

Excerpt from In the Time of Leaving

VI

The Leaving

Toledo

CHAVA

Just before we left mother gave me a quill cut from the feather of a black stork, reminding me that it returned each year to its nest. She gave me a bottle of ink and a journal bound in red patterned silk and said, "Write down everything, so even the daughters you have not yet had will know what the leaving was like."

"But Mama, surely you will join us in Portugal before I have daughters?" I tried to make light of it for moment. She would not. "If it comes to it, I will go to mass and kneel then come home and offer my real prayers in the cellar. I will hold what truth I know under my tongue." When she saw my eyes widen, she softened her voice, "But I am sure I will leave before that is ever a possibility."

When I protested yet again that Sarah and I could pretend with her if it came to that she said, "No, you would have to pretend your whole life. There is a storm coming in tonight. I think it will be a big one. The day after tomorrow you will go."

"Just a little while longer Mama, until the blossoms fall." But I knew it was useless. What difference can a few weeks make when it is forever that I am leaving? I wrapped the quill in a piece of linen and the bottle of ink in a piece of brocade. I opened the small book and took in its scent of newly pressed paper. I ran my fingers over one thick page after another as I counted off the things I was leaving: my feather bed, my new gown, the sun coming through the heavy-paned window in late afternoon, the sweet rising scent of challah from the bakery early Friday mornings, my great grandmother's silver candlesticks, my mother, my father's gravesite still without a marker, the stone I would never place there.

And so it began. We chose carefully what we would carry with us, gold sewn into seams, jewels pinned onto undergarments. This is what can be traded for a life. Mama knew these things. Papa having been an advisor to the royal court for many years made sure she knew. "We are honored now," he had said, "but always there are whisperings about the Jews, and then violence breaks out. Torquemada so believes in his righteousness that he will sway the queen. "Keep this," Papa would say to Mama and he would hand her a piece of gold he had received from the king. My mother kept the coins and the gold chains, and a ruby pendant and she gave it all to us. "Please, Mama." I started to cry when she slipped off her heavy gold wedding band.

"Daughter, what does it matter? Here, see the mark on my finger? It shall remain until my skin dissolves away. This gold band might keep you safe for a month." And she smiled, how could she do that? I wept and she smiled. "It is already gone," she said.

ESTHER

I watch them leave. I feel the weight sewn into the seams of their garments. Even after they turn the corner, I feel the pull of my children. Glimpses of them as babies, as toddlers, as long-limbed girls, seemed to follow them through the arch like strands of embroidery threads unraveling. It broke my heart. As much as I knew there was no other way, it left me bereft.

My husband's voice was next to me. In the months since his death I heard it often. He would stay with me, but my daughters were gone. I pushed them to leave, wanting to save them from the flames, those lit or those that would burn from within, if they lived lies of their lives.

Afterwards, I went into the hall and Maria looked at me with her fig brown eyes. She had been with our family since I married. I know she understood what this cost me. Her sons had died in the holy wars. My daughters gone for no less a cause. She and I would keep each other's counsel. We both closed our hearts to the court of Spain, although I would still need to pretend in order to ensure the safe passage of my children and to carry out the plan to save all our legacies.

I expect Isaac's mother will be here shortly. She will lose her last remaining son. Such sadness, all brought on by the will of that mad man and the fears of the church. This has all happened before, it will happen again. How many times I wonder, how many more times?