

THE IVORY POMEGRANATE

a novel

by Leora Freedman



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Audrey herself had discovered the ivory pomegranate, resting in its stratum in the Judean Hills like the bulb of a perennial flower. She was the archaeologist crouched in the trench, the first human to lift the rare artifact in over two thousand years, brushing the earth off its stylized urn-shaped body and crown-like calyx. It lay, light and cool, in her palm; engraved on its shoulder was an ancient Hebrew inscription that, surprisingly, she could read: Property of the Temple of Adonai, Holy to the Priests. Through her dream Audrey was aware of the bold Arizona morning light, the delicate weight of her cat Marquez curled against her feet, and the humid enveloping warmth of her boyfriend Jose Antonio who slept naked at her side; but at the same time she raised a finger to touch the chipped ivory sepal of the pomegranate and her dream was full of suspense, as if her touch would restore the pomegranate's ancient wholeness.

Her alarm rang and she snapped it off automatically, while Marquez sprang to his striped feet and stretched and Jose Antonio rolled over and yawned. He didn't like to get up so early, but he hated it when Audrey threw on her clothes and dashed out to dig in the hot sun all morning with nothing more than a cup of coffee in her stomach. So ten minutes later they'd both climbed down from her loft and were in her tiny kitchen, Jose Antonio frying four eggs in the cast iron pan and Audrey drinking coffee at the table with Marquez on her lap. Jose Antonio had a special way of making eggs,

heavy on the black pepper and smothered with melted yellow cheese — he never worried about things like cholesterol. “You have to live, *mi amora*,” he often said, and this had various meanings, like, you have to eat, you shouldn’t worry about your dissertation, you should believe that I love you. At the same time he was convinced, at the age of twenty-five, that he was destined to live only another ten years, a fate he predicted often and without apparent regret. He had weak lungs, but even now, cooking, he held a cigarette in one hand and it was useless for her to protest.

Audrey had gone out to the front porch, where she made a mental note to water her tangle of browning plants, sighed over the old wicker couch she had to put outside because Marquez peed on it, and then picked up the tight roll of morning newspaper from the sagging steps, their paint worn off in the middle. Jose Antonio had his subscription delivered to her house because he woke up there more often than not.

“They’re all killing each other like crazy,” she remarked now, skimming the heavy black headlines about the stoning of Israeli soldiers, the killing of two Arabs, American protests. It had taken weeks before the significance of the intifada — the Palestinian uprising — penetrated her absorption in her dissertation on the Water Pipes excavation and the letters from her son Benjamin. Now that she wanted to learn more she’d discovered she couldn’t read past the first sentence of each article. She recalled her grandmother saying sanctimoniously, when Audrey announced she was marrying Brian O’Hara, now her ex-husband: You might want to forget you’re a Jew, Audrey, but you’ll see, the world won’t let you forget. Did the discomfort caused by Jose Antonio’s newspaper mean she’d forgotten her Jewishness or not forgotten? She flipped the paper over to the back page and glanced at a small headline about five thousand Kurds killed in an Iraqi chemical attack.

“Buena apetita,” Jose Antonio said, setting a plate of steaming eggs, toast, jam and cottage cheese in front of her; he overdid things

but most of the time she loved him for it. For a woman who'd lived alone so long she found it surprisingly easy to adjust to being taken care of. "Who's killing?" he asked, sitting down at the small table and tilting the paper so he could read the headlines, while slurping his coffee with obvious enjoyment, as he always did.

"Everyone," she said vaguely. "The whole world is one big brawl." She didn't want to mention the Israelis and she was grateful that Jose Antonio, despite his love of politics, approached this subject with compassionate delicacy, as if Israel were a relative of hers who'd had a nervous breakdown. She reached into her napkin holder which was stuffed with bills and papers, pulled out her son Benjamin's most recent letter, and reread the words she'd already memorized. He was happy to have received her last letter, he had three huge term papers to write, Long Island was the armpit of the universe, and he was looking forward to visiting her this summer. She wondered uneasily what he was hinting; if he thought his long-lost Mom Audrey was going to invite him for a permanent stay in her little box of a house in Arizona and feed him on her checking account that zeroed out at the end of each month, well, she didn't know how to break the news to him. She felt she'd never run out of shame, and no wonder: the world wouldn't let you forget you were a Jew and it wouldn't let you forget you were a mother. What kind of Jew couldn't read about Israel, and what kind of mother hadn't seen her son in five years?

...and I'm really looking forward to coming out there this summer. Don't worry about planning things for me, I don't mind just hanging around.

I mean I've never seen a desert before, and it will be great to get out from under the parental eye for two weeks. I just realized how stupid that sounds since you are my parent, but I'm sure you understand.

Love, Benjamin