



# Rose of the Mediterranean

*a short story by Nava Semel  
translated by Barbara Harshaw*

Promises given are not to be taken lightly, my grandmother used to say, especially if they were made with great love, and I didn't understand back then who made the promise and who keeps it. And she also said: You always have to remember to say thank you, even for a small plum branch.

The words flow from her mouth like minnows and the kerchief tied on her head drips. Until the day she died she didn't take it off. A gray cloth that covered her scalp and her ears and didn't let a single mutinous wisp of hair out. I still wonder what color her hair was. Even at night, she didn't take it off.

Small modest movements, she commands, slow and easy, so it won't think, God forbid, that you came to rule it or to force yourself on it.

I slice the water, my terror bursts out of me. My hands are

taut and I draw my arms in to my chest, and as I do, my fingers bump into the buttons of the shirt, how easy to pluck them off.

Under the rule of her eyes, I reluctantly outline circles. My feet are planted in pebbles and mud, but I don't slip, for her clasp is firm. She warns against the reefs, pushes my arms resolutely, like oars, ready for the oncoming wave. Don't forget, don't be swept away like a mindless thing, but obey the secret voice whispering from below.

We are surrounded by women bathing. A crowded assembly hopping in the water. They spray one another and shout gleefully like little girls granted a surprise vacation from school. Not even on the regular beach is there such a turmoil. A jumble of kerchiefs and scarves and caps and straw hats. Their heads like multicolored balls bob on the surface of the

water, all of them bathing in their clothes, buttoned up to the neck.

I'll teach you, declared my grandmother—more than a promise to me, it was a vow to herself—and she took me to the religious women's beach. No man crossed the sheet that formed the border. Only little boys before bar mitzvah. Their sidelocks immerse in the foam, and become even curlier.

How did my grandmother become an expert swimming teacher? Others have tried to teach me and every time that same paralyzing dread lands on me and I can't dive. The ridiculous long skirt clings to my calves, flaps against my heels as the wave assaults and drags me like a weight. And only my grandmother is light as foam. The waves swell her dress, and I keep from bursting into laughter, because she looks like an upside down flower on the surface of the water, and that's what her name means—little Rose. And despite the clothes that curb the movement of her body, nothing obstructs the bold rowing rhythm of her legs, or the clarity of her memory.

In 1919, a year after the end of World War I, Zelig-Haim Gutman returned from a Russian prison camp to the little village in the Marmuresh strip on the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, on the banks of the River Tisa, and decided to take a wife. He had no money for a matchmaker, so he had to send his uncle Samuel to the home of Sender the Treasurer to ask for the hand of his oldest daughter Rayzel.

During the years Zelig-Haim was away, the village hadn't changed much. In the tavern, the drunkards still wallowed at dawn, waiting patiently for the door to open and imploring Mendel, the Jewish tavernkeeper, to give them a glass of brandy on credit, and Tsitsul the blacksmith would wet his whistle with three glasses at one gulp before he would fit even one horse's hoof. At the well, the women trudged with water buckets, and as they pulled on the rope they would exchange forbidden secrets from the most private rooms, and then they'd go back to gather wood for heating, and didn't guard their tongue even when they washed their laundry in the river. In the synagogue, seating arrangements were still the same, and Sender the Treasurer, owner of the big sawmill, sat in his regular place "in the East" and every other Sabbath, he had the honor of taking the Torah scroll from the Ark of the Covenant. The idlers, led by Itsel, still warmed themselves at the stove and groaned "oy vay, how hard life is," and even Mariana, the prostitute, still lived in a house next to the cemetery and covered her window during a funeral out of honor for the dead, even though he was often one of her clients.

Zelig-Haim Gutman yearned for someplace else. He had

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laughed.*

nothing in the world except for the uniform he wore when he returned home. After he was released from captivity, his feet bore him against his will to the place where he knew every clod of dirt but refused to call it "home." Skinny he was and short, his eyes flashed in a face like thousands of other faces. With neither family nor fortune, he had been raised by his uncle Samuel ever since his mother died in childbirth, and the name "Haim," Life, was added by his uncle when the boy was stricken with diphtheria at the age of six. After his miraculous recovery, the name remained, but the villagers kept complaining about his weakness and joked that any breeze would fly him back over the border.

When he was conscripted into the Austrian army, they laughed and said that any legion Zelig-Haim served in would be routed immediately. Zelig-Haim was the only one who obeyed the conscription order. The others hid in the attic, used up all their money paying bribes and buying forged documents to shirk the draft, and his cousin even cut off a finger, inflicting an eternal defect, just to avoid the army. When it was learned that Zelig-Haim Gutman was captured, there were those who said that was the end of him, a weakling like that wouldn't hold out.

And yet Zelig-Haim surprised everyone and came back. In the three years of his captivity, under the white polar skies, he vowed to see Rayzel once more, the daughter of Sender the Treasurer, and ask her to marry him.

I miss my bathing suit. The one concealed under the clothes, and even though it's threadbare and faded, it's the one I wear at the regular beach, which is so close and so far, right here beyond the dividing sheet. Thin straps that leave a white imprint on my brown shoulders. My back burned by the penetrating sun, my thighs wrapped in salty dust. On the bus, I shrank onto the back seat, hiding behind the straw hat, so no one I knew would see me, God forbid, and discover that I was headed for the religious women's beach. With my hair plaited in two braids that Grandmother wove before we left and the long-sleeved dress coming down to my knees. The stockings I took off without her noticing. I remember asking, Why do we have to swim in the sea all dressed? Is God a man? And Grandmother laughed.

Dejected, Zelig-Haim's Uncle Samuel left the house of Sender the Treasurer. What nerve to ask for the hand of his oldest daughter, who had such a sharp mind, an expert in holy lore, who could debate a point in the Talmud like a scholar, and who also played all of Chopin's

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Jews to purchase land. They would lease a field or a plot from a Gentile, or they would cunningly ask a Christian to purchase it for them and would fill his pockets with bribes. Zelig-Haim would not have his own piece of land until the days of the Messiah, and thus Sender the Treasurer would release his daughter from the punishment of that impertinent leaf blown in the wind.

**A**nd don't fall into the trap of the whirlpool, Grandmother would warn. Its changing moods, gurgling like that, will tempt you with winning ripples, will intoxicate you with the light winding of its waves, but you have to watch out for its fury, because it isn't faithful like a man who really loves.

**T**he day the Zionist agent visited the remote village, Zelig-Haim's hope of getting a house had just been disappointed. In despair, he had pro-

posed to the Gentile Gregor to buy a wooden hut in his name; it was next to the cemetery, two windows away from the prostitute Mariana. In exchange for a gold button from his uniform. Every day Gregor raised the price, until there was almost nothing left on Zelig-Haim's uniform but buttonholes, and he still hadn't given him an answer. The Zionist agent sat in the doorway of the synagogue, a simple cloth bag on his back and his head swathed in a cloth strip that made him look like a shepherd from the Bible. A short while earlier, Gregor had informed Zelig-Haim that he wouldn't buy even a pigsty for the "Zhid."

Zelig-Haim stood apart from the group of gawking idlers who surrounded the agent, listening like them to his excited words about an English lord, his exalted majesty, who in his great mercy, granted the Jews a home in the Land of Israel.

There really is no such place, decreed Itzele, the doyen of the idlers, and was convinced that this was some lunatic who had escaped from an asylum. The Zionist pulled a bundle of papers out of his bag, thrust them under Itzele's nose, and rifled them furiously. Here, in big bold letters. A letter sent from Lord Balfour to the millionaire Rothschild.

A land of paper? Itzele's laughter thundered and all the idlers roared. The Zionist swore on his word of honor that he really was a representative of the company to redeem the lands, "Eternal Possession," and anybody who wants could buy a genuine estate from him, the same price for everyone.

Land for sale? Zelig-Haim Gutman's eyes lit up. Where is this wonder?

The Zionist declared, In Tel Aviv, the first Hebrew city, on

sonatas a mistake on the white piano he had purchased for an exorbitant price in the district town. Rayzel deserved a better match than that skinny, homeless pauper, who had no past and whose future was dubious. The Treasurer said, It will not take place, and he already had another bridegroom for his daughter, the son of well-to-do people from the big city of Budapest and the "terms" were almost arranged. And Sender the Treasurer didn't even look at his wife before he dismissed the uncle from the house. Samuel swore he wouldn't exchange a word with him until next Yom Kippur, then he would demand his forgiveness.

The whole time, Rayzel stood behind the door and eavesdropped, her wrath kindled. The truth is that she had almost forgotten about Zelig-Haim over the years, yet the memory of their accidental childhood encounter at one of the streams of the River Tisa wasn't washed away. Zelig-Haim was so shy that he seldom opened his mouth. A secret voice impelled her to address him. Does he know that this little river ultimately reaches the big sea at the end of the world, that's what they say.

The thin lad looked at his reflection in the stream, dreaming so much about other places and people. Even though she was a little girl, Rayzel was graced with sharp senses and recognized the storms raging in him. With an inexplicable impulse, Zelig-Haim picked a branch off a plum tree, one of many planted on the slopes, stretched it happily over the water and promised that when he reached the place of his dreams, she will be there, too. And years later, she remembered his dark eyes ardent with conviction. If not for those eyes, she would have joined the mockers and dismissed his confused words as a childish lunacy.

For two days she waited and then she appeared before her father and informed him that Zelig-Haim—and no one else—would be her husband.

Since when does a woman make the decision? Sender the Treasurer raised his voice. A rebellious daughter he had raised. And yet, when she persisted in her disobedience, he tried flattery. How would that beggar support her, with his own hands Sender would condemn his eldest daughter to the disgrace of starvation. She would end her days like some village woman and would grow old before her time. At last, a plot ripened in his mind and he said that if Zelig-Haim proved he could buy a house, he would be willing to give him his daughter, and he laughed to himself. For such a thing would never happen. Back in the days of the hostile Empress Maria-Theresa, a decree was issued forbidding

the golden sands, next to the sea as blue as a prayer shawl. Trams go from one end to the other and the buildings touch the sky, real towers of Babel, and in the city square a crystal fountain spits flames to the tunes of an orchestra. And on the tables of the lucky ones who have chosen to live there rise wonderful flavors, stuffed goose and fatted calves and biscuits in honey and fine fruits for dessert, and they even feast on roast Leviathan on the Sabbath and holidays. And gigantic ships anchor in the big port of the city and every day, Jews from all four corners of the world descend from their bowels, a medley of languages of the Twelve Lost Tribes, and they're even leaving America in droves just to win that blessed property, the first ones win.

Zelig-Haim snatched the paper, plucked all the remaining buttons off his uniform and made a down payment.

She swims away from me.

I'm alone, wipe the raindrops of the breakers off my face.

I was desperate. Learning to swim in clothes is a task doomed to failure from the start. I protested, What if I don't know how to swim, so what? Is swimming a commandment?

On the third day the sea was created. In moments of weakness, my grandmother tried to cheer me up with tales, so I'd forget the daunting task. The first water in the world sang to the Creator. And when the waters were condemned to be split underneath separate and above separate, the waters underneath burst into a lamentation of waves. Why, of all creatures, were they condemned to be far away from the Creator? They wanted to change the order of the creation.

Someone who is bold enough to turn the world upside down will finally succeed. You mustn't give up, said Grandmother, and didn't let me go back to the beach.

Zelig-Haim Gutman himself went to Sender's house, with the bill of sale in his hand. He put it on the Treasurer's table and declared: I have fulfilled the conditions, here, I have bought a house. And not just a roof over our head, but an estate in the genuine "East," where seraphim and cherubim hover around the Throne of Honor, in the Land that is the navel of the world.

Sender implored, if he truly loved his daughter Rayzel, don't take her to the ends of the earth, to that wasteland, and his spouse added her pleas. They were willing to bow to the sentence of marriage, if only Zelig-Haim would go west. With a good sum of his money, Sender would buy them a ticket to Hamburg and from there they would board a ship bound for New York. There are real letters from there and not this nonsense about an English lord, whose name nobody can remember, and they tell a lot about the wonders of America. That is really the promised continent.

Like upside-down roses her memories bobbed. She was almost seventy-five years old then, and yet she caught up with every other woman. Despite her kerchief and the burden of her clothes, she'd easily reach the breakwater. I don't know if she ever competed with a man, maybe only with my grandfather. Even the lifeguard knew her by name, and when we came to the beach that day, he honored her, saying Mrs. Gutman, I hope that someday your granddaughter will swim like you.

I almost burst into tears. I rebelled. Why did I have to do this superfluous beating of my arms and legs? I'll never be a ship captain or a fish, and I already started taking off my shirt.

The marriage ceremony was hastily arranged and Zelig-Haim hurried on his way, and maybe he was afraid that Sender the Treasurer was liable to change his mind just before the glass was broken. Business stopped on the wedding day and Rayzel's girlfriends in their Sabbath dresses hurried to the "bride's dance." Despite Zelig-Haim's slight protest, Sender insisted on bringing a troupe of musicians from the neighboring village in a special wagon, and the local jester was also present, entertaining the guests with his best rhymes. On the wooden platform sat Rayzel on a throne padded with rugs and in her hand was a bouquet of plum flowers picked the day before on the same river where she had met Zelig-Haim years before. First the girls danced in couples and then in circles and the bride was taken down from the heights of the throne to join her friends in a last dance before she became a married woman. From the wedding canopy, they were taken to the "private room" and there, for the first time since their childhood, they exchanged words instead of looks. She was taller than he, which made Itzele and the idlers click their tongue, and yet she felt smaller, and Rayzel vowed to take the sheaf of plum flowers back to its stream of the River Tisa, a sign to those who came after them who would want a share of the Jewish home promised by the English lord. Even though Zelig-Haim was the only one who responded to the mirage of the Zionist *kushan*, the land permit of the Ottoman Empire, she had no doubt that someday others would also join them. As soon as they came to their estate, she would send a letter from the Land of Israel and tell its praises, and she was certain that Sender would not be able to dismiss her letters as a bundle of nonsense.

After the "Seven Blessings," the bride was seated next to the groom and the "*mitzvah* dance" began. Every guest held the end of a silk handkerchief that Rayzel grasped and circled her twice. Even the Zionist danced with her, to Sender's deep sorrow, and the cloth handkerchief waving over his head looked like the wings of a goose led to slaughter. As he danced, the agent called to Zelig-Haim, I've given you the finest property in all Tel Aviv. Guard it like the apple of your eye. And his heart warmed by brandy, he prophesied that

someday Zelig-Haim Gutman himself would serve as Treasurer in the first Hebrew city.

The last of the dancers was the father of the bride, the only one who was allowed to hold her hands and not the handkerchief. Sender danced and couldn't restrain his tears and that sight made Rayzl very sad. The jester declared "Zelig-Goodman a good man and Rayzl a little rose, are going out to redeem their ancient land," and soon the whole family gathered around them in circles, the only time a man could take a woman's hand and a lad take a maiden's hand.

Her mother secretly slipped into her hand *The Book of the Angel Raziel*, which was forbidden to look at because it was dangerous, but it would protect her daughter from pogroms, and when they left the village, the idlers took leave of them, still savoring the slices of cake, and Itzele gave Zelig-Haim a special gift—a tall hat he pulled off of one of the musicians—like a real English lord's.

Good thing you're leaving here, spat Gregor, two less "Zhids" to take care of, and the prostitute Mariana covered her head with a handkerchief and blessed them, for Zelig-Haim had never found fault with her when he passed by her window on his way to say *kaddish* over his parents' graves.

**I**'m scared of drowning. Pure and simple. It takes a whole lot of nerve to try to overcome that terror—even for a little while.

My grandmother said, Don't worry. "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together into one place," the Creator set a limit for the waters, they can't ever go beyond it.

**I**n the summer they arrived. Their ship anchored near Jaffa, in spitting distance of the reef. Their goods and chattels they deposited with the owner of the boat who rowed them ashore in exchange for an exorbitant price, and Rayzl took great pains to make sure her dowry chest didn't disappear, God forbid, which was collapsing under lace cloths and embroidered quilts. In the first days of the journey, her intestines hummed and she spewed up her soul. Zelig-Haim placed cold towels on her forehead, cheered her by waving the *kushan*, which he didn't let go of even in his sleep. After a week, her body made peace with the shaking and her strength returned. Rayzl went up on deck, filling her lungs with the fresh smell of salt and the cool wind, for her they were like the incense of Havdalah in her father's spice

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box and regrets flooded her. She thrust off her fear that she would never see him again.

In the narrow, dusty alleys of Jaffa, the two of them crept along to the inn in the wake of the porter, and Rayzl constantly kept an eye out for the pickpockets that clustered around the platform. Zelig-Haim kept asking, Where is Tel Aviv? Since he was so eager to glance at his estate, they went out that evening, staring wide-eyed at the darkness, and striving to make out the towers that touch the skies and the flames bursting out of the maw of the crystal fountain. But—as Zelig-Haim comforted Rayzl—it was hard for them to see because it was a foggy night.

Early in the morning, they hurried to search for the "Eternal Possession" Company, but to their amazement, no one knew the name. The innkeeper took pity on them and led them to the official department of estates, and Zelig-Haim found himself pounding on the desk, an aggressive act he had never done in his life, not even during his years in captivity in Siberia, and demanding that the clerk show him, as it said in the document in his hand, where exactly his estate of thirty square dunams was located.

**I**n the shade of the plum trees, she learned to swim. In one of the streams of the River Tisa. Always in her clothes. One day, somewhere in her childhood, she wanted to know where the stream poured out and discovered that its waters were delivered with great love to the sea at the end of the world.

Where is that place? I asked. Never in my life have I heard of the province of Marmuresh in the Carpathian Mountains. To tell the truth, I doubted her sanity.

A dark cloud of sadness hovers over my grandmother Rayzl's face. Very far away, she whispers, as if she's telling a legend she made up on the spot. For years I refused to believe that such a remote place really did exist.

**T**he cart left Jaffa. In just a little while, they would find peace and be settled down comfortably. A tram they didn't find, and even though she didn't need encouragement, Zelig-Haim tried to bolster Rayzl's spirit. From the winding alleys, the driver turned north, crossed the railroad tracks toward a small suburb of gardens with tiny white houses and straight, clean streets, and soon, carpets of sand stretched before them. The dust rose in front of them and Zelig-Haim impatiently went on asking questions.

Where is the metropolis he was promised? Where is Tel Aviv? The driver calmly blurted out, We just passed it.

It can't be, Rayzl dismissed it. The driver is an ignoramus, a fool who doesn't know the valuables beneath his horses' hooves, and the driver sighed. Once again, for three and a half piasters, he takes a couple of eccentrics to nowhere. Such sleepwalkers are an everyday sight, they gaze at the sands and an expression of confusion spreads over their faces. The man he pitied, for globules of sweat were dripping on his sidelocks, while the woman wasn't perturbed at all by the molten sky.

The driver stopped and took the *kushan* from Zelig-Haim's hand. He was amused, just like the jester at their wedding. Here, mister property owner, a real effendi you are!

Here? whispered Zelig-Haim Gutman, kicking the sand and drawing border lines. And he was already trying to console himself. Even in the sand you can build a house. He'll dig a well like Our Father Abraham, and he'll grow a splendid garden here. Thirty dunams of plum orchards.

The driver refrained from laughing, with a wave of his arm he turned the couple aside toward the blue.

Rayzl filled her lungs with the fresh smell of salt. Zelig-Haim, she cried, you bought me the sea!

Of her whole family, Rayzl was the only one who remained alive. Sender the Treasurer and all the members of his household, and Uncle Samuel and all the other residents of the little village in the district of Marmuresh were taken to the synagogue, where Sender had served as Treasurer for thirty years, and from there they were loaded onto cattle cars.

Once she explained to me that the name Haim, given to my grandfather when he had diphtheria at the age of six, had preserved them from pogroms, and she always believed that *The Book of the Angel Raziel* that her mother put in her hands, and which she never looked at, did indeed fill its function and defended her house against destruction.

Zelig-Haim was dumbstruck. As if Gregor the Gentile had thrown another stone at him. He was sure that Rayzl would turn around and go back. That she would gallop the wagon straight to the port of Jaffa and hurry back to her parents' house. And the driver's shout, Who's the swindler who sold you this nonsense?—just added more torment to his grief. He resolved to throw himself into the water and drown his disgrace. He rushed toward the waves and as he dived, Rayzl's arms wound around his neck and they went in together. He in his *kippah* and caftan and she in her kerchief and long

dress. And they wound around one another, laughing and crying, with the salty seawater pouring on their eyes and lips.

Years have passed since the day she tried to teach me how to swim at the religious women's beach. Once I bathed naked with a man and was amazed at what my grandmother had missed, and afterward I changed my mind. Maybe she was right, and it is when clothes cover every part of the flesh that passion blooms fully.

Rayzl was a romantic, but by no means a fool. She didn't exchange green seaweed for a plum branch. I doubt that the River Tisa connects with the Mediterranean Sea. When I swim, I feel a sense of ownership. After all, my grandfather paid all the gold buttons on his uniform for it. The *kushan* I found among her things after her death, all crushed, on one of the embroidered quilts.

In the end, we dived. The promise she gave isn't to be taken lightly, for it was made with great love. At long last, I dared to look; walls of water, rooms of foam, a polished floor, a ceiling of wind roiling breakers. Trees of rock and slopes of coral protected from the tempest, and between them stretch streams that connect to the hidden river. Their lives and deaths depend on each other. A secret yearning rustles in the limpid depths. I remember that for a brief moment, the kerchief slipped off her head and she was naked. I swallowed water, I choked, I almost drowned. Her hair was gold and she looked like a young girl.

The paralyzing dread has vanished. The face of the sea is turbid now, and rubbish bobs in it, but today of all days I swim a lot. Impossible to live in this place without knowing something from the Torah, even though I'm not a champion like her, and it's been years since I've bathed at the religious women's beach. I keep my eyes open to the wonder underneath and see her—little Rose in the big Mediterranean. ■

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