

Learning to Fly

"God is here, right now. You're not allowed to look, Feigeh."

I'm under Tateh's *tallis*, his prayer shawl. He, like the other men on this Rosh Hashanah High Holy Day has billowed his large white *tallis* over us like one colossal white wing. During this portion of the service the rabbi intones the blessing first uttered in the desert by my father's namesake, the high priest, Aaron, in the Holy of Holies, the Ark where God was said to have shown his face. This is the moment when I believe God is literally going to be here. I sneak a quick peek. I see the men wrapped in their long *tallit*, heads and bodies covered. They look like large birds, white against dark wood of bench, panel, and Ark, about to soar into communion with the Divine. I've heard the face of God is so overwhelmingly radiant, no one has ever looked and survived. He's not here yet but I'm not chancing it. I lower my head and listen.

I'm still young enough to sit downstairs with the men. This is where the real business, the real voice and movement of prayer are conducted. This is where I sit with my father. I'm surrounded by men swaying back and forth each in a solo dance, fast then faster still, as though they're trying to spin themselves into flight through the Ark and into the vortex of the holy Torah scrolls themselves. My Uncle Yitzchak, my mother's brother is here with his son, Cousin Sruli, and Getzel with his squinty eyes and mischievous grin, and Lame Kallman as he is known, and others, Shmuel the Red, Fat Vefcha, Koppel and Yankel, their names not yet odd to my ear. They are remnants, all of them, survivors, not one American Jew among them. They hum, sing, chant, each to his own rhythm, the raucous sounds swelling the hall are as familiar and

comforting to me as the softest lullaby. Like my father, I, too, read from my *siddur*, my prayer book, Hebrew words on one side, Yiddish translation on the other. I don't understand the meaning of the words I'm reading. I think God is not about words. The truth is, God confuses me. Maybe He really won't show up here, just as He didn't in Poland. I know God wasn't in Poland with my parents and their relatives in the forest, otherwise we'd all be in *shul* there on this Holy Day. I know He didn't care that a Torah scroll was kept in my mother's house, so the ten Jews in her village could pray and study in her living room each week. If He did, that Torah and those people would still be there too. So why would He show up here, on a bright September day in the Bronx? I think maybe God is ashamed to have us see His face. Maybe that's what we're not supposed to see. His absence. What matters to me now, is being here, giving over to the music of chanting and prayer, of ancient words uttered as link to a bent but unbroken chain.

Tateh is *davening*, praying, head bent low over his *siddur*, black skullcap almost disappearing in the coal of his hair, swaying slightly to the music of his prayers. His face is calm today as he licks his index finger to turn a single page. His only past here is a distant one connecting him to desert, to ancestors in flowing robes and sandals, to a God who chooses to be present among His people. Sometimes.

Pretty soon I'll be banished upstairs with the women far away from Torah and Ark. Women may touch or kiss the Torah in deference but are forbidden to read directly from it. Upstairs most women, my mother among them, hold their well-worn prayer books in front of them like afterthoughts only occasionally following along with the men. Most of the women here are as likely to cluck and gossip during services as they are to pray. Children clamber, knees and elbows banging against railing and chair, squealing in play, and add to the cacophony of prayer, song, and gossip. The women's long sleeved dresses form a colorful collage of checks, plaids and

flowers, contrasting with the white *tallit* and dark suits of the men. The more pious huddle together near the front of the balcony and ignore the hubbub around them, the *Rebbetzin*, the Rabbis's wife among them. This is where my Tante Basha sits, with her daughter Frances, six years my senior. Wigs bob as the women sway together in prayer like the men. Every once in a while one of the men looks up to the balcony, hisses SSSSSSHAH, which quiets the women and children momentarily.

At twelve I'm a B-movie connoisseur. My current favorites are science fiction movies inhabited by soul mates to our own resident monster *Dee Melchomeh*, *The War*. The creatures I've seen on screen, nightmares born of atomic fears and apocalyptic disasters, nourish me in their familiarity. I watch whole cities destroyed by giant mutant ants, communities gobbled by nuclear blobs, and am mesmerized by scenes of destruction and chaos. It's real to me. My current favorite is *Rodan, The Flying Monster*, a fire-breathing prehistoric killer bird, hatched in the post-atomic netherworld of a Japanese cave. Rodan easily dwarfs the towns around him, creates destructive shock waves when flying. In the film he commits suicide after the mortal wounding of his mate, proving what I already intuit. Monster and victim can be one and the same. I know what's possible.

It's three-thirty in the afternoon and I'm in a South Bronx basement room on Washington Avenue, along with six boys my age. Here, in the dim, forgotten space of an apartment building, we attend Hebrew school each afternoon. Hebrew books with worn thumbprinted pages lie open on small-scale oak desks whose surfaces are grooved and scratched with age. The windowless room is stale with odors of penny candy, old books and boredom. Rabbi Jacov, our teacher, looks like the penguins I've seen at the Bronx Zoo. He's wearing his usual black pants and white shirt, sleeves rolled up haphazardly to the elbow. The buttons of his black vest pull and strain against

an impressive paunch. Pacing back and forth, he stops at each desk to give assignments for the afternoon, holding a pointer in one hand, stroking his beard with the other. His white beard, streaked with yellow, reminds me of peed-on snow. This year the boys have begun studying for their Bar Mitzvahs, have begun learning to read and chant from the Torah and are grappling with Talmud, Jewish Law. I sit apart, the rabbi giving me passages to memorize from a prayer book, busy work, while he teaches the boys to become learned Jewish men.

"Why can't I study the same as the boys?" I ask for the umpteenth time knowing he'll be plenty annoyed. Maybe the answer will differ this time. He bends down, plastic rimmed glasses sliding to the tip of his nose. He's so close I can see smudges on his glasses, competing there with tiny galaxies of dust motes. Slamming his pointer on my desk, he rasps,

"You're not allowed!"

I've had it. I refuse to disappear into the prayer book yet again. These boys are preparing for the most exciting day of their lives, a day they'll be celebrated and honored, while I lag in shadow. I wait for Rabbi Yacov to go to Eric's desk, see him bend over the old books, point and whisper. I reach into my desk, remove a pencil whose eraser has worn down to metal, take aim and begin to scratch metal onto wood. Covering my working hand with the open palm of the other, I carve, first one line then another. I work quickly. Splinters scatter as I make wood yield to metal - curve, straight line, dot, curve, straight line until form begins to take shape, wing touching wing, body long and sleek, beak in profile. I run my finger over the finished form, enjoying the feel of its rough edges. It covers at least one quarter of the desk.

Rodan, my rescuer. In my fantasy he spreads his scaly wings preparing to whisk me away from this room. Maybe he'll even destroy it. Now, in all his cruel majesty Rodan stares out from my Hebrew School desk, wings tucked, waiting for me to climb onto his back. To fly.

