How To...

short-short stories
by women

EDITED BY
IRENE ZAHAVA

A VIOLET INK PAMPHLET
How to Name a Daughter You Will Never Have

JUDITH SORNBERGER

Say aloud all the names of the women you love. Start with names you wouldn't name a soul. As much as you love your mother, you would never choose Roberta, but you might take the Anne from the middle of her name, just as she planted it in the middle of yours. Humble as it is, and small, you might press it like a pale lavender violet between the pages of a fairy tale, put its soft fragrance to sleep there, perhaps even forget it.

When you dream a daughter born to you, set her in her cradle, tip-toe out of the room. Remember you don’t belong there.

Say aloud the names of the women you love: Mabel, your father’s mother’s name. Mabel, Mabel, set the table. Your mother insists Mabel’s had an easy life, never wanting for anything. You say, how do we know what any woman longs for, especially the one who’s always smiling. Watching her cheerful hands setting out the china, serving creamed chicken over her famous homemade noodles, plunging to the bottom of a sink full of soapsuds and gritty water – who knows what they are thinking under there?

When you dream a daughter born to you, tell yourself she is a symbol, a part of you, perhaps some new life bubbling to the surface.

Say aloud your women. Ruth, your mother’s mother, who wove your name into her prayers until the day she died. Ruth, who entreated you to return to the church of your mother, who wished to God you’d say, Whither thou goest, I shall go.

When you wake up from the dream, say aloud the women you love: Kris, the sound of skis across fresh snow. Picture a woman moving at her own speed, sending all her power to her legs and arms. Say Linnea for the fiercest woman you know, named for Linnea borealis, from the honesuckle family: a dainty plant with small pink nodding bells growing on slender stalks in the cold forest. Say Priscilla for the frill of it. Say Alison, say heart’s-ease, the blue pansy beloved of her mother, her mother whose body wilted with breast cancer just as her daughter’s breasts were blooming. Say Aliseur and know how names remember all the selves they have passed through, all the famous hands who ever wrote them. Say Joanne and remember back past the rapes, before you know her, past all the years she’s battled fear, back to her namesake Joan. Be grateful to her mother for arming her with a name to shield her, give her courage.

When you wake from the dream, don’t try to go back and smell her hair.

Say June, the great-aunt you never knew. Who sent back headlines from World War II. Who liberated an Italian village. Who drank. Who married a novelist. Who left her daughter to go overseas. Whose stories are censored in your family. Who was your hero. Who must have drunk herself to death by now. Who knows.

Say your own name. Judith. Pretend your mother named you for a mission.

When you wake from the dream, remember the tubal, how the surgeon went in with a laser to close off the twin tunnels. Remember you wanted it that way. Remember you still do.

Say all the names you never gave a daughter. Say Cecily. Say Jane. Say Raina. Say Margaret. Say the names that have whispered their syllables into your unguarded moments. Names for all the girls you’ve never been.

When you wake from the dream, don’t try to remember what you called her. Remember any daughter goes her own way one day. Pretend she already has. Say your own name. Say it again. Keep making yourself up over and over.

How to Have a Satisfying Jewish Lesbian Seder (in three easy steps)

JUDITH STEIN

You might think that all you need to have a Jewish lesbian seder is Jewish lesbians, or maybe Jews and lesbians, but that’s not really sufficient. Here, for your edification and ultimate satisfaction, is a step-by-step guide.

Step One: The first step may be the hardest; it’s definitely the most important. Find a few quiet moments to reflect on Passover and how you want to experience it. This need not be sacred time and space, just
quiet. Taking a shower, walking to the subway or waiting for the coffee to finish brewing are all ideal moments. Think about what Passover means to you, what you want to get from the holiday. Then think about how you want your seder to feel. How serious do you want your seder to be? How focused? What if your very funny friends make terrific but sarcastic commentary throughout the seder? Is this OK or not OK?

Would you be upset if you didn’t complete the haggadah? What if you only completed the haggadah up to the “Eat Dinner” part? Is it important to hide the afikomen? To sing traditional Pesach songs? These are a few questions for you to decide before you do anything else. This process defines the intent, the kavanah, for your seder.

Now, Step Two: choose your guests and prepare them. Every woman who has ever held a seder, every woman who has ever been to a seder, even every woman who has ever heard a story about a seder, has a headful of idealized seders. Each woman brings with her to your seder her notion of the ideal seder. So you need to talk to each and every guest to make sure that she and you share compatible images of what a seder should be.

Suppose your guest likes seders where people make jokes by listing “not being able to get a good bialy in Boston” as one of the plagues, and you like seders where contemporary and historical political concerns, like genocide, are discussed at length. If this is the case, someone will not be happy. Since this is your seder, you get to be the happy one.

And, since this is a lesbian Seder, you need to check the guest list to make sure that no one who’s coming is the ex-lover or ex-friend of someone else who is coming who would be totally and actively uncomfortable to share a seder table with them.

Once conversations with your guests are complete, go to Step Three: choosing the haggadah. To do this step properly you should have started preparation months before Pesach by reading as many of the hundreds of different haggadot as you could get your hands on. Since it’s now maybe three weeks before Passover, you’ll have to wing it.

Read one traditional haggadah. Read the introduction and the footnotes, review the traditional order, examine the traditional prayers and blessings, then put the book aside. Go back to Step One; pick and choose those parts of the haggadah that make a seder feel like Pesach to you.

Put together a seder that matches your intent. Look through your collection of lesbian poetry and political tracts to find those writings that fit your vision. Or maybe you should ask each of your guests to prepare a portion of the seder. This process of creating a new ritual is most certainly a lesbian process, so you are, by definition, creating a lesbian seder. And don’t worry – even if you don’t include one single

word from one traditional haggadah, the completed seder you create will still be Jewish. Asking questions and inventing answers is the ultimate expression of Jewish dialectics. And don’t worry about tampering with sacred texts. The haggadot you’ve read all your life are relatively new. Only since the Middle Ages – last week in the scale of Jewish history – have the order and the content of the seder been set as they are now.

Define your kavanah, choose your guests and create your seder. That’s it! Steps one through three. Were they easy? Who could say for sure? But you did it.

What’s left? One final question, the answer not entirely within your control, the debate not likely to be settled in your lifetime, or even in a lifetime of lifetimes. The question, a good one for the post-seder schmooze, concerns matzah balls: which are better – light as a feather or heavy as hockey pucks?

So now you know. All the rest is commentary; go and learn!

Glossary:

Seder: Literally: order, the ritual dinner associated with the celebration of Passover.

Pesach, Passover: Jewish holiday commemorating the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

Kavanah: Intent of action or prayer.

Haggadah (plural haggadot): Book containing the Passover ritual. There have been thousands of haggadot written in the course of Jewish history; hundreds are still in circulation and active use. New ones are written every year.

Afikomen: Half of one of the three ritual pieces of matzah, the afikomen is designated as dessert and needed to conclude the Seder.

Bialy: Delicious soft and chewy onion-topped rolls.

Matzah Balls: Oy, you have to ask? Delectable dumpling-like spheres of perfection created from matzah meal and served floating in a bowl of shimmering golden chicken soup. Es!