then she asked me about one of the children and the conversation went somewhere else and I let it, because she wanted me to.

It is quiet.

Here is what I think is in that word, and I could be entirely wrong, and I will find out in about fifteen years.

I think that for thirty years a woman's month has a shape. It has a rhythm and a wall and a return, and it is exhausting and it is intrusive and it organizes her entire life around a body she did not ask for.

And then it stops.

And she is free. Genuinely free, for the first time since she was a girl. No counting. No cloths. No hour in a bath at half past nine. No walking eleven minutes in the dark in February.

And nobody tells her that when the wall comes down, the wanting on the other side of the wall comes down with it.

She may touch her husband whenever she likes. Forever. There is no more waiting and there is no more returning and there is no more Tuesday.

And there is no more coming home from the water with her heart going like a girl.

I do not know what to do with that. It is coming for me and I am not ready and there is nothing to prepare.

My mother said it is quiet.

I think she meant something enormous and I think she said it in three words because that is how women in my family say enormous things, and I think I will understand her in fifteen years, and I think when I do I will not be able to explain it either.

### **The Lesson**

*For thirty years the month has a shape. Then it stops, and there is no ceremony, and no blessing, and nobody says a word. My mother said it is quiet. I think she meant something enormous.*

Chapter 45:

## **My Daughter**

I have a daughter who is old enough now that it is coming.

She is going to read this book. Not now. In a few years, or in ten, or when she is a married woman herself and somebody hands it to her, and I have written every single word of it knowing that.

That is the actual reason for the whole thing and I have been avoiding saying it plainly for forty chapters.

She watches me. She has watched me my whole life, the way daughters do, from slightly behind and to the left, filing everything.

She has watched me take the polish off. She has never asked. Nobody asks in my house, because nobody asked in my mother's house, and this is how it goes down the line, silence handed from woman to woman like a recipe.

She has watched me put my coat on at nine at night and go out of the door with a small bag. She has been watching that since she was very small.

She knows.

Do not imagine for one second that she does not know. Girls in my community are not stupid and they are not asleep and they work everything out years before anybody thinks they have. She knows where I go and she has known for a long time, and she has never asked

me a single question about it, and I have never offered.

That is the tradition. That is the inheritance. That is exactly what my mother did to me and exactly what her mother did to her, and the result was a bride standing in water she did not understand, cold and embarrassed and desperate to leave.

I am not doing that to her.

So here is what is going to happen, and I have thought about it for a long time and I have decided.

I am going to tell her.

Not the technical part. She will have a kallah, a bride, teacher for that, and the teacher will be careful and thorough and will teach her every rule correctly and will not tell her what any of it is for, because that is what kallah teachers do, and I cannot fix that.

I am going to tell her what it is for.

I am going to sit down with my daughter, before she is a bride, before she is standing in a bright room in front of a mirror with her hands shaking, and I am going to say the things nobody said to me.

That the water is not because you are dirty and if any person ever tells you otherwise they have misunderstood their own religion.

That the two weeks are not a punishment. They are the reason you will still want him in fifteen years, when everybody you went to school with has stopped wanting anybody.

That the woman with the towel is not looking at you. She is looking at the water. And she is going to see you cry one day and she is going to say nothing and that is the kindest thing anybody has ever done for me.

That it is going to be tedious and physical and difficult, and that at half past nine at night with a scab on your knee you are going to sit on the edge of a bath and think you cannot do it, and that you will do it, and that the doing is the whole thing.

That she is going to walk home in the dark one night, years into her own marriage, with her heart going like a girl, and that when it happens she should stop on the corner and notice it, because I did not notice it for years and I lost those years.

And that nobody is checking. That nobody has ever checked. That the entire thing rests on her and always will, and that this is not a trap, it is the largest amount of trust that anybody in this world is ever going to place in her, and she should understand exactly what she is holding.

I am going to tell my daughter what I was not told.

And she is going to be embarrassed, and she is going to want the conversation to end, and she is going to look at the table.

And years from now she is going to be standing in that water and something is going to happen in her chest and she is going to remember that her mother sat her down at a kitchen table and told her the truth.

That is what this book is. It is a long letter to a girl who is currently annoyed with me about her shoes.

Everybody else is welcome to read it.

### **The Lesson**

*This whole book is a letter to a girl who is currently annoyed with me about her shoes. She will stand in that water one day and she is not going to be cold and embarrassed and lost, because somebody is going to have told her, and it is going to be me.*

Chapter 46:

## **Why Are You Talking About This in Public**

Now I have to answer my own community.

They have been asking me since the first book and they have got louder with every one, and this book is the loudest yet, and they are not wrong to ask.

Sarah Mushka, why are you telling them this?

That is the question. It comes in the comments, from women who know exactly the world I am describing because they live in it, and it is not hostile. That is what people outside my world never understand. It is not hostile. It is worried.

They are not afraid I will embarrass them.

They are afraid I will give it away.

There is a difference and I want to explain it, because it is the most sophisticated objection anybody has made to my work and it deserves a real answer.

The argument goes like this. The reason the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, works is that it is private. Not secret. Private. Nobody advertises it for a reason. Nobody discusses it for a reason. The whole architecture of my life is built on the idea that some things stay inside the walls of the house, inside the walls of the community, inside the walls of a marriage.

And here I am, publishing it.

And a thing that has been described in a book that anybody can buy in any country on earth is no longer private, and so I have not just told you about the mikveh, I have damaged it.

That is the accusation and I want you to understand that it is a serious one.

Here is my answer and I have had three years to prepare it.

You did not keep it private.

You lost control of it decades ago, and you did not notice, because you were not looking.

There are documentaries about the mikveh. There are articles. There are entire chapters in books written by women who left and are angry and are entitled to be angry, and there are threads on the internet, thousands of them, in which strangers explain my body to each other and every single word of it is wrong.

The privacy is already gone. It went without your permission and it is not coming back.

What is left is the description. And the description is currently being written by people who have never stood in that water, and you are letting them.

That is what I cannot accept.

So when you ask me why I am talking about this in public, here is my answer.

Because they are talking about it in public and you are not, and so they win, and my daughter is going to grow up in a world where everybody knows what she does and every single one of them has it wrong.

You wanted silence. Silence was a strategy and it worked for four hundred years and it does not work anymore, because the world can

see us now, and it is looking, and it has decided what it thinks, and it did not ask.

I am not giving it away.

I am taking it back.

And I know that some of you will never accept that, and I know that this book will be in some houses on my street and not in others, and I know that if a woman I have known my whole life ever found out it was me, she would not speak to me again. I am certain of it. And I am writing it anyway.

I have thought about all of it. I did the counting in the water, with my eyes shut, and I came up and I got dressed and I walked home along the avenue and by the time I got to my door I had decided.

I am writing it. And I would rather my community be angry at me for describing it correctly than have the whole world go on describing it wrong.

### **The Lesson**

*You did not keep it private. You lost it decades ago and did not notice. The world is describing my body without me and I would rather my community be angry at me for getting it right than let strangers go on getting it wrong.*

Chapter 47:

## **The First Time**

I was eighteen.

A bride and then a wife inside the same year. The first time I went to the mikveh, the ritual bath a married woman immerses in before returning to her husband, I went as a kallah, a bride, before the wedding, the way a bride goes, and I did not understand a single thing about what I was doing.

My kallah teacher, the woman who teaches a bride the laws of marriage before her wedding, taught me. Of course she did. She was the same woman who taught me everything else before my wedding, and I have written about her before, in my first book, in a chapter that made a great many people angry.

She would not say the words.

That is what I wrote and it is true and I am not taking it back. She taught me the laws of my marriage in a language so careful and so evasive that I walked out of her house knowing the rules and understanding nothing.

She taught me the counting. She taught me the checking. She was precise and thorough and she did not miss a single technical detail, and she never once told me what any of it was for.

She told me what to do. She did not tell me what it was.

And so I went to the mikveh the first time as a girl performing a procedure. I knew the steps. I did not know the point. I was executing instructions given to me by a woman who could not look at me while she gave them.

And I stood in that water at eighteen years old and I felt nothing.

I want to say that clearly, because there are books that will tell you the first immersion is a transcendent moment, a girl becoming a woman, a light coming down.

Nothing. I felt cold and embarrassed and desperate to leave.

And afterwards, once I was married, I walked home eleven minutes and went into my apartment and my husband was there and neither of us knew what we were doing and both of us were pretending very hard.

That is the truth about the first time and every woman on my street knows it and none of them will say it.

So why am I telling you.

Because I want you to understand what changed, and it was not the water and it was not the ritual and it was not my community.

It was thirteen years.

Nobody explained it to me. Nobody ever explained it to me. I want to be honest about that, because there is a version of this book where the wise older women of my community sat me down and revealed the meaning and I received it gratefully.

That never happened. Nobody said anything to me. I did the counting for thirteen years and I walked eleven minutes for thirteen years and I stood in the water for four seconds at a time and I worked it out myself, slowly, badly, in pieces, over more than a decade.

And that is my one complaint. That is the thing I would change.

Not the mikveh. Not the counting and not the two weeks and not the wall.

The silence around it.

They gave me a magnificent structure and no explanation and told me to get on with it, and I did get on with it, and it took me thirteen years to find out what I was holding.

I have a daughter who is old enough now that it is coming.

She is going to be a bride one day, in a room, with a woman she does not know, and nothing on, and a set of instructions and no explanation, and she is going to feel cold and embarrassed and desperate to leave.

Unless somebody tells her.

That is why I am writing this. Not for you. I have said what I have to say to you and I have said it in three books and you can take it or leave it.

For her.

So that when she stands in that water she knows what she is standing in, and she does not have to spend thirteen years working it out on her own.

### **The Lesson**

*They gave me a magnificent structure and no explanation. It took me thirteen years to find out what I was holding. My daughter is old enough now that it is coming. Somebody has to tell her, and it is going to have to be me.*

Chapter 48:

## **Coming Home**

Eleven minutes.

The same eleven minutes I walked on the way there, except now my hair is wet under my hat and everything is different and nothing has changed.

It is late. The stores are shut. The fish store, the wig shop with the heads in the window who are still watching. The men are gone from the street, and the street is mine, and it is quiet in the way a Brooklyn street is quiet, which is not quiet at all, there is a car alarm somewhere and a bus on the main road.

And I am walking home to my husband.

I have not touched him in two weeks. I have been looking at him for two weeks, which is not the same and is much worse. I have watched his hands on the page and I have watched him with the children and I have lain four feet from him in the dark and talked about my mother.

And I am walking home, and my heart is going.

That is the sentence I want to leave you with, and I have made you read forty chapters to get here.

My heart is going. At my age. After thirteen years and eleven children and every ordinary catastrophe of a long marriage. Walking home from a building nobody talks about with a damp head under my hat.

You do not have this.

I am not being cruel. I have not been cruel in this book and I am not going to start on the last page. I am telling you something true and you already know it, and you have known it for a while, and it is why you have read this far.

You do not walk home to your husband with your heart going.

You have not been separated from him. You have not been made to wait. You have not spent fourteen days looking at a man you were not permitted to reach. There is no wall in your month and there is no water at the end of it and there is no eleven minute walk in the dark.

He is just there. He was there yesterday and he will be there tomorrow and there is nothing between the two of you but the ordinary erosion of two people who have run out of anything to want.

And you cannot fix it by trying. That is the terrible part. You cannot decide to want him. Nobody has ever succeeded in deciding to want somebody. Wanting is not a decision, it is a result, and it results from not having, and you have not been without him for a single night since the honeymoon.

I have.

I have been without him for two weeks out of every month for thirteen years, and I did not choose it, and I could not end it, and it did not care what kind of day I had.

And I am about to open my front door.

And what happens on the other side of that door is not yours. It is not going to be in a book. It is not going to be in a video and it is not going to be described to anybody, ever, by me or by him, and if you have understood one thing in three hundred pages I hope it is why.

Some things stay behind the door.

That is the whole series. That is the name of it. That is what I have been telling you from the first page of the first book and you thought it was a title.

Behind the closed door.

I am going in now.

### **The Lesson**

*Thirteen years, eleven children, and I still walk home from that building with my heart going like a girl. You have a man you can have at any moment and no reason to want him. I would not trade with you for anything.*

Chapter 49:

## **What Is Under the Hat**

So now you know.

You know what is inside the building nobody talks about. You know about the water that has to fall from the sky and the woman in the chair who has held the secrets of hundreds of women for decades and says one word. You know about the hour and the eleven minutes and the four seconds. You know about the wall in the middle of my month and what it has done to my marriage.

You know that I have barely been. That was the one you did not see coming.

And you know the things I did not want to tell you. The woman who does not want him. The man who wrote to me. The fact that nobody checks and what that means in both directions. I said I would not flinch and I did not flinch and it cost me more than the other two books put together.

There is one thing left.

I told you in the twelfth chapter that I shave my head and that I was not going to discuss it, and you have been carrying that around for thirty chapters, and I know you have because I put it there on purpose.

Here is what I will say and then I am finished.

When I walk down those steps into that water there is nothing on me.  
No ring. No polish. No lash. No thread. Not one hair.

And when I come up, and she says kosher, and I get dressed in a small  
room in a building in Brooklyn, I put every single piece of it back on.

The clothes. The rings. The wig. And on top of the wig, a hat.

And I walk out onto the avenue as Sarah Mushka, a woman of my  
community, wife of a man who learns, mother of eleven, entirely  
covered, entirely marked, entirely known to every person who sees  
me, and not one of them has any idea what is underneath.

That is the last door and I have not opened it.

The outside world is obsessed with it. It is the image they want, and  
every documentary finds its way there eventually, and every article,  
and they want it because it lets them feel the thing they came to feel,  
which is horror, and then pity, and then a warm sensation of being  
freer than me.

They think it is about a man not wanting to see me.

It has never once been about a man.

I am going to tell you what it is actually about. What it feels like. The  
mirror. The first time. What my husband knows and what he does not.  
The wig and the hat and the whole apparatus. The girls I know who are  
about to and are frightened. The woman I know who stopped.

And what it gives back, which is the part nobody has ever heard,  
because nobody has ever asked a woman who does it and stayed.

That is the next book.

The next book is about what is under the hat. It is the last door in the  
house, and I am going to open it.

I stayed. I have said that in three books now and I am going to keep  
saying it until somebody understands what it costs.

I stayed, and I looked at all of it, and I told you the truth about every single thing I found, and I am not finished.

Not even close.

### **The Lesson**

*I have opened every door in this house except one. There is nothing under the hat but a woman, and what she chose, and what it gave back. That is the next book and it is the last one nobody has told you.*

— *Sarah Mushka*

Behind The Closed Door Series — Book Three

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