

## THE A LINE

Miryam Sivan

Earlier, the pipe from the water tower on the roof burst and water began to fall. Now we're sitting around my dining table in the living room, drinking Champale and eating humus on melba toast. Two large ashtrays, one glass, the other black ceramic, are filled with cigarette butts.

"It's still raining in the kitchen." Sam takes his seat. He is holding another bottle of Champale. "Can't believe you don't have beer." He gives me a dirty look and pours the pink fizzy liquid into a wine glass. It spills over the top, slips down the stem, and forms a sparkling girdle around the base. He lays a napkin down and it fills slowly.

"Beer?" Marc asks. "Incredulous." He lights a cigarette from the dying one he holds between his thin shaky fingers. He looks at Sam. "Why mix a good beverage with an ordinary one? Learn Sam, to distinguish the fine from the extra fine, the plain from the mundane." Marc presses down the curling silver-pink corners of the empty bottle in the middle of the table.

"This Champale sucks." Sam snorts and drains his glass.

I get up and take the ashtrays into the kitchen. Marc and Sam flick their ashes into the empty bottle. As I walk past the bathroom, I hear the dreadful tap tap tap of water hitting the tiles that cracked open my sleep at 6 a.m. I enter the kitchen and walk carefully on the wet floor. I empty the ashtrays in the garbage and stare up at the ceiling. The slit in the plaster is now a canyon. The rough floorboards of Marc's apartment overhead are practically visible in the dark cut. If this keeps up there'll be an unobstructed hole between our kitchens.

I empty jars and pots and replace them under the heaviest streams. Water finds its way. Randomly. Like everything else in the universe. The jars and pots need to be emptied and moved every half hour. The room is damp and disheartening. My heart drops, fills with dread, and still I drape a damp kitchen towel over my head and go towards the bathroom to inspect the damage. Last I checked, it was even harder hit than the kitchen.

I open the door slowly and observe from the saddle. Plaster falls: multi-figured chips

and fine powder that mix with the rain of hot water twisting down from the ceiling and weave a pasty carpet on the pink tile floor. I move in and stand by the sink. Hot drops hit the towel covering my head and back and spread like patches of mentholyptus balm. A copy of *Watchtower* lies rippled on the hamper. The woman who rang my doorbell yesterday at nine in the morning said the answer to our futures was in the *Book of Revelations*. She counseled me that the end was near and that everyone, every last man, woman, and child, would soon be atoning for the sins of the world. The whiff of damnation would move them all. She was sure of that. And then, she paused, then would we all be saved.

I told her I didn't really care about the end of the world or being saved. Take the newspaper anyway, she pushed it at me. A gift. She would come by another time for a donation. She smiled. Please don't come back I smiled back and closed the door in her face, knowing she didn't hear me, didn't care what I said or wanted, that she would be back and wake me up again early on a Sunday morning. She was pushed to these deeds by the weight and urgency of her prophecies, her fears, her resolve, her view from the *Watchtower*.

I stare at the six-headed monster on the cover. His mouth is open and his large contorted body bobs on a rough sea. The swollen pages have made the sea rougher.

"Enough!" I say out loud and grasp hold of the old crazed sink. I stare at myself in the mirror and confront and console myself. "Didn't you just escape zealotry?" I yelp softly so Marc and Sam can't hear.

Didn't leaving Jerusalem this time feel like escape – from so much, including the damn noisy business of religion -minarets' amplified calls to prayer, church bells knelling, Sabbath sirens crashing down Friday afternoons? All this noise intensified my already unbearable heartache. I was a rejected soul, an open wound ricocheting off all that Jerusalem stone, and the last thing I now need is to be reminded of how I lost it all to what so many over here and over there self-assuredly name God.

I stare into my bloodshot eyes. No doubt if my Jehovah's Witness friend here in Manhattan could see the catastrophic flood in my house this morning, she would claim that she didn't ring my doorbell yesterday for no reason. Randomness is deception. Everything in the universe has a place and a plan. Or maybe she wouldn't be so smug. Maybe she'd be humble and fearful, eyes toward the ceiling, waiting for lightning bolts to emerge from behind the bank of clouds hovering near Riverside Drive. And maybe she's right. And

maybe if I see her and her band of Witnesses making their way door to door selling God's wares next Sunday, I'll tell her about the flood and how I survived. Assuming I survive.

Franky opens the bathroom door with his paw and tucks himself into the only dry spot by the entrance. He stares at me concealed under the towel and looks up toward the falling water. I toss the bloated magazine in the trash. I am seriously unsteady and sit on the edge of the tub. Two bottles of Champale between me, Marc, and Sam and it's only eight-thirty in the morning.

Two hours earlier at six-thirty, Marc, my upstairs neighbor, calls and asks if I know we are being invaded by an avalanche of water.

"Yes," I say. "I am preparing my counter-assault."

"What? What should we do?" he cries into the phone.

"Follow these simple instructions, Marc. Stay in bed, keep head covered with blanket, use pillow too if necessary, turn on side, return to sleep."

"You're not being helpful, dear Adele my belle." Marc's the building poet. And not just the building's. He belongs to the world and poetry circles, small as those are, acknowledge this. He is also twenty years my senior and often instructs me to remain vigilant. Against what I ask? The forces, of course. I, who move back and forth between the central world cities of New York and Jerusalem, should know very well what this means .... Okay I say. Okay just to stop the conversation. I don't want to know what he's referring to.

At seven Marc's down in my apartment calling the super. He's misplaced his cell phone and his landline is out. The first serious casualty of the flood. The super promptly responds with a call to the plumber. The plumber promises to try and make it by noon.

"Try? Noon? Noon's five hours away!" Marc yelps. "Our minds will be waterlogged by then." He paces up and down the narrow hall, wringing his hands. My own anxiety pushes forward, but I refuse it. I can't afford it. I'm leaking inside myself, drowning in indecision, New York, Jerusalem, work, ideals, homes, conflicts, men, yes, even that issue tearing me up, and I'm only twenty-five years old!

We stand by the entrance to my bathroom and watch the water stains spread darkly across the ceiling.

"There's absolutely no reason to worry, Marc."

"Fine, then let's ignore the destruction around us and drown it out with more liquid," he sings into the air as I lead him out of the bathroom to inspect the kitchen.

"You mean get drunk?" A trail of white paw prints decorate the floor. "An interesting proposal." I tighten the belt of my bathrobe, and pull together the lapels. "I'm not sure though."

"It's an excellent idea, Adele." Marc energized by the thought, marches into the kitchen. "Oh my." He stops when he sees the water cruising down from the ceiling. "Our bathrooms and kitchens have truly become what architects and builders call wet rooms."

"It's really not so bad, Marc. Just think. A bomb would level this building in seconds. Last war in Israel, I was with a friend in the Galilee, rockets sizzled, or was it whistled, overhead. You could hear them, feel them, *weeeeee* and then, bam. Air to hard matter. You hear, you feel the impact." I lead him towards the sink. We stand and stare up at the leprous ceiling.

"Thank you, Adele, for your graphic description and optimism. And thank you cosmos that a war has not cataclysmically overrun my life. Should I bow to the landlord and managing agent and sing their praises that I only have to contend with a ravaged ceiling in both kitchen and bathroom, not to mention severe water damage to all my dry goods – cause I have a cabinet over my sink whereas you don't? What about my health? My time? The anxiety of my kitties when they discover small eddies by their food bowls? These are precious commodities whose equity cannot be so easily translated into numbers."

We walk out of the kitchen and into the dry bedroom. "Do you think the plaster will hurt the cat?" I point to Franky lying on the bed, conscientiously trying to clean the white paste from his soft pads.

"What? Hurry, hurry! Don't let him lick anymore!" Marc runs into the bathroom, valiantly taking on the hot waterfall. He returns with a wet towel. As he rushes towards the bed, the cat jumps off, Marc in quick pursuit. The paw prints seem considerably fainter.

"Help me, Adele. Don't let the landlord endanger your precious kitty's life!"

I step in front of Franky, pick him up, and turn his corpulent body over in my arms. As I play with the soft beige fur of his belly, Marc carefully wipes each paw clean. Franky stares complacently into my eyes. He humors us. He lets us bother.

"There, all better." Marc stands back to admire the cat's unblemished pink pads.

"Thanks Marc," I say and return to my warm bed with the cat. I pull the blanket up to my chin. "Let yourself out, okay?" I cover my head with a pillow and don't wait for him to respond.

I close my eyes and hum. Anything to block out the tap tap tap of the leak. A few minutes later, someone's banging on my front door. I rouse myself. The plumber? Yes? Maybe? No, it's Sam from downstairs. Do I know I'm flooding his apartment? His slow speech and glossy eyes say it's been another long night of drugs and no sleep. I lead him into the kitchen and bathroom. His pale cheeks tighten.

"Just as bad in here. What the heck..." Sam rubs his face hard.

"Coming from the roof." I offer him all the information I have. "From the water tank. The plumber promises to be here by noon."

"Have any tea?"

When I come out of the kitchen, balancing a teacup and umbrella in one hand, holding my robe closed with the other, Sam is lying in my bed watching t.v.

"You don't mind," he states matter of factly and makes room for me.

"I put some sugar in it." I slide under the covers and in fact I don't mind. I hide my head against Sam's chest and his heart beat drowns out the menacing tap tap tap. I try and relax in the warmth of Sam's body when the doorbell rings. I want to ignore it but can't. Maybe it's the plumber? The super? Yes? Maybe? No, it's Marc and he's cradling three bottles of Champale. Reluctantly, I lead him into the bedroom. He insists the three of us sit around the dining table in the living room. This is no time for the bedroom.

Sam doesn't join us. He dislikes drinking. He prefers freebasing. On cocaine that he cuts himself, he insists. He does not smoke crack. Okay. Call it whatever but I can see he's been smoking a lot of it lately because he's so thin and pasty. Every night when I come home and walk down towards Riverside Drive, no matter what the hour, his lights are on. But so are Marc's. Fourth and sixth floor A line apartments. My place on the fifth floor is the dark filling between them. I was awakened at six this morning by the water. Marc and Sam were not; neither had gone to sleep.

"Marc, do you think we can afford to waste the morning?" I stare at the three bottles of cheap alcohol and wonder what these two men are doing in my living room at this early

hour.

"It's out of our control, Adele. I cannot write one word today. Thank the powers that be I got a draft of my new poem down last night. All I hear inside my brain now is tick, tick, tick. That ugly explosion. Powerfully intrusive."

"And this happens every year," I lament and think of my lovely Jerusalem apartment in Nachlaot. Old, but not as old as this building with its turn of the century plumbing. There I have a stone courtyard and a bench under a jasmine bush. I have metal casement windows and a toilet the size of a closet. A small closet.

"It's never happened like this, Adele." Marc starts to remove the shiny foil from the bottle top. "Never like this. This is a serious flood. It's even reaching the second floor. Those people have never known half the misfortunes that you and I have, higher up." He hands me the bottle.

"Yeah, I never get leaks." Sam comes into the living room. He hasn't turned off the t.v. A flute, playing the lively theme of a morning news show, dilutes the tap tap tap of the water.

"Maybe you never noticed." I open the cap roughly. It twists off and flies against the wall.

"I notice everything," Sam retorts. "I remember everything. Like the way you look when you can't figure out a word in the crossword puzzle. And I can. Or the way you look when you sleep."

I color slightly. Sam used to sleep with me, but that was months ago, soon after I came back from Jerusalem. It began late one night – one morning for him – when he lost his keys after who knows what – I begged to be spared the details – and came to my apartment to sleep it off. Then he came by more and more frequently. I liked sleeping with him. He was warm and soft and we folded into each other's bodies comfortably. Then one night I initiated sex. I didn't know cocaine addicts couldn't get hard. He was embarrassed and cross and told me to stop pressuring him to be a boyfriend. Boyfriend? He came over a few more times after that, but it was never the same. And I carried a peculiar mood from then too: resentment that he put me out, that he took advantage of my concern, hospitality, even my pity.

Charitably, Marc ignores the exchange and holds up the open bottle. "The glasses,

Adele? I know where your kitchen is, mine being directly above yours of course, but I cannot bear to face the water again. Blindness right now, and a touch of deafness, would be a welcome reprieve."

I take two bottles into the kitchen to refrigerate them as Marc instructs. I return with three wine glasses and two large ashtrays, one glass, the other black ceramic. Marc lights a second cigarette from the stub of the first. Sam searches his pockets for his pack. Marc offers him one of his. Thin, jittery fingers on all four of their hands.

"Can't smoke that kind," Sam mumbles.

"But they're good. Adele?" Marc offers me one which I also light off the stub of his first.

After we finish the bottle, I ferret out the few food items I have in the refrigerator and pantry. Neither Sam nor Marc offer to contribute. Sam, because his fridge is as cavernous as mine. And Marc probably considers his contribution ample enough: the Champale and the idea for a party.

"I wonder if Augusto, our friendly neighborhood plumber, will really get here by noon, or if this flood's an all-day affair." Marc throws back some more pink alcohol.

"Shit," Sam spits out. He's concerned that the super, along with the plumber, and possibly even the managing agent, will have to enter his apartment. It is filthy and drug paraphernalia honorably litters the center of his bedroom.

Marc is also concerned that this trio will march through his place. He has nothing to hide, except himself. He is reclusive and other people in his home affect him negatively for days. Over the four years I've been going back and forth between here and Jerusalem, I've learned not to suggest conversing in person when he calls me on the phone. He enjoys the physical distance. Not necessarily because he happens to be above me, oh no, I shouldn't get the wrong idea he reassures me, he's not into superficial hierarchies. But he finds the division of space – the plaster, concrete, wood flooring, ceiling beams – interesting. And stimulating. And safe I add to myself. Marc is afraid of many things. Of me too, apparently.

The Champale is beginning to take the edge off my end of the world sensitivity. Actually I'm glad they're here, and prayers continue to rise up involuntarily from my gut: hail the cessation of falling water. But until answered, there's only escape. Sometime in between the finishing of the first and the opening of the second bottle, I suggest to Marc and

Sam that we go out for breakfast. Let the walls come tumbling down. Give the super our keys, flee the neighborhood. The men unanimously cast a veto.

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"Great, the ashtrays," Marc says when I return to the living room. I place one down in front of him. The room is compacted with smoke but they will not allow me to open a window. Too cold, they say. I pour myself another glass of Champale and go into the bedroom. I need to lie down. I am exhausted from fighting the anxiety: will the ceiling collapse, are the electrical wires wet, will the tiles come undone? Will I? I turn on the television and start watching *The Black Stallion*. Sam comes into the bedroom.

"Don't watch now," he says softly. "Later. Watch later."

I keep my eyes on the screen. I love the soundtrack. Sam picks up the remote control device.

"C'mon. Marc's in there alone. I'll bring up a little something later and we'll watch."

"I don't want a little something. I want to watch the movie now!" I snap. "You keep him company. This little fete wasn't my idea." I turn towards the wall.

Sam touches my head. "I can't anymore," he whispers into my hair. "Marc's electrified. Talking about world destruction."

I sit up quickly and spill Champale on the down comforter. "Clean that for me?"

Marc's thin unshaven face is flushed with the rush of inspired thoughts. I look at this writer of verse, tottering through middle age like Swiss cheese, he once told me, and suddenly I want to protect him from the holes.

"What's this about world destruction? Marc, don't get started. It's bad enough in here." I sit down across from him and accept a cigarette from the pack he holds out.

"Adele, I'm merely building on the illustration you suggested: a war diminishing the magnitude of our apartments' current destructive force. It's actually a very astute parallel. You're right. What is occurring here is nothing, mere drops of water in the bucket, excuse the awful but irresistible pun, compared to what would happen if a nuclear bomb, or even limited nuclear warfare, or even a conventional bomb, were to hit New York."

"There's a bomb shelter sign on the second floor," I say.

"It's a crummy little shit hole in the basement." Sam sits down again. "In the middle of a war, I'll be drinking Champagne and doing the finest powder in the city. Want some now?"

"Want what?" Marc laughs, and then he understands. "I don't do drugs. Generational lag."

"What better time to learn. It'll come easy. I learned pretty fast at the ripe old age of thirty," Sam says. "I'm serious, man. You interested, later, when the plumber's done, we can hang and..."

"No, no, Sam. Please, let old men be old men." Marc crushes his cigarette in the ashtray and fishes for another in a nearly empty pack.

Sam takes my hand and begins to caress it slowly. I don't know what he's up to. We've been avoiding each other for weeks. When I see him roller skating down Broadway to his high end computer something or other job, we say nothing to each other. And if we're alone in the elevator, we speak as little as possible. Usually about the cats. There is no animosity. Only disinterest. We tried to be friends once. But since I stopped letting him use my bed as a crash pad, and my electricity when Con Ed turned his off, and especially when I turned away from his drugs, we realized there wasn't enough between us even for a casual friendship. I have nothing to say to him and he has nothing to share with me.

So I don't understand this sudden affection. And Marc watches like a cat. He probably thinks Sam and I are lovers. He found us lying in bed this morning. And now this. I try to pull my hand away. It is getting hot and clammy but Sam won't let go.

"I'll pour for you, Adele." Sam holds my hand tighter.

"Marc, do you know why Sam insists on holding my hand?" I shift my body and show the strain it's under.

"No, why?" Marc lights another cigarette.

"Don't know. Thought you might."

That works. Sam lets go. "Damn. I was just holding it."

I walk towards the closed window. I'm dying for air, for space, for silence, for a blue sky, yellow sun, stone pathways, for my other home across the world which at this moment feels like a sturdier ark.

"Adele, please don't open the window! It's too cold out there." Marc points to 'out

there' with his cigarette.

"I'm suffocating in here."

Sam lights another cigarette. "Go ahead. Flaunt your power. We can always shift forces to my house, right Marc?" Sam puts the cigarette in the ashtray and lights another. He puts that one in the ashtray and lights another. I open the window wide. Cold air rushes through. Bands of smoke dip and rise.

"C'mon, Adele." Marc lifts the last Champale bottle. "Just a little more to go."

"I don't want anymore. I'm going to bed."

"But this is supposed to be a celebration. An alternative response to chaos and disaster." Marc points to the accoutrements on the table.

"Please, don't stop on my account."

I go into the bedroom and slide under the comforter. Sam did not wipe up the spill. I put my head under the blanket and try not to hear them talking in the next room. I am not up to this role: the one they come to for information and sympathy. I fall asleep for a few minutes. The front door closes loudly and I wake briefly enough to hear the ugly tap tap tap. I pull the pillow down hard over my ears. Before I can relax and fall into a deeper sleep, I hear someone in the room. Sam lies down beside me.

"Let me stay, Adele." He puts an arm around me.

I am too drained to resist. "Just don't talk." I turn and feel him stretch the cover over himself. I move into the pocket of his long body, feeling soft waves of sleep close around me. I feel Sam staring at me and open my eyes briefly to see that I'm right.

"Sleep," I insist.

"That's like telling a cat to run into the ocean," he whispers hoarsely.

I wonder if he's crying but won't open my eyes another time to find out. All I hear is water falling in the bathroom and kitchen. It is louder than before and I know I should empty and rearrange the jars and pots. I turn and burrow more deeply into Sam's warmth. I drift.

The doorbell rings. I begin to tremble. The super's arrived with the plumber and the managing agent in tow. Come to assess the damage. I want them here. I want to stay in bed. It is only nine-thirty in the morning.

I lift myself from the bed slowly and close the bedroom door behind me so the parade of men will not see Sam. When I open the front door, reconciled and ready for the

rescue team, I am shocked. Marc stands there with a bottle of red wine and some cake. He holds them up in front of him like a second grader holding up his spelling bee prize.

"The party's not over." His grin breaks me.

I walk away quickly, assuming he'll either follow, or get my message and walk back up the stairs to his apartment. I enter the living room. Sam is already seated at the table. The ashtrays are empty. The glasses are clean.

"Marc coming in?" His calm voice suggests he might have been a reasonable person once.

I do not answer. I go into the bedroom, close the door, and push the bureau in front of it. I trip over the telephone and fall into bed. It rings. The super wants me to tell Marc and Sam that the plumber will be in the building within the hour. They do not need to be home. All the work will be done on the roof. I want to ask how he knows they are in my apartment but am not strong enough to hear the answer.

I close the receiver and put the pillow and blanket over my head. As I think of my last trip to the Red Sea , a technique that helps me blot out the world and fall asleep, I hear a hand tapping.

"Adele," Marc calls softly through the bedroom door. "Do you have a corkscrew?"

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