

All Is Safe Here

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p 9-15

Come To Israel, Mama

This body isn't my son; this is a man I don't know. The dense, warm Israeli air weighs me down in the leather chair, my fingers on the buttons that comfortably tilt it backwards. It's what they call a "relax". I'm incapable of seeing my son, seeing my son in this body on the hospital bed.

Cars pull up outside and someone honks, a gentle breeze blows through the palm trees just beyond the window, and inside I keep breathing; a process of digestion takes place inside my body, my heart pumps blood through my veins, the clock in the corner of the room ticks too quickly and too loudly. Behind the door someone wearing squeaky shoes hurries past in another life. I try to keep from panicking because we're moving on, moving on and leaving Immanuel behind, every breath I take another step away from my child. In the middle of the ceiling a fan sways. The air vibrates above a crack that diagonally rises from a corner by the baseboards and steeply takes a dive beside the bed, dropping like a heartbeat in a cardiogram. As if there's actually someone to call, I pass my phone from one hand to the other.

The dusk light softens the shape of the bed and the table on wheels beside it with the book lying on top. It sweeps away the stains on the floor tiles, the dust on the windowsill, the paint peeling from the wooden window frames, the reflection in the glass. In the distance Haifa descends into evening.

I take a photo of him. The flash accidentally goes off. Overlit, he lies on the bed. A downpour begins in the adjacent room. Someone calls out something, as if in an echoey bathroom, someone else replies. Laughter.

The fluorescents unexpectedly flicker like lightning. In the doorway stands a nurse I didn't see earlier. Small, stocky. Her fingers on the switch. She grimaces. "Sorry" she says. Her tone reveals she's especially sorry about my presence. How long have I been here? I want to be alone, I told them this when they brought me here, they need to leave me alone, with him. I've come, Immanuel, I'm here.

She enters the room. Around her neck a metallic Jesus sparkles in the light. He doesn't have a nose or eyes, just an angular expressionless face. The cross protrudes from his back like wings. "Who are you?"

I slip my cell phone into my handbag, still in camera mode. "I'm a tourist," I said earlier this afternoon to the customs officer, thinking, it's true: I haven't seen my son for ten years; I briefly show up in his life, soon enough I'll be gone. I'm allowed to enter the country given I'll leave again in a few days.

"May I speak to the doctor on duty?" I ask.

The nurse shakes her head.

"I'm a doctor myself," I tell her, also to make explicitly clear that the minute I entered the room, I saw what he'd done. I read bodies; I don't have to hear it aloud; she should keep her mouth shut. I nod towards the bed, where my son isn't laid out, only another version of him. He was still here this morning; he can't be far away.

The nurse turns away from me, drifts like a cloud between me and the bed. That's the moment. I rise from the chair, my sweaty skin pulls itself loose from the leather. And suddenly I see my husband lying there – though strictly speaking I can't call him that anymore – on the bed lies my husband, but then twenty years ago. I turn towards the nurse and see myself, dressed in white; I gasp for air, steady myself on the bed's metal bar.

"Got up too quickly?" The nurse has me by the elbow. "Perhaps you'd like a glass of water?"

Spitting image of his father. His brown curls, those feathery hairs on the pillow and his pale forehead, his lips. Though lower: red streaks in his neck, black bruises from there to his shoulders, thin, feeble arms, bony wrists. Screaming letters on his T-shirt: WE WERE STONED IN HEBRON. A cartoon of soldiers smoking a joint while Palestinian boys hurl stones at them. The colors are faded; it must have been washed a lot.

On his right hand only a thumb and middle-finger. Burnt flesh full of white, wormlike scars.

"Ma'am, can I get you a glass of water?"

"I want to prepare him," I say.

"Excuse me," she says. This is no excuse; she's fishing for one.

"I said I want to wash him. I want to wash my son."

She plays with the cross around her neck, scratches her bosom with it. "That's hardly necessary, Ma'am. He's all ready to go."

I can see that too. I know he's in diapers again, incontinent underwear, to absorb what he can no longer hold in. Under his shirt his back will already be dark red, stagnant blood sinks to the lowest point. I know more than I want to, a consequence of my profession: I also see my loved ones as bodies.

"I need a basin," I say. "And a washcloth." My voice falters and I do the same. She feels this and shakes her head. I want to wash him; I'll use warm water, cleanse every square centimeter so I can't forget a single detail and he can't help but feel my touch. I'm here, Immanuel. I've come.

I lean over him. Lift his pant's leg. Also, here a deep, purple bruise under the skin. His leg is hairy, a man's leg; this is not the boy I never got to say goodbye to. He's twenty-three now, I know, I've always remembered his birthday.

"He sent me an e-mail," I say. "Come to Israel, Mama, 5 Sderot Yitzhak."

His hairs are soft. I squeeze his undamaged hand, the last time I held it was when he was thirteen and I had nothing to say anymore. I squeezed it and he disappeared and I couldn't speak for days. His lips were tightly shut, right before he got into the taxi. How does his voice sound behind these sealed lips? I still envision him with the voice of a boy on the edge of manhood, high-pitched, cracking slightly. I want to hear it. I came to you, Immanuel.

"Get me water," I say. Ice cold, his skin. I can warm him up; I only have to cup his hands in mine and he'll warm up by himself. The sandwich he ate this morning is still in his intestines.

"Ma'am." The nurse takes a deep breath.

"Get me some water," I repeat, louder. I squeeze his fingers, force my nails into his skin, which softly gives way, still not stiff, and from the corner of my eye I see the woman rush towards me, she grabs my wrist, tries to pull me loose from him, But I'm not leaving him behind, not again. I push her away, she smashes her elbow on the rolling table beside the bed; the brakes squeak.

Come to Israel, Mama. Four words, and four weeks long I didn't dare to answer.

The message arrived in my e-mail box at work. He must have looked me up on the hospital website to get in touch with me.

The shower in the adjacent room stops.

"I want to see the doctor," I say, perhaps I've also raised my voice.

"The doctor only comes once a week. You're in a special facility, we're more of a . . ." The muscles in her throat tighten. She's waiting, not sure if I'm ready to hear it, the stupid cow, I've already seen it. And the other possibility: she doesn't trust me. I let go of her.

"Where is his father? Joachim Polak?" I ask.

Joachim Polak. Twenty-two years ago: a hospital room, I tell him he needn't worry, his son will make it. I've placed a mask on the child, adjusted the oxygen level, tell the father again that it looks worse than it is. He's gone white as a ghost, tensely stares at the small body that begins to breathe easier. I stay in the room longer than necessary.

Joachim Polak. A name in a file. A name that quickly became a person, a man with dark curls and a heart-shaped, chiseled face behind which there always seemed to be a fire raging. A man bent over a crib, like a question mark. A man trying to fill the emptiness, a man acting stronger than he is to compensate for the loss of his wife. A man trying to outwit death. A man who understands what devotion means. It will be okay, I say; he nods. Your son will recover. I hear myself promise.

Joachim Polak. No diminutives, no pet names, forever Joachim. When he woke up in a panic. When he entwined his fingers with mine while meeting with the doctors. When I crawled against him on sultry nights.

Later, I would recognize his fear. From the moment I became the mother of his son – as intense as natural childbirth – I tried to prepare myself for Immanuel's death. When I was called upon to reanimate a patient, I was reanimating my own child. While relaying bad news, I wasn't only announcing a small child's death, but also that of Immanuel. What I imagined created a shaky bridge to other parents. I practiced despair. In my new role as mother I became a character in a story, an outside force had determined how I should behave and what I should feel, and worst of all was that I actually started to behave that way and felt what was expected of me. "Joachim Polak, his father. Where is he?"

The nurse glances over her shoulder at the door, as if estimating the distance to make a getaway. I place my hand on his temple, gently stroke beneath his shut right eyelid with my thumb, high on his cheek: the only way I got him to calm down when he was little. We should be standing beside his bed together, Joachim and I, looking our son, and saying to each other: "Look how peacefully he's sleeping."

Most difficult is that I know more than other mothers. I'm familiar with the fine line between life and death. How much a body can endure to survive and how finally it couldn't care less about us. Once a month, on average, I find myself powerless and the only thing left is to pull the curtain closed, have the mother or father take a seat in the relax, unhook all the wires and roll the incubator away. Lay the baby against their hearts.

When I became Immanuel's mother he'd already said the word Mama. Though, not to me.

Something in the nurse's gaze has hardened; she clamps her jaw shut. She's waiting until I ask another question, so she can refuse again, but I'm not going to grant her the satisfaction. This gives me a ridiculous sense of control . . . the last little bit of control.

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Somewhere in the North of Belgium, Back Then

Shall we just start over again? Then I'll shift my car into reverse, race backwards over the narrow country lanes of nobody's land – where I've ended up – to Edegem, going eighty per hour, ride the entire emergency lane back, even harder, while the moon recedes into dusk, then I'll park in the driveway and walk backwards into the living room, where you'll turn away from me and I'll sit down on the sofa and by then it's morning, sunlight spills into the living room, illuminating your face, Joachim, and you open your mouth and everything you say is unintelligible because you're saying it the wrong way round, and that's exactly why we can go farther back together, we shift into a higher gear, our hair becomes shorter and longer, our faces relax and at a certain moment my hand touches yours, we sink deeper into the past and our son toddles by, he grows smaller until he can no longer walk and you pick him up, you give him to me and I lie him in the metal crib and

now it's also evening, it's dark, only the hospital room is lit up, and here we fall silent, Joachim, we look at each other, and there it begins.

I say that it will be alright. An infection with the RS-virus is frightening but easy to treat. A few days in the hospital on oxygen sounds worse than it is. You look tired. Grieving has taken its toll, forever etched deep creases in your face. I say the department has a psychologist, who you're always welcome to see. It's a line that I throw you and it bobs somewhere between us; you don't react. You have a gentle voice, with a hint of the Polish in your English. I should get back to work; I'm the only pediatrician on the night shift. I linger in the room. You sit down in the leather chair next to the bed. "Would you like to see my wife?" you ask.

"Of course," I reply.

You pick up your diary from the table on wheels, remove a photo. I take it from you. You keep a close watch on me while I look at the woman in the picture. At first glance you wouldn't say that she's dead, but all the movement in her face is frozen, fixed for eternity. I do my best to stay professional.

You say, "She's beautiful."

"Yes."

"Sometimes I forget that she's dead." You turn away, towards Immanuel, who's sleeping on his back, his arms above his head. "Then I think, it's been long enough, Edyth, you're missing so much."

"Are you in Belgium temporarily?" I ask.

"Yes, but I'm not going back to Poland." You don't say where you're headed. You place your hands in your lap. I return the photo, our eyes stay glued to each other, for a split second, before we both turn our attention to the hospital room.

"I'd better go," I say. I run my fingers along the spots in the formica table, as if they'd reveal an image once they were all connected. A drawing that is already there, which is made up of separate dots, only waiting for a line to make them visible.

"Don't go yet," you say.

I walk over to the bed, lay my hand on the edge. Immanuel makes soft gurgling sounds. I lean towards him, check if the oxygen tube in his nose is okay, though I can see it's just fine. We're hyperaware of each other, so aware that our movements are awkward, we cling to our roles, doctor and father of a patient. I try not to look at you too long because how is it possible that someone's eyes convey so much helplessness and love; I've never met anyone who simultaneously looks at the world with such sadness and trust. Devotion: that's the word. How is it possible for someone to be so completely devoted to life?

"Everything is okay," I say. I nod to you, take my clipboard, pat the pocket of my doctor's coat. Then I walk to the door.

"Doctor," you say.

I turn towards you.

"Have you moved around a lot?"

I push down the door handle. "If there's anything, call me." I don't point to the red button beside the bed. He nods. I do point to the fold out bed pushed up against the window. "Try to get some sleep."

"I haven't slept in a year," you say. "But I'll lie down and close my eyes."

"That's a good start." I say. I don't close the door behind me. Next to Immanuel's room is the table with my computer. A few moments later I hear you gently shut the door.

The entire evening I can't get you out of my mind, a rendering of you that is powerful enough to stay with me. How is it possible for someone to leave such a strong after-image?

“What’s your name?” you ask, even though you already know it. I’ve just discharged Immanuel. You’re standing in the doorway of the hospital room holding him in your arms, a small overnight bag by your feet. Immanuel whimpers into your shoulder, his arms slung around your neck. I rub his back, run my hand over the fragile twigs under his skin. You’re a bit taller and gaze down at me. My hand on Immanuel and Immanuel against your chest; we both feel him breathing, without wheezing or peeping, without that low murmur that caused you to panic and bring him in last week. I’ve given him back his breath.

“Lydia,” I say. I let my title and last name fall to the ground like pieces of clothing and that’s the beginning.

It begins with arm hairs that almost touch – there’s nothing more erotic – two arms that almost touch each other. Side by side at the cinema, another world unfolds in front of us except we’re only those two arms, two arms that will hug each other goodbye later that evening, and in this way we’ll grow closer and closer, until we’re rooted in each other’s psyches and that’s where we take over from each other: we become a version of ourselves that we didn’t know existed, and slowly that life consumes us, we lose the bated breath of our first date, we forget the electrifying excitement of arm hairs that almost touched.

At night you caress every nook and cranny of my body and tell me how beautiful I am. You move in with me. You say that I’m so ambitious, that nothing stands in my way if I want something, that I seek out boundaries only to ignore them, that I underestimate my own strength.

So, should I return? I’m somewhere in the North of Belgium, or so I think, I’ve purposely avoided the highway and landed in an intricate web of dark country lanes. I push down on the gas pedal, even harder, and meanwhile I fall to pieces. A trail of breadcrumbs behind the car, debris of the shared life you just now destroyed. One hundred kilometers per hour, water on both sides, past the pollard-willows silhouetted like fists against the night sky. Should I turn the car around and drive all the way back, while making a list of the moments that might save our marriage? We must keep in mind the thread that connects these kinds of moments. The nights we lie against each other discussing our day, the mornings we shield our eyes from the sun’s rays spilling through the curtain by turning our heads towards each other, the hands we’ve been for one another, the fingers to hold onto.

And all the rest is beside the point. All those non-days, non-moments, non-hours. The non-time when we couldn’t figure out why we’d stayed together, when we didn’t make plans, that non-time when we unfelt each other, and unspoke, and unheard, and unsaw, and undid, and unknissed.

Causing us to speak quieter until ultimately we only thought, and what we thought we no longer shared, so it kept growing until it ran rampant.