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*Fiction*

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## Sonya

*Yehudah Mirsky*

**I**T BEGINS WITH THE BIRDS, ALWAYS WITH THE BIRDS. THEY WHEEL ABOUT, TURN AND FLY AWAY, CHIRP AND COO AND STAY AND GO, VISIBLE IN DEPARTURE, UNSEEN WHEN THEY ARE PRESENT, NESTLED in the tree tops, hidden in the branches, fast in the lush and uneven green.

So it begins, this moment of grace, like all those moments of grace with Chayim, when the two of them would return home from the market at midday, hurrying to beat the afternoon sun and make it to the cool indoors. And then it would happen, the flight of the birds, whisper of mint on the breeze or a turning in the sunlight, and Sonya and Chayim would stop in the moment, know each other's presence and exchange the barest glance before walking on.

And so it begins, but now alone, deeper, sadder, richer with loss, whitened with pain. Still the birds, still the sunlight and the wind, still Sonya, but only Sonya, Chayim forever gone, in his own place, yes, she thought, the dead have their own world, it's a place of their own, a realm that is still and quiet and moving through time, but in stately motion, the pace of the spheres, endlessly circling the planet, clicking gently into place, again and again, distant, observant, unapproachable stars set deep in the night.

The birds pass, the moment passes, Sonya passes from the light into darkness, received by the cool shadows held in the stone, shielded from the sunlight as she goes up the stairs, into the apartment, where she sets down her bag and removes the tomatoes, the bread, the yogurt, the honey, and lays them each in their place.

She boils some water and makes some tea, slices some bread, washes her hands and after saying the blessing dips a flat knife into the tub of

cheese before her, and then spreads the whiteness up to the crust. As she eats, she reads, now she always reads, it seems years, doesn't it, it seems years since she and Chayim sat with their lunch, his hands gray from the printshop, hers soft and full, and they would read together, he his Talmud, she her Bible, lifting their eyes now and again to each other and then back to the page.

When the children were young it was different, but not much. They would be home from school at lunchtime and running and skipping and falling and jabbering, but always the house was enveloped in calm, even during the siege, when Sonya measured everyone's water ration with a ladle in the bathtub, even during the wars, when the radio was always on. And the calm was something she and Chayim felt with each other, like a smooth round stone closed in the palms of their hands.

Now the children are gone, to Tel Aviv to the suburbs, and the grand-children now are getting big too, and they come, and they go, and they kiss their grandmother, and she loves them, and gives them home-baked cookies, and books on their birthdays, and the youngest looks just like Chayim, and always the stillness remains.

She likes buying books for her grandchildren, going into the book-stores in Meah Shearim, walking into the preserves of men, the stiff spines lining the shelves, the proprietors with their black yarmulkes and salt and pepper beards, their pimply assistants, staring at this woman, old and gray and a kerchief on her head, asking for books that a woman shouldn't know. Yes, there's a thrill, an impish delight, in asking for these things, but for the grandchildren, of course.

And today the cleaning girl comes, she's Yemenite and sweet and Sonya asks about her boyfriends and what she's been learning in school, and Anat answers and mops the floor and rinses the dishes and soaks the laundry and hangs it out to dry and she smiles, and she leaves for some other Jerusalem and Sonya knows they inhabit different worlds.

Sooner or later the sun passes westward and Sonya gets up to answer the door, leaving her Psalm book open to the page, and it's Rachel her neighbor, her hands white with flour, she's baking a banana cake, do you have some eggs, yes, some sugar maybe, yes, some cinnamon, yes, and how can I bake this cake if you won't give me some bananas?

And Rachel goes, and the afternoon goes, and the sun goes, plunging to earth in red, blue, scarlet and gold, and when he is gone the sky

closes behind him and drapes its blue velvet cover on the scrolls of the night.

And Sonya sits like she used to with Chayim, and looks through the journals she still gets in the mail and fingers the pages as she tries to understand, where in the world do all the words go, who will gather them up at the end of the day, who will unscramble the great Name of God, and who will bring all the letters safe home?

It's well into night and her fingers are stiff and she warms them with a glass of gold honeyed tea. It's not so easy to move around any more, it's not easy, it's hard, yes, it is hard, yes, it is true, on the bones, it's so hard.

She brushes her teeth and brushes her hair, then climbs so slowly, quietly into bed, feels the down receding beneath her, the night wind as it slips past the half-open shutter, Sonya lies on her pallet and waits. She can feel, she can feel, she can just catch the smell of Chayim's starched nightshirt, just feel his leg brushing up against hers, she is waiting, she is waiting, for the grace of the moment, the caress of God's hand, she is waiting for Chayim, waiting for her lover, waiting like a field opened to the rain.



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