

## Part Two

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Married love*

*The chains that bind us*

*You unknowing forge*

*The fires that burn us*

*You unwitting feed*

*Beloved friend*

*It turns again*

“So then she saw it and she screamed, ‘My mother never told me it would look like *that!* It’s such an ugly little thing.’ And I’m telling you, the poor man, God bless him, he just wilted away. Just like that.”

Women’s laughter bounced and echoed off the tiled walls of the bathhouse pool. Now that Rachel was a married woman, she accompanied Tanta Rosa to the mikvah, the ritual bath every Friday after dark.

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But before you could dip a toe into the living water, you had to be spotless. So first they joined Tanta Rosa's friends in the Baruch baths at the river end of Rivington. There, a whole new world of bawdy female conversation opened up to her.

"Just like that? How do you know such a thing? You were there?"

"How do I know? Because she told me, that's how. Six weeks they were married, she wouldn't let him near her... 'such an ugly little thing' ...*Gott in Himmel.*"

"So what happened?"

"So what happened? So what always happens? One night, he drank a lot of whiskey and then he forced her. I'm telling you. And after that, I suppose, she must have learned to look the other way because now she's carrying the eighth. So, schon. That was that. But you know what I think? It's a good thing they're stronger than us. Because what virgin would touch it if she never saw it before?"

"Oy, if they would only hear us," the second woman laughed. "But it's true. My husband, he should live and be well, a beauty contest he wouldn't win with it. But God forbid he should know I said so."

" 'It's such an ugly little thing!' ...Oy, vey..." the first woman hiccupped.

"And so sensitive! Worse than children they are. One cross word and *pfft*, nothing."

"Enough already," Rosa laughed. "You're embarrassing my niece. Look, you're making her blush."

"What's to be embarrassed?" the first woman said. "She's a married woman. She doesn't know what I am talking about? I am embarrassing you, Rucheleh?"

Rachel drew her arms through the warm water. "No, it's okay," she said. In fact, after two months of married life, she had yet to see a naked man. The

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women's conversation fascinated her. There were things she wished she could ask, but then they would know the truth about her marriage to Schmuel.

"Wait till you have babies. Then nothing will embarrass you."

"Do you remember Chava Moscovitz?" the second woman asked.

"The one who moved to Chicago?"

"That's the one. They used to run the hardware store on the corner of Clinton Street?"

"Yeah? So?"

"So every time she got pregnant, she cursed him for the whole nine months."

"I remember...I remember..." the first woman chuckled. "Right in the store, in front of the customers."

"And such curses, you shouldn't know from it; that he should get a boil, right on the end; that it should itch with prickly heat for a hundred years and then maybe he would cut it off and leave her in peace."

"Oy, I remember...I remember...And such a little one he had too."

"*Vey iss mir*, is there nothing you don't know? You saw it?"

"Me...How would I see it; I'm a decent married woman. *She* told me once. She said, 'Every time he comes near me, he makes a baby. Who would think such a little *pipkeh* could make so much trouble?' That's what she said, I swear."

"Oy, stop already," the second woman gasped. "I'm laughing so hard, I'll pee in the water yet."

"God forbid."

The women settled into a companionable silence. Rachel raised herself out of the pool and sat on the edge, adjusting the scratchy wet skirt of her swimming costume. Later, at the mikvah, she would be able to enjoy moment of pure contact between herself and the tepid water, nakedness, rare and

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brief. She wondered what the women would think if they knew she really had no need to join them there. The *mikvah* was for purification, to make a woman fit to be touched by her husband. The Law said women were unclean until they'd visited the *mikvah* seven days after their time of month.

Tanta Rosa's Rumanian friends turned the ritual into a social occasion. It was their custom to prepare for every Sabbath with a gossip at the public baths followed by a proper, holy immersion at the mikvah. Rachel guessed, from the things they said, it was because most of them lay with their husbands on Friday nights.

The first woman was not the sort who could stay quiet for long. "But you know something?" she said. "I think she must have found a nice big one...more to her liking."

"*Oy gevalt*, your mind is in the gutter...What are you talking about?"

"Well, you know...the last child she had...the blond boy...He didn't look like her and he didn't look like him. So where did he come from?"

"She said she saw an angel when she was in labour."

"*Balt*...and my mother was a hundred-year-old virgin when I was born. I think that's why they moved to Chicago, you know."

"It could be true," Rosa said. "It happens. Didn't it happen to Sarah, in the Bible? And she was such an old woman that when the angel told her, she laughed."

"Rosa, Rosa, the *things* you believe. Those days are dead and gone, take it from me."

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

"So, Rucheleh," the second woman said, "You have for us some news in that department yet?"

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"Please," Rosa interrupted. "What's the matter with you? You don't think about anything else? It's only two months they're married. Leave her alone."

"What? Two months isn't long enough?"

It was the first time Rachel had been asked this question, but soon enough she knew it was on everyone's mind. After all, wasn't that why women got married; what they were made for? Even the affectionate term for little girls, *mamaleh*, meant little mother. Parents could be so greedy. No sooner had Schmuel brought his father the Jewish bride he demanded, than the old man was asking for a grandson. None of this bothered Rachel. It would be a long time before jovial interest turned to concern. And it would mean less family argument when it was time for the divorce.

Keeping up appearances was more of a bother. Once she'd spent the wedding presents decorating the four rooms on West 12th, scouring the downtown stores to match the pictures she cut out of *The Ladies Home Journal*, everyone wanted to visit. "So where is Schmuel?" Sophie asked. "He's never here when I come to see you."

"He's playing pinochle."

"All the time he plays pinochle? Every time I come? What's the matter, he thinks I will be too critical?"

"Mama, please. He likes to go out with his friends."

"Yes, all right, they all do. But Rachel, he's a married man now. He has responsibilities."

"He knows."

"I hope he does...I just want you should be happy." Sophie put her arm around Rachel's shoulders. "So tell me, Rucheleh, everything is all right? He looks after you good?"

"Everything is fine, Mama."

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"Schon...Good...That's what I like to hear."

Sophie looked through the door of the second bedroom. It was simply furnished with a single bed, a chest of drawers and a chair. Schmucl almost never used it, but Rachel had arranged it for the odd occasions when he had to work too late to go to Bessie's. "So who is this room for? You are getting a boarder?"

"It's a guest room."

"A guest room? Fancy schmantzy. You have so many guests?"

"Well...you know...sometimes the men play cards late. And Schmucl has relatives in New Jersey; Uncle Shoe could stay when he comes down; you could stay over," Rachel lied.

"Better first I should see you make it into a baby's room."

"Mama, please."

"All right, all right. It's none of my business."

"What is it like...when you're married?" Ruth asked. Although eighteen months older than Rachel, she was just beginning to notice boys.

"What is *what* like? You live with someone; you eat together; you sleep together. You know. Like Mama and Papa."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Well, what *do* you mean?"

"You know...when you're younger than Mama and Papa...it's different...isn't it? When you...Oh, you know. Do you wear clothes when you sleep?"

"Of course I do. I wear a nightgown, just like Mama."

Ruth was not satisfied. She was having some difficulty framing her questions and Rachel, who was afraid she knew exactly what Ruth meant, was being deliberately obtuse.

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“Does he kiss you?”

“Of course he does. He’s my husband.”

“What does it feel like when he kisses you?”

“It feels um nice.”

“Nice how?”

Although Schmuel had kissed Rachel repeatedly, and flamboyantly, in front of their wedding guests, he hadn’t touched her since. She could barely remember that day, let alone what Schmuel’s kisses felt like. Still, she sensed that this was the sort of thing a young girl talked about with her married sister. She didn’t want to disappoint Ruth. She closed her eyes and imagined the taste of a kiss.

So soft and smooth. His lashes feather my cheek. And his tongue is like silk. I rest my face in the warm hollow of his throat, where his skin is so fine I can feel his heartbeat against my eyelids. He is damp and salty, smelling of nectarines. I hold his head in my hands, my fingers combing his curly hair. And he kisses my neck, my shoulders, my breasts. His breath surprises the tender skin behind my knees. His cheek is cool and sandy where my legs are warm and smooth. There is no part of me his lips do not visit, no part of me his tongue does not taste. And I do the same. His body is a great mystery. For though it is hard and muscled, it is as soft as his touch. His arms, his thighs, his buttocks are furred and downy. The soles of his feet are like warm velvet. All over him, there are secret, fragrant places alive with the rhythm of his heart. Gently, he strokes my thighs until I open to him and when he enters, I am a sheath, fashioned only to hold him, golden and glowing, hot and silken as his tongue. Soon there is no place but the place where we are joined, no part of me but the parts where we touch, where I struggle to cross the barrier of our skins. If I hold him tightly, I will vanish into his flesh, disappear like a

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drop in the sea, a breath on the sky. I cannot bear to be so separate. I growl and tear and shout his name. Then, he stops my voice with his own, a long, sweet shuddering cry. And suddenly we *are* the sea; we *are* the sky. There is nothing else beneath the stars but what we are. We lie with each other in waves of light that spread like ripples on a pond until they cover us with sleep.

“Schmuel doesn’t have curly hair.”

Rachel looked at Ruth and realised, with a start, that she had actually uttered all she had imagined. Ruth’s eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open. Rachel could feel the heat of a scarlet blush creeping up her neck.

“Anyway,” she said, “you don’t need to know about things like that. You’re just a baby.”

“I’m older than you.”

“Don’t you ever tell anybody what I told you. It was just something I...I read in a book. I made it up.”

But Rachel, still virginal after months of marriage, was wet and spent. She had no idea where the vision, which she had seen and felt with the conviction of memory, had come from. She had not made it up. Not one word.

They stopped going to Dreamworld. “Married people don’t do that,” Schmuel said. And now that Bessie spent all day at Mishkin’s and most nights with Schmuel, Rachel never saw her. Except for Friday nights, Schmuel and Bessie spent most of their time in Bessie’s new apartment.

On Friday nights, Rachel and Schmuel fulfilled their mutual bargain by pretending to be a couple celebrating sabbath with the in-laws.



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Once Rachel invited both families for Shabbas at West 12th Street, because she thought it was a married sort of thing to do. The evening was not a great success. Even though Sophie had written careful instructions for the simple meal, and even though Rachel followed them to the letter, the chicken tasted like softened wood, the carrots and potatoes were hard in the middle.

Everyone was excessively polite. What with all the effort and concentration of chewing, nobody had time to ask nosey questions. While she and Ruth cleared the dishes, Rachel overheard her father-in-law reassure Schmuel. "Don't worry, she'll learn. Your mother too could burn water at the beginning." After that they alternated Friday nights between the families.

When they went to East Broadway, Schmuel's older sister cooked. Dinah was sensible and straightforward. She had lost her own chance of marriage while looking after her father and brother but the sacrifice did not seem to have embittered her; she had few illusions, but she was not hard. If the situation were different, Rachel would have enjoyed having Dinah as a confidante and friend.

Rachel missed the intimacy of friendship. Without Bessie, there was no one to tell about the changes taking place in Schmuel. They began just a few weeks after the wedding. She had been ironing his shirts - *For all you're costing me, you could at least do my laundry* - when she forgot and called him Schmuel.

"I told you, I am Sammy to you," he growled.

"I'm sorry...I forgot."

"Yeah?" he said. And he hit her face so hard her nose bled. "Maybe now you'll remember."

Another time he hit her because she spent seventy-five dollars of the wedding present money on a couch for the parlour.

"Whaddya need that for? Seventy-five bucks! What, so your mother can sit like a queen when she comes to complain about me?"

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“My mother doesn’t complain about you.”

“Oh yeah? You think I don’t hear from my father how she worries I play cards too much? Ain’t you got enough brains to make up some other excuse when I’m not here?”

“I’ll try.”

“You do that...Seventy-five bucks. Geez, you stupid broad...I had plans for that dough.” And he stormed out.

Perhaps it was not Schmuel, but only the situation that had changed. After all, Rachel had given him so little thought before they married, she had no real idea of him. Or of what he was like under pressure. And as is usually the case, money, or the lack of it, caused pressure almost from the start.

Schmuel had expected a raise now that he was married. “What for?” The Man said. “I pay you plenty enough to keep a wife very comfortable. You wanna keep a chicky on the side, that is not my problem. Maybe you should have been so smart as to wait until you got promoted to take up with another dame. Then you could afford to cheat on your wife.”

Bessie didn’t consider Schmuel’s lack of money her problem either. With the sort of twisted logic that only Bessie could sustain, she figured that, as Schmuel’s kept woman, she was entitled to the kind of presents she could buy for herself with the money she earned at Mishkin’s. The fact that she could afford to be free with her earnings because Schmuel paid her rent did not enter into it.

And Bessie was bored. “All we ever do anymore is eat and screw...You don’t buy me nothing...You don’t never take me no place. I’m sick of stew,” - Bessie’s skills in the kitchen were only marginally better than Rachel’s - “I wanna go to Delmonico’s.”

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All Schmuel wanted was what he figured men have always wanted. Good sex, a few laughs, peace and quiet. Almost at once, he began to lose the very things he had married to acquire.

When Bessie didn't get her way, Bessie crossed her legs.

"This is the third day in a row you give me the same crap. Ain't there nothing else to eat in this house?" Schmuel picked over a plate of noodles and pot cheese.

On a Monday night, during the dog days, Schmuel had moved into the spare room at West 12th Street. He and Bessie, he said, had had words. He didn't say what about. "Ah, she'll get over it. She's probably on the rag." But she was taking her time. Whatever was bothering Bessie on Monday was still bothering her when Saturday rolled in with a layer of humidity that sat on the city like grease.

Rachel didn't like having Schmuel around. She would have liked to strip down to her shift to cool off. When Schmuel was annoyed with Bessie, he became sullen and the August heat did not improve his temperament.

"I could make you some eggs," she said.

"Yeah, you do that." He poured himself a whiskey. "Don't you have no place to go?" he said.

"It's too hot and muggy to go out."

Rachel felt him watching as she moved between the icebox and the stove.

"That a new dress?"

"No, I made it from an old one."

"Glad to hear somebody knows how to save money."

He stretched back in his chair and half closed his eyes.

"Why don't you go apologize to Bessie."

"I ain't got nothing to apologize for."

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“Oh.”

She wet a cloth at the sink and ran it over her face. Then she broke the eggs into a bowl and beat them with a fork. She poured them onto sizzling butter in a skillet. Hot air shimmered over the black surface of the stove. The eggs snapped and bubbled. While she watched them, Rachel reached back and unfastened the top two buttons of her dress, lifted her heavy braid and wet the nape of her neck with the cool cloth. She thought about the cold bath she was going to take as soon as she finished in the kitchen.

After she put the eggs on the table, Rachel turned to go, but almost immediately Schmuel grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back. “Christ almighty...can’t you even crack an egg? Jesus, I’m bleeding.”

Perhaps it was the heat. Perhaps it was the week of his constant, unwanted company. Or perhaps it was the memory of an Italian boy who had once left his purple fingerprints on her arm. Suddenly, Rachel crackled with anger. “Let go of me,” she snapped, pulling her hand away.

Schmuel lunged and caught the back of her skirt. She felt a staccato ripple as the fabric gave way. He spun her around, snatching her flailing arms. His gums bled, cut by a shard of eggshell that had slipped between his teeth. “Look what you done to me, you useless bitch,” he snarled and spat a mouthful of bloody eggs onto the table.

He was standing. The strength of his grip astonished her. She struggled to free herself but his fingers burned like knotted rope. Then he let go of her right wrist and wrenched her head back by her braided hair. “Here,” he said, “taste your cooking.” And he pressed his dripping, feral mouth against hers, leaving a smear of bloody saliva on her lips and chin. She spat at him and, with her free hand, scratched at his face, his ears. “Jesus...Bitch,” he said, and he punched her in the stomach. As she doubled over, he threw her down. She

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was aware of a cupboard door grazing her forehead and the sharp crack of her head hitting the floor.

Now he was on top of her, on the floor. With his left hand, he held both of hers, pushing them against her throat with the weight of his body so that she could hardly breathe. He was using his right hand to tear at her clothes and his own. She pressed her legs together and tried to raise her knees to push him off, but he was sitting on them. He dug his fingernails into her thighs to prise them apart and fell on her. She could feel his belt buckle cutting into her side. The rhythmic jab of its metal tongue punctuated the dull pounding as he beat himself against her. He stank of eggs and sweat. Weak, from lack of air, Rachel gave up her silent struggle and waited for Schmuel to finish. She let her mind float free, watching from somewhere above, so that even the startled gasp that accompanied the knifelike shock of penetration, seemed to come from someone else, some poor, bruised woman crumpled on the floor below.

But she cannot so easily escape awareness. *The fires that burn us...you...The chains that bind us...you...* When she closes her eyes, another, the one who is always at the edge of awareness, stares back. *Oh, my beloved friend.* Her eyes burn with his tears of frustrated rage. His mouth is stretched in a roar that thunders through time, rivers of guilt and shame in her rushing pulse.

A cold, numbing pain spread across her belly. Schmuel thrust against her, grunted and rolled off. For a moment, she lay on the kitchen floor, unable to move. Then she gathered her torn clothes around herself and limped to the bathroom.

She took a rough towel and tried to scrape away the filth between her legs. She wanted to scrub away every trace of him. To scorch him off her skin. But she was too sore and swollen to touch herself, to make herself feel clean. She looked at the towel. There was blood and a fetid, marshy smelling sap that

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turned her stomach. She tasted bile at the back of her throat and leaned over the bathtub to wretch.

She flinched when Schmucl came to the bathroom door. "Don't worry. I ain't gonna hurt you," he said.

Rachel answered him with her wide, brown eyes. As others had before him, Schmucl shivered in their stillness. He became defensive. "Come on, it wasn't so bad," he said. "You might even get to like it. Lotsa women do."

Although Schmucl was not of an imaginative bent, the hatred and vengeance in her gaze was eternal. It passed through him, beyond him, as deep and infinite as the reflection in a pair of facing mirrors.

He tried to chase away the feeling with words. "Anyway...I got the right," he said. "Who you gonna complain to? Who's gonna blame me for schtupping my wife." His sneering laughter died in his throat. "You ain't thinking of telling Bessie now are you?"

Rachel didn't answer. She turned her back to him and continued washing her thighs. He crossed the bathroom and grabbed her shoulder. "Don't you get no wise ideas about telling Bessie, I'm warning you. Don't you get no ideas about telling Bessie."

He stalked out of the bathroom.

Rachel didn't plan to tell Bessie. Or anyone else. But about a month later she woke up nauseous. And not long after that, everybody knew.

*It turns again*

\*

Droplets of clear water sparkled along the fibres of the webby membrane. As the midwife held up the caul to examine it in the sun, water filmed into lenses

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across its honeycomb cells, scattering spots of light on her arms. The thing was nearly intact; a miracle after she'd had to fish it out of the garbage. But then a caul itself was something of a miracle. After twenty years of midwifery, she could no longer count the number of babies she'd helped into the world, yet she could recall only half a dozen born with this magical veil over their faces. She could remember each one of them, each with its face squeezed tight behind a mask of film; the way each one had taken its first gasping breath when the caul was lifted away, as though it was being born all over again.

She had known what it was, of course. And what to do with it. Her own mother had taught her how to scrub it with coarse salt and wash it in three changes of water. Now she spread it to dry in the May sunlight, creamy white and fresh smelling, on a clean linen cloth.

When it was dry, she would wrap it in the same linen and give it to Rachel in secret. The poor girl abandoned months before this birth of a son, barely more than a child herself, needed as much good fortune as she could get.

The gift of the caul had a special poignancy for the midwife. Nearly seventeen years before, she had delivered Rachel, who was now the first of her own to bear a child. She remembered Isaacson's disappointment when she told him his wife had given him a healthy girl. "Another one?" he sighed and poured himself a glass of plum brandy. He had not even been interested in looking at her.

Although the midwife knew Jacob Isaacson, since, by reputation only, as far as she could determine, he had not changed. The way he had muttered and grumbled; you would have thought he was about to become the grandfather of a bastard. After all, it wasn't the poor child's fault that her

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husband had run off with some shiksa floozie to God knows where. Hadn't Isaacson allowed the wedding in the first place? When everyone knew what kind of a reputation Schmuel Weiss had?

The baker's wife told the midwife, and everybody else, that they'd already filed the papers for a divorce at City Hall. "For abandonment, and adultery," the baker's wife said, clucking her tongue. "I heard also that he was knocking her around...but what else is new?"

"So an American divorce...that is enough nowadays? What about the rabbis?" the midwife had asked.

"Do I know? A new husband she is not going to find so fast without a *get*."

The midwife blotted the caul with another piece of cloth and thought about how, even in the new world, men did as they pleased while women still had to look after each other. Yiddish vaudevillians could make jokes about Jewish divorce; *She gets me, I told the rabbi. So the rabbi said, you have to get a get. So, I got a get. And what did that get me?* It was no joke for a woman like Rachel. Her baby would need a father. Under other circumstances, plenty of young widowers would marry a woman with a baby. She was so pretty, even a bachelor might take her with another man's child. But without a *get*, a Jewish divorce from a rabbinical court, no one would have her. And without Schmuel to ask for one, there would be no Jewish divorce.

"I heard," the baker's wife said, "That the brother in Brooklyn is taking the baby to raise with his own...Isaacson is insisting... because it's a boy."

"Why?" the midwife said.

"You're asking me?... Why do they ever do anything, men? To make *tsuris*, aggravation. To get their own way, why else?"

"So how do you know this?"



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“Mrs. Lieberman told me. You know, she lives downstairs from them... So, yesterday she heard them arguing through the air shaft; that a boy needs a father to teach him God’s Law.”

“Isaacson can’t teach him?”

The baker’s wife had shrugged. “Do I know what goes on in a head like that? Maybe he thinks he’s too old Anyway, as soon as it’s weaned, they’re sending it away for its own good. That’s what Sadie Lieberman told me.”

The midwife pictured Rachel, smiling and whispering to her new born son the way all new mothers did, and wondered how it must feel to have a child torn away after you had laboured to bring it into the world. Since she, herself, was a virgin, she could only imagine it.

There was no irony in this. Her profession was often the respectable resort of ugly women who knew, from an early age, they would have to fend for themselves. The immigration doctor on Ellis Island had written *dark facial strawberry mark* on her papers. But the men in her home village, considered it a mark of Cain. After all, wasn’t her own mother well past her bloom when she was born? Surely, some spirit mischief, perhaps Lilith herself, must have been involved.

Sometimes the midwife thanked God for the deformity that had made her unmarriageable and thus independent of the stupid, thoughtless cruelty she had seen men practice in the name of God’s Law.

Once again, the midwife examined the caul, marvelling at its intricacy. She knew that this was where God did his work, whatever men like Jacob Isaacson thought.

After she had separated it from the remains of the birth that were being prepared for burial, as was the custom, the midwife had told Rachel that someday it would protect a loved one from drowning and accidents at sea. Isaacson overheard her and became furious.

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“Throw the evil, filthy thing away,” he growled. “This is a God-fearing home. I will have no superstitious nonsense under my roof.”

The midwife, whose years of spinsterhood had empowered her tongue, told him to throw it away himself. But he would not touch it; would not even look at it. In the end it was Sarah, the daughter who most resembled him, who had gathered it up and tossed it in a pail with the kitchen scraps, from whence the midwife had rescued it.

God’s Law. As if God had anything to do with it. They made it up to suit themselves, the men; sat in dark little schuls arguing and twisting logic until it supported their own convenience and their childish squeamishness. The midwife had seen enough of life and death to know that God demonstrated his creation through the cycle of a woman’s body. And yet, men had made of it a thing unclean, requiring purification before it was fit to be touched.

She had spent her life watching God quicken in women’s bellies. There was nothing unclean or impure about it. Nothing that would wilt flowers, collapse cakes, turn wine to vinegar, soil men with the sin of Eve.

So many rules. And all because they were afraid, all because they would rather contort themselves into intellectual knots over the mind of God than look, with eyes that really saw, at the way He brought life and death together in women’s blood.