

CATHERINE BRUNET
BATHSHEBA

“It was spring time, the time when kings go forth to war... but David remained in Jerusalem.”—2 Samuel 11:1

MEN WILL INSIST THAT LOVE and war are two separate things. Uriah, my husband, was such a man, rigid in his orthodoxy, wearing duty like a heavy uniform and riding swiftly back to camp whenever he was summoned. He would not touch my ample breasts, my long and fleshy legs, if it was battle season. Sometimes his battles went on for years and stretched for miles like Dead Seas that would neither quench my thirst nor let me sink.

David, on the other hand, allowed for some convolutions of responsibility, for some overlap of war and sex, pain and pleasure. When he saw me bathing naked, he put on hold his military schemes, or at least dared the possibility of carrying out both instincts. And what woman would not be flattered to have distracted a king from his national interest? Perhaps it made him less a leader, but a mediocre king is a king nonetheless, and he was good in the ways that mattered to me: experienced and subtle; aware of what he compromised as he caressed my skin.

I was more than a concubine of course. Born of good family, I was marriage material. If only we had met earlier! Not that he was perfect. Being chosen by God and felling Philistine giants will give anyone an inflated sense of his own importance. He could be arrogant and speak with a superior tone, even to his wisest friends, even to me. And there was a hint of cruelty in him. I'd see it cross his face for just a moment each time he entered me, as if in his own victory he was insensitive to others. I'd heard the tales: David delivering Saul more than two hundred Philistine foreskins, for example. I tried to imagine the logistics of that, how they would be transported through the desert, the stench when presented to Saul. Were the enemies murdered first and then the requisite bits harvested? Or was it a mass circumcision—voluntary or otherwise? I never broached the matter with David. With a lover, it is bad form to bring up other men's penises.

Of course, David knew that I was married. Uriah was a soldier in his army. When I discovered I was pregnant, I told David and he crafted a plot: “I’ll summon Uriah back. He will know you as your husband and the baby will be his.”

I had my doubts. It had taken Uriah months after our marriage to summon up the courage or the knowledge to make a wife of me. My friends giggled and complained sometimes about their too-voracious husbands. My laments were quite the opposite, and never, ever spoken. Seducing my own husband would have been like teaching a camel to sing: nearly impossible and not much fun.

How to explain this to a lover without cheapening one’s value? David was not the sort who would desire another man’s unwanted robes. We must all keep up appearances.

Predictable, obstinate Uriah cited the ancient rule of the kingdom: that active warriors must not know their wives in their own beds. He proclaimed his intention to remain in the company of palace troops. I wondered whether there was one young soldier in particular who had caught his eye. Somehow, it didn’t bother me, the idea of him preferring a man’s sinewy limbs, tall carriage, bearded face. I felt the same way. At the present time, Uriah’s private lusts were more inconvenient than incongruous to me.

David had his own way of settling inconvenient matters. Kings are remarkably resourceful in this respect. Uriah was ordered to the most dangerous front lines. I never heard from him again. One version of the story is that David gave Uriah a message to deliver to the enemy, and that this message called for my husband’s death. As it turns out, even ardent adversaries can be quite obliging, and he was slaughtered promptly. I considered Uriah’s end needlessly humiliating. True: David had arranged for me the respectable title of *widow* rather than the shameful label *adulteress*. And yet, what had he against Uriah that he would sentence him to added twists of irony on the day of his death? Why should a warrior fall carrying out a peaceful errand? I challenged David on the matter.

“Bathsheba,” he said, “Uriah made things complicated when they need not have been.” And I saw that look cross his face again, like a shadow filling in the crueler lines around his mouth. “Now let’s get on with it,” he added. “Will you be my wife?”

The wedding was small, discrete. My belly was big by then so we invited only our most intimates to witness the event. There was some meat,

bread, honey, wine. But the celebrations ended there. David took me to his own bed and we had our way with each other, though the mechanics with child demanded ever flashes of inspiration.

When we were finished, he wanted to again, and when I told him no, he put his clothes back on and left, wandering to another part of the stone palace. I didn't see him again that night.

When my time came, every midwife in the kingdom, it seemed, was dispatched to offer her own golden nugget of advice:

“Lie on your back.”

“Have some wine.”

“Try to stand up.”

“Eat some olives.”

“Breathe.”

“Pray.”

“Confess your every sin so that the child will slip out strong and blameless.”

I rolled my sins around inside my head, but couldn't sort out, in the confusion of it all, which ones were truly mine and which were someone else's. Perhaps I'd only been involved in sin as a sort of prop or audience. I preferred chewing on grape leaves. It helped keep at bay my mounting urge to vomit.

I'd never known such pain. It started out where you'd expect and travelled through me like poison; every vein I had was coursing childbirth. I felt like I'd explode, dissolve, return then and there to sandy earth.

It was a boy; I registered that much. As I got better, the child got worse. He would burn up red and wail like Satan's own bad voice, and then he'd seem to shrink into something small and white, despondent like a flower in drought. David saw him once. The baby would not drink from my nipple nor anybody else's, though there was no shortage of buxom volunteers. His skin looked so thin that I grew afraid to touch him, and his tiny fingers lost the energy to even curl into a fist. He wasn't angry at his death. He accepted it like sacrifice. But I did not.

“We are even now with the Lord for our sins,” said David.

If I'd had the strength to kill him then, I swear he would be dead.

But this was good. My sudden hatred tempered my mourning, gave me reason to live. I swear I grew taller so that I no longer had to crane upwards to look at David. His complexion was not so fine as before, and I grew more beautiful by comparison.

Eventually, I still found moments of pleasure with David. Once enough months had gone by, the feeling of his skin on mine still concentrated joy. I appreciated the advantages of being of king's wife. I'd never gone without, but the delicacy of the wines, the consideration of the people, the fact that I could snap my fingers and have the best of Jerusalem at the foot of my bed still dazzled me. I developed a flirtation with a fair-haired musician who'd strum songs of love at my command. It occurred to me that Uriah might have shared my interest in his sweet voice and skilled fingers. David, meanwhile, had his concubines.

Yet David was the only man I actually knew during my marriage with him. That's how I am certain that all my children are also his. I don't understand why this mattered much to me. Perhaps my policy sheltered me from confusion, guilt, reproach. Perhaps I wanted his sons to inherit his regal chin. Perhaps I had more respect for the kingship than I'd previously suspected. Or perhaps I already knew where it would all lead, and I sought irony to match that of Uriah's death.

Absalom was David's favourite son. At first, his father kept his distance lest this one too should sicken and perish. But once the child was able to wriggle freely onto his father's lap and pull his beard, David accepted him as his plaything and heir.

I have heard that relationships between fathers and sons can be strained. And I was no help. Absalom was a sweet child, at least as devoted to me as to his father, and I filled his head with stories of David.

"And then your father killed Goliath!"

"Daddy is a hero!"

"Do you think it's right to skill another?" I sprinkled seeds of doubt. Absalom admired his father but came to question whether that admiration was the proper thing. Was I the one who taught him that respect for those you love is shameful in a man?

Children have gotten away from parents better than David and me. By the time Absalom was fourteen, he was driving us mad. I will never forget the gardener flagging me down on one of my walks. "It's your son!" he'd said.

"Absalom?" I'd asked.

"No, the other one, Adonijah."

It turns out that Absalom had rendered his younger brother drunk and smuggled in a peasant girl, had paid her to make a man of my eleven year old.

"I'll be King someday," said Absalom. "I will need an army of brothers who are men!"

I spoke with David later. “He has a very peculiar notion of what it means to be a man.” Perhaps David did not think it peculiar.

David had children before mine. Such children have a way of coming back to haunt their father’s second wife. I was never close to my daughters. They lacked something the sons had: the kind of ambition that would lead to Absalom’s downfall at Ephraim. Tamar was whisked out of my sights early on, tended by a wet-nurse, fawned over in a way I never was by the daughters of venerable men. They did her hair and called her pretty names, taught her to play the harp and pick flowers from the garden. Then Amnon appeared like an evil spirit, like a serpent in a garden and damned Tamar terribly.

Absalom, who’d never said two words to his sister, swelled up sad and fierce. “Half-brother bastard! Rapist devil! Thief!” He stomped around, wailing insults and truths about that vile so-called man.

“If anything should happen,” said I. “If Amnon should happen to die, you can flee to Tamai. My father Eliam will take you in. He was always fond of me.”

That is what happened, after the killing some called fratricide. Three years passed before David invited Absalom back to Jerusalem. In those years, Absalom had learned to eat okra and be friendly to black men—and women too, I’m sure. “I’ve learned humility, good mother. I’ve learned justice.” And he would suffer anyone to kiss him in the streets, though he was the son of the monarch. Perhaps he knew his father would disapprove, and that was why he did it. Do puppies chew our sandals because they know not better how to cut their teeth or do they do it to gauge our reaction, to test our strength?

A family’s actions and inactions, I have learned, will build up and crumble under their own weight. And a young man with money in his pocket is a dangerous thing—particularly if he respects his father’s station, but not the man himself. I’ll never know the exact moment when Absalom decided he would make a better king, or that at least it might be fun to try. But it seemed like just a dozen heartbeats before there were fires in Jerusalem, murders in the streets, armies led by husband and son. Civil war seemed sprouted from my own bitter body, from the very place where David had planted this life, this young destructive force.

Solomon, the youngest of them all, clung to my skirts. “It’s all right,” I’d tell him, though the sounds we heard might be slicing up his own only father or his eldest brother. “Someday these monsters will eat each other whole and you will be king.”

I didn't see the scene, though scores did: Absalom—systematic, confident, wielding the potency of youth and rage—coupling with ten of David's concubines, right in the open, stealing another man's women without shame, without pause even to wipe his brow, or anything else, between conquests. And what was going through the heads of these women? Did they believe themselves sinners or sinned against? Did they fathom where divine retribution would lead us all? And why did I not know their names, though their children looked like mine, and my husband and my son knew them horribly and well?