

Meditation on Love at Night.

PEEPERS: Pseudacris crucifer an inch long, dark stripe on side of head; dark X markings on back. In winter, water in their bodies can freeze. During spring mating, thousands of males, each calling with a shrill, continuously repeated “peep” can be heard for miles.

Outside, the peepers called.

Inside, Chandra, her belly distended to near translucence, muttered in her sleep. Once lithe as a gymnast, she now walked spraddle legged, her tumescence steering her as if she were the wayward child of her own pregnancy.

Outside, the peepers chorused.

Inside, I remembered I hadn't lit a yarhtzeit candle for my mother's death a year ago.

The moon broke above the birch trees at the edge of the pond. The mullions cast shadow crosses on the bare, pine floor. The peepers cried, 'Spring/sprung. Spring/sprung.'

Chandra rolled toward me. Her nightgown cinched around her swollen middle. I put my lips to the inside of her wrist. It felt moist. Her skin smelled fecund. Her fingers closed. Her lips moved, she exhaled.

The streaming cadence of the peepers beckoned, 'Come see spring sprung/Come see spring sprung.' I slipped from bed. The floor was cool. Chandra curled around her second

self. The peepers drummed. I pulled on shorts; stepped over the palm print Chandra had painted on the threshold.

In the curtain dimmed moonlight of the sleep drenched house, walking was like swimming. Pale shafts of light dissolved the edges of the stairs. The clock radio's green glow and the blinking red light of the phone served as navigational buoys. A bassinet piled with tiny blankets, the chromium legs of the highchair loomed like shoals. The glass framed photographs were whited out: me on my mother's lap; me hidden under dark curls, playing with Sam; Chandra in pigtails; Chandra posed with my mother. On the kitchen table, a cutting from the lilac bush wavered next to Chandra's tea cup. Polo floated up and nudged my hand with her cold nose. I gave her a biscuit; stepped into my sneakers.

The back door clipped shut behind me. At the pond's edge the peepers' tiny, iridescent eyes glinting, bobbed. Their throats pulsated. They clambered one atop another, wedged sideways, tipped over. Some, in mid cry, slipped back into the water. A bat swooped. The peepers' notes rose in pitch.

A stone shattered the pond's surface. The ripples silenced the peepers. Near the ferns, at the edge of the pond, a small boy half hidden under dark, curtly hair searched for another stone.

"Don't you like the sound of the peepers?" I asked.

He pointed behind him.

Stephanie sat on the moonlit stone bench her blond hair in a thick braid. Her legs were bare. The peepers exploded in renewed frenzy.

Stephanie twisted the end of her braid. "No, hello?"

"I'm hoarse from long silence."

"What a quaint greeting. Who are you quoting?"

"No one." I rubbed my ankle with the toe of my sneaker.

"You're looking good."

She lowered her head. "I've put on weight."

"How's Chris?"

"Fine. Working hard." She fingered her ring. "You're up late. You've got no socks on. Are you coming or going?"

"I live here." I pointed. "House, pond. I'm married."

"I heard." She turned her hands palm up in her lap. "I've forgotten her name."

"Chandra."

"Pretty name." She smiled. "I hope your mother is pleased."

I shrugged. "Yours should really be."

"Touché." She laughed.

"How old's the boy?"

"Don't you know?" She crossed her legs, tugged down on her skirt. Her foot swung back and forth. "Take a good look."

I knelt on the damp grass; looked into the boy's mirror black eyes. "What's your name?"

He cocked his head. His lips moved. The peepers screamed.

A jumble of words, words I could not say to this boy image in the uncertain light beside the peepers' pond: *'there is upstairs a child to be a little like you, dreaming of peepers inside his mother's inland pond,'*

The boy, eyes fixed on me, retreated; buried his face in Stephanie's lap. She ran her fingers through his black curls.

"Jesus. Is he? Does Chris know? How did this

happen? Why didn't you say anything?"

"How did this happen?" She covered the boy's ears. "In the usual way I assure you. It's the anniversary..."

"I had no idea. Steph. I . . ."

"Of course you had no idea. I didn't tell you."

"I ..." I stood. "He's beautiful."

"Shh." She made the sign of the cross over him. "You don't need to say anything. He's mine." She pressed him tight. "All mine. It was an accident. You were too young. Too full of yourself. Everything was a joke, whether others got it or not you'd laugh. And you were always going on about that girl, what was her name?"

"Jennifer."

"And, at first I didn't know what I was going to do." She smoothed her skirt. "It hurt. For a long time really, it hurt. But, I got well. On my own, like a tree around a stone, pain must be absorbed." In the moonlight her eyes shifted from blue to black. "And, thank God, there was Christopher."

"You should have told me, Stephanie. I would have"

"You would have what? You abandoned me."

"A vile thing to say. I did not. I called. You should have said something. I'm not like that Stephanie."

"Really?" Stephanie stroked the boy's back.

"No, damn you. It was one year. Give myself one year, in L.A. Find out if I had the discipline. Vindicate my mother's faith in her son's talent. I called and called. You never answered. Not a word, not even..."

Stephanie tilted her head. "What was there to say? To whom? You were gone. I was pregnant. One year? To confirm your mother's faith? Listen to yourself, even now.

Don't be absurd." She flipped her braid behind her. "I'm fine. No thanks to you. Christopher is very good. He gets along perfectly with my parents; he's a wonderful father."

She smiled. "He dotes on the boy."

"I'm glad, Stephanie. Really." The peepers trilled. "Does Chris know?"

"Of course not." Stephanie touched the gold cross at her throat. "Why should he? He had a Jewish grandmother. There are old photos. Everyone is satisfied. Pleased, actually." With one finger she turned her ring around.

I took a step closer. "Were you miserable when I did love you?"

"I don't know. It wasn't love. I'm happy now."

The boy tugged at her dress.

I reached a hand out. "Should I tell him?"

She shook her head. The shadow of my hand passed over his face. He shrank against his mother.

Stephanie stood. "You mustn't abandon Chandra."

"Abandon Chandra? That's outrageous."

"You don't understand. How could you? You poor boy, you know nothing. Every pregnant woman feels abandoned, transformed; feelings, tastes, smells. The real world is submerged, leaving us in a sea of doubts. Consumed from within. You will never understand. Look at you standing there, while your wife sleeps alone. But not alone, never again alone." She brushed the boy's hair. "Only abandoned by you."

The boy pressed against Stephanie's hip, tugged on her arm. She took his hand, turned toward the house. Her braid

swayed.

The ferns fluttered. The shrill of the peepers rose.

A year ago, at mother's funeral, rabbi Stein handed me the square of torn, black cloth. Chandra pinned it to my jacket. Sammy's plane was snowbound in Chicago. The rabbi's prayers clung in white splotches to his beard. He passed me the shovel. Star bursts of ice crystals flared in the falling dirt. Between spadefuls I wiped at my eyes. Chandra leaned against me.

The Peepers paused. In the silence, Polo came bounding out, behind her my mother dressed in black, her blanched face pinched; her voice sibilant, "You don't look well. Have you finished your book, yet?"

"Mom. It's Sammy who's writing a book."

"But, look at you. Why don't you have socks on? That's how you catch cold. You don't have anything wrong with your feet do you?"

"No, Mom. My feet are fine. It's spring. I don't need socks. I'm not going anywhere." Polo sat at mother's feet, ears erect. The peepers renewed their calls. "Hear the peepers?"

"Is that the racket?" Mother winced, pressed her hands to her side. "Can't you do something?"

"It's their mating call."

"It must be very hard to sleep."

"Not at all. We live here. This is our place, our home, our pond." The peepers throbbed.

"A grown up boy. Mazel tov. But how grown up is it to be

outside in the middle of the night with no socks?" Polo crept forward; stretched out. "At bed time, every night, I had to sing you a lullaby. 'Gone is the sun,' over and over and over again. Remember?" A single strand of pearls gleamed at her neck. In the moonlight, her lips were black. "How spoiled you were. You wouldn't go play until I buttered your toast and sprinkled cinnamon sugar on it. Such a little kvetch. If you didn't like something you had a belly ache." Her lips contracted. She pressed a fist to her side. "Are you eating right, now, at least?"

"Mom, Chandra is an excellent cook."

"What would my little, cinnamon toast boy know from excellent cook?" She touched the pearls at her throat. "That Chandra was a sly one. She saw something good when she looked at you - a green card."

"Mother, please."

"What, mother please. People who don't know think she's a shvartzeh. Not that I have anything against them." Her bone thin fingers spread wide. "What was wrong with a nice, Jewish girl like, Jennifer Toltz?" A cloud drifted in front of the moon. The peepers' calls cascaded. "You had to chase a blond. She called, you know. The shiksa called but I wouldn't take a message."

"Stephanie called? You never said."

"Was that her name? I must have forgot. There's nothing to be upset about. People forget."

"I'm not upset, Mom. It was a long time ago."

She reached to caress me. A shadow crossed my cheek. "And that dark girl? the one who's a good cook."

"She is. You've said so yourself. You praised her curry."

We're married. We're going to have a baby."

"A baby? How should a boykin like you be making a baby? You know from nothing about babies. Once, for five minutes, just once, I left you to look after Samuel. Next thing he is screaming and covered in blood. What kind of a person would do that?" She pressed her hands to her midsection. "An accident, you said. Accidents come from God." Her fingers trembled. "Always, you. You think only of yourself."

"It's in the past, Mom. We've been through all that. Are you cold? Do you want to come inside."

"I'm always cold. It's the pain. It doesn't matter." She tugged at the sleeve of her dress. "First you were a baby and then you abandoned me for Los Angeles. You needed to be a somebody. Did you think because you were first born you would always be best loved?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"A question from a mother to her boyson. How could so picky an eater be such a sponge of love? How could a person like you have a baby? There'd be no room in your heart."

"Aren't you pleased about a grandson?"

"I could wait for a Jewish one."

"Why come then?"

"For a candle. A remembrance. Something. Anything."

Polo stood and shook herself. Mother turned towards the house. Over her shoulder she said, "There's no entitlement to love. A child, like the tide, pulls your heart but there are storms. Always storms." The back door closed behind Polo.

A breeze stirred the grass. My sneakers were soaked. I felt chilled. The peepers throbbed. I closed the back door muffling their sound. I toed off my sneakers. Polo's tail thumped the floor. My bare toes left damp marks on each stair tread.

Outside the peepers cries rose and fell in waves.

Inside, mother, wound in Chandra's silk shawl, stood at the foot of our bed. Stephanie lay with her hair fanned out over my pillow. She held Chandra's dark head against her pale breast.

Mother sang: "Day is done. Gone the sun." Her voice was sweet and low.

Eyes closed, Chandra's mouth curved in a smile. She took Stephanie's hand; put it on her engorged belly. "Do you feel it moving?"

"Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. Will it hurt?"

"Of course and for a long time, too."

"Pain is like love. It never goes away."