

The Makeup Artist

She wanted to fix more than just faces



AS TOLD TO CHAYA SILBER

I was putting the finishing touches on the *kallah's* makeup at the wedding hall. Tensions were already high when the *machateneste* motioned for me to take a break for a moment. I followed her into a side room in the bridal suite, and she closed the door.

"So, Raizy, I just wanted to mention something. You're doing an amazing job, by the way. Shani's face is glowing."

"Uh, okay..." I was in a rush to finish with the *kallah* as I had another three faces to do before the *chuppah*. It was odd for her to call me out in the middle of working when I was under such pressure.

"So, uh, after the *kallah* you'll be doing her mother. Her real mother," she added in a whisper, seeing the confusion on my face.

"I'm Shani's stepmother. I married her father when she was a baby, and we have full custody. I just wanted you to know."

"I see," I said, though I really didn't know where she was going with this. The *kallah's* biological mother deserved the same time and attention as any other member of the wedding party. Perhaps more.

"So her relationship with Shani is a little awkward, and things haven't been going so well lately," Shani's stepmother continued. "You see, her mother didn't raise her, and she's not walking her to the *chuppah*, which she's very sensitive about. So I think it's better to do her makeup here, away from everyone else. I don't want her to say something, and then Shani might become upset."

"Are you serious? You're going to punish Shani's mother by making me do her face in a corner somewhere, away from the

wedding party?" I was genuinely confused. "Isn't she being punished enough?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're telling me that you are not Shani's biological mother. And that the woman who gave birth to her but didn't have the privilege of raising her also won't be walking her to the *chuppah*. That's a tremendous amount of pain and agony that this poor woman is experiencing on the night of her child's wedding. And now you want to make it worse by putting her in a small room and keeping her away from the *kallah* so that she won't be able to spend some quality time with her before the *chuppah*? Do you really want to do this?"

The woman's shoulders sagged. "I didn't do it that way," she said in a small voice. "I'm just trying to protect Shani."

"Of course you never thought of it that

way," I responded. "Because you were never in this woman's shoes, thank G-d, and never felt the agony of watching your own flesh and blood get married without you. But I have. I know what it feels like. I don't wish that *gehinom* on anyone."

My eyes filled, and I reached blindly for a tissue. "I'm sorry. I'm just very emotional because I'm reliving my own pain. Do me a favor. Please, please, be gentle with Shani's real mother. Don't make her agony worse."

"You're right," said Shani's stepmother. "You're so right, and I'm sorry."

There was a soft knock on the door. "The *kallah* is waiting," said her younger sister. "And also, tell Mommy that Shani's mother is here."

I went back to finish with the *kallah*, trying to gather the strength to deal with her biological mother, the heroic woman who would need all her strength and courage to get through this interminable night since she would be reminded at every turn of the *nachas* denied her.

I had no idea of the circumstances that had led Shani's father and his wife to obtain full custody, nor was it my business. Two years ago, I, too, had experienced the agony of marrying off my precious daughter as an outsider.

Twenty years earlier, I had gotten engaged relatively young, at 19-and-a-half, to one of the most sought-after boys. In addition to being a top learner, Yosef was charming, intelligent, and very handsome. He came from a well-connected family; his father was an influential businessman, and his mother was involved in numerous *chesed* activities. In my own family, my father was a respected *maggid shiur* in a prestigious *yeshivah*, and my mother worked as a kindergarten *morah*. They were very nice, *chashuve* people who had no airs about them.

Needless to say, my parents could not of-

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fer any support, but Yosef's parents had no issue with that. I was so excited and grateful that I had been chosen from his long list of potential dates that I failed to read the warning signs.

We got married, had a fairy-tale wedding, and soon moved to Eretz Yisrael on cloud nine to begin our new life together. During those early days, I had no inkling that my enchanted life would soon descend into a nightmare.

The trouble started early on, but it was subtle at first, and so discreet that I assumed I'd imagined it. It began with comments about my appearance, my job, my choice of friends, and my intelligence.

The numerous friends we'd consulted for information about Yosef hadn't lied. He was exceptionally charming, ambitious, and learned. At the same time, he was quite manipulative, insisting on controlling every detail of our lives, from how

much money I could spend at the supermarket to what I could make for dinner and to whom I could speak (not everyone was worthy of my attention). He would ask for an accounting of every shekel I spent, insinuating that I was wasting his father's hard-earned money.

All this occurred in a very subtle manner. Yosef suggested sweetly that I quit my high-pressure job because the bosses were taking advantage of me; he turned down many invitations for Shabbos meals because he didn't feel it was right to eat with other couples. Whenever I complained that I was bored, he would remind me that a woman's place was in the home and that there was more than enough housework to keep me busy. He was very careful about *hechsherim* and ate almost nothing out of the house, which meant I had to make noodles and gefilte fish from scratch.

When my parents called to let me know they missed me and were eager to visit, Yosef insisted that I tell them to stay home because we needed our privacy. My parents are not confrontational, and though I desperately wanted to confide in them, I was too afraid to rock the boat. After all, Yosef was an *iluy*, the head of his *chaburah*, and his family was wealthy and influential. I was just a nobody, a simple girl from a plain family who had been chosen to be his wife.

I continued to suffer in silence, eating myself up inside, not letting on how miserable I was. Naturally, my emotional health began to suffer, and I became a shadow of my former lively self.

Over the next few months, as we anticipated the birth of our first child, Yosef's charming interest in every detail of my life turned into an obsession. Before long I was a virtual prisoner in our apartment, without a job, cut off from contact with my friends, having to ask permission every time I left the house.

Next came the emotional abuse, the gaslighting and web of lies that Yosef spun. He tried to convince me that I was completely dependent on him, that without him I was a zero. He also used his high standard of *frumkeit* as a weapon, demanding that I wear a shawl when I went out and not to speak to any men, even if it was the cashier in the supermarket.

I gave birth to our daughter alone in Shaarei Tzedek Hospital because Yosef had a *chavrusa*, and he claimed it was *bitul Torah* to waste a night in the hospital. Our cellphone didn't have overseas service because Yosef had shut it off. I borrowed a phone from a kindhearted nurse to let my parents know they'd become grandparents. They were over the moon and wanted to book a ticket. I tried in vain to convince them to stay home as I was terrified of Yosef's rage. Fortunately, they didn't listen and came anyway.

That Shabbos, Yosef made a small *kiddush* in the local *shul*, naming our beautiful daughter Dina after his grandmother. I had wanted to call the baby Baila after my mother's mother, with whom I had been very close, but he didn't even give me a chance to discuss it. Thankfully, little Dina was a beautiful doll, and as I snuggled up to her, I felt a sense of peace and happiness, however fragile. I vainly hoped that her birth would bring us closer. At the time I still didn't realize just how unhealthy Yosef was and how he was messing with my mind.

My parents arrived two days after the birth, soon after I was discharged, but they had no idea how to reach me. They tried my cellphone and the house phone relentlessly, but Yosef was monitoring both phones and kept telling them I was too weak for a visit. They knew which building we lived in, though, and eventually just showed up and knocked on my door.

Fortunately, Yosef had gone out for *Minchah* several minutes earlier, and the coast was clear. When I heard the knock, I opened the door and collapsed into my mother's arms, sobbing hysterically. In hindsight, that was the beginning of the end.

When my parents learned the extent of Yosef's control and saw what had happened to me and how frightened I was, they made a fuss, involving local *rabbanim* to try to save the situation.

Unfortunately, Yosef's family had many more connections, and they were one step ahead. To make a very long and painful story short, I would be "allowed" to leave the country—without my newborn daughter, who needed both parents' permission in order to get a passport. I refused to consider the idea and stayed with Yosef for two more torturous years, raising my daughter in a virtual prison. By the time she was two years old, things had gotten so bad that if I hadn't left, I would have snapped from the pressure.

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And so I made a painful decision, one that I have regretted many times over the years. I left my beautiful Dina behind for what I thought would be a temporary arrangement. But when it came to the divorce, Yosef would give me a *get* only on the condition that I give up my right to custody now, with the promise that I could see her anytime and that once I was married and had a stable home, we would have shared custody.

I beg you not to judge me; I cannot divulge all the details of what I endured up to that point, how much I suffered before making this excruciating decision. It took a long time before I was healthy enough to consider *shidduchim* again, and another decade for me to meet my *bashert*.

Today I am happily remarried, and my husband and I are the parents of three lively, healthy sons and two beautiful daughters. I am happily employed as a makeup artist, a career I really enjoy.

But not a day goes by that I don't think about my eldest, Dina, who was raised by my ex and his new wife—who, from what I understand, has a very difficult life. They live in Jerusalem, where they are raising their family.

Over the years, I have tried to contact Dina, to send her letters and speak to her on the phone, but I have been rebuffed each time. And then, when Dina turned 18, she reached out to me, calling me when her father was away. Our conversation was very fragile, but it somehow filled me with renewed hope.

A few months later, I traveled to Eretz Yisrael to see my estranged daughter, and we met for the first time since she was a toddler. I tried to explain the circumstances behind my apparent abandonment of her, but it was hard for Dina to understand, especially since her father controlled her every move.

Two years ago, Dina called to tell me she was engaged and that she wanted me to at-

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tend her wedding. I knew it would be very hard, especially as Dina told me that with the help of her *chasan* she had fought her father on this issue. But Dina had invited me, and there was no choice but to accept the invitation. I hadn't been there for her as she was growing up; I owed her at least this much, regardless of the price I would pay.

I left my ego at home, along with the remaining shards of my self-esteem, and traveled with my sister to Eretz Yisrael to be a fifth wheel at my daughter's wedding. I wasn't given the opportunity to be at her side, to bless her, let alone walk her to the *chuppah*. I was treated like a pariah, a cruel mother who had chosen to abandon her daughter for her own selfish interests. From the nasty comments made by Yosef's family to the outright hostility of his wife and her children, and the photographer's

refusal of my request for a picture, the experience was like having a gallon of salt poured on a still-raw, gaping wound.

I cried buckets of tears during that trip, but I also made a decision. As a makeup artist who played a role in numerous *simchahs*, I would do everything in my power to ensure that no woman felt like a second fiddle at her biological child's wedding—not if I could help it.

This was the first wedding where I had the opportunity to keep my promise. I turned to Shani's stepmother, who had hired me and who had asked me to take Shani's mother into a side room, and asked for a few moments of her time. I shared my story, and we cried together. (I promised to touch up her makeup afterward.) And then I begged her to allow Shani's mother the small privilege of standing near her daughter under the *chuppah* so that she could bless her and be at her side at this pivotal moment.

I said to her, "You will not only be doing a true *chesed shel emes*, breathing new life into a broken woman, but you will be sending the *kallah* a powerful message. You will be showing Shani that you care about the woman who gave birth to her, the mother who gave her life but did not have the privilege of raising her."

Since then I have continued to use my capacity as someone servicing a wedding party to make sure that no mother ever suffers the pain I did. And many people are willing to do what they can to make the *simchah* complete for everyone involved. Sometimes all it takes is awareness of the pain that is being caused. ●

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