

Sami BERDUGO

TRADE

Every Friday, between four and five in the afternoon, I undo my mother's bra. From the moment of release she and I enter the restful sabbath. Every time I undo the bra for my mother I know I can relax. For from that moment on the working stops, the cleaning stops, the cooking stops and we have our queen back. When I release first one hook, then another and yet another one, my mother sighs, and I answer back, like an echo. After the big bra has been tossed onto the bed or onto the pile of cheap perfume bottles gathered on the toilet table, my mother turns to me. Her breasts fall down and feel wonderful, having been imprisoned for six whole days, day and night, in the stiff bra fabric. On Sunday morning my mother knocks on my bedroom door, so I can do her bra up again. She is already wearing it, now turns her back and shouts at me: "Not on the last one. Make it looser, on the first hook." I listen to her and only snap the hooks on the second row of eyelets. Sometimes, when I am angry and tired from the morning on, I hook her up on the last row on purpose, and she asks me "Is it all the way? It feels so tight," and I answer her, "mother, it's on the first, shut up," and watch her suffer the whole week with the bra squeezing her breasts tight against her body. On weeks like those, when I undo her bra on Friday, I see the red marks that have been braising under the breasts the whole week. To my satisfaction, my mother can't ever feel them, because she can't see all of herself in the mirror.

Every month and a half I give my mother a back massage. She asks me whether to take off everything, and I tell her take off everything except for the bra, because I don't have the strength to close it up again afterwards. My mother flattens out onto the double mattress, spreading her hands to the sides, and sighs. I take out expensive Chinese oil from the medicine cabinet, drip just a few drops and close the bottle. I rest my palms on her big greasy back and begin massaging. I go up and down until the tail bone, spreading out to the sides and to every corner possible. My mother's back begins to redden. The redder it turns,

the more my mother screams "enough, enough not so hard, I can't any more, stop, yes, yes, there, there, it seems like something is broken there ... ah ah hh... enough , enough, I don't want any more," and I don't stop. I tell her it is good for her health, that she must shut up and bear it quietly and say thank you. She keeps quiet, and after three seconds starts up again. When the massage is over she turns over with difficulty and lies on her back. "Now release my legs a bit, but slowly." I take one leg and raise it in the air, turn it on its axis and my mom sighs some more. That's what I do with the other leg too. "Yes, that's how it should be kept up; it should be done all the time... Has," she says , and I answer her with a scream, "sure all the time, but you abuse it ,you don't do a thing for a whole week, just see what you look like." My mother looks at me and nods her head. She knows I am right. She continues to suffer in silence, throws a last sigh, and kicks me off her bed.

Every time my mother goes out to a wedding I have to make her beautiful. I have to make sure she is dressed appropriately and doesn't put on too much makeup. She calls me to her room and closes the door. She stands in front of me in a beige slip, her body covered with shower drops which she never dries. Out of the cupboard she takes out dresses, skirts, elegant blouses and big jackets." This one I think," she says and lifts up a big black dress with a lace collar. "No!" I tell her. She suggests another dress and again I don't agree. "So what do you want me to wear?" she yells. She goes over the skirts and says she is not comfortable in them." Makes no difference, you have to look elegant" I tell her. My mother looks at me, angrier and starts with her row of dark skirts. After we agree on a satin blouse with a skirt, she slips the skirt onto her waist and I zip her up from behind. She puts on the blouse by herself as I spread out on the double bed mattress, watching her through the oval vanity mirror as she struggles to push her spreading arms into the sleeves. "The jacket I'll carry in hand", she says, and I agree. Now to work on the makeup. The black line on her eyes she puts on her own, because she can't have someone else pointing the pencil into her eyes. She never puts it on properly, and most of the black is off. "Disgusting" I say to her , but she will not have any other way. "Now put on just a little color" she says. I take the Caroline eye shadow palette and think about what will look best with the clothes. We both agree on gentle green-turquoise. "Wipe your face properly" I say before I pat. Mother takes a cloth hankie, wipes off the shower drops that have blended with the sweat drops and

closes her eyes. We both know how unprofessional it all is. Starting from her underwear, her loose body and the colors we have put on her.

Every morning my mother exits the bedroom into the kitchen; that is her melting pot. It is a workshop that doesn't know any rest even when she is not in it. There she checks what is in the cupboards and her freezer. There she operates in a storm of screams and ear-ripping silence. There she decides whether to take me on a shopping trip to accumulate new stock of goods. And she has no shame. My mother has no shame in her body. She has no shame in anything. She has sucked up her confidence into every gram of fat in her body and left me with none. I cover myself in my mother's confidence, and don't expose even a piece of flesh of my body. I am my mother's leftover modesty, in our home and outside of it.

When we go out to the market to buy severed thighs and ripped turkey throats I flush and shrink "Meat not kosher, I'm not paying that price. Not fresh, I'm going to another," she shouts at the old peddler, shoving plucked chicken wings with both her hands into a plastic bag." Weight it for me and give me a good price, and take out the leftovers from the shoulder, without that hard fat, give me the soft one... on your life, Hayoun." My mother is friends with every peddler in the run-down market streets, she knows them by their first names but calls them by their surnames, and I feel how some of them could become among my worst enemies. From this smelly place she creates the most delicious dishes. She takes shortcuts in her route familiar only to her, from department to department, from ward to ward, from the meat man to the fish man, from the spice sacks to the soap and shampoo wholesalers, from the cucumbers to the canned meatloaf, from wax candles to dried lentils, from the hard toffee sweets to the fresh coriander leaves. Everything is dropped into a mix in the trolley I pull. When we stop for a rest we sit at the corner of a smelly falafel counter, chewing quietly a whole serving of tahini with fried eggplant, drinking warm grape soda and both focusing on tomorrow's endless worries. From there, following my mother's baskets, I drag the squeaky aluminum trolley in the direction of the bus stop. I can't hurry and my mother overtakes me. Her baskets sway ahead of me like pillars of fire that must not be lost, illuminating the darkness, swung too low to lead.

At the bus stop rules the silence of sweating oldsters, seated comfortably and resting from the market's bustle, staring into the harsh air, clinging to the dead time before the arrival of

the bus, enjoying the common meeting station. I too am a part of this partnership, recognizing tired old men and old women from previous times; they recognize me too and together we find not a hint of hope. We are empty of content, while still managing to carry full market trolleys. Only my mother is the odd one. With her big bottom she sits down on the thin wooden bench, shaking the bus station's foundations, erect and shiny from fat and sweat. When the bus arrives she immediately rises, clutching her baskets and calls at me," don't forget anything, hurry, hurry, the bus is here." "Don't yell" I rush behind her , pulling the trolley onto the bus steps, then stand next to the driver and watch my mother manage to sit in an empty seat through the square mirror above him. I can't stand by her side and there is no room to sit. My mother is still in her seat but shouts to me," come next to me, hold tight so you wont fall over in the curves." As we drive I hold the trolley close to me and watch it closely, my hand reddening. Halfway home I don't feel the effort and try to enjoy the hot wind piercing through the window .Every now and again I look at my mother through the mirror and she is quiet and polite, like a good girl. At the end of the trip we both hurry to get home. Each one has his load, bearing the pain, the heat, the weight, and the burden of hope of reaching our home. But there, where the bedroom and the jumbled kitchen are, there's no order. Mother does not despair about the mess; instead she starts to undress: dress, slip, corset, strewn everywhere. Then she retires to the kitchen to unpack the goods and I retire to my bedroom to rest. I always shut the door quietly and try to block out any noise coming from outside.

The rattle of the plastic bags, the fridge and freezer doors, the aluminum pots and their lids puts me to sleep, and it's those that wake me in the hot hours of the afternoon. Redness and sweaty heat are the byproducts of every summer, of every trip to the market with my mother, and every time that I need to leave my room for the slaughterhouse to quench my dry throat. That's when I feel that for the two of us there is no winter in the world, just heat, redness and light. "What is it? What happened? Are you dead, go stand in front of the vent, it's summer, it's summer, there's nothing to do about it," she says to me while I drink cold water out of the plastic bottle, looking at the washed coriander resting on the dish rack and drying alongside the glasses and the pots. In the days to come, the combinations of colors-- silver-chrome and fresh green--will be soothing, not harsh .Now I'm filled with anger, not understanding how she can get used to the heat, "I can't live like this, ok!", "Come on, sit

with me, I have prepared the stuffing for you to sew up." She accepts each situation and makes do with whatever comes and whoever comes into contact with her, in or outside the house, her body, the bothersome neighbors, the courtyard cats, the dictatorial mountain wind that carries with it dust and dried leaves .

Every month or two my mother prepares stuffing for the sweetbreads, which I sew up. After she gets three spleens we need to stuff and stitch them up .We both sit at the table, the three spleens are laid out on the chopping board, stuffed with meat, liver, white fat, lots of green leaves, red hot pepper, and the smell of spices. My mother takes out a needle, then another needle with a long thread, and I begin to sew carefully. I slowly stitch the vertical openings of the sweetbreads, stuffing the organs with my hands through the slit, then stitching them up immediately .As soon as the thread is finished she hands over the other needle, and threads the first .This way my sewing on the spleen is smooth, running continuous. At moments like these there are is no interference from outside. Even the heat stops bothering us. In these solemn working hours of the day everything is done quietly and efficiently, our hands humming. When the task is completed my hands are filthy from the leftovers, dried now under my nails. My mother, too, is filthy round her mouth, as is the top of her dress. Nothing bothers us. We look at the three stuffed spleens, stitched up, prepared, ready and complete. We lean back, each in our own chair. The calm doesn't last long. My mother gets up and says to herself, " We'll put one in the freezer. Let's peel the potatoes. We'll see when I'll put them in the oven".

I remain seated and try to forget whatever is taking place around me. Slowly, slowly, I recognize that there are no events, only recycling of different time spans, of months, weeks , hours and half-hours and, in between, of undefined moments. These are the times of the torn rags, the wide dresses, the old slippers, the tiny rooms, the colored plastic bags on the floor, of frozen meat defrosting in the kitchen drying up in the palms of my hands. All these are breathing, becoming worn thin for me, taking no part in what really takes place outside our house. And I am thirsty for events, sensing the present time be against me, contributing not a single moment to my hopes.

Now my mother is dead. It's blazing summer and today is her funeral .The mirrors are covered with sheets and I stand in front of the stretcher covered in dark fabric. On its top the letters R.I.P. are embroidered in white, making the shape of a rainbow. The middle letter is prominent, heaving atop her breasts. The remaining letters are slouching toward it, bent and irrelevant. My mother lies beneath the letters, bloated and bigger than ever. On the way I march in front of her and watch the old kadish undertakers, sweating and struggling to carry the heavy load. They take turns and I hear one of them say "Allah be merciful, she was a big woman she was, but heavy, heavy." I don't see around me the hands clutching colorful greenery to be placed on the pile of soil which will cover her. From behind me I hear both her younger sisters weeping loudly. I turn to them while walking and try to tell them to shut up. They both are big, smug , white, delicate and pink, smooth from shiny fat, wiping their tears in a shared white cotton hankie. They are far from being my mother. I want to bury her already, I want them to bury her for me, so I can return home and think about how to live today, how to defrost the chicken wings she bought for me at the market, then shoved forcefully into the freezer .
