

The Letter ... And The Wordⁱ - By Ena Burstin

The letter's in the mail. It didn't arrive at my work today, although I ran to check five times. I guess it will arrive Monday, which means I may not be the first one to open it. I hope I won't get into trouble.

I know the letter is coming because she rang for my address. I've never met her, though the name is familiar. She told me she was sending an invitation to write something for her journal. I asked her what about. She said it was for an issue on man/woman. I wondered whether she thought I could write on men. Then she added, "Maybe your partner could write something too." My partner publishes on acetylcholinesterase. Chuckling, I wondered if that was what they wanted. I wasn't even sure if she knew who my partner was. So, I asked, "Who recommended me?" Her reply told me that she knew.

Euphemism. It was all left so unsaid. She did not name me over the phone. I wonder whether she will. I spent the day checking the letterbox, because I wanted to see how she'd worded her letter. Had she said the word? Or had she just alluded to it?

Did she expect me to just allude to it, to dance around the flame but never touch it? Allusion - it's such an illusion. Will it shatter?

Does it matter? I'm wondering already what I should write. Should I describe how it feels to be always alluding, never saying, never spelling it out, always wondering who knows, who's wondering and what will happen if it is all out in the open? If I tell her, 'Imagine having to drop the word Jew from your vocabulary, to describe it but never say it', will she understand?

Or should I talk of Jewish pride, of being raised never to be ashamed of who I am, never to allow injustices to be rained upon me because of being a Jew. Will she understand if I say that that is rooted deep inside me, so that I will not allow another to make me ashamed of anything that I am.

Oh, she said it was about relationships. So, should I tell her, that no matter how many men I tried, they didn't cut it with me. Shall I tell her that the first time I explored a woman's body, I finally understood what 'aliyah' meant. I felt like I was coming home to the Promised Land. And it was flowing with milk and honey.

Should I mention, just in passing, that there is no law of return which cuts me out from my promised land. And no part occupied without consent.

Perhaps, I should talk about love, how it feels to catch those dark Jewish eyes smiling at me, to watch those soft Jewish lips shaping lush Yiddish words. About how sweet it is to share my life with a Jewish woman, this Jewish woman.

Perhaps she wants to know how I got here. Maybe I should describe the feeling, like trying to unstick bubblegum, of trying to break free. Should I tell of the aching loneliness when I was the only one I knew? Should I tell of the strength, the courage, the sheer guts it took to be what I had not been taught to be. What I had been taught not to be.

Maybe I should tell her about the things people say. Like the time recently when someone said, "I'm very private. The thing about coming out is that people know what you do in bed." I wondered why she thought she knew what I did in bed, when she hadn't been there. And did she worry that people knew what she'd done when she was pregnant? And did she know that it wasn't just about beds? After all, is she a Jew just in shul?

Perhaps I should write about another time recently, when a man said 'Jewess. The word makes you think of men raping and pillaging.' I was confused. Jewess rolls off my tongue deliciously. When I think of Jewess, I think of beautiful women, round and dark like eggplants, succulent, bold, with a bit of a bite. I laughed, 'No it doesn't make me think of that at all. But then, we're from different worlds.'

Maybe I should tell her about tsoris. Like two balabostes in the kitchen, each swearing her latke recipe is the greatest. Or premenstrual tension twice a month. Or being expected to live as if we are straight without any straight privileges. Should I tell of the fear of losing my work, my home, my safety because of who I am. Will she understand if I tell her of being hated, called unnatural, silenced?

Would she feel for me, if I told of the heartache of not having the words to name myself to my Booba, in her language, my language? The frustration of discovering the dictionary had not translated me. Should I try to describe

how it felt to have had to travel a day and a night by plane, just to find someone who dared to name me, in my mother-tongue and out loud? Could I capture how it feels now be able to hear myself named that way in my lounge room?

I don't really know what to write for her. I don't know yet what she expects. I just know that she has asked me to write for an issue on woman/man. Whoops, man/woman.

I gather she doesn't want me to write about man. I don't know much. I know that I don't hate men the way that women who have to live with them do. But what else could I say?

So, I guess she'll want me to write about woman. And about woman, I could tell her a few stories. But I'm not sure what she wants to hear. I won't know until the letter gets here.

So, I guess I'll spend the weekend wondering, did she skirt around the edges, did she phrase things oh so delicately?

Or did she dare to say the word...lesbian?

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