

If You Could Imagine How Many Times

by Moshe Dann (August 2014)

“You were always telling me what to do,” Grace wanted to tell her Ex when she saw him down the aisle at the supermarket, looking at the shelf of condiments, his belly resting on the orange handle of a half filled cart, his balding head sparkling under the neon lights. “I wonder what he’s looking for?” she squinted, moving behind the shelf of oils next to the jams and jellies that tempted her. She wondered what else he intended to buy, remembering shopping together when they were still married and she still trusted him, before Diane came along, three years ago, and others Grace didn’t know about, his insurance office buzzing with clients and secretaries, busybusybusy.

“Why had he taken time off in the middle of the day to shop?” she might have asked him if they were still married. Was he planning to entertain friends, potential clients? Her cart contained only two containers of cottage cheese and a four-pack of yogurt. The fruit and vegetable stands were on the other side of the store; she could get there without being spotted by going down the soap and cleaning products aisle, bagging what she needed and getting to the check-out counter before he decided what he wanted. Peeking around the corner, obscured by packages of spaghetti, she noticed JoAnne, her neighbor, a mouth as big as her behind, in red leotards, checking prices on detergents. Maybe there was a sale, but that would have to wait for another time. The crackers and cookies aisle looked like a safer bet.

The supermarket was suddenly becoming more complicated, a maze of alternating obstacles and openings, balancing conflicts, an intricate web in which she could become trapped. She thought about postponing the rest of her needs and getting out as fast as possible, but lines were already forming at two of the cashiers. Three registers were empty; she cursed the management for not hiring more people. Henry, the guard, in his usual light blue shirt and dark blue pants, leaned against the partition where the manager sat. He seemed tired, his white hair neatly trimmed, trying to make conversation with one of the young women inside. She admired his resourcefulness and perseverance.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed her Ex moving slowly up the aisle in her direction. He stopped midway by the pickles; indecisive about the hot pepper mix. She pushed her cart quickly toward the canned goods. Tuna on sale again was tempting. At the pace, as though

jaywalking into traffic, she could still make it to the produce section, and get to the exit before he finished. Colorful piles of red tomatoes, dark green cucumbers, oranges and grapefruits sparkled in the distance. She could grab a few apples, assorted reds and greens, sweet and sour, like life.

There was, however, the possibility that it really didn't matter what she did, or didn't do, with or without intention and careful planning, the bravado of unconcern. He could suddenly make for the produce section, just as she was choosing the best tomatoes, see her and sneer, "No, no; too ripe," or, "Not ripe enough." It seemed a rule of life, her life especially, that no matter what she did, despite her efforts to please, nothing was good enough. She got that just as she passed the peanut butter. She liked peanut butter, especially with jam in a sandwich. It reminded her of childhood, of a kind of freedom that she longed for, like falling into a deeply cushioned chair, a place with few expectations.

She noticed Carlos, the produce manager heading towards huge steel grey flaps that hung over the opening which led into the storage area. Carrying two empty crates, his red-checked shirt flaring, he disappeared into semi-darkness. She could duck into that area if needed, pretending to look for Carlos, asking for pineapples, or some exotic fruits that she knew would not be available, or ordered, even if she would ask. To ask is to want, that is the problem, and then, there was always JoAnne, who would seek her out like a hungry shark. Diane was probably waiting for her Ex at home.

Home, Grace thought, a cozy apartment in a new fancy building, not the suburban house where she lived, where they had lived, with their children, a boy and a girl, a dog, cats and rooms full of things she didn't even know about. The kids were no longer kids. They were teenagers, a sub-category of human beings, closer to animals and birds, always moving, always eating, and forever unsatisfied, always complaining, like her Ex. But it was summer vacation, and she didn't know where they were, or when they would return, and with whom, which was why she left a light on, always, to let them know, to let the whole world know, including her Ex, that she was home.

Suddenly Carlos emerged from his inner sanctum carrying a box of broccoli, his dark face shining triumphantly as if he had won the lottery. Focused on an empty place between the peppers and radishes, he didn't notice her moving towards him. Aisles and displays arranged to trap innocent shoppers, a labyrinth without recognition, no place to hide.

When she checked the aisle again, her Ex was gone. He must have cut through the break in the middle. Where was he headed? The meat section? He liked meat, thick and juicy, tasting of

blood; she preferred salads. Such differences swirled between them, like dust storms, and the terrible finiteness of everything, like his impatience and demands, the threat of his rage and desire.

He could circle around and pass the frozen fish. She decided not to take a chance and looked around the mops and brushes into the next aisle. Empty! She breathed, feeling a surge of excitement and danger. Suddenly she saw his back at the soft drinks. He would no doubt take a case. Sugar was a poison, an addiction and she had steadfastly refused to participate in his indulgences. She watched him hesitate before the diet drinks, wavering; he might buy a bottle for Diane. Slim Diane with her wide smile and pointy breasts; Diane with her pony tail and sexy dresses. Grace knew when she saw her apply for a secretarial job at the office that there would be trouble. But there was nothing she could do. She saw her Ex's eyes light up when Diane was around; she went home to take care of the kids. Home.

Carlos saw her, waved extravagantly and smiled. Comforted, she smiled in return, but did not wave and pushed her shopping cart forward, glancing quickly around, suddenly bursting with hunger, watchful as she passed the instant soups, full of salt and chemicals, an easy fix. If her Ex appeared, she could detour quickly towards the rice and lentils. And, although Carlos was an attraction, he was also a distraction. Drawn towards the sweet fragrances of fruits and vegetables, she felt the need to risk. Carlos wiped his hands on his red-stripped apron and smiled again, a gold tooth glistening, babbling about the peaches that had newly arrived. He held one up and offered it to her.

"Taste," he said, like Eve to Adam, she thought. "Taste," he repeated, oblivious of the danger of sudden passions. She imagined making love to him between piles of boxes in the back. She blushed and looked around. Other shoppers filled carts and spaces around her, like a pool of fish swarming for food. She tasted, and it was good, warnings disregarded. But the price was high; she took only a few and moved quickly to the cukes and tomatoes, then added a lettuce, breathing the aroma of Life, parsley and dill. She needed to be careful; her resistance was down. She bagged some apples as Carlos went back to the broccoli display. Such green and purple, she thought, a contrast to the dull hues of potatoes and onions.

Suddenly she heard her name, from the aisle of sweets. She trembled, afraid to look in his direction, his familiar voice resonating with memories, pushing his cart towards her. And then, there he was, smiling, "Hi," as if an old friend, which they had once been but were no longer, his voice charming, seductive, testing for holes in her defenses, vulnerabilities which she had carefully hidden. "Hi, so nice to see you, wanted to talk; how are you?" She tried not to look at his eyes, but pulled by habit, a rush inside, memories flooding through

her, overwhelmed, she gave in.

"Oh," she tried to seem startled, "it's you."

"I wanted to tell you that I think of you, no, not that I want to start up with you, but just thinking about us, what happened, my need to be loved and taken care of, you know, what I was needing from you, and now that I have some perspective ..." he looked towards the paper towels and tissues. "Perspective," he repeated again slowly, deliberately. "I thought we should try to be friends, for the kids' sake, let the war be over."

She stared at him, his words, icing on cake with no cake, smelling his cologne that she remembered. Gripping the plastic bar of her shopping cart, she ran her fingers along the letters, trying to decide what to do, as if the floor trembled. Carlos was arranging bell peppers; JoAnn-in-leotard appeared near the cauliflower, all ears.

"Well," she began, finally, "I don't know," anvils of memory tied to her feet as she tried to swim, things she had come to accept about him, and others, not. A decent father, she conceded, but not her companion, at least not always, and not the one she could trust.

"I needed you," he leaned against his shopping cart, their bodies separated by metal baskets on wheels filled with things they needed to survive. "I wanted to explain," he seemed suddenly like a child, lost, trying to explain who he was, and where he was going, not the man that was her Ex, who confused her with his demands, his needs that made her feel used and useless, unusable.

And then, suddenly, the zinger, a spasm of affection reminding her of his calm self-assurance, her feeling overwhelmed when they had fallen in love, his charming certainty that drew her to him, her need for security and home, unraveling into excuses, a voyage with no destination.

"By the way," he began softly, seductively, "do you have a policy? I mean, protection, in case, ah, something happens."

Something happened. Something always happens. She wanted to run.

"And Labor Day weekend we're going to be out on the Island. A client offered me his huge house. He's going to Europe for the week. I'll invite the kids, of course, and it would be great if you could come too. Any time. There's plenty of room for everyone."

Perhaps, if nothing happens. She pushed her cart towards the check out counters. *Cream cheese,*

she remembered. *The ocean; I could get swept away and drown.*

Moshe Dann is a writer and journalist living in Jerusalem. His next book,