

Mouth Full of Seeds

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Black
Lawrence
Press

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I. Drawn That Way

Drawn That Way

1.

On my birthday my mother writes me: *What is it about you that allows you to pick up, with your little daughter, and leave all your former life behind? Your background, your family, nationality, religion, friends, siblings, parents, your roots. And just start a new life in a new country?*

What freedom of spirit you must have!!

Maybe if Catholic church altars featured statues of Mary with a baby and a book, instead of a crucified, bloody body of a man, I'd have stayed Catholic and become a Catholic Mother in our ancestral homeland, Moravia.

I try to focus on the double exclamation point in *freedom of spirit!!*

2.

I am studying theology at a Jesuit university and discover that the 1905 and 1906 papal commissions on modernism found no legal (as in canon law) reason a woman could not be ordained a priest. But, it was concluded, since God chose to inhabit the body of a man, not a woman, priests should be men, not women.

The most important thing about Jesus' humanity was his genitalia.

Ever after, when I saw a figure of a male hanging from a cross in a church, I would feel waves of nausea. My body would sometimes become wracked in sobs, and I'd have to remove it from the nave. It was embarrassing and puzzling—I certainly wasn't conscious of feeling upset. I liked the candles and incense and ritual and liberation theology.

3.

I loved Mary, the mother. I did not deify the son. This probably would disqualify me from Jewish Motherhood. Luckily I gave birth to a daughter.

4.

I have no idea, Mama, where I got my *freedom of spirit!!*

5.

I meet a man at a wedding. He asks me about my child. Is the father Jewish? It's a question I'd never heard before. I explain that my child's father is Jewish, but I was never married to him. He tells me he is a cohen, that if the father of my child had not been Jewish, well, then maybe...

It sounds sketchy to me, but tell him I am a convert, so it doesn't matter.

He pauses for maybe three beats. He explains the kabbalistic idea that the soul of a convert was always a Jewish soul. It simply got lost and was born into a non-Jewish body. Conversion is *tikkun*. It is making something whole, repairing it, making my body Jewish to house my Jewish soul.

But if the soul was always Jewish, why does my now-Jewish female body become flawed in the presence of your priestly Jewish body?

He has no answer. He is not a scholar. He would be offended if he knew that at that moment I suddenly had an image of a naked bloody man hanging on a cross.

2 (b).

But there is another way of looking at it—and that is to say that Jesus's body denies the humanity of mine. If Jesus is a human, and my human body could not be priestly, maybe the most important thing about *my* body is the genitalia.

But I know what that Papal Commission on Modernism's conclusion really means, as progressive as I found the mere fact of its existence in 1904 and 1906.

6.

Maybe what I'm getting at here is the sheer physicality of the Mother's Body as a receptacle of life, sure, but of impurity. It shocks me. It always has—simply the physicality of the woman's body. And it continues to shock me after all these years of being alive.

7.

In my perfect world, our thoughts, intentions, emotions, would be visible; our spirits would be visible. We'd see their shape and size and style under our clothes. We'd cover our insecurities with panties or support them with bras. But our ideas would be the physical representations of our selves in the world.

Our bodies, the physical elements, would be accessible only through our minds and our actions. Like the wind—we'd see our bodies only in their movement. When we moved them to fulfill an intention or thought.

8.

"I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way," says Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

I am drawn that way, too.

9.

When people ask me how I like Israel, if I plan to stay, I say that I am over the angry phase. Over all that bursting into tears when strangers yell at me for no reason in the street. Over asking the neighbors for the tenth time, but this time with a hammer in my hand, to turn down the stereo. (Finally, they do. The silence is astonishing.)

10.

Because in America I was the only tenure-track woman in my university English department who had given birth pre-tenure. Because in Israel I am the only pre-tenure woman in my department who has only one child.

11.

The woman ahead of me at the grocery store in Tel Aviv, furious about an item she'd been over-charged for, shoves her large purse onto the conveyor belt, refusing to bag her groceries. She and the checker exchange loud words, and then the checker checks me out around her. When the checker realizes I don't have a discount card, she freezes. Then she asks the furious woman if she'll lend me her discount card, since, really, I should be saving at least 50 shekels on the bill. "Oh, but of course," the angry woman says, and tells the checker her ID card number. Together they chide me for not getting a card, their argument forgotten.

12.

Today I meet my student to discuss the book she is writing about gender-based violence. *The female body as receptacle for the pain and flaws and sins of the world*, she muses.

Suddenly she explains that the gang rape actually occurred when she was a child. The story she'd shown me about a still-born baby birthed in a toilet stall in school is not, technically, a work of fiction.

She is the second woman I know and love who was gang raped as a child. Both incidents resulted in pregnancy. The other woman's family had had the wherewithal to fly to a country in which abortion was legal. Both women have multiple graduate degrees and supportive families, spiritual, material and intellectual resources. They were raped while in "safe" places.

My student tells me that rape was only conceived of as a crime against a woman about 150 years ago. Previously, rape had been considered a property crime against the woman's father or husband, or to whomever she belonged.

That night I get out of bed and go to my daughter's room. I have been helping craft the "story line" for a documentary about sex trafficking. We have never had a way to secure the balconies in any of the three apartments we've lived in since we moved to Israel. There are no locks on the bedroom doors.

We don't belong to anyone.

13.

The community garden has been closed all week, due to the jackals. Sometimes it is closed because the IDF needs it for something that will, presumably, protect us.

The garden lies past the convergence of the dreamy green Yarkon and the brown Ayalon rivers. It's a 15 minute bike ride along the river from our apartment—past the petting zoo and bird safari, through the little eucalyptus forest that is a national park, just past where the three ancient mills used to be. We pay 180 NIS a month for 40 square meters, which is far too large for us, but my daughter kept shouting, *get the big one! get the big one!* when I was on the phone with the garden people.

Our plot is the most overrun in the entire garden, and I think the other gardeners love us for making them feel so good about themselves in comparison. One has given us sweet-potato clippings, another sunflowers and melon seedlings, another grapes, passion fruit.

I weed for three hours till my hands and shoulders are weak as clouds. It is satisfying. My daughter, for whom this is supposed to be an enriching and wondrous experience, stands next to me and repeats every 90 seconds, *I'm bored when can we go home?*

14.

Pumpkins, zucchini
yellow squash, okra, zinnias
watermelon, sage

cantaloupe, eggplant
heirloom tomatoes, cherry
tomatoes, green beans

basil, hyssop, mint
oregano, cilantro
roses, lemon grass

artichoke, onions
sunflowers, asparagus
yams. Not potatoes.

Now is not the time to plant potatoes.

15.

It finally happens: The Iraqi window repairman's mother can't understand my Hebrew, so I put my six-year-old on so she can translate that it's broken glass and it needs to be replaced. I am ashamed. And yet, it's wonderful to see her pacing up and down with the phone, explaining in detail. Sticking to the facts. Which is more than we can say for the repairman's mother, who is apparently also named Marcela.

My daughter broke the glass. She explains it to the repairman, and that is how I learn she broke the window with her head. She'd told me it was her shoulder. The repairman says that his cousin *died* that way and that we are very, very, very, very lucky.

16.

After the fourth visit to the Ministry of Education to petition that my daughter be returned to the same kindergarten, the only bilingual public one in Tel Aviv, that she was in last year, and *why did they take her out for no reason, and I don't speak Hebrew and I'm a new immigrant and a single mother and I need this school and if they don't put her back I swear to god I will home-school her, which is actually illegal to do in Israel but I don't care*, and receiving a discouraging non-committal response, I tell the other parents at kindergarten, *I've tried everything I can think of.*

Have you tried crying? every single one of them asks me.

17.

Every time you cry in a government office in Israel you are given a glass of cold water in a disposable plastic cup.

18.

Mommy, are you a girl or a boy? asks my daughter, watching me assemble furniture for the fourth day that week.

I turn the final screw on her bed, *Most definitely a girl.*