

At dawn
the boy
awoke
with a jerk
as if he had
been bitten
by a snake,

even though his father, Mr. Pazuelo, had touched his shoulder gently, as one who takes pity on a child called to a man's task. The room was cold and dark, and he imagined he could feel on his face warm puffs of air, the heavy breath of his five brothers, who lay in a heap all around him. The excitement that had gripped his small body since last night, when his mother and father had spoken to each other in French, roused him to look carefully at his surroundings, and to listen.

A murmur was the first sound he heard, when his father woke him with a kind of reticent mumble. He couldn't speak

because he hadn't yet cleansed his hands, and impurity filled his body. Besides the darkness and the steamy sweet smell of his brothers' breath, a sharp, sour stench of socks hung in the air.

That was the living room; his sisters slept in the other room, which served as both foyer and dining room. Outside, rain railed against the porch and the trees and the earth. He could hear the hollow metallic howling of the drainpipes fixed to the shafts inside the tenement. Someone closed and locked a door, then descended the stairs heavily; then came the sound of coughing and spitting, and brisk steps vanishing down the length of a corridor. His father was earnestly whispering *birkat hanekabim*, and from the hall the syllables sounded like the slurping of a sweet being sucked in a boy's mouth. He pronounced the word *nekabim* with stress on the *k* and the *b*. [*Birkat hanekabim*, "the blessing of the apertures," said after going to the toilet.] Every so often one of his brothers would scratch his head as if seized by a frenzy.

Yohai plunged his head under the blankets and curled up into his belly with importunate petulance, the edges of his heels touching his buttocks. He breathed in the stench of rank rag that rose from the blanket which also served as a cover for the *hamin* on the Sabbath. [The *hamin* is a traditional dish of meat, potatoes, and beans set to cook on a low flame early Friday morning.] His feet were still cold, even though he had rubbed them hard that night before going to sleep. His only consolation was in the warmth of his hands, pressed deep between his thighs.

What had Isaac thought on the morning of his binding?

Yohai recalled last Rosh Hashana, when he had stood with his father at the lectern used by the cantor and the tomech, the cantor's assistant. There was silence in the sanctuary; the ark was opened, revealing Torah scrolls that stood expressionless, gallant popes in splendid vestments, as if still unaware of the judgement. His father had begun to sing sweetly and beseechingly *Et Sha'arei Ratzon*, his voice splitting the silence that had made the congregants tremble. [*Et Shar'arei Ratzon*, the story of the binding of Isaac, sung in Sephardic congregations on *Rosh Hashana*, the Jewish New Year, immediately before the blowing of the *shofar*.] The boy had enfolded himself in his

father's prayer shawl, clasping his knee.

Suddenly his father's voice had broken. For a moment, the silence had lingered. Then words rent the air sharply, nasally. The congregants hid their faces in their prayer shawls, some of them bowing into their prayer books. Quiet, restrained weeping could be heard amid the mumbled words of prayer, then wordless cries burst forth. His father, for years the principal cantor, had not been able to go on. Someone in the congregation had hinted that the tomech should continue the prayer, but the tomech, who respected his father with a kind of awe, instructed the congregation to join together in the song of the binding of Isaac.

Fear had overcome the boy. Feeling he was about to fall, he had tightened his grasp on his father's thigh as if he feared he would lose him. Father's going to be slaughtered they'll slaughter me too — Mother will cry! Father's a criminal — he's bad! Father's afraid — Father, he's the slaughterer, a certified slaughterer, he slaughters chickens too — he confesses, an awful crime, so very awful, like in Sodom — what do they want from him, what has he done, why does he cry so — for God's sake, make him stop!

At school they didn't know what Isaac had thought. Abraham was the whole story. Isaac hadn't known, he'd asked his father Abraham where they were going, and Abraham had said that only God knows where a man is going when he goes. But when they bound him he must have known, because they don't just go binding someone like that. Later on in the legends it said that Isaac knew, and that in his righteousness he was glad to be God's sacrifice.

Yohai heard his father laying *tefillin*, and so got up and hurried to get dressed. A chill passed through him as he dipped first one hand and then the other into the cold water. He tried to touch the water with just the tips of his fingers, and didn't dare get any water near his face. His father was already waiting for him by the door, wound in prayer shawl and *tefillin*, his right hand resting on the *mezuzah* as he prayed for the welfare of his household. They stopped before the puddles at the edge of the portico while his father gathered up the tips of the fringes of his

prayer shawl, to keep them from getting wet. The boy skipped over the puddles, a few paces behind his father, who was completely hidden within his prayer shawl. In the raging wind and sprays of rain, Yohai's father looked to him like an abominable snowman. They were going to the first service of morning prayers.

Mr. Pazuelo stopped at the entrance to the shelter of tenement number eleven, and listened to the prayers which began with the story of the binding and the sacrifice. He took care not to enter the synagogue before the congregation had reached the prayer *Baruch She'amar*. At that point all would rise in honour of He who had said "and the world was formed," and not in honour of flesh and blood. Congregants who rose in Mr. Pazuelo's honour caused him anguish, for he feared they were depriving him of his reward in the world to come.

Yohai continued walking mechanically through the dim hall, then suddenly froze in his tracks. Eliahu the moron pushed his smiling, death-like face toward Yohai from under the electric memorial lamps. Reb Eliahu, as the elders of the neighbourhood called him, was a distant relative of his father's, who in his youth had been his father's playmate. One day, Eliahu's father had taken his son to see how chickens were slaughtered; as a result, Eliahu had lost his mind, and his body had taken the shape of a slaughtered chicken. His head and neck were outstretched, his right arm extended as if to strike. Sometimes he would flail at the air, his elbow contorted, until the arm again went limp. His clothes were fetid, and his body stank of kerosene and chewing tobacco. Yohai detested him because sometimes, without any warning, he would pull from his jacket pockets bloodied, severed chicken heads that he'd gotten from the housewives of tenement eleven. Yohai couldn't fathom that it was possible to eat the heads of animals.

Recovered, he went to sit in his distant corner, under the fluorescent lamp lit in memory of his eldest brother, who had died under mysterious circumstances. Beside him sat two hoary old men, covered from head to toe in black jalabiyas, like two monks who had taken the vow of silence. Now and again they would poke their heads out toward their hands and pluck up

wads of tobacco, snorting in a way that frightened Yohai.

About 30 fluorescent lamps lit the narrow shelter, all of them dedicated to the memories of congregants who had died of old age or of various diseases, or who had lost their lives as soldiers, or who had been run over in the streets. Yohai would shift his gaze from one lamp to another trying to decipher beneath them the initials and names of those sanctified. His eyes slowly closed, and he felt himself on an endless descent down a narrow passageway lit by a bright light that came from nowhere. He hadn't grown old, hadn't served in the army, nor had he been crushed to death; yet his classmates were weeping bitterly, led by Mrs. Oren, the music teacher. "We have hung violins in the darkness" she shrieked, until the swelling under her left earlobe expanded and burst, and she lost her voice. The friends he had left behind now wailed in disarray, and Rabbi Sokolowski, the homeroom teacher, began to rave.

Yohai started out of his sleep, his whole body shaken. On his neck he could feel the grip of fingers poised to poke into his throat, and his whole body bristled. With an effort he raised his head, and his gaze met the lizard-like eyes of Eliahu the moron, who suddenly stuck out his hand like a long tongue and hit him with a prayer book. "Sleeping at prayer, huh?"

The old men around him snickered with hollow mouths, their faces black holes. The boy sailed a pleading glance toward his father; but the latter stood like a statue before the cantor's lectern, every fibre of him sunk in prayer. Tears sprang to Yohai's eyes; now he felt the full weight of sin. Again he turned his gaze toward his father. There wasn't a soul in the world who could pardon him as his father sometimes did with his merciful, quiet, attentive gaze that said: "Watch and guard your soul: It is all you have in the world, and that is not much." Now the father was chanting the mourner's prayer, with his son answering "amen" after every line, as if to say: "Yes, Father."

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