

Navid Kermani, Thou Shalt

Take not His, your God's name in vain

– Don't say you love me.

He saw that she saw that he was holding his breath. One second, her questioning brown eyes, two seconds, the contraction of her womb, three, her open mouth. When he exhaled, she had not said it.

They never told each other that they loved each other. He didn't want it, and he had forbidden it to her. He had declared his love by declaring he would never speak of love.

– I will never tell you that I love you; and promise me that you will never say it, either, nor ask me to say it.

– Pardon?

– I will never tell you that I love you; and promise me that you will never say it, either, nor ask me to say it.

– What do you mean?

– Just promise me.

She said nothing, so he put his right hand around her neck and kissed her for the first time. He kissed her on the mouth. That was dangerous, because she had not yet promised not to speak of love to him. He noticed that her lips were dry. His weren't. He noticed how his lips wet hers. He opened his eyes, with his lips still on her mouth and his tongue in it, and looked at her lowered lids, where capillaries branched as if lightly breathed into them. His gaze wandered around on the upper half of her face. How beautiful she is, he thought, the face so slender that he could embrace it with both eyes. He felt her cheekbones, which were gently raised. He discovered a brown line in the scar she bore on her forehead, as long as a fingertip. His decision to kiss her was not spontaneous. He had planned it for the case that she hesitated. If he kissed her, he had thought, she would believe in his love without his speaking it out, and he might get her to make the promise without understanding it. He couldn't explain it. She had to promise it without question: not to speak. To speak about everything, but not about that. Fuzzily, because he was so close, he observed how a tear formed in the corner of her right eye. Her tongue entered his mouth. His heart beat hard enough against his chest that she felt it. The tear ran up and down the hill of her cheek. Astonished at his happiness and to savor it, he closed his eyes, but at the same time the thought came to him to mention the promise to her again. He waited a few seconds until she withdrew her tongue because he received it more measuredly than she expected. Then his lips drew a taste of her breath from hers.

– I will never tell you that I love you; and promise me that you will never say it, either, nor ask me to say it.

She opened her eyelids. Almost beseechingly, she looked at him from moist eyes. She would never entrust such a look to any other person, this he knew.

– I'll promise you whatever you want.

– Promise me that you will never speak of love.

In the first months of their life together, she already noticed that he avoided more than a word. He didn't take her in his arms. Not even in words did he caress her. He didn't kiss her during the day. He didn't reject her tenderness, but he wriggled away whenever she approached him with caresses, not immediately, not explicitly, but – despite all polite effort not to hurt her feelings – so firmly that she always needed a long time before trying it again, and gradually she stopped. But she seldom seemed to doubt his love. However much she might miss what he failed to give her, she felt his gifts more strongly. It was as if he held back his love to keep it pure, concentrated. When they slept with each other, he stormed her. When she was

unhappy, in despair, or ill, he not only took care of her; he also abandoned his solitude until she was strong again.

– Why do you turn to me only when I am weak or naked?

– Only when you are weak do you need me. Only when you are naked do I reach all the way to you.

She didn't become happy, no, not that. She could not understand what held him back. His asceticism embittered her. But his painstaking care and the passion of his body were more than she had ever experienced from a man. And there had been many men. And yet it was so little that he let her experience. She often watched him and felt nothing but inadequacy. By withholding himself from her, he took possession of her. In time, she no longer dared demand his closeness, and yet did so with each glance – all the more beseechingly, the more rejecting he seemed to her. And yet his behavior had not changed. With quiet consistency, he compensated her when they shared the bed, the carpet, or the kitchen table. He never spoke then.

– Only when we are silent do we speak.

He seldom permitted her the feeling that she was the giving one. He decided. He made gifts. He circled her sex with his tongue. Even when she sat on him, she felt herself moved by his hands. Even when his hands cramped around the bedposts, he held her tight. His lips wandered over her mouth, over her body, as far as in the crack of her behind, between the shoulder blades, which drew to a point in arousal, and in the backs of her knees. The twitches in her kissed toes spread up to her thighs, even up to the nerve ends of her sex. Her kisses he merely accepted. That is how it seemed to both, without either of them ever putting it into words. Of course she sought the fault in herself: she couldn't kiss, she couldn't satisfy him, she lacked sensitivity for his feelings. He knew what she thought and that it wasn't true. She herself could not overlook the bliss that stood written in his face. They had become one. She lay between his outstretched arms. But she didn't believe that it was she who brought forth this bliss. She was merely the mirror in which he pleased himself. She didn't want to be merely his object, she didn't want to merely reflect his gifts. If nothing else, she wanted at least to thank him and convey her love to him.

She looked at him. He moaned only softly; all his arousal was drawn together in his eyebrows. Even now he held himself back, she thought. He doesn't cry out, he doesn't bring me to cry out. They had become one in that he had ingested her or in that he had dissolved himself in her. She didn't know. She only knew that he had become one with her, not she with him. For him that was no difference. She grew quiet; only her breathing was audible. She wanted to speak to him, she wrestled to find a sentence but couldn't grasp ahold of one. Earlier, she had constantly talked, she had laughed in bed. With him, she refrained. With him, being in bed seemed to her like being in a church. And really: he didn't accept what appeared inessential to him. She seemed to be inessential to him, who sufficed for himself. He noticed that she had grown quiet. He heard nothing but their breathing. He saw her lips, pressed tightly together. She wanted to say something.

– Don't say you love me.

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Translated by Mitch Cohen