

## Cause of Death.....Gomer's daughter speaks

### The book of Hosea

One thing you have to know about me. I'm careful with words.

*Here's a word: "orphan".*

Is this word what I have become? Yes it is. *Orphan*. This word, is this the right one, for this moment in my life?

Let it be so for now; let it be....

A container into which I pour this new experience – at least until I can mix it up, season and stir it a bit, swish it around and then tip it to my lips to see if it will stay down, if it will please my palate and feel good in my belly?

*Orphan.*

I will try it out.

I don't know if you've ever had to face the death of your last parent – have you? That's what I'm doing now. It's strange, I find....when *one* parent is gone, and the other is still alive, that's one thing. But when both are gone...for good...

I've been estranged from my parents most of my life. Somewhere, though, in the deepest part of me there was always a little fluttering hope, a fairy tale waiting to be told of how we all met up again, everything was forgiven, and we all lived happily ever after. It was always there: an impossible, childish seed of hope that kept sprouting and being aborted, chewed to bits by reality grubs inching their blind way through the soil of my immature dreams. Then they'd sprout again. Fairy tales just don't know when to give up. "It could happen" the fairies said. In response, the sprout munching grubs whispered "Your parents didn't want you– they are lost to you. It's over.

It's over.

But still, the fairies would lay on the manure, and that thing kept sprouting. Like a mustard seed, or a dandelion that just won't quit.

So – even though we were estranged, it's not the same as knowing they are dead.

Coldly, finally dead.

Bones and decaying gristle, in the tomb dead.

THAT'S different.

What will happen to that little sprout now? Even now I feel it inside me; the little sprout-like fairy voice saying “you’ll see them again, Rue – with all our ancestors, on the other side of the rainbow”.

Well - let the sprout spout.

Me? I don’t know what I think about that. Will I see them in some other life? For now I leave that to the soil of my dreams and whatever germination the fairies will conjure up next. I need to get down to business.

My mother is dead. I never imagined it would feel like.....like this.

Oh – that’s the other thing you need to know. I’m the last in my family now. The last one living. The next in line to die. My grandmother who raised me, bless her memory – my grandmother has been gone for many years now. Father as well. And my brothers – both of them killed in war. Not even war truly. That’s too dignified a word for it. Local skirmishes; men proving some point that not even they understand. Too much theology mixed with testosterone is a deadly combination. And so my brothers too are dead. That – that leaves me.

And so here I am, alone, called at the death of my mother. It’s up to me, apparently, to deal with what remain of her possessions, and to fill out the hellish paperwork that will make her death official to the state. What will make it official to ME – we’ll have to see.

I haven’t seen her in years. She has been my mother in name only. And in blood. I don’t know if that makes this easier – or more difficult.

I suppose the easiest thing to do is simply start. One step at a time, that’s what Ama always said. When you have a difficult thing to do, just put one foot in front of another.

Will you stay with me while I fill this paper out? It will be one less thing to do, and I’ll feel as though at least I’ve accomplished something today. And if you stay with me, perhaps....perhaps it will help.

NAME OF DECEASED. That’s easy. I can fill that in right now. Gomer is (was) her name. No, IS. Gomer IS her name. Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. It was she, Dimlaim, my grandmother, (we called her Ama) who raised us. Gomer is my mother’s name. I’m ashamed to say I know very little else about her. Like you, I have the scroll that scribes have prepared – collections of my father’s speeches, and what he chose to tell us about her. Hardly a balanced account, as you will see. But there it is.

NAME OF HUSBAND: You know my father – you would call him the prophet Hosea. Me? I don’t know him as a prophet – in fact, I don’t know him at all. I do know he had a passion – perhaps passion isn’t the right word. There was no - no *juice* in him, do you know what I mean? Only dry, fleshless words, and heat. Not a comforting, warming heat - but rather words and stares meant for singeing the spirit of whoever disagreed with him.

Hosea. The prophet Hosea.

We called him Adonai, “my lord”. Not papa, not any childish name for knee bouncing and beard tickling....none of that for us. Adonai. My Lord.

He was not a man, I believe, who would have chosen to marry, except that he received (apparently, I don't know how these things work) he received a word from his God to marry my mother.

For love? Oh no, not for that. For the begetting of children to carry on his line? Not even that. He was called by his God to marry my mother *to make a theological point. For an idea.*

You see, my mother was....

Oh here is the blank on the form “OCCUPATION” – my mother was a harlot.

If you know a bit about our land, you might ask “what KIND of harlot?” And you would be right to ask that. You see – there is more than one meaning for that word. Some women, out of desperation and poverty, sell their bodies to feed themselves and their children. (How this is different in many cases from marriage I have asked often and always been shussed but never answered)

There are others, who service the soldiers

and others who are the harlots of the high ranking government officials. They make quite a good living I am told, until they grow old, or unpleasant to look at.

Still others are priestesses at the temples of gods foreign to Israel. It is an act of worship and devotion to serve in such a capacity, at least that's how they see it. Everything depends on how you name things, doesn't it?

So there. OCCUPATION – harlot. What that means in my mother's case has never been clear even to me. Here in my father's scroll, it is not clear, not in my own memory or understanding. Listen to what it says:

READ CHAPTER 1: 2 and 3

It's funny....when I was given her things today, this small sack of her belongings, the first thing I did was to lift her robe to my face to see if it smelled like....like her. Like my memory of her.

It did not.

It smelled of dust, and stale sweat, and cinnamon – not the fragrance I remember at all. I think I also recall singing, and a large room where we all (many of us, my older brother, my baby brother, our mom – and many others; I don't know who) bathed in sweet scented water and ate figs with honey. Isn't it funny, what things the memory clings to? Or do they cling to *us* of their own accord, knowing more than we, what it is we'll need in times to come?

I remember the feeling of being safe there, buoyed up by that water, at home in myself and in the world. I think that was perhaps the only time I have felt that way. My father was not there. I'm sure of that. My memories of him are not of scent, but of sound.

His voice like thunder – and always angry, it seemed.

What I learned later is that we was a prophet. A visionary. Called by his God to speak truth into the insanity that had become our country and its leadership.

What a shock for me to hear others speak of him in that way – so highly – I had no idea that he was respected, and feared (the fear I can understand) but respected and honoured by so many! Children's understandings of their parents are so...well, you know what I mean.

So...he was a prophet, called by his God to speak truth. And he did. He was very good at it. Admired by all the God fearing people of not only his own time, but every age since. His words, you call Holy Scripture! I have to learn to remember that and hold it in some balance. All I remember is that he was hardly ever home, and when he WAS, he was angry. Read his scroll for yourself – here's an example.

Chapter 4: 6-12

Everything for him was a concept. And idea. A symbol.

Even us. Even his wife. His sons, his daughter.

His ideas were good; don't get me wrong – but they had nothing to balance them, nothing to fill them out, no moisture, no life, no... dirt between their toes and certainly no laughter.

Funny – among my mother's things, I found a crude drawing made by one of us when we were very small., A child's drawing. It was of father. A biiiig head, mouth open, eyes narrowed. Tiny legs and arms beneath. I think that was more than a child's lack of proportion. It's how I would draw him today. All head. Do you know what I mean? All head.

He married my mother to make a political point. She was for him - a *sermon illustration*. The point was this: just as my mother, his wife, was a harlot who slept with other men, so Israel was unfaithful to the One True God by lusting after other gods.

Ok. I get that. Couldn't he have just SAID it?

And then, when we were born, he named us. First my brother Jez. Jezreel is his name. It means "God sows". Ok....Then, as the country grew worse and worse, I was born. Lo Ruhamah is my given name. It means....

It means not loved.

As a sermon illustration, I understand the point. Actually come to think of it no I don't. God – threatening the people, God saying that because of our idolatry God would withhold love, would not love, would not forgive, would not pity us...would withdraw Divine favour and enjoy the pain we suffered as a result? This is not the God I know, nor is it the God the scriptures hold most dear. So – even as an idea of God, to call me "Lo Ruhamah" "not loved" doesn't work.

*But I was a little girl! In the name of any God, how could a father do that? I was a little girl.* I didn't understand any of that. All I knew was that my name was Not Loved, and how can anyone grow up whole, sane, faithful, with a name like that? I needed someone to pick me up and swing me around and braid my hair and wipe my nose – I needed to be REAL. Not some symbol. A metaphor. An idea. A cardboard cutout of a child that he could dress in paper clothing to make his point in the public arena.

I do remember that my mother never called me that. I'm remembering that right now as I speak to you about it. I haven't thought about that in years. "Ruhamah" she would rock me and say you are my little Ruhamah

Loved - you are loved.

But when my father came near – Lo Ruhamah it had to be. Not loved.

My little brother was called "Lo Ammi" "You don't belong to me" that means. "Not my child".

We called him Ammi. He was too young to go into that ridiculous battle that took his life. His death nearly killed Ama. I wonder sometimes what would have become of us had we not been named as we were? Be very careful, please – the words and names you give to people. Lives are at stake.

In fact – this blank here, on the form? CAUSE OF DEATH – for my mother, as well as my brothers – Cause of Death? Metaphor. Death by theological concept.

You know - I may be more my father's daughter than he or I knew. I feel an oracle rising within me. Listen to me, my people. Whatever kingdom of faithfulness God calls us to, includes the frailties as well as the glory of our kind; the shades of grey of human existence. Not abstracts, not theories and thoughts but real flesh and blood - The tastes of wine and bread, the smell of honest living, the touch of a friend and the way a piece of broken pottery can shine in a mud puddle as a thing so beautiful it could bring tears to your eyes, and draw you in like a sky full of stars. If the call of the Almighty does not include those things – then it is no call at all. And the Holy One – The Holy One does not ask anyone to sacrifice a child on the altar of an idea. The ears that claim to hear such a call are blocked with the wax of too much theology and not enough God. And the ram caught by the horns in the thicket of your misguided idea will testify with its final bleat before the blade cuts off its warm and precious life forever – it will testify that whatever this is, it is NOT of God. When the life is drained out by blade or by words it is not of God. Period.

Any God who calls you to ignore your child no matter WHAT the cause, is no God at all. So give your wooly prophet's head a shake and see who is REALLY worshipping an idol here.

I don't remember being taken to live with Ama – or why – but our mother had gone away again as she often did, and father was never home – and we just – just went to be with Ama and never left. She forbade us to speak of them, and even though this sounds terrible, that didn't bother me at all. I loved Ama, and she was kind, and made the best date cakes ever.

Now that I think of it, my parents became for me what we had always been to my father – ideas. Fleshless memories. And so it was that I grew up - safe in the home of my beloved Ama – my Grandmother Diblaim.

Never once did I think of what my mother had to say, if anything, about our leaving. And never once did I imagine that father even noticed we were gone.

When I read the scroll that bears his name – the middle chapters of warnings and curses were so like him I could hear his voice in the pages. Bu then I came to this:

HOSEA 11

And I thought – there’s real feeling there. For Israel, yes I get that, but beneath the skin of that image beats something else – something real – almost human. Did he feel that way about us? When we left?

Just today, though, among mom’s things, I found a scroll. I think it is written in her own hand. I don’t know she could write but I’m sure this is her hand. The force of that – even apart from the words themselves and what they mean – the fact that these are her marks on this scroll. She made them with her own hand. I can see the distinctive way she forms her letters....there is such power in that I had no idea. Do you feel that way about handwriting? It reveals so much and is so...so intimate. There are people who say that some day machines will write for us. Much will be lost if that is so. My mother’s own hand – I will treasure this scroll always. But listen it’s even better than this – listen to what she wrote.

QUOTE SOME OF CHAPTER 11 AGAIN

*Can it be that in the end, my parents worked together – I can’t imagine it, but I would like to. That mother went home in the end, (he bought her back you know....at great expense to himself both financially and personally I’m told) can it be that in the end some of his words are hers as well; that the vision of God the aching parent who loves the child no matter what – that the experience of God the cuckolded lover who never gives up and whose lover returns; the wound healed and the relationship restored....can it be that this comes from the actual experience of my parents who may have found one another truly in the end and worked together on the words that would tell about hope that is crazy beyond belief but all the more real for its insanity?*

I choose to believe it is so. I will now hold my memories in the container of gentle words; reframing them if I have to, so that I can go on. Who knows what the truth is beneath this scroll? I have told you my own truth, and we know there is so much more. You choose – you choose the words to complete this story and your own.

And so the final blank space – FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED – is for me and for you to fill in as the Spirit leads.

