
Lonely, Lonely, Lonely Is the Lord of Hosts

BY YAEL GOLDSTEIN LOVE

WITHIN THE FIRST YEAR, MOST OF the grass had given itself over to mud, and by the third, all the buildings were sagging inward or tilting sideways like three crooked rows of children. Now, in the fifth year, the gate to the dairy was hanging on by a tired nail, and the stables and the printing press were rotting side by side, adding a whiff of decay to the

scent of manure that already clung to the colony newspaper. And though what had been completed of the schoolhouse had a guileless elegance, the

project had been abandoned halfway through for lack of capital; Karl Tannenbaum, the Staatliches

Bauhaus graduate who'd designed the structure, had gone off on a fundraising mission in January but had written in May from St. Louis to say that he'd found a bride and a job with an architecture firm and would not be returning. Yet just now, the New Marlborough colony was beautiful.

The warm yellow of the Berkshire Mountain sunlight filtered, prism-like, through the red and

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orange blaze of the grand old elms the first wave of colonists hadn't had the heart to clear, and the last stubborn bits of green still clinging to the ground jumped out in jubilation; even the mud sparkled a rich, satisfied garnet between the hours of noon and two, which was when Anna usually walked the length of the farm, from her office to her bungalow and then to the dairy. She always took this circuit slowly, curbing her long strides so that instead of gamine she looked gangly. She invited envy and she knew it. You couldn't be Alfie's woman and not. There was nothing personal in it. If they rarely gossiped with her or poured out their troubles for her over weak tea, it was just as well; she didn't have time for their intimacies, her only leisure this slow, admiring walk each afternoon.

Back in Vienna, she used to stroll the parks of the Prater the same way. Alfie would tease her about her wide-eyed intensity, saying that her face lit by the sight of chestnut trees in bloom was insultingly indistinguishable from her face lit by lovemaking. Now at night in their bungalow, Alfie spoke. He spoke worlds into existence. He spoke himself out of the need for sleep and almost spoke her out of it as well. The rings under her eyes, which the other women smirked over, were not worth smirking over in that way. Sometimes they were, but usually not. Last night had been one of those sometimes. She had been turning down their sheets, inspecting for long-legged spiders, when she'd looked up to find Alfie half in his clothes and half out, furiously pondering a spot on the floor. "Jack will come around," she'd told him. "He doesn't understand yet what we're trying to do in New Marlborough."

"Yes, if only the others could see our purpose as clearly as you can," he'd agreed, and then he'd come for her, still silent, and pushed the hair back from her face with both his hands.

The door of their bungalow, which never fit smoothly in its frame, had swelled in the heat of the late afternoon. She had to give it a shove. The tangle of her blouse was over her head, her skirt kicked half-way across the room before she noticed the envelope lying on the rough-cut table. It had been nearly two years since she or Alfie had received mail from overseas. They rarely spoke about this, and when they did it was to reassure each other that no news was good

news and that their families were safe. An Austrian who had passed through the colony last winter assured them that the wealthier families had abandoned Vienna for the Alps, waiting out the war in the resorts. Alfie had believed it absolutely, and Anna had tried to as well, but when she opened the envelope and saw her sister's handwriting, she knew she never had. On her way to the dairy, she thought how best to present it. The timing was not good.

THE TROUBLE in New Marlborough had started the month before. Jack Friedlander had been with the colony only a few weeks by then, in the United States not much longer. No one knew how he'd gotten himself out of Lvov. He didn't volunteer the information, and this was fine with her. He had impressed Anna as one of the precious few who would work their arms and legs more than their mouths. And so she'd been surprised, though not to say displeased, to see him duck into the meetinghouse that Friday night.

They were debating what to do with the inheritance Gittel Weiss had received from an uncle in Chicago. Everyone agreed that the money should be used to fix the hole in the roof of the meetinghouse, but that was beside the point. They were ideologues, every one, and every decision brought them back to a war of fundamentals. Did the money belong to Gittel or to the community? If it belonged to the community, did Gittel have a bigger say in how it was used? If, on the other hand, it belonged to Gittel, could she use it to buy more property than she could work herself?

"Again with all the wrong questions," Alfie finally said, and the room went silent as it only did for him. The man had a way of speaking. He spoke and you felt that you were speaking, speaking through Alfie's lips, saying words you hadn't known you'd wanted to say. He could announce, for instance, "Anna, we're going to move to the United States of America in order to create a new basis for community that's going to be like God's own promised land," and even if you'd never before considered leaving your mother and father and sisters, you'd say, "Of course we will," and feel as though he had read your mind. Alfie could read anyone's mind this way. It was why

they were here, four dozen souls huddled in the left half of a ruined barn. “These questions,” his voice was soft; the colonists had to strain to hear. “Why do you ask them? You know, my friends. You know that when one truly acts out of loving responsibility, the interests of the community and the interests of the individual become one. You know that labor and money are irrelevant. That class disappears. You! I say ‘you’ to you all, and the answer is plain. Are none of us Buberists anymore that I have to be so plain?”

“We say ‘you’ to the world!” had come the response, but it was bloodless. To be a Buberist was difficult, and the effort was telling on them all. Only Alfie seemed really to excel at it. Not even Martin Buber was such a Buberist as Alfie. In fact, Buber was no Buberist at all. Buber was a Zionist, fled to Palestine. It took an Alfie, Buber’s last student in Mainz, to come to America and make an -ism of the man. That Alfie was a visionary no one doubted. But to be a Buberist was something harder than to be a visionary, and that was the miracle of Alfie.

It was one thing to dream up a community where the only laws were those that arose out of loving responsibility, where everyone was linked only by their natural desire to do right one by the other, where the only obligation was that each citizen see every other, at all times, in the wholeness of their humanity and behave accordingly. But what did it mean, in practice, to live that way? Only Alfie seemed really to know, but the rest of them had not stopped trying.

Nor did any seem inclined to doubt that it was *worth* the trying, this impossible, exhausting task, until that planning meeting, when from behind the uninspired chorus Jack rose from his place in the back row, a small, narrow man, sickly looking and pale, and asked, “But I wonder.”

“But I wonder,” he had said, “this money. Is it possible, perhaps, that we could send it elsewhere? I know a way, you see, to get this money into the hands of those who know how to help back home. We could use it to save lives.”

But “New Marlborough first, the world later,” Alfie had explained, so gently, so respectfully, that who could doubt the wisdom of the plan, seeing where it could lead, to a man disagreeing just like this? The vote had been taken then, the money slated for the

roof, and there was every reason to think Jack’s outburst had been a newcomer’s misstep, like the time Moishe Nuiberg from Ukraine had suggested they build a synagogue and hold Sabbath services, a motion that was laughed down rather than voted on.

Jack, though, was not as easily put off as Moishe, who now went by the more modern “Mose.” The following Friday, he had been the first to raise his hand when the meeting was called to order.

“Forgive me. I am new, and still trying to understand,” Jack had begun, mild but not *so* mild. “But am I alone in my confusion? You speak endlessly of loving responsibility and of kindness here. But I hear no kindness at all in what you describe. Choosing to mend a roof over saving a human life? What sort of kindness is that?”

A whisper had clotted through the small crowd, silenced by Alfie’s hand clapped affectionately on Jack’s shoulder. “Ah, Jack, my friend, here’s your mistake: the promises we make are only toward each other. That’s how it has to be for now. One day we’ll act with loving responsibility toward all mankind. One day we will, and I love you, my friend, for your impatience. But we are showing the way for all humanity. And how can we show the way out from thousands of years of human history if we don’t do right by our own small community? How can we show the way unless we focus all our resources on New Marlborough and make this the perfect model of what can be? This is why I say, ‘New Marlborough now, the world later.’”

Outside the meeting hall afterward, people had gathered in groups to discuss the exchange. It was the first time so much analysis had been devoted to words that weren’t Alfie’s.

AT THE BROKEN GATE of the dairy, Anna stopped to watch the milkers lined up at cows’ teats. The new recruits were pulling too hard, but Alfie walked between them whirring with praise, and they smiled as they worked. Briefly she saw her family’s dining room in Vienna, Alfie ecstatically conversing on the imminent end of all allegiances separating man from man. He had just started coming to see Anna then, and so, out of courtesy, her

parents and siblings had let him talk uninterrupted, even her father holding his tongue while he kept his eyes trained on the flickering shadows cast by the Sabbath candles on the fine stitch of the tablecloth. Anna's mother and three middle sisters were throwing her desperate glances, but it was the youngest, Rachel, who interceded: "Are you real, sir, or from the radio?" It had grown so late while Alfie lectured that Rachel had been sent up to bed, but she had returned and was balancing on one foot in the ornately sculpted arch of the dining room, dressed in her pale pink nightgown, scratching at a spot above her eye with a finger tangled in fine blonde hair. It was Alfie's delighted laugh, louder and more appreciative than the rest that Anna had thought about later that night, with a flush of warmth, after he'd left to the cool farewells of her parents.

She leaned against him lightly.

"I have a letter from Rachel."

Saying it out loud made it simple. One thousand dollars sent to France and her sister would be standing in this dairy, in the yellow stillness of this day. It seemed *too* simple, almost, to be important.

"I'm sure your family is still in the Alps," she added.

"Yes."

His eyes were on his happily bungling dairy-maids, but she could tell that he was pondering, and this was good.

"The money from Gittel's uncle, maybe," she said.

"No."

"We could start by selling one of the cows, in that case."

"No."

"What, then?"

He looked at her with some surprise. "What can we do? None of this is ours. It belongs to everyone. We'll earn the money some other way."

"But Alfie, be reasonable. We don't have time."

He had taken her hand, and now he pressed it to his chest. There was nothing disapproving in his tone. "But I am being reasonable, Anna. You must be, too. Every person here has family. Every person in the world has family. Why yours and not theirs?"

"Because I have a letter."

"And what is a letter?"

And it was true, of course. What was a letter?

What was a sister? A letter was a piece of paper. A sister was just another woman tied to her by accidents of birth. New Marlborough first, the world later.

IT WAS ALFIE'S IDEA that Anna approach Mrs. Van Orter, the town doctor's wife, for work. She went the next morning, foregoing her hours with the financial books. She left with a job: she would clean the Van Orter home once a week, on Thursdays, for a dollar.

That night she skipped the meeting to catch up on her bookkeeping. It was late when she returned to their bungalow, nearly dawn, but she found Alfie sitting at the table, his fist closed tight around a piece of paper. He held her eyes while he showed her the page and this made her feel less tired. The page was a newsletter. Not the newsletter Alfie wrote every week, but one filled with news from outside, news from Europe, about the war. So here was the reason Jack had taken on the printing press. For months after Abe Rabinowitz ran off to New York, the role had remained unfilled. Working the lever was tedious and difficult, the room itself stank of rotting wood and horses, and Alfie had considered it a peace offering when Jack stepped forward. The feint, the double-dealing of it, playing on Alfie's unfailing generosity of judgment—it caused a constriction in her that was pointedly un-Buberist. She could not think of Jack in the wholeness of his humanity that night, and it was his face, pale, feral, untrusting, that she held in her mind as she lay in bed knowing: a dollar a week was not enough.

ON MONDAY MORNING, Anna woke early and went to the home of the town lawyer; his wife let her down kindly over tea. The grocer's wife wouldn't let her in the door. When she cleaned for Mrs. Van Orter on Thursday she explained her predicament, but Mrs. Van Orter could not increase her pay.

There was again a second newsletter at the meeting that week. At home, Alfie said, "Why can't I make him see? He's protesting against paradise. How can it be?" and the sadness of his tone, the pure-hearted pity of it, pierced her through.

Outside, a low rustling groan swept through the unbuilt schoolhouse and a door nearby was pro-

testing its poor construction against a wall. Beside them their stove sputtered sickly, giving very little heat. The newer stoves, the ones that worked, were reserved for families with children. All these years she'd brought small miracles out of columns of numbers, walked Alfie on roundabout routes to avoid the worst scenes of decay, while Alfie saw nothing but God's own promised land around them. She'd protected him from a discouragement of which he was not capable. Now, here, he needed her to shield him and all she could think to say was, "Give Jack time."

In the morning she found it hard to concentrate on her calculations. She caught several mistakes in her arithmetic. She considered whether she should go through the long rows of sums a second time to be safe but found herself rebelling against the idea. "It's not as if anyone would know," she said out loud. And though it was true that no one other than Anna looked at the books, the words distressed her. Resting inside them, smuggled into the room and quickly taking over, was a shameful possibility.

ANNA KNEW what the colony could stand to lose, and she knew how best to lose it. What was a dollar or two fallen off the page every other week, another three or four pocketed directly when she went to sell their extra produce at the market on weekends? It was nothing, and by the end of the month she had gathered just over \$70, including the money she had earned from the Van Orters. And she had ideas for how to make the pile grow more quickly.

Something from nothing, and yet she paid. She thought it might be better if only she had a friend. Just to say to someone: *This is what I have done, can you forgive me?* But she was alone. So alone she could not understand how she had ever *not* felt lonely here. But even here there was someone lonelier. In the few hours a night that Alfie fell still, she sat in the almond light of a homemade candle, reading and rereading the pair of weekly newsletters, Alfie's and Jack's, each given over entirely to arguing with the other, and felt a loneliness so profound it was almost sacred: the loneliness of Alfie's immaculate goodness. In those hours, she burned with an excitation that directed itself at Jack. It was very far from loving-kindness.

THERE HAD BEEN three more letters back and forth: two she had sent, and one she had received. Whenever she closed her eyes, even for a moment, just to blink, her sister was waiting. The last time she'd seen Rachel, they had locked themselves in the attic, the youngest and oldest natural allies against the bland ones in the middle. "Can you keep a secret?" Anna had asked, and Rachel had narrowed those eyes set wide in the round ball of her head, making her look even more the wise old frog than usual.

"But then you'll send for me," Rachel had insisted. "You have to send for me as soon as you arrive, or I'll put a curse on you and make all your hair fall out." That was Rachel at 10, a funny-looking, fierce little amphibian. What was she like at 15?

On Thursdays, on her way to the Van Orters, Anna stopped in at the post office. A man there had agreed to set aside her mail. The colonists seldom ventured into town, and so she didn't take precautions. Whom would she meet? And even caught, who would think to doubt her?

It was only luck that kept her from running headlong into Jack. She was walking fast, rounding the corner with arms swishing, when she saw him, bent, thin, chafing his hands and blowing into fists. She thought at first to get out of his sight, but why? If she had business to hide, then so had he, and she had better know it. In fact, the longer she watched him—he had moved onto the green, onto a bench, and drew a hunk of bread from his pocket—the clearer it became that she *must* speak to him, to reason with the man as Alfie couldn't, perhaps even to plead.

If he was surprised to have his lunch interrupted, he wanted her not to know it. He slid along the bench to clear a spot for her.

"Rebbetzin, good afternoon." The white puff of his breath made her feel the wind worse than before. It was not respectful the way he called her Rebbetzin. It was because of "Rebbe," his name for Alfie. But Alfie it didn't bother.

"It's cold," she said. "So suddenly."

He broke his bread in half and offered her a piece, and since she couldn't think what to say next, she took it. They ate in silence, watching a young man on a bicycle, then a mother rushing a child from the

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town's one store, then a round old man in an apron and a visor emptying a bucket on the ground. Each took his turn being the only thing to watch. The silence was restful, and after a while she felt herself bucked up by it, enough to ask, "Why do you stay?"

He chewed deliberately, his shoulders hunched against the chill. The muscles of his neck, inside his raised collar, looked taut and uncomfortable.

"You'd like me to go?" he replied.

"I didn't say that. I'd just like to know why you stay. You don't believe in the community. Where's the sense in it?"

"You may be right," Jack said. "I myself don't know how much sense it makes."

"But really, why stay and be that way? Or perhaps you do believe a small amount in what we're doing?"

"Well, when you put it like that, I'm not so sure. Surely there are some things I believe."

"In loving responsibility, perhaps," Anna said.

"No, not in that. I'm too simple a man. I'm not so smart that I can wait each time for a theory to tell me how to be kind."

She stamped her foot, more from the cold than in anger, but realizing at the same time that she had spent too long here, that she was expected elsewhere, and that this was his fault. "But see, you aren't fair."

"No?"

"No," she said. "That isn't fair at all to say. And it upsets him, you know, very much, when you say things like that. When you're unfair like that. You're making him unhappy." The words were thickening in her mouth even as she spoke them. She was choking herself up and felt ridiculous.

"It isn't my intention, believe me, Rebbetzin." Now Jack was watching the withered leaves chase each other around the base of a tree trunk, and Anna watched them too because it was the only thing to watch. Her eyes were wet; she was glad he didn't look at her. "You won't believe me, I know, but it isn't my intention to upset him. I would rather it weren't this way between us."

"So make it not that way. Or else find somewhere else to go."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's so, and I ought to leave. But—you won't believe me—it's a great disappointment to think of leaving. I hoped it might be right for me, this place."

It was very late, and she felt foolish for staying this long. How could she have thought that she would succeed where Alfie had failed? How could she have thought that her words would do better than Alfie's?

"No, maybe I'm too simple," he continued, "but for me the loving responsibility, as you say, is just what isn't right. There's something not right in what we're trying to do. It isn't for us."

"For you," she corrected. None of this had gone as she had hoped, and now this "us." What was it? She suspected it wasn't nice.

"For all of us," he said. His nose was running from the cold. Why didn't he do something? "Human men and women. I don't know how to say it. We can't try to see like God sees. We can't try to love like the Lord of Hosts. To try is to become the opposite of kind. It's to become cruel. We love who is beside us. We help who reaches out a hand. Maybe God's way is more fair. Maybe. But for us it's not so good."

She was impatient with the glisten beneath his nose and wanted to slide farther down the bench, but something prevented her. It was his hand in hers. Whether it was she who had done this or he hardly made a difference. One of her hands was warm and moistly cradled, the other clutched cold against itself, and she preferred the cold and clutched. She stood.

"For you," she said, and left.

THAT NIGHT she had no patience. The slow boil of the soup infuriated her, her mind shut down in the onslaught of Alfie's conversation, and then beneath him she lay stubbornly, and thought how strange it was: she felt his need, but she was not a part of where it led. He thrashed about ecstatic and complete, and what was she in this? Lonely, that's what she was, alone even in their lovemaking. The sorry oven belched and tried its best but she was cold beneath him, and lying there she thought she was aware of a chill desiccation throughout the colony, a withered groan all through the wood and stiffening mud, and it hurt her heart for Alfie, even knowing it could never make a difference. He was so lonely it could not make a difference what happened beyond the boundaries of his thoughts.

Later she drifted in and out of sleep as usual while he marched tirelessly through the tangle of his

own ideas, waiting until she would again be needed. It happened close to dawn. There would be snow before too long, and the meetinghouse must be repaired. Whom should they send, he wanted to know. Someone must drive to Pittsfield for supplies, and whom could they spare just now?

“Send Jack, of course. A gesture of goodwill.”

“Of course. There’s no other answer. You understand so well.”

He pushed her hair back from her face and stared at her delighted.

“I’m tired,” she said, and turned away from him.

“WHY ME?” Jack’s back gleamed silver pale in the linty light, beaded and heaving as he worked the lever press to churn out Alfie’s newsletter. The room’s stink of manure and rot had been transformed by the addition of Jack’s sweat and for once was not so unpleasant.

“Because he’s trusting you. It’s a compliment. That’s how you should take it.”

“Pardon me for saying, but if he needs to trust, that’s no compliment.” He lifted his shirt from the back of a chair, and wrapping it around his neck he smiled. “So, when? Today? You’ll send me off with a king’s ransom and hope that I return?”

She ran a finger through the condensation dripping down the dirty window and said, “What if you don’t?”

Only the concave dip of his chest still moved; he watched her closely.

“Believe me, me you can trust.”

“Yes,” she said, “but what if you don’t?”

He swabbed his forehead with the shirt, then put one arm in and the other. His voice was no longer friendly, but neither was it unfriendly. “Listen, do you want me or not? Truthfully, I’d rather not make the trip. You want me to go, I’ll go. But maybe you should stop with so many compliments.”

It was just like when she had found her hand in his. She heard a voice saying, “Is it possible, perhaps, that we could send the money elsewhere?” and if it weren’t the same one she’d always heard out of her mouth she would have believed it was someone else’s.

He set his jaw; it didn’t seem nice.

“I have a sister.”

The nod was curt. He closed his eyes. It was a long time before he spoke.

“You won’t believe me,” he finally said. “But I don’t like to leave. I’ll do what you ask, but I don’t like to leave this place.”

She had no sentimental urge to gaze on Alfie in his sleep that night, but took one long look anyway, thinking that this was how she would remember him: contented and cut off, wrapped tight in his immaculate kindness.

Would he miss her; could he? She felt that he would not and could not, but this did not make her love him less. It only made her leave.

AND YET she never did entirely. At least my mother would have said she never did. If my mother had known what I know now, she would have blamed those five years in New Marlborough for the chill remove she had always felt in her mother’s way of loving. Not like the way her father loved—sweet, simple Jack, so easy and adoring; not like her fierce aunt Rachel, cursing your existence and then smothering you in kisses. No, her mother loved wrong, she’d always claimed, wept over little Vietnamese babies, marched for the children of Africa, but when you scraped your knee she might gaze down at your blubbering, snot-nosed self like you were anyone, just a child like any other. *Her* child, yes, but a child like any other all the same, and who were you to carry on like this? My mother said her mother had made her feel so lonely as a girl that no number of friends could warm her up. She’d piled on friends like sweaters, and it was never enough. I saw none of this in my grandmother.

But then one bloated afternoon in Palm Beach Gardens, while an August thunderstorm was steaming on the other side of the sliding doors, she pulled out an unfamiliar album. On the front page was an old photograph of a man I’d never seen among the besilked and befeathered Viennese she loved to bring to life in stories. “Alfie,” she’d said, “like your uncle.” A handsome face smiled out from the past, eyes cold with a righteous light. A very young man, so certain of the possibilities of human kindness, ready to share a burden with the Lord of Hosts.

I think she died still loving him. 🐾