
A Bintl Briv

Deborah Brody

The Jewish Daily Forward was once the world's most widely read Yiddish newspaper. One of its most popular features was Der Bintel Briv, or "The Bundle of Letters," a precursor of today's advice columns.

"*Herr zikh tsu*, Lillie, listen." He sets down his tea glass and snaps the limp newspaper to attention. "Here, in *Der Bintl Briv*, a letter." His long, ink-stained finger taps the page three times. "Here, listen. *A man hot finf kinder*, five children. All his life he works, he feeds them, clothes them, gives to them life. And now not one has room for the pappa. Lillie." A fingernail rings softly on the glass, three faint chimes. "Hot me up my tea."

His wing back chair and small table crowd her dining room, but this is where the light is best for reading in the afternoon, and that is when he reads. Tonight, as always, he will stay up late, writing in the next room, and lying with her husband she will strain, as if she were a child again, to hear the scratching of his fountain pen, constant

and irregular as a suppressed memory.
His bedroom seems more dim than any other
in her house, as if he'd brought the city
with him, setting just outside his window
high brick walls to shield from suburbs' glare
his dingy furniture, fragrant of tobacco
and fried onions, and the rows and stacks of books,
their broken spines stamped with letters in gilt,
an alphabet he never taught her to read.

Yesterday, he went for his afternoon walk
Before he could return to complain there was
no point in walking with no place to go,
she slipped into that shadowed room and opened
each of the hand-bound composition books
filed neatly in his desk's recesses.
His delicate pen marks curled across the pages
like little hunched men, running away from her.

She watches him from the kitchen door:
leaning forward, writing in the margins
while his other hand curves around the glass
of tea steaming in its silver holder.
His calloused finger traces the filigree,
barely touching yet knowing each tight curl
of vine and flower, the history of each
dent and nick. He picks up the glass and sighs,
"Oy Lillie, such a world. You'll never know,
you'll never know," shakes his head,
and pursing his lips, blows the steam away.

Deborah Brody lives and writes in Kinston, North Carolina. Her poetry has been published in such varied journals as The Laurel Review, Tikkun, Potato Eyes, Earth's Daughters, and Fan: A Baseball Magazine.