

Customs

Abigail felt her body sway in unison with the movement of the train. She tightened her arm around the baby and adjusted her sari over the child as it suckled at her breast. The rocking movement seemed to calm the baby although Abigail's toddler son did not like it. He stood on the wooden bench beside her brother-in-law, who tried to entertain him with particulars from the scenery as it fled past the window. Barukh was accompanying his brother's family on the journey home to Jwalanagar. Abigail's husband had died ten days earlier so now the little family was returning to the home of the paternal extended family.

Abigail did not wish to return but she had no choice. Since she had moved in with her husband's family for a few months after her wedding, she knew what awaited her there.

Barukh had married six months before she and Asher had married so Rebecca, his wife, was the other outsider in the family. Abigail was lucky that her husband had a job far from home. He worked for Indian Railways and was stationed in Karachi. He rented a small two room house in the city so Abigail escaped the duties of a daughter-in-law in a large family. Rebecca stayed a year longer. When Asher heard of a 'job opening' with the Customs in the port, he applied for the position on his elder brother's behalf. Barukh arrived for the interviews and was given the job. At the time of Asher's death he and Rebecca were the only family Abigail had in the city.

Abigail looked at her brother-in-law. He had always been a friend to her. He had taken care of the funeral and made all the arrangements. Rebecca was different. She seemed to resent Abigail's ability to make friends easily. The women from the neighbourhood, who came to help during the shiva, all fell silent when Rebecca was around. To make matters worse Abigail had two children and Rebecca had none.

Abigail closed her eyes. The backdrop of her eyelids allowed her to relive scenes from the past ten days without interruption from the world around her. She remembered the day three men had knocked on her door. She thought it strange that she did not remember their names, only what they wore. One was dressed in a dhoti, shirt and waistcoat. He had a tilak of sandalwood paste on his forehead with grains of rice still stuck in it from his morning puja or prayers. The second wore tight churidar pyjamas, a long sherwani coat and a round hat of the Muslims. The third was in western clothes. In her mind she once again lived through the time the news was broken

to her. "Behnji, sister, we have bad news. Mr. Asher Samson was working in the railway yard and there was more than the usual noise of shunted wagons, moving trains and the whistles of engines. The army men were unloading two trains with their supplies, so there were more trucks and raised voices. Mr. Samson, without looking, stepped in front of an oncoming engine."

Abigail had asked to see the body but the man in western clothes had said, "I would advise against it. There is not much left. Your husband's brother has been asked to identify the body. We will give it to you in a sealed coffin. Try and remember him as he was." He gave her Asher's wristwatch and wedding ring. She had looked uncomprehendingly at the objects in her hand. "Keep them for the boy" he had said.

The train seemed to speed away from a happy past to an uncertain future. Abigail had been unable to weep. She tried to remember the warmth of her young husband's body as he slept beside her, curled up like a baby. He always gave her a light kiss when she brought him his morning tea while he was still in bed. She would have to sleep alone for the rest of her life.

She would have no one to talk to at the end of the day or the beginning of a new one. Abigail tried to think positive thoughts. She was not completely alone because she had two children. The children were her hope for the future.

The baby stopped sucking. Abigail adjusted her breast and inner clothes before she lifted her sari and removed her daughter to burp her against her shoulder.

"How old are you?" Barukh asked after the baby had burped and brought up some milk on the little towel Abigail had placed on her shoulder.

"I completed nineteen three months ago" she replied.

"Ah, yes. You married at sixteen. You are so young. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Your parents will not allow me to go out and work. I am not properly educated. Who will give me a decent job without at least a matriculation certificate? I do not want to live on the charity of my father-in-law or brothers-in-law. My children will be the orphans the family is taking care of. So far they are the only grandchildren but there are six brothers who will marry and have children of their own. A time will come when they will resent feeding, clothing and educating



Photo credit: Allison Heiliczer

my children. Asher is dead but I cannot die. I have his children to care for."

"Abby, I am going to say something that I will never say again. Go back to your parents' home."

"They will not let me come back. I belong to your family now. Your parents are my parents. An Indian girl never returns to her first family no matter how bad things become in her husband's home" Abigail explained.

"These are only customs that are cruel to women and favourable to men. In our home you will be a slave in the kitchen and laundry room. My mother is still having babies. Penny is one year old and mother can have more. I know what my brothers and sisters are capable of. In a society where men and women do not mix very much a young and pretty girl is not safe if she has nobody to protect her. I have eyes and I see things. If you complain to my mother she will blame you, not her son. She'll find fault with your behaviour or your clothes. That is, if she believes you in the first place. Listen to

my advice as an elder brother and leave."

"How? My parents will not want me back. They will not care for a daughter and her children. I will be a charity case in their house too. I am a Samson now. Where can I go if I leave your home? How will I feed my children?"

"I have an idea," Barukh said. "Asher had a life insurance policy and has named you as his beneficiary. I made him open it. The Railways will also give some compensation. I will collect it all and bring it to you when I come home on leave next year. Asher gave me the authority to deal with his affairs in his absence. What ever you do, don't give this money to the family. There are enough brothers to help there. Take it and move out. Buy into some small business, open a shop, do something that will help your children. Asher has done what he could for the family. Now he is not here to take care of you or his babies. You have to do it for him."

"We have our customs and traditions. What will people say?" Abigail asked.

"Damn the people. Everybody will have something to say no matter what you do. Nobody will come to suffer for you or your children. Forget the customs. They are made by man and can be broken by man."

Abigail was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, "Asher and I had our first argument the day he died. I told him that I would stop bringing him his cup of tea in bed. I was only joking but he took it seriously. He said many unkind things but when I started to cry he was sorry and we made up before he left for work. I loved him very much. I don't know why I teased him that morning. I never wanted to make him feel that he was unimportant to me."

"Married people quarrel over the silliest things," Barukh said, "but whatever you do, don't tell the others that you had quarreled on your last day together. The next thing you know, people will say that he was thinking of you and that is why he did not hear the engine. You will get all the blame."

Abigail realized the truth on this statement. They did not talk much during the rest of the journey. There was a three hour wait at a railway junction, whose name Abigail forgot. The luggage had been taken off the train but the waiting rooms were too crowded to accommodate them or their bags and boxes. Somebody had to sit with it to make sure that nothing was stolen. Barukh took Jonathan to the toilet immediately because the child had been afraid to use the one on the train. Barukh washed himself and the child at a tap before he bought lunch. He then came back to take his turn with their luggage and sent her to wash and eat.

Abigail left the baby asleep with her brother-in-law and made her way towards the restaurant. An old man stopped her. "Listen to me my daughter" he said. "There are troubles ahead of you but you will find a measure of happiness some day. Listen to what your jeth, your elder brother-in-law is saying." Abigail was surprised. She thought that perhaps, this man dressed as a sadhu, a Hindu holy man, in saffron coloured clothes and beads, had been on the train with them and had heard what Barukh had said. He probably wanted money and was pretending to be a fortune teller. She opened her purse but he stopped her. "Hear what I have to say. There is no bigger incentive than money to convince people to break customs and traditions. Use your money to rent a house for both you and your son. A shop at the crossroads, the one where there is a large neem tree and a public park, will be on sale next year. Do not worry. Things will work out in spite of losses you still have to bear."

"What do you mean?" Abigail asked.

"I speak about your daughter my child. The only reason I have spoken to you is to give you strength, to ask you not to lose faith after your recent loss and more trouble to come. Go and have something to eat now." He joined his palms together and said "Pranam." Abigail wished him with the same gesture and word. She then watched him disappear into the crowd on the platform.

Abigail followed the sadhu's advice and got something to eat. She could not bear to waste time in a restaurant so she bought some puris and spiced vegetables from a vendor and ate it in a relatively quiet area of the platform. She then drank some water from a tap and went back to her family. The baby slept peacefully in Barukh's arms. Abigail was angry with herself for letting the words of a starving beggar, who would probably say anything to get a piece of bread, upset her so much. She took Jonathan for a walk along the platform so that Barukh could have some rest from the restless boy.

They waited for the train that stopped at Jwalanagar. This train came all the way from Delhi, so by the time they got on board it was already very crowded. Barukh managed to get two seats and they sat squashed between the other passengers. It was many hours later that Abigail got enough place to curl up with her baby beside her. Even in this cramped position she managed to sleep since she was very tired. Barukh nodded in a sitting position while Jonathan slept on his lap.

When Abigail awoke she sensed that something was wrong. She checked her luggage. The locks were in tact. Barukh had found place enough to curl up on the bench and Jonathan was asleep beside him. There were fewer passengers than before. They must be nearing Jwalanagar.

The first faint streaks of pink and blue were visible in the dark sky. She remembered the strange words of the sadhu she had met the day before.

She broke into a cold sweat as fear constricted her chest and made it difficult for her to breathe. In the faint light from the single overhead lamp she looked at her baby daughter. The child's eyes were fixed and open. She picked her up and suppressed the scream that rose to her throat. The child was cold. She felt for a pulse but could not find it. She held the baby's face against her cheek. There was no breath. Her hand upon the chest felt no heart beat. Slowly she placed her hand on the baby's face and closed the eyes. She knew

that the other passengers would not travel with a corpse. The Hindus would consider it a loss of caste. The Railway authorities would make them get off the train and bury the child. Abigail had to pretend that everything was fine. She folded one leg upon the bench and placed the baby upon her lap. She patted the shoulder rhythmically as though she were trying to put the child to sleep.

When Barukh awoke he looked at her and asked in Marathi, "Kai zhala? What has happened?"

"I don't know when it happened," she answered in the same language, "but the baby is dead. She had no fever and she nursed well. I changed her diaper not more than two hours ago. Don't look at her now. I don't want the others to know."

"We have four hours more before we reach Jwalanagar. Just keep up the pretence" he said.

Abigail held her dead baby on her lap for four hours. When they arrived at Jwalanagar, she held the baby's face against her shoulder all the way from the platform to the tonga. In the tonga she placed the baby in the crook of her arm with the face turned towards her breast.

Asher's parents came out on to the verandah as the tonga drew up. Two of his brothers lifted out the luggage and took it into the house. His father picked up Jonathan and kissed him. His mother came towards Abigail with her arms outstretched for the baby. Abigail took a step backwards.

"Why can't you give me my granddaughter? I've never seen her. Come on, give her to me." It was more of a command than a request.

"The baby is dead" Barukh said in a soft but clear voice.

The grandmother dropped her arms. Everybody stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Abigail. Abigail went into the house and according to custom placed the corpse not on the bed but on the floor. She opened her steel trunk and took out clean clothes and a towel. She needed to remove the coal dust, smoke and other dirt collected during the journey from off her person. Before she entered the bathroom she heard one of Asher's sisters say, "Lazy, sleepy woman. She rolled over the baby in her sleep and smothered it. Look she has left the body for us to wash."

"So it has started already" Abigail thought. "There was no place to stretch or turn leave alone roll. I hope that the girl who said this never travels anything but third class like I did



Photo credit: Allison Heiliczer

with my children just because all our money went into the purchase of this house." She suppressed her anger and said in a meek voice, "I cannot bathe her while I am dirty myself. Do not worry Sister, I will wash my baby myself. You just ask the boys to inform the Jewish community and to make the funeral arrangements."

She had shown humility and the proper amount of dependence that was expected. "Custom," Abigail thought. "Brother Barukh is right. Some customs need to be broken. A person has to be financially independent in order to break them. Once I can leave, I will." ✡

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, *Dropped from Heaven*, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.