

The Lost Story of Esther:

a rabbinic exploration of trauma

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Synopsis

This thesis seeks to tell the Esther story in narrative form, bringing together Biblical, rabbinic, psychological, and feminist texts. In seven chapters, this thesis tells the beginning of Esther's story— from early childhood through capture, queenship, and the beginning of complete unraveling during the three day fast.

The rabbinic understanding of Esther's story is not the story of any one trauma or any one Esther, but rather the interplay of multiple traumas on Esther and her many parts of self. This thesis seeks to tell Esther's story, piecing together the stories the rabbis created into a cohesive web of interconnected sources and citations. It is a story of one trauma layered on top of another and one character's struggle to cope with a world who cannot seem to take her pain seriously. Esther is a victim of childhood trauma, coping the only way she can—through running away and coming back to her divided self. Over and over, Esther retells her own story, trying to make sense of her present in order to survive her past and ultimately destroy her future.

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*The Violence of the Letter.
At first I didn't see it. The Letter.
Little by little the letter captures the gazes.
At first I looked at the body.
This body that lets itself fall into itself.
That weighs. Weighing. For? Against?*

- Helene Cixous, Stigmata

Introduction

During my 4th year of rabbinic school, I began researching Purim for a children's resource guide I was creating for the congregation where I was working. At first my research went the same way it did with every other holiday— I learned about Pagan roots and the meaning behind ritual practices. And then, when, I mentioned the guide I was working on to a professor, the professor said, "Well you do know Esther was raped, right?" I was astounded. Floored. No one had ever mentioned the possibility. I had never thought of Esther as a rape victim. I had never considered what the "Beauty Contest" really meant, nor what Esther must have given up to approach the King. And so I pressed my teacher for more information. I couldn't believe that this story I had known all my life, this story I had grown up with, really was an entirely different story than I had realized. And then he told me how the rabbis knew that Esther was a rape victim— they didn't hide from it, but rather wrote about it and discussed it and struggled with it. And so we began to study. First the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah 12a-15b that functions in many ways as an extended midrashic commentary on the Book of Esther, and then working outwards, tracking sources and different understandings of the Esther story.

Through our study together, I came to discover Esther the traumatized, fragmented victim. According to the rabbis, Esther is a victim of incest, adopted by Mordecai as a baby, but married to him some time later (B. Megillah 13b). She is a victim of sex trafficking, violently captured with other young virgins and taken to the Harem by force. There was no beauty contest, but a contest of sexual gratification, a contest which the rabbis argue Esther won because of her ability to erase all sense of

self. In B. Megillah 13a, Rav teaches that even Esther's most secret and private part of herself, her sexuality, is not her own, but dependent on the desire of the King— "If [the king] wanted to find in her the taste of a virgin, he found it; if the taste of a non virgin, he found it." Esther has no sense of self—it's been destroyed. Ruined beyond repair. And the rabbis who see Esther's pain and trauma, take it seriously. In B. Sanhedrin 74b they describe her as Karka Olam, the dirt of the earth, total nothingness. She is a character with endless names and a myriad of characteristics— a victim who has been shattered into many different parts of self.

The rabbis see Esther's trauma, and struggle to reconcile it with the narrative of her glorification— she does save the Jews after all. For the rabbis, Mordecai is no clear cut heroic uncle, but a tenuous and confusing figure. On the one hand, he is compared to Moses as the greatest man in his generation, and on the other, he exploits Esther and engages in a sexual relationship, which though technically legal, is clearly frowned upon and considered morally murky. They create a web of texts, leaping from source to source by deliberately creating hyperlinks of words and ideas that illustrate through analogy just how deep the narrative of violence and exploitation goes.

When the King is need of a second wife, he sends out messengers to capture and acquire beautiful young virgins, וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נַעֲרֵה־בְּתוּלָה טוֹבֹת מִרָאָה (Esther 2:3). This phrase, נַעֲרֵה־בְּתוּלָה, young virgin, only appears four places in the Bible, and every single time it is in a context of sexual exploitation and violation. In Deuteronomy, the phrase "young virgin" appears twice, in a discussion of the line between rape and

adultery.¹ In Judges, one tribe lies in wait for another, seizing young virgins to rape and take as wives as they return from “the dances and the vineyards.”² In the Book of Kings, David is an old and dying King who “can never grow warm,” but tries to use a beautiful young virgin to warm his bed, a euphemism which is assumed to be sexual, therefore requiring the additional detail, “but the King was not intimate with her.”³ The rabbis compare these two instances of kings seeking young virgins, arguing that when King David sought young virgins, fathers brought their daughters to him, but when King Ahashverosh did the same, they hid them from him.⁴

This phrase, young virgin, appears twice in the book of Esther. The first time, in response to Vashti’s refusal to appear naked before the King, the opposite kind of woman is sought after—a category of women which could be expected to do what they

¹ In the case of a **young virgin** who is engaged to a man—if a man comes upon her in town and lies with her, you shall take the two of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. Thus you will sweep away evil from your midst. (Deut 22:23-24)

If a man comes upon a **young virgin** who is not engaged and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall pay the girl’s father fifty [shekels of] silver, and she shall be his wife. Because he has violated her, he can never have the right to divorce her. (Deut 22:28-29)

² Judges 21:21 “As soon as you see the girls of Shiloh coming out to join in the dances, come out from the vineyards; **let each of you seize a wife from among the girls of Shiloh**, and be off for the land of Benjamin.”

³ 1 Kings 1: 1-4 “King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm. His courtiers said to him, “Let a **young virgin** be sought for my lord the king, to wait upon Your Majesty and be his attendant; and let her lie in your bosom, and my lord the king will be warm.” So they looked for a beautiful girl throughout the territory of Israel. They found Abishag the Shunammite and brought her to the king. The girl was exceedingly beautiful. She became the king’s attendant and waited upon him; but the king was not intimate with her.”

⁴ B. Megillah 12b Rav teaches that when Ahashverosh looked for a wife, everyone with a daughter hid her.

were told and attempt to please the king.⁵ And then, in the very next verse, we meet Mordecai, a character who will exploit the young virgin under his care. When Mordecai is introduced, he is described as someone with power and influence,⁶ but when Esther is introduced a verse later, she is described as, a “shapely and beautiful” young orphan⁷—a vulnerable and also sexually desirable category of woman. And then, in case the reader missed the hint, in the very next verse, Esther is seized with the other maidens, taken to the Harem, and literally exploited for the pleasure of the king.⁸

Esther’s story is a story of sexual exploitation and the price of trauma that extends far beyond the Book of Esther or tractate Megillah of the Babylonian Talmud. Esther’s story exists in a web of interlocking texts— Midrashim, commentaries, halachic works, feminist theory, psychology, and rabbinic and non rabbinic literature. The rabbis created stories out of stories, using narrative as a means of adding additional layers of meaning to the text. Because of this, this thesis functions primarily as narrative, aiming to bring the Esther story to life in a rabbinically grounded way. The story is told in such

⁵ Esther 2:2-4 “The king’s servants who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti.” The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it.”

⁶ Esther 2:5-6 “In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.[Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon”

⁷ Esther 2:7 “He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.”

⁸ Esther 2:8 “When the king’s order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Haggai, Esther too was taken into the king’s palace under the supervision of Haggai, guardian of the women.”

a way as to allow the reader to both appreciate the story as well as learn where different pieces of it comes from. This thesis seeks to introduce part of the web of sources and ideas from which it draws in narrative footnotes. These footnotes are designed to give readers a chance to discover or rediscover the sources for themselves, drawing their own conclusions about how they impact the Esther narrative and our understanding of the issues at stake. The footnotes are designed to provide context to the narrative, and remind readers that our stories always come from somewhere.

Ideas don't just appear out of the air, but are grown and nurtured and built upon. With each retelling we transform the story and what is at stake, changing the content through what is emphasized and what is avoided. This story, Esther's story, is a painful story, a story filled with trauma and darkness and horrific exploitation. Some of the rabbis saw this horror and wrote about it. Now it's our job to continue that legacy and Read the texts of our world and our tradition with new and old eyes alike, exploring a multiplicity of meanings and their implications.

Beginning

Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a vast kingdom that stretched all the way from the Eastern sea to the Western⁹— from India to Kush.¹⁰ And in the very center of this diverse and decadent¹¹ kingdom, teetering on the edge of the capitol city, there was a great stone Kaach.¹² And behind the Kaach's impressive facade, in rooms that were never quite warm enough, there lived a certain Jew named Mordecai and his young charge Esther.¹³

It was just the two of them in their cozy life high upon the a hill. Just the two of them, a few servants, a handful of animals, and a crumbling wall that had seen more than one King come and go. It was a regimented life, but a clear one— filled with implicit rules and rewards for good behavior.¹⁴ It was the kind of life that was sure to make sense and could easily be held onto. And when it didn't, Mordecai was always there to run to and explain away any incongruity and put it all back together the way it should be.

⁹ B. Megillah 11a Rav teaches that Hodu and Kush were on opposite ends of the earth, meaning that the king ruled from one end of the world to the other. Shmuel disagrees and teaches that Hodu and Kush were situated next to one another, thus showing the king's tight authority.

¹⁰ Esther 1:1 "It happened in the days of Ahasuerus—that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia"

¹¹ B. Megillah 12a Rav, R. Yose, R. Nehemiah and R. Judah have an extended conversation describing the decadent wealth of the palace and its elaborate and expensive adornments.

¹² Kaach is palace in Persian.

¹³ Esther 2: 5 "In the fortress Shushan lived a certain Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Yair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite"

¹⁴ Halacha, Jewish Law, governs every aspect of daily life and can be used as a complex system of keeping score of "sinful actions" that carry dire consequences in both this world and the divine.

Everyone loved Mordecai¹⁵ and as a little girl, Esther always hoped to be the first and last person to greet him when he left for the City and returned home each day. As the light turned golden each afternoon, she would stand on tip toes in the attic, peering out of the tallest window. Her heart would thud and breath come slower until she spied him rounding the last curve in the road.¹⁶ And then little Esther would come back to life and squeal, racing down the stairs and through the inner courtyard to launch herself against the heavy wooden door. It would take all of her weight and her strength to get it open, but somehow she always managed it. And then breathless and glowing, she would exchange his cloak or his hat for a smile or wink, or sometimes even a present. On good days he would look down at her and pat her head, crooning, “What a beautiful sight you are, my little Ishtahar!”¹⁷

She would look up at him then, basking in the glow of his approval. And for that moment, it always felt like she was the only person in the entire world—the only one that had ever counted or would ever count. He would hold her chin in his huge hand and stare straight into her soul, examining her for any sign of good deed or the slightest hint

¹⁵ Midrash Rabbah on Esther 2:5 teaches that Mordecai was as great in his generation as Moses was in his generation.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 6:5-7 “וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ:” You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְחֹךְ לְפָנֶיךָ וְלְבָבְךָ: Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. וְשִׁנְתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלַכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשָׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.

¹⁷ B. Megillah 13a R. Nehemiah teaches that “Hadassah was her name. Why call her Esther? All peoples called her so, after Ishtahar,” the ancient near eastern goddess of fertility.

of misbehavior.¹⁸ He saw everything. Always. It only took one disappointed glance from the old man to turn the little girl into a puddle of apologies and insecurities¹⁹ or one smile to light her up like the sabbath lights. But every day, after the greeting, he would drop his hand and turn away from her, looking past her to his books, or the wine, or one of the servants or his endless guests. And once again little Esther would watch herself dissolve into invisibility, relegated to the lonely obscurity of childhood in an adult world.

Sometimes it felt like her whole world started and stopped with Mordecai's presence. His boisterous laugh and abrasive critiques told her who she was and what mattered most. His approving nod and stony silences were the pillars her whole being rested on and the sieve through which she filtered everything she saw and everything she did. Her world was empty without him.

Less real.

Less alive.

Less full of color.

Every morning at daybreak, little Esther would watch the old man she called Cousin²⁰ disappear behind the bend in the road, and feel her heart sink, suddenly

¹⁸ Proverbs 5:21-22 "For a man's ways are before the eyes of God; He surveys his entire course. The wicked man will be trapped in his iniquities; He will be caught up in the ropes of his sin."

¹⁹ In a discussion about damages owed for the pain of degradation B. Bava Kama 86a asks, "is a minor subject to suffer degradation? Yes, as elsewhere stated by R. Papa, if reminded of some insult [the minor] feels abashed."

²⁰ Esther 2:7 "He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother."

desperate and afraid. But then she'd push the creeping loss away and turn from Mordecai to take the other path, the one to the left, away from the hustle and bustle of the waking City, towards her secret Meadow where all the prettiest flowers bloomed. It was another world away off to the left— her own Eden.²¹ Somewhere Cut off from everything else and all those awful watching, waiting eyes. Somewhere entirely and magically her own.

Esther used to play games as she walked. Little, silly games that made her smile and quieted the endless chatter of different voices inside her head. Sometimes she would see how many steps she could take without making a single twig crackle, or how far she could get without allowing even the smallest corner of her skirt to leave the shadows of the trees. Sometimes she'd walk with her eyes closed, counting her steps until she could no longer take the not-knowing and would open her eyes once again. Other times she'd open her eyes as wide as possible and count all of the changes she could find since the day before.²²

But, no matter the morning's game, as soon as little Esther reached the Lightning Stump that guarded her Meadow's entrance,²³ she felt her whole body change. There was no one watching and nothing to be afraid of here. Here, in her

²¹ Genesis 2:8 "The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed."

²² The traditional morning liturgy discusses the ongoing nature of creation. In the Yotzer Or, the liturgy reads, "God renews the work of creation every day."

²³ Genesis 3: 24 God "drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life."

meadow, no matter what was happening everywhere else, she could always breathe. As soon as she crossed the invisible boundary, Esther would kick off her sandals and hitch up her skirts, running as fast as she could through the whispering grass of the wide open spaces.²⁴ She'd run so fast the ground blurred,²⁵ arms outstretched and hair wild like one of the demonesses Mordecai told her stories about,²⁶ letting the endless fears, anxieties, and frustrations fly off of her and out into the wide open sky.

Sometimes Esther would scream or laugh as she ran. Other times she would close her eyes, giving herself over completely to the speed and the meadow and the unknown known of it all. She would run and run and run until she reached the tree at the very center of the Meadow. Her Tree. The tallest, wisest, oldest etrog²⁷ tree in a whole meadow full of fruit trees. But this tree was different. This Tree was her Tree. Her confidant. Her friend. Her mother and grandmother and goddess. Her everything. A tree so gnarled and so strong, it had become her very own Tree of Knowledge.²⁸

²⁴ Genesis 1: 12 "The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good."

²⁵ B. Bava Kama 4a: "Is not the control of man's body [exclusively] his own?— Whatever view you take, behold Karna taught: The principal categories of damage are four and Man is one of them. [Now] is not the control of a man's body [exclusively] his own? You must therefore say with R. Abbahu who requested the tanna to learn, 'The control of man's body is [exclusively] his own'"

²⁶ B. Eruvin 100b In a Baraita it was taught, "She grows long hair like Lilith."

²⁷ B. Berachot 40a discusses what kind of fruit the forbidden fruit in the garden of eden really was. Suggestions include a fig because Adam and Eve create clothing out of figs, grapes (because they create wine), or, as R. Abba of Acco teaches, an Etrog because both its fruit and its wood can be eaten.

²⁸ Genesis 2:9 "And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad"

Every morning little Esther would greet her Mother breathless and eager, resting a palm on rough bark. She would stand there, eyes closed, concentrating on every detail she could feel, letting Mordecai's voice and presence recede with every crack and hump and familiar crevice in the bark. She would say hello to each of them and to all of them, individually and full of wonder. And then, some time later, the wind would rustle the leaves above her, lifting her hair gently off her cheek. And then Esther would smile and rest her forehead against the comforting roughness of her trunk, soaking in her Mother's joy and love and welcome. Then Esther would make sure her skirts were safely tucked up so her legs were free and then climb and climb and climb. Way up to the highest crook of her Mother's branches, where the wind sang and the sun felt so close you could almost touch it.

And sometimes, when Esther was feeling extra small and alone she'd curl up against her Mother, burrowing her face in her leaves and her lemony bark. She would breathe in deep, relishing the feeling of being enveloped by her mother's scent and tell herself the story of her own beginning.

"Once upon a time, long long ago, far far away in the Holy City of Jerusalem," she whispered in her littlest of voices, a voice not entirely her own, but not quite someone else's either. "There lived a great man named Mordecai, the righteous. He was a handsome young man and the smartest, wisest, youngest judge the Sanhedrin had ever seen.²⁹ But then one day the evil King of Babylon forced Jerusalem's nobles into

²⁹ B. Megillah 13b Mordecai was able to uncover the plot against the king because of his language skills, a prerequisite for his former seat on the Sanhedrin.

exile³⁰. But the smart young Mordecai was no man to be pushed around. No, he was a man of intellect and of influence, even then. So just a few weeks after Jerusalem had been thrown into chaos, but long before anyone else “got it together to leave” young Mordecai was on the road to Babylon, homesick and eager to make his fortune.

He travelled as quickly as he could, spending as little coin as possible. Better to appear to be a pauper on the road, and a Prince once he arrived than the other way around... Mordecai made good time on the journey, and it didn’ t take long to rent a small house in the best part of town and establish himself as a great sage and advisor. By the time the rest of Jerusalem’ s fanciest people came to Babylon, Mordecai had already made a new life— in the perfect place to help the new exiles³¹ set up their homes and businesses and get back on their feet.

Life wasn’ t so bad in Babylon. Mordecai was smart and powerful and very very rich. But after a while there was nowhere left to go— no new challenge to reach for, no new barrier to overcome. He had already climbed as high as he could. There were too many rules to Babylonian life and Mordecai wanted a new challenge. A new Empire to make his own. So after hearing rumor after rumor of untold wealth in Shushan,³² a

³⁰ II Kings 24:12-14 “Thereupon King Jehoiachin of Judah, along with his mother, and his courtiers, commanders, and officers, surrendered to the king of Babylon. The king of Babylon took him captive in the eighth year of his reign. He carried off from Jerusalem all the treasures of the House of the LORD and the treasures of the royal palace; he stripped off all the golden decorations in the Temple of the LORD—which King Solomon of Israel had made—as the LORD had warned. He exiled all of Jerusalem: all the commanders and all the warriors—ten thousand exiles—as well as all the craftsmen and smiths; only the poorest people in the land were left.”

³¹ B. Megillah 13a Rava teaches that Mordecai went into exile of his own accord explaining Esther 2:6: “Who had been carried away from Jerusalem”

³² Esther 2:5-6 “In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kush] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.”

now much older and much wiser Mordecai moved his household from the seat of the Babylonian Kings, to that of the Persians.

The Persian Kings were good kings to Mordecai.³³ He spent his days making friends with all the right people and his nights going to all the right parties. He was smart and worked hard so of course everyone loved him for it and he always had plenty of friends.

He was the kindest, strongest, most pious man either community had ever seen.³⁴ Mordecai helped at the soup kitchen and the Tzedakah fund, and the Clothing Warehouse. And it wasn't just money he was willing to give—he went door to door once a month collecting for tzedakah even though he was so much older than the other young men who also collected money.³⁵ Everyone loved Mordecai and he was always the first to help. Anyone close to him was lucky to have him as a friend.

³³ According to Eliezer Schulman's "The sequence of events in the Old Testament" Mordecai lived under Babylonian and Persian Kings in the following order: Nebuchadnezzar, Merodach (called evil), Belshazzar, Darius, Cyrus, and Ahasuerus (followed by Darius II who is considered to be the son of Esther and Ahasuerus)

³⁴ B. Megillah 12b explains Mordecai's different names by teaching that, "he was called "the son of Jair" because he was the son who enlightened [*heir*] the eyes of all of the Jewish people with his prayers; "the son of Shimei" because he was the son whom God heard [*shama*] his prayers; "the son of Kish" because he knocked [*hikish*] on the gates of mercy and they were opened to him."

³⁵ B. Bava Batra 8b the sages teach that, "the charity fund is collected by two persons [jointly] and distributed by three. It is collected by two, because any office conferring authority over the community must be filled by at least two persons. It must be distributed by three, on the analogy of money cases.

And so, in the middle of winter, when a baby girl was found in a basket³⁶ on his doorstep, that Mordecai the Righteous took one look at her and proclaimed her his.³⁷ He was already an old man by then—a man who had already accomplished so much.³⁸ And it was only right that the head of the household, the great savior and Tzaddik, Mordecai, be the one to name her and determine her future.³⁹ It was an honor, really. He had reached for the baby, or so the legend went—but she squirmed and hid her face from him.

“Ah,” he laughed, “This poor little orphan needs a name.⁴⁰ I shall call her Esther, the hidden one.⁴¹ And Hadassah for her bitter and sweet nature.”⁴² The baby smiled and Mordecai grinned and held her close to him and told her would never ever leave her. The End.”

³⁶ B. Megillah 13a R. Yohanan teaches that Pharaoh’s daughter was like a mother who had born Moses because she raised and adopted him.

³⁷ In Esther 2:15 we learn that Esther’s father’s name was Avihail: “When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—and then Rav Aha teaches in Megillah 13a “When her mother became pregnant with her, her father died; when she was born, her mother died”

³⁸ According to Schulman’s “Sequence of Events in the Old Testament” there were 64 years between Mordecai’s first exile from Jerusalem and his return with Zerubbabel. This means that according to the text, Mordecai was an old man by the time Esther became queen.

³⁹ Genesis 2:18-19 “The LORD God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.” And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name.

⁴⁰ Exodus 22: 21-22 “You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me”

⁴¹ B. Megillah 13a R. Judah asks if “Hadassah was her name, why call her Esther? Because she concealed facts about herself as it says, “Esther did not make known her people or her kindred” (Esther 2:20)

⁴² Midrash Rabbah: Esther is named Hadassah because myrtle is sweet smelling but bitter to taste.

Esther burrowed her face deeper into her mother's branches, wondering why she always felt so hollow and sad and far far away inside.

Esther had been six when Mordecai left for Jerusalem.⁴³ And nine when he returned. It had been a long three years.

Endless years.

Dark, hungry, scary years.

Years that shook little Esther to the core.

Years she barely remembered, even while they were happening to her.⁴⁴

But they were also years she could never really forget.

They broke into shadowy slivers of memories that haunted her sleep and disappeared before she could touch them, catch them or ever quite see them for what they were or what they could tell her.

She had been six when He first went away. Dressed up and laced into her most expensive clothes, primped and scrubbed and clutching her nurse's hand, as she said

⁴³ Ezra 2:1-2 "These are the people of the province who came up from among the captive exiles whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried into exile to Babylon, who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own city, who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah"

⁴⁴ "Some people with dissociative identity disorder describe their memory as being like "Swiss cheese holes," "foggy," or "full of black holes". They may suspect something happened or may have been told by others that something happened to them, but have no personal recollection of events and often feel afraid to think about them." Suzette Boon, Kathy Steele, and Onno van der Hart, *Coping with Trauma-Related Dissociation Coping with Trauma-Related Dissociation: Skills Training for Patients and Therapists* (New York: NY Norton & Co 2011), 16.

good bye to her old and impressive cousin Mordecai.⁴⁵ Little Esther had given Him her finest curtsy, a woman's curtsy she'd been practicing for just this occasion. And He had grinned and touched her cheek, "Be good, my little Ishtahar and do as you are told. I'll be holding you accountable when I return."

And then He was gone. And little Esther was all alone, clutching her nurse's hand.

The streets of the Jewish quarter were filled with revelry and merriment and little Esther was on her tip toes, trying to get a last look at the procession of important men leaving the city, proud to see her very own Cousin Mordecai commanding a squadron of them. "*He's off to do God's work to rebuild the Great Temple in Jerusalem,*⁴⁶" she reminded herself, taking a deep breath before cheering all the louder.

But everything seemed smaller when the little girl and her nurse returned to the house on the hill that afternoon. Or rather, everything felt bigger, and Esther herself, felt smaller and smaller, and less and less real. She looked up at the looming stone walls

⁴⁵ Esther 2: 7 describes the relationship between Mordecai and Esther as one of cousins: "He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter"

⁴⁶ Ezra 1:1-5 "In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the LORD roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows: "Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone of you of all His people—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the House of the LORD God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem; and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, besides the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem." So the chiefs of the clans of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites, all whose spirit had been roused by God, got ready to go up to build the House of the LORD that is in Jerusalem."

and those peering, cavernous windows and wondered how long it would take fifteen thousand men to ride from Shushan to Jerusalem and back.⁴⁷

Too long, whispered a familiar, dark rasp that seemed to be coming from somewhere just behind her eyes. The little girl shivered, insides suddenly cold and mouth dry with foreboding. *He's gone Ishtahar,* the voice taunted. *He's gone and He is never coming back.*

The Kaach seemed far too big and far too empty with all the servants gone to other posts, and the windows boarded up. Esther was used to a bustling household filled with chores and servants and men of business coming and going at all hours of the day and night. But now everything was Silent. And still. Echoing no matter how much or how little noise they made. There was just little Esther, her old nurse and a red faced groundskeeper to keep the stone house aloft on the hill for who knew how long. Everything felt empty without Mordecai. And too quiet. Like it was already dead and rotting from the inside.

Even the plants withered without Him.⁴⁸ Before He left for the Promised Land, the summer harvest from the kitchen garden had promised to be a good one. But then,

⁴⁷ Ezra 2: 3-42 numbers the party that left with Mordecai to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem as close to fifteen thousand men.

⁴⁸ B. Megillah 12b describes Mordecai as “the son whom God heard [*shama*] his prayers; “the son of Kish” because he knocked [*hikish*] on the gates of mercy and they were opened to him.”

despite all of their prayers,⁴⁹ the rains came out of their season⁵⁰ and the crop rotted right there in the ground. And once the rains came, they never left. The great stone Kaach was colder and damper than ever and before long Esther's old nurse began to cough.

It didn't seem to matter how many teas she drank, or how many shawls she wore or how high the fire burned, she coughed and she coughed. At first it was just a tickle and then it became a deeper wheeze and then that awful awful rattle that made Esther, as young as she was, feel a cold wave of fear wash over her every time she heard it. She's stand there stock still and silent, waiting for her nurse's chest to heave and gasp and breathe again. But every time it did. And then little by little Esther's panic began to subside. This was just who her nurse was now—someone who coughed and stopped breathing, and then gasped and got her breath back again. It was just part of a bad winter sickness. Nothing too serious, she told herself, just icky and hard to watch. *She' ll be ok. She has to,* that smaller, gentler voice kept repeating over and over again. *She' ll be ok. She has to be.*

Esther was only seven when it happened.

She'd been in her secret meadow all day, gathering berries and nuts and other bits of things that could be eaten. She was going to make them into a soup that was

⁴⁹ A woman's prayer is not halachically relevant, so therefore could be considered futile when women pray to make things happen, like the rain.

⁵⁰ During the Amidah, traditionally Jews pray for God to cause the rains to fall in the proper amount and season.

going to help her nurse. *Maybe even cure her,* Esther hoped. It was from her secret Eden after all, from her very own Tree of Life.⁵¹ *If anything is going to save her, this will.*⁵²

But little Esther was too late.

She found the old woman slumped in the rocking chair by the glowing hearth, still rocking, but no longer coughing or wheezing or making any sound at all.

The little girl had known something was wrong as soon as she opened the garden gate. It was too quiet. She could feel the nothingness lurking there inside the cold dark house. That awful stillness. The fathomless silence that was always waiting for her. But the waiting was over. Here it was. Her biggest fear made real— and little Esther had no idea what to do.

She just froze.—

—standing there on the threshold,⁵³ watching the rocking chair slowly stop rocking.

The sun crossed the sky as the little girl stood there. The shadows lengthened and one by one the stars came out, but still Esther stood rooted, staring at death with

⁵¹ Genesis 2:9 “And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden”

⁵² According to Sforno commenting on Genesis 2:8 “ולשמרה, eating the fruit of the garden would ensure that man’s natural juices would not dry up. Man is equipped with natural heat, and if not supplied with the proper kind of nourishment he may dehydrate. The excellent fruit of the trees of the garden would replenish loss of moisture through evaporation on the skin in the heat of the sun”

⁵³ Genesis 3:7 “Surely, if you do right, There is uplift. But if you do not do right Sin waits at the threshold; Its urge is toward you, Yet you can be its master.””

unseeing eyes. She clutched a basket of fruit in white knuckled hands, thinking of everything and nothing.

Nothing made sense.

And everything did.

*It's your fault, orphan.*⁵⁴ Esther cringed at the familiar violence of the voice inside her, feeling her insides quiver and crumple as each word landed. *You made it happen. This is all your fault, Ishtahar. You wanted it to happen. No you didn't!* It chimed in that other, scared, pleading voice.⁵⁵ *Yes, you did,* the Violence menaced. *You thought about it every day since He left. Every single day. You made it happen, Ishtahar. Your thought it here.* Esther shivered, looking away from herself, trying to push that awful voice away. But there it was, looming over her and making her palms sweat. *There's nothing left here and it's all your fault. You've ruined everything.*

⁵⁴B. Sotah 10a, amidst an analysis of the Judah and Tamar story, R. Samuel b. Nehmani teach that when Judah “solicited her, he asked asked her, ‘Are you perhaps a Gentile?’ She replied: ‘I am a proselyte’. ‘Are you perhaps a married woman?’ She replied: ‘I am unmarried’. ‘Perhaps your father has accepted on thy behalf betrothals?’ She replied: ‘I am an orphan’. ‘Perhaps you are unclean?’ She replied: ‘I am clean’.”

⁵⁵ “When people have been traumatized, their personality is generally organized into at least two types of parts based on functions. The first type of part is focused on dealing with daily life and avoiding traumatic memories, while the second type is stuck in post traumatic experiences and focused on defense against threat (Van der Hart et al., 2006),” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 25.

She thought of the groundskeeper and the way he was always watching her and licking his lips. Her stomach lurched and mouth went dry. *Run away*, circled that rasping, knowing, voice from deep inside. *You're all alone now, Esther. Just run. This is all your fault, you're just a dumb witted orphan and always will be.*⁵⁶ *Run away.* She felt her insides giving way and darkness engulf her on all sides. *You're all alone 'till he comes back*, that other softer voice chimed in. *He's not coming back. Not ever.* That's not true, a calmer voice tried to break through, but that darker voice and that younger, less sure voice were too loud and too insistent. *Get your things and go, Esther. Run away and hide before anyone finds you. You don't want them to blame you for it. Everyone you love dies. It's your fault, Ishtahar, you kill them all.* Esther turned away from herself, overwhelmed with shame. *He's never coming back. Now grow up and run.*

And so she ran.

—back to the nearby meadow.

And hid.⁵⁷

And waited.

And did whatever she had to do to survive, no matter the cost.

⁵⁶ Rav Aha teaches in B. Megillah 13a “When her mother became pregnant with her, her father died; when she was born, her mother died.”

⁵⁷ Genesis 3:10 “He replied, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”

But Esther was nine now and Mordecai was home again and everything appeared to be back to the way it had always been and always should be. The house was reopened and servants hired. There was enough to eat again and new dresses to wear and Mordecai's reassuring arm back around her shoulders where it was supposed to be, patting her head and reminding her she was safe now and had always belonged to him.

Changes

Little Esther's body grew, but the morning ritual in her secret meadow remained the same. As knobby knees turned into awkward jutting ribs, Esther continued to play her private games, honing her skills with an urgency and a diligence she never questioned, nor ever stopped to wonder about. It was just her world. Her normal. And she'd always needed to know she could disappear from it.

Esther would sit there every morning, straddling her favorite branch of her favorite tree, and stare off into the distance, breathing herself into every detail of the wooded paradise below. She spent most of her days high up in her Mother's arms, relishing the freedom of a world laid out at her feet. But every detail she took in came

with a price, and she paid it every time, losing hold of her body with every breath. First she'd take a deep breath and then open her eyes, and then open them again, squinting into the purple mountains on the distant horizon.⁵⁸ Sometimes they would be crystal clear, jagged walls she could never quite see beyond. Other times they would be nothing more than smudges, far away and hazy, as if you could just brush them aside with one hand. Kaving birds flew over the distant mountains, and oh how Esther envied them.⁵⁹ She'd watch those black specks circle and zoom from one corner of the sky to the other,⁶⁰ *free to go wherever they wish to go. Free to see whatever they wish to see and be whatever they wish to be.* Sometimes she would imagine she too was a bird, soaring far far away from anything and everything she had ever known or cared about. And then, after the birds had flown out of sight, Esther would look down at the tall trees and rolling farmland far below; inventing stories about people and animals traveling along the dusty line of the road.

It didn't look like they were on the way to Shushan. *And they aren't,* Esther had decided long ago. *That's the road they take to leave. Not to come. They're leaving... always leaving. Never coming.* And then she'd watch the road itself for a while,

⁵⁸ Genesis 1:9 "God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so."

⁵⁹ B. Sanhedrin 39a "The emperor said to Rabban Gamaliel, 'He who created the mountains did not create the wind, for it is written, For lo, there is a former of mountains and creator of wind.' (Amos 4:13)—According to this reasoning, when we find it written of Adam, And He created... and, And he formed: would you also say that He who created this [one limb] did not create that [another limb]? Further there is a part of the human body just a handbreadth square, which contains two holes"

⁶⁰ Genesis 1:19 "God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky."

noticing every detail she could notice. When she was tired of studying the road and everything near it, Esther would let her gaze just wander, opening her eyes as wide as they would go, doing her best to take it all in at once. But of course, much to her constant aggravation, she never could. Her eyes could never open quite wide enough. Never stare quite long enough. Never see far enough. And so after awhile, she'd give up and close her eyes. And then she would just Listen. And Smell— trying to understand and learn⁶¹ and study⁶² the world in any way she could.⁶³

Sometimes Esther would lean forward until she was lying across the far branch, legs and arms wrapped tight like the wimple around a Torah, eyes closed, and face turned towards the morning sun. And then she'd take a deep breath. And then another, breathing slowly and deliberately until piece by piece, limb by limb, her body gradually began to feel lighter and lighter and then eventually disappear. It was a game she'd played with herself for as long as she could remember, a magic trick where she stepped

⁶¹ Genesis 3:8 "And He said: Who told you that you were naked? [i.e., Where did you learn to be ashamed of your nakedness?] Did you eat of the tree from which I bade you not to eat?" (Rashi Chumash by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein)

⁶² Rashi comments on Leviticus 19:33 and warns, do not say to him, "Yesterday you were an idolator and now you come to study the Torah which was given from the mouth of the Almighty!" Sifra Kedoshim 7:3 "lest the land fall into harlotry": by withholding its fruit. I might think (that this occurs even) if individuals (sin in this regard); it is, therefore, written "and the land be filled with lewdness," and not if individuals (alone sin).

⁶³ In B. Sotah 21b the rabbis ask what the words "I wisdom" mean. R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: Words of Torah only remain with him who renders himself naked on their behalf; as it is said: 'I wisdom have made nakedness my dwelling'. R. Johanan said: Words of Torah only remain with him who makes himself like one who is as nothing, as it is said: Wisdom shall be found from nothing.

out of herself⁶⁴ and into the world around her, free to go wherever she pleased, just like the Birds flying far above.

It had been harder to do when she was younger. When she was little she'd had to concentrate on disappearing for what felt like forever before she finally managed it. It took an entire aleph-bet's⁶⁵ worth of breaths that first time she'd decided to Go-Away-For-Awhile for no reason other than she felt like it and needed to know that she could. That first time she'd been too scared to leave her body too far behind and the third person flight only lasted a few seconds. Esther had been so surprised and excited to see her body nestled there in the crook of the Tree below her, that she snapped back into it and found herself opening her own eyes from the usual vantage point a blink later.⁶⁶ Her heart was pounding, face hot, and body frozen. She was exhilarated and petrified. This feeling of disappearing and coming back to herself felt oddly familiar, as if she'd already managed to perform this magic before.⁶⁷ As if she'd stumbled across something she'd always known how to do, some powerful mystery that suddenly didn't

⁶⁴ Hat Full of Sky-dissociation depicted as a magic trick that leaves one open to being invaded by other voices and ideas (parts of self, but in this case the parts are from different people so it's more like schizophrenia than Dissociative Identity Disorder)

⁶⁵ Gematria relies on the alef bet used as a counting tool.

⁶⁶ Practitioners often describe dissociation to their patients as "the experience of watching yourself from outside your body, and see another part of yourself doing things as if you were watching someone else" (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 17.

⁶⁷ B. Sanhedrin 65b Rabbah created a mai and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: 'You are a creature of the magicians. Return to your dust.' In a note, Steinsaltz explains, "The Book of Creation, Hebrew Sefer Yezirah, is the title of two esoteric books. The older, referred to here, was a thaumaturgical work popular in the Talmudic period. It was also known as Hilkoth Yezirah (Laws of Creation), and is so called in the same story quoted on 67b. Rashi there states that the creation was performed by means of mystic combinations of the Divine Name, which does not come under the ban of witchcraft. Its basic idea is that the Creation was accomplished by means of the power inherent in those letters., 602."

feel like a game at all anymore. Esther took a deep breath, forcing herself to feel the roughness of the bark on her cheek, and the cramp of her legs. To hear the rustle of leaves and the thud of her heart. *You' re ok, Esther. You' re safe now.* Little Esther looked at the familiar slope of the branch and smiled to herself. *This is your own secret power, Ishtahar.* She took another breath, feeling stronger and watched a line of ants march across a leaf. *As soon as you learn how to use it, you can go wherever you want, whenever you want. Be whoever you want.* But why does it feel so familiar? Esther wondered. *Never mind how you came to have it or whether you' ve done it before. Don't think about that, Esther. Not now. What matters is that you have it now.* She nodded, accepting the familiar voices in her head without question or second thought. They just were. And they always had been. And they always would be.⁶⁸

But Esther was older now. Years had passed and the little girl with scraped legs and knotted braids was jostling with another, unfamiliar body. A-soon-to-be-woman's body. An awkward rebellious body filled with desires and fears and secrets she could barely whisper to herself, much less anyone else, not even her Tree of Knowledge.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "People with a complex dissociative disorder have a dissociative organization of their personality that is comprised of two or more dissociative parts, each having (at least somewhat) different responses, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, physical sensations, and behaviors. The inner world of these individuals involves interactions among various parts of the personality, whether or not within conscious awareness." (Boon, Steele, and van der Hart 2011), 25.

⁶⁹ On a drawing of Bathsheba by Rembrandt, Cixous sees, "a motion-less movement, a transformation. Now I see it, it is time, and even: it is time's writing, it is age. From the young head, the body goes forward, aging imperceptibly. Ah! So that's what was gripping my heart. This young woman is in the process of aging. The future spreading through her limbs. Her breasts are still childlike, already her pelvis, her thighs, her legs are in the hands of age." (Cixous 2005), 13.

She spent long hours twined around that uppermost branch of the Tree, careful to lie so that one ridge in the branch lay between the beginnings of her breasts and that other flat bit rested against the triangle of her legs. She liked to imagine those new bumps on her chest pressing against the tree, sucking in her mother's endless life force and growing larger and larger until Esther finally wore those outer badges of female power that would force Mordecai and the world to see her as the Woman she knew herself to be.⁷⁰ As a נערה בתולה, a young maiden, instead of a child, and maybe just maybe, allowed to marry some far off handsome stranger who would take her far far away past the furthest mountains, to places she had only read of and could barely even imagine.⁷¹ *Children didn't have futures, but women do*— and after so many years of waiting she was impatient for her own to begin.

Esther stared off at the hard line of horizon as she daydreamed, eyes unfocused and breath lazy. She felt the softness of the breeze on her face and imagined a lover's hand reaching for her. Beckoning to her. Esther wriggled closer to the branch, her legs wrapping tighter, hips rocking ever so slightly as she pictured a blurry embrace and a

⁷⁰ B. Nidah 47b contains an extensive discussion of the physical properties of a young girl's breasts that would qualify her for womanhood and maturity including the shape and color.

⁷¹ Judges 21:12-21 "They found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 maidens who had not known a man carnally; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. Then the whole community sent word to the Benjaminites who were at the Rock of Rimmon, and offered them terms of peace. Then the Benjaminites returned, and they gave them the girls who had been spared from the women of Jabesh-gilead. But there were not enough of them. Now the people had relented toward Benjamin, for the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. For they said, "There must be a saving remnant for Benjamin, that a tribe may not be blotted out of Israel; yet we cannot give them any of our daughters as wives," since the Israelites had taken an oath: "Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin!": hey said, "The annual feast of the LORD is now being held at Shiloh." (It lies north of Bethel, east of the highway that runs from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.) So they instructed the Benjaminites as follows: "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards. As soon as you see the girls of Shiloh coming out to join in the dances, come out from the vineyards; let each of you seize a wife from among the girls of Shiloh, and be off for the land of Benjamin.

gentle voice whispering half heard words of love and desire. She kept moving against the tree, rocking harder and harder.⁷² That secret place between her legs was throbbing with heat and an itch she'd never let herself move towards before.⁷³ She rocked slower, but with more deliberation and attention to that secret building something, grinding her body into the tree branch, eyes shut tight, fingers clutching bark. Rubbing. Shaking. And then she was moving faster, confused and surprised by the breathlessness and the desperation and the heat that had come out of nowhere and was building towards something that both scared and delighted her.⁷⁴ But then, all of a sudden, right before the wave of whatever-it-was-that-was-happening broke and Esther thought she would fragment into a million pieces, she stopped moving, body rigid and breathless and throbbing and still.

Waiting.

And the birds were chirping and the wind was rustling in the leaves.

And then all of a sudden she was crying. Huge racking sobs that came out of nowhere. Tears poured down her face, body shuddering with a pain and a grief she

⁷² Bereishit Rabah 60:5 commenting on Genesis 24:16, "The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up," asks why it was necessary to say that Rebecca was both a virgin and had never known a man. The rabbis argue that she could still have the "taste" of a virgin even if she had technically lost her virginity to a tree."

⁷³ B. Nidah 13a analyzes the mishnah—"Every hand that makes frequent examinations (of their genitalia) are in the case of women to praiseworthy, but in the case of men, it ought to be cut off" the Gemara then continues by asking, "In what respect do women differ from men? — Women [in this matter] are not sensitive, hence they are praiseworthy."

⁷⁴ B. Yevamot 34b: R. Isaac said: All women of the house of Rabbi who exercise friction are designated Tamar. And why are they designated Tamar? — Because Tamar exercised friction with her finger.

didn't understand and could not explain.⁷⁵ So she just clung to the branch of her mother and cried and cried and cried, burying her face in the smooth leaves and rough bark. Crying and crying until all of a sudden, the tears were over and the cloud of despair had evaporated just as quickly as it had appeared. She blew her nose on the corner of one sleeve and wiped her eyes, wondering if she would ever understand herself.

Esther looked out at the familiar wall of mountains on the horizon and took a deep breath. She lay her face on the branch and closed her eyes, listening to the many voices of the forest.⁷⁶ Birds were chirping. Leaves were rustling. Critters were scampering. And everything, everywhere, was Alive and Breathing. *Just like you*, that smaller voice whispered. The wind stroked her cheek and Esther nodded inside, breathing a little deeper as she relaxed into her mother's embrace. Her breath came slower and slower, until after a while, her body finally relaxed and she fell asleep, twined like a snake around her favorite branch of her favorite tree.

Esther woke confused and disoriented, half afraid and sweating. One of her legs was numb and her fingers cramped from clinging to the branch for so long. The sun was

⁷⁵ B. Nidah 13a: R. Johanan uses the Tamar and Onan story as a gateway to talk about the evils of masturbation. He teaches, "Whosoever emits semen in vain deserves death, for it is said in Scripture. And the thing which he did was evil in the sight of the Lord and he slew him also (Genesis 38:10). R. Isaac and R. Ami said, he is as though he shed blood, for it is said in Scripture: Ye that inflame yourselves among the terebinths, under every leafy tree, that slay the children in the valleys under the clefts of the rocks; read that not as 'slay' but as 'press out'"

⁷⁶ B. Bava Batra 3b describes Herod's violent slaughtering of the rabbis. He kills all the Hasmoneans, except for one maiden who he lusts after, and then embalms after her suicide. He also spares one of the rabbis. In the conclusion of this violent episode, Herod is talking to the one rabbi he spared: (the rabbi) said: I am afraid of him. But, said Herod, there is no-one who can go and tell him, since we two are quite alone. He replied: "For a bird of the heaven shall carry the voice and that which hath wings shall tell the matter" (Ecc 10:20)"

lower in the sky than she'd expected it to be, and soon she was scrambling down the tree and stumbling as she ran back to the big stone house on the hill. *What if I'm too late again?* Esther panicked without understanding or wondering why.⁷⁷ *What if I missed Him and He never comes home?* a smaller, higher pitched voice shrieked. Esther ran faster, heedless of the bushes she leapt over or the sticks and brambles that clung to her skirt and hair. All she could see was Mordecai riding away from her on a horse that fateful day, surrounded by banners and fine men, but leaving her all alone and abandoned nonetheless. Esther ran faster and faster, finally skidding to a halt just before the last bend in the road, breathless and jittery with adrenaline. She tugged at her skirts, fixed the worst of her hair with her hands, and then turned to walk as quickly and as sedately as possible, trying to control her breath just in case someone in the House was watching.

There was a Royal edict⁷⁸ nailed to the doorpost when she arrived, but no sign of Mordecai. Esther was puzzled and scared, but she didn't dare approach the door to get a closer look— there were often edicts coming and going. Instead she swung open the garden gate and rushed to the kitchen to see what she could learn from eavesdropping on the servants. *Did something happen to Mordecai?* Esther's heart pounded and mind raced, but she couldn't bring herself to ask anyone directly. It just wasn't done. Not in

⁷⁷ People suffering from trauma based dissociation “may then feel confused, ashamed, and afraid of what is happening inside themselves and might feel a sense of impending doom, as though something terrible is about to happen.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 27.

⁷⁸ Esther 1:22 “Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people”

this household anyway. *What if he got sent away again? Don't be a fool.⁷⁹ Journeys like THAT take weeks or months to organize. They don't just happen in a day. How dim witted are you? Have you learned nothing in the last five years?*

Esther stationed herself just outside the kitchen door, and sat down with a basket of rice to separate. She leaned against the wall and made herself as small and as insignificant as possible—*like part of the background*, doing her best to decipher the words she was hearing over her rapidly beating heart.

The cook and maid of all work were chopping vegetables and speaking in hushed tones, as if they were afraid they would be overheard.

“She just refused”⁸⁰ the maid was whispering, with a thrill in her voice.

“She never!”

“She did!” Esther could almost see the glee on the maid’s face.

“But why??⁸¹ You can’t just refuse the King.... you just...you can’t!⁸² He’s the king!”

⁷⁹Proverbs 13:16 “But a fool unfolds his folly”

⁸⁰ Esther 1:10-12 “On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.”

⁸¹ B. Megillah 12b R. Yose Bar Hanina taught that Vashti refused to come to the banquet because she was embarrassed of her Tzaraat (leprosy). In a Baraita it was taught that the angel Gabriel came and fixed a tail on her, which was why she was embarrassed and refused to dance naked for the King and his guests.

⁸² Esther 1:15 ““What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?”

Then there was silence and the heavy thud of chopping and the soft swoosh of vegetables being swept into the pot. *What are they talking about?* Esther wondered, still secretly afraid that she had somehow done something wrong and was in some way, some how, entirely to blame.

“There’s an edict nailed to our front door! What can it mean?”⁸³

“It’s not just ours,” the maid whispered, “There’s one on every door and courtyard in Shushan.⁸⁴ I saw it myself on the way back from the market.”

Esther gave a shiver and leaned against the wall—both relieved and worried. Where could Mordecai be? And then all of a sudden Esther felt a shadow on her face and someone looking down on her from the kitchen door. Scared eyes met scared eyes and the Cook nodded to the little girl.

“Be a dear, little miss and go out and read the notice on the door. Then come help us get the last of the meal prepared. Master should be home any minute, the girl will keep watch and set the chickens clucking if she sees him coming.”

Esther nodded and scrambled to her feet, careful to let the recently shucked rice fall back into the basket. But before she could open the garden gate she heard the clatter of hooves and the jingle of armor that meant someone important was coming.

⁸³ Esther 1:19 “If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she.”

⁸⁴ Esther 1:22 “Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people”

Esther raced back to the house. And then she was inside, tugging at her over dress and skittering to a halt in the front hall, just in time for the great doors to swing open and Mordecai to step in, glowing with his own self worth.

There were a few finely dressed elders clustered around him and Esther curtsied her deepest curtsy, eyes trained on the floor. She froze that way for what felt like long minutes, waiting for him to notice her and bid her rise.

“Doesn’t look like *you* have anything to worry about, Mordecai!⁸⁵” one of the men laughed, nodding at Esther and the prostrate servants behind her.⁸⁶

Mordecai laughed, clearly pleased. “What could the King mean by sending us word that every man should be ruler in his own house?⁸⁷” he asked surveying the kneeling household. “Of course he should! Even a weaver must be commander in his own house!⁸⁸ Come my friends,” he turned to the men, “let us share some fine wine and

⁸⁵ Esther 1:16-18 “Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty’s officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation!”

⁸⁶ While describing ‘authority’, Arendt argues that “its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed.” (Arendt 1970), 45.

⁸⁷ Esther 1: 22 “Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people.”

⁸⁸ B. Megillah 12b Rav upholds the King’s edict, but thinks it ridiculous because it is so obvious that a man should be ruler in his own house—mean by sending us word that every man should bear rule in his own house? Of course he should! Even a weaver in his own house must be commander!

talk before we eat. Esther, this beautiful ripening fig,⁸⁹ will serve us, and later we will enforce the King's edict in *full* force!" His friends cheered and clapped him on the back, jabbing each other in the ribs like gleeful little boys on a feast day.

Esther looked down and blushed, heart pounding and body suddenly weightless. When she looked up the old men were gone and it was time to earn her keep.

A few days later a wagon full of scared young women and girls, bundled in blankets, came trundling up the hill and stopped at the great stone house. Mordecai was standing on the steps when they arrived, eyes benevolent.

"Come now, fair Jewesses," he boomed, "I know the Palace has been unkind to you, and you were unfairly treated.⁹⁰ There will be none of that here, you are safe now! Trust me, I know what is best for you." Esther didn't know what he meant or why these women were at their doorstep. *They can't possibly be staying here...* she told herself.

But then one by one he was reaching for them. And though his hair was white and his hands sometimes shook, he was strong as he helped the women step from the cart to the stone steps so their blankets wouldn't slip. *They're naked!* Esther realized with a gasp. Straight from the palace and naked as babes, how could this be? And what

⁸⁹ B. Nidah 47b discusses a girl's maturation into puberty using the metaphor of a ripening fig. When a girl is completely unripe, she is still a child. She is considered in her maidenhood (and thus of marriageable age) when she is a fig at the beginning of ripening, for a ripening fig is subject to tithing while an unripe one is not.

⁹⁰ B. Megillah 12b Rava teaches that Vashti used to strip daughters of Israel and force them to work on Shabbat.

were they doing here? She felt herself receding into the stone walls, eyes huge, and chest thudding— *They' re naked because they don't have any clothing. They don't own any. Not a stitch....*

And then the darkness of those awful years when Mordecai was gone, was lapping at her toes and threatening to swallow her up. She tried to shake it off and push that uncomfortable whatever-it-was as far away as possible.⁹¹ Esther tried and she tried, but despite her best efforts, her body was soon filled to bursting with a slow steady ooze of foreboding. Everything seemed too far away, as if it were happening on a stage far far away and to someone else.

Esther studied the scene before her and tried to ignore the extra gleam in Mordecai's eyes and the way he seemed to be speaking louder and louder, taking up more and more space as his courtyard became fuller and fuller of scared and naked women. *Not women. Girls. They' re no older than me...* Some tried to retreat into the background, and some let their blankets slip when they thought Mordecai was looking their way, but they were all silent— all Waiting for whatever came next.

Mordecai surveyed the now crowded courtyard and smiled, his face warm and open and grinning from ear to ear. He turned to the closest girl, a girl only a few years

⁹¹ “Dissociative intrusions are those symptoms that occur when one dissociative part intrudes into the experience of another. Intrusions may happen in any arena of experience: memories, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, ideas, wishes, needs, movements, or behaviors. That is why many different symptoms have a dissociative underpinning.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 18.

older than Esther, with dark hair and deep set eyes that twinkled. “Now what shall we call you?⁹²”

The woman gave a little giggle and bobbed a curtsey, eyes fixed on the cobblestones. “They call me Rishon,⁹³ my lord, for I was first among the Queen’s serving maids.”

Mordecai reached for the young woman and lifted her chin so their eyes met. They stood like that for a long moment— dark eyes drowning in grey blue flashes. And then, after what felt like forever to Esther, the old man took both her hands in his and proclaimed, “From now on, you will have a name fit for a true daughter of Israel. You will be called Sarah, for your eyes are made for Seeing, just as hers were.⁹⁴” The woman nodded with tears on her cheeks and Mordecai pulled her close and kissed her, his own eyes misty with the promise of so much salvation.

Then Mordecai turned to the next woman, a girl with dusky skin and hard eyes who seemed to be a few years younger than Esther. And once again he asked her what she had been called in the Palace, and then took her by the hand and stared into her eyes and searched for a new name there. Miriam he decided to call her, for she was no

⁹² Genesis 2:19 “And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name.”

⁹³ Rishon is the Hebrew word for First. According to both the biblical and rabbinic narrative, the women of the King’s palace were totally reduced to sexual objects, rather than considered people or even women in their own right.

⁹⁴ Megillah 14a describes the seven prophetesses in Israel. The first mentioned is Sarah for Sarah was called Iskah “for she saw (sakhta) by means of divine inspiration, as it is stated: “In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice” (Genesis 21:12).

more than a child when she foretold the birth of her brother Moses,⁹⁵ the greatest man in his generation. She smiled and nodded, transformed from number to prophetess in one word from this beneficent master.⁹⁶

And so it went. One by one, Mordecai named them. Each for one of the seven prophetesses in Israel.⁹⁷ There were Sarah and Miriam, Deborah and Hannah, Abigail and Huldah, until there was only one left. One scared, but defiant girl with sparkling green eyes and a surprising cruelty to her mouth. She stepped forward, head held high, eyes locked on Mordecai's. And then, as if it were nothing, she just dropped her blanket and stood there naked in full view of the street and everyone in it. Esther's mouth fell open despite herself, watching the strange girl stare straight into Mordecai's eyes, challenging him with the nakedness of her young body. *She's gonna get it now...* But then, much to Esther's amazement, Mordecai's mouth twitched and then grinned as he nodded in recognition. He licked his lips ever so slightly as scanned her face and lingered over her body. *He likes her being like that...* Esther realized, confused and suddenly full of dread.

⁹⁵ Exodus 15:20 explicitly calls Miriam a prophetess because she prophesied the birth of her son Moses. This is discussed in Megillah 14a.

⁹⁶ "The pedophilic teacher had a lot of anger and despair to fool around with, and he didn't let any of it go to waste. He'd tell you any story you wanted to hear, give you the narrative of any book gone missing; Anna Karenina went from being Tolstoy's to being his." Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Militant Feminist* (New York, NY, United States: Basic Books, 2002), 38.

⁹⁷ B. Megillah 14a The rabbis teach that, "the seven prophetesses were Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther."

Esther couldn't help but notice that the girl seemed no older than herself. And that her breasts were fuller *and so much prettier. But there' s no hair⁹⁸ down there...* Esther's cheeks were hot with embarrassment, but like everyone else in the courtyard, she couldn't look away.

"Well what have we here?" Mordecai laughed, taking the strange girl by the hands and pulling her just a smidgen closer than he had anyone else.⁹⁹

The naked girl laughed, clearly pleased. "I am whoever you say I am.¹⁰⁰ I can be whoever you want me to be... Make me into any likeness, my lord.¹⁰¹"

Mordecai smiled a slow spreading smile and took a step back surveying the naked girl from head to toe, clearly delighted with himself. He stared into her eyes for what felt like hours to Esther. And then finally, in a soft and expressive voice he declared, "You, I shall call Esther, for your green eyes and hidden nature."¹⁰²

On the other side of the courtyard, Esther gasped despite herself and all eyes turned to her. Mordecai turned last, his face a stone mask before it transformed in front

⁹⁸ B. Nidah 52b discusses how a girl's suitability for marriage is dependent on her beginning puberty, something which is measured when she grows "two hairs."

⁹⁹ Deuteronomy 21: 11-13 if "you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and would take her to wife, you shall bring her into your house, and she shall trim her hair, pare her nails, and discard her captive's garb. She shall spend a month's time in your house lamenting her father and mother; after that you may come to her and possess her, and she shall be your wife."

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 2:23 "Then the man said, "This one at last Is bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, For from man was she taken."

¹⁰¹ Genesis 1:27 "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

¹⁰² The color green is associated with Esther in multiple places including B. Megillah 15a and 13a.

of her, softening deliberately into welcome. He beckoned and little Esther ran to him and buried her face in his chest when he held her close.

“There, there, little Esther” he crooned, “It’s only a name. And such a fine one at that. You have so many names, Ishtahar. Look at this poor girl who has nothing—not even clothes on her back—and here you are,” he gestured to the large house and her own well made dress, “Surely you wouldn’t begrudge a poor orphan such a little thing as a name! You couldn’t possibly be so cruel and so selfish as that.”

Little Esther nodded against his chest, knowing herself to be acting like a petulant child. But she couldn’t help it. It was her name! How could he not see that? How could he just take it away like that? *And give it to HER of all people... How could he?*

And after that, everything changed.¹⁰³

It wasn’t just Esther and Mordecai and a few servants anymore. It wasn’t just little Esther’s salvation Mordecai was concerned with anymore. She was no longer the one who desperately needed saving and she shouldn’t want him all to herself. She was being unsurprisingly selfish, or so He was always telling her. These girls need Him. And they required endless nightly tutelage and careful daily attention. The house was

¹⁰³ Sifrei Devarim 218:5 in the context of a discussion explaining the creation of a stubborn and rebellious child, “His father desired a captive woman and brought the devil into his home”

suddenly crowded and filled to bursting with jealousies¹⁰⁴ and brokenness. Everywhere she turned, there was another scared young woman scrabbling to create or survive a future.

But she still missed their nightly study sessions and the way He used to pat her cheek when she answered Him correctly. She missed the way His eyes would light up when she greeted Him at the door with her perfect curtsy. She missed the way He always used to notice when she changed her hair or added a bit of embroidery to her tunic, but everything was different now. There didn't seem any point rushing home to open the door for Him anymore, not when there were so many other pretty girls to gush over and remark about and pay attention to.

You're stupid and ugly and he just finally noticed, screamed the Violence in her head. You knew it would happen one day. You knew he would leave you and go away again. You never really mattered. Not ever. That's not true. You're just an unwanted orphan. Nothing more than a charity case. But he saved you! He does care. He's the only one who does. The only one in the whole world. You just have to try harder... be better... more perfect... more attentive... You just have to remind Him how much he needs you.

¹⁰⁴ B. Megillah 13a analyzes the verse "And when the virgins were gathered together the second time and Mordecai sat in the king's gate" (Esther 2:19) and argues that, the King gathered the women together after asking Mordecai for advice about what he should do to get Esther to reveal her identity. The gemara teaches that Mordecai said to him, "a woman is jealous only of the thigh of another woman. Therefore, you should take for yourself additional women. But even so she did not reveal her origins to him, as it is written: "Esther had not yet made known her kindred nor her people" (Esther 2:20).

And so Esther tried to do just that. She woke up early and went to bed late, using the extra hours to prepare Mordecai's favorite foods and arrange his things just the way he liked them.¹⁰⁵ She smiled and nodded and made sure she was always ready and waiting should he need even the smallest thing. But while Esther was constantly and consistently making herself available to her Cousin, she was also carefully reinstating and establishing her place within this new household. She might be the same age as the other girls in the house, but she was family— the woman of the house— not a servant like *they* were.¹⁰⁶ And so she fussed with her appearance in a way she never had before, embroidering lower and lower necklines and experimenting with a woman's upswept hair. She was *not* a servant, but she sure was going to make sure the new women from the palace were considered as such. So she gave them orders and disappeared to her meadow when non-Mordecai related chores needed doing so the other girls would get stuck with messiest and most servant-like tasks.

Time passed and slowly life in the stone Kaach settled into a new routine with Esther always at Mordecai's side and everything else fading into the background. And for a while, it seemed to Esther, like everything really was the way it should be. Through hard work and careful planning, she had survived and won and that was more than she had ever hoped for.

¹⁰⁵ Esther 2:20 "Esther obeyed Mordecai's bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage."

¹⁰⁶ Esther 2:7 "He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter."

And then one night, Mordecai returned from the City hiding a bundle of roses the color of blood and a new glint in his eye. Esther was waiting for him, the house gleaming, and a roast chicken on the table, *just the way he likes it*, she told herself with a smile. She curtsied, took his cloak and hung it carefully on its hook.

“Lovely roses for my lovely Hadassah,” Mordecai greeted her, lips lingering as he kissed her cheek.

“Thank you,” she stammered, caught off guard by the name and the flowers and the warmth in his voice. But she blushed and found herself standing taller, conscious of the many pairs of jealous eyes trained on her back.¹⁰⁷ *Look who's winning now, whores!*¹⁰⁸ Esther preened, smiling and triumphant.¹⁰⁹

“Put them in that Greek vase I like,” He grinned, stroking her hair. “We’ll have them here on the table for Shabbat. They were expensive!”

He reached for a pitcher of wine and took a sip before filling the silver Kiddush cup. Esther returned with the brown vase Mordecai loved, eyes averted from the naked

¹⁰⁷ “The third great teacher was different in substance and in kind. He liked little girls, especially little Jewish girls... he liked us, my two best friends and me. He had sexualized relationships with the three of us. He played us against each other: Who was going to get him at the end of the day or through his machinations get to skip a class to see him? Who had spent the most time with him that day? Who had had the sexiest conversation with him?..... The sexiest thing about him was the range of his experience, not only concerning sex.” (Dworkin 2002),15.

¹⁰⁸ Leviticus 18:18 “Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister and uncover her nakedness in the other’s lifetime”

¹⁰⁹ B. Yevamot 2b-3a discusses the different prohibited sexual relations of “Arayot” (Leviticus 18) including the prohibition against having a sexual relationship with both a woman and her rival.

men and erect animals chasing after a naked, full bosomed maiden, painted on it.¹¹⁰

Mordecai looked from the vase to Esther's chest, and she blushed even deeper, busying herself behind the flowers.¹¹¹ She was embarrassed and confused, mind blank.

She dared not meet His eyes as she lit the candles, but then she glanced up and couldn't look away, "Baruch atah adonai, meleh ha olam, Blessed are you lord," Mordecai grinned as if the words of the blessing were meant for him.¹¹²

"King of the universe, who commanded us to kindle the lights of Shabbat," Esther continued in a rush. She was flustered and confused, and yet strangely detached, as if she both knew and did not know what was coming next.

Once the candles were lit and the blessings sung, Esther rose to begin serving the food, but Mordecai took her hands in his, and bid her sit. "We're not quite done yet, little one." Esther sat down again, confused, but silent, *as always*. Mordecai raised her hands to his lips, and kissed her fingers in a way that made her feel both warm and wary all at once.

¹¹⁰ "He sat next to me and wanted to know details of sexual abuse I had suffered. A lovely woman, not knowing that his interest was entirely pornographic, told a terrible story of being molested by a neighbor. He ignored her.... He pointed to the friends of my godson and said they were old enough to fuck. They were twelve and thirteen. He said that all sex was good, including forced sex." (Dworkin 2002), 46.

¹¹¹ "The one difference, unbridgeable, intractable, between prisons and pornography was that prisoners were not expected to like being in prison, whereas women were supposed to like each and every abuse suffered in pornography." (Dworkin 2002), 167.

¹¹² After a discussion of what qualifies someone to become an apostate, B. Horayot 11a discusses the Mishna, "Who is meant by a ruler? a king." In response, "our rabbis taught, a ruler might signify the ruler of a tribe, like Nahshon the son of Amminadab, hence it was stated, Of all the things which the Lord his God has commanded" (Lev 4:22) and further on it is stated, "that he may learn to fear the Lord his God" (Deut 17:29).

And then, with her hand held firmly to his lips, so close she could feel the heat of his breath creeping over her fingers and wrapping around her wrists, he crooned “Eshet hayil, mi yimtza?”¹¹³ His voice was as rich and as cloying as velvet, eyes like vices. “What a rare find is a capable wife! Her worth is far beyond that of rubies. Her husband puts his confidence in her, And lacks no good thing. She is good to him and never bad, all the days of her life.”

“Cousin..,” Esther interrupted, pulling her hands away, cheeks pink and heart pounding. “You shouldn’t...”

“Esther,” he said, staring her straight in the eye and taking hold of her hand once more, “My little, Ishtahar, beautiful as the moon,¹¹⁴ do me the honor of becoming my wife. Make me the happiest man in all of Persia, let me teach you to be the best wife in all the land.”

Silence.

Esther couldn’t breathe. She just stared at the old man who had raised her,¹¹⁵ dumbstruck as he reached for her cheek and kissed her soundly on the mouth. She just sat there. *You wanted to be woman of the house, Esther... this is all your fault. You made this happen.* Esther turned away from herself and the voices in her head. She smiled a shaky smile, numbly watching herself as Mordecai took her fingers in his

¹¹³ Proverbs 31:10-12, also known as Eshet Hayil, traditionally recited by a man to his wife on the Sabbath eve in thanks for the hard work she did to prepare all of the sabbath meals and ready the household for twenty four hours when work is prohibited.

¹¹⁴ Rashi comments on B. Megillah 13a teaching that Esther is from Ishtahar- as beautiful as the moon.

¹¹⁵ Esther 2:7 “The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.”

mouth. First one and then two, her body suddenly overcome with that hot itch that sometimes happened when she was wrapped around her tree in the meadow. The itch was familiar, but so was the slow gut turning nausea. She looked up, confused, her body divided against itself. Mordecai grinned with his tongue firmly pressed between two fingers. She tried to pull away and he held her fast with one hand, his breath hot and eyes intent.

“Come now, my little princess, these hands have been slaving away preparing for the Sabbath all day. Don’t they deserve a little Sabbath *delight*?”¹¹⁶ His eyes gave a wicked glint and he nipped the side of her palm in a way that made her gasp and blush and gag all at the the same time. She wanted to pull away, and yet... and yet... she was mesmerized.¹¹⁷ She wanted to know what would happen next and in the same instant she wanted to run as far and as fast as she could.

She was caught.

Trapped.

But then Esther looked into his eyes and saw that were looking at her with such wonder and awe... *This can’ t be so bad...not when everyone does it...And when he wants you so badly... And He Loves you, Esther!* and was that even Respect way over

¹¹⁶ B. Shabbat 118b discusses the spiritual and physical pleasures of Sabbath observance. This discussion begins with R. Judah teaching in Rab's name, “He who delights in the Sabbath is granted his heart's desires, for it is said, Delight thyself also in the Lord; And he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.(Psalm 38:3). Now I do not know what this ‘delight’ refers to; but when it is said, and thou shalt call the Sabbath a delight,” (Isaiah 38:13) you must say that it refers to the delight of the Sabbath”

¹¹⁷ Andrea Dworkin—“ there is a specific kind of education the pedophilic teacher gives; the education itself is a seduction, a long, exciting-but-drawn-out-coupling, an intellectually dishonest, soul-rending passion in which the curiosity and adventuresomeness of the younger person is used as the hook, a cynical use because the younger person needs what the older provides.”(Dworkin 2002), 18.

there, in that corner? *It couldn't be. It is. He loves you. He just wants to show you how much he cares. This is what all women want.¹¹⁸ Don't you want to be a woman too?*

"Have some more wine, my pet," he grinned refilling her glass.¹¹⁹

Esther smiled another shaky smile, and reached for her wine with a free hand, hoping she looked like a fancy lady at the Palace and not the unprepared child she knew herself to be. She took a few sips and sat up taller, determined to ignore the cacophony of voices and feelings inside.

"What is this?" Mordecai tutted as he stroked and massaged her hands. "Worn to the bone and full of callouses... no hands for a lady... I must get some special lotion from the spice seller's stall. I know just the thing. A rare and expensive ointment that only the finest Queens use. It will have this skin supple as silk in no time." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Come, my princess, I'll soon teach you to be the finest of wives.¹²⁰"

And then somehow, unbelievably, as Mordecai was letting her hand go, and she was eagerly pulling it back to herself, somehow, her hand brushed that space between his legs. She gave a start and quickly jerked her hand to her own chest. But she couldn't un-feel what she had felt. Nor un-see the jolt of delight in his eyes. She

¹¹⁸ "Women suffer from terrible shame and the shame comes from having been complicit in abuse because one wants to live." (Dworkin 2002), 190.

¹¹⁹ B. Kiddushin 65b teaches that after drinking four cups of wine a woman will solicit even a donkey in the street and not think anything of it— in other words excessive drinking makes women lower their sexual inhibitions.

¹²⁰ B. Megillah 13a A tanna taught in R. Meir's name that Esther was really an obedient wife, as obedient as a daughter, not an actual daughter.

couldn't un-feel the confusion and embarrassment at how she could have been so clumsy in the first place. But there was nothing she could do. All she could do was edge further away on the cushion and busy herself with food that had turned to dust in her mouth. *For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.*¹²¹

“So my little Ishtahar, come and let me make you a wife.¹²²” Mordecai stood and reached out his hand.

Esther choked on her wine.¹²³ *What? Already?* It was too soon. They had only lit the candles a moment ago.¹²⁴ *What about courtship and fairy tales?* This was too soon and too uncontrollable.

“You’ve made me sick wanting you. You’ve bewitched me little Ishtahar, and only you can make it better. Only you can cure me. All the doctors know it to be true.”¹²⁵

Esther met his eyes, startled and concerned. *You can't let something happen to Him. What if he dies because of you? This is all your fault. Again.* “I.... I... I had

¹²¹ Genesis 2:19 God curses the man saying, “For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”

¹²² B. Ketubot 1:1 There are three ways one can acquire a wife: through sex, document, or the exchange of money.

¹²³ B. Ketubot 5b “The question was asked: Is it allowed to perform the first marital act on Sabbath?... [and the question arises] does he do damage in regard to the opening, or does he improve in regard to the opening?...is he concerned about the blood and it is forbidden, or about his own pleasure and it is allowed?”

¹²⁴ “People with a dissociative disorder often have related problems of time distortion (Van der Hart and Steele, 1997). They experience time passing by much too slow or too fast; perhaps more time has passed than they thought, to an hour seems like an entire day.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 16

¹²⁵ **B. Sanhedrin 75a tells the story of a man who becomes sick with desire for a woman. He consults doctors and they agree that the only way to cure him is for him to have a sexual interaction with the woman. The sages however, teach that the woman must not debase or degrade herself in order to save the sick man.**

no idea. I never meant to hurt you, Cousin... But i... I'm only...." The half uttered sentence hung in the air between them, waiting for the scales to tip one way or the other.

And then there was a new voice in her head, a calmer older voice... a voice that was rich and full of power and seduction. *This is your chance, Hadassah—He wants you to be his woman.*¹²⁶ *He needs you. And only you. So go. Please him. He will give you the world for it.*¹²⁷ *This is an easy choice. No choice at all. This is what you've always wanted.*

Esther looked past Mordecai, towards the dark hallway where she knew the women from the palace were lurking. *You can't say no. He'll replace you with someone else.*¹²⁸ *You'll be worthless without him.*¹²⁹

"Come my bride!"¹³⁰ Mordecai's eyes were wide and hopeful. "It's time."

¹²⁶ In Hebrew, to take someone as a wife is synonymous with acquiring a woman—woman and wife are the same word in rabbinic and biblical Hebrew.

¹²⁷ Esther 5:2-3 "As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor. The king extended to Esther the golden scepter which he had in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. "What troubles you, Queen Esther?" the king asked her. "And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you."

¹²⁸ B. Yevamot 65a after a discussion of the complexities involved in a woman marrying man after man consecutively (not simultaneously) Rava teaches, "A man may marry wives in addition to his first wife; provided only that he possesses the means to maintain them."

¹²⁹ Genesis 38: 16 ""Here, let me sleep with you"—for [Judah] did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," [Tamar] asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?"

¹³⁰ B. Shabbat 119a discusses different ways to make Shabbat special. The gemara teaches that "R. Hanina robed himself and stood at sunset of Sabbath eve [and] exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the queen Sabbath.' R. Jannai donned his robes, on Sabbath eve and exclaimed, 'Come, O bride, Come, O bride!'"

And so a girl who looked just like Esther coughed and took another sip of wine before nodding and taking her cousin's hand to do what was commanded of her.¹³¹

Esther woke the next day huddled beneath her bed, cramped, alone and confused. She couldn't remember anything after that last sip of wine at dinner.¹³² The sheets were gone and the blanket was stained red with the beginning of her monthly bleeding.¹³³ *You're a woman now.* But instead of feeling her whole world expand, as she always imagined she would, Esther felt nothing but cold hard dread.

—and regret.

—and a distant, awful gnawing fear she could not name. A fear that lay broken and screaming just out of reach. But whenever Esther managed to come close, it would just lay there screaming and screaming. Never explaining why.

Never listening.

Never stopping.

¹³¹ B. Kiddushin 65b Rav Nahman and Rav Ashi discuss a wife's duties to her husband and whether or not the commandment to "eat with him on the Sabbath" refers to actual eating or to sexual intercourse.

¹³² "People may not only have amnesia for the past, but also for the present. This is called "time loss" and is a hallmark symptom of Dissociative Identity Disorder. People may find themselves in a place and have no idea how they got there, or they may report that there are hours or even days when they do not know what they have been doing." (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 16

¹³³ B. Nidah 8b Our Rabbis taught: [If a virgin] married and observed a discharge of blood that was due to the marriage, or if when she bore a child she observed a discharge of blood that was due to the birth, she is still called a 'virgin', because the virgin of whom the Rabbis spoke is one that is a virgin as regards menstrual blood but not one who is so in regard to the blood of virginity.

Just crying and crying and screaming and crying
—shouting and shouting. and screaming and crying.

But there was no one to listen.

No one to explain

No one to tell her it would all be ok and everything would one day be as it should
be.

So after a while Esther just got up and got dressed, turning her back on the
unnamed fear and the unintelligible pain. There were animals to feed, and a man to
please and a life to survive.

There'd be time enough for unknown nightmares later.

And so she closed the door on herself, hiding the darkness and the shame—
hoping that everything would soon go back to the way it had always been.¹³⁴

But that strange distance between Esther and the rest of herself just kept
growing and growing, leaving the world feeling less and less real.¹³⁵ Every day she felt
herself shrinking and shrinking, leaving larger and larger spaces between herself and
her dirty skin; running away from the things it did and said to Him. She didn't like to think

¹³⁴ Genesis 24:16 "The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up."

¹³⁵ Some practitioners and researchers inform patients experiencing dissociation that "in addition to alienation from yourself, you may also have the unsettling experience that your surroundings or people around you seem unreal." (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 17.

about those lessons in the deep dark night. It made her insides squirm and mind scatter like the autumn wind.

“See, my little pet, I know just what you desire,”¹³⁶ Mordecai would croon in her ear. “Every last thing. I always have and I always will.” And then he’d slap her hard across her rump, or push into her with a sudden thrust. “You are mine,” he’d pant. “And you always have been.¹³⁷ And always will be.” And then she’d whimper something unintelligible and shudder, watching the old man licking his lips and and knowing herself willing to do anything she could to disappear into the ground beneath her.¹³⁸

And sometimes she succeeded.

And sometimes she even managed it before he started panting and slobbering and reaching for her. There were great big holes in her memory of those years. Huge black spots she shied away from and forgot even while they were happening, just as she had before—during those long years of absence and struggle.¹³⁹ Huge creeping patterns of dark lace that overlaid everything she did and experienced and most of all,

¹³⁶ Dworkin describes the pedophilic teacher as someone who “knew what each of us wanted and there he was dangling it and if you were part of his sexual delight he’d give you a taste. We thought he was the honest one” (Dworkin 2002), 16.

¹³⁷ B. Ketubot 38b: A man can have sex with his betrothed wife when she is the age of three years old and one day and older.

¹³⁸ B. Sanhedrin 74b “Esther was like Karka Olam, the dirt of the ground”—meaning that she was a rape victim.

¹³⁹ The DSM IV defines the diagnostic criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder as “A. The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self). B. At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person’s behavior. C. Inability to recall personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness. D. The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behavior during Alcohol Intoxication) or a general medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures). Note: In children, the symptoms are not attributable to imaginary playmates or other fantasy play. (APA, 1994, p. 487)” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 443

remembered.¹⁴⁰ But the lace was beautiful in its own way, and most of the time she barely noticed it. Besides, other than those strange gaps in consciousness, life was good now. There were new dresses to wear and good things to eat and a household to run. There were scrolls to read, and servants to manage, animals to take care of and a meadow to escape to. The bits on the edges weren't so bad, and before long, it began to feel like this was the way things had always been. *And always will be.*

A year passed, and then another.

Esther filled her days with his home, and her nights with his pleasure, centering her whole world around this one great man and his every need. *This Tzaddik... This*

*Prophet.*¹⁴¹ *You're lucky to have him,* she repeated over and over inside, wishing she

could make herself feel the way other women seemed to. *He knows so much more than*

you do. He' s such a great scholar. Such a wise man. He understands how the world works, he' s just trying to teach and protect you. You should be grateful. You

don' t deserve him. He didn't have to pick YOU to be his wife... He's a tzaddik and

prophet. You're lucky to have him. He's a tzaddik and prophet—you're lucky to have him. And

¹⁴⁰ "With sexual abuse people remember and people forget. The process of remembering can be slow, tormenting, sometimes impossible." (Dworkin 2002), 208

¹⁴¹ B. Megillah 15a Rav Nahman teaches that Malachi is the same as Mordecai (meaning Mordecai is a prophet).

with each repetition she pushed herself and her own judgement just a little bit further away, deliberately losing sight of the world and the feelings she once inhabited.

And after a while, she began to believe it. And even worse— had forgotten that things had ever been any different. And perhaps they never really had. *You're a wife now, Hadassah.*¹⁴² *You have responsibilities now*, she told herself, celebrating his successes as if they were her own, and punishing her own minor failures as if they were world shattering catastrophes.¹⁴³

She was just a nobody after all. *Just a dirty street rat without the street. Pretty to look at but not worth much.*¹⁴⁴ Esther knew with a certainty that took her breath away that ultimately she owed everything to Mordecai. She was nothing without him. *Barren and unloveable. Easily misguided and always afraid. Like the untilled soil in need of a farmer.*¹⁴⁵ She couldn't survive on her own.

No woman could.

¹⁴² B. Ketubot 47b “R. Eleazar b. Azariah may admit [that betrothal has the same force as marriage] since [undertakings of such a nature] are due to [a desire for] matrimonial association, and such association, surely, had taken place.”

¹⁴³ “The shock of being unable to control what happens, especially tragedies, overwhelms us.... The orphan is always an orphan” (Dworkin 2002), 201.

¹⁴⁴ Esther 2:7 The biblical text introduces Esther by saying “the maiden was shapely and beautiful”

¹⁴⁵ B. Sanhedrin 74a “אסתר קרקע עולם הייתה”

And yet. Why did everything seem to hurt so much? And feel either suffocatingly close or so impenetrably far away? Why did she shrink at the slightest sound and why did she feel so dead inside?

If marrying Mordecai was the best she could hope for, why did everything feel so wrong and so secret? Why did her chest feel so constricted?¹⁴⁶ Why did she feel the need to scrub her skin raw on sticky mornings?¹⁴⁷ And why oh why, did she always feel so feverish and so off kilter? It didn't make sense to her, and yet somehow, Esther knew better than to ask any of these questions too seriously.

She couldn't think about it. Not yet.... They were too big.

And they could lead anywhere.

To anytime and any person and any place.

She couldn't face that.

Not yet. *Maybe not ever.*

¹⁴⁶ Sifrei 192:1 "And he shall say to them "Hear, O Israel, who is the man that is fearful and faint-hearted...and the officers shall continue": (Deut 20: 3) Why was all this stated? So the cities of Israel should not be desolate. As Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai has said: Come and see how G-d cares for human dignity. When one [soldier] returns, the others would say "maybe he has just built a house" or "maybe he has betrothed a woman". All had to bring proof besides the fearful one whose situation was evident. He heard shields clashing and was scared, blaring trumpets and was shaken, he sees swords being wielded and loses control of his bodily functions."

¹⁴⁷ Psalm 73:13-14 "It was for nothing that I kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence, seeing that I have been constantly afflicted, that each morning brings new punishments."

So the questions just waited, watching her.

Silent and menacing.

Hiding just out of reach...

....way down in the deep dark stillness that made Esther curl into a ball
and beg for death to take her quickly.

The beautiful young Esther,

the hidden one,¹⁴⁸

was still in hiding from herself.

¹⁴⁸ B. Megillah 13a R. Judah asks if “Hadassah was her name, why call her Esther? Because she concealed facts about herself as it says, “Esther did not make known her people or her kindred” (Esther 2:20).

One afternoon Mordecai strode into the Kitchen while Esther was bent over the hearth, adding ingredients to the evening soup. She didn't hear him come in, but she did hear the sudden silence and scattering of serving maids that meant he was in one of *those* moods and looking for solace. She froze and took a deep breath, willing the inside of herself to escape as far away as possible. *Run off to the meadow, Ishtahar,* she told herself. *You know he likes to fuck the fear out of you.... so don't let him see you're petrified. That's all you have to do— just pretend. Head up, eyes down, voice steady. You can do this, Hadassah.* Esther took a deep breath and felt the smallest piece of herself peel off from the rest. It hovered in the doorway for a second, unwilling to leave the rest of her alone with those reaching, grasping, cloying hands and that blood chilling grin. *Go— it'll be too late soon! It will be fine. And over soon... and sometimes it doesn't hurt so much...* Esther shivered, feeling sick to her stomach. And so that smallest, most secret part of her turned and left, floating away on the afternoon wind.

And then Esther took another breath and tried to become someone else, shielding the rest of her from whatever was coming next. She pasted a smile on her face and asked, “What is your pleasure, בעלי,¹⁴⁹ my master, my husband?”

Mordecai’s cheeks were red with wine and eyes alight with his own self worth. “I’m moving up in the world!” he boomed, throwing his arms out expansively as he flopped down on a bench by the table. “Now fetch me some wine and we can drink to your master’s success!” Mordecai spread his legs and scratched himself, laughing when Esther flinched, body on high alert and focused on his every move.¹⁵⁰ *You dimwit.*

What happened to hiding your fear? Esther swallowed her panic and took a deep breath, transforming her face and her body into someone else’s.

“How wonderful!” she agreed automatically, busying herself with his wine. Esther prepared a small plate of food and added as much water to his wine as she dared.¹⁵¹ “What magnificent deed have you done today, my master, my lord?”

Mordecai puffed out his chest and sat down like a king. “I, my dear, have just come from the Palace.”

¹⁴⁹ In Hebrew the word construction “my master” is identical to “my husband”, both are בעלי, baali.

¹⁵⁰ B. Shabbat 118b in a discussion about the merits of not looking at one’s own genitalia, Rabbi and R. Jose agree that someone may merit being called “our holy teacher” if “he did not insert his hand beneath his girdle. R. Jose also said: The beams of my house have never seen the seams of my shirt.”

¹⁵¹ In the context of a discussion of Ecclesiastes 7: 26 “I find more bitter than death the woman, B. Yevamot 63a teaches that “Rab was constantly tormented by his wife. If he told her, ‘Prepare me lentils’, she would prepare him small peas; [and if he asked for] small peas, she prepared him lentils.”

Silence. *Respond orphan!*

“The Palace?” Esther faltered. *This is unexpected!* “בעלי, what were you doing at the palace?”

“Well, my little Ishtahar,¹⁵²” he crowed, reaching for her as she laid down his plate. *Too late! He has you now...* “I am the king’s newest adviser,” Mordecai pulled her close, stroking her waist in a way that made her skin go cold and that place between her legs pulse with that awful rhythmic pain she knew was waiting just around the corner.

“How wonderful בעלי, my husband, my master!” she tried to sound enthusiastic but his breath was hot on her neck.

Rancid and overpowering.

He twined a lock of her hair around a finger and Esther froze, stilling her body to better read the ever changing tide of his moods, hoping against hope, she could find a way to distract him and shift his attention towards anything and anyone but her. *There’s no way out, but in.¹⁵³ He’s going to have his way with you, best find a way to enjoy it.*

But she couldn’t shake the awful clinging feeling of dirtiness, no matter how much she

¹⁵² Rashi comments on B. Megillah 13a that Esther comes from Ishtahar because Esther was as beautiful as the moon.

¹⁵³ B. Ketubot 63b teaches that a woman who refuses her husband’s sexual advances is considered a rebellious wife. This implies that a wife cannot say no to her husband, and therefore that her consent is impossible to give and therefore unimportant (even though we learn elsewhere that a wife’s consent does matter a great deal (such as B. Eruvin 100b)).

ignored it or tried to shove it away. No matter what, there it was, sliding over her body like oil, staining everything.

Shaming everything it touched.

“Don’t you want to know why the King is seeking Mordecai, a certain Jew to advise him?” he drawled, tracing the outline of one breast with a greasy finger.

“Of... of course,” she stammered, trying to ignore the creeping hands and the way it made her flesh crawl.

Esther looked at the hard gleam of lust in Mordecai’s eyes and shuddered, wishing it didn’t have to feel like this. Wishing she could be anywhere else but here with him. *There’s something wrong with you, Esther,* that regal voice taunted. *You must be the problem. You should want this and even demand it from your husband.*¹⁵⁴ *All women do. There must be something wrong with you. You make him like this.* But

Mordecai was staring at her, waiting for her to fluff his feathers and make a fuss over his victorious trip to the palace. Esther groped in her mind for the thread of the conversation and found it, holding it tight in one hand.

“What are your duties, baali, my husband, my master?” Esther asked, voice timid and eyes round and far away.

“My duties?!” he guffawed letting go to slap the table with mirth. Esther tried to move out of his reach while he was distracted, but once again, *too slow!* One hand

¹⁵⁴ B. Kiddushin 61b discusses how many conjugal visits a man owes his wife according to his profession (and how frequently he returns home). This implies that all women want to be having a sexual relationship with their husbands.

snaked around and grabbed her breast, squeezing hard enough to make her jump. *He doesn't know his own strength.*¹⁵⁵ *Go away, you aren't supposed to be here,* that harsh voice yelled. The smaller, growing green voice cowered from the violence and shrank, darting out the door with tears in her eyes.

“Spoken like a true woman!” Mordecai continued, “As blind and ignorant as you are, even YOU must know that our dear King is need of a wife.”

Esther nodded. She remembered that decree all too well.¹⁵⁶ It had been the beginning of the end... when everything started to go wrong again. *What could the Queen have been thinking to run away like that?* Esther wondered. *Who would do such a thing knowing every woman in the kingdom would get hurt? She was just being selfish. How could she be so short sighted and give up the chance to be queen?*

“We had quite the night that night, didn’t we?” Mordecai crooned into Esther’s ear, pulling her onto his lap and grinding into her.¹⁵⁷ She looked away from him, past that shameful night, and out the window at the swiftly setting sun. She couldn’t remember what had happened that night, just that it made her feel small and and

¹⁵⁵ B. Sotah 3a: “The School of R. Ishmael taught: A man does not warn his wife unless a spirit enters into him; as it is said: ‘And the spirit of jealousy came upon him and he be jealous of his wife’. What is the meaning [of the word] ‘spirit’? — The Rabbis declare, It is a spirit of impurity”

¹⁵⁶ Esther 1:19-22 In retaliation for Vashti’s refusal to dance naked in front of the King and his guests, the King issues a royal decree which commands all women to be subordinate to their husbands.

¹⁵⁷ Amidst a discussion of Samson’s sexual impurities, B. Sotah 10a discusses Job 31: 10, “May my wife grind for another, May others kneel over her.” R. Johanan teaches that, “Grind means nothing else than [sexual] transgression; and thus it is stated: Then let my wife grind unto another.”

scared and far away from herself. The old man calmly lifted her skirts, acting for all the world as if he had every right to what was beneath.¹⁵⁸ *And he does you know...*¹⁵⁹ *All men do.*

Esther closed her eyes,
words fleeing,
heart racing,
cheeks burning.

“Well,” Mordecai continued as if nothing were amiss. “I am in charge of procuring the King a new queen!¹⁶⁰ A more amenable כלי this time,” he laughed. “The king wants me to find him all of the best of the eligible young maidens in the land and bring them to him. But we already know who the best is, don’t we?” he rasped into her hair, fingers roaming. Esther shuddered, feeling him begin to move against her.

Into her.

“But don’t you worry, Ishtahar, I’ll keep you safe,” he panted. “I’ll hide¹⁶¹ you far away from the king.”

¹⁵⁸ B. Nedarim 20b R. Josiah teaches that whoever gazes at a woman eventually comes to sin.

¹⁵⁹ B. Ketubot 63b discusses under what circumstances a woman may refuse sex with her husband. The discussion begins with the Gemara arguing that, “the fact, however, is that [in respect] to conjugal union all agree that [a wife who refuses] is regarded as a rebellious woman.”

¹⁶⁰ Esther Rabbah Chapter V: 4 on Esther 2:4 “let the maiden who pleases the King...” Who was the right man for this occasion? Mordecai.” This means that Mordecai was the right man to help the King find his newest wife.

¹⁶¹ B. Megillah 12b Rav teaches that when Ahashverosh looked for a wife, everyone with a daughter hid her.

Like a beam crashing into her.¹⁶²

Destroying her from the inside out.

Ignore it. You know how this works. You've been here before and will be here again.

You will survive this and maybe even enjoy it. You always do. Just disappear. Just go

away. It'll be over before you know it...just a moment or two... It'll be over

soon. She dug her nails into her palm and bit her lip until it bled, focusing on the sharp

vibrant pain of her hand and lip instead of the deeper, duller, more earth shattering pain

way down at her very center, ripping her apart.¹⁶³ *Enjoy it while you can. All good women*

do. There's something wrong with you. You're disgusting.

Mordecai's breath was coming faster now, and she moved instinctively against him, doing the only thing she could to make it end.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² B. Bava Kama 32a responds to a mishna about damages resulting from a beam crashing into a barrel with Rabbah b. Nathan questioning R. Huna, "If a man injures his wife through conjugal intercourse, what is [the legal position]? Since he performed this act with full permission is he to be exempt [for damage resulting therefrom], or should perhaps greater care have been taken by him?"

¹⁶³ B. Eruvin 100b Rami b. Hama citing R. Assi further ruled: A man is forbidden to compel his wife to the [marital] obligation, since it is said in Scripture: And he that hastes with his feet, sins. (Proverbs 19:2)

¹⁶⁴ B. Sotah 9b discusses the relationship between Samson and Delilah. In analyzing the verse, Judges (16:16) "Finally, after she had nagged him and urged him constantly," the text asks, "What means 'and urged him'?" R. Isaac of the School of R. Ami answers, teaching: At the time of the consummation, she detached herself from him."

“You my lamb,¹⁶⁵” he wheezed in her ear, “You would be the fairest of them all!” she shuddered, trying to look away from herself and what she was doing. *What he is doing. Focus on the tapestry. It'll be over soon. Just a little while longer.* “You, my tasty כלי¹⁶⁶ would be a gift fit for a King. But, I’ll never let him have you.¹⁶⁷ I wouldn’t let that happen to my little Ishtahar.... not if she’s good. You need me to protect you, Esther,” he whispered into her hair. “I won’t let anything happen to my perfect little princess...”

And then with a shudder and a grunt it was over and Mordecai was kissing her cheek and then pushing her off him before shoveling food into his mouth as if nothing had happened.

¹⁶⁵ II Samuel 12: 1-8 “The LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said, “There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had very large flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it and it grew up together with him and his children: it used to share his morsel of bread, drink from his cup, and nestle in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. One day, a traveler came to the rich man, but he was loath to take anything from his own flocks or herds to prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him; so he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” David flew into a rage against the man, and said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and showed no pity.” And Nathan said to David, “That man is you! Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: ‘It was I who anointed you king over Israel and it was I who rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master’s house and possession of your master’s wives; and I gave you the House of Israel and Judah; and if that were not enough, I would give you twice as much more.’”

¹⁶⁶ B. Megillah 12b tells the story of the King boasting during a drunken feast to his friends and advisers about the beautiful women in his Harem. In this context the King refers to Vashti as הכלי שאני משתמש בא; the object/vessel that I use and then requests that she come entertain his guests.

¹⁶⁷ B. Megillah 12b Rav teaches that when King David was looking for a wife, all men brought their daughters to him, whereas when Ahashverosh looked for a wife, everyone with a daughter hid her.

Esther stumbled towards the hearth, eyes skittering around the familiar kitchen, as she felt herself come back to herself—heart pounding and dress askew. *You' re a bad wife, Isthakhar.*¹⁶⁸ She turned away from the old man and his meal, ears pricked for the slightest hint of movement. Gingerly, she patted her inner thighs with her underskirts, hoping to clean herself up before the gaggle of serving girls returned to stare and giggle, or even worse, show pity.

Esther's hands were shaking slightly and the place between her legs was throbbing and tender as it always was right after. She tried not to think about the clotting ooze trickling down her leg and soaking into her skirt. Tried not to think about how familiar this all was and just how revolting.¹⁶⁹ *No point in really cleaning up now. It' ll only provoke him. You know he doesn't want to hurt you, you make him do it. Yes he does. He likes that. You know he does. Don' t say that. He is a man with manly desires. It' s not his fault. I am sure he has more in him tonight...*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ B. Yevamot 63b asks the question, “How is one to understand the term a ‘bad wife’? Abaye said: One who prepares for him and has her tongue also ready for him. Rava said, one who prepares for him the tray and turns her back upon him.”

¹⁶⁹ B. Eruvin 100b Rav Ika b. Hanina teaches that the verse “without consent, the soul is not good,” refers to having sexual relations with one’s wife without her consent. This means that while there was not a legal concept of marital rape, the rabbis did understand that a husband was not entitled to have sex with his wife whenever he wanted to, but rather it must be a mutual decision.

¹⁷⁰ B. Shabbat 118b Towards the end of a discussion about the importance of fulfilling one’s conjugal marital obligations, the gemara asks, “Shall we say that R. Jose did not fulfil his marital duties?” The text then answer it’s own question by saying, “rather I cohabited five times and repeated.”

Esther swallowed and took a deep breath, staring into the fire.¹⁷¹ *You know what to do, Esther.*¹⁷² The voice was gentle now, but insistent— like twilight. Soothing—the way Esther thought a mother might sound. The stew pot sat where it always sat, boiling over an endlessly burning hearth. Esther stared at the blackened metal pot as she reached for it, mesmerized by the fire and the promise of a slow burning release.¹⁷³ She held her pinky to the hot metal, feeling nothing at first, and then a sharp gasping pain.¹⁷⁴ It made Esther bite her lip to keep the sound in, relishing the sharp sudden escape she knew would grow and spread long into the endless night. A painful freedom all her own. And then tomorrow there would be a bubble to burst and a scab to keep picking at and prodding every time a fresh wave of pain was called for. *Good girl,* that dark voice crooned. *Don't you feel better, Ishtahar?* Little Esther nodded inside, hugging herself close and wishing she was far away from anywhere she had ever known. *No one can touch you now,* the Violence promised. *He can't have you. Not all of you. .. Not ever. You're the only one who can touch you. You're*

¹⁷¹ Genesis 38: 24 “About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.”

¹⁷² “Some people hurt themselves because they hear inner voice(s) that command them to do so.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 315.

¹⁷³ “Self-harm behaviors are coping strategies involving injury to the body that people employ when they do not have sufficient skills to cope in more adaptive ways. Many traumatized people use self-harm as a way of coping with overwhelming inner experiences.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 314.

¹⁷⁴ B. Bava Kama 85b discusses the importance of pain when factoring in the amount of damages owed a person. Over the course of this discussion, the issue of burning a finger (with no visible bruising) is raised and it too is deemed worthy of restitution because the damage and pain inflicted and felt is considered real.

the only one who gets to destroy you...!¹⁷⁵ the only one who can really end it all if you need to.

Esther smiled a small secret smile, and stuck her hand into the fire once again, riding the slow wave of pain as it cascaded over her, washing her clean and waking her up. She took a deep breath and stepped away from the hearth, content to focus on her throbbing fingers and avoid her slowly shattering heart.¹⁷⁶

Esther didn't know what Mordecai's plans were, nor how he meant to protect her from the King.¹⁷⁷ All she knew was that everything felt harder and scarier than she ever thought it would. *It's all my fault*, she told herself, turning the hurt inward. *You have to try harder, Ishtahar. Work more carefully. Be a better wife. He's a great man and he loves you. He wouldn't let them take you. Not unless he had to... Not unless*

¹⁷⁵ B. Bava Kama 91a discusses liability in damages owed a slave. If a master hits a slave with his own hand and blinds him, or otherwise permanently injures him, the slave must be freed afterward. If however the man hit his slave with an object, and the slave is permanently damaged as a result, he does not go free. The text explains its reasoning by arguing, "we say that it was the slave who frightened himself, as taught: If a man frightens another he is exempt according to the judgments of Man but liable according to the judgments of Heaven; thus if he blew into his ear and deafened him he would be exempt, but if he actually took hold of his ear and blew into it and thus deafened him he would be liable."

¹⁷⁶ B. Bava Kama 59a in the context of a discussion of damages made for pain, degradation, or time loss due to injury R. Simeon b. Judah teaches in the name of R. Simeon b. Menasya, "in the case of rape no compensation is made for Pain, as the female would [in any case] have subsequently to undergo the same pain through her husband. A woman having intercourse by her free will is not to be compared to one having intercourse by constraint."

¹⁷⁷ B. Megillah 12b Rav teaches that when King David was looking for a wife, all men brought their daughters to him, whereas when Ahashverosh looked for a wife, everyone with a daughter hid her.

you make him do it... All you have to do, is be perfect. It's on you Ishtahar. Just be perfect and everything will be ok.

Days passed and then weeks. And slowly Esther relaxed back into the routine of things. One day bled into another and every day Mordecai's warning began to feel less and less real until one day, it was just another jumble of words, discarded in the corner with all the other painful names and idle threats he had left for her over the many years.¹⁷⁸ Soon, it had become just another half remembered something that made her feel small and shaky when she found herself awake in the darkest part of the night.

And then, there finally came a day when Esther didn't look over her shoulder when she walked to the Meadow or made her way to the City Market. And of course, on the day she finally forgot to be afraid, Esther's entire world came crashing in on itself and crumbled down around her.

¹⁷⁸ B. Sotah begins with a discussion of warning one's wife about her inappropriate relationship with another man and the jealousy it instills in her husband. The Gemara analyses the phrase, "if one warns his wife," and argues that if it is an accomplished fact it is allowable, but as something still to be done it is not. Consequently our Tanna holds that it is forbidden to give a warning ."

Capture

Esther was trapped in the very center of the marketplace when she first realized that everything was not as it should be. Everywhere she looked, she saw women and girls. *And only women and girls.*¹⁷⁹ *Where had all the men gone?* Esther looked around at the young women fingering folds of cloth, old women selling ribbons, and girls giggling over knotted bracelets..... Everywhere she looked, there were women, *but not a man in sight.* Esther thought about doing something, about listening to her almost-felt fear—

But then there were screams.¹⁸⁰

Shrieks and the clatter of horses.

Men with weapons.

—and scary twisted faces.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Judges 21:19-20 “So they instructed the Benjaminites as follows: “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards. As soon as you see the girls of Shiloh coming out to join in the dances, come out from the vineyards; let each of you seize a wife from among the girls of Shiloh, and be off for the land of Benjamin.”

¹⁸⁰ Job 15: 21 “Frightening sounds fill his ears; When he is at ease a robber falls upon him.”

¹⁸¹ Me’am Loez teaches that the King and his men kidnapped virgins against their will. The messengers did not tell the virgins that they were recruiting for the Harem, because the King was afraid they would flee.

A chaos of bodies frantically running.

falling.

struggling.

tangling.

Weeping and dying.

Everywhere women were crying.

Shouting.

Begging.

But Esther just stood there, watching the horror unfold all around her. Feeling nothing. Watching it all as if she were listening to a minstrel's tale by the fire.

Someone grabbed her arm with a grip like iron and she stumbled after him.¹⁸² Her body just folded. She didn't even think to struggle. It never occurred to her as an option. *This is your fault, you should have trusted him. He tried to warn you. Mordecai was trying to protect you. You should have seen this coming... Should never have left the hill and come to the market... You should have been prepared for this.* Esther felt herself tugged and jostled and pulled towards the other women, and she just let it happen, unable to hold onto to any one thought for long enough to form a plan or see a way out.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Esther 2:8 "Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Haggai, guardian of the women"

¹⁸³ "Rage is by no means an automatic response to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable. Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise." (Arendt 1970), 63.

They were herded like cattle.¹⁸⁴

A huddling mass of women and girls. Some with the barest hints of a ripening body, others so old, their breasts hung loose beneath threadbare robes.

Some weeping, others defiant,

all terrified.

Waiting to see what new horror life had in store for them.

And then the stillness was broken by the blast of a horn and the beat of the ceremonial drum. More soldiers and then a sudden, swift and piercing silence.

A man in fine robes and an strangely familiar gait stood on the steps, yelling orders to the soldiers and pointing out women. Esther strained to hear him, but all she could hear were snatches of words that made no sense.

“Our Great King..... the Magnificent Ahashverosh..... yes her...not like that one... will serve and please... most worthy Lord and Master. We,” he said, gesturing to the scribes, officials and soldiers standing around him, “have been charged..... with this most sacred of duties.... beautiful virgin maiden, naarah btulah...”¹⁸⁵ Only the very luckiest... will be chosen.”

¹⁸⁴ According to the Moalvim and other commentators, Esther was taken by force.

¹⁸⁵ 1 Kings 1: 2-3 “His courtiers said to [King David], “Let a young virgin (naarah btulah) be sought for my lord the king, to wait upon Your Majesty and be his attendant; and let her lie in your bosom, and my lord the king will be warm.” So they looked for a beautiful girl throughout the territory of Israel. They found Abishag the Shunammite and brought her to the king.”

And then, it was chaos.

“You over here.”

“Not you. Too old.”

“This one’s got a great ass, but not tits, what do you think?”

“Keep her, the king wants a new batch of toys. She’d make a good כלי if you know what I mean!”¹⁸⁶

And so it went.

on and on and on.

—until every woman was humiliated and objectified and thoroughly categorized and catalogued for a stranger’s pleasure. Some tried to prove they already belonged to a man and therefore unfit to be Queen, but no one seemed to be listening.¹⁸⁷

Some tried to escape, slowly edging towards the walls of the courtyard in hopes of a secret way out or a father’s rescue.¹⁸⁸ But there was nowhere to go. It was already too late. There were soldiers everywhere. —Men leering; mouths twisting, cocks hardening.

¹⁸⁶ B. Eruvin 18b Eve, the ideal and archetypal woman, was built with large hips and narrower chest so as to best house sperm, incubate life, and sexually please Adam.

¹⁸⁷ Judges 21: 11-12 “This is what you are to do: Proscribe every man, and every woman who has known a man carnally.” They found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 maidens who had not known a man carnally; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.”

¹⁸⁸ B. Megillah 12b Rav teaches that when King David was looking for a wife, all men brought their daughters to him, whereas when Ahashverosh looks for a wife, everyone with a daughter hid her.

Some women pulled at their skin and mussed their hair, doing everything they could to appear unattractive and unsuitable, but for some of them, that just meant the defilement came all the sooner.¹⁸⁹

Esther looked away from the blank eyes and deadening stares, wishing she could un-see those ravenous, plotting faces and roaming fingers.¹⁹⁰ *I will never be one of them,* Esther shuddered, suddenly sick to her stomach with dread.¹⁹¹ *I will never be one of them.*¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Judges 21:13 “Thereupon the Benjaminites returned, and they gave them the girls who had been spared from the women of Jabesh-gilead. But there were not enough of them.”

¹⁹⁰ Deuteronomy 21: 10-14 “When you go to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your power and you take some of them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and would take her to wife, you shall bring her into your house, and she shall trim her hair, pare her nails, and discard her captive’s garb. She shall spend a month’s time in your house lamenting her father and mother; after that you may come to her and possess her, and she shall be your wife. Then, should you no longer want her, you must release her outright. You must not sell her for money: since you had your will of her, you must not enslave her.”

¹⁹¹ “The worst immorality is in apathy, a deadening of caring about others, not because they have some special claim but because they have no claim at all. The worst immorality is disinterest, indifference, so that the lone person in pain has no importance; one need not feel an urgency about rescuing the suffering person.” Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Militant Feminist* (New York, NY, United States: Basic Books, 2002), 202.

¹⁹² “I had to live with what I was being told. Like death, rape happens to one woman, an individual, a singular person. Even in circumstances of war when there is mass rape, each rape happens to one woman. That one woman can be raped many times by one man or by many.” (Dworkin 2002), 147.

Mordecai will realize what happened she told herself, Mordecai will realize what happened. and then he' ll come speak for you. The king will never want Mordecai's leftovers. You're dirty and used now, Ishtar.... no good to anyone but Him.¹⁹³

Esther, like most of the women at the center of the mass, just stood there, too shocked and too terrified, to do anything but exactly what she was told.¹⁹⁴

They were prodded and poked.

Fondled and laughed at and drooled over.

“Turn this way. Now that”

“When was your last bleeding? Was it heavy or light?”

“Virgin or whore?”¹⁹⁵

“Let's see that hair of yours!”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ If somehow, Mordecai had been unable to protect Esther and sufficiently hide her from the King, as the text claims other Jewish fathers did, he should have been able to come forward after the capture and disclose to the Court that Esther was no virgin, but in fact already married to Mordecai.

¹⁹⁴ Deuteronomy 22: 23-24 “In the case of a virgin who is engaged to a man—if a man comes upon her in town and lies with her, you shall take the two of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man because he violated another man's wife. Thus you will sweep away evil from your midst.”

¹⁹⁵ Leviticus 21:13 “He may marry only a woman who is a virgin.”

¹⁹⁶ B. Bava Kama 91a discusses damages owed a person after injury when the two parties are of different statuses. After discussing a master who harms a slave, the text continues with the Mishna, “ It once happened that a certain person uncovered the head of a woman [in the market place]” In response to this case, the Gemara asks, “But is time allowed? Did R. Hanina not say that no time is granted in cases of injury? — No time is granted in the case of injury where there is an actual loss of money, but in the case of Degradation where there is no actual loss of money, time to pay may be granted.”

“Sure you’re not lying, Missy?”¹⁹⁷

“We’ll soon find out!

Up with them skirts!”

And so it went. Humiliation after endless humiliation.¹⁹⁸ Until Esther, like all of them, begged for anything but captivity... anything but that awful marketplace of Shame and Degradation.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ B. Ketubot 16a R. Gamliel teaches that If you marry a woman and did not find her hymen intact and she says, “after you betrothed me, I was raped and his field was inundated” and he says no, rather you were raped *before* I betrothed you (and my transaction was a mistaken transaction).

¹⁹⁸ “Their bodies have no borders.” (Dworkin 2002), 196.

¹⁹⁹ B. Bava Batra 8b discusses the different kinds of hardships that can happen to a person. R. Yohanan teaches that “famine again is harder than the sword; this again can be demonstrated either by observation, the proof being that the one causes [prolonged] suffering but the other not, or, if you prefer, from the Scripture, from the verse, “They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger” (Lam 4:9). Captivity is harder than all, because it includes the sufferings of all.”

The Harem

That night Esther and the rest of the youngest, and freshest looking maidens found themselves deposited in a sumptuous series of rooms and courtyards, filled with endless nooks and hiding places.²⁰⁰

The Harem,²⁰¹ they were told.²⁰²

Esther tasted the word, playing with it between tongue and teeth. *Harem. Like Cherem. Exile. From everyone and everything. Except the King of course. You belong to him now.* Esther's heart sank, feeling far from home and everything she had ever known. She looked around at the beautifully constructed display case for all of the King's pretty little toys and playthings.²⁰³ How she would ever find a way to survive? *What are the rules here?* She shrank from the domed ceilings and patterned floors; mystified by the endless knots of painted, staring faces. *And when will Mordecai*

²⁰⁰ B. Megillah 12a, Rav teach that the door of the palace was made of fine lace work and there was row after row of luxury.

²⁰¹ In *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, Rebecca Hancock argues that the word Harem is anachronistic in the Esther context. She argues that, "the term should be used with some caution, as it not only tends to describe the physical space where royal women lived, but also has been used to imply significant limitations to women's autonomy and exercise of power that are nowhere clearly described in the text." (Hancock 2013), 73.

²⁰² Esther 2:9 "When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan, under the supervision of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women."

²⁰³ "It is no doubt possible to create conditions under which men are dehumanized-- such as concentration camps, torture, famine-- but this does not mean that they become animal-like; and under such conditions, not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization." (Arendt 1970), 63.

come? Esther stood with the other new girls, silent and unsure just inside the Harem gates. *When in doubt, stay silent and look pretty.*²⁰⁴ *Don't let anyone see how stupid and afraid you always are.*

At first the new acquisitions were stripped naked, doused in steaming tubs, and then placed atop open barrels of wine as they were checked for bugs or deformities or other disqualifying imperfections.²⁰⁵ Esther kept waiting for a stone faced eunuch to reach between her legs and feel for her virginity,²⁰⁶ and then she'd be home!²⁰⁷ But somehow, that inspection never came, and soon Esther's heart was beating faster and faster and her breath was coming shallower and shallower. But there was no way to tell anyone that somehow, an awful mistake had been made. *You shouldn't be here.*

²⁰⁴ Esther 2:7 "The maiden was shapely and beautiful"

²⁰⁵ B. Yevamot 60b while analyzing Judges 21:12, "And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins that had not known man by lying with him," the text asks, "From where did they know that they were virgins? Rav Kahana said: They sat them on the opening of a barrel of wine. If she was a non-virgin, her breath would smell like wine; if she was a virgin, her breath did not smell like wine."

²⁰⁶ Esther 2:3 discusses appointing messengers to "assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem." Since according to the rabbis Esther is married to Mordecai (Megillah 13a), it can be assumed that she is no longer a virgin. If she was not a virgin she would be deemed unsuitable for the King's Harem and the sexual contest for Queen.

²⁰⁷ Deuteronomy 22:11-17 "A man marries a woman and has sex with her. Then he takes an aversion to her and makes up charges against her and defames her, saying, 'I married this woman; but when I approached her, I found that she was not a virgin.'" In such a case, the girl's father and mother shall produce the evidence of the girl's virginity before the elders of the town at the gate. And the girl's father shall say to the elders, "I gave this man my daughter to wife, but he has taken an aversion to her; so he has made up charges, saying, 'I did not find your daughter a virgin.' But here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity!" And they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town."

They were herded into a big room with lots of pillows and couches and cushions and told to make themselves comfortable. Panicked, Esther sat down on the nearest cushion. But then, a moment later, there was a small irate woman yelling at her in a language she had never heard before. Esther scrambled to her feet, flustered and feeling smaller than ever. She just backed away from the shouting woman, apologizing profusely until she knocked into a wall. And then she just stood there, shoulders hunched and back to the wall. *I never knew the world was so big.* It seemed as if there were every kind of woman from every kind of nation trapped here in the Harem. *They don't look trapped to me.* Everywhere Esther looked, she saw another cluster of similar faced, lounging, chatting women— some laughing, some staring, most talking or dozing. And each ethnicity and language provided its own sort of group and haphazard safety net. *A family of sorts.* Esther's heart lifted and she looked around for her own people, but she saw none. She closed her eyes and listened to the steady stream of languages flowing around her— to Persian, and Median, and Chaldean,²⁰⁸ straining to hear fragments of Aramaic or Hebrew, but she heard none.

Esther was all alone in a sea of strangers.

²⁰⁸ B. Megillah 12b The King is bragging to his officials about all of the different women he has, claiming that Vashti is the most exotic of all, a Chaldean. Then men then beg for her to come and dance naked in front of them and the King calls for the כלי שאני משתמש בו, for the toy/vessel that I use.

That night she met Haggai, the chief steward of the Harem²⁰⁹—a man who had the attention of every woman in the Palace and loved the power²¹⁰ it gave him. He was the man who controlled their whole world. Their everything. Their entire world. The one man who decided who would be sent to the King and when and how and most importantly, if. He might be a eunuch, but he was still the gatekeeper to every young woman's dreams of freedom, and he knew it and took full advantage at every opportunity.

A dazed Esther watched Haggai make his rounds, bestowing favors of cosmetics²¹¹ and opium on his favorite girls and ignoring others, eying the new ones, and giving orders to the stewards and guards. His belly bounced and his eyes leered, roving from new woman to new woman. Some tried to flutter their eyes or let drying cloths slip down as Haggai patted them appreciatively.²¹² Others cowered or shrank, trying to disappear into the crowd around them, but no matter what, each new plaything

²⁰⁹ Esther 2: 8 “When the king’s order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Haggai, Esther too was taken into the king’s palace under the supervision of Haggai, guardian of the women.”

²¹⁰ Arendt argues that “power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*), without a people or group there is no power), disappears, “his power” also vanishes. In current usage, when we speak of a “powerful man” or a “powerful personality” we already use the word “power” metaphorically; what we refer to without metaphor is ‘strength’” (Arendt 1970), 44.

²¹¹ Esther 2:3-4 “Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti.”

²¹² “Where there was hunger there would be women and children selling sex.” (Dworkin 2002), 74.

was catalogued and pointed towards an overly decorated room that branched off the center courtyard.

And they soon learned just what the rooms were for. Each was a world in of itself.²¹³ Each the perfect backdrop for a King's every whim and sexual pleasure.²¹⁴ One was painted to resemble a jungle, another a seedy tavern, a third a child's nursery, a fourth a dungeon and so on, each more lavish and more detailed than the next. Some were filled with handfuls of women, others with just one or two. All were carefully positioned and told how to arrange themselves, should the King appear at a moment's notice and wish to peruse or enjoy his many exotic treasures.²¹⁵

²¹³ B. Sotah 9b in discussing Samson's relationship with philistine women and prostitutes, R. Isaac of the school of R. Ami taught that Samson "lusted after unclean things, therefore he made his life dependent upon an unclean thing."

²¹⁴ "Pornography and prisons were built on cruelty and brutalization; the demeaning of the human body as a form of punishment; the worthlessness of the individual human being; restraint confinement, tying, whipping, branding, torture, penetration, and kickings as commonplace ordeals. Each was a social construction that could be different, but was not; each incorporated and exploited isolation, dominance and submission, humiliation, and dehumanization. In each the effort was to control a human being by attacking human dignity. In each the guilt of the imprisoned provide a license to animalize persons, which in turn led to recognition of the ways in which animals were misused outside the prison, outside pornography..... The offense of women in pornography was in being women." (Dworkin 2002), 166.

²¹⁵ "That turning a woman into an object or using her body in violent, sexually explicit ways was contributed to the devaluing of women in every part of life. The pornography itself was defined in the statute as a series of concrete scenarios in which women were sexually subordinated to men." (Dworkin 2002), 170.

"Pornography brought me back to the world of my own kind; I looked at a picture and I saw a live woman." (Dworkin 2002), 178.

Esther followed the huddled knot of women as one by one and two by two as they were assigned rooms and roles to inhabit. Some were handed new dresses or costumes to wear.²¹⁶ Others were not. *Most were not.*

Esther looked away from their shameful, wanton nudity, and down at her own naked body. *I won't be like them. I won't be like them,* she promised herself. *I just won't. I'll do whatever I have to, to win myself a dress. Whatever it takes... I'll put Mordecai's lessons to good use and make him proud. Just watch.*

Before Haggai could deposit her in a room that resembled a Greek Temple, complete with painted marble columns and looming statues, Esther reached for his wrist and fluttered her lashes. "Please, my lord."

Haggai stopped and turned, his chest swelling. "I am no lord, miss, just Chief Steward of the Harem."

"Forgive me my lord, but you are so strong and so noble and I am nothing but sinful dust and ashes²¹⁷ and so very very afraid." She looked up into his eyes, crossing her arms ever so slightly, so her naked breasts were pushed together. "Please, my Lord, it is so rare that one finds such a REAL man as yourself. Please, let me show you just how grateful I am for you."

²¹⁶ Sifrei Devarim 213:1 "And she shall remove the garment of her captivity from her" (Deut 21:13) We are hereby taught that he removes her alluring clothing and dresses her in widows' weeds; for the Canaanites would dress their daughters enticingly to cause others to stray after them."

²¹⁷ B. Taanit 24a "He had a beautiful daughter. One day he saw a man boring a hole in the fence so that he might catch a glimpse of her. He said to the man, What is [the meaning of] this? And the man answered: Master, if I am not worthy enough to marry her, may I not at least be worthy to catch a glimpse of her? Thereupon he exclaimed: My daughter, you are a source of trouble to mankind; return to the dust so that men may not sin because of you."

Haggai grunted clearly pleased with himself.

So Esther dropped to her knees and looked up at him, eyes big as he knelt over her.²¹⁸

She took a deep breath, *This is what you wanted*, the violence whispered inside, making her shudder and try to push that voice away. *That's enough, Hadassah*, the imperious voice cut in, *time to focus your mind on the prize*.²¹⁹

Maybe when she was Queen she'd finally be able to breathe.

The next day, Esther, now clothed in a dress of translucent silk, *but a dress nonetheless*, suddenly found herself the unwelcome center of attention. Haggai was bustling around her, clucking and touching and bestowing gift after gift upon her.²²⁰ Esther watched the other women of the Harem whispering to one another, their eyes unforgiving behind the glassy stupor of slight intoxication.²²¹ Esther tried to look away, but everywhere she turned, cold stony gazes made a wall around her—Judging and resentful.

²¹⁸ Job 31:9-11 “If my heart was ravished by the wife of my neighbor, And I lay in wait at his door, may my wife grind for another, may others kneel over her! For that would have been debauchery, a criminal offense.”

²¹⁹ According to the Tosefot commenting on Ketubot 26b, it can be assumed that a captive woman would try to seduce her prison guards in order to potentially win her freedom.

²²⁰ Esther 2:9 “The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem.”

²²¹ B. Kiddushin 65b teaches that after drinking four cups of wine a woman will solicit even a donkey in the street and not think anything of it.

They know what you did and they're disgusted. They hate you. Just look at them whispering behind their fans. They see the whore you really are. Just like He always said you were. You didn't have a choice. Don't they see? Don't they know? You had to. You couldn't just walk around all exposed and shameful like that... Stop being such a foolish orphan, Ishtahar! They're just jealous!²²² They see that you are the most beautiful²²³ woman in the Harem and they can't stand it. It's nothing personal, it's a compliment. And a powerful one. So stop complaining and enjoy it. Liar. If you were really all that beautiful, you wouldn't need all these fancy perfumes and face paints to win the King.²²⁴ But you can't win the King all on your own. Never mind if you want to win him at all. You're just a broken orphan. And a dirty slut. You are mistaken, Ishtahar and you are a fool. ... only worth as much as the man that desires you. That's what women were made for.²²⁵ The voice was smug and commanding, as if she

²²² B. Megillah 13a Rav teaches that Mordecai even counseled the King to make Esther jealous with other women, in order to get her to reveal her true identity, but still Esther remained silent and did what Mordecai had requested.

²²³ B. Megillah 15a, the Rabbis teach that four most beautiful women in the world were Sarah, Rahab, Abigail, and Esther.

²²⁴ Esther 2:15 "When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her.

²²⁵ Genesis 3:16 "And to the woman [God] said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

had all the answers Esther could ever hope to find. *You can study the king and become*

*anything he desires,*²²⁶ the voice Esther had come to call/see as the Prophetess

promised. Esther wanted to believe the voice inside her, *You can be like water, mirroring*

*his needs.*²²⁷ But everything was so big... and so new... and so overwhelmingly sexual.

Virgin or whore, it doesn't matter. This is your life now, best make the most of it.

Just like with Mordecai.

But then, when Esther had opened the last box of expensive objects meant to transform her into the King's ultimate object, Haggai stepped aside and beckoned to a row of servants. Esther looked up, straight into familiar green eyes she had hoped she had already seen the last of. *How did they get here? And where did they come from?* Esther looked down at their toes, afraid her face would betray them all.²²⁸

Seven women stepped forward, the same seven women who had appeared on Mordecai's doorstep all those years ago, and changed everything. *Destroyed everything.*

²²⁶ B. Megillah 13a R. Joshua b Korha teaches that Esther had an aura of Hesed (compassion) around her. Rashi explains that this aura of Hesed was sent from God and made her beautiful and appealing to the King and to all the nations of the world.

²²⁷ B. Megillah 13a: Rav teaches that "If [the king] wanted to find in her the taste of a virgin, he found it; if the taste of a non virgin, he found it"

²²⁸ Esther 2:10 "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it."

Esther pinned a grateful smile on her face and looked passed the other Esther, to Haggai preening to one side. “One for each day of the week!”²²⁹

“You are far too kind,” Esther demurred with a thudding heart. “I can’t possibly accept these gifts. I am unworthy of such lavish kindness.”

“Let’s just say I see something special in you,” he stroked her cheek, and lifted her chin so their eyes would meet. “Consider it an *investment* in your future.”

Esther nodded and the Chief of the Harem laughed a booming laugh, leaving her alone with the one person she thought she hated in this world. She stared at the woman who had stolen her name, willing her voice not to tremble and her spine to straighten.

“What of *my* husband?”²³⁰

The other woman pursed her lips and looked away, clearly furious to be here with Esther.

“I asked you a question.” Esther’s voice was hard as she rose, imperious and suddenly masking a wild rage she had never allowed herself to feel before. A rage whose intensity took her breath away. The other woman took a step back, surprised.

“I...uh...”

²²⁹ B. Megillah 13a Rava teaches that Esther was given seven maids so she could count the days by them. This would allow her to continue to keep Shabbat, with the maids none the wiser (no one maid could compare Esther’s behavior from one day to the next).

²³⁰ B. Sotah 10a amidst a discussion about Samson’s promiscuity and sexual relationships with “unclean” women, R. Johanan teaches, “Whoever is faithless, his wife is faithless to him; as it is said: If mine heart have been enticed unto a woman, and I have laid wait at my neighbor’s door Then let my wife grind unto another, and let others bow down upon her. That is what the proverb tells, ‘He among the full-grown pumpkins and his wife among the young ones’.” (Job 31: 9-11)

“What of *my husband* Mordecai?” Esther advanced. “Clearly he sent you here. Has he a message for me? Does he have an audience to meet the King? Has he rallied the community?²³¹ Is he petitioning on my behalf?²³²”

The other woman squirmed, cheeks reddening, eyes darting from corner to corner. “He is indeed near the palace...” she trailed off.

“When is he meeting with the King? When will I be free?²³³”

“He’s in the courtyard, mistress, keeping his ear to the ground and listening to the gossip.²³⁴”

“He isn’t with the King?”

The woman met Esther’s eyes, triumphant. “No, my *lady*, he is *not* meeting with the King, nor does he have any plans to do so.” She spoke slowly and deliberately, launching each word like a weapon.

And it worked. It took everything in Esther not to collapse on the floor right there in front of her rival, weeping and broken and desolate.²³⁵ *Mordecai can’t save you. Or won’t. It’s just you now. Just us. All alone. with nobody. Nobody. Just like before.*

²³¹ B. Bava Metzia 8b discusses how every Jewish community must provide a fund for the redemption of captives.

²³² B. Ketubot 47b teaches that in exchange for benefiting from, and owning a wife’s labor, a husband must pay a wife’s ransom should she be taken captive.

²³³ B. Ketubot 15b-16a discusses what happens when a woman claims she was married as a virgin but her husband claims otherwise. In Esther’s case, her lack of virginity would render her unfit for the king, since he was explicitly in search of virgins.

²³⁴ Esther 2:11 “Every single day Mordecai would walk about in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was faring and what was happening to her.”

²³⁵ B. Yevamot 63b “Rava further stated: A bad wife, the amount of whose ketubah is large should be given a rival at her side; as people say, ‘By her partner rather than by a thorn’.”

With nobody. Esther's heart was thudding in her ears and her legs were shaking. *You're a worthless orphan and you always have been,* she cringed. The voices were leering.

Sneering.

Circling, and biting. *What did you expect would happen?* the Violence taunted. *This is exactly what you deserve, Ishtahar.* Esther thought of those nights and his hands. And his face. The pleasure and the pain and the awful confusion of it all. *This is what whores get.*²³⁶ And yet, she missed him. Desperately. He was her world and he always had been. *You're all alone and always will be.*²³⁷ And then, before she could stop herself, she was crumpled on the floor, silently weeping and wishing for death. *If Mordecai can't save me, no one can. It's lost. Everything is lost and it always has been.*

It got no easier to breathe nor any less confusing the next evening, nor the next. Esther lived in a strange false world of lamplight and heated braziers. Everything in the

²³⁶ Deuteronomy 23:18-19 "There shall be no harlot from the daughters of Israel, and there shall be no harlot from the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a prostitute [(If one gave her a lamb as her hire, it is unfit for sacrifice)] and the exchange of a dog [i.e., a lamb exchanged for a dog] into the house of the Lord your God for every vow; for the abomination of the Lord your G-d are also both (shneihem)."

²³⁷ B. Sanhedrin 97a in the context of a discussion about the coming of the Messiah, the Gemara teaches, that the messiah will not come "until the redemption is despaired of, for it is written, there is none shut up or left, as — were it possible [to say so] — Israel had neither Supporter nor Helper."

Harem revolted around the king's pleasure, so it followed that the first lesson of the Harem was to learn to sleep all day, and learn the meticulous art of seduction by night.²³⁸ Nights became days, and days night until soon, Esther had forgotten what the sun felt like on her skin, or what season it might be.

Time passed and she tried to lose herself in her daily lessons, relishing the learning no matter what form it took. Each day brought new cosmetics oils²³⁹ to apply, and new techniques to master in the art of pleasuring this king. Each month²⁴⁰ brought new demands to transform more and more of herself into someone not quite herself. And each day she became less and less of that little girl running in the meadow and more and more of an empty shell no one would have recognized.²⁴¹ She wasn't a person anymore, but a painted and oiled creature—more and more of a doll and a כלי every day. This languid, swaying temptress only knew how to laugh and simper and suck and fuck. And part of her was grateful for the hollowness and the lack of knowing. The less real she became, the easier it was to play the perfect toy for a King's perfect

²³⁸ B. Megillah 13a R. Yohanan teaches that the King only had sexual contact with his concubines during the night, and abstained from sexual relations during the day.

²³⁹ B. Megillah 13a analyzes Esther 2:12, asking, "What is 'oil of myrrh'?" R. Hiyya bar Abba teaches that it is "the aromatic oil called *setakt*." R Huna, however, teaches that, "It is a cosmetic oil derived from olives that have not yet reached one-third of their growth".

²⁴⁰ Esther 2:12 "When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics"

²⁴¹ Jeremiah 51: 34 ""Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon Devoured me and discomfited me; He swallowed me like a dragon, He filled his belly with my dainties, And set me down like an empty dish; Then he rinsed me out."

pleasure chest. Not a person, but a thing.²⁴² *The perfect portrait²⁴³ of a King's perfect whore.*

This was Esther's life now and it was up to her to survive it.

Pleasing the King

*I can be whoever he wants me to be...*²⁴⁴ Esther reminded herself as she followed Haggai down a torchlit corridor one evening. It was the first time she had left the Harem in what felt like a lifetime²⁴⁵ and that imperious part of herself was trying to take control.²⁴⁶ Tonight was the night it all came down to, the night she presented herself in the King's Chamber to meet her fate and win his favor and love.²⁴⁷ *His perfect little toy and plaything.* Esther stood a little taller, fussing with her hair for the thousandth time

²⁴² "For the prostitute, the whole body becomes the sexual part, as if there were nothing human, only an anatomical use. She gets to be dirty all over and what is done to her gets to be dirty all over. She is also a joke." (Dworkin 2002), 194.

²⁴³ Midrash Rabbah on Esther 2:12-15 teaches that Esther was like a portrait, admired by all.

²⁴⁴ B. Megillah 13a Rav teaches that "If [the King] wanted to find in her the taste of a virgin, he found it; if the taste of a non virgin, he found it"

²⁴⁵ Esther 2:16 "Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign," after spending an entire year in the Harem.

²⁴⁶ "Parts of the personality have their own unique characteristics based on their functions within the person as a whole. Their characteristics, such as age, gender, emotional range, beliefs, and behaviors indicate what still needs to be integrated for the whole person." (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 29

²⁴⁷ Esther 2:14 "She would go in the evening and leave in the morning for a second harem in charge of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, guardian of the concubines. She would not go again to the king unless the king wanted her, when she would be summoned by name."

that evening. *And if you don't, it's off to the House of Concubines for you,* the Violence warned. *And there's no coming back from there....* Esther looked at the huge door that lead to the King's private chamber. *His pleasure chamber,* she shivered, wishing she was anywhere but here. But there was nothing she could do.²⁴⁸ He was the king and he had called for her by name.

And then Haggai was knocking at the door and a deep slurred voice was bidding them enter.²⁴⁹

Esther took a deep breath, and stepped into the cavernous room. It was the heart of winter and she was cold, despite the huge fire blazing merrily to one side.²⁵⁰ Esther found herself standing before an endless bed, covered in a deep glowing velvet and fine golden embroidery.²⁵¹ The king lay in the middle of it all, propped up on cushions, his robe untied as his eyes drank her in. Esther tried not to look at that place between his legs, the place he was so casually stroking like a pet or toy he was in the habit of

²⁴⁸ According to the Ramban, Esther is not subject to the laws of Arayot (forbidding marriage or consensual sex with a non jew) because she was taken against her will and should be treated as a rape victim, not as a willing participant.

²⁴⁹ B. Megillah 12b Rava teaches that Israel begins shabbat with torah and ends with wine, while other nations (like the Persians) just drink the wine and get intoxicated for its own sake.

²⁵⁰ B. Megillah 13a teaches that Tevet is the month when one body gets pleasure from another body.

²⁵¹ Rav Assi teaches in B. Megillah 12a that the palace was decorated with "stones that cause their owners hard labor"

playing with.²⁵² He took a sip of wine and gestured with two fingers. *You know what that gesture means. You've practiced it for weeks. And Haggai has used it once or twice on you when he is feeling especially full of himself...! Isn't that lovely— Esther— everyone's favorite* ²⁵³כֹּה. *It's a talent...and an important skill... or so Mordecai always seemed to say....*

Esther thought of that day in the courtyard when the other Esther had stolen Mordecai away. *Two can play at that game.* Back in the palace, the scared girl stepped out of herself and into a mask of fearless seduction. She unfastened the gauze cord²⁵⁴ wrapped around her body, eyes flashing, *you can do this, it's what you were made for.* Then she glanced down and let the material waft to the floor, angling her body just the way Haggai had instructed her.

²⁵² B. Nidah 43a discusses the ritual impurity created through the emission of semen. In this context R. Eliezar, Raba, and Abaye are discussing the dangers of touching one's penis while doing daily chores (such as urinating) and as a result accidentally arousing oneself and becoming impure through ejaculation. Rabbi teaches that a man may hold his member "with a soft rag, for once the semen has been detached the subsequent touch is of no consequence."

²⁵³ Rava teaches in B. Megillah 12b that the King referred to his concubines and his Queen as the "Vessels which I use— the כלי שאני משתמש בו"

²⁵⁴ B. Megillah 13a Amidst a discussion about Esther's physical appearance and many names, R. Yehoshua ben Korḥa teaches that Esther was called Hadassah because she was greenish, but a cord of Divine grace was strung around her, endowing her with a beautiful appearance.

*You are better than her.*²⁵⁵ *You are Esther, daughter of Abihail.*²⁵⁶ She straightened her spine, lifting her chin and cocking one eye brow ever so slightly in challenge to herself and to the King and to that other woman who was always lurking in the shadows ready to steal everything away from her. *You have been preparing for this moment for many months now. You are a Prophetess worthy of Princes and Kings.*²⁵⁷ *You can be the rushing river, crashing into his shores when you need to, or the sinking sands, giving way to his touch... Just step outside yourself and become what he wants you to be. You can please this man. If you can please Mordecai, you can please the king.*²⁵⁸ *It's not so hard. You've been practicing all your life.*

Esther looked straight into the King's eyes, and saw only hunger. *Only desire.*

Hunger we can work with.

²⁵⁵ Midrash Rabbah on Esther 2:16 teaches that “Esther was taken to the King” really means that she rose in value.

²⁵⁶ Esther 2:15 When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her.

²⁵⁷ B. Megillah 7a Rabbi Akiva teaches that Esther was seen through the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, “And Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all that looked upon her” (Esther 2:15).

²⁵⁸ “Clearly the folktale writer has no qualms about women's using sexuality to obtain benefits for themselves or others.” (Niditch 2000), 141.

Esther took a deep breath and breathed herself out of herself, willing herself to become everything and everyone the King had ever desired.²⁵⁹ Willing herself to cease being completely, transforming into someone else entirely. Something else. Some fantasy of a woman she had spent the last year studying and learning and becoming.²⁶⁰

She moved toward the King, *But at least it isn't Mordecai...* mouth slightly open and hand outstretched, *I wish it were Mordecai....* turning away from herself as she took him in her hand *At least it isn't Mordecai....* and then her mouth. *I wish it were Mordecai....*

and then...

and then....

But a part of her couldn't escape. Not that deepest, darkest, oldest part of her. Not the one that woke her up shivering and shaking in the middle of the night. No. That part of herself was always there, holding the pain and the blood and the violence.

Holding it.

And suppressing it.

And transforming it.

²⁵⁹ B. Megillah 13a. Rav teaches that Esther was whatever the king desired—when he wanted to taste of a virgin, she seemed to be a virgin, when he wanted the taste of an experienced woman, that's what he tasted.

²⁶⁰ Esther 2:12 "When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics"

Keeping it in the box she had created and hidden so long ago she had forgotten it even existed.

Queenship

And it seemed to Esther, as if in the very next instant, she was Queen.²⁶¹ But there was no freedom in it. No satisfying realization of a childhood fantasy and no

²⁶¹ Esther 2:17 “The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.”

comforting obscurity to hide within. Now there were always people watching. No matter where she was or what she was doing. *Always watching.* No matter the hour of the day or night, *always watching.*

But at least, more and more, she got to see the sun these days. As Queen, her presence was demanded both day and night. And those rare, hopeful sightings of natural light, and wide open sky made all the primping and waiting seem all the more tolerable and worthwhile. Sometimes Esther would go weeks without seeing the sun or the sky, and then one day, she would be yanked from slumber and dressed in full Feast regalia. No one ever bothered to tell her when these feasts were happening, nor what they were celebrating. She just had to be ready and waiting for her King. *Always.* And so she took to sleeping with a face full of cosmetics, body contorted so her elaborately styled hair could be presentable at a moment's notice, knowing she could be called to dance naked whenever the king wished in front of whoever the king wished.²⁶² 'No' was never option. Nor had it ever really been.²⁶³ She knew she couldn't live with what *that* would surely bring.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Esther 1:10-11 "On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman."

²⁶³ B. Megillah 13b R. Jeremiah teaches that Esther 2:20, "For Esther obeyed the commandment/will of Mordecai" means that she used to show her menstrual blood to the sages, "as when she was brought up with him" (Esther 2:20).

²⁶⁴ Esther 1:19 "If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she."

It felt like more of a prison than a palace with all those watchful eyes, stinging critiques and layer upon layer of stifling isolation. It seemed to Esther as if her entire world had dissolved into a parade of rowdy guests, painful beauty treatments and nightly debauchery.²⁶⁵ And so Esther sipped her wine and played her part—night after endless night, becoming more and more disgusted with herself and retreating further and further away from the reality of it all.²⁶⁶

Some nights she tried to forget to breathe and most she tried to forget to be²⁶⁷—to just stop feeling all the grossness around her. There was just so much of that awful clinging ooze. It haunted her days and her nights. Her waking life and her dreaming one. Instead of one man to please there were two.²⁶⁸ There was no escape. Instead of one man to avoid and predict— one daily horror to submit to and then repent for, there

²⁶⁵ B. Megillah 12a Rav and Shmuel teach that the King had an excessive number of guests.

²⁶⁶ Esther 2:18 “The king gave a great banquet for all his officials and courtiers, “the banquet of Esther.” He proclaimed a remission of taxes for the provinces and distributed gifts as befits a king.”

²⁶⁷ “For the prostitute, the whole body becomes the sexual part, as if there were nothing human, only an atomical use. She gets to be dirty all over and what is done to her gets to be dirty all over. She is also a joke.” (Dworkin 2002), 194.

²⁶⁸ B. Megillah 13b Rabbah b. Lema teaches in Rav’s name that Esther goes from the lap of the king to the mikveh, to the lap of Mordecai. This means that Esther is having sex with both the non Jewish King and her Jewish husband and adopted father, Mordecai. There is no ritual conflict however, because it is understood that Esther is not consensually having sex with the King, and always goes to the Mikveh to cure the her ritual impurity before it can be dangerous to Mordecai. Esther is also not capable of consent with the King because she is considered a captive held in the palace under duress (Hidushei HaRITVA).

were two.²⁶⁹ It was endless and exhausting, breaking off a pieces of herself day by awful day, encounter by confusing encounter.

It was an hour after dawn and Esther was about to submerge herself in the cold clear waters of the Mikveh as she had done sometimes sometimes weekly and sometimes monthly in the many years since she'd been queen.²⁷⁰ If the king called for her at night, Mordecai would call for her in the morning.²⁷¹ Like clockwork. And yet if the king didn't call for her for months, neither did Mordecai.²⁷² *He only wants what he can own. You're not a person, but a thing. Don' t say that. But how does he know?*
He knows everything.

²⁶⁹ B. Ketubot 51b discusses if a woman who is taken captive can be permitted to her husband after captivity because it can be assumed that the woman was raped while in captivity and that she also aided her captors (through helping feed them and arm them) in order to protect herself and stay alive. R. Judah argues that the woman is permitted to her husband after her return because she aided her captors out of fear. If however, she returns to the captors of her own free will, she is no loner permissible to her husband.

²⁷⁰ Esther is queen for five years before the Jews are endangered and she must willingly approach the King (Esther 2:16 "Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign" and Esther 3:7 "In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, pur—which means "the lot"—was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar"

²⁷¹ B. Megillah 13a Rav Yohanan explains Esther 2:14 "In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned," as meaning that the king did not have sex during the day.

²⁷² Numbers 5: 12-14 "Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her—but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself"

She shivered, feeling small in the dark dank cavern like room. This wasn't anything like she'd imagined it would be, and yet there was nothing the young woman could do. All she could do was get through it and survive—shut up and do what she was told and hopefully not think about any of it too clearly.

How did I end up here? She felt cold inside. And still, like she seemed to most mornings. Trapped and tugged apart like a talit it with two owners.²⁷³ “You’re mine,” they seemed to shout. “No you are”, pulling at her and ripping her away from herself and her body and any memory of her own desires or needs. It was as if she was playing dead in her own life, waiting for a lion or dog to drag away her carcass or lose interest, but it never did. They never did. Instead they toyed with her. First one and then the other. Tearing at her and pulling her apart. Crushing her.²⁷⁴ From the lions jaws to the dogs paws.²⁷⁵ It was terrible. And Esther was feeling further and further from her herself and any sense of reality day by day,

rape by rape,

²⁷³ B. Bava Metzia 2b discusses a conflict over a garment when both people claim that “it belongs to me” as well as a conflict over an animal that two people are riding. If both parties can appreciate the validity of the other person’s claim, the property is divided. The rabbis also argue that claiming to have found property is the same as to have seized the property.

²⁷⁴ B. Yevamot 15b discusses the rivalry of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. “R. Joshua was asked, ‘What is the law in relation to the rival of one's daughter’? He answered them, ‘It is a question in dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel’. — ‘But [he was asked] in accordance with whose ruling is the established law’? ‘Why should you,’ he said to them, ‘put my head between two great mountains, between two great groups of disputants, aye, between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel? I fear they might crush my head!’”

²⁷⁵ B. Megillah 15b R. Levi teaches that Esther asked herself, “Or is it because I called him (Haman) a dog.....? She straight way retracted and called him a lion”.

violation by awful violation.²⁷⁶

She was beginning to feel desperate, but she had no where to turn. No one to trust. No friend. No confident. No secret consensual lover to run away with.

No one.

She was just a young orphan, alone in the world. *No better than a slave.*²⁷⁷

Just her. And no one seemed to see or to care. *Then get rid of one of them...* the

Violence commanded, *one's better than two...* Esther pondered this, her heart

sinking. *It's impossible.* And she'd tried that before. *Tried and failed oh so miserably.*

And oh so predictably. They were just so strong and she such a weak little girl. *Just*

*another common whore one job away from the street.*²⁷⁸ Esther shuddered,

seeing Mordecai's leering face and hearing that old, old threat ringing in her little ears.

²⁷⁶ B. Sanhedrin 82b discusses that marrying a non Jew is prohibited but that Esther did not have a choice in the matter. In Torat HaAdam, the Ramban teaches that she was not subject to the laws of Arayot (prohibited sexual relations) because she was taken against her will and should be treated as a rape victim.

²⁷⁷ B. Bava Kama 86a discusses damages owed for loss of time do to injury as well as the pain of degradation. In this context, R. Judah teaches that "in the case of slaves there would be no liability for Degradation means only that no payment will be made to them, though in the matter of appraisement we can still base the assessment on them."

²⁷⁸ B. Sanhedrin 51a continues a discussion of a priest's daughter profaning the sabbath through a forbidden sexual encounter. "'I might think that this applies even to an unmarried woman. But does not the verse state: 'by playing the whore'? — This is taught on the view of R. Eliezer, who maintained: If an unmarried man cohabits with an unmarried woman without conjugal intent, he renders her a harlot. 'But perhaps "her father" is stated in order to exclude others?' — How then would you explain the verse? That she committed adulterous incest with her father! If so, why only a priest's daughter: does not the same apply to an Israelite's daughter? For [did not] Raba say: R. Isaac b. Abudimi said unto me: 'We learn identity of law from the fact that hennah [they] occurs in two related passages, and likewise zimmah [wickedness] in two'? — The verse [she profaneth] is necessary. For I would think that this whole passage treats of incest with one's father, and the penalty of burning is prescribed here intentionally to obviate Raba's deduction. Hence the deduction [from she profaneth].

And then suddenly it was the day after her third birthday²⁷⁹ and she was terrified—standing in the kitchen with a shadowy familiar figure next to a huge bathing tub. Her heart was pounding and her chest felt tight, like the world was ending and she couldn't look away.²⁸⁰

Esther the woman dug her nails into her palms and found herself back in the damp cold Mikveh, breathing hard and staring at an impassive Mikveh attendant. The other woman looked bored and tired, as if her face was willing Esther to, “just get on with it already!” Esther shivered, hands shaking as she fumbled with her clothing and submitted herself for inspection next to the bathing pit. She took a deep breath, biting down on her lip, and focusing her eyes on the details of the wall just over the mikveh attendant's shoulder, away from those awful burning eyes.

The old woman never said a word. She never questioned why Esther came into the Bathhouse dressed like a Queen and left looking like a good Jewish housewife.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ B. Nidah 45a discusses how a man can have sex with his wife as long as she is older than three years and one day. To have sex with a wife younger than three is not allowed, but three and over is halachily fine.

²⁸⁰ B. Nidah 13b: Our Rabbis taught: ‘proselytes and those that play with children delay the advent of the Messiah’.

²⁸¹ B. Sotah 10a R. Johanan also said: Whoever is faithless, his wife is faithless to him; as it is said: If mine heart have been enticed unto a woman, and I have laid wait at my neighbor's door. Then let my wife grind unto another, and let others bow down upon her. That is what the proverb tells, ‘He among the full-grown pumpkins and his wife among the young ones’.

The Mikveh lady kept her mouth shut and eyes open.²⁸² She never met her eyes during this morning ritual. She never reacted to the bruises, or the bites, or the ever splintering scars.²⁸³ Her eyes ran up and down over Esther's body without ever seeming to see the Damage or the Pain the marks surely covered...²⁸⁴ The old woman's face and mouth always remained blank and impassive during the examination, as if the flaky patches of dried crustiness that often got caught between the young woman's thighs or on her chest were either invisible or completely normal, and not worth a reaction. She never said anything when Esther came in with rope like burns twining around her limbs and torn, raw flesh scabbing between her thighs.²⁸⁵ The mikveh attendant just glanced up and down and then away, as she always did, as if she didn't see a thing.

²⁸² "I had found out that when you told people your husband was beating you, they turned their backs on you. Mostly they blamed you. They said it wouldn't be happening if you didn't want it and like it. You could be, as I was, carrying all could hold in an effort to escape or you could be, as I was, badly hurt and bleeding, and they still told you that you wanted it. You could be running away fast and furious, but it was still your will, not his, that controlled the scenario of violence; you liked it. You could ask for help and they'd deny you help and it was still your fault and you liked it." (Dworkin 2002), 118.

²⁸³ B. Bava Kama 32a responds to a mishna about damages resulting from a beam crashing into a barrel with Rabbah b. Nathan questioning R. Huna, "If a man injures his wife through conjugal intercourse, what is [the legal position]? Since he performed this act with full permission is he to be exempt [for damage resulting therefrom], or should perhaps greater care have been taken by him?"

²⁸⁴ B. Bava Kama 32a Rabbah b. Natan asks the question if a man damages his wife through marital intercourse, is he liable for damages owed her.

²⁸⁵ B. Nedarim 20b R. Yohanan b Davai teaches "She replied: [Because] he [my husband] 'converses' with me neither at the beginning nor at the end of the night, but [only] at midnight; and when he 'converses', he uncovers a handbreadth and covers a hand breadth, and is as though he were compelled by a demon.

Didn't see or didn't care. It's what men are supposed to do. And you, Hadassah, should be enjoying it.²⁸⁶ The problem isn't with Mordecai or the king. It's you. He just misses you. You're the broken one, Ishtar. He loves you, Esther. You make him do it. And wants to remind you who is your Lord and Master. The voices circled inside her, first whispering and then muttering louder and louder, each struggling with the other to be heard. They seemed to be fighting more and more now, pulling Esther towards a thousand different thoughts and feelings at once. There was just too much activity inside her head. It was hard to keep up. Impossible to follow.

The young woman stared at the cold water of the mikveh, bracing herself for the shock she knew was coming. *How did it come to this?* she wondered, feeling the walls closing in on her. *You're worthless and you always have been and always will. Just a halfwitted orphan. Mordecai doesn't care about you. He's got the other Esther now. Don't say that. Of course he cares. He loves you. He's going mad with you at the palace! Is this what you call love?* Esther's shoulders slumped inwards as she thought of all those secret hurts and bruises and the way her insides always felt like she was being split in two or ripped apart.

²⁸⁶ B. Bava Kama 32a continues the discussion about damages owed a wife after painful conjugal relations with the question of who is at fault. Since "both of the parties were simultaneously [active against each other], whereas here it was only he that committed the deed. Is she act at all]? Is it not written, The souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people? [considered] not [to have participated in the — [It is true that] enjoyment is derived by both of them, but it is only he to whom the active part can be ascribed."

Two men are better than one, that imperious, all-knowing voice whispered from behind her ears. *This is what powerful women do.*²⁸⁷ *And what all powerful women want.*

Two men means twice the shame. Two men means twice the power. You'll never escape. Why would you want to? But despite the bravado, Esther felt like she was grasping at sand. *It's not supposed to feel like this*, she had to acknowledge. *It was better before...* *Before no one had to know. No one had to inspect you. No one had to see the grossness. No one had to see our shame. Except the other Esther... she was always watching...* *And Cook and the other servants...they knew too...* Esther hung her head underneath the old woman's scrutiny, knowing she could see every shameful mark they'd left on her. Those men. *Your men*. The king and his newest adviser.²⁸⁸ She was nothing but a whore. *A dirty piece of garbage caught between two men who could do no wrong.*

Esther looked away from herself, forcing the complicated tangle of feelings back where they belonged. As far away as possible, locked away in the deep deep dark. She

²⁸⁷ B. Megillah 15a teaches that the most beautiful (and also powerful) women in the world are Sarah, Rahab, Abigail, and Esther. They are considered beautiful because of their sexual power over men— R. Isaac teaches whoever says “Rahab, Rahab” will ejaculate (if they knew her)

²⁸⁸ Esther 2:21-22 “At that time, when Mordecai was sitting in the palace gate, Bigtan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the threshold, became angry, and plotted to do away with King Ahasuerus. Mordecai learned of it and told it to Queen Esther, and Esther reported it to the king in Mordecai's name.”

took a step into the water and then another, mind focused on the cold, and the wet, and the magic that was about to transpire. *Nothing else matters. Just the cold... and the clear... and the clean.* Esther dunked her head under the water and bobbed to the surface. *You'll be clean soon, Hadassah. And Pure.* She submerged again, holding her breath under the water.

And then she was three again, holding her breath under other water and wriggling away from huge grasping hands. She tried to kick and to splash and to stay away from him, but he was too fast.

Those hands were always too fast.

They always caught her.²⁸⁹

Touched her.

Made her hurt.²⁹⁰

And covered her in shame.

She didn't like those hands. Or the booming laugh they belonged to. Or the way they always seemed to find her and invade her dreams.

Esther found herself fighting an enemy that was no longer there, and rose to the surface, gasping for air. She opened her eyes, breathing heavily. *That was long ago.*

²⁸⁹ Deuteronomy 20:6 "Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home (bayit, which in rabbinic hebrew also means wife), lest he die in battle and another harvest it."

²⁹⁰ B. Nidah 13b teaches that anyone who engages in sexual intercourse (rape) with a minor or in the molestation of a minor is deserving of extreme punishment such as bringing about the Flood during Noah's time.

You're here now. And you are Queen. She looked at the sweating stone walls of the

Mikveh and bit her lip, wanting to taste blood. Those hands belonged to long ago, not to here and now and to today. And so she tried to push those hands back into the past, ignoring the creeping certainty that she knew those hands and exactly who they belonged to and what they were doing reaching for her in the water. But she didn't want to know. Not yet. It was too much.

Too big.

Too scary.

The young woman sank below the water again, holding her breath until she felt like she would explode with wanting. And then, just after specks began to appear behind her eyes, Esther burst to the surface and muttered the words of the blessing. *See. You do want to live. You can't just end it all. Not yet.*

The old woman on the side of the pool nodded as if she'd heard the voices too. "Kasher" she creaked.

And then it was over. With a word and a nod, Esther was pure again.²⁹¹ *Like magic.* She grinned, relishing the new feeling of lightness as she dressed. *But you know it won't last long... The way things are going you'll be back soon enough and dirtier than ever tomorrow.*

²⁹¹ Tractate Nidah deals with the particulars of the Mikveh ritual and the rules surrounding a woman's ritual purity.

Esther looked at the wise old Mikveh lady, eyes suddenly blurry with tears. *There must be a way out of this. There has to be a way someone can help me...* Esther thought of all the old men coming and going from the stone Kaach on the hill and how she used to crouch behind the courtyard door and listen to them study and learn together. *They can't want this for us... Not after studying what they studied...²⁹² and teaching what they taught. ...if only they knew... surely someone would help you...²⁹³* Esther opened her mouth to say something, anything. But before she could, the old woman stepped back, eyes hard, and shook her head, “zona” she spat at the floor, “You have no place here!”

Esther recoiled, stunned.

“No one wants you here.” And then the woman was gone and Esther was alone, plastered in shame and coated with that feeling of ooze all over again. She felt her cheeks burn and her eyes fill, *No one wants you here. You're dirty and gross. Broken and ruined beyond any hope of repair.* But she couldn't say a word. Not out loud. Not to anyone. So she just took a deep breath, dug her nails into her skin, and began to dress, apologizing to the world for her very existence.

²⁹² B. Avodah Zarah/ B. Sanhedrin 74b

²⁹³ B. Sanhedrin 73b according to the laws of Arayot, one must kill a would be rapist in order to stop him from committing such a heinous sin and defiling his soul so profoundly. Unfortunately for Esther, however, this is only to prevent the first instance of rape, and is not useful in the case of repeated or ongoing abuse.

But today was today and now was now, and Esther was determined to just get through this Day and this hour and this minute, *even if it kills you*. And right here, right now, she was pure again, no matter what that awful woman said. *And clean again*, even if it didn't feel like it.²⁹⁴

All she could do was survive.

Every minute

of every day.

What other choice did she have?

The Beginning of the End

The Queen was strolling through The Garden of Endless Pleasures with her ladies in waiting, relishing her newfound ability to walk the Palace gardens by day, when she first saw that everything was not as it should be. At first Esther couldn't quite place the difference, just knew that for once, palace life didn't feel quite so jarring. For once it

²⁹⁴ B. Sotah 10a, amidst an analysis of the Judah and Tamar story, and specifically "she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife." (Geneses 38:14), R. Alexander teaches, that Tamar "went and sat at the entrance [of the hospice] of our father Abraham, to see which place all eyes ['enaim] look. R. Hanin said in the name of Rab: It is a place named Enaim, as it states: Tappuah and Enam. R. Samuel B. Nehmani said, [It is so called] because she gave eyes to her words. When [Judah] solicited her, he asked asked her, 'Are you perhaps a Gentile?' She replied: 'I am a proselyte'. 'Are you perhaps a married woman?' She replied: 'I am unmarried'. 'Perhaps thy father has accepted on thy behalf betrothals?' She replied: 'I am an orphan'. 'Perhaps you are unclean?' She replied: 'I am clean'."

didn't seem like she would have to fake a smile or hide her fear to fit in. *Where are the silly pranks and the laughing courtiers?* She took a closer look at the people she passed, noticing the furtive glances and hushed conversations with a sinking heart.

Everywhere Esther looked, the people of the palace were whispering— glancing over bushes and around bends. They clustered in small groups that kept forming and dispersing. Forming and dispersing like exotic jellyfish in a sea of intrigue.

The air in the Palace had *changed*. *There's fear everywhere*, Esther realized, amazed. *Right out in the open*. Where once court life had been raucous and flamboyantly debaucherous now it was a buzz with tension. Courtiers no longer seemed to drink themselves into a stupor simply for the fun of it. Now they filled their cups and emptied their flagons in a desperate attempt to forget. There was a new vizier²⁹⁵ at the King's right hand— a former slave²⁹⁶ who had played the system well, and now was looking to transform it.²⁹⁷ No one knew which law or custom would be creatively reinstated nor whose head would be the next to hang from the gallows.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Esther 3:1 "Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials"

²⁹⁶ B. Megillah 15b R. Papa teaches that Haman was once called "the slave that was sold for loaves of bread"

²⁹⁷ Esther 3: 6 Haman "disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus."

²⁹⁸ Esther 3: 11 "And the king said, "The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit."

Esther paused behind a hedge, in an alcove that reminded her of home, and gestured to her ladies to sit and be still. Esther sat on a bench, face blank and eyes glassy as she listened to any fragment of conversation she could catch.

“The Jews are to be killed,”²⁹⁹ one maid whispered to another.

“Who cares?” a different voice whispered back. “The Jews don’t pay any taxes anyway.”³⁰⁰

Esther felt herself shrinking into the rose bush she sat behind, imagining the stalks growing and reaching for her, encircling her in a cocoon of leaves and thorns and deadly rosebuds. *They’re coming for you, Ishtahar.* She imagined the living cage growing around her, thorns digging into naked flesh. Protecting her. Eating into her. Hiding her from everything and everyone.

“I heard they drink wine made from the blood of drowned Persians!”³⁰¹

“They never!”

“I heard they don’t obey any laws... they’re just a bunch of criminals so who cares if they die?”

²⁹⁹ Esther 3: 13 “written instructions were dispatched by couriers to all the king’s provinces to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—and to plunder their possessions.”

³⁰⁰ B. Megillah 13b Rava teaches that Haman convinces the King to kill the Jews of Persia through a series of logical arguments: they are scattered throughout the land (their absence won’t be felt physically), they don’t pay taxes (their absence won’t be felt economically) and they don’t follow Persian law and custom (their absence won’t be felt socially or culturally).

³⁰¹ The discussion of kosher wine laws in B. Megillah 13b is given as a reason for why Jews are morally contemptible and thus deserving of extermination.

“First it’s the Jews, but then who will be next?” an old woman interrupted. The knot of servants paused, staring death in the face. And then they turned away, escaping back to the chatter of Palace life. And then, as if the conversation had never happened, she watched another jellyfish of gossipers take its place in the sunny courtyard.

They can’ t kill you if they can’ t find you. Esther’s heart pounded and her cheeks felt hot. *Stop. It’s not you they’re after. You’ ve done your part and kept your secret. No one knows who you really are. Mordecai made sure of that.³⁰² He always looks out for you. This is all your fault, Ishtahar. You should never have listened to him. The King wouldn’t be killing the Jews if he knew his darling Queen was one of them. You could save everyone. Don’t fool yourself, orphan, it wouldn’t make any difference. And He would owe you everything. They all would. It would never work. You’re just a silly plaything that can be replaced at a moment’s notice. You don’t matter. You never have and you never will. It would never work.*

Esther shook her head, trying to push the uncomfortable cacophony of voices aside. She looked down at her hand and the sharply thorned stem she was clutching. Her wrist seemed so thin and so fragile against the vibrance of the foliage. Greenish³⁰³ and otherworldly as the sun shone threw the leaves, coating everything it touched. Like

³⁰² Esther 2:20 “Esther obeyed Mordecai’s bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage.”

³⁰³ B. Megillah 13a Joshua ben Korha teaches that Esther was greenish in color and had an aura of Hesed (compassion) about her.

she was the one who belonged behind a glass case in an exhibition hall, not these dark, twisting magical flowers so peppered with dangerous thorns and exquisite beauty. She looked at small line of ants marching along the stem she was clutching. *Where are they going, do you think? They're running away, like you should.* Esther clenched her hand, suddenly overcome with anger.³⁰⁴ *How dare those silly ants run away! How dare they escape when I can't.*³⁰⁵ She clenched tighter and tighter, and then something in her palm gave, and sliced against a thorn, and so did the anger. Esther stared at the warm pool of red against the green of the growing vine, mesmerized by the proximity of Life and Death and her own unwillingness to choose one without also choosing the other.

A few hours later, Esther was walking the castle walls with her manservant Hatach, and her ladies in waiting when a commotion erupted.³⁰⁶ The Queen's retinue

³⁰⁴ "Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage, and this reaction by no means necessarily personal injury, as is demonstrated by the whole history of revolution, where invariably members of the upper classes touched off and then led the rebellions of the oppressed and downtrodden. To resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness. To act with deliberate speed goes against the grain of rage and violence, but this does not make them irrational. On the contrary, in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy" (Arendt 1970), 63.

³⁰⁵ Sifrei Devarim 196:1 "And who is the man who has betrothed a woman" (Deut 20:7) whether he has betrothed a virgin or a widow, even one awaiting levirate marriage, and even if he has heard that his brother died in the war, he returns."

³⁰⁶ Esther 4:1 "When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly, until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth."

gathered around giggling as they peered over the wall for a better view. There was a beggar standing there in the courtyard. Ranting and raving and tearing his rags like a madman. Esther looked closer. *Was that...? Could that ...? Mordecai!!!* Esther wanted to shout with first relief and then panic. She clutched her belly, feeling a sudden cramping in her womb.³⁰⁷ *Something must be wrong.* Esther's stomach dropped and mouth went dry.³⁰⁸ *Not the baby... please, anything but that.* Esther peered closer, trying to catch Mordecai's eye and somehow communicate to him just how badly she needed him. But he seemed to look everywhere but up at the young queen and her attendants clearly outlined against the winter sky. *He' s never like this. Not ever.* Esther swallowed hard, trying not to give into the tide of panic lapping at her toes. But she knew she couldn't say a thing. No one could know that Ahashverosh's perfect Queen was acquainted with Mordecai the Jew, much less a member of his family. No, she couldn't disobey him like that.³⁰⁹ *Not now.* Not when she might be about to lose everything she had ever been worth.

And so heart thudding and palms sweaty, the Queen beckoned to her servant and bid him find out what the lunatic was raving about.. And then she turned and

³⁰⁷ B. Megillah 15a teaches that when Esther became distressed, it meant that she had a miscarriage out of fear.

³⁰⁸ Esther 4:4 "When Esther's maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated."

³⁰⁹ Esther 2:20 "But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had instructed her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai's bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage."

retreated into the Palace, trying to ignore the pain in her womb and the gnawing fear deep in her chest.³¹⁰

Esther was safely ensconced in the privacy of the Queen's tower, when Hatach came in breathless and unable to meet her eyes.

"Yes?" Esther did her best to sound like the impervious and imperious Queens she read about in fairy tales.

"The lunatic was no lunatic, but Mordecai the Jew."³¹¹

Esther knew he was waiting for her to say something—anything, but there was nothing to say. She was just too tired. Bone weary.

The servant glanced up at his mistress, and then continued in a rush, "Mordecai was ranting about the King and the vizier and the Royal Treasury.³¹² And then he bade me give you this." Hatach handed her a roll of thick parchment and backed ever so slightly away.³¹³

Esther glanced down at the scroll, and the death sentence against her people. "Did he give you another message?"

Hatach looked away.

³¹⁰ B. Nidah 57b discusses the ritual impurity of a menstruating woman. The Gemara argues that even if she did not see the blood herself, "if on most days her observation of the blood is accompanied by a feeling of the discharge she is unclean since it might be assumed that she had felt it this time also but did not pay any attention to it."

³¹¹ Esther 4: 6 "Hatach went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate"

³¹² Esther 4:7 "and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews."

³¹³ Esther 4:8 "He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction."

“What is it?”

“Well...” he hesitated, “Mordecai also requested you intervene.”

“Excuse me?”

“He requested you intervene on the Jews behalf, my lady.” Hatach edged further away, watching his Queen blanch. His heart ached for her and soon words began to tumble over one another in their hurry to be over and done with and safe out of sight. “It was most surprising....He wasn’t being rational, my lady. He... he said they were your people too and bade me tell you so.”³¹⁴

Esther turned to the window, and bit her lip, trying to still her racing heart.

Confused. What does he expect me to do? *How could he just betray you like that? After*

everything. There must be an explanation... after all this time and all this not

telling...³¹⁵ He must have a good reason. He has to...

There is no

possible reason. Just betrayal. Don’ t say that. He doesn’t love you. He

never has and he never will.

³¹⁴ Esther 4:6-8 Hatach went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate; and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people.

³¹⁵ B. Megillah 13a Rav teaches that The king went to great lengths to get Esther to tell him who she was, but she listened to Mordecai and said nothing. Mordecai even counseled the King to make her jealous with other women, but still Esther remained silent.

Esther barely felt her nails break the surface of her skin nor the barest hint of blood trickling between her thighs, staining her favorite dress. She was already long gone.

Gone and far away.

leaving...her dirty rotten body in the dust far below.

Esther turned and looked out the window, surveying the distant kingdom far below. *You can't approach the King, it's been too long since he desired you...³¹⁶ and it won't make any difference anyway. Even if you saw him, why would he listen to you? You don't matter at all. You never have and you never will. What can Mordecai be thinking? It's been too long. And you're meant to be breeding...* Esther clutched her stomach and looked away, feeling sick. *He'll never want you now. You'll be dead before you ever open that pretty little mouth of yours.*

"Are you sure he asked me to speak on the Jews behalf?" Esther faltered, watching herself ask a question she could not bear to be answered.

"Yes my Queen," Hatach bowed again.

"Bring me a scribe kit and a bit of parchment, I must put this nonsense to rest."

³¹⁶ Esther 4:11 "Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days."

Her hands were shaking as she mixed the powder and the water for ink. *He can't understand what he's asking of you. He just can't. You know he does. He's smarter than's you'll ever be. He knows everything.*³¹⁷ *He made this all happen... he's behind everything... Don't say that. Not about Mordecai... not Him... Not ever...* *He's always been in it for himself and this mysterious 'greater good'. They all have. You're just a worthless orphan, you've never mattered. Not REALLY. You're wrong.* *He'll come through, you'll see.* Esther took a deep breath and then turned to the parchment.

"Dearest Cousin," she wrote. "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days."³¹⁸ *He must've panicked and*

³¹⁷ B. Megillah 15a Rav Nahman teaches that the prophet Malachi is really Mordecai.

³¹⁸ Esther 4:11 "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days"

forgotten... Mordecai never forgets. Not that... You know he'd never forget

that.³¹⁹ He must have. He wouldn't do that to you.³²⁰ He couldn't. He could. Not him.

Esther turned back to the waiting servant. "Bring me his reply and do not tell anyone what business you are about."

Hatach took the sealed parchment, bowed, and hurried away.

A few hours later Esther was hurting and restless. Nothing seemed to matter. And yet everything did. The cramps were still coming in waves. They were stronger now, but Esther couldn't bring herself to check her underskirts for the tell-tale sign of failure.³²¹

Instead she pulled on a few extra layers of skirts—*Just in case*—and headed for the Castle wall. At least then she would be in the open, and out under the wide sky. *And maybe just maybe it'll all be ok.*

³¹⁹ B. Megillah 13b R. Jeremiah teaches that Esther 2:20 "or Esther obeyed the will of Mordecai" means that she used to show her menstrual blood to the sages, "as when she was brought up with him" (Esther 2:20). The rabbis make multiple claims that Mordecai was intimately and consistently aware of Esther's nidah status and menstrual cycle and therefore also very aware of how frequently she visited the King's chambers.

³²⁰ B. Bava Kama 91b amidst a discussion of whether or not there are instances when a man can injure himself, R. Eleazar teaches about the verse, "surely your blood of your lives will I require," (Genesis 9:5) that "it meant I will require your blood if shed by the hands of yourselves, for murder is perhaps different."

³²¹ "Individuals can lose power just as easily as they gain it within the palace, where personal relationships dominate the political landscape." (Hancock 2013), 61.
Genesis 3:20 "The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living."
1 Samuel 1:5-7 "Hannah he would give one portion only—though Hannah was his favorite—for the LORD had closed her womb. Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the LORD had closed her womb. This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of the LORD, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat."

Hatach first spied his Queen silhouetted against the afternoon sky. She had never looked so beautiful in his eyes as she did standing there alone, caught between earth and sky. He was nervous entering the Palace and full of foreboding as he hurried up the Gate stairs. But Hatach was the Queen's steward and he took his job seriously. He would never abandon her. Not ever. And especially not now when the whole world seemed turned against her.

Hatach wished he didn't have to say the words he was about to say. He wished with all of his being that Mordecai could have just written it down. But no, Mordecai had made sure the humiliation would come from a servant's lips.³²² Mordecai had made a choice; a cold strong deliberate choice. A choice calculated to deliver the maximum shame and shattering possible. A message crafted for the whole purpose of subjugating and destroying his young Queen. And it was Hatach's duty to deliver it. He had no choice in the matter. Orders were orders and his Queen deserved to know.

Hatach cleared his throat, and stared at the horizon, reciting in a calm and even voice, "I bear a message from one Mordecai the Jew," he glanced at the Queen and paused, wishing he hadn't seen the panic and the desperation in her eyes. *She's just a child*, he thought. *They always are.*

The Queen reached out her hand for Mordecai's message and stopped at the sad shake of his head.

³²² B. Bava Metzia 58b discusses the difference between verbal insults and monetary ones, "tanna recited before R. Nahman b. Isaac: He who publicly shames his neighbour is as though he shed blood. Whereupon he remarked to him, 'You say well, because I have seen it [sc. such shaming], the ruddiness departing and paleness supervening.'"

“He gave me a spoken message, my lady.”³²³ Esther nodded and waved him to continue, swallowing her misgivings and clenching her fist against the creeping tide of embarrassment.

“To Esther, Queen of Persia and Kush,” Hatach stumbled. Improvising wasn’t his mindset. So he looked away from the scared young woman, and out to the cloudless sky. He took a deep breath and recited the message he was given, using all of Mordecai’s words and none of his cold venom./fury

“Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews,” the servant continued, eyes fixed on the ground. “will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace.”³²⁴ She felt like she’d been slapped in the face and then punched in the stomach. *Do not imagine that YOU, of all the Jews, will escape with your life.* Esther felt cold and then hot, burning with terror and shame.³²⁵ *You’re as good as dead already, Ishtahar. I’ve made sure of it.*

³²³ Esther 4:12-13 “When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther”

³²⁴ Esther 4:13 “Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace.”

³²⁵ While analyzing the concept of authority, Arendt argues that “a father can lose authority by either beating his child or by starting to argue with him, that is, either by behaving to him like a tyrant or by treating him as an equal. To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine is laughter.” (Arendt 1970), 45.

“On the contrary,” Hatach continued in a smooth and impassive voice, “if you keep silent in this crisis,” but Esther couldn’t concentrate on the words he was saying, couldn’t really hear them or hold onto them or make sense of them. It was all a jumble. All too painful and too shameful to take in. *It couldn’t be... He’s not saying... He couldn’t... He is.* “Relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for just such a crisis.”³²⁶ *And who knows, And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for just such a crisis. Perhaps you have reached this royal position for just such a crisis. He’s telling you to die. To kill yourself, Esther. You understand that, right? He wants you dead. It couldn’t be. You’ve been replaced. You must’ve misheard. Mordecai would never abandon you like that. He just wouldn’t.*³²⁷ *He needs you. You’re wrong. I’m worthless. Always have been and always will.*

³²⁶ Esther 4:14 “On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”

³²⁷ In analyzing Esther 4:14, Hancock argues that “the implication in [Mordecai’s] question is that Esther has a unique opportunity that is born out of her special relationship to the king. Although her decision to approach the king does involve personal risk, is not outside the realm of the possible.” (Hancock 2013), 74.

“Excuse me Hatach,” the Queen said in a voice that sounded far away and as if it belonged to someone else. “Please repeat your message. I don’t believe I heard you properly.”

And so the servant repeated the message, word for word, but slower this time, and without vocal nuance or variation. “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for just such a crisis.³²⁸” He spoke as if the words were nobody’s words, but words that bubbled up from some eternal and elusive spring somewhere far far away. And once again Esther felt each word like a blow to her spirit, pushing her further and further away from her already tenuous sense of self.

If you keep silent in this crisis, the Jews will be delivered another way.

He doesn’t need you. No one does. You’re worthless. You always have been and you

always will be. And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for

JUST such a crisis. JUST such a crisis. Mordecai’s words echoed in her mind,

driving everything else out. Pushing everything else to the side. Turning everything else

³²⁸ Esther 4:13-14 “Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”

inside out and upside down. She felt her throat close like a vice, paralyzed with a forgotten desolation she had known all her life.³²⁹

*And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for MPTJ such a crisis. He knew. All this time... And who knows, perhaps you have reached this royal position for MPTJ such a crisis. He's always known. And he's been part of it from the very beginning.*³³⁰ Esther was horrified. *It couldn't be. He sold you to the highest bidder and you fell for it. You believed him. How could he?*

And yet it all made too much sense.

Esther felt sick inside as the voices began to draw closer, taunting her with a truth she had been running from her whole life. *He doesn't love you, Esther.*³³¹ She felt her heart race and her cheeks flush. *He never has and he never will.* She closed her eyes,

³²⁹ B. Bava Metzia 58b discusses the damage inflicted on a person who is subjected to verbal abuse. R. Johanan teaches "on the authority of R. Simeon b. Yohai: Verbal wrong is more heinous than monetary wrong, because of the first it is written, 'and thou shalt fear thy God,' but not of the second. R. Eleazar said: The one affects his [the victim's] person, the other [only] his money. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: For the former restoration is possible, but not for the latter."

³³⁰ Midrash Rabbah V:4 teaches that Mordecai was the man that helped the King procure a maiden who would please him.

³³¹ Judges 14:16 "Samson's wife harassed him with tears, and she said, "You really hate me, you don't love me"

clutching her belly without realizing it. *You have no power here. And you never have and you never will. He doesn't even want you anymore.*³³² *No one does.*

You don't matter Ishtahar, that cold Violence rasped raising the hairs on the back of her neck. *You never have and you never will. He never loved you... Never really wanted you for a wife. You were just a toy, his little 'קל for the taking and the fucking. His perfect little whore... No more than a clever fraud*³³³ *against the king. He thinks you're worthless. Because you are.* Esther felt the cloud of darkness enveloping her, sweeping through her like a tidal wave. *You're nobody. You' ll never amount to anybody or anything,* the voices shouted. *It's over.*³³⁴ *Just step off the wall, Ishtahar. Right now. Just one step. End it. Just die. Just one step. It would be so easy, Hadassah. There's nowhere to go from here. You could, you know. You*

³³² Judges 15: 2 “I was sure,” said her father, “that you had taken a dislike to her, so I gave her to your wedding companion. But her younger sister is more beautiful than she; let her become your wife instead.”

³³³ Deuteronomy 22:11-17 “A man marries a woman and cohabits with her. Then he takes an aversion to her and makes up charges against her and defames her, saying, “I married this woman; but when I approached her, I found that she was not a virgin.” In such a case, the girl’s father and mother shall produce the evidence of the girl’s virginity before the elders of the town at the gate. And the girl’s father shall say to the elders, “I gave this man my daughter to wife, but he has taken an aversion to her; so he has made up charges, saying, ‘I did not find your daughter a virgin.’ But here is the evidence of my daughter’s virginity!” And they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town.”

³³⁴ B. Sanhedrin 97a in the context of a discussion about the coming of the Messiah, the Gemara teaches, that the messiah will not come “until the redemption is despaired of, for it is written, there is none shut up or left, as — were it possible [to say so] — Israel had neither Supporter nor Helper.”

could die! Esther's heart lifted and she felt her insides expand, creating room after room

inside of her. *You could end it. Right now. Right here. It would be the right thing to do.*³³⁵

No one would notice. No one would care. It would be your choice. Your death. Your

freedom. Your choice.

Esther looked down at the city below her and then up at the birds above, scanning the horizon for something to hold onto. Anything. But everything looked different from up here. *Different and all wrong.* It took no more than a moment to spot Mordecai's stone Kaach was clearly visible on the far side of the city, but her Tree, her Mother, was nowhere in sight. She never was. No matter how many times Esther searched for her, no matter what window she looked out of, nor which rampart she tried, ever since she came to the Palace, her Mother was gone—and so was her special secret Meadow. *They're on the other side of that hill, just over there. You know you can never see it from here. You never have been and you never will.* Esther took a deep breath and then another, wishing she could fly off into the sky and just be done with it all.

³³⁵ B. Sanhedrin 74a teaches that in the case of a rape or instance of adultery about to be committed, "a betrothed maiden is compared to a murderer: just as one must rather be slain than commit murder, so also must the betrothed maiden rather be slain than allow her violation."

She gazed out at the city and the slowly sinking sun, feeling darkness closing in on her from all sides. *Where do I go from here?*³³⁶ She scanned the horizon, mind blank with shock, unable to look at the only choice she had left. She tried again to find her Mother Tree, way off on the other side of the city, but it was nowhere to be found. It was as if it had never existed. All she could see was Mordecai's stone house on the hill, windows open and leering at her. *You can't let him win. Not now. Not ever.* Esther shivered. *But how?* And then she stepped out of herself, into the endless desolate wind.

Esther wasn't quite sure where she went when she disappeared.³³⁷ Just that it was dark and quiet and safe and she could never quite remember where she'd been when she found herself back in the world once again.

³³⁶ Job 15: 23-24 "He wanders about for bread—where is it? He knows that the day of darkness has been readied for him. Troubles terrify him, anxiety overpowers him."

³³⁷ Job 15: 22 "He is never sure he will come back from the dark; A sword stares him in the face."

There were four figures sitting in a cluster there in the deep warm darkness, in a place without horizon or substance, somewhere far far away. Somewhere secret and untouchable and yet always at the very center of it all. A secret Pardes,³³⁸ all her own.

They were all different sizes... these people. These parts. And they kept changing, faces shifting and transforming themselves as they talked. They sat clustered around a shallow pool, whose surface reflected the past and the future as well as the present.³³⁹ A haggard woman, old beyond her years, peered into the changing images, leaning so close the blood stained rags she was wearing threatened to disrupt the glass like surface of the water. Next to her, a naked young woman sat with her knees hugged

³³⁸ B. Hagigah 14b "The Rabbis taught: Four entered the Pardes. They were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them, "When you come to the place of pure marble stones, do not say, 'Water! Water!' for it is said, 'He who speaks untruths shall not stand before My eyes' (Psalms 101:7)". Ben Azzai gazed and died. Regarding him the verse states, 'Precious in the eyes of G-d is the death of His pious ones' (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and was harmed. Regarding him the verse states, 'Did you find honey? Eat as only much as you need, lest you be overfilled and vomit it' (Proverbs 25:16). Acher cut down the plantings. Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace."

³³⁹ Ma'asiya: Once upon a time there was a Rabbi who had a magic mirror that would show him the past and the future whenever he wished. One day the man's child was stolen from his house by a Christian woman and brought to a monastery to be raised. The child was an intelligent child and full of promise. He thrived in the monastery and quickly climbed the ranks from priest, to bishop, to cardinal, and eventually, to the highest office of all—to Pope. The child was now a man, and a wise one, so wise in fact, that one day he realized that he was not in fact the man he had been raised to believe he was, but was originally the son of a rabbi in Meintz. And so, wanting to meet his father for the first time in many long years, the Pope sent a decree to the Jews of Meintz forbidding their ritual observance of the Sabbath. The Pope knew this would greatly distress the Jews of Meintz and they would send their wisest and most learned men to plead their case, thus delivering the Pope's father to him. His plan worked, but when he was face to face with his father, at first his father did not know him. They played a game of chess, and through the playing of the game the father came to recognize his long lost son, and wept and wept. The rabbi returned home to his wife and told her all that had happened. At first she was greatly distressed, devastated to learn that the son she had brought into the covenant of Israel was now the Pope of the Christians. But then, against all odds and logic, their stolen, almost sacrificed child returned to Meintz and his congregation to join them on the second day of Rosh Hashanah as they read the Sacrifice of Isaac aloud. And not only did the grown child return, but, because this is a fairy tale, he also came back to Judaism and to his parents, inspiring the undoing of the entire church. And everyone lived happily ever after, as if everything was impossibly back the way it had always been.

to her chest and purple silk sheet wrapped tightly around her. On the other side of the premature crone, sat a little girl with plaited hair and big sad eyes. There were leaves and flowers in her lap, but the green dress she was wearing was perfectly starched and set and there wasn't a single lock of hair out of place. Across from them, on the other side of the small pool, sat an undefined figure—a hazy blur of blackness and pain that the other three women instinctively edged away from and did their best to ignore.

“What can we do?” the naked woman was asking, cheek pressed against her knees, eyes fixed on the kaleidoscope of images forming and disappearing on the surface of the pool.

“Die. We can Die.” The crone waved her hand over the pool of water and the images shifted, showing a young Queen standing on the Palace ramparts, staring off into nowhere. *“We are dead already.”*

“There has to be another way.” The little girl crawled forward, resting her head on the old woman's shoulder. *“Maybe he didn't really mean it.”*

“He meant it, Ishtar.” the old woman patted the little girl's head. *“He knew exactly what he was doing. He's always taken exactly what he wanted when he wanted it. This was all part of a plan, Ishtar. He sold you to the king from the very beginning.”*³⁴⁰ The little girl just stared and then buried her face in

³⁴⁰ Exodus 21: 7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed as male slaves are.”

the woman's rags. Her shoulders heaved with silent tears as the old woman pulled her closer, gathering her up in bony arms. *"Don't worry little one, it'll be over soon."*

"We can't let him win. Not now. Not ever." The naked woman sat up, letting her knees fall open and her spine straighten. *"There has to be a way to get back at him."*

"We can die. We could just step off that wall and end it in an instant. Quick and Clean. It's the only choice we have left."

"And give him exactly what he wants?" the Prophetess's eyes flashed as she crossed her arms over her chest and clenched her fists. *"I'm not going to let him treat us like this. It's not right."*

The haggard woman tutted and shook her head, but before she could speak, the little girl was wiping her eyes and saying, *"Will you tell me a story? There's always a way out in the stories."³⁴¹* The little girl looked at the two women, one old beyond her years and the other painted and plucked into the image of someone else's desire.

The naked woman smiled and leaned back against her hands. *"For you, little Ishtahar, anything. Now let's see... what kind of story shall I tell?"*

"One with magic and power."

³⁴¹ The rabbis created legends and stories called Midrash and Aggadah in order to explain and discuss both the biblical world and their own complicated lives.

"And violence. Always violence."

"Hmmm," the naked woman pondered. And then she took a deep breath and began. *"Once upon a time, long, long ago... before the world was fully formed... God created the first man and the first woman in God's own image, God created them."³⁴²*

The little girl smiled, relaxing back into the older woman's embrace, eyes locked on the Prophetess's face.

"Now when God created Adam and Lilith," she continued. "God took a handful of dust from the earth and formed it into two equal beings, both equally Divine in likeness and being. But as soon as they were formed they began to argue with one another"³⁴³. Adam believed his needs were more important than his wife's in every way, especially when it came to the marriage bed."

The little girl giggled, burying her face in the old woman's rags.

"At night when Adam wished to lie with his wife, he demanded that he lie on top of her, crushing her body as he crushed her spirit." The bony woman held the little girl closer,

³⁴² Genesis 1: 26-27 "And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

³⁴³ Adapted from the Alphabet of Ben Sira circa 1000 CE

both bodies tensing. *"I belong above you in all things, closer to the noble heavens," Adam told his wife.*

*But Lilith was strong and full of magic. And so with one mighty push, she pushed Adam off of her. "From dust we were both created and to dust we will both return," she told him. "You are no more Divine than I. Nor any less. Let us be equal partners in our pleasure as well as in our pain."*³⁴⁴

*But Adam would have none of it. The gaunt woman harrumphed. He just laughed and laughed, and did his best to catch her off guard and overpower her. Lilith could see where this tale was leading, so one day, she refused his advances for the last time. declared the ineffable name of God, a name so powerful and so secret it was hidden even from Adam. But Lilith was strong and smart and she had found the secret name all on her own. So one day she took her power into her own hands and spoke the secret name of God, disappearing from Eden and everything she had ever known.*³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ In, 'The Coming of Lilith,' Judith Plaskow rewrites the Lilith myth in a modern feminist context. She describes Lilith and Adam as "created from the same source, both having been formed from the ground, they were equal in all ways" (Plaskow 2005), 31.

³⁴⁵ "But Lilith wasn't one to take any nonsense; she picked herself up, uttered God's holy name, and flew away." (Plaskow 2005), 31.

Adam searched high and low for her, growing angrier and angrier with each passing day. But still, no Lilit. One day, God found Adam wandering through the Garden lonely and dejected.

“What troubles you, my son?” God asked.

“The woman that you gave me has fled from me! She’s shown her evil nature and abandoned me here, leaving me all alone. She’s so selfish.”

God pitied the man and sent three angels to find the wayward Lilit.³⁴⁶ Sanoy, Sansenoy, and Samange searched all the corners of the world for her, through dusty valleys and baking deserts... over tall mountains and across vast oceans.

One day, in the midst of the swirling seas, they found her. She had whipped the waves into a tempest. And there Lilit stood, right in the middle, arms outstretched like wings,³⁴⁷ calmly waiting for the Angels to halt.

³⁴⁶ “The Lord, inclined to be sympathetic, sent his messengers after Lilit, telling her to shape up and return to Adam or face dire punishment.” (Plaskow 2005), 31.

³⁴⁷ B. Nidah 24b R. Judah citing Samuel ruled: If an abortion had the likeness of Lilit, its mother is unclean by reason of the birth, for it is a child, but it has wings.”

“What do you seek here?” Lilith boomed, her voice echoing with all the storms of the winter wind.

The angels looked at the powerful demoness,³⁴⁸ at the first woman ever created and were very afraid. They huddled together in the face of her fury, begging her to return to her husband. But the winds just whipped faster and the seas frothed higher.

Lilith threw back her head and gave a great roar. “How dare you seek me here! If Adam desires my return, where is his apology?”

“You are his wife,” they replied, “it is you who is in the wrong.”

“No,” Lilith said, cold as ice, “We were made as one. Equal. No person should be forced to be subservient to another. Not man. Not woman. Not wife. Not person. It is Adam who is wrong. He has done me a great injury. And God is committing an even graver injustice if it is Adam’s petition that will be exalted.”

“Come back,” the angels cried, “We will give you all the riches your heart could ask for.”

³⁴⁸ “Was Lilith indeed just another woman? Adam had said she was a demon.” (Plaskow 2005), 32.

"I have already said No once. That should be enough for you. But it isn't. Some things never change. And it never will be." Lilith roared. "Take whatever you want from me. Kill a hundred of my children every day of my life, if you will...! I will suffer as many miscarriages as it takes. No matter what you do, I am never going back. It's too late for apologies, Adam has already lost me. If I am lost, I am lost.³⁴⁹"

"If I'm lost, I am lost" the tired woman whispered, absentmindedly stroking the little girl's hair.

"If I'm lost, I'm lost."

There was silence, the words hanging between them, all eyes averted.

Then the naked woman took a deep breath and continued, *"The Angels returned to the Garden, and told God what had happened. God sighed and looked at the man, "If she is lost, she is lost. Let us³⁵⁰ make another, more fitting help-mate for the man. It is not good for*

³⁴⁹ Esther 4:16 "If I am lost, I am lost."

³⁵⁰ Genesis 1:26 "And God said, "Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness"

Adam to be alone.”³⁵¹ And so God put Adam to sleep and formed another woman out of his rib.³⁵²

And way, far off, on the other side of the known universe, tucked away on the very edge of the desert, there was a little cave, where Lilit, the first woman turned demoness, made herself a home. In the image of a home, she created it, for herself all alone, she created it.”

And then there was silence.

“The first woman became a demoness and made herself a home... but how? How did she do it?”

“She ran away and disappeared.”

“But she fought first.”

“Not enough.... She didn't make him pay. Not really.”

“But WE could.”³⁵³

“Could we?”

³⁵¹ Genesis 2:18 “The LORD God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.”

³⁵² Genesis 2:21-22 “So the LORD God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man.”

³⁵³ Deuteronomy 19:19-20 “you shall do to him as he schemed to do to his fellow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst; others will hear and be afraid, and such evil things will not again be done in your midst.”

*"I can. I don't know about you, but I can."*³⁵⁴

"How?"

*"What are you willing to lose? What price will you pay?"*³⁵⁵

*"If we give up everything. Lose everything..."*³⁵⁶

"I can't."

"We can. We already lost it long ago."

³⁵⁴ Deuteronomy 20: 3 "He shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them."

³⁵⁵ In a discussion of damages owed a person, B. Bava Kama 85a discusses how the idea of pain should be factored into the monetary calculations. The text asks "how much a man would require to be paid to have his arm cut off. To have his arm — The father of Samuel replied: We cut off? Would this involve only Pain and not also all the Five Items? Moreover, are we dealing with fools [who would consent for any amount to have their arm cut off]? — It must therefore refer to the cutting off of a mutilated arm. But even [if the calculation be made on the basis of] a mutilated arm, would it amount only to Pain and not also to Pain plus Degradation, as it is surely a humiliation that a part of the body should be taken away and thrown to dogs? — It must therefore mean that we estimate how much a man whose arm had by a written decree of the Government to be taken off by means of a drug would require that it should be cut off by means of a sword. But I might say that even in such a case no man would take anything [at all] to hurt himself [so much]? — It must therefore mean that we have to estimate how much a man whose arm had by a written decree of the Government to be cut off by means of a sword would be prepared to pay that it might be taken off by means of a drug."

³⁵⁶ Up until this point, Esther has been considered to be a rape victim and a captive according to Jewish Law. If however, she were to willingly approach the King and seduce him, she would be consensually having sex with a non-Jew and thus committing one of three categories of capital sin and rendering herself unacceptable to both her husband and her Jewish community. B. Sanhedrin 74a teaches that "R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper chambers of the house of Nithza in Lydda that in every other law of the Torah, if a man is commanded: 'Transgress and suffer not death' he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, [which includes adultery] and murder."

“All we have to do is plan.³⁵⁷ It’s on us now.”

And so, unknown to Esther, they talked and they planned and did their best to find a way out of an impossibly bleak situation.

The Queen and her servant stood on the Palace ramparts for hours, staring with unseeing eyes at untouchable places they would never visit. Guards came and went, stepping around the living statues with wary eyes and half hidden superstitions. It wasn’t until the last ray of sun sank behind the far off mountains, and all the torches were lit that the Queen finally spoke and broke the spell. She wasn’t sure where she had been nor what she was about to say, just that she was here now and surprisingly unafraid.

Her voice was no more than a whisper. A croak after long disuse. “I have a message for Mordecai.”

“Yes, my lady,” Hatach bowed fluidly, showing no evidence of the many hours of stillness.

Esther squared her shoulders and looked her servant straight in the eye. Her eyes flashed in the torchlight, holding something he had never seen there before.

³⁵⁷ The rabbis characterize Esther as someone who carefully plans and execute a political plot: B. Megillah 15b R. Joshua teaches that Esther entrapped Haman with a banquet because she learned to do so from her father’s house, as it says. “If your enemy be hungry give him bread to eat” (Proverbs 25:21-22). R. Elazar also teaches that Esther lay a trap for Haman by inviting him to a banquet—“Let their table before them become a snare” (Psalms 69:23)

“Tell Mordecai this,” her voice was firm and Hatach found himself standing straighter, pleased to see new resolve in his Queen’s posture.

“Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan. Fast on my behalf,” the Queen continued, pacing the castle wall like a caged lioness. “Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I am to die, I shall die! If I am lost, I am lost.”³⁵⁸

Their eyes met—just an old man and a young woman caught in choices they had never really chosen. Something close to understanding seemed to pass between them. They weren’t so different— Queen and eunuch. Master and slave, prophetess and prophet; both paying heavy prices for decisions they never wanted to make. The man hesitated, wanting to give the young woman something. Anything. The moment stretched, waiting for someone to say what neither could bring themselves to say.

“Go, Hatach,” she whispered. “Go and make sure all that I have asked is done.”

“Yes, my lady.” He bowed, and walked off into the night.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Esther 4:16 “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan. Fast on my behalf. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish! If I am lost, I am lost”

³⁵⁹ Esther 4: 17 “So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.”

The Fast

The cramps were worse that night and Esther was feeling untethered and afraid. *Light headed.* She had dismissed her ladies as soon as she entered the Queen's wing, determined for just this once, not to have to be seen. They seemed confused, but no one argued, as if they could already sense the aura of death clinging to the young queen and were happier keeping it and her at arms distance. There was no sight of the other Esther nor of any of the women Mordecai had sent so many years ago to both guard and serve her when she first found herself locked away in the Harem. *They're with him now.*

And then the heavy wooden doors of the Queen's Bedchamber thudded closed behind her, leaving Esther all alone for the first time in years. She leaned against the ornately carved door and sighed, suddenly aware of the dirty dress she was wearing and the sensation of slow leaking wetness between her legs. *It's over. It's all over. It was over before it even began. You're damaged and worthless and you always have been. There's no saving you.³⁶⁰ There is no redemption here. There never has been and there never will be.* Esther's legs gave way and slumped to the floor. She knew she should take off her underskirts and clean herself up, but she was just too tired. Too supremely exhausted to move. So she just lay there, crumpled and clutching the space

³⁶⁰ B. Sanhedrin 74b argues that a person should kill someone rather than let them rape a person for the first time, so as to save the would be rapists's soul. If however the betrothed maiden "has been ravished previously, she may not be saved by her pursuer's death, likewise, if she can be otherwise rescued. R. Judah said: This applies also if she said [to her rescuers]. 'Let him be,' lest he slay her."

between her legs as wave after wave of cramping shot through her and the candles burned low.

Time slowed and stretched, holding her so tightly she couldn't move.

Moments passed.

And then hours—

—and the young woman just lay there motionless and bleeding on the bedroom floor.

Eventually the paralysis dissolved and the young woman found her way back to herself and her abandoned body. The cramping was over and her womb felt empty.³⁶¹ Esther sat up slowly, feeling light headed and still far away. There was blood covering her hands and her arms and her skirts.³⁶² So much blood. And little bits of something that looked like a dead animal and made her insides jump over one another.³⁶³ She stared at her bloody hands as if they belonged to someone else, mesmerized. *It's over.*

It's all over. It's been over since the day you were born.

³⁶¹ Midrash Rabbah - Esther VIII:3 “Our Rabbis there [in Babylon] say that [Esther] became menstruous, but our teachers here say that she had a miscarriage, and having had a miscarriage never bore again.”

³⁶² B. Nidah 57b discusses how a woman can be rendered impure if blood is found on her clothing because it can be assumed to have emanated from her depending on where it lies: “The Master said, ‘A bloodstain on her body, concerning which there is doubt whether it is unclean or clean, is regarded as unclean; on her shirt, when it is doubtful whether it is unclean or clean, is regarded as clean’

³⁶³ B. Nidah 24b “If a miscarriage had the likeness of a serpent, Hanina the son of R. Joshua's brother ruled: Its mother is unclean by reason of the birth.”

Esther shuddered and crawled on her hands and knees to the basin at the far side of room. The water was cold and her hands her shaking as she unfastened underskirts now stiff and scratchy with dried blood.³⁶⁴ But slowly, carefully, Esther patted and sponged her legs and her thighs and that hurting place in between, wiping the blood and the impurity and the failure away.³⁶⁵

Esther couldn't sleep that night. She lay wide awake staring at the yawning mouth of the royal bed and clutching a blanket around her still naked body. Darkness was everywhere. Death was everywhere. Pain, humiliation, embarrassment and betrayal reached for her from every side. Clinging to her skin and tangling her hair.

She couldn't breathe.

Couldn't see.

Couldn't think.

All there was, was Darkness and Chaos.³⁶⁶

And pain.

So much pain.

³⁶⁴ B. Nidah 56b discusses if blood stained clothing can be pure again after washing or not. "There is presumption that the daughters of Israel examine their shirts at the time they are washing them; but if they did not examine them, they impair its presumptive cleanness retrospectively."

³⁶⁵ Leviticus 15:19 "When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening."

³⁶⁶ Genesis 1:2 "the earth being unformed and void (תֵּהוֹ וָבֶהוּ), with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water"

Every molecule of Esther's being hurt. Even the space between her legs was throbbing. *But why? Why do I feel so dirty?* The cramping was gone, but it felt like she was being torn apart. Ripped open and plowed into. She felt that secret space for a wound, but the bleeding had stopped and there was nothing there. *It's been months since I saw the King. Why does it feel like you just left his chambers?*

Esther turned away from herself and from the uncomfortable memories haunting everywhere she looked. But then there was that voice, that awful Truth-telling, scraping older voice, waiting for her wherever she tried to hide. *It's not the King's cock you're so desperate to run from is it? It's not the King's cock that lances into you every time you close your eyes.*³⁶⁷ Esther was shaking, pulling at her hair, scratching at her arms and neck and face—wishing the vortex of terror and fear would just sweep her up and annihilate her already.

“SHEKET!”³⁶⁸ she screamed at herself. “GO AWAY!”

Make me. The voice cackled, darting deeper into Esther's fracturing mind, taunting her, goading her to give chase.

I can't follow you there, Esther thought.

³⁶⁷ B. Nidah 43a discusses ritual impurity from ejaculation. Rava and Samuel argue that the feeling of ejaculation is part of what determines if a male orgasm communicate impurity or not: “Samuel ruled, Any semen which does not shoot forth like an arrow causes no uncleanness. What is the practical difference between the latter reading and the former reading? — The practical difference between them is the case where the detachment of the semen was perceived but the emergence was not felt.”

³⁶⁸ Sheket is the command to be quiet in Hebrew.

You mean you won't. Coward.

I am not!

Then why are you still here secluded in the Queen's pleasure chamber?

I'm the Queen, where else would I spend my final days?

The haggard crone inside her was laughing and pointing and soon Esther found herself alone at the very top of the winding stairs in an unused room.

It was a small room. *A room meant for a servant or guard, not a Queen.* A safe room. Tucked up behind a secret stairs that attached to the Queen's Official Bedroom. That huge palace of a room where all her most important duties took place... That looming, grasping, reaching room which Esther would give anything to escape.

Don't think about that room. You're here now. Alone. But Esther couldn't help herself.

She felt that other room staring at her. Leering at her. Mocking her with all the things she'd ever done. All the sounds she'd ever made. The pleasure she'd ever given. *And*

*taken. You enjoyed it too, you know. It was your fault too.*³⁶⁹ And she had

sometimes. Sometimes her body had betrayed her. That was the worst part... when he

³⁶⁹ B. Bava Kama 32a discusses the damages owed a wife after painful conjugal relations by asking who is at fault. Since "both of the parties were simultaneously [active against each other], whereas here it was only he that committed the deed. Is she act at all]? Is it not written, The souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people? [considered] not [to have participated in the — [It is true that] enjoyment is derived by both of them, but it is only he to whom the active part can be ascribed."

told her she wanted it and she thought it to be true.³⁷⁰ Esther turned away from herself and that awful dirty room, humiliated and ashamed all over again.³⁷¹ *How did I come to this?*

But this room, *her room*, could not be more different than it's mistress a floor below. *That* room was dominated by a gargantuan four poster bed and endless mirrors. *That* room was covered in those disgusting cushions and aids d'amour and that were always staring at her, taunting her, no matter where she looked. *That* room was meant for being looked at and toyed with. *That* room was meant for סכלי, for toys. *This* room was meant for People and for being seen. *That* room was overly decorated and ostentatious in its displays of wealth. But *this* room was bare except for a small bed, a mirror, a chair, a brazier and an empty basin. Esther crossed the room and turned the reflective face of the mirror to the wall. Here at least, she didn't have to be looked at by anyone, not even herself.

Esther looked up and noticed a trap door in the ceiling above. She pulled over the chair and climbed up, fumbling with the heavy latch until it finally gave and revealed a square of star studded sky.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Genesis 3:16 "To the woman [God] said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."

³⁷¹ Ibn Ezra argues that the pain of bearing children described in Gen 3:16 refers to the agony and torment that women endure during the letting of blood at the loss of virginity.

³⁷² Isaiah 22:1 "What can have happened to you that you have gone, all of you, up on the roofs"

A moment later all of Shushan lay at her feet. Esther peered out over the edge of the tower³⁷³ at a blur of dark houses and purple sky. The very first lamps of the day were just beginning to be lit, and Esther was far away and dividing into herself as the city began to wake up and come to life around her. One by one lights winked on and doors were opened and fires lit. Everywhere but in the Jewish quarter and way far up on the hill, Esther noticed with satisfaction. *He listened. He actually listened.*³⁷⁴ Esther's heart soared and then plummeted.. *Because he didn't have a choice. There's always a choice. There' s never a choice.*

Esther watched the sky turn from deepest purple to blue to pearly white, holding the blanket close around her. *I just want to go home.* Her heart was heavy and the world felt bleak. *I know sweetheart, I know.* Esther looked out at the horizon and the purple mountains now popping into view. *Ima.* And then she was on her feet, scrambling over the roof, looking anywhere and everywhere for her special secret Meadow and the Mother it contained.

At first she couldn't see a thing. It was just like it always was when she tried to find Her from the palace. *Nothing.* Just houses and hills and other people's special trees. But she kept looking. Kept searching for the only mother she had ever known. Her heart was pounding when she finally saw her. And then everything went still. And Silent.

There it was.

³⁷³ Genesis 11:4 "And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.""

³⁷⁴ Esther 4:17 "So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him."

Just over there on that hill with the stone Kaach on one side.

Esther couldn't see much of her. Just the barest traces of her tallest branches swaying in the breeze. But it was enough. It had to be. *It has to be. Everything's gonna be ok.* Esther breathed. *No it's not. It never is.*

A strange but familiar man's face flashed in front of her eyes—smacking his lips and reaching for her. She shuddered and pushed the whatever-it-was far away, suddenly cold and sweating.³⁷⁵ Her stomach was growling and she was hungry. Starving just like she had been all those years ago when Mordecai went away. *When he left us. You mean abandoned us.*

She had been such a little girl. Far too small to be expected to fend for herself and be able to survive on her own. *Only six.* The naked young Queen huddled on the Tower roof wanting to cry for the little girl she had once been, but there were no tears—just the awful weight of inevitable looming doom. *But he came back. He always came back,* that little voice piped up. Esther shuddered, feeling sick. *He comes back. No matter, what he always comes back.*

Esther thought of the day when he finally came back from Jerusalem and found her curled up in the animal shed, starving and half wild. She didn't recognize him at first. She just saw an old man coming at her, and so she fought. Hard. Harder than she ever remembered fighting before or since. Scratching and biting and kicking and screaming

³⁷⁵ B. Bava Kama 84a discusses damages owed a person after they have been injured by someone else. In response to a mishna about the infliction of pain without visible bruising, the Gemara argues that compensation for “healing could apply in a case where one had been suffering from some wound which was being healed up”.

as if her life depended on it. But she was just a little girl then, no more than nine. And old though Mordecai was, he was strong, stronger than she ever imagined he could be. It took him a few tries to grab her, but once he had her in his vice like arms, there was no escape and he let her fight him until her energy was spent. But no matter how hard little Esther kicked and bit, Mordecai's voice remained calm and gentle, and his grip unrelenting.

"I'm here now Ishtahar. You're safe now," he whispered over and over, kissing her hair and rocking her as he took her inside the big house. "I'm here now Ishtahar. Mordecai has you now. Everything is going to be ok."

And then little Esther was crying into his chest, and there was food and a warm bath and new clothes and gentle hands and warm blankets. It had felt as if the nightmare was finally over and she was just now waking up and coming back to the world.

Far away and many years later, Esther, the woman people called Queen, sat staring at the wide open sky, unseeing vacant eyes. Hours passed and eventually she fell asleep dreaming of a safety she had never really known.

Esther was groggy and confused when she woke with the setting sun. At first she didn't know where she was or who she was, but then it all came back to her in an awful

frothing rush. *It's over. It's all over. He never loved you Ishtakar.*³⁷⁶ *You're as good a dead. Don't say that. It's not over yet.*

The air was heavy with woodsmoke and as the night darkened, Esther noticed an orange stain on the horizon, off over there. *Where my mother should be.* Esther's heart pounded and she stood in one motion, trying to get a better view of that house on the hill and the secret Meadow off to the left.

And there it was.

Burning.

The wind was blowing in gusts now and Esther's insides kept sinking and sinking. *He couldn't have... Of course he did.* Esther stared at the burning smudge of fire on the horizon, heart cold and disbelieving. *How could he?*³⁷⁷ And yet, deep down, she also wasn't surprised at all. *He's always taken exactly what he wanted to.*

Don't say that. Esther was desolate and shaking— crumbling from the inside out. And then she was tearing at her clothes,³⁷⁸ scratching at her neck and chest desperately

³⁷⁶ B. Yevamot 48b in the context of a discussion of the characteristics of proselytes and why they refuse the commandments and continue to behave the way that they do, "Abba Hanan said in the name of R. Eleazar: Because they do not do it out of love, but out of fear."

³⁷⁷ Deuteronomy 20: 21 "Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced."

³⁷⁸ 2 Samuel 1:11-12 "David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men with him. They lamented and wept, and they fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the soldiers of the LORD and the House of Israel who had fallen by the sword."

fighting to breathe.³⁷⁹ *He didn't... He couldn't... He could... and he did...* She looked at the flames and the stark outline of a house against them that meant it was the far side of the hill that was burning. The left side. The meadow side. *Ima*, Esther wailed, falling to her knees and crawling towards the edge of the tower. *Not you too. Not now.* Her heart gave way. *You were supposed to outlive us all.*

And yet, no tears fell. The pain wouldn't let itself be released.

Not yet. It was all too much.

Esther thought of her Mother and her complicated web of branches, remembering the way they swayed in the wind and dappled in the sun. And how they always held her safe and tight and how strong she felt when she used to climb way up towards the sky. Each memory shot through Esther like a knife, cutting away piece after precious piece of beauty, leaving all the darkness and the worthlessness and the shame cowering inside her. *Mordecai must pay.* And then she was tearing at her face and her hair and her chest and her legs, screaming and wailing as she watched the only Mother she had ever known burn to the ground in front of her.

Esther remembered all those days when she had leapt from her Mother's branches to run home to Mordecai, eager to prove to him she was his perfect little pupil.

³⁷⁹ B. Bava Kama 91b discusses self harm and asks if it is permissible or not. The Gemara explicitly states that the rabbis disagree and within this context, the tearing of garments is added to the discussion. Since, "Garments may be rent for a dead person as this is not necessarily done to imitate the ways of the Amorites. But R. Eleazar said: I heard that he who rends [his garments] too much for a dead person transgresses the command, 'Thou shalt not destroy', and it seems that this should be the more so in the case of injuring his own body. But garments might perhaps be different, as the loss is irretrievable, for R. Johanan used to call garments 'my honorers', and R. Hisda whenever he had to walk between thorns and thistles used to lift up his garments Saying that whereas for the body [if injured] nature will produce a healing, for garments [if torn] nature could bring up no cure."

You chose him over her every time. Deep down you wanted this, you know you did. No I didn't. This is all your fault, Ishtar. You should've run away when you had the chance. Esther cowered from herself and the voices inside her.

It's always been my fault. I was never good enough. Never smart enough. Never pretty enough. And then he had another Esther to perfect and love.

Esther turned away from her selves and the chaos inside her head. Why can't it just be quiet for once? She wondered. Why can't they all just stop and go away? It's all just too much. But the voices just became louder and louder and more and more jumbled until Esther's temples were pounding and she had lost all sense of who or where she was.

By sunrise all evidence of her Mother was gone, eviscerated in ash and betrayal.

It had been two days since Esther had eaten and her vision went blurry as she struggled to rise and greet the morning. She clutched the wall with one hand and her blanket with another, turning her back to the rising sun, as she always had for as long as she could remember.³⁸⁰ But that meant turning her back on her mother's corpse. On her mother's memory. —and it felt all wrong. And so she turned back to face the sun instead, closing her eyes and soaking in its warmth. Then, after Esther had listened to

³⁸⁰ Traditionally, Jews turn towards Jerusalem during their daily prayers. Persia lies to the east of Jerusalem, so an observant Jew would have faced west, towards the setting sun, during their daily prayers.

the waking morning for a while, she took a deep breath. And softly, in no more than a whisper, she began to recite, *Yitkadal V'yitkadash shme raba*,³⁸¹ wishing she could weep, but the tears were too far away.

Just like they always were.

It's over. It's all over.

Some time later Esther found herself back inside the tower room, curled up in a ball underneath the wooden cot, mystified as to how she ended up there. All she knew was that she was shaking and afraid. She felt like she was splayed wide open and couldn't possibly gather herself back up again— like someone had reached deep inside and touched something that should never be touched. Taken something that should never be taken.

What happened? Esther wondered.

Do you really want to know? that old, tired voice asked, gentle and harsh all at the same time.

Esther shook her head and curled up tighter, edging closer to the wall. But I have to. I have to know.

³⁸¹ The mourners Kaddish, begins with the words, Yitkadal V'yitkadash shme raba, and is traditionally recited following the burial of a loved one. The kaddish, like the book of Esther does not actually mention the word God.

*You can't un-hear what you hear, the voice warned. Are you sure you want to deal with it?*³⁸² *Do you really want to know?*

I don't care. It's all over anyway. If I'm lost, I may as well be well and truly lost.

Be careful what you wish for, another voice cautioned.

Tell me, commanded Esther bat Avihail, Queen of Persia and Kush. Tell me the truth. I deserve to know.

Esther didn't realize she was talking aloud to herself. Nor ever paused to wonder who these voices belonged to nor if they were her or not her. They just were—both other and not other. Self and not self. The voices had always been there, guarding her, checking in on her, keeping her safe when no one else would. *Or could.*

Once upon a time, long long ago, that dark voice began. *There was a greedy, bitter, old man who lived with his niece in the capitol of a great city.*³⁸³

Don't say that about Mordecai. He isn't greedy, he's just good at business!

³⁸² B. Bava Kama 91b raises the question of culpability after a discussion about whether or not self harm can be permissible. The text then moves on from bodily self harm to harming one's own property or plants. The Gemara raises the case of a person who kills his own plants and in response to which Rabbah b. Bar Hanah recited in the presence of Rab a case in which a plaintiff pleads "'You killed my ox, you cut my plants, [pay compensation]', and the defendant responds:] 'You told me to kill it, you told me to cut it down', he would be exempt. [Rab] said to him. If so you almost make it impossible for anyone to live, for how can you trust him?"

³⁸³ Esther 2: 5-7 "In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.—He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother."

You have your story, Ishtahar, and I have mine. I've been patient. Now shut up and listen. This is my story to tell. And no one else's.

Once upon a time, the dark voice began again. There was man who believed the world was out to get him and tear him to shreds. A man who had once been rich and powerful and blamed everything but himself for its loss. He was the kind of man who would take advantage of anyone and anything.³⁸⁴ Who would buy a starving man's life rather than share a loaf of bread with him.³⁸⁵ Who would smack a girl stupid and then grope and prod her back together again. Esther shuddered.

This man lived alone in an old, crumbling house, choosing to spend his coin on strong drink and flashy clothes instead of the things that really matter. That's not fair, you have to spend money to make money. Everyone knows that. Everything was a charade. The voice was cold and cutting, forcing her to pay attention to herself. Esther struggled to breathe, terrified to hear what came next and yet unable to look away. She *had* to know.

—but each word felt like it might crush her.

³⁸⁴ B. Bava Batra 9a The rabbis taught, "The collectors for charity are not required to give an account of the moneys entrusted to them for charity, nor the treasurers of the Sanctuary of the moneys given for holy purposes."

³⁸⁵ B. Megillah 15b: Haman became a slave because he sold himself to Mordecai for a loaf of bread.

Annihilate her.

Mordecai was a greedy man who pretended to be a Tzadik,³⁸⁶ the voice continued inside her. He had everyone fooled. Esther couldn't breathe. He didn't raise you out of the goodness of his heart, Ishtahar. Before you were a wife you were like a daughter.³⁸⁷

Silence.

But you weren't just a daughter, you were also a toy. א כלי.

He was the closest thing to a father you ever had. He just saw an opportunity and he took it. A clever man like him could mold a little girl into whoever he wanted. His perfect little plaything. His own darling pet. His perfect little princess.

"No. No....It can't...I...that's not..." And yet..., those awful words were ringing true, resonating in every cell and in every fibre of her being. They were familiar words. Words

³⁸⁶ Rashi refers to Mordecai as a tzaddik, a righteous person, during his comments on B. Megillah 13b. Rashi explains that while Esther was having a sexual relationship with both the King and with Mordecai she was careful to go to the Mikveh so as not to distribute her impurity to the Tzaddik Mordecai.

³⁸⁷ B. Megillah 13a R. Yohanan teaches that since Pharaoh's daughter was like a mother who had born Moses because she raised and adopted him.

Esther felt she had known once long ago, but forgotten over and over again every day since.

You were his perfect little wife, that dark chilling voice continued. *His little Ishtahar, beautiful as the moon. A pretty young כל' all his own, to do with as he pleased. A little girl so beholden to her great and magnificent uncle that she could never hope to ever grow into a Woman of her own. She would simply be his בית³⁸⁸, his home, his object, and never her own.*

It wasn't like that. The small voice argued. *I made him do it. I wanted it. It was my fault I became his wife.... not his. I was jealous and I didn't want to lose him.... I made him do it. No you didn't. It was him. All him. From the beginning.*

It wasn't that simple, the prophetess argued. *I saw an opportunity with Mordecai and I took it. It was my choice and I made it knowing full well what it meant. It was a good match and I made it happen. I seduced him.*

And that night... that Sabbath... I chose him and I knew exactly what I was doing.

³⁸⁸ B. Megillah 13a A tanna teaches in R. Meir's name that Esther was an obedient wife (like an obedient daughter, but actually a bayit, a rabbinic term for both house and wife). B. Shabbat 118 b in a discussion of marital duties and obligations, R. Jose teaches, "I have never called my wife 'my wife' or my ox my ox', but my wife [I called] 'my home,' and my ox 'my field'".

No you didn't. It wasn't like that. You were only eleven.³⁸⁹ No more than a child. I hadn't even bleed yet.

He asked. He gave us the choice and I took it. I said yes. He didn't make you do it... you never had to. You wanted to.

Liar. He never really asked. He just commanded.³⁹⁰ You never had the chance to say no.³⁹¹ It was never really a choice. Esther looked away from the turmoil inside her and the ever shifting pronouns and perspectives of self, taking in the room around her. Her eyes fell on the back of the copper mirror leaning against the far wall. *Have you ever wondered why you've never wanted to look at yourself in the mirror?*

³⁸⁹ B. Ketubot 39a, R Nahman teaches that, "Three [categories of] women may use an absorbent in their marital intercourse: a minor, expectant mother, and a nursing mother. The minor, because otherwise she might become pregnant and die. An expectant mother, because otherwise she might cause her fetus to degenerate into a sandal. A nursing mother, because otherwise she might have to wean her child [prematurely] and this would result in his death. And what is [the age of such] a minor? From the age of eleven years and one day to the age of twelve years and one day. One who is under, or over this age must carry on her marital intercourse in a normal manner, [so teaches] R. Meir.

³⁹⁰ B. Yevamot 6a discusses Leviticus 19:3, the commandment "to honor your father and mother and obey the Sabbath." The Gemara argues that, "since it might have been assumed that if his father had said to him, 'Defile yourself', or if he said to him, 'Do not restore,' he must obey him, it was explicitly stated, "You shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths," (Lev 19:3) it is the duty of all of you to honor Me! — The real reason is because this objection may be advanced: Those are in a different category since they are also essentials in the execution of the precept."

³⁹¹ "I couldn't say no. And he left no place in his voice for doubt. It was a voice that checked me, frightened me; made me want to run away, kept me willingly riveted to the bed which I couldn't leave, where I had gone to ground; buried myself; shrunk, felt myself getting younger and forgetting" (Cixous 'Angst' 1997), 72

There was no reason to...Simple as that. I never did anything wrong. I did what I had to do. I seduced the King and pleased Haggai. I transformed myself into whatever their hearts desired and they loved me for it.³⁹² Call me a whore if you will, but I will not apologize for saving us... and being the woman God created me to be.³⁹³ There has to be some meaning behind all this whoring. Some sense to all this desecration...

My point exactly. You can't even see it anymore. He's gotten inside you. They all have. Your uncle³⁹⁴ twisted your truth and stole you from yourself. He turned you into a whore. His whore. You' re wrong— I was his wife.³⁹⁵ Same

³⁹² B. Megillah 13a R. Elazar explains that Esther 2: 15 “Esther found favor” meant that men of every race and nationality thought she looked like a member of his people.

³⁹³ Genesis 3:16 “And to the woman [God] said, “I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

³⁹⁴ Esther 2:15 describes the familial relationship between Esther and Mordecai as cousins in convoluted terms. Instead of saying that they are just cousins, the text describes the relationship as “Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter”. Because of this convoluted description, many modern Jews grow up learning that Mordecai was Esther’s uncle, not her cousin.

³⁹⁵ B. Ketubot 47b “R. Eleazar b. Azariah may admit [that betrothal has the same force as marriage] since [undertakings of such a nature] are due to [a desire for] matrimonial association, and such association, surely, had taken place.”

difference.³⁹⁶ No, Hadassah. Wife makes all the difference.³⁹⁷ Wife changes everything.

He manipulated you into believing him.³⁹⁸ It's not your fault. You didn't have a choice. You were just a child. It was the only way you had to survive.

Esther's throat was tight and her mouth dry. She clutched her knees close, wrapping long arms around herself, rocking her body and shaking her head as she felt the words seep into her and echo over and over again—*You were just a child... you were just a child....³⁹⁹* resonating like ancient mysteries half understood. She knew

³⁹⁶ B. Yevamot 20b in a discussion a forbidden relations, the text asks what happens if a man does in fact have intercourse with a woman who is forbidden to him. One school of thought presented in the text is that once a man has intercourse with a forbidden woman, she becomes his wife in full, despite her previous forbidden status.

³⁹⁷ Amidst a discussion of Levirate marriage, B. Yevamot 19b states “if he married her, she is regarded as a wife in every respect.”

³⁹⁸ “One day she was suddenly very happy. One of the adult rockers sent into her bed by her father was going to Spain and he wanted to take her. This was proof that he loved her. I knew from the hippie father that he had paid the rocker to take the girl. Finally i was the adult and someone else was the child. I told her. I told her carefully and slowly and with love, but I told her the truth, all of it, about the rotten father and the rotten rocker. Her mother now wanted her and her sister back. I sent them back. Nothing would ever be simple for me again. A strain of melancholy entered my life; it was the fusion of responsibility with loss in a world of bruised and bullied strangers.” (Dworkin 2002),116.

³⁹⁹ B. Yevamot 33b discusses the guilt of two men who marry two women and then exchange them on the wedding night. When the question of age of the brides is raised, the Gemara teaches “The seduction of a minor is deemed to be an outrage, and an outraged woman is permitted to an Israelite” (who deliberately exchanged his wife).

she knew this story, and yet she had no idea what would happen next and she couldn't look away.⁴⁰⁰

He used you all along.⁴⁰¹ It was never about us and our future. But him and his. Always his. He used you, Ishtahar. Like a toy. Just another כלי שאני משתמש בו. Just another toy that I use whenever and wherever I like.

Silence.

Esther took a deep breath and hugged herself closer.

That night, the dark voice continued. That shabbat... after you went with him and then panicked and started to cry and shake...

He held me.⁴⁰² And whispered in my hair that everything was going to be ok. Nothing happened even though I tried to touch him like I knew I was supposed to. But He stopped me and said there was no rush... that we had our whole lives for that...

⁴⁰⁰ B. Shabbat 68a continues the discussion of obligations of an individual while held as a captive. In this context, "Rab and Samuel both maintain: Our Mishnah treats of a child who was taken captive among Gentiles, or a proselyte who became converted in the midst of Gentiles. subsequently forgot, he is liable [to a sin-offering] for every Sabbath."

⁴⁰¹ Esther 4: 14 Mordecai wrote to Esther "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

⁴⁰² B. Bava Metzia 59a amidst a discussion of the power of shame and just how detrimental publicly shaming a person is, Rav teaches, "One should always be heedful of wronging his wife, for since her tears are frequent she is quickly hurt."

He was strong and sweet. And patient... a real mensch. You're the one that acted like a mad person overtaken by their yetzer. Not him. That's not the whole story.

Silence.

That night... after the tears and the madness... after you left his chambers and crawled into your own bed... it wasn't over...

Silence.

He came into your room after...

Esther froze. Un-breathing. Unthinking.

No.

He woke you up.

No.

Silence.

Esther. He raped me.

Silence.

He raped me.

Mordecai raped me.

He crawled into my bed and he shoved himself inside me.

like a beam that wouldn't fit.⁴⁰³

He raped me Esther.

He was like a father to me.⁴⁰⁴

The only father I had ever known.

And here.... here...⁴⁰⁵

... he was pawing at my chest and slobbering on my face and neck and I didn't

say a thing. He held me down and told me I wanted this. That I belonged to

him. That it was his right. and he'd had me all along. We were engaged after

all.⁴⁰⁶ And always had been...⁴⁰⁷ He told me that I was begging for it and

⁴⁰³ B. Bava Kama 32a responds to a mishna about damages resulting from a beam crashing into a barrel with Rabbah b. Nathan questioning R. Huna, "If a man injures his wife through conjugal intercourse, what is [the legal position]? Since he performed this act with full permission is he to be exempt [for damage resulting therefrom], or should perhaps greater care have been taken by him?"

⁴⁰⁴ B. Megillah 13a Rav Yohanan teaches that adoption is equivalent to biological parenthood.

⁴⁰⁵ While a sexual relationship with one's daughter is not explicitly listed in the list of forbidden sexual relationships in Leviticus 18:9-18, it can be inferred, as Rashi does, from the combination of verses 18:10 "The nakedness of your son's daughter, or of your daughter's daughter—do not uncover their nakedness; for their nakedness is yours." and 18:17, "Do not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter; nor shall you marry her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter and uncover her nakedness: they are kindred; it is depravity."

⁴⁰⁶ B. Ketubot 47b "R. Eleazar b. Azariah may admit [that betrothal has the same force as marriage] since [undertakings of such a nature] are due to [a desire for] matrimonial association, and such association, surely, had taken place."

⁴⁰⁷ B. Nidah 44b teaches that a man can marry and have sexual intercourse with a girl as young as three years old and one day.

I believed him. He told me he loved me. and that I'd always be his no matter where I went or what I did. Always his... always his.

Esther wanted to cry, but no tears came. She felt hollow. Too hollow. And far far away. Present and not present. As if her whole world had narrowed down to just this. This darkness. This Chaos. This horror of horrors that infected everything it touched. Unnameable and yet already named. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else was real. Just here. Just now. Just this awful, disgusting truth she had been hiding from for all these years.⁴⁰⁸

*I woke up with him on top of me,*⁴⁰⁹ *the voice continued. I didn't know what was happening, but it didn't feel like the first time. Even then, I knew it had happened before. You' re lying.*⁴¹⁰ *Why would I lie?* Esther shuddered, clutching the space between her legs as the phantom pain threatened to rip her into pieces. *He covered my mouth with the back of his hand and told me it was supposed to hurt....that I wanted it.*

⁴⁰⁸ “With sexual abuse people remember and people forget. The process of remembering can be slow, tormenting, sometimes impossible.” (Dworkin 2002), 208,

⁴⁰⁹ B. Ketubot 39a discusses the compensation for the pain of rape or the taking of virginity. The Gemara asks, “for the pain of what? — The father of Samuel replied: For the pain [the rapist inflicted] when he thrust her upon the ground.”

⁴¹⁰ Judges 16:15 “Then [Delilah] said to him, “How can you say you love me, when you don't confide in me? This makes three times that you've deceived me and haven't told me what makes you so strong.”

but I couldn't..... It was just..... so.....

*...so unthinkable..... no words for what he did.....⁴¹¹ no words for the pain
or the humiliation... I thought I was splitting in two..... that it would never
end...that I would die with him on top of me...crushing me...*

Invading me.

Betraying me.

*But then as suddenly as it began, it was over. I took a breath and he
was gone, taking my bloody bedsheets with him. The evidence of our virginity to be
used against us when the time came⁴¹². Not virginity but violence... I wrapped the
blanket around me and hid under the bed until dawn.*

*At some point, I must've fallen asleep... when I woke, I told myself that it
was all just a bad dream. Mordecai was his usual distant self at the noon meal,*

⁴¹¹B. Yevamot 22b: In the context of a discussion about the possibility of repentance after betting a Mamzer (an illegitimate child), Shimon ben Menasya teaches that the verse, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight" (Ecclesiastes 1:15) is referring to one who engaged in intercourse with a relative who is forbidden to him."

⁴¹²Exodus 22: 15-16 "If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride-price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must make her his wife by payment of a bride-price. If her father refuses to give her to him, he must still weigh out silver in accordance with the bride-price for virgins."

*and before the day was out, I had managed to forget the whole awful
whatever it was.⁴¹³*

*A few weeks later I woke in the night with more blood pooling between
my thighs, crying and afraid. I remember staring at the dark, moonlit blood,
wondering what it was and where I had seen it before. Wondering why I
suddenly felt covered in the dirtiest of sewer muck. I couldn't stop weeping.
Wailing with blood on my thighs and my hands and then, inevitably my face. It
was everywhere and it wouldn't go away.*

*But after a while the tears faded and I came back to myself without
knowing or understanding where I went or why... or what had just happened.*

Esther nodded, feeling worthless and afraid. Everything was wrong. Everything
was upside and down, and all all wrong.

And yet...

⁴¹³ Midrash Rabbah V:1 "Just as the basilisk parts death from life, so wine parted Lot from his daughters through incest, as it is written, "they made their father drink wine that night" (Gen 19: 33)"

And yet everything made sense for the first time in years.⁴¹⁴ How could she have missed it for so long?⁴¹⁵ How could she not have known?

He told me I was beautiful, but I'd never felt so gross.⁴¹⁶ I thought my life was finally beginning... Marrying the man of my dreams, my savior. my redeemer... but marrying Mordecai never quite felt like it was meant to feel...I just assumed it was my fault, but...

He ruined me before I knew what ruining meant.

⁴¹⁴ B. Sotah 9b discusses the relationship between Samson and Delilah. The rabbis analyze the verse, “when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart” (Judges 16: 18) asking the text, “How did she know this? R. Hanina said in the name of Rab: Words of truth are recognizable. Abaye said: She knew that this righteous man would not utter the Divine Name in vain; when he exclaimed: I have been a Nazirite unto God, said: Now he has certainly spoken the truth.”

⁴¹⁵ Deuteronomy 22:16-21 And the girl's father shall say to the elders, “I gave this man my daughter to wife, but he has taken an aversion to her; so he has made up charges, saying, ‘I did not find your daughter a virgin.’ But here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity!” And they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town. and they shall fine him a hundred [shekels of] silver and give it to the girl's father; for the man has defamed a virgin in Israel. Moreover, she shall remain his wife; he shall never have the right to divorce her. But if the charge proves true, the girl was found not to have been a virgin, then the girl shall be brought out to the entrance of her father's house, and the men of her town shall stone her to death; for she did a shameful thing in Israel, committing fornication while under her father's authority. Thus you will sweep away evil from your midst”

⁴¹⁶ B. Bava Kama 59a “R. Simeon b. Judah taught in the name of R. Simeon b. Menasya: in the case of Rape no compensation is made for Pain, as the female would [in any case] have subsequently to undergo the same pain through her husband. The rabbis however, said to him a woman having intercourse by her free will is not to be compared to one having intercourse by constraint.”

Esther's body was cold and far away, listening with all that she had. *He*

*shattered us into a thousand tiny pieces and three little parts.*⁴¹⁷ *There was no*

*seduction.*⁴¹⁸ *It hurt too much. He just took. There was no seduction. He took what*

*he wanted when he wanted it. You never had a choice. We never had a choice.*⁴¹⁹

Esther felt every word echo at her very core, unable to look away. Unable to disbelieve.

And yet hoping against hope that she was wrong. Or crazy even. But no. Here was the

truth, sweeping away her whole life like a landslide and there was nowhere left to run.

Nowhere left to hide.

He just....

He just....

Took.

⁴¹⁷ B. Bava Kama 32a responds to a mishna about damages resulting from a beam that is forcefully inserted into a barrel too small for it. As a result the barrel splinters and breaks. This spurs Rabbah b. Nathan to question R. Huna saying, "If a man injures his wife through conjugal intercourse, what is [the legal position]? Since he performed this act with full permission is he to be exempt [for damage resulting therefrom], or should perhaps greater care have been taken by him?"

⁴¹⁸ In a discussion on B. Ketubot 39b describing the difference between seduction and rape, R. Nahman in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha, teaches that "the smart women among them declare that one who is seduced experiences no pain. But do we not see that one does experience pain? — Abaye replied: Nurse told me: Like hot water on a bald head. Raba said: R. Hisda's daughter told me, Like the prick of the blood-letting lancet. R. Papa said: The daughter of Abba of Sura told me, Like hard crust in the jaws."

⁴¹⁹ B. Ketubot 39a-39b discusses the question of paying restitution for the seduction or rape of a virgin: "Simeon b. Judah stated in the name of R. Simeon taught that a violator does not pay compensation for the pain inflicted because the woman would ultimately have suffered the same pain from her husband, but they said to him: One who is forced to intercourse cannot be compared to one who acts willingly"

...and made you believe you were the thief.⁴²⁰ Esther felt the tide of mud and sewage crash into her, covering her in a disgusting ooze of knowing. *You were the one that had to hide the truth. You were the one always left to pick up the pieces. He never cared. He's been using you as his personal pleasure banquet your entire life.*

That night wasn't the first time...⁴²¹

Esther couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't speak.

Couldn't Be.

It was all too much. Too much to take in. Too much to process.⁴²² Too much to believe. It was unbelievable. And yet all too true to be anything less.

⁴²⁰ Deuteronomy 22: 23-24 “In the case of a virgin who is engaged to a man—if a man comes upon her in town and lies with her, you shall take the two of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. Thus you will sweep away evil from your midst.”

⁴²¹ B. Yevamot 20b discusses forbidden sexual relationships and degrees of incest. In this context, Rava teaches, “The first act of Intercourse is forbidden as a preventive measure against a second act of intercourse.

⁴²² In a discussion about memory and forgetting, B. Horayot 13b lists ten things that make a person forget what they have learned. The third instance given is “a woman who passes between two men.”

So she just sat where she crumpled, cheek pressed against the cold stone floor, heart still and mind numb, waiting for a death that would never come.⁴²³

Hours passed and the candles guttered and then went out, but still Esther sat, eyes open, staring off into the darkness. She couldn't move. Couldn't think. There was just shame. Awful tearing choking shame. Shame that seemed to seep into her and ooze out of her, chasing her everywhere her mind turned.

*He's been raping you all of your life, Esther. Controlling you.*⁴²⁴

Silence.

Molesting you. Violating you.

Silence.

Abusing you.

Esther's heart was pounding and her throat was so tight she could barely breathe. *And you deserved it, Esther. You're worthless, Ishtahar. You always have been and you always will be.*

⁴²³ B. Chullin 121b discusses at what point an animal mid slaughter is considered dead and if its limbs are allowed to be consumed. 'Hezekiah said: It is no more subject to the prohibition of limbs', because it is now considered as dead. 'R. Johanan said: It is still subject to the prohibition of limbs', because it is not actually dead!

⁴²⁴ B. Beitzah 32b in the context of a discussion of extreme suffering when life is no longer worth living, "Our Rabbis taught: There are three whose life is no life and they are: He who is dependent on the table of his neighbor; he whom his wife rules; and he whose body is subject to suffering."

He sold you to the King. Esther thought of that day in the Marketplace and the familiar stance of one of the men in robes. *He was behind it all along.*⁴²⁵ *He didn't. He did. He planned it all along.* She remembered that afternoon in the kitchen and how he'd promised to protect her. *But how did he know? He sold you. Stop. He sold you, Ishtahar.*⁴²⁶

But there was no where to run. The voices were everywhere, coming at her from all sides and all depths—from every angle. *He's never going to stop.* There was no where to hide. *He's been raping you all of your life, Ishtahar.* And so it went. Like a litany that would never end.

*Molesting you. Violating you. And you deserved it, Ishtahar.*⁴²⁷ *It was all your fault, Hadassah. You made it happen.*

⁴²⁵ Midrash Rabbah V:4 teaches that Mordecai was the man that helped the King procure a maiden who would please him.

⁴²⁶ Exodus 21: 7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed as male slaves are.” According to Sforno, “It is not appropriate for an upstanding member of society to buy a Jewish girl as a servant against her will. Such a “sale” is acceptable only if the girl in question will become the wife of the buyer or his son when reaching puberty. The purchase price will be given to her father as our sages have stipulated in Ketubot 46a.”

⁴²⁷ B. Ketubot 63b begins with the argument that a woman who consistently refuses a conjugal relationship with her husband is considered a rebellious wife. The text continues, asking if there are any contexts in which it is appropriate for a wife to refuse the sexual advances of her husband, an act which is likened to a laborer refusing to work. If she is refusing her husband out of malice, she is to be pressured into consenting, but if however, “If she said, however, ‘He is repulsive to me’, no pressure is to be brought to bear upon her. Mar Zutra ruled: Pressure is to be brought to bear upon her. Such a case once occurred, and Mar Zutra exercised pressure upon the woman and [as a result of the sexual act that followed] R. Hanina of Sura was born from the re-union. This, however, was not [the right thing to do].”

All there was, was darkness and shame and that awful pounding ripping tearing between her legs. And that cold ooze trickling down her neck, over her face. Gushing out of her mouth and nose.

Choking.

Gagging.

Esther tried to wipe it away, tried to rid her mouth of that awful taste and sense of being stuffed to bursting with something all too familiar.

But she couldn't.

It wasn't really there. None of it was. But she was still gagging and heaving all the same.⁴²⁸ Esther was all alone in the high stone tower, covered in Shame she could only half remember and never, ever seem to forget. She felt herself standing on the edge of a whirling vortex of fear and despair.⁴²⁹ Of betrayal and shame and that awful feeling of being scooped out by the core. The place between her legs was pounding with a sharp phantom pain that could not have felt more real. Esther crossed her legs and pressed her fists into that place, rocking like a small child on her side, imagining

⁴²⁸ "Generally people are able to recall important events they have experienced in the past. They realize the event has happened to them and that it is not happening now. The memory is, so to speak, a part of their "autobiography". Traumatic memories, however, can work a bit differently. When a person, or a dissociative part of a person, re-experiences a traumatic memory, they may feel as though it (or at least some aspect of it) is happening in the present. "Traumatic memories may include intense or overwhelming feelings such as panic, rage, shame, loss, guilt, despair; conflicting beliefs and thoughts; physical sensations such as pain; visual images, sounds, and smells; and also behaviors such as running away, fighting, freezing, or shutting down. Each of these aspects of traumatic memory can occur simultaneously, in succession, or separately at different times." (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 166.

⁴²⁹ Isaiah 22: 3-4 "Your survivors were all taken captive, Taken captive without their bows. That is why I say, "Let me be, I will weep bitterly. Press not to comfort me For the ruin of my poor people."

tears pooling beside her. But nothing helped. The agony in her groin just roared louder and louder, until it subsumed everything else. It was everything else. It was all she was.

Just pain.

Just that awful, relentless stabbing—tearing at her, ripping her apart. Violent, violating splinters of pain began at the base of her pelvis, and radiated outward and into, penetrating deeper than she ever thought possible.⁴³⁰ It was all she could think about—and all she could feel. Esther rocked back and forth, cradling herself tight in a fetal position, mind frozen in a world of hurt and pain and hopeless violation.

It was endless and all consuming.

Horrifying.

Fragments of memories and moments of violence circled her mind, pressing in on her; shouting and screaming and calling out to her. But every time she looked, the shard of memory would blur and then disappear, dissolving before she could read it or see it or hope to take any of it in. So she just lay on the stone floor, bombarded by violation after violation, captive and shaking deep inside her own mind.⁴³¹

She couldn't take it. It was all too much. Esther's face was hot and she felt a phantom hand at her throat, squeezing tighter and tighter until she was surprised she

⁴³⁰ B. Bava Kama 32a responds to a mishna about damages resulting from a beam that is forcefully inserted into a barrel too small for it. As a result the barrel splinters and breaks. This spurs Rabbah b. Nathan to question R. Huna saying, "If a man injures his wife through conjugal intercourse, what is [the legal position]? Since he performed this act with full permission is he to be exempt [for damage resulting therefrom], or should perhaps greater care have been taken by him?"

⁴³¹ B. Yevamot 20b discusses the prohibitions of incest and the degrees of sexual prohibitions. There is a disagreement about what happens to the woman after the forbidden intercourse has taken place. One school of thought presented is "If they had intercourse [with any of the forbidden women] they acquire [her as wife] by the first act of intercourse, but may not keep her for a second act of intercourse."

could still breathe. *If I'm lost, I am lost.*⁴³² Her stomach lurched, and without thinking, she began to scratch her bare arms and legs—and neck and face. Gently at first, no more than a faint hello. And then harder and harder and faster and faster. Tearing and tearing and ripping and scratching until the young woman's hands had turned into claws and her body was covered with angry red lines. She tore at her flesh until she bled, doing everything she could to eradicate the memory of those awful awful hands and that disgusting disgusting feeling way down deep at the core of who she was and ever thought she would be.⁴³³

But as quickly as the violence began, it was over again.

—leaving Esther breathless and afraid on the cold stone floor.

On the afternoon of the second day of the fast, Esther came back to herself and the drafty tower room. She was stiff and cramped. And hungry, so hungry. She sat up and stretched, eyes falling on the empty basin. *A bath would be nice. Clean would be*

⁴³² Esther 4:16 “Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am lost, I am lost.”

⁴³³ “Self-harm is deliberate injury to your body in order to cope with stress and inner conflict and pain. It can be understood as a substitute action for more adaptive coping that attempts to deal with a variety of overwhelming problems, many involving too much feeling (for example, loneliness, abandon, panic, inner conflicts, traumatic memories) or too little feeling (numbness, depersonalization, emptiness, feeling dead). Self-harm is thus often related to the need for regulation skills, that is, finding ways to modulate and tolerate unbearable inner experiences, such as painful emotions, or traumatic memories (Gratz & Walsh, 2009; Miller 1994)” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 315.

nice. There was flint next to the brazier, and a small bundle of kindling that only took a few attempts to light. Once the stove was burning, Esther unbolted the door and began hauling bucket after bucket of water from the Queen's bedchamber a floor below. And then, once the basin was full, Esther heated pot-full after potful on the glowing stove, remembering a time when hauling and heating water was just another one of her daily chores.

Esther stared at the steam rising from the basin for a while, overcome by its beauty and its purity. Strands of steam waved and danced above the water, beckoning to her with outstretched hands. She reached for them, awed by the stillness and simplicity of the moment. By the glass like ripples of water. She imagined the sheets of steam were people; like little dybbuks and demonesses, tugging at her curls, and brushing her cheeks as they danced off into the air. They whispered secrets in fragments, mixing tenses and syntax until Esther's mind was abuzz with imagined gibberish and somewhere safe and far away.

Minutes passed as Esther stared at the water. And then hours. The sun moved from one corner of the sky to the other, but it was not until a stray bolt of orange sunset struck her square in the face, that Esther stirred and came back to herself. She looked down at the cold tub and sighed, rekindling the brazier and reheating the water once again.

When the water was ready for the second time, Esther let go of her blanket for the first time in days. And then without looking at herself she stepped into the basin of water.

Now this is freedom! Hot water and no one in sight. Just us!

Us?⁴³⁴ This voice—these voices— was different than the gibberish of the mist people or the fantasy of the stories she saw in every day objects. This voice, these voices, felt more Other than that. More, her and less not-her than the voices of the characters in her stories. Esther pushed the thought aside, suddenly afraid of where the reasoning might lead. She felt the caverns of her mind waiting there, just around a dark corner, but they were so dark. So narrow. So twisting and so full of pitfalls. She didn't want to go there. Not yet. She didn't want to confront whatever monsters were waiting for her, lurking just out of sight. She didn't want to listen to whatever awful secrets they contained. *They' re still too big. Too terrible. Too life shattering.* So instead of exploring the darkness and the shame within her, the young woman slipped lower into the water and closed her eyes, feeling her body slacken as the clean warmth washed it all away; melting the hurt and the shame and loosening the endless ropes of hopelessness that had been knotting themselves around her for so, so long. She sighed, her body weightless and painless. *As if it wasn't even there,* that dark familiar voice whispered.

No such luck. The softer, more self conscious one chimed in.

⁴³⁴ “Many individuals with a dissociative disorder are afraid of inner voices that come from other parts of themselves. They label themselves as “crazy” and feel ashamed and afraid of these voices” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 52.

You wouldn't get rid of this— that no-nonsense courtiers voice argued— *You can't. This*

body is the only thing of any worth you have! Look at how the King goes mad for it! ... and

Mordecai and Haggai...! You can't buy power like that!

This body puts us in danger every time it's seen. It's disgusting. ...and

asking for it. You make them do it to you. They just can't control themselves around

*you*⁴³⁵. *It's your fault*⁴³⁶. *You make them do it. If only we could have been born*

fat and ugly and forgettable, then maybe we would have had a chance.

You don't mean that! How could you even think it?!

*Just look around you. This is where beauty leads.*⁴³⁷ Esther thought of the

humiliation of the King's gaze. And the choking feeling in her mouth. She shuddered,

⁴³⁵ Halachaly, the importance of a woman's modesty is based upon the idea that her voice and body are so sexually desirable that a man cannot control himself or his sexual desire when faced with the sounds of a woman's voice, a glimpse of her body, or the sight of a sexually active woman's uncovered hair.

⁴³⁶ "Guilt often implies that had a choice in your actions. Yet traumatized individuals have not done anything wrong to cause abuse and were in no position to make choices about what happened to them or what they did as children. And even when they have engaged in unacceptable behavior and did have a choice, they seem unable to eventually learn from it and let it go. Thus, feelings of guilt are often unrealistic or inappropriate in people who were abused as children. Though they may believe the abuse was their fault, they have no idea of what could have been different, just that traumatizing events would not have occurred if only they had been different in some undefined way. This appraisal is not based on realistic facts or on what would be expected from other people in the same situation. It does, however, provide the helpless child with an internal sense of control." (Boon, Steele, van der Hart, 2011), 293.

⁴³⁷ Niditch argues that "very much like Joseph, Esther is a passive character at the beginning of her story who will become an active character later..... her major asset is her beauty, a gift of nature" (Niditch 2000), 135.

hearing him groan, and feeling his hand in her hair, pulling her closer. “You were born for this Ishtahar,” Mordecai always used to say. “You always know *just* how to please me”.

Esther scrubbed herself harder in the basin, skin raw but still covered in filth, head filled with their awful voices and clinging eyes.

This is where beauty leads! Esther thought of all the banquets and the rich foods.⁴³⁸

You brought this on yourself. On all of us. She thought of her fine jewels and expensive dresses, of all the servants who ran to do her bidding, and the jealous eye of every woman in the kingdom, but somehow none of it seemed to matter the way it once did. *The way it never really did. Those stupid girls wouldn't be jealous if they knew what it was REALLY like. No one would.*

“Who are you?” Esther asked aloud, looking at her hairless body with disgust.⁴³⁹

Silence.

She closed her eyes and listened to the Night around her. To the soft gurgle of water against stone and the hushhhhhh of the wind as it wrapped itself around the tower. Somewhere far away Esther heard the hoot of an owl and the bark of a watch dog. The voices in her head were silent again. Waiting. Watching. She could feel them in the back of her mind, peering from behind endless dark corners.... somehow herself and not

⁴³⁸ Esther 2:18 “The king gave a great banquet for all his officials and courtiers, “the banquet of Esther.” He proclaimed a remission of taxes for the provinces and distributed gifts as befits a king.”

⁴³⁹ B. Megillah 13a R. Judah says that Anpikson oil was used for smearing [in the harem] because it “removes hair and makes the skin soft.”

herself. Separate and not separate. Watching everything she did, waiting to spring up and push her aside....

"No, that wasn't quite right," Esther thought. "They don't want to get rid of me... not yet... They just... they just have a lot to say....? But who are they? Who are you? Where did you come from?"

We've always been here. Always. I am me and I am you. We all are. We are the voices you never knew you had. The selves you never really wanted. Or saw. Or listened to.

It's time you saw yourself Ishtahar. Esther. Hadassah. We know who you are. Because we are you. I am you. And you can never escape us.

"I.... I don't understand." Esther's heart was pounding and her palms her sweating.

Silence.

“Who are you?”⁴⁴⁰ Esther asked, eyes closed as she sank deeper into the water.⁴⁴¹

Silence.

“I mean it,” Esther continued with more resolve, “I want to know who you are.”

So look at me. Look at you. Look at us. They spoke from deep inside, commanding a power that made Esther shake and want to crumple.

She felt far away from everything. From the water and the stone. From her stomach and breasts. Like a shell of herself with nothing left to give. She looked inside herself, and saw nothing but tunnels. Dark twisting, shaking, turning tunnels. Scary corridors that led deep down into the darkest part of the overwhelming Nothingness

⁴⁴⁰ “Who are you?” they asked each other, “What is your story?” And they sat and they spoke together, of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over and over till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.” (Plaskow 2005), 32.

⁴⁴¹ Practitioners often advise patients with dissociative disorders to make contact with their internal parts by “talking inwardly”. This is described as “a one sided conversation with parts of the personality” which is useful even when patients are not yet ready for the parts of self to communicate back to them. Practitioners advise their clients to “use this technique if you seem agitated, anxious, confused, or afraid inside. You do not always need to know immediately the reason for your inner turmoil or which part (s) is having trouble to be able to help. Just quietly talk inwardly to all parts of yourself, calming and reassuring the parts of you that you are safe and willing to learn to care for yourself more effectively, that you are getting help.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), pg 75.

within herself. She was Hollow and Alone. She was Nothingness embodied. A statue watching the world go by.⁴⁴²

Esther watched herself stand up and climb onto the bare stone floor. She noticed the water running down her back; felt it dripping between her legs as if it was some other woman's back... some other girl's inner thighs. She held a candle in one hand, her heart racing as she took a deep breath and turned the mirror away from the wall, determined to finally See herself, even if it killed her. One hand was clenched into a fist unconsciously, and for the first time in years,

Esther began to cry.

First it was just one tear slowly mustering on the corner of her left eyelid. Esther watched it grow and fall, like a painter sketching the first outlines of a portrait. She watched her face contort as the tears came faster. Watched herself crumble, giving into the agony and the sorrow that had been waiting all these long hard years. Her chest shook as she cried, face blotchy and red, fingers raking through her hair and down her body; snot mixing with tears, mixing with blood.⁴⁴³ *Blood? Why is there blood?* Esther looked down. The candle was melting into a crack between flagstones and her fingernails were torn and hands covered in blood. Angry red lines laced her chest and

⁴⁴² Genesis 19: 22 "Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt."

⁴⁴³ B. Nidah 55b discusses which bodily fluids communicate ritual impurity to other people. In a response to a comment by Rav, the Gemara teaches that "the tears of his eye, the blood of his wound and the milk of a woman convey the uncleanness of liquids".

her thighs, some raised, others bleeding freely. She wiped her face, smearing blood across one cheek.

Esther raised her head and looked into the mirror again, as if seeing herself for the very first time. There she was crouched naked and triumphant and defeated—covered in blood;⁴⁴⁴ wet hair coiling like snakes around scarred arms and legs. Blood and water transforming her into something Other. *Something. Someone.* Not wholly herself. “Not wholly myself” and yet more completely herself than she had ever seen herself to be. *You’ re free now. No one can touch you now.*

She edged closer, one palm reaching towards that strange and beautiful mirror self— that strange almost demoness who had fire in her eyes. She took in the criss crosses of scars covering the woman’s hands—the deep shadows between every finger and secret crease that marked where she had found solace in burning and broken flesh⁴⁴⁵.... the hollows under her eyes that bore witness to night after night of quaking dreams and terrifying wakefulness. There was that full mouth that had been kissed so many more times than it had been listened to. But where was she? Who was this woman really?

⁴⁴⁴ B. Bava Kama 91b discusses whether or not a man can injure himself, but ultimately concludes that “Tannaim differed on this point, for there is one view maintaining that a man may not injure himself and there is another maintaining that a man may injure himself.”

⁴⁴⁵ “Each person has his or her own unique reasons for engaging in self-destructive behaviors. And various dissociative parts of a person may have different reasons for self harm.” Theorists and practitioners advise patients to try and understand the reasons behind their self harming behaviors because, “once you understand your own motivations to engage in self-harm, you are a step closer to learning how to receive your pain or conflict in a more helpful manner.” (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011), 316.

You are Esther. I am you. You are me. Esther the hidden one...⁴⁴⁶ picking flowers in your secret Meadow... Whispering words of Torah to the stars in the attic.

You are Hadassah. The righteous. I am you. and you are me. You are the powerful prophetess who will save her people. Not some silly man. Not that dolt Mordecai. I have been waiting for this moment your whole life... Looking for the chance to finally debase yourself in a way that matters. I can take us there. I can do this thing for us, if only you'll let me. I will seduce the King and win us our freedom. Let me. This is what I was made for. I've been doing this our whole life.⁴⁴⁷ I can do this.

Not so fast Hadassah. The voice was cold and cutting and Esther felt herself sinking into the ground, trying to hide from the violence it contained. *Hadassah, the bitter, Your time is up. A reckoning is called for. You can't hide forever.*

⁴⁴⁶ B. Megillah 13a Amidst a discussion of Esther's names, R. Judah asks, if "Hadassah was her name, why call her Esther? Because she concealed facts about herself as it says, "Esther did not make known her people or her kindred" (Esther 2:20)

⁴⁴⁷ Every dissociative part of the personality is designed to help cope with different aspects of daily life or the traumatic past. (Boon, Steele, and Van der Hart 2011)

Revenge must be had. There are stories to tell. Truths to expose. Blood to shed and men who must pay.⁴⁴⁸ Ishtahar, you have a wrong to right.

Esther stared into the reflection of her eyes, stock still and unblinking, the room and its sparse furniture suddenly sharply focused and deathly still.

Mordecai must pay.⁴⁴⁹

“This is who I am,” she whispered. “Me.... and...and all of you...?”

She felt the voices nod deep within her, and a secret, knot, long forgotten, slowly began to untie itself and come loose.

Esther's heart convulsed, remembering a time so long ago. A time before everything shattered. A time before she disintegrated into all of these pieces. All of these competing voices and ideas and world views. Into all of these selves that were herself

⁴⁴⁸ Genesis 9:5 “But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man.”

⁴⁴⁹ B. Bava Kama 85b discusses the importance of paying for pain and damages inflicted on another person and asks the question if each different instance of hurt should have it's own punishment/restitution or if all the individual hurts should be lumped together in to one reconciliation event. The Gemara teaches that with “respect of Pain and Degradation the payment should be made for each occurrence separately, as he surely suffered pain and degradation on each occasion separately. If, however, you find it [more correct] to say that since no appraisalment had been yet made he can pay him for the value of the whole of him altogether, what would be the law where separate appraisalments were made? Shall we say that since separate valuations were made the payment should be for each occurrence by itself, or since the payment had not yet been made he has perhaps to pay him for the value of the whole of him? This must remain undecided.”

and not herself.⁴⁵⁰ It was the only way she had of living through the horror that could not be named. Could not be thought.

—and could never.

Ever.

Be spoken aloud.⁴⁵¹

*That's right. You already know how this story begins.*⁴⁵²

Esther nodded and looked away, seeing that scared little toddler unable to make sense of the world.

Suddenly it was the day after Esther's third birthday and she was terrified. Mordecai was reaching for her. Touching her. Telling her it was her special day and

⁴⁵⁰ "I know that if there are black holes in the universe, multiple personalities simply cannot be impossible. In fact they have God's mark all over them as an elegant solution to a vile problem-- children forced to live in hell find ways to chop the hell up, a child becomes plural, and each part of the plurality must handle some aspect of the hell as if it's got all of it." (Dworkin 2002), 210.

⁴⁵¹ B. Yevamot 65a discusses a woman who has multiple childless marriages and now seeks to remarry. The question was raised, "If she married a fourth husband and gave birth to children, may she claim her ketubah from her third husband? — We advise her: 'Your silence is better than your speech.'"

⁴⁵² B. Yevamot 65a discusses a woman who has been married multiple times, but has not born children and is now seeking a divorce or marriage to another man. Regarding the subject of infertility, "If the husband pleads, 'The fault is hers' and the wife pleads, 'The fault is his', R. Ami ruled in private matrimonial affairs the wife is believed. And what is the reason? She is in a position to know whether emission is forceful, but he is not in a position to know it."

there would be lots of presents later if only she was a good little girl and did what she was told.⁴⁵³

And then Esther the woman was tearing at her hair and her skin, clawing at herself to come back to herself and far far away from those terrible, shaming memories.

Esther woke the morning of the third and final day of the fast, exhausted and unfeeling. Numb. *He'll never touch you again, Ishtahar. Not ever. I'll make sure of it.*

How?

Esther looked down at her arms and the dried blood and the scabs and then up at the little black brazier smoking in the corner. *You know what to do, Ishtahar,* the old woman crooned. Esther reached for a twig from the pile of kindling and then stuck one end in the fire. When the twig caught light Esther pulled it out of the fire and blew, leaving a perfect glowing ember at the very tip. And then slowly—carefully—Esther held the burning tip against the inside of her other arm. She closed her eyes and gasped at the sudden flare of pain, biting her lip with pleasure. She grinned, rocking back on her heels and feeling alive for the first time in who knew how long. And then it was over and Esther was reaching back to the fire, lighting the twig again and creating another perfect

⁴⁵³ B. Nidah 44b R. Meir teaches that “a girl of the age of three years and even one of the age of two years and one day may be betrothed by intercourse.” The sages, however teach that only one who is three years and one day old is suitable for intercourse (not a two year old child).

dot of pain right next to the first.⁴⁵⁴ Reed after Reed.⁴⁵⁵ Dot after dot, Esther burned the pain away, expelling each moment of painful memory with the ever growing pattern of pleasantly burning flesh.⁴⁵⁶

She didn't recognize herself when she finished. There was another woman caught in the mirror over there. A stranger. A demoness clothed in a pattern of tiny red wounds and an ever shifting constellation of hurt and betrayal.

*The perfect corpse for the perfect King.*⁴⁵⁷

Esther took a deep breath and turned away from her reflection, ready to meet the rejection and the martyrdom that she was sure were waiting for her a world away on the other side of the Palace.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ B. Berachot 61a in the context of a discussion about animal tithing for the sacrificial cult R. Simeon teaches, "We may cause sacred flesh to be brought to the place where the unfit [are burnt]. The one who says: Let them be left to die gives the opinion of R. Judah."

⁴⁵⁵ B. Chullin 16b discusses the possible uses of a reed due to the dangers of splintering. The Gemara states, "'One must not cleanse oneself with it'. But is it not indeed [prohibited to do so] because of what a Master said regarding, 'Whosoever cleanses himself [after an evacuation] with a material that is inflammable tears away the ligaments [of the anus]?' " R. Papa answered: We must say that the Baraita deals with] the cleansing of the opening of a wound."

⁴⁵⁶ B. Sanhedrin 51a continues a discussion about the case of a priest's daughter who profanes the Sabbath by engaging in a forbidden sexual interaction. While discussing the possible punishments, Rabina teaches, If 'with her father' [betrothed], she is stoned; if 'with her father-in-law', [married], she is burned."

⁴⁵⁷ According to Jewish Law, a person is considered already dead as soon as they are sentenced to death.

⁴⁵⁸ Esther 5:1 "On the third day, Esther clothed herself in royalty and stood in the inner court of the king's palace."

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