

The Tattoo

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She'd been begging for three years. "Please ma, please!"

"Babe,babe. You know what I'm going to say. It's against Jewish law. It reminds survivors of being branded at the camps. No. No. No. I'm not changing my mind. Let this go.

"Ma, I want a symbol of YOU", she says.

"Good try", I think. This kid is relentless. Creative too. "Nyet, Nein. Lo. Bu Yao. Olvida lo. Nuh-uh. Is there any other way to say it? Forget it sweetie. " I can't open to this. She persists. I'm a little puzzled.

"You are 18, babe. You don't need my permission any more. It's your body. I won't like it, but I'm still going to love you. Anyway, you didn't get my permission even when you WERE a minor for the tongue thing!"

"But it's not your permission I want. I want a symbol of YOU." The conversation gets interrupted yet again as we scurry about our lives. She's off to Spain for a summer program. She phones home. "Ma! I love it here!"

"Honey", I tell her. "I'm not feeling great. I'm heading to the ER."

"Ma, I'm sorry you don't feel good. My roommates are awesome! Everyone here is really tight already. I think my card is almost out and I want to shop in Madrid. Do you think I can re-load from my United credit card?"

I want to throttle her through the wire. But then I wonder if maybe it's a good thing that she doesn't look directly into the faces of the demons that constantly hover over us.

I'm at Parnassus for almost a week. A blood clot in the superior vena cava is so large, that it blocks all passage from head to trunk. This explains the growing feeling, over the last few weeks, that my head will burst from the pressure when I bend down. Like a terrible cold, except I don't have one. It's all the blood that can't drain. The technician inserting the pic line in my forearm gasps in awe- the biblical kind that entails both terror and wonder.

"What?" I ask. He turns the monitor toward me, which I raise my head to see. The vein where he is inserting a catheter leads to a series of long meandering loops from my arm, down my side, and back up again -- an alternative blood vessel system that my body has built, like a series of underground tunnels beneath a security wall, sneaking blood to and from my heart despite the clot's best efforts at blockade.

I write up my near death story and send it to my inner circle. I put Hannah's e-address in the cc line, not knowing if she'll choose to read it. Only two days pass before her e-mail arrives. "Mama- Your writing was so beautiful- now I know that any shred of talent I have comes from you; EVERYTHING good I have comes from you. It is so UNFAIR that of all the people in the world, YOU are the one who got cancer! I will never forgive my father for breaking your heart! If anything happens to you, I will personally kill God! I love you mama. I need you. Please mama, heal. And..... have you thought about the tattoo?"

I laugh through tears and snot. Then it comes to me. I get it for the first time. The tattoo means something different to her than to me. For her, this is not a symbol of rebellion. Hannah knows about death camps only what she has read in school; and what is Jewish law to her beyond singing Shabbos blessings while lighting the candles together on Friday nights? She wants this from me. How can I withhold from her what she wants most? What if the time comes sooner than I'm ready, that I can no longer give her anything? Something in me shifts, like a tectonic plate. I finger my keys, and pensively rub, as I often do, the chamsa on my keychain. Chamsa, the Mideast hand of protection. Chamsa. That's it! The chamsa!

My revelation must have been carried over the waves of the Atlantic and through the Iberian atmosphere. The call comes from Spain at 3 a.m. that same night. "Mommy", she's sobbing. I hear her choking through the phone. Whenever she calls me "mommy", I know something big is happening. The slumber yields to a state of quick alert. "Breathe honey. I'm here". I sit up. I take a big breath myself as I prop myself up on the pillows. "Tell me sweetie, tell me when you are ready".

"I dreamed you died". Now she is sucking in air, like hiccups. It takes a while before she can make words again. "I came to our house. It was empty. Your things were in the closet, but you weren't there." Her voice is getting squeezed like she can barely press it past her throat. "I saw all your clothes, and all your things were there. But I wanted YOU. I kept looking for you". She yields now to her weeping.

I wait a little, keeping my own tears quiet. "I have an idea for your tattoo", I say.

"Really?" she pushes the question out through her breaths.

Two weeks pass before I fetch her at SFO. We're seated at Fresh Choice, the one right near the airport, with our stockpiles of salad and soup horded around us like a fortress. She waits, as if we had been in mid-conversation. I know what the question is, before she speaks. "The chamsa," I respond.

The forks and spoons go still. I study her face and watch something move over her mouth and brow. Her eyes get wet. I hold my breath. "Yes! That's it! Ma, I want it on my backbone, because YOU are my backbone!" I tell her that I'm giving it to her in February. It will be my birthday gift.

As I prepare to leave for Israel for experimental immunotherapy, she tells me that she has decided that it should be MY hand. The real thing. The day before I leave, I make a Xerox copy of the front and back of each hand. I show her the file where she can find it, just in case.

By the time I return, she has already brought the image to an artist. It has been transformed, the fingers and palm filled with the ancient and timeless symbols of protection- the fish of longevity, the flowers of fertile spirit and regeneration, the watchful eye.

Ask me and I'll show you the picture—my hand, full and powerful, smack center on my daughter's spine.

21 July 2010

