

Rosebud Ben-Oni

Don't Call it Returning
A No Second Chances Play

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HANNAH — Anthropologist, mid-20s

SOUL — late fiancée of HANNAH, former Israeli tour guide, mid-30s

TIME AND PLACE

Present Day. Late Winter Shabbat Evening.

Cemetery, Jerusalem.

Lights fade in, sounds of wind and crickets. HANNAH sits in the lap of SOUL, who is wrapped in a white bedsheet. His eyes are closed and his arms are locked around Hannah. They sit on a rock. Beside it is a backpack.

Hannah is not properly dressed for the winter weather; she is in a tattered, somewhat torn sundress. Her hair is in disarray. Her face is buried in Soul's shoulders, hidden from the audience. After a timely pause, she writhes with a weariness of someone who has not slept in days. From her lap, she picks up a spring of a plant in flower and hangs it over their heads like mistletoe.

HANNAH

The silence of Syrian rue...

Soul moves to kiss her.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
(CONTINUING)

You told me to hang it over the front door.

SOUL

To protect our new home.

Soul puts the flower behind her ear. Reaching into her lap, Hannah holds up a small votive.

HANNAH

And these votives of elecampane to burn to keep away insects and demons...

SOUL

Including our own.

Hannah drops the votives on the ground and puts a hand to Soul's forehead.

HANNAH

You're burning up.

Soul shakes his head and with a smile, takes her hand away and kisses it tenderly.

SOUL

I've merely quit the body for a while.

Soul arises, cradling Hannah in his arms.

HANNAH

Sometimes I wish that was true.

SOUL

So don't send me away.

HANNAH

It's a year to the date.

SOUL

It was. It's so late it's already tomorrow.

HANNAH

Not yet-- there's still time.

Soul puts her down. Hannah digs through her backpack until she finds matches.

SOUL

But I'm still here. Let's say I've upped the air in a gamble. Because I've promised many things... promised you many things.

HANNAH
(digging furiously)

I forgot the matches.

SOUL

Don't forget me.

HANNAH

I'm not doing this to forget you.

SOUL

You don't have to do this at all.

HANNAH
(frustrated)

If only you hadn't been on that bus!

Hannah stops. There is a pause.

SOUL

I'm not gone yet. Because when I am, that's it. And there's no partaking of a cigarette in the after, no more faint words, falling asleep on a thought slowly coming apart. I'll be worse than a mute without a slate.

HANNAH

I want you to be at peace.

SOUL

I'm glad you weren't there with me, Hannah.

HANNAH

Were you? Wouldn't it be easier for both us if I was?

Suddenly Soul shivers and leans down to her.

SOUL

(tenderly)

Good thing you weren't leading us out of Egypt... It's going to snow, you little fool.

HANNAH

It doesn't matter. The cold is in my bones.

SOUL

Almost 3 in the morning. I should be on a bus to Masada by now. You went so often in the beginning, you were everywhere I went. Masada, Eliat, the Golan, the Galilee.

HANNAH

(as SOUL helps her up)

I won't forget.

SOUL

But then as time went on, you went on fewer and fewer of my tours--

HANNAH

Couldn't stay on an eternal vacation. I was falling behind in my own work.

SOUL

I, a mere tour guide, smoke and mirrors, and you a burgeoning woman of letters.

HANNAH

I thought you were the Great Leader. Guiding middle-aged American tourists across perilous channels, seemingly planned with unexpected detours.

SOUL

So you finally figured out how often I got lost, *nu?*

HANNAH

I always knew. From day one.

Hannah begins to unpack two glass jars from her backpack. One has a feather, one is empty. Hannah sets them down on the rock and takes the flower from behind her hair and turns it over in her hands.

SOUL

There's just so many things left... for us to consider. And I don't even mean the big ones. Not anymore. We've worn those out, *nachon*?

HANNAH (looking out
at audience)

The house isn't safe. It won't ever be. After tonight, I'm going to sell it.

SOUL

Our home.

HANNAH

It was never *our* home--

SOUL

--where I'd be sleeping next to you. Instead of bits of broken bone on the side of the road.

HANNAH

Stop it!

Soul goes to her.

SOUL

It should be easier, shouldn't it?

Hannah turns to her.

SOUL (CONT'D)
(CONTINUING)

In the pitch-black cold. Sometimes it's easier not to see what you're doing.

HANNAH

I feel like the ground has gone from me.

Hannah drops the rue and turns away, but Soul catches it in his hand.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
(CONTINUING)

I came to say Kaddish.

Hannah comes to Soul with a jar in each hands.

SOUL

To exorcise the demon.

HANNAH

I need to move on.

SOUL

I would've stuck with you through postpartum, menopause, bone loss, dementia. I bet you forgot how romantic I could be.

HANNAH

I've forgotten nothing.

SOUL

I'd hold you tight through those nights full of sparking wire and lead-hearted loneliness. Those nights full of demons, ready to swallow up anyone in their way.

He take the jars from her and looks into them.

HANNAH
(tracing a finger over the feather jar)

A feather from the rare Masada grackle...

Soul laughs.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
(closing a hand over the second)

And this one...

SOUL

You forgot.

HANNAH

This one you bottled the sounds of the two green bee-eaters.

SOUL

Their listless, endless calls to each other. Each in plain sight of the other. Each perched on a mesquite tree, until a Masada lark chased them away, one after the other...

HANNAH

The Masada crackle, the Masada lark...

SOUL

Chased them away although the lark was crippled and slower to move...

HANNAH

You made up all the names.

SOUL

I thought I was the Great Leader of Masada.

HANNAH

You were a horrible tour guide.

SOUL

I gave that tour in four different languages.

HANNAH

You were a wonderful poet. But there are no mesquite trees in Masada. There's nothing there but a large stone stuck in the sand.

SOUL

I'll have you know that right now, a helpless bunch of American Jews is climbing that large stone right now... God knows where they'll end up now.

HANNAH (managing a
small smile)

God knows, but their stomachs will be intact.

SOUL

Do you dare disdain the Great Leader?

HANNAH
(amused)

Who hands out warm milk and chocolate croissants for breakfast before a climb like that? And in the middle of August, when it's like a furnace before sunrise? I guess you forgot how sick it made me.

SOUL

And I guess you forgot who took care of you.

HANNAH

I'll never forget, though it could've been prevented if the Great Leader was wiser.

SOUL

And yet you went home with him that night and stayed for a year, how wise is that?

HANNAH

Wise, indeed.

SOUL

For almost five years, I listened to the *oohing* and *ahhing* over the stark beauty worthy of many panoramic photographs. They take photos of everything, everything in Israel is a symbol, every Israeli waitress is sacred. Every cab driver is a savant. And I am their divine authority, leading them around the ruins, their cameras snapping--

HANNAH

--as you embellished to the point of historical inaccuracy--

Soul laughs.

SOUL

But then, this pretty, young plant-lover kept correcting me. And when she wasn't correcting, she was questioning. Suddenly, I found we were lost in Ein Gedi.

HANNAH

Of course, I distracted you.

SOUL

I didn't mind.

HANNAH

Being wrong?

SOUL

No. Falling from my sacred savant status-- fell gladly. Gladly for those clumsy arms, someone to watch the sun go into the Judean desert in a faint dissolve.

HANNAH

You know, even when I correcting you, I didn't know... I was looking for someone who did. But then I found a scribbler who made mistakes. Who embellished because he loved a place that I'd never love like that. I wanted to hear everything. Even if I couldn't use it for my dissertation.

Soul takes a bow.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
(CONTINUING)

Before we met, it seemed no matter how long I stayed, the country would remain like a long-extended visit. I could always go back to America-- instead of falling in love with some prophet-poet molding history between his palms, rubbing them together as a reminder that he's waiting for his tip.

SOUL
(closing her hand over the empty jar)

The birds really are called green bee-eaters. In here I caught their calls.

HANNAH

And you bottled up their fears.

SOUL

The problem with that is once it's opened, you only get to hear it once. Then you lose it for good.

HANNAH

No-- I'll always remember.

SOUL

The sound--

HANNAH

Not the sound but the moment. It's the best I can do.

Soul sets them down on the rock, and puts the backpack on her shoulder.

SOUL

Now shall I give you the grand tour and then we'll go home?

HANNAH
(taking off backpack)

I know it by heart.

SOUL

I have an idea: let's make a new story.

HANNAH

That wouldn't make any difference. It still will have happened, and we'll still be here.

SOUL

But at least we can try to replace it with something else.

HANNAH

We tried that last time.

Soul takes her into his arms and they began to dance around the stage in a sort of waltz.

SOUL

You are a celebrated military heroine. A real “Mother in Israel.” Lioness of the Sinai covenant, and God help those who cross you and your people....Poets are consumed with you. Amichai in his blessed grave is beside himself with desire and pride. Prodigies abandon everything they know to write that you are the fury in the crashing of the cymbals, you are a lioness of the Sinai, you’re a Sinai War paratrooper who retook Jerusalem in 67.

HANNAH

I must be exhausted.

SOUL

And you were in all the battalions: cobra, viper, *echis*. And after seeing so much battle, nothing can get past you.

Hannah pulls away.

HANNAH

More like I can’t get past what happened. What *really*-- happened.

SOUL

Wait, wait. Let me try again. Let’s make it simple. I’m just temporarily held-up. I’m trying to get Bezek to come over and fix the phone-

HANNAH

No. I can’t do this anymore. I’m lost in the widening between us. In this terrible stirring. Like I fall asleep with pins sticking in me.

SOUL

I can feel your cold feet pressing up on my legs.

HANNAH

But *I don’t feel* you.

Soul reaches for her, but Hannah pulls away.

SOUL

Because now your face is always slightly turned away no matter how you lay. The Hannah I know isn’t filled with such cold. The Hannah I know--

HANNAH

The Hannah you know is gone. She died with you.

SOUL

Hannah--

HANNAH

(suddenly)

I need you to forgive me!

There is a pause.

SOUL

There's nothing to forgive. It wasn't your fault.

HANNAH

So why do I feel guilty?

Hannah starts to cry and then they fall into an embrace. After a pause, Soul begins to speak.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

I miss you. I miss you so much I don't think I'll ever lose this cold in my bones.

She looks ready to lose it when Soul goes over to the rock and blows out the votives. Then Soul hold out the jar that "holds" the call of bee-eaters.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Tell me they were there with us at Masada. The trees. The little green birds.

SOUL

Open it. You'll hear it.

HANNAH

Tell me you'll still be there when I wake up in the morning.

SOUL

It's morning already. I'm here.

HANNAH

Tell me again-- through postpartum, menopause, bone loss, dementia.

SOUL

Don't let me go, Hannah. Keep me here.

Hannah takes the jar uncertainly as Soul finds the springs of Syrian rue and puts them back behind her ear.

HANNAH

The silence of Syrian rue... you told me that story but I've forgotten it already... I'm starting to forget, Ephraim.... I'm so tired...

Soul sits down onto the rock and Hannah falls into her lap. They resume the position at the beginning of the scene, with Soul's eyes closed and his arms locked around Hannah. They hold the position in a profound silence.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

We'd be watching the sun rise over the desert. And for a moment, you'd stop scribbling your stories to let us watch in silence. You loved it too, you kept loving it, no matter how many times you did it. That silence-- was that the silence of Syrian rue? Tell me again so I won't forget... I still want things. I want to know everything.... Tell me once more...

Hannah opens the jar and the lights brighten to nearly blind the audience and then BLACK OUT.

Author Bio

Rosebud Ben-Oni graduated from New York University, where she won the Seth Barkas Prize for Best Short Story and The Thomas Wolfe/Phi Beta Kappa Prize for Best Poetry Collection. During her study at NYU, she was also a Leopold Schepp Scholar. She was a Rackham Merit Fellow at the University of Michigan where she earned a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry, and was a Horace Goldsmith Scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where she completed post-graduate research. A graduate of the 2010 Women's Work Lab, she is a playwright at New Perspectives Theater.

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