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Moving Waters

Winter Bloom didn't plan to fall in love with the nanny of her son's classmate. She was married, for one thing, and, a moment before straight, or at least she was until she saw the cotton straps of the nanny's sundress tied at the top of her suntanned shoulders and thought, in full, of what it would be like to untie them. The nanny's parents were Israeli, well, had tried to be, had lived for seven months in a dusty flat in Be'er Sheva, before turning around and going back to their teaching jobs in upstate New York, but not before naming their daughter Aviva, which meant Spring. Winter, whose parent's had named her Susan – a name she relinquished when ordering her first set of head shots – could not stop thinking of the way their names rhymed and whether or not, at this late date, she might yet qualify as a lesbian. She had experimented once, some thirty years before in college, with a girl across the hall in the dorm, who was now an agent at ICM and would tell the story from time to time to her husband to get him hard. Winter was nearly fifty, and wasn't sure that the girl – she was certainly a girl – would find her beautiful in return. At the gym, Winter increased her time on the elliptical from thirty to forty-five minutes. And when she thought of her – this highly paid nanny who had a master's in Jewish Folklore – she thought of how soft her mouth would be. And then, one afternoon at the Grove, she found out.

They had taken the boys to see a movie, and afterward they had stopped at the Fresh store. There, while the boys sampled fragrances just underfoot, Aviva tested a lip-gloss called Burnt Sugar. "It's pretty," Winter said.

"It would look good on you too," said Aviva, and with that Aviva leaned over and pressed the color from her lips onto Winter's. And from that moment, Winter was unable to do the smallest thing – drop off her son at carpool, pick him up in the same line six hours later – without longing for her, the nanny of the single mother who was a writer on the hit medical series developed for television by Winter's husband, Howie.

Twice when she had sex with her Howie, Winter's thoughts drifted to Aviva – easy images of her shoulders, her hair pulled back at her neck – Winter only carried back to the here-and-now by the scruff of her husband's chin or the deep resonance of his voice. Winter wondered if the thoughts themselves were adulterous. She was sure that any ladies magazine would back her play and remind her that fantasy is healthy and can enhance the sex life of a couple married nearly twenty years. But that was not what she was feeling. She was feeling that, in the same way that she had organized her thinking around a successful career, and then again to raise her child, that within her, something was stirring. That busily in the back and sometimes the front of her mind, a direction was being taken; that while she pushed her cart around Whole Foods, she was winding her way out of her marriage.

A screenwriter friend, who had been twenty-five years sober when he went back to drinking, owned the Case Study house that Winter wanted. She was fairly certain that she could acquire it with the money in her residual account from her first sitcom. The screenwriter's soon to be ex-wife was liquidating his assets, having already sold his collection of first editions and then moving onto the quirky parade of vintage typewriters that marched around the perimeter of his office. He had restarted his drinking with a commitment to Warner Bros., who had paid for the first and second rehab. Before the third, the studio had sued his wife for the story payment and the rent of his office on the lot. Winter's business manager, Victor, contacted the writer's wife and made the offer. It was fair and accepted without counter, a mitzvah really, helping the wife out of a bind. And although Winter's heart ached thinking of her son joining the ranks of Wednesday and every other Sunday travelers, she knew that divorce no longer held the stigma that it used to, certainly not here in LA, and that her new place was architecturally significant and had a tidy little bedroom near hers where she could hear Noah sleep, although most nights he still climbed in with her, sleepy headed, like a puppy. She would lift the blanket like the door of a tent for him to tuck inside – the smell of his hair still a drug to her.

Winter drove her husband to the San Ysidro ranch to tell him, in the very room where they had stayed, only four days after they met on the set of the first short-lived Ellen series. With their names wood-burned into a plaque outside the door for the last time, Winter told Howie that she loved him and their lives together, but that there was only one life, as far as she knew, and that she needed hers to be authentic. They both cried and held each other. They made love slowly and powerfully in a way that made Winter suspect that she wasn't the only one imagining her new life with Aviva.

Winter bought lean, modern furniture for the spare, beautiful house, and when her son was with his father, Aviva would bring her things from her place in Los Feliz and spend the night. In the mornings, they would lounge on the sofa with the New York and Los Angeles Times and Winter would watch Aviva as she walked to the kitchen for more coffee, nearly always in a white tank and Cosabella panties in the colors of sherbet.

Winter surprised herself at how facile she was in their lovemaking, like discovering a hidden talent, like waking up one day and finding you can draw. She loved the aesthetic of sex with Aviva, who was immaculate and had skin that smelled of products from the store where they first kissed – milk, nectarine, sugar – her skin as firm and warm as a newly baked yellow cake. Winter liked the way Aviva's hand felt in hers and how she leaned into her flirtatiously, even when they had been together six months and flew back east to Aviva's parents' house in Woodstock for Passover. Aviva's mother was about the same age as Winter, but so skilled at being without judgment, that she sat up late with her and talked about the Israeli authors they liked in common: Amos Oz, David Grossman, and, in the morning when Winter and Aviva slept together in Aviva's childhood room, pulled the door closed for them so they could have privacy. When they awoke together in the sun filled room, Winter drew the white sheets over her head and, with Aviva biting her lip, had nearly silent sex, while Aviva's parents prepared Matzoh Brei a room away.

After the requisite cooling off period that allowed her to now finalize her divorce in the state of California, Winter and Howie, names that never rhymed, sat at the table in an office in Century City, in a room with a Hockney collage of people playing cards, and, with hyperbolic generosity, divided the Haywood Wakefield furniture and the posters by Robbie Conal, the Roy McMakin desk, the box at the Bowl, stepping over each other with consideration as if vying for the title of best divorce ever. Howie's parents had managed their divorce less well, treating it as a blood sport. He had vowed to do better, for Noah. Even when it hurt him, even when he wished to raise his voice, he smoothed it instead like the white sheets of a bed. The rancorless division was admirable, and in the elevator, Winter unconsciously pet the sleeve of Howie's shirt. His kiss on her cheek at the valet was soft and proprietary.

Howie had quickly taken to the habit of including Aviva when considering Winter's weekend plans. "Where are you and Aviva staying in Santa Barbara? Be sure and take Aviva to see the Murakami," creating room for Aviva, the fact of her, as if she were a gift for both of them, like a thoughtful exchange student who replenished the milk and sometimes lingered to dry the dishes. But in all his consolation and obedience, Howie had been reluctant to give Winter a get - Howie, who after twenty years, had just begun to believe that Winter was his, who had still not recovered from the first surprise that she had agreed to go out with him - not out really - but back to his house in the hills after the taping of the pilot, where she sat in his Eames chair with her hands tucked into her sleeves and her knees to her chest, while he made her cocoa like an after school snack. She was far more beautiful to him with her face scrubbed and hair pulled back, than coiffed and made up for the show. In the morning, when he saw her come out of his bedroom in his sweats held up with one hand at her waist, he thought he would die. He had handed her coffee. Taking the mug with a peacock logo, she released her hold on the sweats, which fell easily to the floor. She sipped her coffee, looking up at him over the rim, set it back down, hopped onto the counter and unbuttoned her shirt. When Noah was born, he admitted that what he did at work mattered to him very little, but for the world he could make for his family. He regarded his wife and son as a dream woken up to.

In the end, Rabbi Beth, who had also married them, had had to call him in like a truant Bar Mitzvah student. Howie had dragged himself to her office, and then, like a child in a backyard play, commanded the scribe to, in real-time, draft the divorce proclamation. Howie and Winter were taken to separate rooms to wait, literally, for the ink to dry. Aviva had taken their son to the Tar Pits and, from the window of the empty classroom where she waited, Winter pretended to herself that she could see them: Noah only willing and delighted to be driven to school by Aviva, to be helped at the dining room table with his spelling list, and to have milk poured by her into his cereal. Winter calculated that, right about now, they would be in the gift shop buying worthless Tar Pit swag. She would have to remind Aviva about saying no. Winter wished that she and Howie had not been separated while they waited. She remembered when, late in her pregnancy with Noah, she had begun cramping. She was frightened, and that bitch, Dr. Davidson, had made Howie wait outside. She felt embarrassed to want him near her now, to help her leave him, weak in a way that she sometimes felt with him. The cute rabbinical intern, who looked like an even younger Ashton Kutcher, leaned the door open with a silent ta-dah and let Winter know it was time.

In the rabbi's office, Winter was instructed to extend her hands, palms up, in front of her like for a mother wrapping a skein of wool. Winter stared up at Howie, surprised to see tears welling in his eyes. He drew his breath as if to reverse the tears, and proceeded to lay the document in her hands. Winter was instructed to take steps away from him as he pronounced the words that released her. Moments later, the corners were torn from the document and it was placed on file. The rabbis' secretary, Marilyn, stopped them in the outer office and cheerfully reminded Howie and Winter of the meeting next Sunday for selecting a date for their son's Bar Mitzvah, which was three years away. Howie righted himself and, drawing his finger across its face, entered the information into his iPhone. In the parking lot, Howie hugged Winter briskly and got quickly into his car, where she could see that, once again, he was crying, and as he pulled away, she stood with her keys in her hands looking for them. Winter glanced back at where she had just been and then down at her hands, and wondered how the keys had come to be there. Inside the car, suddenly weary, she shut her eyes and did not open them again until she heard the voice of the eager intern on the heels of the rabbi. It was dusk, and hers was the only car left in the lot. Winter started her car and rolled it past the security guard who, ducking down, looked at her carefully and then waved back.

With the divorce and get now final, Winter drove west on Mulholland for her appointment at the U of J Mikvah. Winter had removed her nail polish as the email from the Mikvah Lady had instructed, and, wearing flip-flops for the pedicure she had scheduled for immediately afterward, downshifted into a lower gear so that she would not go careening off the cliff into the ravine like the half-a-dozen drivers that did so every year. Winter had made the appointment at the University of Judaism at the suggestion of Rabbi Beth. The idea of a mikvah seemed strange to Winter at first, a throwback to the idea of family purity, when women were tameh – impure – and needed to immerse before returning to their husbands, a bride again. But Rabbi Beth had assured her that it was different now, that it was part of the empowerment of women to take this ritual back. Winter had hesitated at first, but came around after talking to her friend Mayim, who had once worked as Winter's double and was now a life coach. Her left hand firmly on the wheel, Winter cranked up the Yael Naim CD Aviva had given her – everything about Aviva, new and of the moment.

Winter parked the car up on the top of the hill and walked past the gift shop to the elevator and down to the Mikvah office. She had been there once before on a tour with Rabbi Beth and the Sisterhood. She had learned that, to satisfy the edict that a mikvah must run with moving waters, a panel of scholars in Los Angeles had arrived at the inventive solution of bringing in blocks of ice, which, when melted, were sanctified. Winter hadn't told anyone that she was coming, not even Aviva, and told her instead she was going to Pilates. Surprised, but not distressed by her own omission, Winter reminded herself that relationships need breath to survive. She walked past the school bulletin board that offered Hebrew tutoring and a room to share, a reward for a lost watch, scholarships to a school in the Negev. She tore off a little white slip for a Jewish sleep-away in Ojai, thinking it might be good for Noah.

In the Mikvah office, a woman with wet hair, who seemed more religious than Winter, was writing a check to the woman at the desk, who Winter assumed was Sharona, the woman she had spoken to on the phone. Sharona acknowledged Winter with a broad smile and continued her conversation with the woman whose skirt landed well below her knees and whose shirt covered her arms and rose high on her throat. To dress that way in LA was to be Amish. Winter tucked her naked feet in flip-flops under the chair. The woman made her feel out of place and that she might have made a mistake. Sharona guided the woman to the door, her hand at her elbow, and lingered there for a moment speaking quietly, a reassurance that Winter could sense but not hear. On the table, Winter saw a book of photographs of women in blue water, their hair floating around them like lithe seaweed. She was about to reach for it when the Amish Jewess took her leave. Sharona clapped her hands, startling Winter to her feet. "Susan," she said. Winter blushed at the sound of her given name. Sharona had the energy of a teacher on the first day of school. Winter took a half step toward her with her hand extended, but Sharona closed the gap and embraced her. The embrace was not cursory. Rather, Sharona held her, breathing deliberately in and exhaling. Winter surprised herself by giving way to it. She felt her feet sink and her body relax. Sharona rocked back and looked at Winter with the pride and pleasure of a parent, "Why are you here?"

Winter, without thinking, told the truth. "My marriage," she began, then, "I've...I'm divorced." Sharona opened her self out, but did not let go of Winter's hand. Sharona nodded, and Winter saw that she was grieving. Like her husband's tears, she wondered at this woman who did not even know her, but had taken the full weight of the divorce as if it were her own failure. But even as Winter watched her, Sharona recovered, as if placing the loss in an in-box, a tickler file to review later. Sharon released Winter's hand in a way that now felt abrupt, and pressed open a door to a changing area that, in every way, resembled the one at Kinara Spa. On the wall was a list of steps that Sharona read aloud with the mixed routine and vigilance of a flight attendant. Any missed step would make the immersion unkosher. Winter listened now attentively. She was to use the bathroom, shower, remove her jewelry, brush and floss, rinse her mouth, and, with a Q-tip, trace the shape of her ear, as she had done so carefully for baby Noah. When she had completed the tasks, she was to comb her hair through and squeeze it, but not dry it. She was to stand at the door and knock, and Sharona would come for her.

Alone in the room, Winter felt like a schoolgirl, referring to her notes hoping to do well. As she stood in her bare feet, the pink of her nail beds unfamiliar to her, not polished to the gloss of a car. She felt a million miles away from the rest of LA on her secret mission. If there were an earthquake, no one would know where to look for her. She removed her rings and set them on the sink. The wedding band had come from Barney's and was a Reinstein Ross, which, she was reasonably sure, meant Ross Reinstein, a nice Jewish boy in the jewelry business. It was too nice not to wear. The band was rose gold and with it was a diamond seeded ring by the same artist. Howie had gotten the ring for her when Noah was born, to mark the courageous day when, at Cedars, she had delivered him in a room with Howie's parents and brother Seth, the color TV mounted on the wall showing a Lakers game, and a buffet of sandwiches from Canter's for everyone but her. Howie's mom, Elaine, who had wished for a daughter after a lifetime of boys, had braced Winter's knee against her shoulder when it was time to push.

Winter put the rings on the stem of the toothbrush they had given her, and left it on the counter, reasoning that a person who stole from a Mikvah would have to be pretty bold. She wrapped the towel, tucked it in over her left breast and, curling the toes of her bare feet under, knocked as she'd been told to, on the door.

Sharona opened it as if she had always been behind it, and silently brought Winter into the cobalt tiled room. Winter was led by Sharona with the measured steps of a bride. The water was as blue as the pool itself – a pool for one – with seven steps descending and a guide rail leading down. A small cistern that housed the melting ice was side by side and, connecting them, Sharona explained, was a small stopper that, when opened, allowed a nishika of water, a kiss. Sharona guided Winter to the top of the stairs, took the towel from Winter as prescribed, and, in deference to Winter's modesty, held the towel in front of her own eyes, so that she could only see the top of Winter's head as she descended. Winter took the first step down and found the water not cool as she had expected, but temperate like the days in LA when the air temperature is so close to that of your own body that you can't discern it, feeling only that you are buoyed through your day.

Sharona read to her from a script, but Winter's attention to it went in and out, attending more to the thoughts that ran through her mind in the darkened room like the illuminated screen of a drive in. She remembered being married, not the wedding, but an hour before at their place on Hauser, when she and Howie had stolen away to the stairwell that led to their back porch and he had hiked her dress and pulled aside her blue silk panties to enter her, hoisting her by the ass and leaning her against the cool painted wall. She stepped again, and the water rose to her calves. She remembered bathing Noah in the sink, when he was so small and she so fearful, that every gesture was rhymed with an apology. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said as she cradled his trusting head in her hands. Howie, the more skilled at swaddling, waited with a duck billed towel.

Sharona was reminding Winter to let go of past hurts as the water grazed her thighs, and this seemed too much to ask. Instead, she surprised herself by praying that she would have the strength to do it. To pray seemed a strange thing to her, so long had she gotten everything she wanted. She took the next two stairs one after another and her fingertips traced the surface of the pool. Winter looked at her navel as it pooled with water. Howie would follow the curve of it with his hand, asking her, like a man with a fetish, to do fewer crunches so that it would not be rock hard; coming up from behind her when she would try to read a script, vying for her attention like a child. When, at the sixth step, the water lifted her breasts, she remembered them full in her pregnancy, the unrivaled pleasure of nursing her son, the cup of his rosebud mouth, robust in his sucking. Rarely had she felt so proud.

At the bottom step, the water came above Winter's shoulders, and the surprising pressure of the surrounding water caused her to panic and her heart to pound. She reached for the pool's edge. Sharona crouched down beside her. "It's all right," she said, "You'll get used to it in a second." She nodded her head and Winter relaxed her breathing. Sharona continued her instructions. "It helps to jump up a little, just a little hop." Winter tentatively removed her hand from the wall. She felt better now, but still shaken. On tiptoe, the water was up to her neck. "A little hop, that will help you go completely under." Winter stepped away from the wall, and, centering herself in the pool, found that she was trembling, her breath stuttering as she exhaled, like an unfamiliar stage fright. Winter focused on Sharona's instructions, "A little hop," she reminded her. Winter obeyed her, and jumping, she dropped back into the water. Floating there, her back rising from the air in her lungs, she slowly exhaled and, splayed her fingers, the way that Sharona had demonstrated. Then, dropping her feet and lifting her face, she drew in a breath and looked up at Sharona. "Kosher," she pronounced. Winter laughed, relieved. "And again." Winter, now expert, repeated the immersion twice more. Sharona guided her through the blessings that were printed at the pool's edge in transliterated Hebrew. And then, leaving her alone, reminded her that the prayers uttered in a mikvah were carried most swiftly to God. Winter looked after her, wanting to follow, afraid to be alone.

Winter relaxed her body with intention and reminded herself that it was only a pool, that there was nothing in particular to be afraid of. She focused on the physical details around her; the way in a scary movie she would divert herself by training her eyes on the exit sign. It was tile and water, the candles were candles, she was fairly certain that the dish of potpourri was from Bed Bath and Beyond. She let her head tip back into the water her arms drift out to her sides. "Noah," she heard herself say, as easy as breathing. She already felt him moving away from her. She remembered the longing she had felt when he was an infant, how she betrayed herself daily loving the Noah he was, even as the Noah he'd only just been receded. She had read Wendy Mogel's *The Blessing of the Skinned Knee*, and knew that she needed to let him falter and stand away that he might learn to stand, that she was to not build his dioramas or manage his play dates, but let him be his own ten-year-old man. She had nearly bragged that he'd gotten through the divorce just fine. She had arranged for five visits with the doctor *LA Magazine* had named best family therapist, so that he could express his anger, and when it was her week, she would sit in the waiting area, re-reading the lone issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, reminding herself to someday serve pumpkin soup in a pumpkin. Noah would come out hoisting his backpack, his Buckley uniform disheveled from a day of play, his knees scuffed, all boy. Together, they would go to Ben and Jerry's at the Galleria, and over Oreo sundaes, he would ask her like a perfect gentlemen how her day was, telling her only that school was "fine," giving Winter nothing to work with, no truths to share like in the second act of her sitcom, where levity would halt for meaningful feelings and she would tousle the hair of whatever twin played her son that day. He resisted her maternal concerns and, looking daily more like Howie, seemed bent on protecting her. More and more, father and son soldiered on. She thought of them as she had seen them together in the sanctuary.

It was a Friday night service and she and Howie had been seated on either side of him; Howie, after work, with his jacket folded on the empty seat beside him, a closed prayer book on his lap. Rabbi Snow had invited, to come up for an aliyah, anyone who had gone through a transition in the year prior: a new home, a new job, and then, he had quipped, “a divorce,” and under the cover of the congregation’s laughter, Winter had leapt to her feet. Grabbing a tallis, she had made her way giddily up to the bima, and as she climbed the stairs, she had seen her son, seen him resting on the shoulder of his father, as a weary swimmer on the shore. His feet were tucked up under him like a younger child and he regarded her, his mother. He regarded her not with judgment or rancor. He regarded her without even curiosity. He regarded her as if she were only familiar. Someone he might have known, but in the end did not know. And then, he closed his eyes and, shifting his weight, rested against the body of his father. His father, who had not left him, who had not let a cold wind steal into their home. His father, who was still his parent, with whom he had the contract of boat and harbor. Howie, had reached for his jacket and brought it around Noah’s small shoulders, then rested his arm across the boy’s back. Winter had had to be shaken by Ellie Herman, who had quit television that year to write a book, and who had hustled Winter up the remaining stairs. The rabbi had held up the laminated prayers and Winter had recited them, hearing her own voice distantly.

Winter felt the chill of the water at the back of her neck. Her arms floated at her sides like a drowner. Her breath shallow, nearly silent. First drawing in a breath through her nose, and breathing out her mouth, Winter softened her knees and brought them to her chest and, letting go, dropped easily below the surface of the pool, with water touching every part of her body, no part of her exposed to air.

And then, pressing her feet fast to the tile bottom, Winter brought her face to the surface and refilled her lungs with air. She wiped the water from her eyes with her hands. Then, steadying herself with one hand on the ledge, she used the other to trace the cistern wall, locating the stopper that connected the two pools, and bracing herself, turned it hard counter-clockwise to stop the moving waters. Turning away, she took hold of the metal rails and hoisted herself out of the water, taking the stairs two at a time. She wrapped herself again in the towel against the cool air; patted her face, and then, bending, briskly dried her feet, first one and then the other so that she would not slip. She took quick small steps across the wet tile floor, resisting the urge to run.

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