

Bashert

Leo asked me to explain the term to him some time after we went in on the secluded mountain bungalow (I paid more than my half). Chaim had become the first of my friends to lay low with us in upstate Vermont and joked that he and I were “bashert”. I told Leo bashert means beloved, the person you were fated to, your Yiddish soulmate. What I did not tell him is that bashert is your beloved if love was ugly and mean. You were made for your match even if it irks you, fated to be together from the moment of your mutual existence and inextricably linked. New York, for instance, is my bashert; the place of my birth drags me back time and time again and even though it seems wrong we were matched. Time and again I leave for the country, respite from the rush of the city and reminders of my past life; time and again I return because I cannot let these poor men like me, leaving Crown Heights disowned and penniless, be swallowed up by her. Voluntarily or involuntarily, that is the order of this universe and I must lie in it.

That fetid scab of a city.

I sat on a bench in the Bronx one night. Aaron had tipped me off about a young man he'd heard about who had lost faith but was certain his father would kill him if he left home. I took the train in, I sat at the designated location with a flower pin on my lapel, and he never showed. I was crushed by the oppressive weight of experience—I would certainly never hear from him again. He would be cowed by family and friends or slit his wrists or both but he would never visit the bungalow.

It seemed as though every man who passed by was bundled, and bearded, and smelled of booze. It began to rain, and the rain didn't smell like the rain in Vermont. Its odor was not fresh, or like renewal. It awakened the stench of industrial rot, of oil and decaying food, of rats; nothing like the vegetal aromas of country rain. The rain didn't have the clear beauty of country rain either—it fell in big dark unilluminated drops that seemed to be burdened with the weight of

pollution before they even struck the ground, and then accumulated in putrid puddles and rivulets encumbered by the refuse and the sludge deposited by last month's snow. There was no grass for the precipitation to patter against, either, instead it inelegantly clattered on the pavement like so many discarded tin cans.

Just when my thoughts grew equally stormy and squalid and I considered leaving I saw a couple. Dark haired, light skinned. They huddled under an umbrella and prepared to part. She held his lapels elegantly in small hands and he looked down into her eyes. She wore a red slicker over some argyle-patterned coat and looked like a fairy or a demon against the dark façade of the building behind her. When the two kissed, they were perfectly framed by an archway, their lips meeting directly beneath the keystone. Then woman jogged lightly up the steps and unlocked the simple wooden door, man jogged heavily through the rain towards a bus stop, and the moment was washed away with the garbage of the urban masses.

I have often wondered why our most beautiful things come from the worst places.

Love may be the most intrinsically beautiful sight in man's eyes, for example, and it strikes me that ugly contexts serve only to enhance its beauty. Imagined against even the most horrid backdrop—that of war, or deadly feuds between families—even then it strikes us with its pure majesty. In fact, the horror of the context compels us to embrace this love still further. Perhaps it is something about the contrast. Perhaps horror highlights the fragility of this most basic of human emotions. Either way, I do not want to be a Romeo, but I want someone to love me like Juliet. Love me in the deathliness of the city and not the liveliness of Vermont. Love me like that woman in the red slicker holding the man with the umbrella by the lapels as the sky fell around them. To death.

There were two girls, blondes, outside of Aaron's apartment complex when I returned. They were standing in the lee of the building, shielded from the rain by its bulk, smoking and

chattering in some Eastern European dialect. I am certain I meant little to them but one had on a red parka with an ugly faux-fur ruff. I looked at her for a moment but she did not make eye contact and then I moved on into the building.

I used to believe in bashert. Honestly, I think that kept me “on the path” for far longer than belief in anything else—long after I lost faith in God and the prophets and the Talmud, I had faith that the universe was conspiring to bring me my beloved, someone soft and warm and bosomy and possibly dressed in red. It was like a shield, I was fated, my eye didn’t wander and I didn’t watch people kiss in doorways or stare at blondes because the perfect woman was being delivered to me in a brown package tied with string by someone or another, the shadchan or my parents or maybe even God. God knows. I left home because I became skeptical, but there is still part of me that believes with perfect faith that some lost girl from Brooklyn will wind up on my porch in Vermont craving nature and sunlight and me, perhaps with Elijah the prophet in tow.

When I reached to Aaron’s apartment, which was barren and frigid as an ice sheet, I removed my soaked shoes and pants and hung my coat on the handle of the bathroom door. I turned on the shower and washed my feet and my hair with the warm water that dribbled from the faucet. My host was nowhere to be seen so I laid down in a sleeping bag on the floor beside the futon.

When I awoke I found Aaron on that hard mattress beneath a black matted tangle of unkempt hair and beard. The smell of beer and urine overwhelmed me. He had an uncle who abused him and ran away from home at 15. That happens a lot in black hat Orthodox communities. They’re so worried about the outside world they want to take care of their own their own way, and pretend righteous men cannot do heinous deeds. I’d say all of the guys who stop by the bungalow have been traumatized in some way, and that helps them see some hypocrisy in the religious lifestyle. My father beat the shit out of me almost until I received my

s'micha, my ordination. I threw on the only dry clothing I had left, packed away my paltry things in my backpack, and evacuated the building hoping for fresh air and scenery.

My walk was dingy. The clouds looked exhausted in the sky. They seemed too tired to move in their steely grayness and crawled toward the horizon, having expended their energy in downpour the preceding evening. I felt the same, and sat on a park bench. The trees were barren. Dead leaves languished in pathways. Occasionally joggers, mostly big men with weights in their hands, passed me by. Some West Indian kids moved onto a blacktop and started to play basketball, shouting colorful curses in rich accents. I was watching their game, in which one team seemed to be obliterating the other due solely to the efforts of one child who was a full head taller than the rest, when I heard a voice call out.

"Teitelbaum!"

I turned towards the noise and saw a man of medium build, with a nearly bald head and leggings and a bright blue windbreaker, running up to me.

"Teitelbaum?" he repeated, voice betraying an insecurity that he had mistaken me by my seated profile.

"Yes," I assured him as he approached, "Yes, Moshe."

"I'm Michael now," he said sheepishly. "Didn't suit me."

"I don't judge." There was a moment's pause. Moshe cum Michael wiped his face with the back of a gloved hand. He was red with exertion and I recognized his pinprick searching black eyes as they made quick work of me, seeking and finding the reassurance that time had changed me little. It had been just over three years since he spent that month on my farm, hiding from his folks, anxiously discussing whether or not to shave his beard with me for long hours beside the woodstove. I could not help but notice that he did not even have a five o'clock shadow now, and seemed to hold himself more upright. "You look good," I finally responded.

“Thanks, exercise does wonders.” There was confidence in taking my compliment I had never seen in him before. His demeanor had changed. I had taken a number of young men to Vermont in the years between our meetings, but I had not seen any of them after they left my auspices. Phoned? Yes. Discreetly wired bail money? Regrettably. But never seen. I felt humbled at the confidence of the man before me.

“You really do. Will you walk with me?”

We only reunited for a few minutes. He invited me to dinner and I declined, explaining that my train would leave in the afternoon. My invitation to the farm was offered with less of an expectation of acceptance and was rebuffed as well. After pleasantries and professional inquiries he gave me his card and then continued on his run. I examined the simple little piece of cardstock.

Michael Leibovitz
Sales Associate

I ran my finger along its crisp top edge and then dropped it into my shirt pocket. I journeyed back to Aaron's place only to find him gone once again. I bought lunch in a sub shop near the train station and then sat, looking at the ugliness around me, chewing salty ham and cheese. Cement floors. The trash thrown by the rails. Men engrossed by private games or conversations, faces lit up by harsh cell phone light.

And then, of course, part of an Orthodox family. A mother with vivid chestnut hair, although her wrinkles incongruously led me to believe she had ought to have gone gray, and a teenaged girl in a red tichel with a floral pattern around the edge. The younger jabbered in an animated fashion, speaking with her hands as well as her mouth. She had a dark complexion, and there was something captivating about how much she wished to convey whatever she was saying to her grandmother, even though the older woman seemed not to be paying attention. That earnest way she spoke that reminded me of the last evening's thoughts and that, perhaps,

people are another example of beautiful things coming from the worst places. Then she caught me staring and flashed a smile in my direction. I looked away abashedly.

There was no Jewish girl waiting for me, in Crown Heights or the country. New York was my bashert, as shrewish a love as a man was ever fated to live out his days with. That day she became agunah, a chained woman, when my train pulled out of the station. Tomorrow I will be back to pick up some sad Yid hooked on smack or TV. That's how Jewish love works. We are chosen to have it out with one who will challenge us, and we can only pray she provides us with some daily beauty.

This city, ugly as it is, promises human loveliness. That is why she is fated to me.