

Open Me

by Jeff Shapiro

Chassidic story about Rabbi Shlomo, an 18th-century healer from the town of Karlin in what today is called Belarus. Frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts to communicate with a person clearly in need of help, Rav Shlomo said, "I have no key to open you."

The man cried out, "Then pry me open with a nail!"

Which reminds me of my beloved friend Ruth. Life-saving, straight-talking Ruth, a native Dubliner transplanted to small-town Tuscany. We met – could it really be thirty-five years ago? – during that terrifying, intense moment that turned out to be my first marriage's breaking point. In the eyes of just about everyone else, my ex-wife and I seemed a couple destined to outlive every challenge. Who knew of the unhappiness that had spored like mold, hidden, odorless, yet soul-destroying to us both? Friends and family had grown distant. Silenced by an overblown pledge of loyalty, I confided in no one.

Until I met Ruth. I was transparent in her eyes. I heard it in the way she laughed and said, "Really now?"

The crucial rupture came when my ex-wife's nose began to bleed. Not a few drops. A hemorrhaging gush. We had moved to Tuscany as a last-ditch effort to make life happy again. Instead, we fought non-stop. Ruth, recommended to us by a mutual friend, became our house-hunter, English-Italian translator, and facilitator in all things. She even rode with my ex-wife in the ambulance to the Siena hospital when the blood vessels burst.

The doctors cauterized the tissue deep inside my ex-wife's nostril, and kept her overnight for observation.

"We need to talk," Ruth said as I drove her back to her house.

"Thanks, but everything's fine."

"Fine, you say? Well, *she's* not half so shy."

“Meaning?”

“She’s talking to everyone, she is. The nice man who drove the ambulance, the doctor who examined her, the nurse who settled her in on the ward. I had to translate. You don’t think they speak English, do you now?”

“What did she say?”

“Only that you’re trying to kill her. You know her blood pressure’s high but you fight with her anyway.”

“That’s what she’s saying?”

“And what have you to say for yourself, young man?” Ruth asked, smiling.

I said nothing.

When she showed me into her kitchen, Ruth plied me with a glass of Jameson’s. Gemmison’s, she pronounced it. “Tell me this and tell me no more,” she said. “What exactly is going on?”

I drank from the glass, said not a word.

She looked at me. “My mother was right.”

“About what?”

“‘There are no bad children,’ is what she’d say, ‘only children who are tired.’ And you, I see, are one very, very tired child.”

I drank some more, rubbed tears away with the palms of my hands. “If I start speaking, I’m afraid I’ll never stop.”

Ruth drank, too, and she smiled once more. “So start.”