

Le câlin infini

Devora Neumark

traduit de l'anglais (Canada) par **Hélène Thibodeau**

Dear Ms. Neumark,

As per your instructions and according to our agreement, a crew was dispatched to your residence on Saturday November 23 to do a waterproofing application on approximately 12 feet of the eastern foundation of the kitchen extension. After having excavated the area, it was established that in fact there is no foundation under the wall in question. There exist only two stone-fabricated posts that seem to be the only support allotted to that area of the building.

Further this revelation leads us to assume, without actually having excavated, that the other two walls of the extension are supported in the same manner. This seems strange and would be non-conforming to all building codes, as someone had installed a brick facing on the other two walls without (apparently) a proper support of a footing and foundation wall underneath.

Given the above development, and, as per your instructions, we agree not to continue with the work, and regret we cannot complete our contract, as it exists. Please advise me of your decision as to how you intend on proceeding.

Very Truly Yours,

Les Services S. Services (Montreal)

Dear Shirley,

For so long I took it for granted that I could simply drive out to see you. Now, with you having ceded to me your birthplace and moving an ocean away—our time zones mismatched to each other's rhythms—, I've finally had to learn how to hold myself, something you had little preparation for before your mother died. I'm reminded how eight years ago, at the age of three and in hushed tones, Léa told me what it was like to have been in my womb. Her grabbing me the other day and saying, "No, you cannot go, I am holding you in a *câlin infini*" even as she knew and acknowledged the impossibility of this with the laughter in her eyes, made me aware of what I have known for some time. The only place to be held in the way that I am longing for is within one's own heart.

Faithful witness to my creative practice, you know perhaps more than anyone how the work I have been doing to examine and release that which blinds and wounds between mother and daughter is not just personal or particular to me. With this work I am reminded how what one expects to see is all one sees.

I know well the fear of letting go one's victim identity, the almost absurd desire to hold on to what is familiar, however painful, because of the certain comfort it offers. I know the suffering this creates. Since finding out about the lack of foundation under the kitchen of this house I recently bought, I cannot help but see the metaphoric relationship between this absence and the absence of mother and the longing for her love. In many ways, finding out about the latent defect in this house has helped me to see just how much the absence and longing for mother is perhaps the greatest *vice caché* of contemporary society. I feel so saddened that in our fear we have rejected what loving is available. We have more than turned our backs.

We have used our pain as a weapon, scarring and tormenting with our actions, our words and intentions.

With love,
Devora

Dear Shirley,

How is it that the very stories that could make all the difference are kept silenced and secret? Je dois savoir que mon grand-père maternel a vu sa propre sœur mourir dans ses bras lors d'un pogrom en Pologne si je veux espérer comprendre et pardonner la violence dont j'ai moi-même été victime étant enfant. Je dois également savoir que mon père et sa famille ont été expulsés de leur maison lorsque mon père était encore enfant.

I think of how you and Eliyahu joined the sitting one Tuesday during the summer of 2000 when I was out by Frontenac metro as part of *The Art of Conversation*. Do you remember as vividly as I how upset and uncomfortable he was sitting in the living room space I created on the sidewalk? When I asked him a few days later what was it that disturbed him he told me of how sitting on the couch outdoors had triggered a memory that he had long ago forgotten of when he was a little boy growing up in Russia. I'm certain that it was the telling that allowed him to realize what had made him so uncomfortable.

He told me how he was responsible for closing the curtains every Friday night before his mother would *bench licht* (light the Sabbath candles). As he recalled the time he had forgotten

to close the curtains, he haltingly spoke of the Jewish neighbor who denounced his family to the local authorities. He talked about how he and his family were evicted from their home and how they were forced to live on the street and by lodging temporarily with others while their house stood locked and inaccessible for months.

I need not tell you of the impact of this early childhood expulsion. He has long carried his sense of fear, guilt and anger around this incident without being aware of how it has influenced the atmosphere in our own home as I was growing up and still affects the home he shares with you. Did you never wonder why *bench licht* was so fraught with anxiety, fear and urgency?

With love,
Devora

Dear Shirley,

I remember how you stood by your mother's casket (coming as close to crying as you dared), pleading with her to forgive you, saying: "I have tried to be a good girl, I have tried to be a worthy daughter." Did you know I witnessed you in this?

How could I have anticipated the place of darkness I would come to inhabit (or more accurately come to realize I have inhabited for forty-two years) triggered by your leaving? I want to describe to you the process of finding that part of me still stuck in the back room of the Brooklyn apartment I was placed in during the long-ago fight. Yet how can I put words to the sensations of being unable to move, to reach the door handle or open the light in the

midst of the sun's total eclipse? Part of me has lived in abject darkness and fear ever since. Holding ground, I've lived moment-by-moment tasting, breathing, shitting fear—a fear felt sheer to my bones. I couldn't imagine embracing that little-girl-self of barely three and my grown-women-self of forty-five, else I would become fear itself.

In the darkest hours, during a moment stretching skin and soul taut to infinity, I called to you: "Help me, I need you." The gift of your response was: "I too ask this of my mother." My heart ached with compassion for you, for your mother, for me, for my children and the children of all children. In your response I came to understand how, though you couldn't carry me in/through my fear, you at least felt the trust enough to admit your own to me. And this was the greatest gift you could give me.

With love,
Devora

Dear Shirley,

Last week in the space of meditation, I became aware of a most wondrous sensation beyond time and without thought. Suspended in and contained by a pulsing life force it was as if I was reliving my experience in your womb. Sensing all as sound—my entire body felt like a hearing organ. Back in January, on my birthday, you asked me if I remembered my birth. After saying no slowly while lingering on the question—taking time to get over the surprise of your asking—, you proceeded to tell me that it was a beautiful and easy birth. With the time of my gestation so re-membered, I

accept that though you could not protect me nor be wholly present once I was born, you gave yourself totally for the time I was still within you. The joy and love of life that I felt then, that has always been a part of me—though sometimes eclipsed by life's harsh events—, is also who you are, who you have always been. I rejoice with you in this.

With love,
Devora

Dear Shirley,

Last night and this morning I went to sleep and woke with such a sense of your presence. In my sleep I heard my name called out and today opened my email to find your words: "The article is very well written, and is sensitive, true. I put off reading it until I felt I could cope with whatever it was you had written, but, as it turned out, I was taken by it. Good luck, and love." With your response to the first draft of this text, I have been able to make a choice to focus directly on the correspondence between the two of us instead of including letters to friends that initially were part of this text—allowing the trembling to be, the vulnerability, the fragility—and to find strength by doing so. Now, having thought myself free, I can begin to really mother myself well and embrace my capacity to mother my children. How simple really the way that affirmation and acceptance releases us both.

With love,
Devora

Dear Ms. Neumark,

With reference to the problem with your property, we summarize as follows: if you had an inspection done on the property prior to acquiring it and this problem was not visible to the inspector this becomes a hidden defect and the old owners are responsible; if no such inspection was carried out then you must carry out the work yourself. On the other hand, if such report exists and you were advised prior to buying the house about the lack of foundation, then again you must assume the cost of the repairs.

Sincerely,

L.M.

Avocats / Barristers & Solicitors