

**AN EXCERPT FROM *THE AWAKENING OF CHAYA PEARLMAN***

When Chaya arrived at the lobby alcove for the designated meeting the following afternoon, Dov was already there. He was seated in one of the large leather armchairs, his head buried in a book. He didn't look up until she said hello, her voice coming out thin and scratchy as fraying thread.

He stood, placing the small black leather volume into his coat pocket. The first thing Chaya noticed was how tall he was, the first match who exceeded her in height. She guessed he must be at least six-foot-three, maybe six, four. And she liked his looks. Lanky but broad shouldered, dark and intense, full black brows framing blue eyes, and a straight nose continuing down from the bottom of his forehead without a dip. His hands were large and beautifully shaped, though she noticed there were rims of black dirt beneath some of his nails. Odd. Didn't he like to bathe? Otherwise, he looked clean. And he smelled fine.

"Thanks for coming all this way to meet me," he said. "It's a long ride on the bus." Dov crossed his long legs and leaned back in his chair.

He was in typical summer garb: black pants, white shirt, black velvet kippah, tzitzit and peyos, but no coat or hat.

"Oh, I'm happy to have a trip," she said without thinking.

"My sister Tamar tells me you have a big family. How many are you?"

“I’m one of eight.”

“Blessed with children, yes. And you?”

“The eldest of six.”

“Like me. I mean being the eldest.” Oh, she sounded like a nitwit. How would she impress him?

“Have you met other matches?” He rested his left elbow on the armrest, chin in hand. His eyes gleamed and his glossy peyos fell into his face.

She was startled by his question. “I don’t think you should ask me that,” she said and they laughed, sharing a moment of communion. “And you? If you ask me I can ask you.”

“Yes. But I won’t settle,” he said and she felt a faint streak of alarm and irritation. What chutzpah he had. Well, he was a man, he could get away with it. Would she pass muster?

“Nor will I,” she declared. Something about this Dov Golden made her bold. It was his boldness, a direct manner she was not used to encountering.

“Marriage is long,” he said.

She nodded.

“My own parents, well, I don’t know....I think about how our community has been doing this for centuries. I wonder sometimes what it was like for my parents when they were our age.”

Chai was astonished. “Do they reminisce?”

“Never.” He looked into his lap. “Duty not love.” This came out in a hoarse whisper.

“I could say the same of mine,” she answered, feeling a twinge of guilt. Why was this getting personal so fast? Well, if you could get engaged after one short meeting, or just a few, that explained it. You had to cram a good deal of getting to know one another into an hour or however long the first encounter lasted.

But Chai was interested in Dov, less so in his family, though if they married, his family would be hers and hers, his.

“How do you like Yeshiva in New York?”

“It’s a wider world here. I’m learning. Meeting people both inside and outside of our community. My father knew how restless I felt in Montreal, that I couldn’t stay there.” His brows furrowed and he looked past her as if he was thinking of something he could not share.

“But will you come back?” She meant, for marriage.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I might prefer to build a life here if my wife was agreeable.” His eyes were so intent that she had to look away, down into her lap. Her skirt and blouse felt too tight and she regretted the Chinese banquet she’d shared with Aunt Galit. She hoped she didn’t look fat. She hoped the safety pin would hold her blouse in place. She hoped he wouldn’t catch a glimpse of her ample cleavage...but that might be an asset. Unless he preferred a willowy wife. Who knew?

“There’s opportunity for growth,” he said. “Here.”

“What kind of growth?”

“Spiritual, intellectual, cultural. You name it.” He stroked his glossy peyos. “I’ve fallen in love with this city, as if it were a person.”

She laughed. “Maybe you could marry the Big Apple. And have lots of little apples.”

He smiled at her and she noticed he had dimples in his cheeks, his teeth white and well cared for. But why the dirt under his nails, a conundrum.

“Do you want lots of little apples?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered, surprising her again with his bluntness. “And you?”

“Likewise,” she said, smiling.

“I think when we have too many children we can’t give them the attention they need. We spread ourselves too thin. There are lots of problems in the community we can’t address. Poverty, mental illness, loss of faith. Lots of people our age are dealing drugs, engaging in credit card fraud. But there’s this community craziness. We’re obsessed with how everything *looks*, rather than with substance and meaning. Do you know how often I hear es past nisht? That’s inappropriate, this is inappropriate.” He shook his fists as if angry at Hashem.

*Wow.* Chai smoothed her skirt against her thighs. She could feel sweat gathering between them and beneath her breasts, despite the hotel air conditioning.

“What are you thinking?” Dov asked.

She shook her head, her face and the tips of her ears warming.

“If people were more familiar with our sacred texts,” Dov went on, “with Hasidic philosophy and Jewish history, they’d be less obsessed with fetishizing our clothing and they wouldn’t have to get so worked up about ‘the outside world.’”

He was a rebel, and everything he said made perfect sense.

“No matter how much you appreciate the beauty of Hasidic thought and practice, we still have to live in the community,” she said. “Things don’t seem likely to change anytime soon.”

Dov nodded and uncrossed his legs, leaning toward her. “If I have children, I refuse to raise them on fear. You starve on a diet of fear and punishment.” As he said this he made a circle of his thumb and third finger, for emphasis. “What about you, Chaya? What do you wish for?”

“Time.”

He smiled at her and she noticed how his blue eyes flashed darkly when he found something surprising or funny. She had never seen eyes of that color before, nearly navy.

“And what will you do with your time?” Dov asked. “With mine, which is at a premium, I look after my dog and my garden. I love to garden and grow vegetables and flowers.”

So that explained the dirty nails. Chai was delighted. “So are you allowed to have a dog?”

“I allow myself,” he said.

“And what breed is he...or she?”

“He’s a rescue. Part golden retriever, part lab maybe. It’s hard to know for sure.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Chewy. He likes to chew anything and everything. Eating garbage and worse is his thing. I’ve had to replace a few pairs of shoes and he’s shredded several pairs of socks.”

“You have to train him better.”

“I’m trying. He’s a tough case. But he keeps me grounded in *this* world.”

“I have to say,” Chai started, “you are so different than my other matches.”

Dov laughed. “I hope that’s a good thing.”

“It is. But would your family tolerate a dog at home? In Montreal?”

“No. But I’m not there. I’m here. They’re afraid of dogs like lots of people in our community. They don’t believe dogs should be brought into the home. And why? Why not!”

“So you have a bit of independence.”

“For a time, yes. But you didn’t answer me.”

“About what?”

“What you would do with more time?”

Chai waited a long while before answering. She didn’t know how he would react.

“Draw.”

“What do you like to draw?”

“My family, people, splices of life. My life.” Sometimes fantasies, she thought to herself.

“Would you show me? One day?”

She bit her lip. “Maybe. Some day.”

They talked and talked and Chai lost track of the time until she spotted Aunt Galit who had come looking for her, standing by the reception desk some distance away, raising both palms into a question mark.

“I have to go,” Chai said.

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When Chaya returned home from New York, she was floating, a helium balloon cut loose from its string, frothing bubbles in a glass of champagne.

Dov. Dov, Dov Golden—she loved the sound of his name which would be hers soon—Golden, she was golden, and he was a young man like no other in their community, tall and dark with those extraordinary blue eyes, an original thinker, like herself, unafraid of questions. Escape and arrival all at once.

Yes!

Dov had a dog! He was interested in her art! He lived in Manhattan! She would share an extraordinary life with him in the City. She scarcely believed her good fortune. They were beshert, meant to be.

The buoyancy of expectation carried Chaya through her daily routine of chores with a sunny disposition, humming to herself. None of the things that usually bothered her—the noise and mess of her siblings, the chaos at home, the lack of privacy and time to herself, Mameh Anat's many infirmities—dampened her good cheer.

A week went by and she didn't think much of it, she was so deeply immersed in her fantasies; she was certain a call would come soon. Then a second week passed and anxiety coiled inside her like a snake. Chaya heard her parents whispering, then hissing in hallways. Perhaps there had been a crisis in the Golden family, what kind of crisis, Chaya had no idea. An illness, a death. Surely, they would have heard, though, if there had been a crisis of that magnitude. Her parents ruminated, gnashed their teeth. They all waited and waited.

Silence.

By the end of the second week, Tateh took matters into his own hands and appeared at her house.

When he got home, he looked angry and perturbed. Once the younger children were tucked into bed, he called Anat and Chaya into his study to tell them the outcome of the shidduch.

“I’m sorry, Chayala, the family does not want to go forward. Lovey, you will find your beshert, don’t worry.” He stroked her hair for a moment, his eyes contracted in pain.

Chaya plummeted, as if she’d fallen into an uncovered manhole. Deep, dark, down.

“The family, then, did not approve of the match?” asked Mameh.

He nodded. “I asked Zippy about Dov. What he had felt about our Chaya. I called Dov’s father. He said the two were not beshert. That the match would not proceed. They did not give me any details or explanations. They slammed the door.”

“They didn’t feel our family was good enough for them,” Mameh said, her lips twisted as if she’d tasted something sour. “The Golden’s trace their roots back to prominent Rebbes on both sides. In comparison, we don’t measure up. And some people think--”

“Shah Anat!” he ordered, his black eyes flashing. “You be quiet.”

Chaya’s parents then started shouting at one another. Chaya shut herself inside her room, but could still hear them hurling insults and accusations, their voices sharpened like instruments. She clicked off the lights in her room and lay motionless face down on her bed.

The next few weeks, Chaya went through her chores like an automaton. Her family’s voices sounded distant and strange, metallic, without warmth or color. They buzzed and buzzed and she could barely distinguish words from sounds. She couldn’t read, the print like black ants crawling across the page, senseless. She felt divided from herself, floated above her body, split, severed, as if a shell of her was on earth going through the motions

and another part had broken free of the world, enclosed inside a spacesuit, spinning, spinning, without mooring or direction. Nothing was real.