

Session 2, Monday, December 6  
Reading

*The Veil, by FRADEL SHTOCK*

The veil and the myrtle were brought to them at home. Manya got a bowl of water and put the myrtle in.

Beyle, Tsirel's daughter, was getting married today. Her family thought it a miracle when she had gotten engaged some four weeks back. Beyle was an older girl. No one had expected her to get married.

"True, he's not a young man, but he's got a shop with quality merchandise," explained Zlate, Manya's mother.

Manya was not really pleased. She knew she wouldn't be going to the wedding even though they were relatives. Ever since their father, Yitskhok, had left Zlate an abandoned wife she wouldn't let the children hold their heads up in public. They never went to weddings. They were never allowed to hear the musicians playing except from a distance. Manya loved the music. More than once she would sneak downstairs at night and open the window, listening for the musicians as they roamed the town, gradually getting further and further away; as they played some sad piece that drifted in through the window, leaving people unable sleep for the rest of the night; as they sent hearts into such distress and confusion about what they wanted.

Manya had a sweet face. Her heart was always aflutter. Why did it flutter?

Sometimes it was the ringing of the scythes on a summer's eve, or a handsome peasant atop a hay wagon, or a song of grief coming through a window at night. She always wanted to attend a wedding, and always her mother would not let her go. Where *did* she let her go? Well, it wasn't to the circus when it came to town. She had to sit at home helping her mother mend other people's laundry.

As a result she never learned how to behave among people. On the Sabbath fête before the wedding she wanted to take a second helping of *flodn* cake, so it was good her mother

stepped on her foot to stop her.

Sunday morning Tsirel herself came over and burst into tears, begging Zlate that at the very least she should let Manya come to the wedding. They had no one to be the garland maid. Zlate's face had a strange look as she considered it and then said, "We'll see." When the children heard that "we'll see" they started pleading with her. Their neighbor Pessi and her daughter Leyetsi also started pleading. Tsirel wiped her eyes. But Manya kept quiet. She was the eldest and she understood very well, though her heart was aflutter and her face had gone pale. Zlate took a look at Manya and said, "Go iron that white dress of yours, garland maid."

So the veil and the myrtle were brought to them. The house was turned topsy turvy. Leyetsi came over and hugged Manya, telling her that that new flutist would be playing at the wedding. Who was the new flutist? A student, studying in Vienna. He had gotten in a row with his father and gone off to some city abroad and become a musician, just to spite his father. Oh, how he played!

Manya leaned over the water bowl and smelled the myrtle. The small green twigs had swollen in the water and filled the house with a fragrance redolent of a bride, a white veil, preserves, and a wedding canopy.

Rosa, the hairdresser, arrived to arrange the garland. She took some grey thread and braided the branches, winding them around Manya's head and connecting them at her

forehead to look like a crown. Then she took the white veil out of a box and shook it out. The room filled with the veil and set Manya's heart to fluttering — *so much veil...*

She stood there motionless out of respect for its whiteness and delicacy. She then urged the neighbors who had arrived into the corners of the room. She trembled at the way Rosa had shaken the veil out across the entire room.

“Rosa, the veil will get dirty. Spread something out underneath it.”

“What should I use?”

“My white dress.”

“You're crazy!”

Later, the veil lay spread out with the green garland dripping water onto the veil's white crown.

And Manya's heart fluttered at the veil, that it could cover an entire room, and it was so... *ahhhhh...*

“*Ahhhhh...*”

When it was time for her to bring the veil to the bride she carried it like a breath of air that might dissolve at any moment, fading into nothingness. And when as a garland maid she put the garland on the bride she lowered her head so that the water from the myrtle might run off onto her own head.

The musicians were playing at the bride's house. Dressed in white, Manya stood by a lamp that reddened her face. She avoided looking at the new flutist, but she held her head so that she could see whether he was looking at her.

She heard nothing but his flute. Then, she suddenly grew embarrassed in front of the flute — embarrassed at Tsirel, her relative, for the fact that she was constantly going

to the Aid Society for interest-free loans for her shop; that she didn't have a tooth in her mouth; that her husband, Leyzer, was caught up in that business with the Carlsbad waters; and that her son, Yosi, went around with a bandage around his neck.

And she was embarrassed that everyone was crying, as if the sun shining on a frosty roof had set everything to melt and trickle down.

It seemed to her as if Leyzer's long face looked as it did on Rosh Hashanah during *tashlikh* ceremony, when she saw him shaking his sins into the Zbrucz, ridding the yoke from his shoulders and getting square with God.

Then she turned her eyes to the musicians, whose playing had sent more than one Jewish bride to her grave. She sensed they were smiling behind their mustaches, and felt that it was true what people said, that the trumpet sounded: "This will be for you as well, this will be for you as well..."; that the flute cried: "Oh, how ill you'll fare!"; and that the bass raged: "Just like that, just like that..."

The wedding meal was at the hall. They arrived by horse-drawn carriage. Manya sat next to the bride, constantly adjusting the garland, moving the veil from her shoulders, from over her face, spreading it over her legs, gathering it up around her knees, all the while wiping away the drops of water that fell from the myrtle onto the bride's forehead. She felt a burden as big as the world; she hadn't had any idea of what a garland maid was really supposed to do. It wasn't just looking after the bride's garland; she had to take care of the bride's veil as well.

And once inside, again she heard nothing but his flute. She didn't look at him, but she could feel him watching her. After she had danced Les Lanciers she curtseyed politely before him.

She kept finding herself going over to the musicians — a garland maid must see to it that everyone dances. Along the way, she stole a glance at him. She saw his chestnut hair, dark eyes, and a heavy lower lip. She felt him bowing to her, close, too close...

*“Fräulein, Sie tanzt wunderschön — Miss, you dance beautifully.”*

He then spoke so many words to her, passionate words, right in her ear. At one point he said, *“Es ist ja lieber Unsinn — It’s all rather ridiculous.”*

And he burst out in a soft rasping laugh, straight from the heart. That passionate laughter right in her ear made her ears flush deeply.

*“It’s all ra-ther ridiculous....ra-ther...”*

Leyetsi came over and called her away, “I have to tell you a secret.” She leaned in closer to her face, “The flutist...he was asking about you. ‘Who is that girl? Oh she is a lovely girl.’”

Manya looked at Leyetsi’s face with its dark teeth and thought those dark teeth might be charming after all.

She walked over to the bride, put her own hot face behind the veil, and adjusted the myrtle on the bride’s head.

All of a sudden her mother came over, wearing her weekday clothes, and told her that it was three o’clock and she should come home. The children had already been carried home asleep.

She stood there in a daze, not knowing what was happening to her. As the music played it seemed so alien to her, so distant. All at once a grey sheepskin coat appeared, a man’s coat, and Manya put her arms into it, letting her mother wrap it around her neck, and it seemed to her that the worst part was her mother wrapping it around her neck.

(translated by Allison Schachter and Jordan Finkin in *From the Jewish Provinces*)

Malka Heifetz Tussman

*Widowhood*

1  
Do something  
to the W  
in "widow"  
so it won't be  
like a spider  
  
that crawls on my flesh  
scratching death,  
scratching  
death.  
  
Do something  
to the  
W

2  
Illumined within myself  
luxuriating in my warmth,  
I am a column of sun.  
  
And he bent down,  
bent down low over me.  
  
I looked up and softly said:  
My name is Desire—  
is yours Passion?  
  
And he: No, my name  
is Compassion.  
  
And he opened his large, square mouth  
and blew on my glow,  
and put me out.

3  
A gentle hand slowly descended  
Like an earth-longing leaf  
To brush my skin.  
  
A quiet cheek,  
Cool and compassionate,  
Bent down and barely touched  
mine.  
  
And he whispered  
Like a quiet prayer:  
Wife, sad wife.  
  
He had wanted to calm.  
He had meant to soothe  
The wailing of my flesh.

*Water Without Sound*

The sea  
tore a rib from its side  
and said:  
Go! Lie down there, be  
a sign that I  
am great and mighty.  
Go  
be a sign.  
  
The canal  
lies at my window,  
speechless.  
  
What can be sadder  
than water  
without sound?

Marcia Falk

Malka Heifetz Tussman

וואסער אָן לשון

דער ים  
האַט פֿון זײַן זײַט  
אַ ריפּ אַרויסגעריסן  
און געזאָגט:  
גײ,  
לײג זיך דאָרטן,  
זײ מיר אַ סימן אַז איך בין  
גרויס,  
מעכטיק בין איך.  
גײ,  
זײ מיר אַ סימן.

ליגט דער קאַנאַל בײַ מײַנע פֿענצטער  
שטום.

וואָס קען נאָך טרויעריקער זײַן  
ווי וואָסער  
אָן לשון.

Tsilye Dropkin

## The Acrobat

## די צירקוס־דאָמע

I am an acrobat,  
and I dance between daggers  
erected in the ring  
tips up.  
My lithe body—barely  
touching the blades—  
eludes death-by-falling.

They hold their breath  
when they watch me dance,  
and there is always  
someone praying for me.  
The tips shine in a fiery  
circle—no one knows  
how much I'd like to slip.

I'm tired of dancing between you,  
cold steel daggers.  
I want—my blood warming  
your bare tips—  
to fall.

איך בין אַ צירקוס־דאָמע  
און טאַנץ צווישן קינזשאַלן,  
וואָס זיינען אויפגעשטעלט אויף דער אַרענע  
מיט די שפיצן אַרויף.  
מיין בויגאַם ליכטער נוף  
מיידט אויס דעם טויט פֿון פֿאַלן,  
באַרירנדיק קוים, קיים דעם שאַרף פֿון די קינזשאַלן.

מיט אַ פֿאַרכאַפטן אָטעם קוקט מען אויף מיין טאַנצן,  
און עמיץ בעט דאָרט פֿאַר מיר גאָט.  
פֿאַר מייע אַרבעטן גלאַנצן  
די שפיצן אין אַ פֿיערדיקן ראָה, —  
און קיינער ווייס ניט, ווי מיר ווילט זיך פֿאַלן.

מיר בין איך פֿון טאַנצן צווישן אייך,  
קאַלטע שטאַלענע קינזשאַלן.  
איך וויל מיין בלוט זאָל אייך דערהויצן,  
אויף אייערע אַנטבלויזטע שפיצן  
וויל איך פֿאַלן.